Stages of Hope

by Kayly Silverstorm (Kayly_Silverstorm)

Summary

“Your robes are…red,” Hermione finally said, strangely accusing.

“Burgundy!” Severus protested. Red was tacky. Burgundy, however, had class.

“And what did you do to your hair?” she asked in horrified fascination.

Snape’s hand rose to his scalp.

“Nothing! What is wrong with you? I just washed it and blow-dried it like every morning…”

“Ah, I see.” She nodded and stepped back. “Alternate dimension. It must be.”

Notes

This one is a bit of a wild mix – there’s a lot of (black) humour, especially in the earlier chapters, then there’s action, adventure, drama, heartbeat, and possibly a lot of angst (I disagree with the widely used meaning of angst, so in my opinion, this one’s not very angsty,
but you will probably disagree).

The story takes into account canon until the Weasley-wedding at the beginning of Book Seven, including Horcruxes and Deathly Hallows, and will share general plot points with the whole of “Deathly Hallows”. It begins one and a half years after said wedding, with most of the Order dead and Harry, Hermione, Neville and Luna searching for Horcruxes on their own. Basically, things went pear-shaped somewhere along the way, and they’re coping the best they can. You will learn more about the Alternate Dimension in the course of the story.

Thanks and praise go out to my betas for this story: Chapter 1-6 was betaed by Ioci, and from chapter 7 mylady_phoenix is doing a wonderful job of preventing me from drowning in my own mistakes! Hail to you!

Enjoy! – Oh, and I disclaim! I disclaim most thoroughly.
Deep in the bowels of Gringotts, Harry Potter and Hermione Granger were fighting a dragon.

Things were not going very well, but that was so much of the ordinary these days that it had them barely worried. Too busy to worry, actually.

While Hermione was hard pressed to keep up a shield against the dragon’s fire, Harry Potter, leader of the rather pitiable opposition against Voldemort, was being defeated by a lock.

A medieval lock, to be precise, but it was goblin made and hellishly stubborn.

“I can’t hold it much longer,” Hermione yelled, her shield charm flickering under the onslaught of flames.

“Nothing’s working,” he yelled back. “You wanna try?”

She nodded, and when the stupid – and huge – dragon next drew breath, they changed positions with the ease of long practice.

Not that it helped any.

She hit the lock with every spell Flitwick, Bill Weasley and the Hogwarts library had ever taught her. The metal burned with spellfire, but the Lestrange-vault remained secure. Damn goblins!

Harry’s shield was still holding, but even he couldn’t keep this up forever, and she could hear the battle sounds drawing closer. Luna and Neville were quite the team, and in the narrow tunnels two people could fight a larger group to a stand still, but only for a time.

“You have to use fiendfyre!” Hermione screamed.

She could barely hear her own voice over the dragon’s roaring, but Harry understood.
“We don’t know what’s in that vault!” He shouted back. “We could start a magical chain reaction…”

“We could also be killed by a dragon! Very soon, in fact!”

Harry hesitated. Hermione knew he was considering their alternatives and coming up with nothing at all. She saw his face harden and knew he agreed with her.

“Position change… now!” She shouted and once more raised the shield while Harry let his spell fall.

It was harder this time, and she felt the force of the dragon’s attack in every bone. They couldn’t keep it up much longer. At least Neville and Luna were still alive, and coming closer by the minute from the sounds of it…

Then she felt the atmosphere change, her own magic screaming in the air, and knew Harry was wielding fiendfyre.

The dragon ceased his attack – perhaps even he was shocked by their daring -, Harry shouted in triumph, the vault door crashed open, something exploded…

…and Hermione was drowning in magic.

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Meanwhile, in a world very much the same and yet fundamentally apart, two friends sat talking within the strong walls of Hogwarts, warmed by a merry fire and the flow of their conversation. It was old custom for them to sit together like this, the familiarity of the situation connecting the schoolboys of once to the grown men of the now.

The clock roused them from their talk, and though neither of them felt the slightest inclination to brave the Scottish winter in the middle of the night, duty was duty, and even a Slytherin could not always shirk it.
“It’s your fault,” Severus Snape accused his second oldest friend while donning a thick black cloak and a green scarf. “I wanted to take autumn duty, but no, you were too busy chasing after that woman and so we have to trudge through this damn blizzard instead of getting drunk.”

His companion grinned, white teeth flashing in a face that was considered ‘dreamy’ by the majority of the female Hogwarts population.

“Jealous, Snappy?” He asked.

“Don’t call me that,” Severus said, but the demand lacked conviction. This exchange was as old as their friendship, and even stubborn Severus had given up on ever losing his childhood soubriquet.

“Oh, but you love it, I know you do…”

“Shut up, Fluffy, or I’ll sic Lily on you,” Severus sighed, doused the candles and aimed a slight stinging hex at his friend to get him moving.

Who simply swatted it away, expecting nothing less from Severus after all these years.

“You’re getting slow,” he teased. “I think the life of quiet research and scientific achievements doesn’t suit you.”

Severus just laughed. “You mean compared to living with hundreds of students in a damp old castle? No, thanks very much. If there was one thing that would surely reduce me to a miserable old bastard, it’s teaching.”

“Teaching’s lovely,” his friend disagreed while they traversed silent corridors and headed out into the glittering cold of Scotland in December. “You just have to keep them interested, is all.”

“And how are you doing that?” Severus drawled. “By flashing your smile at the girls and your auror badge at the boys? Demanding work, I must say.”

This time, the hex was aimed at Severus, but he blocked it with the same ease before turning his attention to their task. There had been no threats to the castle as of late, and their wards were holding
stronger than ever, but even the finely spun net of Hogwarts’ protections had weaknesses, and one of them was the border to the Forbidden Forest.

So no matter that they were at the oldest magical institution of Europe, with one of the most powerful wizards at its head, patrolling it was. Even in a blizzard.

Severus sighed. Then he dutifully performed the location and detection charms that were a part of the job and spent the time they were running on a clever plan how to somehow get snow into his friend’s collar. Ah, the simple joys of school.

But the results of the spells sent these thoughts right out of his head.

“Two intruders,” he whispered, his eyes already straining against the darkness. “They should be somewhere to the left. Can you…”

“On it. Give me a moment.”

Severus slowly followed, a shield spell waiting for activation at the tip of his wand. He wasn’t a bad dueller, but he lacked his friend’s experience, and he would be damned if they caught him unaware. But nothing happened.

“Oi, Severus, over here!”

No nickname, no joke. Severus hastened his steps until they stood once more side-by-side.

He was looking down at the unconscious bodies of a young man and a girl, both no older than twenty. They lay close to each other, limbs thrown haphazardly across each other, faces caked with grime and blood, and yet they looked strangely peaceful. There was no sign of how they’d gotten here, no hint of another intruder, and Severus’ hasty spells confirmed that. He crouched down, slipped their wands from their hands and secured them in his pocket, and then allowed himself time for closer observation.

They were dressed completely wrong for the season, he next noticed. Though both were wearing what looked like an assortment of torn shirts and sweaters, one layer over the other, the girl’s right arm was bare except for a wandholster, and the boy’s cargo trousers were of a thin material more fitting for the summer. Also, their hair was singed. Quite badly.
And the boy had the sword of Gryffindor, the mythical weapon kept safe by Dumbledore’s phoenix himself, strapped securely to his back.

“Huh,” Severus said, glad that only his friend could witness the expression on his face.

And Sirius Black, Head of Slytherin House, veteran Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts and partner-in-crime of Severus Snape, met his best friend’s eyes with echoing shock, their easy banter forgotten in the face of this mystery.
The girl woke first.

The alerted Albus had decided to place both strangers in the hospital wing and not involve the Ministry for now. While Sirius had argued that this wasn’t safe – his friend was a tiny bit paranoid – Severus had agreed that two wandless, unconscious teenagers didn’t constitute a threat to Hogwarts. So Sirius had left to gather the Order members currently in residence, while Albus and Severus had assumed watch position in the infirmary.

They’d settled in for a long wait, but obviously they’d underestimated their visitors’ resilience. And now the girl was awake.

One moment her eyes were closed and the readings showed her to be deeply unconscious, the next her eyes were open. She blinked once, focused, and then she was off the bed, stumbled, nearly went down and just barely kept hold of the bedpost with her left hand while her right arm snapped out in a perfect attack/defence position.

She blinked again, then stared at her empty hand and her empty wand holster with honest confusion, as if being without a wand hadn’t happened to her for years. She repeated the gesture, as if the wand would suddenly appear out of nowhere, which, of course, it didn’t, being safely secured in the pocket of Severus’ robes.

Only then did she look up and, for the first time, truly notice them. Another blink. This one was either incredibly slow or incredibly fast.

“Okay,” she finally said in a hoarse but not unpleasant mezzo-soprano. “Either this is the worst impersonation attempt ever or things have just become very complicated.”

Yes. Definitely not the first words Severus had expected. But Albus remained as unfazed as ever.

“Perhaps we should start with your name, my dear?” he offered. “I find that introductions are usually the best way to proceed in cases such as this.”
In all his years as a student, comrade, and finally friend of the great Albus Dumbledore, Severus had seen this tone fail only twice. The first time was with a very old, very cranky lady who had refused to believe Minerva McGonagall was not, in fact, her lost cat, and the second time with Alastor Moody, who was a force all to himself.

Now he had the honour to witness a third time.

“I’m afraid I won’t cooperate until I have my wand back,” the girl said coolly. “Not a bit. But you are very welcome to tell me your real names.”

If Albus was perturbed by this, he didn’t show it.

“Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, and this here is my dear friend, Severus Snape, renowned Potions Master and researcher.”

Another blink. Then she startled fumbling in her pocket and produced a small, scuffed looking rectangle of wood.

“Would you be willing to repeat that on a truth rod?”

So she was slow. And more than a bit mad, Severus thought with an internal sigh. But one look at Albus told him that the Headmaster actually seemed quite overwhelmed by this turn of events, staring at the piece of wood with slightly bulging eyes. Well, he’d always been a bit mad, too, but…

“Where did you come by this?” Albus asked. “There are only three of these artefacts in existence, and they are invaluable! Their use is restricted for ritual purposes, and for good reason, I’d say.”

“Yes, yes, I know.” The girl swatted his protests aside like a fly. “Not to forget that Veritaserum is decidedly more reliable and adds an important psychological element to the process. But do you have any idea how difficult it is to brew Veritaserum without a stable lab environment? The stuff has to simmer for twenty-three point seven days, for goodness sake. We couldn’t really carry it around with us. And since we were breaking into the Ministry anyway…”

“You broke into the Ministry?” Severus interrupted.
Another blink.

“You didn’t know that, huh?” she then asked. “I guess we can rule out mysterious resurrection for good then. So, the truth rod?”

Albus stretched out his hand and the girl handed the piece of wood over without hesitation. Albus examined it, tapped it with his wand, and again squinted up at her with the accusing indignation of a white-bearded Indiana Jones.

“Your names?” she repeated sweetly, and after a reluctant nod from Albus, they both placed a finger on the rod and stated their full names and professions.

When they were finished, something in her face had changed. It looked less hard, less forbidding, and perhaps there was a hint of grief added around the edges. She took a deep breath, nodded, then turned around to her still unconscious companion.

Only now did Severus realize that she hadn’t looked at him, not once, hadn’t turned her back to them for even a second until their identities had been confirmed.

But now she had eyes only for him.

“What’s the matter with him?” she asked. “Will he be alright?”

“Perfectly fine, my dear.” Albus had not quite regained the state of full-blown serenity he usually sported, but he was well on his way. “He simply suffers from magical exhaustion, the same way you do.”

“And the others? Where are they?”

Dumbledore’s smile dimmed.

“I am afraid we found no others with you, Miss…”
She closed her eyes, and the grief on her face increased.

“Damn it!” she whispered. Then nothing.

When she opened her eyes again, however, the perfect control was back. Severus was really beginning to wonder about this girl.

“What’s the year then?” she asked, and while Severus wondered if he should step in about now, put his foot down, and demand her name and what she’d been doing on the grounds of Hogwarts, unconscious in the snow, she came closer. Much, much closer.

First, she inspected Albus, who inspected her right back without the slightest perturbation. But that was Albus’ nature.

“1999, my dear. The December of it, to be precise,” he answered pleasantly, as if she wasn’t close enough to count his nose hairs.

She nodded. “No time travel, then,” she murmured to herself. She turned to inspect Severus even more closely.

It was an uncomfortable experience, to put it mildly. The girl was a good deal smaller than he, and her bushy hair smelled unpleasantly of sweat and damp, with something wild and dangerous underneath it.

She squinted up at him silently, frowned, and then walked around him slowly before returning her attention to his face.

“Your robes are… red,” she finally said, strangely accusing.

“Burgundy!” Severus protested. Red was tacky. Burgundy, however, had class.

“And what did you do to your hair?” she asked in horrified fascination.
Snape’s hand rose to his scalp.

“Nothing! What is wrong with you? I just washed it and blow-dried it like every morning…”

“Ah, I see.” She nodded and stepped back. “Alternate dimension. It must be.”

Albus lips were twitching. “You deduced this from the state of Severus’ hair?”

“Believe me, you would have, too,” she deadpanned; then she suddenly broke into an excited grin.

“But this is fascinating!” she exclaimed, and several layers of exhaustion seemed to simply drop away from her. “It has been theorized, of course, but I never read a convincing hypothesis of how… perhaps when we… and then the dragon… oh, yes, yes, that must have been it, but how… I need to read Bedsdoel again!”

“You read Bedsdoel?” Albus inquired at the exact time that Severus asked: “What dragon?” and so there was a moment of confusion.

“Well, I only skimmed through it once when I was looking for…” The enthusiasm vanished abruptly. “But there’s no reason to get into that, yet. I assume that you will want to organize an Order meeting, if you haven’t called one yet, and I’d rather not explain all of this twice.”

“Now listen here…” Severus began, determined to finally wrestle control away from her. This simply wouldn’t do anymore. But Albus, who was watching the girl very closely indeed, rested a hand on his shoulder.

“I have been very indulgent until this point,” the Headmaster said seriously, and his words were laced with authority and power. “But I am afraid that I really must insist now, my dear. I will need your name and that of your companion, the reasons you came to be at Hogwarts, and why you know of things no stranger should know.”

The girl met Albus’ eyes and matched the serious expression on his face exactly.
“Those answers will take time, Headmaster,” she said calmly. “I won’t give them without my companion being awake, and certainly not without our wands safely returned. But this should be sufficient reason for you to trust me.”

She stepped forward, then rose to the tip of her toes, and whispered something into the Headmaster's ear.

Albus’ face paled enough to match his beard. He stared at the singed head of curls that only reached his chin and continued staring when she stepped back a bit and stretched out her hand.

“Our wands, please,” she demanded. And as if in a dream, his movement slow and sluggish, the Headmaster stretched out his hand, silently accio’ed the two wands from Severus’ pocket, and handed them over to the girl.

“Thank you,” she said, tucked one of them into her wandholster and kept the other one in a firm grip. “I am going to wake my friend now.”

“Headmaster?” Severus asked quietly as soon as she had turned away from them.

Albus blinked, shook his head in silent bemusement, and finally met Severus’ concerned gaze.

“It is a sure sign of true age when being surprised becomes this surprising,” he mused. “I do not know whether we should be looking forward to her explanations or fear them, Severus.”

Severus knew his old mentor well enough not to pry for now. As much as Albus loved to talk at great length about irrelevant topics, he could be like an oyster where anything important was concerned. So he concentrated on the one question that truly mattered right now.

“So we can trust them?” he asked.

Albus sighed.

“I sincerely hope so, my friend,” he answered softly. “For if this woman should truly wish us harm, I fear our future endeavours might be doomed.”
A white-bearded Indiana Jones = Indiana Jones has the endearing habit to shout “This belongs in a museum!” whenever the invaluable piece of art that is being stolen isn’t being stolen by him.
Chapter 3

Chapter by Kayly_Silverstorm

Chapter Summary

Severus had not expected the reaction Sirius’ entrance produced. Hermione went pale, and blinked again – nothing new there – but Harry actually barrelled across the room, cutting of Albus’ introduction, flung himself onto Sirius, and nearly suffocated him in an embrace that wasn’t appropriate in any dimension.

“I’m so, so sorry, Padfoot,” he babbled. “I never wanted that to happen, I just… I just…”

Sirius, after a moment of nonplussed hesitation, began patting Harry’s back in a vague fashion. Over the head of the short teenager, he met Severus’ eyes in utter confusion.

“Should I know this person?” he mouthed.

Severus couldn’t help himself. He sniggered. He only sniggered more when Albus withdrew a camera from one of his many pockets and deftly snapped a picture. Severus would bet his Mastery that this picture would feature prominently in the next annual teacher bulletin.

Dimension travelling or not, waking up people seemed to be done the same way in both worlds (although not the Slytherin way, Severus noted, which usually involved a pitcher of water and a lot of sniggering).

The girl slowly circled her companion’s bed and then snapped off a quick series of diagnosis spells as comprehensive as anything Madame Pomfrey could have produced (and Albus had produced, less than twenty minutes before). The results satisfying her, she moved even closer, levelled her wand on the man and added an expert Rennervate. Should they be worried that she seemed so well versed in reanimating unconscious men?

Again, the waking-up went quicker than Severus had expected, and again it stayed invisible save for the slight change in the boy’s breathing patterns and a tensing of his muscles. Severus was sure that they wouldn’t have noticed it, had they not been looking for it specifically.
Displaying once more her immunity to normal human reactions, the girl did not rush towards the boy or try to touch him. Instead, she stood very, very still, as if a predator had suddenly entered the room and she was trying not to anger it.

Only her left hand rose to her forehead, forming a symbol Severus didn’t recognize. As if in answer, golden light spread from her fingers, bridging the distance between the two, forming a coalescent bubble around her, then around the boy.

“Harry,” she whispered, and something in the way she said it told them that she spoke more than a name. The golden light seemed to pulse for a moment, then trickled back into the skin of the boy, who gave no sign of reaction but for the slight relaxation of muscles.

Snape had to admit that he was impressed.

“Hermione,” he rasped in a surprisingly deep and strong voice, and for the blink of an eye, the girl’s skin seemed to glisten golden.

Besides Severus, Albus gave a little hum of appreciation he only used for sweets and truly remarkable feats of magic.

“An identity check, activated only by gesture and voice. Marvellous, quite marvellous!”

The girl either didn’t hear him or decided to ignore this comment.

“Harry, we have a three-oh-seven red,” she said quickly, and Severus was astonished at the range of emotions that crossed the boy’s face in answer to this cryptic information.

“So I guess the dragon didn’t kill us,” he commented after a moment, his voice growing richer and more controlled. Then, he too opened his eyes.

Quickly, the girl – Hermione – positioned herself between her companion and Albus and Severus.
“Stay calm, Harry!” she warned in a slightly worried tone, and what the hell was that about?

Only now that the boy took in their appearance for the first time did Severus begin to appreciate the calm reactions of the girl. *Harry* didn’t blink, nor did he quietly and calmly assess the situation.

Instead, he did an actual double-take, a reaction so clichéd that Severus had only seen it with Gryffindors and in cheap American cartoons.

Then he rubbed his eyes.

Gaped.

Shook his head wildly as if denial would change the situation in any way.

Gaped some more.

And then he turned back to Hermione.

“I’m not hallucinating, right?” he asked, as if this was a viable and not at all exotic option. “They are real?”

Hermione sighed.

“No hallucinations this time, I’m afraid,” she answered calmly. “It seems that your warning about the magical chain reaction was quite valid, Harry.”

The boy was still gaping.

“One hell of a chain reaction,” he whispered. “Are they… I mean, do they know…”

Hermione shook her head. “I gave the Headmaster a few tidbits that would make him trust us, but so
far they only know our names and predicament. But, of course, we should tell them. If you remember my briefing, full disclosure promises the most advantageous outcome in the case of such an event.”

Finally, the man ceased gaping. Three parts of Severus’ brain were busy sorting through the utterly insane conversation – The boy was hallucinating on a regular basis? The girl had prepared for this kind of situation? What tidbit would make the Headmaster trust these strangers? – but the fourth part of his mind noticed the fluidity of Harry’s movements as he rose to stand beside Hermione and the way the two of them unconsciously stood in a perfect back-to-back fighting stance taught to all auror partners.

Once again the boy's eyes rested on him, then on Albus, with an expression so full of grief and longing and uncertainty that Severus couldn’t begin to interpret it.

Then, as abruptly as the girl had accepted the facts and moved forward, his mood changed, and the grin he levelled at Hermione was wide and worryingly maniacal.

“Hermione,” he asked, “do you remember that I said you were quite mad when you insisted on codes for time travel and alternate dimensions?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Very clearly and with no little indignation, I might add.”

“Well, I take it all back. You’re awesome, Hermione.”

She sniffed.

“I think you should know me well enough by now to believe that the theories behind my decisions are valid, even without seeing proof, Harry.”

“Sure,” he said and smiled fondly at her. Then, he returned his attention to the fascinated men facing them, or, to be more precise, to Snape’s robes.

“How the hell did the red happen?” he asked in obvious surprise.
What was it with those people?

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They had stumbled into yet another conversation about dimensions, magico-physical theories and implosive chain reactions that somehow centred around Severus’ dressing habits and bodily hygiene and avoided all explanation of how the hell the two mad people had ended up at Hogwarts.

Severus was beginning to feel more than a bit put upon. The girl Hermione had started asking rather pointed questions about his childhood, which he was not going to answer, and Harry was staring from Albus to Severus and back with a sort of vacant grin that was screaming ‘axe murderer’ to Severus (he blamed all the nights he and Sirius had snuck out of Hogwarts and watched bad muggle movies for that association).

So it was with a certain sense of relief that Severus greeted his salvation, approaching in the form of Sirius Black. And if he was secretly looking forward to how his friend would deal with the girl and her maniac companion, could he really be blamed?

That said, he had not expected the reaction Sirius’ entrance produced. Hermione went pale, and blinked again – nothing new there – but Harry actually barrelled across the room, cutting of Albus’ introduction, flung himself onto Sirius, and nearly suffocated him in an embrace that wasn’t appropriate in any dimension.

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Sirius was glaring at them both, but the effect was slightly ruined by the kid still clinging to him like a disoriented koala. Severus sniggered some more.
“Harry,” Hermione now said sternly, her arms crossed over her chest. “This isn’t your Sirius. Unhand him immediately; you are frightening the poor man!”

“Your Sirius?” said Sirius mouthed over Harry’s head. He showed definite relief when the young man obeyed Hermione’s command immediately and shuffled backwards with a mumbled apology that set his mental age at about thirteen.

“Listen,” his friend then said in the absence of any more productive comment, “you smell awfully like you were burned.”

“Probably the dragon,” Severus said offhandedly, and while his friend was still echoing “Dragon?” in a shocked tone, he proceeded to fill in the necessary details. “Apparently, they are visitors from an alternative dimension which differs considerably from our own, a fact the girl, Hermione, derived from the red colour of my robes, over which they both expressed no little horror.”

“They’re burgundy. Red would be tacky,” Sirius answered immediately, and Severus felt the warm glow of friends understanding each other. “And they look excellent on you. That young assistant of Pince’s can’t get enough of you in burgundy, Snappy!”

“It’s Severus,” he answered absentely. “And apparently this other dimension does not share our refined tastes, dear friend.”

A choking sound cut off their conversation and they turned back to Harry, who was being visibly restrained by Hermione. Apparently, he had recovered from the emotional outburst and was back to gaping again. Severus had never thought he would consider that expression an improvement.

“Friends…” Hermione now said, sounding a bit out of breath. Severus wanted to groan – now that they were through with his hair and robes, would they move on to relationships? But Sirius was a more happy nature. Besides, he hadn’t suffered through the past twenty minutes.

“Sure,” he answered readily. “Since we got sorted into Slytherin together. Had a few rough patches at first, but who hasn’t? And Snappy here even introduced me to a few Gryffindors, and let me tell you, the girls there…”

He trailed off as he noticed Albus’ rather stern expression, belatedly remembering that he was a teacher and authority person and not supposed to spread lurid details about other houses.
But he had talked long enough for Harry to compose himself somewhat. His jaw clicked shut and something like intelligence reappeared in his face. He looked shocked, and for some reason slightly grossed out.

“Wait…” he said, disbelief coating every word. “You… you _like_ each other?”
Chapter 4

Chapter by Kayly_Silverstorm

“But you hate him, Sirius!”

Sirius looked very much as if he wanted to flee the infirmary – or body-bind the very insistent Harry. Instead, he tried for patience. That was the teacher showing, Severus guessed.

“Nonsense. We are best friends. Have been forever. Now, could we please…”

“But why?” Harry whined.

Something in Severus snapped. Two hours ago, he’d been sitting comfortably in front of a warm fire, and now he was standing in the infirmary, in the middle of the night, arguing with a madman who seemed unable to understand why anyone could like him. Even his good humour only went so far.

“Alright,” he hissed. “That is quite enough from you! I forbid you to further question my outer appearance, my history, or my choice of friends. Instead, you will sit down and explain exactly what is going on here and what you think you know about us. In case of further reticence, let me just remind you that I am a potion expert! I can kill you in several unpleasant ways, and believe me, that option is growing more attractive by the minute! So sit! And talk!”

He caught a thankful look from Sirius and a reproachful one from Albus, but what really rattled him was the expression of profound relief that settled on Harry’s face as he closed his mouth, sat down meekly besides Hermione, and even smiled.

“Finally,” he whispered to her. “Something familiar.”

She, however, only sniffed. Severus could understand the sentiment.

“Maturity, Harry,” she said. “We talked about the concept, remember?”

He simply grinned. “And I still say it’s overrated, Hermione. Indulge me a bit, why don’t you?”
Something softened in her eyes – Severus couldn’t understand why, for the life of him – and she almost answered his smile.

“I would, normally,” she said quietly. “But Neville and Luna haven’t been found here, and while not running for our lives is a pleasant change, we can’t afford to lose any more time. He’ll know about Gringotts by now, and if he draws the right conclusions…”

Something changed in the atmosphere of the room, then, something so subtle and yet fundamental that it took Severus a moment to trace it back to its origin. Harry.

His grin was wiped away, his shoulders were straight, and his face, so full of contrasting emotions just a moment ago, was now filled with nothing but intent. Maturity, it seemed, had arrived without the slightest warning.

“You’re right,” Harry said, sounding eerily similar now to Hermione when she’d first woken up. “Let’s get this show on the road, then.”

And Hermione, who’d behaved like a long-suffering mother not a moment ago, suddenly looked a lot younger. She sighed in relief, sagged a bit, and met Harry’s eyes with the same calm determination.

“Headmaster’s office?” she asked.

“Sure,” Harry agreed. “Same procedure. You do the talking. I do the planning.”

Hermione nodded, rose to her feet, and turned towards the Headmaster.

“I assume there’s no reason not to continue this in more comfortable surroundings?” she asked pleasantly. “I also assume that the Order members you sent Sirius for will have gathered by now, and unless you have added to the castle in this dimension, they will probably wait in your office? Not to mention that I would die for a cuppa right now.”

Only now that he was addressed directly did Severus realize how quiet Albus had been until this moment. Normally the natural leader in any situation, he had been quite happy to hand the reigns of
the conversation over to the strangers, and Severus could only assume that he’d done it to better analyse their behaviour.

Unfortunately, whatever conclusions he had come to, they made him smile nearly as widely as the madman Harry. He even made the suggestion of a bow towards Hermione, reached out his hand to offer her his arm, and nodded most happily.

“It will be an honour to oblige you, my dear,” he said serenely. “If you will accompany me?”

She answered his smile readily, if less carefree, and accepted his arm with unexpected grace.

As the two swept from the room, Harry walking after them with the pose of a soldier, Severus could hear Albus’ words echo out behind them.

“I am sure we three will get on splendidly!”

0o0

Of course it wasn’t that easy. Their swift progress was hindered first by Remus and the sudden – if only short – departure of Harry’s newfound maturity. Apparently, clinging to someone and claiming that he was sorry was part of Harry’s everyday routine. But Hermione only had to clear her throat in warning this time, and soon they continued on their way to the office.

Still they were forced to pause at what felt like every other step because of teary-eyed exclamations from Harry (“Look, the bathroom, Hermione! I wonder if Myrtle still lives there! And did anyone take care of the poor basilisk?”) and weird questions from Hermione (“So, Headmaster. Have there been more than the usual amount of strange disappearances these past years?”) that Albus answered without the least sign of perturbation.

As Severus listened and watched and remembered Albus’ chilling words about how Hermione could turn out to be their doom, he sincerely hoped that all of this made some sense in someone’s head – it certainly didn’t in his.

He had been a friend of Albus’ and a member of the Order for a number of years now, and had thus considered himself quite used to unusual and surprising circumstances, but the night’s events and their possible consequences were frankly making his head spin.
But Albus seemed to be keeping up well and Sirius seemed enormously entertained, if slightly overwhelmed, and so Severus had decided to simply play along and stay in the background, as long as they didn’t mention his robes anymore.

And he stuck to that decision, right until they entered the Headmaster’s office and were confronted with Minerva and Lily, standing in the middle of the room and arguing as usual.

Without conscious thought, Severus found himself standing between Lily and Harry. It had been fun watching Remus and Sirius being hugged to death, but he would not allow some unstable man-boy to grope his female friends.

For once, however, Harry’s reaction was less than melodramatic. He just went very, very pale, and his hand reached out to grasp Hermione’s in what had to be a bruising grip. His eyes were wide, resting on Lily without any expression at all, and then he whispered something.

“Mum.”

Hermione took a small step forward and to the right, until she stood slightly in front of her companion, mirroring Severus’ stance.

“Not your Lily, Harry,” she warned quietly, but Severus could see that her grip on him was as tight as his. “Calm down right now.”

Fortunately, the boy actually listened to her. Severus, overwhelmed by the implications of that single word, felt a bit weak in the knees as he abandoned his guard post.

And Lily, not having been present for any of the previous drama, simply put her hands to her hips and cocked a single eyebrow.

“Whoever came up with that prank,” she said archly, “it’s not funny. I’d remember if I had a son.”

Harry flinched, and Hermione pressed his hand even harder.
“I’m sorry, this is all rather complicated, but he is, in fact, your child,” she explained politely. “His full name is Harry Potter. His father is James.”

This time, Lily actually snorted.

“And what does that git Potter have to do with me?” she demanded. Harry flinched even harder. “Could someone explain to me what’s going on? Albus? Severus? Husband-dearest? I swear, Remus, if you’re part of this, I’m going to hex…”

Harry actually gave a short moan, and Hermione moved her grip from his hand to his shoulder. It looked as if he needed her to stay upright.

“Oh dear,” she whispered, then shared a rather unreadable look with the Headmaster and let her wand slide into her hand.

“I think we should go about this more organized,” she murmured, summoned a chair with a flick of her wand, and Harry sank down on it silently. She then swish-flicked again, and a sufficient number of chairs appeared in a half circle, facing Albus’ desk.

With a silent gesture, she invited them all to sit. No one did, except for Albus, who still looked utterly complacent as he summoned tea for everyone.

“So, just to get this clear,” Hermione said, sounding out of breath again. “You’re married to Remus, right? Not to S…Snape?”

Harry moaned again. It should have been utterly ridiculous, but somehow it made Severus realize for the first time what all this had to mean for the two teenagers in front of them. They had been torn from their own world, confronted with people they’d obviously known in their dimension but who were strangers to them here, and now the boy’s own mother didn’t recognize him.

Though Lily and James bloody Potter… that thought boggled the mind.

Although she knew nothing of the circumstances, Lily was sensitive enough to the atmosphere to drop the attitude. She actually looked at the girl with something like compassion, and her stance softened a bit.
“Yes,” she simply said, instead of demanding an explanation. “I’ve been married to Remus for
twelve years now, though I dated Sev for a while. Who are you, if I may ask? And why does that
boy think I’m his mother?”

This time, Harry didn’t make a sound, but Severus saw the tears on his face and looked away
quickly. This wasn’t ridiculous at all.

The girl’s lower lip seemed to wobble a bit, but then she managed to give Lily a real smile.

“I’m Hermione,” she said, then sat down besides Harry and took both of his hands in hers.

“Do you want to leave for a bit?” she whispered. “I can do this alone, Harry. You don’t have to look
at them if you can’t.”

Harry shivered all over, but then he shook his head.

“No,” he answered. “Just do your thing, Hermione. Don’t worry.”

Hermione nodded, took a deep breath, then looked up at them and again gestured for the chairs. No
one sat.

“Oh,” she said, her voice high and nervous. “Okay. Before I start – was there a student at
Hogwarts by the name of Hermione Granger? She should have entered the school in 1991 and was
perhaps sorted as Gryffindor?”

While Severus stared at her – was she asking about herself? – Minerva answered the question with
only a short glance at Albus.

“There was indeed a Hermione Granger, though she was sorted into Ravenclaw, my dear,” she
answered. “However, I am sad to tell you that there was an accident in her first year, involving a
troll, and though we did everything we could, Hermione didn’t make it.”
Again, the girl gave a short blink. Again, Severus was impressed. If this was the way she dealt with news about her own death, he didn’t want to know what would unsettle her.

“Right,” she said. “I guess that clears up the problem with our alternate selves. Good. I guess.”

She took another deep breath, and then repeated the gesture towards the chairs with something close to desperation.

She looked younger than before, but perhaps that was because Severus now knew she could be no older than nineteen. Her hair, where it wasn’t singed off, was frizzed quite badly, and even the baggy layers of clothing couldn’t hide how thin she was. There was a smudge on her right cheek of a reddish brown colour, and Severus had the dark suspicion that it was blood.

She looked bone tired.

Silently, Severus sat down on the chair closest to him, then tugged at Lily and Sirius to follow his example. Remus had always been the mildest tempered of them and simply sat without prompting.

Severus arranged his robes around him, hesitated, then leaned forward and poured the girl a cup of tea. She really looked as if she would die for one. After another moment of hesitation, he added a few ginger biscuits, then handed her the cup without a word.

She smiled at him.

“Right,” she said again, but this time her voice wasn’t so very high anymore. “I guess introductions are in order. My name’s Hermione Granger and this is Harry Potter. We are dimension travellers – though that part wasn’t planned. In our world, we’re pretty much all that’s left of the resistance against Voldemort, and Harry here is the prophesized Chosen One. Oh, and he’s also a Horcrux – do you have a Horcrux-problem in your reality, too?”

There was a clattering sound as, for perhaps the first time in a century, Albus Dumbledore dropped a cup of tea and choked violently on a lemon drop.
“What do you mean, he is a Horcrux?”

Albus didn’t sound serene anymore. He sounded dangerous. And, worryingly enough, frightened.

“That he was made into one accidentally when Voldemort tried to kill him,” Hermione answered simply, then frowned. “As you should at least suspect by now… I’m sorry, but don’t you know about the seven Horcruxes? And don’t you have a Boy Who Lived in your world?”

“…seven Horcruxes…” Albus whispered, his face white with shock.

Hermione’s frown deepened.

“This is unexpected,” she said. “Why… okay, let’s go about it this way. Was the Chamber of Secrets opened during the past thirteen or so years? And did anyone find out who did it?”

Again it was Minerva who answered, though her Scottish accent deepened, betraying her irritation.

“There were a few incidents in 1992,” she replied. “A petrified cat, messages on the wall… it never came to anything, though one girl fell from the Owlery tower and died around that time.”

To Hermione’s left, Harry stirred.

“Was the girl Ginny Weasley?” He asked tonelessly, and Minerva nodded.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “Her poor parents – they never got over it. She was their only daughter.”

Harry closed his eyes, sinking deeper into his chair. Hermione blinked again. Severus assumed that
meant they had known the girl.

“That makes sense then,” Hermione murmured after a moment of collection. “It was the diary that tipped you off originally, but if you didn’t have that... How did Voldemort resurrect himself? He *did* resurrect himself, didn’t he?”

The atmosphere changed again as memories and sorrow rose darkly among them. Minerva made no move to answer and Albus’ face had changed from shocked to forbidding.

“Miss Granger,” he began. “I have trusted you this far, and I think you will agree that I have been more than lenient. But now is the time for answers, not further questions, I’m afraid.”

It was the tone he used when he was about to lose his patience, the one that came right before what Lily called The Reckoning, and Severus had only heard it used a few times these past thirty years. It was a tone that made Ministers of Magic give in and villains slink away with their tails between their legs. It was the tone that had given Voldemort pause more than once.

Hermione waved it away.

“That’s pretty funny, coming from you,” she said archly, then softened a bit. “And I’m trying to give you answers, Headmaster, but if I have no idea what you know, how should I start? So, the resurrection?”

Albus looked positively cross, and Lily seemed about ready to start hexing the girl. She had always been rather protective of the Headmaster, and she had been willing to start duels over his apparent dottiness even back during school.

“You are inquiring into the dark secrets of our time,” Albus said, his tone even sterner now. “I need to know more before I can trust you with them.”

He seemed to grow larger as he sat upright in his leather chair, his hair and beard gleaming white, the golden light of his hundred instruments surrounding him like an aura of power. Severus felt his own breath catch. Surely the girl would back down?

But no, she didn’t. She leaned back in her chair instead, ignoring the way her companion sat straighter and looked altogether more threatening than a teenager should be able to, ignoring the
heavy tension in the room and the wands that were being drawn from holsters.

“You will have to trust me, I’m afraid,” she said, utterly calm. “We cannot afford your normal policy of shadow-spinning, Dumbledore. As I said in the infirmary: I know about Ariana, and your lost love, and the origins of your wand. But now I also tell you that I know where the other two are hidden, and that their rightful heir is sitting beside me. And I ask you again: Will you challenge me on this, or will you give me what I ask for and receive the answers I’m willing to offer? Think good and hard on this, Headmaster.”

Albus looked dumbstruck, and for a moment, Severus had the wild notion that he would challenge this chit of a girl to a duel. But that was ridiculous, wasn’t it? The great Albus Dumbledore, losing his temper because of a teenager? Severus wasn’t sure what she’d been talking about, but it certainly couldn’t have that much power over him.

For a moment, thoughts raced across the face of their venerable leader, more visible than they had ever seen. Then, Albus’ features cleared and he smiled.

He gave a soft, humming sound, then reached for another lemon drop.

“Like minds often clash, my dear,” he said, and it sounded surprisingly like an apology. “I am sure we can trust your judgment on how to go about this.”

This time, it was Severus who nearly gaped. Had Albus Dumbledore really just given in? Who the hell were these people?

“Good for you,” Hermione whispered, then: “The resurrection, Headmaster?”

“June 1995,” Albus answered succinctly. “We later found out that Voldemort had manipulated the events of a tournament held at Hogwarts that year to lure Neville Longbottom, our own Boy Who Lived, away. However, Neville did not win the contest and was snatched off the grounds during the following feast. Luckily, Sirius noticed his abduction, alerted me and led a squad of aurors to a graveyard, where Voldemort had resurrected himself with the help of an ancient ritual involving…”

“…the flesh of the servant, the bone of the father and the blood of the enemy,” Hermione cut in tiredly. “Yeah, we know that one.”
“Intimately,” Harry echoed, sounding just as tired. “Did Neville survive?”

Albus shook his head sorrowfully. “He tried to duel Voldemort and was killed in the crossfire when the aurors arrived. I am afraid that we failed the poor boy.”

Harry shook his head, murmuring something that sounded like “…got lucky…” to Severus.

Hermione smacked him lightly over the head.

“None of that,” she scolded absently, then nodded once and fell quiet. The room descended into uneasy silence.

“Right,” she announced after a minute. “Got it. So our Voldemort – and I guess yours, too – spent his first years as a wizard creating six Horcruxes for himself. He grew darker and more powerful, and during your time at school…” she nodded towards Lily, Severus, Remus and Sirius, “he was at the height of his strength. However, that is the point where our realities diverge, I think. In our world, Lily and James Potter married and had a baby, Harry, who fit the prophecy just as well as Neville Longbottom did. In your world, due to different circumstances…” she gestured towards Severus, who was just waiting for her to mention the colour of his robes again, “…that part never happened, and Voldemort came for Neville instead of Harry.”

She paused for a moment and took a sip of tea. Her hand was trembling slightly, and Severus noticed that she was keeping her eyes on Harry the whole time.

“In both worlds, Voldemort was defeated by ancient sacrificial magic and lost his body, splitting his soul without intent and without being aware of it. In both worlds, he lived a half-life for many years, trying to gain power again and again. One such attempt was the opening of the Chamber of Secrets, an event that was actually caused by one Horcrux taking over a student from this school. I believe your Ginny jumped to her death because she understood what was happening to her. Our Ginny was saved by Harry, who destroyed the Horcrux and brought the evidence to our Albus Dumbledore, which in turn put him on the trail of Voldemort’s plan. It is actually quite interesting how much of your finely spun web depended on coincidences, Headmaster. If we take into account only a few of the philosophical theories about the nature of chance, it seems apparent that…”

The girl’s speed had increased considerably over the past sentences, until Harry silently reached out, took her hand and squeezed it. She stopped abruptly, as if coming back to herself, then smiled at him, slightly embarrassed.
“Yes. Sorry. Back on track now. Anyway, your Boy Who Lived died in 1995, ours survived to begin the hunt for Horcruxes together with you, Headmaster. Unfortunately, our society refused to believe in the Dark Lord’s return for quite a long time, giving Voldemort the chance to build a secure power base in the Ministry. When he attacked, it crumbled quickly, and so did most forms of resistance in our world. The Order held out longer, but many were killed in 1997 and 98. For the past months, it has only been us, and though four Horcruxes have been destroyed, our chances to get at Number five and six are slim. But since you have never heard of them, I assume that they will still lie in their original hiding places in this dimension. Since you have also managed to hold Hogwarts against the Death Eaters, your situation can’t be as dire as ours is. We’d be willing to give you the Horcruxes’ locations, of course, and it should be easy for you to destroy them, leaving your Voldemort essentially mortal, though still dangerous.”

When she had finished, the silence was complete. The whole room was staring in shock at the young, frizz-haired girl that had just handed them the solution to their problems on a plate. Could it truly be that easy? Could their answers really have arrived fully formed in their dimension through a freak magical accident? Could they be that lucky?

It was Harry who ruined the moment by chuckling hoarsely.

“It seems that congratulations are in order,” he said dryly. “You’ve just won the upper hand. Cheers.”

Again, Hermione hit him over the head.

“Appropriate humour, Harry, another concept we’ve talked about,” she hissed.

He just raised his arms in defence.

“I think I’m allowed to joke a bit after making it that easy for them, aren’t I?” he asked. “I mean, how lucky can you be, getting all the solutions just because I tried my hand on fiendfyre…”

“Fiendfyre?” Sirius thundered and jumped up from his chair. He was red in the face, and his wand was in his hand.

Hermione sent a livid glare at her companion, who just raised his arms higher.
“Oops?” he offered.

Hermione sighed, pinched the bridge of her nose, then tried a placating smile.

“We can explain,” she said calmly. “Fiendfyre’s the only thing that can destroy Horcruxes except for Harry’s sword, and so we had to learn to use it, see? Now could you please put that wand away, Sirius? Things are tense enough without…”

Then things got even tenser, because Harry Potter, the alleged Chosen One, yelled in pain, clapped his hand to his face and toppled from his chair to the ground. He was bleeding. He was convulsing.

It was all very melodramatic.
There was a lot of noise in the room. Harry was still screaming, chairs were being pulled back with a screeching noise, and Hermione’s voice was raised above it all, yelling at them to ‘calm down, please!’.

Where the others had jumped up, she had simply slid from her chair to the ground, grabbed Harry’s head and drawn him into her lap. Her quick, sure fingers removed the sword from his hip, opened a few buttons on his shirt, then she conjured a blanket and a wet cloth and started nursing her companion quite efficiently.

“Don’t worry,” she said once the ruckus had ceased a bit. “This isn’t new. It’ll be over soon and he’ll be embarrassed to have made a spectacle of himself.”

She seemed totally unimpressed by the continued screaming. And the blood. Where was that coming from, anyway?

Then Harry abruptly stopped convulsing, opened his eyes, shook his head, and sat upright.

“So I had another vision,” he remarked, wiping the blood on his forehead away with his less than clean sleeve.

Hermione simply tutted, withdrew a potions vial from one of her pockets, then coated the lightning-shaped scar liberally with what looked like an antiseptic.

“I noticed,” she then said. “It’s been a while.”

Absently Harry watched the red stain spreading on his sleeve.

“Yeah,” he murmured, then suddenly jerked his head up, grinned his wild, unbalanced grin, and climbed back to his feet.
“I’m not used to them anymore,” he explained happily. “That’s why the falling down happened. Sorry about that.”

“Think nothing of it, my dear boy!” Albus replied just as happily, and Harry actually chuckled.

“That’s what you always said when I… well, yeah, never mind.” He answered, and settled back on his chair as if nothing at all had happened.

“But guess what?” He then continued. “Good news! Neville and Luna are alive, it seems, and Voldemort is really confused about that. Seems a bit frightened, to be honest. He’s always been paranoid where unexplained immortality is concerned. Wants it all for himself, the greedy bastard.”

That remark was greeted with general silence.

“You had a vision,” Lily then said, more than a bit sceptical. She was really good at that. When Lily didn’t believe something, scepticism positively oozed out of her voice, making you feel small and insignificant and rather stupid. It was a scary superpower, and one she was really proud of.

But it didn’t work on Harry.

“Yeah,” he agreed happily, leaning back in his chair and balancing it precariously on two legs. He hadn’t fallen down enough today, it seemed. “Do you know that Barty Crouch junior is working for him in this reality, too? But perhaps that’s inevitable. He’s very miniony by nature… miniony… is that even a word, Hermione?”

Hermione just quietly shook her head.

“A vision about Voldemort,” Lily continued in the same, sceptical tone, not about to give up her most effective tool in the fight against stupidity.

“Of course!” Harry continued, sounding aggrieved now. “I never have visions about good looking girls, or ice cream, or cute puppies. But that’s the tragedy of my life, and I wonder…”

“Harry,” Hermione warned. It didn’t sound sceptical at all, but Harry still snapped to attention.

He fell silent again, but this time it was the concentrated silence of a man trying to remember something specific.

“Voldemort seems mostly the same in this reality,” he then continued, and there was a new, dark tone in his voice. “Perhaps a bit less mad – he hasn’t done all those nasty necromantic rituals, I think -, and a bit less powerful. He also doesn’t hate Neville’s guts as much as he hated mine, which is good for us.”

Hermione grinned.

“Perhaps that’s because Neville is a much more likable person than you are,” she offered, and Harry actually chuckled.

“From the layout of the cells,” he then said, again deep in his memories. “I’d say they’re at that old castle in Wales we raided half a year ago – good security, but not perfect -, and the makeup of his followers is quite different from our world… I suppose you’ve never been a spy, here?”

This last question was aimed at Severus, who reacted to it with speechless amazement. Sirius at his side laughed.

“Snappy?” He asked. “A spy? No one would believe it! I mean, look at him. Are you trying to tell us that he spied on Voldemort in your reality?”

“Until he got killed for it,” Hermione said. Her voice sounded bleak.

“Severus got killed for being a spy,” Lily repeated, scepticism now changed to sarcasm. She was certainly pulling the heavy weapons.

Hermione blinked again. She looked defeated, only her eyes were suspiciously bright. Severus felt strangely touched that she would feel that strongly about him. Also, he was kind of horrified by the thought of spying on anybody and being killed in the process.
“Yes,” Hermione now whispered. “He tried to teach us what he could, in the end, but we didn’t have
enough time and he… I found him… He only had enough time to show me…”

She turned away on her chair, and this time it was Harry who put his arm around her.

“Just to get this straight,” he said calmly, his voice strong and his eyes steady. It seemed that maturity
was making another appearance. “We are not lying. We are not dramatizing things. We don’t have
time for nonsense. In our world, every single person sitting in this room is dead, and quite a few
more. Now I may be mad, but I’m not stupid, and Hermione here is the cleverest person I’ve ever
known. So perhaps it would be wise to listen to her, because her advice might be the thing that saves
you when we’re gone. Do we understand each other?”

Sirius and Lily seemed taken aback by that, Remus still hadn’t gotten over the screaming and the
blood, apparently, and Albus was stirring his tea with a silver spoon, eyes at full twinkle-capacity.

“Perfectly, dear boy,” he agreed. “I have just a few questions, if you don’t mind answering?”

Hermione moved to disengage herself from Harry’s arm, but he shook his head and placed a hand on
her head, directing it back to his shoulder.

“You did your thing, now I do mine,” he whispered, sounding totally normal, then returned his
attention to Albus, and back was the mad grin. For the first time, Severus wondered how much of
Harry Potter was calculation and how much genuine weirdness. It was an unpleasant thought.

“Anything I can do for you, Headmaster,” Harry announced. “Well, except for allowing myself to be
sacrificed for the greater good, of course, but we haven’t had that discussion yet, have we?”

Albus seemed slightly perturbed by that, but recovered quickly enough.

“You mentioned the names Neville and Luna – are you talking, perchance, of Neville Longbottom?”

“Yes,” Harry nodded emphatically. “Your Boy Who Lived is part of my little ragtag team in our
reality. He seems to be unputdownable – unless it’s Voldemort who does the putting down. He’s
uncannily good at it.”
Both Lily and Sirius flinched at that, and as if he knew of the people they’d lost and the way his callous words had to hurt, Harry gave an answering flinch and ducked his head between his shoulders.

“Sorry,” he said, much quieter. “That was uncalled for.”

That in turn made Hermione raise her head from his shoulder and give him an encouraging smile.

“See?” She asked as if continuing an old conversation. “You don’t have to be so bloody insensitive all the time. Being friendly is easy.”

“Yes, sure, Hermione,” Harry said absently, but Severus noticed that his arm was still snug around her shoulder.

“Anyway,” he then continued. “The four of us were on a mission when we were catapulted… here, and it seems that the dimension-thingy took them along but brought them somewhere else…”

Hermione sighed, but made no effort to rephrase his words in acceptable scientific terminology. They all knew what he meant, anyway.

“…and so it’s clear what will be our next steps: One, we’ll have to find out as much as possible about what’s brought us here and how to get us back, and two, we’ll have to break Luna and Neville out of Voldemort’s prison.”

He traded a look with Hermione, grinned, and looked very self-satisfied.

“There, see?” He said. “I’m done. Planning’s easy.”

Severus stared at him in disbelief. Hermione, however, only nodded.

“We can fix the details of the latter part when we have more information about this world,” she agreed. “I’ll hit the library first thing tomorrow for part one.”
The room at whole answered this with silence.

Until Lily broke it with a voice that had moved fairly beyond sarcasm and into open horror.

“’I’m sorry, but was I the only one who heard that?’ She asked. “Are you really telling us that you plan to sneak into Voldemort’s headquarters?”

Harry decisively shook his hand.

“I was thinking more along the lines of full frontal attack,” he disagreed calmly. “For some reason, it really creeps the Death Eaters out when you come at them with waving swords and a lot of noise. They expect sneaky. Loud and confident they can’t deal with.”

“Until they portkey out and explode the whole castle, of course,” Hermione added, perhaps a bit sharply.

“Well, yes,” Harry admitted sheepishly. “But you have to admit that was a one time thing. He can’t have all his strongholds triggered for self destruction, can he now?”

“I think you’ll find that he can,” Hermione sniffed, then, suddenly, grinned as madly as Harry ever had. “However, since I’ve developed a detection spell for that kind of thing after being exploded the last time, it shouldn’t be a problem again.”

His grin widened in turn.

“You’re brilliant,” he whispered. “Have I already told you that today?”

“Wait… an attack?” Sirius now interrupted. “On Voldemort? You and whose army, if you’ll excuse the question. Are you all mad?”

“No to the second,” Harry replied happily. “I’m the only mad one in the group, well, apart from Luna perhaps, but she compensates better. To the first: I’m the army, Hermione’s the general.”
He affectionately rubbed her arm and tucked her closer against his side.

“In other words, she points and I charge. Brilliant system. Worked quite well these past years. You’re welcome to tag along if you fancy it.”

He suddenly let go of his companion, sprang up and rubbed his stomach vigorously.

“But now I really need to eat something. We’re starving, no, really, we are. Haven’t eaten anything in at least a day, and before that, well, let’s not talk about it, it would stand in the way of my appetite. Coming, Hermione?”

He actually had the gall to whistle as he left the room.
After Harry had waltzed out of the room and Hermione had followed him with an apologetic smile, informing them all that they would be in the Great Hall, eating, since they truly were starving, Minerva too left them, stating in her usual no-nonsense voice that her holidays wouldn’t wait, not even for dimension-travellers, and that they should call her if anything more dramatic took place. She swept out of the room with a disbelieving shake of her head.

Albus and the four friends sat in silence for a long while.

As usual, it was Lily who summed up their evening so far.

“Did that really just happen?” she asked her three friends. “I mean, I distinctly remember it, but it seems weird even by our standards.”

“Planning’s easy,” Sirius whispered, then began to laugh. It was a mere chuckle at first, but soon it turned into the true, deep bellow that seven years of Slytherin hadn’t been able to train out of him, and before long Sirius was howling with laughter, only the back rest of his chair keeping him upright. “Brilliant system! You can tag along!”

In the end, Lily did the only thing that worked on Sirius in this condition – she reached out and smacked his shoulder.

“Oi! We’ve had enough violence today!” Sirius complained, but he was noticeably calmer now.

“And enough dealings with mad people,” Remus remarked sharply, then sat up straighter and took over, as they’d all known he would. Sirius might be the charming one and Lily the headstrong one, but it had always been Remus’ job to organise their thoughts and plan what they were going to do.

“The magical theory behind her explanation was valid,” he said, and Severus, their resident expert on the more exotic fields of magic, nodded in agreement.

“The girl’s first reaction, unusual as it was, gives further credibility to their story,” he added. “The boy, however, might as well have escaped from an asylum.”
For the first time since the dimension travellers had left the room, Albus Dumbledore stirred.

“Quite the contrary, my dear boy,” he disagreed. “Harry Potter is as sane as I am.”

This statement led to an embarrassed silence among the four friends. Nobody would ever point it out to Albus, of course, but he wasn’t the best character reference where sanity was concerned.

“He’s unhinged, Albus,” Severus finally said, choosing this as the most diplomatic answer. “Did you not notice his mood swings? And this mad tale about being Lily’s son…”

“He's mind is wounded, certainly, and from their tale we can assume that their past has been traumatic,” Albus said. “But he has a sharp eye for detail, excellent strategic abilities and the reflexes of a warrior. I cannot yet estimate his magical strength, of course, but the girl’s ease with highly complicated spells and her grasp of theory is extremely unusual for her age, and if she accepts his leadership, I think we can expect great things from him.”

He paused, poured himself another cup of tea and delicately sipped it.

“As to his genetic identity… they were telling the absolute truth. I performed a genealogy-spell under the table – noticed by both of them, I must add – and he is, indeed, Lily’s and James Potter’s biological son.”

To Severus’ left, Lily took a sharp breath. Severus did not turn to look at her, just took her right hand and squeezed it, just as he knew Remus would be slinging his arm around her. The subject of children was painful to her, to all of them, really, and she would need time to deal with the facts. One couldn’t rush Lily, just support her quietly. And change the topic.

“So… does that mean we can trust them about the Horcruxes?” he asked, both to give them something else to think about and because this question had been burning inside him ever since the girl had brought the matter up.

Again, Albus hesitated. He himself seemed not quite recovered from that particular piece of information, and the way he clutched his teacup with both hands was not as steady as befitted his serene personality.
“I must confess that I find the idea of a soul split seven times hard to believe, even if Tom Riddle is the perpetrator,” he then said quietly. “It is a frightening thing to consider. However, it would explain much that has been a mystery to me, and it would shed light on the complex relationship between Voldemort and the Boys-Who-Lived. Tom’s unhealthy obsession with Neville would be entirely more understandable, as would the events of that Halloween night 19 years ago.”

Severus hesitated. He could see how shaken Albus was – a fact that shook him, and he didn’t like being confrontational – that was Lily’s job in their dynamic, after all, but this was too important to let it slide.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he therefore said. “Can we trust them? This could mean the turning point of the war, or it could lead us into a dangerously wrong direction.”

And Albus Dumbledore, arguably the wisest wizard of their time, just shrugged, an entirely atypical gesture for him.

“I don’t know,” he answered.

Remus nodded.

“Our knowledge of their character and background isn’t sufficient to judge their trustworthiness,” he said in the slightly stuffy way that always surfaced when he was deep in thoughts. “Too much of what they said is impossible to prove.”

“But how can we hope to evaluate their claims without access to their dimension?” Lily now asked, calm and as scientifically objective as Remus, although her face was very still and white.

Sirius, the only one of them without academic training, just leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs and grinned.

“Well, that’s easily done,” he announced. “The girl clearly has a thing for Snappy and his robes. So why don’t we just make him go down there and chat her up?”

The rest of the group stared at him, nonplussed.
“We’re talking about a complex personality evaluation,” Severus answered drily. “I hardly think it would be that easy, Fluffy.”

“Why not?” Sirius asked, grinning even broader. “She’s a pretty girl, you’re a good looking guy, and you even understand what she’s babbling about most of the time. Sounds like a recipe for romance to me. Just go and give it a try, Sev.”

Severus opened his mouth to protest once more, but was interrupted by the soft sound of Albus’ chuckle.

“An excellent idea, my friends,” he said.

While it was a relief to find the Headmaster amused and relaxed again, the reason for it was anything but acceptable. They couldn’t do this to him, could they?

He exchanged looks with Lily, who was actually smirking, and with Remus, who raised his hands in a silent gesture of defeat. No help from that side, then.

“You do know this isn’t an American spy novel, don’t you?” he then asked his best friend weakly.

“Nonsense,” Sirius replied happily. “Just get to know her. One of your smouldering looks and she’ll fall head over heels. Go get her, tiger!”

Before the innuendo could reach an unbearable level, Severus fled the room. Sirius’ laughter was still audible in the corridors.

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“Slowly, Harry. You haven’t eaten much of anything this past week.”

Severus heard the admonishment before he’d rounded the last corner of the hallway and slowed, unsure for a moment what to do. Listening in on other people wasn’t polite, but these two had been too mysterious by far, and perhaps they would let something slip if they were unaware of his presence?
So he very nearly crept the last steps to the entrance doors, pausing in their shadow. He was close enough to hear Harry sigh, now, and drop his cutlery on the plate in irritation.

“I understand what you’re going through and that you need to reassure your control, Hermione,” Harry said calmly, sounding more intelligent and understanding than he had the whole evening. “But I really don’t need you to count my calories right now. I know how to eat.”

“I just don’t want you to get sick again, Harry,” she said unhappily, and he sighed again.

“That was once, Mione. Once. And I still claim that the pork had gone bad. I’ve been on and off starving since I was a toddler, for Merlin’s sake, so I would really appreciate it if you trusted my judgment right now.”

There was a moment of utter silence.

“Sorry,” she then said, her voice small and very unhappy. “Sorry, I know, I’m just…”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed.

Again, they fell into companionable silence.

“Did you see how Sirius looked?” Harry then asked, longingly. “All happy and healthy, and without that expression in his eyes…”

“And Remus,” Hermione added. “Every single piece of his clothing looked new. And he doesn’t have the scars anymore.”

“And Snape…” Harry whispered, then trailed off, as if he lacked the categories to describe what he’d seen. For God’s sake, Severus thought crossly, just because he was wearing burgundy in this reality!

“It’s like looking into a mirror of our world,” Hermione murmured. “Only that this side is all shiny
“Yeah. Turns out me not being born wouldn’t have been such a bad thing after all,” Harry commented.

There was silence, then a smack and a suppressed sound of pain from Harry.

“Would you stop doing that all the time?” he demanded, and was rewarded by another smacking sound.

“Only if you stop being such an idiot,” she sniffed. “I don’t know if you noticed, but I’m dead in this world, and so is Ginny, and it’s both because you didn’t come and rescue us. So shut up, will you?”

Harry sighed again, then chuckled tiredly. There was the sound of cloth rubbing against the bench, then his voice again, muffled, and as Severus carefully leaned forward he could see them both sitting very close, Hermione’s head resting on Harry’s shoulder and his face half-buried in her hair.

“What would I ever do without you, my weird, scarily-brilliant almost-sister?” Harry whispered.

Another moment of silence, during which Severus slowly retreated from sight, then the distinct and shocking sound of female sobbing.

Hermione was crying. He never would have pegged her down for that sort of normal human behaviour.

“Oh Harry,” she now whispered. “What if he’s part of the Order? His parents must be! I couldn’t bear to see him, to talk to him without…”

“Shh,” Harry murmured. “It’s alright, Hermione. We’ll get through this. We’ve gotten through worse. You’ll be all uber-English and I’ll be my usual unhinged self and we’ll be back home in no time. Trust me.”

“I do,” she sobbed. “I’ve always trusted you, Harry, but this is a bit much even for me, and I really, really want Luna to tell me that it’s the Wrackspurts’ fault right now!”
Harry chuckled.

“Hey, there have to be advantages to alternate dimensions,” he mused aloud. “I don’t know… perhaps Umbitch is still alive here! We could hunt her down, kidnap her and then you could sacrifice her to the centaurs again. Wouldn’t that be fun? Perhaps they would even eat her this time, who knows what’s different here, after all!”

Hermione sobbed, but it almost sounded like sniggering now.

“Do you know that the latest studies in anthropology question the general assumption of widespread anthropophagy in early human tribes?” She asked, very quickly and with that high, nervous voice. “Researchers claim that the cutting marks found on ancient bones might in fact be a result of specific burial practices, not cannibalistic rituals. If that were true, a huge part of prehistoric ethnology would have to be rewritten!”

And Harry chuckled again, his cutlery scraping across his plate as he reclaimed his food.

“That’s it, Hermione,” he whispered. “We’ll get through this just fine. Don’t you worry.”
When Severus returned to the Great Hall ten minutes later, having spent the time pacing up and down corridors and feeling bad for spying on a weeping girl, well, when he returned, he found Hermione calmly nursing her tea.

Harry on the other hand was deeply asleep, stretched out on one of the wooden tables like the offerings of a mad cult.

Hermione acknowledged his presence with a nod, then noticed his fixed attention on her comrade.

“He’s asleep,” she explained, unnecessarily. “I don’t suppose you would like some tea.”

It wasn’t a question, not really, but Severus rather felt like tea after the talk he’d overheard, and there would probably never be a better chance to talk to Hermione without Harry interfering.

“Actually, I would,” he therefore said. “Thank you, Hermione.”

He slid onto the bench opposite her, conjured himself a teacup and filled it carefully with what seemed to be a rather strong Assam, adding milk and a good deal of sugar.

Only then did he look up and notice the surprise on her face.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Wasn’t I supposed to accept the invitation?”

She blinked, and he began to dread another comment about his hair or robes.

“No, sorry, of course you were,” she then answered, coming back to herself. “I just… I never expected you to be so polite.”

Severus was rather taken aback by that.
“Oh,” he said, not sure how to react. “It sounds as if I was a real bastard in your world.”

She looked up abruptly, and the anger in her eyes shocked him a bit. She seemed ready to lash out at him, and only the realization that it would be ridiculous to scold him for insulting himself seemed to stop her.

“You had a hard life,” she instead said stiffly. “Harder than any of us. That marked you.”

She hesitated.

“But, yes,” she then continued. “You weren’t exactly easy to live with, especially in a rather small tent.”

Severus stared at her in consternation. Why would he be living in a tent? He hated camping.

“We were on the run,” Hermione added, offering one of her explanations that didn’t actually explain anything. “Undesirables number one, two and three.”

“Ah,” Severus murmured, casting about for a way to finally ask his questions, or, more importantly, change the topic to something resembling a sane conversation.

“So why is he sleeping on a table?” he tried.

“Because neither of us has recovered enough to transfigure a bed yet,” she answered. “And he was very tired.”

Severus wanted to counter that Hermione looked tired, too, but obviously had the self-control not to go to sleep on random furniture. She did look exhausted, her face sallow, her eyes bloodshot and circled with dark shadows.

As he had in Albus’ office, Severus suddenly realized the extent of what had happened to this woman during the past day – even disregarding the war they were obviously deeply involved in,
there was the matter of the dragon, an unprepared dimensional crossing-over, the stress of awakening in foreign and yet familiar surroundings and then the necessity to encounter dead allies, not to mention explain their situation to said strangers with the faces of friends.

It was too much to really take in even for Severus, and still Hermione was sitting there calmly, drinking tea and guarding her unhinged friend’s sleep, as if all the things the universe had thrown at her would be manageable with the right attitude.

She watched him with a mixture of sadness and amusement, as if she could actually read the process of his thoughts on his face (and judging from what she’d done so far today, perhaps she could).

“Why don’t you just start asking the questions you really want answered,” she then asked. “Or rather, the things the others want you to find out?”

“Others?” he repeated rather weakly, and she stared at him in disbelief.

“You really are a bad liar in this reality, aren’t you?” she whispered, sounding inappropriately awed. “No wonder they were all laughing themselves silly at the thought of you spying. Shouldn’t have sent you to do it, then.”

Sirius would pay for this humiliation, Severus decided in that moment. He wasn’t quite sure what he’d do yet, but it would certainly involve public embarrassment. Perhaps even partial nudity or shaved-off eyebrows.

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about,” he tried carefully, not willing to admit the failing of his covert mission before it had even started.

She just scoffed.

“Please, it’s obvious,” she murmured and took another sip of tea. “You don’t know enough to trust us yet, but the information we gave you is so important that you can’t simply let things develop on their own. The others have naturally noticed that I behaved less warily towards you than to the rest, and Sirius being Sirius, he’s probably concluded that I’m sweet on you. I guess in his world it makes sense that I’d forget myself and whisper all my secrets into your ear the moment you smile at me. Which, just to mention that, won’t happen, even though you have a surprisingly nice smile. You didn’t use it much in my world.”
“Ah,” Severus murmured again. He searched for something more intelligent to say, but came up dry.

This had to be the shortest and most disastrous episode of spying in the history of wizardkind.

Hermione’s face softened.

“Look,” she said. “I get it. I would be trying the same thing if you’d suddenly appeared in my dimension. But I’m at a bit of a loss as to what we can do about this. I don’t really want all of you to see my or Harry’s memories – trust me, that’s for your own good, and Veritaserum isn’t an option because you made us build up a tolerance against it. You could try Legilimency, but, again, you taught us Occlumency, so you could never really trust what you found in our heads. So the best thing would probably be if you just asked your questions and we went on from there? There’s really nothing I can do to prove my answers to you, but at least you’d have something to go on.”

“Right,” Severus said. That actually made a lot of sense, and now that he thought about it, he was rather relieved that he wouldn’t have to try and curry favour with her. He chose not to wonder about his alternative self that obviously thought feeding Veritaserum to teenagers on a regular basis was a good idea. “My questions, then.”

He withdrew a sheet of parchment from his pocket and unfolded it carefully.

“I have prepared a list,” he began. Only to have her burst into peals of laughter.

The sleeping boy-man on the table didn’t wake, just turned on his side, murmured something unintelligible, and started to drool.

“What?” Severus demanded a bit testily.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped, giggling helplessly. “I just never expected you could have turned out like me.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?”

“You wouldn’t have, in my world.”
Severus, not sure how to react to this, decided not to and concentrated on his list instead.

Since, as Hermione had said, they would be unable to verify any facts the dimension travellers could give them, he thought it would be best to concentrate on their individual histories and personalities. When Sirius had undergone auror training, he had told Severus that many interrogation techniques tried to get at the suspect in a roundabout way. Anyone would make sure to get their stories straight where specific events were involved, but relationships, biographical development, motivations – those were the levers you could use to crack a story wide open.

So he looked at Hermione and wondered how he could surprise a genuine emotional reaction out of a person that was so unnaturally self-possessed. He decided to take the bull by the horns and nodded towards Harry.

“Why does he behave that way?”

She snorted.

“That’s your first question?” she asked. “Seriously?”

Severus shrugged. “It’s a relevant concern. He’s the Chosen One and, as you so readily informed us, a Horcrux. Your story stands and falls with that. So what happened to him?”

Hermione hesitated, her eyes darting over to her sleeping friend.

“Life,” she answered. “As to us all. I’m afraid you’ll have to be a bit more specific to get an answer.”

Severus sighed. Despite her alleged willingness to collaborate, she was obviously not going make this easy for him.

“The visions, then,” he tried, fixing on a very small aspect of Harry’s weirdness that he could put into words. “How long has he had them, and how do they work?”
“Since he was fifteen,” she answered easily. “They started after Voldemort’s resurrection. It would probably have happened to your Neville, too, had he survived. They continued for about a year, then got a bit better, but they didn’t stop completely until we nicked a protection talisman from the Department of Mysteries. When we lost that, you… your other self had already taught Harry Occlumency so he could defend his mind.”

Nicked a talisman from the Department of Mysteries. Yes. Of course.

“Why did you break into the Ministry of Magic?” Severus asked.

“Which time?” Hermione asked back.

Severus sighed again.

“How often did you break into the Ministry, and why?” He corrected his question patiently.

Hermione smiled.

“Twice,” she answered. “The first time at the end of our fifth year, 1996. We rode thestrals from Hogwarts to London and sneaked into the Department of Mysteries, where we wrecked part of the hall of prophecies.”

Severus stared at her.

“Don’t tell me that was your idea of a prank.”

“No,” Hermione said, her smile dimming. “It was a plot by Voldemort. He wanted to get his hands on the prophecy and kill Harry while at it.”

“And why, for heaven’s sake, would you fall for that? I mean, students don’t regularly decide to sneak into the Department of Mysteries even in your reality, I hope.”

“I…” For once, Hermione seemed at a loss.
“It had to do with the visions, you see,” she then explained in the high voice that indicated she was nervous. “Harry hadn’t learned to block them, yet, and Voldemort sent him an image of Sirius, being attacked in the hall of prophecies, and Harry was sure Voldemort would kill him so we tried to save him… We were young and rather stupid, you know?”

In general, Severus disapproved of things that were justified by youth and stupidity. But when that sort of event had occurred in his life, Sirius had usually been involved, too (read: the cause), so he kept his criticism to himself.

“And did you?” he asked instead. “Save him, I mean?”

Hermione averted her eyes, looked up at the enchanted ceiling for a moment, then blinked. Twice.

“He wasn’t there,” she confessed quietly. “Voldemort tricked Harry with that vision. By going on our own, we forced the Order to come after us. It was on that mission, defending Harry, that Sirius died. Harry’s never really forgiven himself for that.”

Ah. That explained the koala-impression, then. Severus’ constant irritation towards the drooling man on the table lessened a bit. For a moment, he tried to imagine a world where Sirius had died, and worse, where he, Severus, had caused it.

He shivered.

“And the second break-in?” He returned to his questions after a moment of heavily laden silence. “Why did that happen?”

“That was about two years later,” Hermione said absently, her mind obviously still on her friend. “We were hunting horcruxes by then, me, Harry and R… someone else, and one of them had been taken by a Ministry worker. We took polyjuice to blend in, Harry went after the horcrux, and I took the opportunity to nick a few useful things. The Ministry had been taken over by Voldemort at that point, so I didn’t feel very bad about that.”

Severus ignored that she was actually trying to morally justify her behaviour; his mind was fixed on a completely different part of the story.
“How old were you at that point?” He asked.

“Harry was seventeen. I had… well, my age is a bit complicated, really. Let’s say eighteen for succinctness.”

Severus decided just not to go there.

“So you were basically still children,” he summarized. “And you hunted Horcruxes? In the Ministry? On your own?”

Hermione snorted again.

“Yes,” she answered. “Ridiculous, isn’t it? We should have been busy considering our life options, or some such rot. The worst thing is that by that point I didn’t even notice anymore how messed up it all was. We’d been fighting for our lives on and off for almost seven years by then, and even that sort of thing becomes normal after a time. Not to mention that almost all the adults who could have helped were dead by then.”

“Hermione,” Severus said, following a sudden impulse and leaning forward to meet her eyes. “I don’t want to be rude, here, but why the hell did you get involved in all of this at all? You seem to be an exceptionally clever person and at least comparatively sane, so how come you didn’t back out while you could?”

She just shrugged.

Her eyes were travelling across the Great Hall with the expression he’d seen on so many former Hogwarts students’ faces over the years. There was nostalgia, remembrance of years past, longing for easier times. But he’d never seen that expression mixed with so much sadness before.

“He’s my friend,” she said quietly. “We were three Gryffindors, best friends, my first friends, actually. And it became clear very quickly that Voldemort would always be after him, and even clearer that he didn’t have the slightest chance to survive without me.”

“Three Gryffindors? Was Neville the third?”
Hermione swallowed. Her right hand moved towards the tea, then went off course and started toying with a plain silver band on her left ring finger; the only piece of jewellery she wore.

“No,” she whispered. “No, there was someone else, but I don’t know if he exists here, so I won’t tell you his name. He died. More than a year ago.”

She let go of the ring, cradling her teacup in not-quite steady hands instead. She took another sip.

“Anyway,” she said. “By the time I was old enough to realize what was really going on, I thought about leaving Hogwarts… but he’s my friend. I could never leave him. I would die for him.”

Severus thought about that for a moment, remembered how, when he had heard nothing from Severus for two weeks in the summer after third year, Sirius had stolen his father’s flying motorbike and come searching for him, how Sirius had drawn himself up to his full height in front of Tobias Snape and told him in his best imitation of Lucius Malfoy that, if he ever hurt his son again, Sirius would make sure they’d never find his body. He remembered how Sirius had been thrown out of his own home for that, but had just shrugged and called it a relief, and how they’d spent the rest of the summer camped out in the Evans’ back garden, much to the disgust of Lily’s obnoxious sister.

“Yes,” he said quietly, smiling. “Friends like that are worth dying for.”

And Hermione looked at him with something like wonder in return, blinked, sipped her tea, and smiled.

“I am glad you can understand that in this dimension, Severus.”
Sirius Black considered himself a man easily amused.

It was a talent he was quite proud of, to be honest, and he wasted no opportunity to amply demonstrate it in front of his more sophisticated companions, having found himself, alas, befriended to the three probably most intelligent and certainly most decorous people to ever have graced Hogwarts’ halls. At least he’d managed to ruin Severus a bit, even though his friend’s concept of pranks was still disgustingly mature.

But anyway. Easily amused. Proudly so.

Which was why these dimension-travellers caused him far less headaches than his friends, and a good deal more entertainment. After a long night of discussions with a paranoid Lily, a cautious Remus and a surprisingly optimistic Severus, he was actually looking forward to what chaos they would cause today.

They might decide to redecorate the Great Hall, fight another dragon or raid Severus’ wardrobe. The possibilities for amusement were endless.

But although he found both of them awake and very much active when he entered the Great Hall at dawn, it seemed that nothing funny was going to happen in the near future.

Harry was eating his breakfast with the determination of a swarm of locusts, while Hermione’s head almost vanished between the pages of a huge book. They were both still wearing the ragtag assortment of clothes they had arrived with, although they looked markedly cleaner this morning. Someone had sown patches over the burn-holes.

“Good morning, everyone,” Sirius sing-songed happily, receiving smiles from Lily, Remus and the rest of staff, a vague hand motion from the bedraggled pre-coffee Severus, and a rather choked ‘morning’ from Harry.

Obviously, a night’s sleep had restored his sanity somewhat.
Intent on proving that theory, Sirius flopped down on the empty chair to Harry’s right, ignoring the way Harry bent down lower over his plate.

“So how are the guest quarters?” he inquired casually. “And couldn’t the elves find a change of clothes for you? These are nothing more than rags.”

“Maybe,” Harry answered without looking at him. “But they’re very well protected rags. Hermione’s been spelling these clothes for years now, and her deflection spells and armoury charms are the best I’ve ever seen.”

That sounded like an entirely sensible reason for wearing tattered muggle clothes, Sirius thought disappointedly. Had yesterday’s hilarious insanity been really only a glitch?

“So when are you going to attack Voldemort, then?” Sirius tried again, hoping for something that would make less sense.

Harry still wasn’t looking at him.

“Tomorrow,” he answered, reached out and nudged Hermione. When she looked up, eyes far away under her mop of frizzled hair, he pointed to her plate of untouched toast and eggs. She nodded and reached for a slice of bread, her attention already back on the page she’d been reading.

“Today, Hermione will research the different developments of your and our dimensions while I’ll pull up all I can find about the place where they’re keeping Neville and Luna. Dumbledore has already agreed to a gathering of selective Order members that could tell us what we need to know. If everything works out, we’ll attack at dawn tomorrow.”

He nudged Hermione again, and she actually started chewing the toast she’d bitten off a minute ago. Huh. Had insanity transferred from one of them to the other? Was it a spreading disease?

“Don’t mind her,” Harry commented. “She’s reading. And revising everything she knows about fiendfyre. And trying to come up with a research schedule for today. And planning what we’re going to do. And worrying like mad about our friends. Basically, ninety percents of her brain are busy with other things right now. But this is my last chance to get her to eat before we go to the library.”
Having grown up with the aforementioned sophisticated friends, Sirius actually understood this explanation. But he was still rather doubtful about the attack-at-dawn plan.

Unfortunately, Hermione perked up before Sirius could question Harry further. She closed her book with a snap, arched her back and grabbed the final piece of toast.

“Did you mention the library?” She asked. “Does that mean we can go now?”

“Not until you’ve finished your eggs,” Harry answered.

Hermione grumbled something, re-opened her book, and reached for a fork. Sirius lifted a questioning eyebrow at Severus. Severus shrugged.

Five minutes later, Hermione’s plate was empty and she was fairly vibrating with tension.

“We could be doing important work instead of wasting time, you know,” she snapped, eyeing Harry’s half full coffee mug with something bordering on hatred.

“Hermione,” Harry whined. “Once you’re in there, I’ll never get you out again. Can’t we just… I don’t know, enjoy that we’re alive and Hogwarts isn’t in ruins anymore for a moment?”

“We can do that in the library, too,” Hermione countered. “It burned down, remember, and before I could salvage even a portion of the texts relevant for our search. This is a perfect opportunity to further our understanding…”

“Oh, alright,” Harry interrupted her and drained his coffee. “You’ve won. Library it is. Will we be going alone?”

“Remus and Severus have agreed to be my research assistants,” Hermione reported happily, already on her feet. “And from the shocked looks he’s giving you, I assume that Sirius will want to follow and question you about Hogwarts in ruins. Well done being discrete, Harry.”

Harry bit down on a rather ugly swear word, kept his eyes averted from Sirius and rose to his feet in a surprisingly graceful motion.
“You probably won’t forget I said that?” he tried. “By the way, could you ask Dumbledore to return Gryffindor’s sword to me tonight? Not that I don’t understand why people would want to keep sharp pointy things far away from me, but since we’re going to be fighting for our life and all that…”

He shrugged, artfully avoided looking at Sirius, and followed his friend out of the Great Hall.

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Hermione Granger took possession of the library with an authority and implicitness that seemed more than a bit creepy to Sirius.

She navigated stairs, corridors and turnoffs with the blind ease of someone who’d been there and done this a thousand times, and so quick and eager were her steps that Sirius, Harry, Remus and Snappy could barely keep pace.

But when she threw open the doors to the Great Library, she simply stopped for a moment, stood there with a dreamy half-smile on her face, eyes darting from shelf to shelf, from corridor to corridor.

“Hello, old friends,” she whispered longingly, and then she was in motion again, commandeering the largest table in the middle of the room, gesturing absently for them to be out of the way and then flicking her wand once in a complicated figure that had taken Sirius ages to learn.

A large number of tomes, as different in age and size as it was possible, began drifting over to the table and organizing themselves in neat stacks to the left and the right of her working station.

Hermione frowned. A few quick steps carried her over to where the restricted section began, and she slashed her wand through the air aggressively, once, twice. She repeated the catalogue-summoning spell, and this time, a truly huge amount of books detached themselves from the shelves.

Sirius suppressed the impulse to gleefully rub his hands. Had Hermione really just sliced through the wards around the restricted sections as if they were a first year’s? He smirked at Remus and bathed in the look of shock and outrage on his friend’s face – Remus was rather particular about the library.
Sirius wanted to ask the girl where she had learned to slice wards like an expert – the answer was bound to be delightful, but Hermione was muttering to herself, pacing from one end of her table to the other. One of her hands was tangled in her thick curls, the other was touching books, short, fleeting brushes against covers, lingering caresses of their spines. Despite her nervous energy, she looked happier and more relaxed than he had yet seen her.

“And she’s off,” Harry commented before casually strolling away and hiding behind a book case.

This, Sirius would realize a few minutes later, was his sanest action to date, because once Hermione had snapped out of her reverie and remembered that there were other people in the room, the situation descended into a study session from hell.

Sirius had never seen the like. And he had been taking NEWTs alongside Lily, Remus and Severus.

Hermione started assigning reading material and issuing details about the subjects of interest. As books began towering over Snappy’s and Remus’ workplaces, she turned towards Sirius with glinting eyes.

He raised both hands.

“No,” he said quickly. “No, really, I’m an idiot with books. I once managed to destroy three of them in a single afternoon, and somehow there’s always liquids close that I spill on them, and on one occasion…”

She dumped a book into his arms. He promptly dropped it.

He was rewarded with outraged glares from his two friends and Hermione, and an appreciative snicker from the invisible Harry.

Hermione looked disappointed, but the call of the books was too strong, and soon Sirius was all but forgotten.

The next hour was surprisingly entertaining, considering that Sirius did nothing more than watch other people read, and his hopes for the dimension traveller’s amusement factor climbed again.
To be fair though – what Hermione did could only be called ‘reading’ in the broadest of meanings. She seemed to inhale the books whole, swallow down huge chunks of information and move on to the next one, reading like a drowning man would breathe.

While her eyes flew down a page, her right hand would search for page references in the next book and her left would summon new tomes from the shelves or sent the read ones back to their proper places. All the while two automatic quills were hovering not far from her, jotting down the constant stream of mumbling and murmuring.

Now and again, she would throw questions at her ‘assistants’ and just incorporate their answers into her muttering, questions that ranged from the inane (“Is Gilderoy Lockhart still writing books?”) to the sensible (“Bill Weasley is still a curse breaker for Gringotts, isn’t he? Has he taken an apprentice yet?”) to the downright disturbing (“I assume that you made these advances in the Wolfsbane formula because Remus is still a werewolf, Severus? Are all the other werewolves on Voldemort’s side, or could you coerce a few?”).

When her reading pensum lost its novelty, and even Remus’ and Severus’ increasingly rattled appearance wasn’t so interesting anymore, Sirius wandered off to find Harry, only to be disappointed again, because the other dimension traveller was hard at work, too.

Harry had claimed a table close to the Southern windows of the library and was pouring over sheets and sheets of handwritten notes. They seemed to be colour-coded.

“How did you survive school?” Sirius inquired casually, nodding his head towards the force of nature that was Hermione.

Harry snorted.

“By listening to her,” he answered without looking up from his work. “And I can dodge rather quickly. Also, there seemed to be a consensus that only Voldemort was allowed to kill me. But mostly, I just listened to her and did what she said. When I didn’t, people tended to die…”

His eyes darted towards Sirius’ face and away again. The line of his shoulders grew tense.

“Has she been always so… efficient?” Sirius asked, substituting ‘ruthless’ with a more complimentary word at the last moment.
Harry looked up from his notes, his gaze zeroing in on his friend, and his face softened. He looked younger this way and strangely vulnerable.

“Luna used to say that we all have a superpower,” he mused quietly. “Neville has common sense, Luna can exasperate anyone into giving her what she wants, and Hermione is the queen of all knowledge. You should see her when she isn’t working on a deadline. It’s beautiful, in a rather terrifying way.”

“And your superpower?” Sirius asked. He found himself strangely interested in this crazy young man. Suddenly, he realized that any child of Lily’s in his dimension would probably have had him and Severus as godfathers, and he wondered who had looked out for Harry in his reality. Was it still one of them?

“Me? I survive,” Harry answered, as if surprised that someone had to ask. He chuckled, and his eyes seemed to fix on something far away. “For now, that is. For as long as it’s useful.”

Now if that wasn’t a depressing outlook on life, Sirius thought.

0o0

Sirius Black considered himself a man easily amused.

But even for him there were limits to what would amuse him, and that evening’s Order meeting was so far beyond them, it wasn’t even funny anymore.

It began when Hermione burst into Albus’s office, arms full of books, her hair a bushy crown upon her head, trailing notes and nervous energy and Harry. She started talking immediately. It went downhill from there.

Of course there were other people present than just Albus, Sirius and his friends, though less than Sirius would have expected. Severus had been quite insistent on not inviting the Weasleys, James Potter or Augusta Longbottom, claiming that their presence would only emotionally compromise Harry and Hermione.
Judging from the way both of them had behaved the night before, Sirius agreed, but he was still surprised that Albus would have listened so readily. Normally, gatherings couldn’t be large or tumultuous enough for the Headmaster – he seemed to thrive on chaos.

But perhaps the two dimension travellers brought enough chaos with them to satisfy even Albus.

The people who were present certainly didn’t seem to faze Hermione. She greeted most of them by name – Kingsley, Tonks (she didn’t even make the mistake of calling Sirius’ cousin ‘Nymphadora’, so Tonks couldn’t be so different in her world), and Amelia Bones, only pausing when she reached Arcadius Wilkes, one of their former classmates and now liaison to the secretary of foreign affairs.

She barely waited for necessary introductions to be over, however, before she plunged right back into the question of warding and development of advanced shield matrices, talking about highly complex magical theories as if they were a pastime and not something other people specialized on. The newcomers looked a bit shell-shocked. The others looked resigned.

Harry, however, was grinning as if he enjoyed the whole thing immensely. He seemed quite willing to simply listen to Hermione and nod now and then for as long as she was willing to babble on.

That seemed to be the outlook of the evening right until the large fireplace flared green and Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy stepped into the room.

Hermione’s mouth clicked shut abruptly.

Books and papers rained to the floor as her suddenly slack arms released them.

And then her wand was in her hand, and her face was twisted into a grimace of pure hate, and she hissed a single spell.

“Crucio!”

Red spell light jumped from the tip of her wand. Lucius reached for his wand with the quick gesture of practiced dueller, but there was no way he’d be able to arm himself in time. The Crucio flashed towards him, sizzling through the room, had almost reached him…
…only to be stopped by a solid shield of metal, conjured from thin air right in front of Lucius’ face.

Harry Potter lowered his wand, his face grim and forbidding.

“We will talk about this in a minute,” he told Albus, and it sounded like a threat.

Before anyone could react, he had reached Hermione, grabbed her wrist, wrestled her wand from her hand and was towing her out of the room.

“Not our Lucius, remember?” Sirius heard him whisper before the door closed behind them.

Chapter End Notes

Wilkes is a Death Eater and classmate of Severus that was killed off before Book I in the original timeline. Since Slytherins are much more active in the alternate dimension’s Order, I assume that he’s one of the good guys, here, and wasn’t killed. I also made up a first name for him.
Chapter 10

In the silence the two dimension travellers had left behind, Lucius raised an inquiring eyebrow, then drew out a chair for his wife. Narcissa inclined her head gracefully and sat, arranging her robes carefully around her.

“Quite a welcome,” she commented coolly. “Is this to be part of a new training regime for the Order? One of Mr Moody’s ideas?”

Sirius exchanged a glance with Albus, then met Severus’ eyes and pointed his head towards the door. The two of them left the office and descended the winding staircase, wands in hand.

“Any idea why?” Sirius asked

Severus shook his head, a clipped, abrupt gesture. He’d rather taken to Hermione, but Lucius had been his friend for almost twenty years, and Severus didn’t react kindly to others threatening his friends.

Neither did Sirius, and when they found Harry and Hermione, locked in a very tight embrace not twenty feet from the entrance to Albus’ office, he made his displeasure absolutely clear.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he roared.

Because while Sirius might be easily amused, he was also an auror. And, right now, a very angry one at that.

“Do you even realize what you did in there? That was an unforgivable!”

Harry raised his head from Hermione’s shoulder. His eyes were very green, and very cold.

“Leave her be,” he demanded. “Just leave us alone for a moment.”

Sirius’s anger rocketed up another notch. He would not be talked to like this in his own home, and he
was quite finished with catering to Harry’s and Hermione’s quirks.

“The hell I will!” he yelled. “I could have you shipped off to Azkaban in an instant, Hermione, and no one would question my judgment!”

The Hermione Sirius had come to know would probably have babbled about how the dementors’ powers would most likely be warped in contact with memories from a different dimension.

This new, volatile Hermione did not lift her head from Harry’s shoulder, nor did she try to turn around to them. She was crying, dry, heavy sobs that shook her body and seemed to vibrate in the silent corridors.

“Don’t you dare threaten her,” Harry hissed back. “You don’t understand what’s going on here, you have no idea what she’s been through! You’re lucky she didn’t kill him and even luckier I didn’t let her!”

“You’re both mad!” Sirius shouted. “And she’s dangerous! She shouldn’t be allowed a wand if she behaves like this! Why didn’t you warn us?”

Hermione shuddered against Harry’s chest, her hands ghosting over his arms and shoulders, scrabbling for a hold, and the noises she made were not quite human. Harry’s arms tightened around her and he began rocking her slightly, but his attention was on Sirius, and Sirius alone.

“I swear, Sirius,” he began slowly. “I love you dearly, but if you don’t leave her alone right now, you will regret it.”

“Don’t you threaten me! That girl attacked one of my oldest friends for no good reason! I will not tolerate that kind of behaviour!”

“Your friend!” Now Harry was shouting, too. “How can you be friends with a monster? How can you defend a man like Lucius Malfoy?”

“Lucius Malfoy is an honourable man, and has done more for the Order of the Phoenix than any other besides Albus!” Sirius yelled. “He’s been a loyal friend for years! He can’t have done anything that’s so bad he deserves a Crucio…”
“He tortured her fiancé to death right in front of her eyes!” Harry roared, and Sirius heart missed a beat. He lowered his wand, took a step back, but Harry was too far gone now, his arms clenched around Hermione, his face white, lips pale with anger, and his wand hand vibrating with tension.

“He tortured her! For three weeks, and when I finally found her, she was as close to death as one can be! Her blood was all over my hands, and your friend had chained her to a wall, right opposite the corpse of Ron, and he wouldn’t take him down unless she betrayed my hiding place! That’s what your friend did, Sirius!”

It felt as if all the air had been sucked right out of the corridor. Sirius met Harry’s eyes, narrow and full of wild rage, and realized that the other man was telling nothing but the truth.

“No.” Sirius whispered, thinking about how Lucius had been fascinated by Voldemort’s ideology when they had first met, how he had revelled in his pureblood status (and did to this day), how he had despised muggleborns until Lily came along and changed his mind by mere force of personality. “No. He wouldn’t.”

Harry snarled. There was no other word for the way his teeth were bared. His body hunched down like a protective cloak around Hermione. He readied his arms to move her out of the line of fire. He drew his wand hand back and up, ready to loosen a barrage of spells. In a second, he would attack Sirius, and no mistake about it.

Then Severus stepped in front of Sirius, wand nowhere to be seen. His arms were raised in a calming gesture, and his voice was rich and controlled, despite the slight trembling of his shoulders.

“You do not want to do this, Harry. Think. This isn’t your world, and it isn’t your Sirius. He doesn’t understand. You should take care of Hermione, not start a fight.”

Sirius had always admired his friend’s bravery, but never more than in this moment. Harry was shaking with rage, his wand now trained on Severus, but his stance didn’t waver, and his eyes did not move from the two dimension travellers.

And after a long, silent minute that held the potential for anything, Harry lowered his wand.

He breathed in deeply, brushed his sweat-slicked hair away from his face, closed his eyes for a moment. His hands began rubbing circles into Hermione’s back, stroking her hair. The girl still
hadn’t moved from his embrace, and still her shoulders were trembling with silent sobs.

When Harry looked back up at Sirius and Severus, he seemed almost sane again, or at least under rigid control.

“We’ll take a few minutes, then we’ll be back in the office,” he said hoarsely. “Tell them we… apologize. This was a misunderstanding. It will not happen again.”

Severus shifted, met Sirius’ eyes in questioningly, then nodded towards Harry and smiled.

“Take your time,” he said. “And if there’s anything I can do…”

Harry shook his head curtly, and without another word Severus took Sirius’ arm and led him away, back to the gargoyle.

xXx

When they re-entered the office, it was right in the middle of one of those Gryffindor-versus-Slytherin games so many of the Order meetings turned into.

„I apologize for lacking my customary wit right now,” Lucius was saying, and he sounded a bit sharp. „But are you actually telling me that the so-called ‘solution to our problems’ is, in fact, a ragtag team of dangerous children that look as if they haven’t shared in the comforts of civilisation for quite a long time? Is this why I dropped everything and came here for a secret meeting?”

“Yes,” Albus answered, twinkling happily. „Though there is also the planned attack on Voldemort’s headquarters tomorrow morning.”

Lucius sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. He looked up when Severus approached the table.

“I gather an explanation for all this will be forthcoming?” He inquired.

Sirius let Severus and Albus do the explaining. He threw himself into a chair that stood to the side,
ignoring the worried glances of Remus and Lily. While the newcomers were treated to a crash-course in dimension travels and guidebook for the interaction with unhinged teenagers, Sirius stared at Lucius and tried to imagine his friend doing the things Harry had spoken of.

There was the potential for cruelty in Lucius, he had to admit that. His friend came from an old family that had allied themselves with Dark Lords more than once, and despite the kindness Lucius and Narcissa displayed to their son and their friends, they could be cold to outsiders, their arrogance an almost tangible aura around them.

Yes, in a different world following different rules, Lucius might have done these things.

But so might all of them, really.

Sirius’ family was as dark as Lucius’, Severus’ knowledge of the Dark Arts was extensive and he commanded a ruthlessness born from desperation that had frightened Sirius a few times in their youths. Remus was a werewolf. And Lily was as fierce in the defence of her friends as she was knowledgeable of rare magic and dangerous potions.

So who could say what they’d have done or become if things had been different. The thought chilled Sirius. Suddenly, he found it harder to be angry with Hermione for the unforgivable she had used.

Twenty minutes had passed and Lucius and the others were now fully aware of both the unusual situation they’d all found themselves in, and of Harry’s and Hermione’s plans to attack Voldemort’s Welsh stronghold.

They were not amused by either.

“This isn’t prudent, Albus,” Kingsley said with his usual calm dignity, although Sirius thought he could detect a hint of bewilderment. While they had all gotten used to Albus’ somewhat erratic behaviour, he was in general a more than careful leader. To accept two strangers’ words like this was highly unusual for him.

“If you trust these people, information as valuable as the position of Voldemort’s hiding place shouldn’t be wasted on an attack that’s doomed to fail. We should gather our forces, liaise with the Ministry. With luck, this could be the turning point in our struggle…”
“No,” Harry said from the door, his voice resolute. “You could invade a thousand strongholds and it wouldn’t matter. The only way to win this war is to destroy his horcruxes. And the only people who can help you with that are Hermione and I. So you will do as we say, Kingsley.”

Kingsley bristled at being talked to like that, and by someone who barely qualified as an adult.

But Sirius was busy examining the two dimension travellers, and as always, he came up with more questions than answers. Harry was holding himself differently – he noticed that first. It reminded Sirius of that strange moment last night when he had warned them all not to take his and Hermione’s words too lightly. For one moment, he had sat before them like a man entirely comfortable in his own skin, like a man used to being the centre of attention wherever he walked.

He looked the same now, and the way his eyes moved, his hand half-curled in the beginning of a snapping gesture that would slide his wand between his fingers, told Sirius that he was aware of every single person in this room and the potential threat they constituted.

It was a look that shouldn’t have fit him, that should belong to a man much older than this nineteen-year-old, and yet it seemed too natural a pose to be rehearsed. It made Sirius wonder.

But it was Hermione who made him doubt his memory of the past hour. Despite the fact that she’d thrown an Unforgivable barely thirty minutes ago and had then spent considerable time sobbing hysterically into her friend’s shoulder, she seemed entirely unchanged.

She studiously avoided looking at Lucius, and perhaps her eyes were a bit red rimmed, the line of her shoulders a bit stiffer, but her gestures were quick and sure as she spread a detailed map of Voldemort’s stronghold and the surrounding area on the table and proceeded to fill them in on her and Harry’s plan.

What little there was of it.

“Having a more detailed strategy wouldn’t make sense,” Harry shrugged away comments to that regard. “My plans never survive the actual situation, anyway. I think best on my feet.”

“But we prefer not to be blasted to bits in a ridiculous attempt no one’s bothered to think through,” Lily retorted.
“Well, nobody’s forcing you to join us, do they?” Harry asked. “Now to our questions.”

They were surprisingly numerous and in-depth. It seemed that Hermione had used her day-long study session well, gaining a truly staggering overview of the differences between her dimension and theirs. But Harry hadn’t been idle, either, and so their discussion ranged from shield charms to the Ministry policies on Voldemort, from Voldemort’s known Death Eaters to the redistribution of their possessions after their trials, from their knowledge of Tom Riddle’s history to the Hogwarts staff of the past years.

While Harry’s and Hermione’s questions were short and to the point, and their answers to counter-questions even shorter, the Order did their best to gather as much information from them as they gave, but in the end, the dimension travellers had made a much better deal. Unsurprisingly.

“Right,” Hermione finally said and began collecting the sheets and sheets of parchment that were spilling from the table to the floor. “I think that’s all we need, apart from a private word with the Headmaster. We’ll leave for Wales at four a.m. Anyone who wishes to accompany us can meet us in the Entrance Hall.”

“He had better not come with us, though,” Harry said, pointing at Lucius, whose eyebrows were climbing to his hairline in reaction to their impudence. “I might forget he’s on our side in the heat of battle and accidentally kill him.”

Hermione just nodded. Passionately.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

A/N: I thank you all for reviewing! A few questions came up regarding the last chapters, so I’ll try to answer them at least partially in this longer note. Feel free to skip it if you think you’re fully informed.

Hopingforthemoonlight asked about Hermione’s age, which she gave as “eighteen for succinctness” when they broke into the Ministry hunting for the locket. The ‘succinctness’ refers to her time-turner in third year, the use of which changed her magical age from her official biological age, making her about half a year (?) older perhaps. Officially, she would therefore be twenty at the time of my story, unofficially, she might very well be already twenty-one. Harry is nineteen.

Several people have remarked that Harry and Hermione really need to be briefed/debriefed properly. I agree, but keep in mind that a) you only get a limited point of view in this story (what Albus Dumbledore is doing behind the curtain you will never know!); b) that Harry’s and Hermione’s interest is to rescue their friends as soon as possible, not sit around and talk; and c) that they want to protect the people from this dimension from the evil facts of theirs. As long as they can, at least. James Potter is a git. Not a Death Eater. There isa difference.

DS asked how Hermione and Harry could change so much from the characters in so short a time. Please keep in mind that my story deviates from canon during the wedding of Bill and Fleur (the summer of 1997) – the Burrow is attacked and a lot of people die. This story however takes place in December 1999, meaning that the hunt for Horcruxes has been stretched out over more than two years, leaving enough room for the characters to develop and change (and to acquire new skills).

Four a.m. found Sirius, Severus, Remus and Lily assembled in the Entrance Hall. After another heated and long discussion last night (and those were beginning to look like a fixture as long as Harry and Hermione were around), the other Order members had agreed to leave the dimension travellers to the four friends, or at least for as long as Christmas holidays left the teachers among them enough time.

Actually, ‘agreeing’ was a very euphemistic term for what they had done.

After Harry and Hermione had left with Albus for their ‘private word’, there had been a long, thoughtful silence.
“Why does Albus trust them?” Tonks then asked. Sirius smiled at her ability to cut straight to the point. His young cousin was an excellent auror and an influential Order member, even though Narcissa despaired over her lack of grace and decorum on a regular basis.

It was Remus who answered.

“We are not entirely sure,” he told them. “He seems to know more about them than we do, and Hermione in turn knows a few things Albus seemingly never bothered to share with us. She keeps dropping cryptic hints and Albus keeps reacting strangely, and nobody is telling us anything.”

Sirius snorted, and Remus seemed to realize how pubescent he had sounded and offered the others a sheepish grin.

“I am sorry. It’s been a long day.”

“I can imagine,” Lucius drawled. If the idea of his alternate self torturing teenagers bothered him at all, he didn’t let on, but that was Lucius for you.

“So they come out of nowhere, drop a few hints, know more about dark magic than is good for anybody, and the Headmaster lets them do what they want?”

When she tried, Tonks’ sarcasm was almost as good as Lily’s.

To Sirius’ left, Severus heaved a tired sigh.

“Unfortunately, it is more complicated than that,” he said. “While much about these two remains mysterious, they are indeed who they claim to be, the sequence of events that led them here is plausible, and they act like people who have been fighting a guerrilla war.”

He sighed again.

“I agree that their behaviour is abrasive and seems more than a bit mad, but while it is impossible to gather any irrefutable proof of what they are claiming, their intentions seem honourable. Albus trusts them. And, for the record, so do I.”
“You have spent too much time among Gryffindors,” Lucius commented coolly, but the thin line of his lips softened a bit. He had always valued Severus’ insights. “Let us go over the past day again, then. Perhaps together we can lift this shroud of mystery.”

When, after almost an hour, Albus returned to his office, looking tired and strangely downtrodden, they had managed to arrive at what Remus called ‘a scientific collation of all the given facts’, meaning (as far as Sirius knew) that they had cobbled together everything they knew about Hermione and Harry and their world.

What they came up with was a timeline with very many holes and even more depressing facts.

Sirius definitely preferred his own dimension.

Albus gave their list a quick once-over, and something in his face told Sirius that he could have filled most of the holes in it easily, but wasn’t about to do so.

He didn’t answer any of their questions, either.

“They have suffered much hardship,” was the only thing he said. “And they keep silent about their pasts more for your sake than their own. But I know everything I need to know to trust them with my life – and with yours.”

With any other man, Sirius would have objected very loudly and decisively. But this was Albus, who had been there for Sirius when he’d only been a boy, frightened and conflicted, Albus, who had led the Order these thirty years without faltering. Albus, who had never steered them wrong.

And so that ended this particular discussion and brought them back to the question of who would have to brave the constant presence of the two dimension travellers.

Sirius wasn’t quite sure how he felt about being saddled with two unstable almost-adults, but Kingsley’s and Lucius’ arguments had been valid. The four of them had been on the spot from the very beginning, and both of them seemed to share a special bond with Severus and Sirius. For Lily it was personal, courtesy to the fact that she had somehow acquired a son who wouldn’t look her in the eyes and seemed more than a bit mad, and Remus hadn’t budged from her side since all this started, anyway. So it could just as well be their official task to babysit them.
Still, even as an auror and teacher Sirius had never expected that babysitting would include an open attack on Voldemort and his Death Eaters. He wasn’t quite sure how he felt about that.

He was, however, quite sure that both Remus and Severus were terrified, and that Lily was only pretending to be so untouched.

But no matter their feelings, they were all ready and prepared for battle, clothed in trousers, shirts and dragon-hide vests of greyish-brown materials, wands ready in duelling holsters. Even Remus, who was the least battle experienced of the four, had taken part in enough missions and skirmishes to know exactly what he needed to get through this alive.

Sirius let his eyes travel over his friends in silent pride. He’d trained the three of them in auror procedures shortly after he’d learned them himself, and while none of the others had ever developed a professional interest in battle or law-enforcement, they were all good enough to take out any better-than-average auror.

They looked every inch the seasoned fighters they were.

Harry and Hermione, on the other hand, did not.

In fact, they looked just as they had yesterday, wearing the same ragged clothes, their usual wand holsters and the ever present small belt pouches that were as muggle as their clothing. They looked like normal teenagers, not like fighters preparing to attack Voldemort.

Well. Except for the sword of Gryffindor that was strapped to Harry’s back. And the ammunition belt that was loped around Hermione’s waist and shoulders a few times and filled with tiny potion vials.

And then there were the expressions on their faces, of course, and the way they stood there, waiting for them, as serene as if they were about to go for a walk. As if they were doing this kind of thing every other day.

“More of you than we expected,” Harry commented their appearance calmly. “Ready?”
“Readier than you, I’d say,” Lily answered with a look at their clothes. “You’re not about to go into battle like this, are you?”

“Oh, no,” Harry answered happily. “There’s a rather vital ingredient missing yet.”

Grinning widely at them all, he took a bottle from his belt pouch (a bottle that was slightly too large for the pouch, but they’d all seen too many enlargement charms to care) and started to unscrew it.

Hermione, who was lifting a similar bottle to her lips, stopped and looked at him critically.

“Really, Harry, must you?” She asked, sounding uneasy.

“No, of course not, but you know it gets worse with every single dose, and the long-term effects…”

“Well, I won’t have to worry about those, will I?” Harry snapped, and Hermione’s eyes widened. She blinked a few times, then averted her face and breathed deeply, in and out.

Harry unscrewed the bottle’s lid and took a good swallow, but before he could close it again, Severus had moved forwards and stretched out a hand.

Harry hesitated. He seemed unwilling to let go of the bottle, but despite the wild discussions about his robe colours, both Harry and Hermione seemed to accept his authority more readily than anybody else’s, and so Harry handed it over slowly.

Severus sniffed the potion, then tipped the bottle and poured a drop of it into his palm.

“Felix felicis?” He then demanded, his voice a good deal higher than usual. “You carry a pint of liquid luck around with you?”
Harry shrugged.

“How do you think we survived this long?” He asked casually.

Severus raised his palm to his mouth and tasted the drop with his tongue. He let his hand sink and stared some more.

“This was made by me,” he whispered. “But this is a highly controlled, dangerous substance! Why would I…”

It was Hermione who answered him.

“Because you knew that you might die any day, and it was essential that we would survive long enough to find all the horcruxes.”

She smiled, a wobbly, painful smile.

“You also figured that substance abuse wasn’t really our worst problem, what with half the wizarding world trying to kill us and a million galleon reward on our heads. The other you was quite pragmatic, Severus.”

As if to demonstrate that this talk was over, she lifted her bottle again and took a sip of her own – a considerably smaller sip than Harry.

“We can’t offer any of it to you, I’m afraid,” Harry said. “We’ve only got these bottles left, and once we’ve run out, we have no means of procuring more. Our Potions Master is quite dead, alas.”

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The trip down to Hogwarts’ gates was made in complete silence.
Somewhere along the way, the *liquid luck* began its work on both Hermione and Harry. Hermione was relaxing visibly, her walk acquired the grace of someone utterly confident in herself, and her head started to sway in a rhythm inaudible to anyone but her.

With Harry, the differences were not noticeable at all, and wasn’t that altogether frightening?

“Right,” he announced as the reached the gate. “Just to remind you: Hermione and I are going to side-apparate you all to a point two miles away from our target. We’ll make our way there on foot, and you’re not allowed to use any magic before one of us tells you to. Questions?”

It galled Sirius to be commanded by a man half his age, but Hermione and Harry had made it quite clear that the attack would follow their rules, and their rules only.

There would be time enough to take control when things went wrong. So he nodded, just as the rest of his friends did, and suddenly found his hand grasped and his body squeezed through the nauseating sensation of apparating.

When they re-materialised, they found themselves in a wilderness of bushes and lush grass. The landscape was probably quite beautiful, but four in the morning was definitely not the time to appreciate it, nor was shortly before battle.

A battle there was a very real chance they would lose. All four of them were carrying portkeys, of course – they had offered them to Hermione and Harry, too, who had seemed entirely disinterested. But even with those means of escape and the additional layer of protective and tracing spells Albus had placed on them, there was a good deal of risk involved in this.

Sometimes, Sirius himself couldn’t quite believe how much trust he placed in his Headmaster’s decisions.

Sirius waited until they’d been on their way for ten minutes and Harry and Hermione had fanned out and away from the group, scouting.

“What did Hermione mean when she mentioned long-term effects?” he then asked Severus quietly.

Sirius knew about *Felix felicis*’ properties – every auror had to, because while the potion itself was incredibly rare and difficult to make, now and again someone would get their hands on it and more
often than not use it for a nefarious purpose.

Thanks to being best friends with a potions master, Sirius had actually felt those properties himself – and hadn’t that been a wonderful day? But he’d never heard of anyone who’d taken it more than once or twice, and definitely not often enough to cause damage.

“It all makes sense now,” Severus whispered back. “The mood swings, the bravado, the carelessness – Harry’s suffering from an overexposure to *liquid luck*. I’ve only heard of one other case like that – a Potions Master who spent his whole fortune on the ingredients. Frequent consumption of the potion changes behaviour and causes recklessness and an unstable temperament – exactly what we have witnessed in him.”

“Brilliant,” Sirius grumbled. “So he’s not mad, he’s an addict? That doesn’t really improve things, does it?”

“I’m mad *and* an addict,” Harry corrected happily from the left. “A wizard should never limit himself to being just one thing!”

Hermione elbowed him quite hard in the ribs.

Harry just grinned harder.

xXx

You could say a lot about these two, Sirius thought some time later, even his mind-voice slightly out of breath, but they were certainly very good at running.

The *liquid luck* probably helped with that, since Harry and Hermione didn’t even have to look out for treacherous footfalls or branches that could take them down in the dark. Their steps were guided perfectly by the potion’s power, but beyond that, there was an ease to their movements, a practiced economy that made Sirius believe they had spent considerable time in the woods at some point in their lives.

Curiouser and curiouser.
They barely seemed to notice the three men and Lily accompanying (read: stumbling after) them and only halted when Voldemort’s stronghold came into view, leaving Sirius and the others time to catch up with them.

When they reached the two silent dimension travellers, Harry turned around to them, scanning them with a critical gaze, then looked back at Hermione and nodded. She answered the sign, withdrew a large grey duffle bag from her belt pouch (and that wasn’t an enlargement charm you saw every day), and vanished into the woods to the right. Harry gestured for the rest of them to stay, then copied Hermione’s actions to the left of them.

This gave the four friends time to examine Voldemort’s stronghold and each other.

“I should really take up running again,” Remus commented with an envious look at his wife, who did her three miles every other day and looked barely out of breath now.

“I should really stop surrounding myself with unsavoury characters,” Severus said drily. “Yet here I am. And for once Sirius isn’t even the worst of them.”

“Oi,” Sirius protested good naturedly, but his attention was fixed on the edifice in front of them.

Even from this distance he could feel the muggle repelling charms wash over them. To non-magical folk, this probably looked like an old and very uninteresting ruin, but they saw a medieval keep, forbidding and dark, squatting against the side of a hill like a huge ugly toad.

Now that Sirius took it in with his own eyes, the dark shapes guarding the battlements, the blue-white fairy lights hovering over every entrance, he rather had to agree with Harry. As important as planning was, their undiscovered entry into this place really depended on luck.

Good thing they had two fighters under *Felix felicis* with them, then.

“The diversion should be ready in a minute,” Harry suddenly informed them from the darkness to their left, and Sirius jumped. He hadn’t heard the other man return, even though all his senses had been fixed on his surroundings. That was some scary woodcraft.

“It is ready,” Hermione confirmed to the right, and this time Remus did the jumping. “The Instant Darkness Powder?”
“I have it right here,” Harry answered, then turned to Sirius. “I really hope you have Fred and George Weasley inventing for the Order. They’re absolutely brilliant.”

Sirius vaguely remembered that Fred and George had brought a few prototypes of shielded garments to one of the Order meetings in summer.

“Their work at Zonko’s doesn’t leave them much time,” he shrugged. “We didn’t think about it until recently.”

Hermione nudged Harry.

“See?” She whispered. “Another good thing you did – giving them that money.”

Harry shrugged. His eyes were fixed on the keep, and a rather manic grin was playing on his lips.

“Can we go blow things up now?” He asked plaintively. “I’m bored.”

Hermione nodded and raised her wand. In the distance, golden flowers of explosions bloomed to the north and west, and suddenly parts of the keep were burning. Loud pops echoed in the area, and Sirius could feel the magical signatures of wizards swarming the area – not so many that they would be a real danger for the Death Eaters and cause them to evacuate, but enough to get their attention and keep them rather busy for a while. Those decoys Hermione and Harry had planted were, indeed, rather brilliant.

And then they were off and running, Hermione casting a cloaking charm that flowed over them like damp fog, disguising their appearances and dampening their signatures, and Harry threw a black powder into the air that made sudden darkness descend on them, hiding them from each other so efficiently that Sirius almost missed how Hermione sliced through the wards of a small wooden door.

And before he had quite realized it, they were inside the Keep.
Chapter 12

Harry had been right – *Felix felicis* was indeed the vital ingredient to this endeavour. Sirius had never fought with anyone using that potion before, so the differences were all the more startling to him.

Harry and Hermione led them through the winding corridors of Voldemort’s stronghold easily, taking every turnoff and stair without a hint of doubt. Sirius wasn’t sure whether this ease was due to the potion or their former acquaintance with the place, but he pushed that question away and memorized their route instead, not caring to be lost somewhere inside this maze without a clear idea of how to get out again.

This ease pertained to other aspects of the situation just as much, namely the avoidance of most of the Death Eaters that had to be running through this Keep in great numbers. Only once did they encounter someone else, and Harry finished the man with a perfect *Reducto* before Sirius had even noticed him.

Harry didn’t bother looking at the dead man’s wide open eyes as he passed by him, and in any other situation, Sirius would have stopped him right there and lectured him on the value of human life. As things stood, however, he was rather glad that he wouldn’t have to contend with squeamish sensibilities. He had Remus for that, after all, whose reproachful stare promised a good, long talk with Harry about this later.

And then, before Sirius had fully realized that they were actually inside the building without having raised an alarm, they had reached the dungeons, a succession of damp corridors and wet cell, roughly hewn into the dark stone.

Harry killed two Death Eaters while Sirius and Severus stunned the other two, then let out a quiet whoop of triumph.

“Right in the middle of the snake’s den, and I haven’t even been almost killed yet. This must be some kind of record, Hermione!”

“We’re on a mission, Harry, not having fun,” his friend reminded him rather tersely. “Could you please concentrate a bit longer?”

“Right you are,” Harry agreed, reached out and calmly pocketed the two dead men’s wands.

He swished his wand at a door that was probably leading to the cell tract, and the lock opened with a satisfying click. He moved towards it, then stopped and gestured gallantly towards Hermione, who scowled at him and let lose a barrage of detection and decloaking spells.

“See?” Harry sing-songed. “I’m being caaareeful. And responsible, Hermione. Like a real grown up!”

“Is that an effect of the *Felix*?” Sirius asked quietly, and Severus shrugged.

“Might be,” he answered. “Or it’s just his irritating personality.”

Sirius snickered.

“So this is where Voldemort keeps his prisoners?” Lily asked, a warning very clear in her voice. She could fool around with the best of them, but she clearly didn’t consider this the right moment for it.
As always when she addressed him directly, something in Harry deflated and he avoided her gaze.

“Should be,” he answered more calmly and stepped through the door. “Unless Neville’s important enough to be kept in the throne room at all times. Then we’d be in trouble.”

“What do you mean, in trouble?” Remus asked.

Harry shrugged. His wand was trained at the corridor opening up before them.

“I didn’t really plan for a confrontation with Voldemort today,” he said. “We’d have to improvise, and that usually leads to problems. Also, I wouldn’t like the Dark Lord to know who I am and why I’m involved in this, yet. Meeting me would tell him more than I care for.”

Remus opened his mouth to further question him, but they had reached the cells now, and Harry raised a finger to his lips to silence them.

“I really hope you’re in there, Neville, Luna,” he called out. “Otherwise, I’d have trekked through very unpleasant woods for nothing, and that would really ruin my day.”

For a moment, Sirius worried that they had miscalculated.

The cells looked empty except for clichéd heaps of mouldy straw and a lot of shadows. But then a figure detached itself from said shadows and slowly moved forwards, a smaller figure trailing behind it.

Sirius’ breath caught in his throat.

Neville Longbottom looked very different from the boy that had died in his arms four and a half years ago, but his identity was unquestionable.

This man was even taller than the young Neville, but where their Boy Who Lived had been all gangly limbs and clumsiness, this Neville had grown into his body. His frame was muscled and his stance upright, and although blood was coating his face and one side of it was badly swollen, his eyes didn’t show a hint of fear or insecurity, just steady, calm confidence.

He looked much more the hero than Harry Potter.

“Harry?” Neville asked, peering out of the cell’s gloom, and while there was a good deal of relief on his face, there was barely any surprise, as if he had expected Harry to come barging into Voldemort’s stronghold any minute.

Harry grinned broadly.

“Neville,” he answered and touched his forehead the way Hermione had done two days ago in the infirmary. “Luna.”

The golden glow enveloped the group as Luna and Neville echoed their friends’ name.

“Thank goodness,” Neville then said. “I didn’t want to try it because I wasn’t sure you were our Harry, and I didn’t want to give all our tricks away… this alternate dimension stuff is bloody confusing, mate.”

“You figured the dimension thing out on your own?” Harry asked, sounding a bit disappointed.

Neville just shrugged, pointing silently at the girl by his side, whom Sirius vaguely recognized as Luna Lovegood, albeit a much thinner and older version of the girl he’d taught.
“The Nargles around here are a completely different breed,” she said in a high, dreamy voice. Obviously, explanations that didn’t explain anything were a common thing in their dimension, not just restricted to Hermione. “And Hermione made a code for it, so I was sure it would happen sooner or later. Hermione’s always right.”

Her eyes were fixed on an invisible something way above their heads, and she was smiling vaguely, as if they’d come for an afternoon visit, not to rescue her from Voldemort’s dungeons.

“There, you see?” Hermione asked from behind them, stepped forward and swished her wand at the cell door. The lock clicked open. “Some people actually listen to me.”

Luna, suddenly very focused, rushed from the cell and fairly barrelled into Hermione, arms reaching around her as if she was the most important person in the world. Hermione’s shoulders relaxed as she hugged the girl back just as tightly, and for one moment, she closed her eyes in obvious relief.

Then her self control was back, and she tenderly but efficiently detached Luna from herself.

“Are you two alright?” She asked quickly, giving the girl and then Neville a visual once-over. “Do you need any healing-potions? Antidotes? Curses broken?”

Neville grinned, walked over to Harry and engulfed him in a hug of his own. Hermione joined them a moment later, and then Luna was there, and the four of them were forming a rather strange-looking huddle in the middle of Voldemort’s dungeons.

“We’re quite alright,” Neville then said, suddenly all business. “They haven’t gotten up to very much yet, just a bit of Cruciatus and a few punches. Mostly, they seemed concerned with finding out why the hell I am alive. They didn’t ask after you once, Harry.”

“Ah, yes,” Harry said, grinning unabashedly. “It seems that you drew the short straw in this dimension, Neville. Congratulations on being the Boy Who Lived!”

“Stop it, Harry,” Hermione interrupted, just as Neville went very pale. “We can talk about it all once we’re outside this place. Do you know where they keep your wands?”

“The Great Snake is a greedy beast. He has hidden our treasures away in his nest and will protect them with his life,” Luna said dreamily, and Hermione nodded as if that made perfect sense.

“I’m afraid we won’t get them back, then,” she told them.

“They took our belt pouches, too,” Neville added.

“Anything irreplaceable?”

He shook his head.

“You had all the research, and Harry the old horcruxes. Apart from our potions and gear, there was nothing too important in there, definitely nothing we couldn’t replace. They haven’t tried to open them yet – we’d have heard the explosion even down here, I’m sure.”

“Right. Wands then.”

Once again Harry reached into his belt pouch, this time his arm vanishing up to his elbow, and retrieved a bundle of at least twenty wands, all of different sizes and types, bound together by a red ribbon.
“Start swishing and flicking,” he told Neville and Luna. “One of them should work for you.”

Neville obediently began testing the wands, only to be interrupted by Hermione, who pressed a pepper-up and a general healing potion into his hands and wouldn’t leave him be until he had downed both.

The girl Luna, however, ignored her friends’ preparation for battle, her eyes fixed on the four adults in the room instead. Sirius had been watching this unusual reunion as quietly and intently as the rest of them, strangely touched by the easy intimacy between the four, its cheerful ease in stark contrast to their surroundings.

Therefore he was not expecting the girl to walk right up to him, up until their noses almost touched. She was tall and willowy and beautiful in an ethereal way.

She was also looking at him as if she saw something not quite connected to this reality.

“I am glad you got to grow up properly this time,” she said in a high, serene voice, her blue and slightly protruding eyes fixed somewhere over his left ear.

Beautiful. Another mad one.

She moved on to Severus, eyes quite obviously lingering on his clothes and his hair, but at least she didn’t make a fuss like Harry and Hermione had done. Instead, she smiled.

“It’s good that you’ve found friends, Professor,” she said.

Remus received a kiss on the cheek; she had to stand on her toes to reach up to him.

“Thank you for trying to protect me,” she whispered. “It meant a lot.”

But it was Lily she spent the longest time on, her eyes moving from her to Harry and back. She suddenly looked very sad.

“Oh dear,” she whispered.

Lily was clearly at a loss how to react to that, but before she could come up with something, Hermione was there, taking Luna’s hands and filling them with potions bottles. Luna drank obediently, not even trying to identify the potions.

Instead, her eyes rested on Harry, who was handing Neville wand after wand, his face still split in that wild, unsettling smile.

“He’s getting worse,” she announced calmly, and Hermione’s face fell for a moment.

“Yes, I am,” Harry answered just as calmly. “But as long as I don’t climb to problem number one on our list, we can move right on to the second part of the rescue. Choose a wand, Luna.”

“But the wand chooses the wizard, Harry,” Luna sing-songed as she walked over to him, and Harry barked a sharp, rough laughter.

“We should never have let you near Ollivander,” he commented, handing her one wand after another until one of them erupted in sparks of red and gold.

Silently, both Hermione and Harry reached for their bottles of Felix felicis, offering them to their friends. Silently, both Luna and Neville drank.
“Can we wait here until it’s working?” Neville asked, his eyes darting across the room, touching Sirius and the others but not giving them any attention. Sirius felt a bit miffed by that – out of the four dimension travellers, Neville was the one he’d really wanted to talk to.

“I don’t think that’s wise,” Hermione answered quietly. “We haven’t been discovered so far, but that can change any minute.”

Neville looked at Luna, who cocked her head, then took her hand for a moment and squeezed it, before nodding at Harry and Hermione.

“This’ll have to do, then,” he said calmly, every inch a Chosen One.

And Harry clapped his hands once, rubbed them in glee, and grinned at them all.

“Excellent. Now, are you two up to a bit of rigorous fleeing?”

But it didn’t turn out to be that easy. Of course it didn’t.
All in all, Sirius wasn’t surprised when things went wrong. He was only surprised that it took so long to happen.

They were out of the dungeons and halfway through the small door they had used for entry when the sounds of the keep changed. It had been noisy from the start – being awoken to attacks from what looked like several groups of wizards tended to do that to a place -, but now the noise gained a new quality, became more concentrated. And moved towards them.

“They’ve found us out,” Hermione hissed from where she’d taken point, and veered off sharply into a corridor twisting to the left and, if Sirius’ memory served him correctly, away from the door they had entered through. “All the doors will be guarded now. Time for plan B.”

“There was a plan B?” Remus asked behind them. Lily scoffed.

“There was barely a plan A,” she commented, but her wand was out and her eyes were flickering from wall to wall.

Harry, who’d been quietly bickering with Neville about something entirely irrelevant, suddenly straightened and quickened his steps until he was at Hermione’s side. His voice cut through the clamour with ease.

“Neville, Luna, take the back, we’ll do point. You four, secure the side corridors we are passing. Fly, you fools!”

One last, wild grin, and he was off, his stride long and graceful as he easily kept pace with Hermione, running quite literally where she pointed. Now he only needed to wave his sword around, Sirius thought dryly.

But instead of doing that, or all the other things Sirius might have expected from an unhinged teenager on a luck potion, Harry started killing. Efficiently. Frighteningly so.

He and Hermione were dropping Death Eaters with the ease of seasoned fighters, long used to violence. They were working in tandem, as it was common with two fighters tuned to each other, as Severus and Sirius did, or Remus and Lily.
But where in usual teams one would concentrate on defence (Severus could raise and lower a shield charm in perfect sync with Sirius’ curses) and one on the offense (no one in the whole auror squad stunned as precisely as Sirius), neither of these two seemed to even bother with defence, as if it was a thing pertaining only to lesser beings.

They did not block spells, only tilted their bodies just so, did not shield against their opponents, just dodged and ducked and spun away, every move instinctual and yet part of a perfect choreography.

Most of Sirius’ concentration was fixed on the turnoffs they rushed by, ensuring that no attack would catch their flanks undefended, but the rest of him marvelled at the horrendous grace that was Harry and Hermione, crashing down on their enemies with the inevitable force of a tidal wave.

Hermione’s spells were complex, tricky, often borderline dark and lethal in entirely unexpected ways. Harry lacked her refined style, but made up for it with sheer power.

His curses blasted through the Death Eaters’ ranks, shattering shields and splattering blood over the roughly hewn floors. Often, Hermione would distract their opponents with something aggressive and obvious, forcing them to turn all their attention to defence and then Harry would be there, all wildness and determination and flashes of spell light, breaking through every protection and leaving only death.

A quick glance behind showed Sirius that Luna and Neville were holding their own, too, taking a more defensive approach than their friends, certainly, but still leaving numbers of unmoving opponents behind.

Sirius noticed that their spells were a good deal less aggressive than those of their fellow dimension travellers, aiming to stun rather than kill. Not that they were pulling their punches, far from it, but they lacked the almost feral, all-or-nothing attitude that was second nature to Hermione and Harry, were perhaps less used to throwing themselves head over heels into battle.

Sirius was strangely glad to see it.

The corridor ahead of them flashed white, and Sirius whipped his head around only to see a wall of blinding light erupt from Hermione’s wand and swallow two Death Eaters whole before a third could counter it, only to be beheaded by a cutting curse from Harry immediately.
“Hurry up,” Hermione shouted. “We must make it to the outer wall of the keep before they surround us completely!”

Sirius quickened his steps and exchanged a short, worried glance with Severus. None of them had been injured yet, probably because they had *Felix* on their side, but it was only a question of time.

“And how will the outer wall help us?” Lily shouted, then downed a Death Eater that was rushing towards them through a side corridor, only an eye blink before Remus snapped his shield back into place. The two were an *excellent* team. “Voldemort isn’t an idiot – he’ll have his structure warded against explosions!”

“Only against magical ones, if I know my Dark Lords,” Hermione shouted back, not bothering to look at them. “Now hurry up!”

Impossibly, they increased their speed, Sirius and the others following suit out of sheer necessity, though the muscles in his thighs burned and his breath came in pants.

As it was always the case for him in high-stress situations, his focus narrowed down to the essential: Keeping up. Keeping their enemies at bay. Keeping his friends safe.

Spell light illuminated the corridors as they crossed from the well-used areas of the keep to abandoned side tunnels, empty but for dust and spiderwebs.

Shouts and magic filled the air, Severus’ shields hummed and faded around them in perfect sync with Sirius’ hexes and curses, and they had a rhythm, here, could keep going, could make it out of here, he was sure, and Sirius found that he was grinning, just as wildly as Harry, could even feel an echo of the other’s blazing, reckless optimism…

… right until they turned a corner and found themselves confronted by at least fifteen Death Eaters.

Their group came to a sudden, stumbling halt. Hermione staggered and almost fell, but Harry had regained his balance immediately and steadied her easily.

“Oh, look,” he said appreciatively. “It’s a trap. Nicely done!”
“Harry,” Hermione hissed, and for the first time since she’d tried to *Crucio* Lucius, she sounded worried.

Harry shrugged, but his eyes and wand were trained on the Death Eaters.

“Only fifteen of you?” He asked with mild interest.

“Plus the fifteen that are coming up behind us,” Neville added calmly from the back of their group. “This was planned alright.”

“Congratulations! I haven’t been this surprised by Death Eaters for almost three days!” Harry told the white-masked men confronting them. His grin showed way too many teeth. “You must be so proud!”

If the Death Eaters were confused by this rather atypical reaction, they certainly didn’t show it.

“You will hand over your wands and accompany us,” one of them ordered sharply.

Harry’s eyebrows rose to his hairline.

“Listen to that, Hermione,” he said. “How polite they are. One could almost mistake them for civilized beings.”

“Harry!” Hermione hissed again.

“Do you really think it’s wise to antagonize us, boy? We’ve take you prisoners,” the Death Eater said, his voice almost amused.

Surreptitiously, Sirius cast a glance around, meeting his friends’ eyes as he began to ease the ring that doubled as his emergency portkey from his finger.

Loathe as he was to leave the four, it would be worse to be stuck here together, with no one to report to the Order and organise rescue. There was no way that anyone could turn this situation around
“I’ve been called many things,” Harry now said, teeth bared and eyes dark. “But wise was never one of them.”

He took a step towards the Death Eaters, his wand hand calm and steady, and the group tensed.

“He’s going to get himself killed, Sirius thought with horrified fascination.

His portkey was in his hand, waiting to be activated, and he knew the others were ready and waiting for his sign, but he couldn’t leave now, couldn’t allow this to happen. Despite everything, Harry and Hermione were barely grown up – it was his duty to protect them.

“Harry,” Hermione hissed again, but this time there was a whole message hidden in the way she spoke his name, and it had nothing to do with de-escalation.

Harry shrugged again. His eyes were still on the Death Eater.

“Nothing for it, love,” he said quietly. “You have my back?”

Hermione’s grip on her wand tightened, and she blinked several times in quick succession, as if something had caught in her eyes, but her voice was calm as she answered.

“Always, Harry.”
“Right then,” Harry said forcefully, hesitated a moment, then abruptly lowered his wand. “We surrender. Everybody: Lower your wands, and get down on your knees.”

What?

Of all the things Sirius had expected to happen, this wasn’t one.

“What?” He asked stupidly, just as Neville shouted “Harry?” in a shocked tone.

“What?” Hermione told them harshly, her eyes on Harry alone. “Remember St. Mungo’s, Neville. Sometimes, this is the only way.”

Sirius had no idea what St. Mungo’s might have to do with all this, but he would be damned if he let his friends become prisoners of Voldemort. He grabbed his portkey harder and took a deep breath, readying himself to signal the others.

But then Neville spoke, and his voice was so commanding, so full of unquestionable authority, that Sirius found himself complying without conscious thought.

“Right,” Neville said. “On your knees, everybody. NOW!”

Sirius dropped to the floor and felt the others follow his example besides him.

He saw Hermione’s wand fly through the air, accioed by the Death Eater nearest to her, opened his mouth to activate his portkey, when the corridor around them descended into chaos.

Because Harry, the only one to remain standing, had not followed his own order. He had not lowered his wand. Instead, he’d raised it higher, well above his head, and, in a gesture Sirius had only ever seen once in auror training, brought it down in a wide, sweeping arc that encompassed the whole corridor and left his torso entirely open and unprotected.

And the air above their heads exploded.
The shockwave of a sonic detonation spread outwards from Harry as its origin, hitting the Death Eaters that surrounded them at neck level.

The blast was silent and invisible, but its effects painted the corridor with gruesome colours, and many of the men and women that had fallen would never rise again.

The rest had been stunned or at least disoriented for the time being. The trap had trapped the hunters.

But not soon enough.

Harry had been incredibly quick, but not quick enough to keep himself safe, not quick enough to prevent one of the Death Eaters from aiming a vicious curse at his vulnerable side.

Layers and layers of cloth were ripped away by the spell, revealing a long line of pale skin, suddenly gaping open from ribs to knee, spewing forth blood, slicing him open like a slaughtered animal.

And this was why that spell had only been demonstrated once, Sirius remembered dazedly – it was the perfect way to disarm an overwhelming force, but only if you didn’t value your life, only if you were willing to leave yourself entirely unprotected to protect your partners, and what sane man on earth would do that?

Harry cried out once and dropped to his knees, one arm curling around his ribcage instinctually, the other trying to keep his wand steady against the Death Eaters that were still conscious.

His hand was trembling wildly. There was no chance that he’d be able to keep fighting.

But Hermione was on her feet again, wandless, a truly frightening snarl on her face. Her left hand reached out with the ease of long practice, gripped the sword that was strapped to Harry’s back, unsheathed it, and in the same fluid motion cut the closest Death Eater’s throat.

She did not even blink when his blood sprayed across her body and face.

The fight broke out anew with full viciousness, only that now the tides had turned. Few of the Death Eaters were able to fight effectively, few seemed even aware what had happened, and it was
surprisingly easy to disarm and stun them all.

But while Sirius conjured ropes and fired off *Petrificus*-spells, his eyes just wouldn’t move away from the scene in front of him, from Harry, blood swelling from between the fingers pressed to his side, swaying on his knees, and from Hermione, cutting and slicing her way through the lines of disoriented Death Eaters until she’d reached the man who’d disarmed her.

She ran him through without a hint of hesitation, grabbed his robes so he wouldn’t fall, and reached into his pocket for her wand.

She turned away from him as he crumpled. He was dead before he hit the ground.

She did not bother guarding her back as she rushed towards Harry, trusting her friend to take care of the two Death Eaters still standing – which he did – without having to look. Sirius wasn’t sure how Harry managed to keep casting spells, but despite the blood loss, he seemed as coherent as he’d been all night.

“Neville?” He shouted over his shoulder, just as Neville and Luna took out two more Death Eaters and Lily finished the last one with a well placed stunner.

“Done and done!” Neville shouted back.

The corridor fell silent.

With a sense of rising hysteria, Sirius let his eyes wander over the piles of Death Eaters – unconscious, bound, and a worrying number dead – that surrounded them. They shouldn’t have survived this. He wasn’t sure how they had.

But the force of nature that was Hermione didn’t leave him much time to contemplate. As soon as she had reached Harry, she got to work, stopping the bleeding with a few well practiced spells and knitting broken skin back together as if she did it every day.

“My *Felix* shouldn’t have stopped working yet,” she informed Harry absently while she dug through her belt pouch, retrieving another potion vial that she handed to Harry, as if she hadn’t just gone on a killing spree with Gryffindor’s sword.
Her hair was damp with blood and sweat and frizzling wildly all around her head. Her face looked as if someone had gone overboard with red paint on it.

“Who knows,” Harry grinned and downed the potion. “Might have been my head otherwise.”

She sniffed.

“The loss wouldn’t have been that much greater,” she snapped. “Really, Harry, you have to be more careful than that. Taking them out quicker wasn’t worth…”

“Not now, Hermione. Get us out of here, will you?”

She nodded.

Already, her arm had vanished elbow-deep into her belt pouch, quickly digging through her belongings and coming up with a black duffle bag that had seen better days.

“These walls are pretty thick, so I’d better make sure…” she murmured to herself, ran towards the outer wall they’d been trying to reach and blasted out several bricks from the middle of it. Into the resulting hole she wrenched a small bundle she took from the bag and fixed it there with several strong spells.

“Neville, Luna, up front. I need overlapping shield spells, two high and two low. The rest of you, guard the corridor!”

It wasn’t time to ask what they were planning, and by now Sirius had a feeling that Hermione was the likeliest person to get them out of this alive, so they just nodded and took position a bit further down the corridor.

One look back showed him Hermione standing over the still kneeling Harry, Neville and Luna flanking their sides. They all had their wands out, and their faces were grim but calm.
Then Hermione flicked her wrist, and suddenly everything was noise and bright lights and heat. The explosion rocked the whole corridor, rocks, bricks and rabble rained down on them, bouncing off a perfectly executed overlapping shield, and though Luna gave a hoarse cry of pain, the four wands held steady and the shielding with them.

When the air cleared, the cul-de-sac had become an exit.

xXx

A/N: “Fly, you fools” – Gandalf says this as he confronts the Balrog in “Lord of the Rings”
"You see, Voldemort is brilliant in many ways," Hermione was telling them twenty minutes later as they finally walked into the infirmary – limped, badly and painfully, in Harry's case, but he'd refused to use a portkey or be floated.

Madame Pomfrey was away on her customary winter holidays, but fortunately her store of potions was not.

"But he's blind to the achievements of muggle society. In our dimension, he'd protected his strongholds against any kind of magic, but add a bit of Semtex to the equation and suddenly you're getting somewhere."

She paused to direct Harry over to one of the infirmary beds, whipped out her wand and began casting diagnostic and healing spells with dizzying speed.

"Of course he cottoned on to our trick pretty fast – he is brilliant, but I assumed that your Voldemort had not. Worked out quite well, I think."

Sirius let his eyes rest on the huge gash in Harry's side, still only barely knitted together, and winced.

"Working out well looks different," he commented dryly.

Hermione sent him a glare, then began summoning potions in quick succession and handing them to Harry, who downed every single one without hesitation.

"But so does failing, and it usually involves more unattached body parts," she replied. "Are the rest of you alright?"

"We're excellent," Luna said happily and joined Hermione at Harry's bedside.

Her left sleeve was ripped and bloody, and disconcerting bits of dirt clung to her hair, but her eyes were wide and blue and guileless, and she could just as easily have come home from a day at the park.

"Nothing a shower, something to eat and a good night's sleep won't heal," Neville added steadily.

He reached out and slung his arm around Hermione's waist.

"You?"

She blinked, and something in her stance relaxed.

"Glad to have you back," she said, and her head sank down to rest on his chest for a moment.

He smiled, a warm, open smile full of affection.

"Glad you came for us," he murmured.

"Always," Hermione murmured back. "You know that."

"And I'm glad you were still alive and relatively untortured when we came for you – it's a nice change," Harry piped up from the bed.
He looked ghastly – pale and coated with blood, dark bags under his eyes and his limbs trembling uncontrollably, and the eerily upbeat sentence only made him look creepier.

In Neville's shoes, Sirius would have stayed well away from him.

But it seemed that Neville was a better man than Sirius, or perhaps his standards of creepiness just differed, surrounded as he was by madmen and –women.

His smile just broadened, he kissed Hermione's hair and sat down by Harry's side, only to be immediately engulfed in a hug. It seemed that Harry on a high was clingy, which explained the incident on the night of their arrival that Severus had termed the “koala bear photograph”.

"Everyone's alive and happy here," Harry babbled into Neville's shoulder as he clung to him. "Except for Hermione and Ginny and you, and I wasn't even born, because my parents hate each other here, which is why they're alive – can you believe it Neville? And I'm sorry your parents died this time around and couldn't give you any presents, but they loved you and your Gran probably gave you a real bedroom, yes? Have you seen Snape's robes? He's really nice in this reality, you wouldn't guess, and his hair's shiny!"

Sirius heard an irritated whisper from somewhere back and grinned, but he kept his attention on the infirmary bed and the group of friends clustered around it, because instead of reacting with frustration to this string of useless information, Neville's arms just tightened around Harry, and the look he sent Hermione was one of helpless anguish, not irritation.

"He's just coming down from it," she told him nervously, but her hands were steady as she healed the gash in her friend's side. "He'll be much better in the morning."

"I'm a mess and a freak and that's probably genetic," Harry disagreed, still talking much too quickly. "But it was worth it, don't worry, Neville, and it'll all be worth it in the end, and you'll all live happily ever after and that's the only thing that matters, just you wait and see."

Harry was shivering wildly now, steadied only by Neville's embrace, and Sirius, who as usual had no idea what was going on here, felt unease slither up his spine, as if he was missing something vital.

That feeling only increased when Neville closed his eyes in obvious pain and grief.

"Nothing will be worth that, Harry," he said quietly, and his voice was very close to breaking.

What the hell were they talking about?

"Yes it will," Harry sounded agitated. "And we agreed, Neville. There's no other way, and you promised you would accept it and not look at me like that, and I…"

"Harry," Luna interrupted calmly, gliding over to his other side and settling down beside him.

She started petting his hair, and Harry leaned into the touch almost instinctively. 

"Have I ever told you about the Kynocephalous I saw with my father in Greece? They're huge, almost as large as Hagrid, and their heads look like those of dogs. Father said…"

She continued to tell a story that, as far as Sirius was concerned, made no sense at all, but her high, sing-song voice seemed to calm Harry and the others in an almost hypnotic fashion. Harry closed his eyes and slumped against her shoulder, some of the emotional distress vanished from Neville's face, and even Hermione slowed down a bit, although she was still casting spells faster and more efficiently than most people were able to on a good day.
"Right," Hermione said five minutes later. "You're all fixed now. Time to go to bed, Harry."

Harry sent her a dark glare and although his hair was still being petted by Luna, he managed to look quite threatening.

"I'm not a child, you know," he complained. "I won't be sent to bed while the grown ups talk shop. I can be crazy and part of the team!"

"You can also be crazy and an idiot," Hermione answered archly, hands pressed to her hips. "And not recuperating properly when your energy levels are that low would be idiotic, wouldn't it?"

Still, Harry looked mutinous, as if the idea of people talking about him in his absence was unbearable to him. Hermione's stance softened.

"I'll just bring Neville and Luna up to speed, Harry," she added. "Everything important will wait till tomorrow, I promise."

And just like that, the fight went out of Harry. His shoulders slumped, and suddenly he looked as tired as he had to feel.

"Alright," he said. "I'm sorry, you're right. I know you wouldn't talk behind my back. But I'm…"

"It's just the fury-flies, Harry," Luna said soothingly. "And the cupboard in your head. But we're your friends, not your hunters."

Harry nodded, but his face scrunched up as if he was about to cry.

That was the point when Sirius decided he'd been silent long enough.

"What is going on here?" he demanded. "Neville and Luna have just escaped from Voldemort's prison, and yet all you care about is Harry?"

"I also care about Hermione," Luna cut in happily, a comment that only increased Sirius' frustration.

"This is unhealthy," he stated, beginning something that would undoubtedly evolve into a long lecture on co-dependency, but Neville, after a searching look directed at Hermione, suddenly stood and raised both hands.

"I'm sorry," he stated. "But this isn't the time for that conversation. Harry needs to rest. Luna and I need to clean up. And to eat. We haven't had anything to eat in ages."

"Of course!" Harry jumped up from the bed, and although he went white and swayed and needed to be steadied by both Luna and Hermione, his enthusiasm was back in full force. "And you'll want to see the Great Hall in its full glory! I'll show you to our rooms, come on."

Debriefing with Albus took time, mainly because Remus kept exclaiming over the level of violence the dimension travellers were comfortable with, Lily kept expressing her general worry over teenagers being put into such a situation, and Sirius kept trying to describe the calm strength Neville had projected so effortlessly.

Albus remained curiously quiet, as if nothing they had to say could surprise him. He did, however,
insist on them recounting every step of the operation and then asked for Lily to stay behind to review her memories in a pensieve, so that when Sirius, Remus and Severus were done and had reached the Great Hall, the three dimension travellers were already halfway through their meals and almost finished with their debriefing.

Pity, really. Some masochistic part of Sirius wondered how the girl had explained their dimension to the two newcomers.

"So the only horcrux destroyed in this dimension was me," Neville was saying as they entered the Hall. "Do you have the location of the others yet?"

"We've been a bit preoccupied with getting you two back," Hermione answered dryly. "And we're also not quite sure how far we want to get involved in this."

Neville nodded thoughtfully, then noticed the three men that had joined them, gave them a friendly grin and returned to his pie.

Damn it. Sirius had been looking forward to finding out more about the horcruxes.

After Neville had polished off an obscene amount of food, he leaned back and met Hermione's eyes for a long, silent moment.

"He can't keep this up much longer," he commented. If past experiences held true, there was no real need to ask which 'he' they were talking about.

Hermione sighed and rubbed her eyes.

"He won't have to," she whispered. "Back home, we only need the cup and Nagini, and then his job is done."

"That doesn't make me feel any better, Hermione," Neville said darkly, and she sent him a tired smile that wasn't amused at all.

"I know," she replied. "But it's the only answer I have for you, Neville. You know the state of things as well as I do."

"That doesn't mean we have to accept them!" Neville countered, and was rewarded with a sudden explosion of anger from Hermione.

"And you think I have?" she shouted, rising from the table and striding towards him. "Don't you think I've spent the last months worrying my head off? I've searched and researched until my mind felt like bursting, but as you well know, I haven't found a way to stop it from happening, and it isn't right to give him hope when there's none!"

"There's always hope," Neville shouted back. "There has to be!"

"Well, I'm glad you still have the luxury of illusions," Hermione hissed. "But I really can't afford them, Neville!"

"Don't treat me as if I'm…"

He was interrupted by Luna, who took his hand and squeezed it tightly. "This is Hermione," she whispered, her blue eyes unfocused but strangely keen at the same time. She was watching Hermione very carefully. "Outside she may be shouting, but inside she's always crying, Neville."
As if Luna had betrayed a great secret, Hermione's shoulders slumped and she half turned away. Neville, on the other hand, rubbed his temples and bit off a curse. Then he stood, rounded the table and enfolded Hermione in his arms.

"Sorry," he murmured. "Sorry, Hermione. It's been a long three days."

She sighed, and again rested her forehead on his chest for a moment, before pulling herself together and snapping back into action.

"Right," she said. "We'll talk about all that later, yes?"

She waited for Neville's nod, touched Luna's cheek tenderly, and stepped away from the table.

"Wait, where are you going?" Remus asked.

"Back to the library," she answered, surprised that anyone even had to ask. "Now that we've freed Neville and Luna, someone has to figure out a way to get us back to our dimension as soon as possible, after all."

"You're going to do research?" Sirius asked, nonplussed. "After all this?"

Hermione looked as if she didn't quite understand what he was on about, but Neville grinned broadly.

"That's nothing," he said, not bothering to hide how proud he was of his friend. "She once researched an antidote for a poison while we were all four dying from it. There's no one as brilliant as our Hermione."

Hermione slapped at his head painfully, but her smile was bit brighter and more carefree than before.

Severus exchanged a glance with Sirius.

"I'm coming with you," he then announced. They had decided that none of the dimension travellers should be left alone, and if Sirius knew his friend, Severus was itching to find out more about *Felix Felicis*-effects, anyway.

Hermione agreed easily, leaving the Great Hall in long strides, Severus right behind her.

With only the newcomers left, Sirius returned his concentration fully to watching Neville. Who was eating again, his face smooth and unflappable as if nothing about this whole situation could faze him.

There were so many questions Sirius wanted to ask – how Neville had grown up in his world, whether he'd been as close to Sirius as in this dimension, how he had changed from the always nervous, stuttering boy to the confident leader that sat in front of him now.

But he was painfully aware that he didn't know this Neville, and that he had no right to those answers, although he was itching for them.

So he settled on safer topics instead.

"Albus asked me to tell you all that there will be a full Order of the Phoenix meeting tomorrow night. The Order needs to know about you and the horcruxes."

Neville's eyes were sharp as they met Sirius'.
"And you're telling me that because..." He said slowly.

Sirius knew what he was really asking – why had he kept this information to himself until Hermione had left the room? But he couldn't give the answer Neville deserved – that he was their Boy Who Lived, after all, the one they'd fixed their hope to, not the strange duo of Hermione and Harry, capable as they might be.

So he took the coward's way out.

"Because the Order will want to see proof of the horcrux theory," he answered without really answering. "So if you could prepare something..."

Neville's gaze was keen and a bit suspicious, and it hurt Sirius in ways he couldn't quite understand. But then Neville nodded, accepting his answer, and turned towards Luna.

"I guess the tiara would be easiest," he said. "Would you go to the Room of Requirement with Hermione tonight?"

"Coming and going and finding evil jewels" she agreed happily. "But we should also slay the snake, or Harry might just burn the world by accident."

Unsurprisingly, Neville treated this statement as if it made perfect sense.

"You're right," he said. "Poison would be safest. We should make sure that our dimension's blade will work as well as this one's, anyway. If not, we need to open the Chamber tomorrow and coat this sword of Gryffindor's, as well. If we can get Hermione to leave the library, that is," he commented, smiling,

"And we shouldn't leave a monster free to roam in a school, anyway," Luna added. "The children are bad enough without it."

She shivered, and again Neville slung an arm around her shoulder.

"Right," he then said. "We'll be ready for tomorrow. And we'll bring proof, Sirius."

His voice was steady and left no room for doubt. Sirius felt strangely reassured.

"You're very good at this," he therefore said, thinking back on the past hours and the rock Neville had been in the torrent of events. "Organizing, I mean. Inspiring confidence."

Neville shrugged.

"I led the resistance against Voldemort from within Hogwarts for a while," he answered, then reached for the teapot and refilled his and Luna's cups. "While the others were hunting for horcruxes. It's surprisingly easy, once you get the hang of it."

It certainly looked easy with Neville, Sirius thought. And he couldn't help but notice that Harry and Hermione had turned to him for emotional reassurance more than once today. It was as if they hadn't been fully complete without Neville around to steady them, and once again Sirius wondered why Neville followed Harry without question, when by all evidence it should be the other way around.

"He's not your King Arthur, you know," Luna stated out of nowhere, breaking the silence that had fallen over the group. "He's Lancelot."

She hesitated, then added in a serious voice: "Without the hanky-panky."
Even Neville looked confused for a moment, but then his face smoothed and he pointed his thumb at Luna.

"What she said," he agreed.

Sirius sighed. "And what did she say?" he inquired, not expecting a coherent reply.

But to his surprise, it was Remus who answered, and Remus was always coherent.

"That Neville is not the true hero in this, whatever he might look like," Remus supplied. "That role falls, I assume, to Harry?"

Luna nodded solemnly, then beamed at Remus, as if he'd won an award for understanding her.

"But why?" Sirius asked helplessly. It wasn't in his nature to openly criticise or demand explanations – he was too Slytherin for that, no matter whether Severus teased him about it or not -, but these people obviously needed things spelled out in big letters.

"I mean, not to belittle him and his abilities, but Harry's clearly unstable and needs you more than you need him. He's only surviving because you three compensate for his madness. Whyever would you accept him as a leader, when you're clearly more confident and in control?"

Neville took Luna's hand and pressed it as if to keep her quiet, then met Sirius' eyes. His lips curled up in a sad smile.

"Is that what it looks like?" he asked quietly, but before Sirius could answer, he shrugged.

"To answer your question," he continued. "He's our leader because he's willing to die for us when it becomes necessary."

The smile was gone without a trace.

Sirius looked at him with surprise – that had been a pretty grim statement, even considering the group's black humour.

But then he realized that Neville had to mean the fight back in Voldemort's keep, and how Harry had used a spell that would put him in mortal danger, might even kill him, to save the others. He'd done it without a moment's hesitation.

He had to agree that the willingness to sacrifice himself like that was the mark of a leader, but… "I admire your loyalty, but how much of his actions today were due to his addiction and his recklessness? A leader shouldn't…"

Fire flared in Neville's eyes as he stood. His chair scraped back over the polished stone floor with a screech.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," he stated. "If there's no other way, Harry will go to his death for us willingly. There's no greater sacrifice than that!"

This time, it was Luna who found Neville's hand.

"That's just the sandman making your eyes feel gritty," she whispered, and after a long moment, in which Neville glared angrily at them all, he nodded.

"You're right," he agreed. "We need to rest. We'll talk about this tomorrow."
It sounded like a threat, but as Sirius watched the two leave the Great Hall, his mind was puzzling over another thing Neville had said.

*Harry will go to his death,* he'd claimed, with absolute conviction. *Not would.*

And Sirius could not help but wonder.
Chapter 15

Remus Lupin woke to the grey light of an early morning and the warm body of his wife next to him. His first impulse was to jump up and hit the ground running, as he’d done the past two days, ever since Hermione and Harry had come to Hogwarts. But then he remembered that there was no emergency waiting for them, no attack at dawn, and that Severus had taken over Hermione-watch for the morning. He had time.

With a sigh, Remus sank back into his pillows. A glance at the clock told him that it was barely seven, but years of teaching had transformed him from a late sleeper into a morning person, a fact he usually lamented each day at breakfast.

Not today, though. Today he was actually glad that he’d woken before anybody else, that his wife and most of the castle were still asleep and that he would have time, finally, to think.

Or even to breathe.

Remus was aware that his friends and family thought him fussy and complicated sometimes, too focused on control, tending to overthink anything and everything, even though they respected him too much to complain or even comment on it. He’d never been fully able to explain his need for caution to them – to Sirius, who was willing to go along with anything as long as it promised to be fun, to Severus, whose cutting intellect could analyse a situation easily and adapt to its necessities immediately, or to his wife, who could wrestle authority from anyone, take over and make it look as easy as breathing.

But then neither of them had a beast lurking in the back of their heads, just waiting to take over and destroy their life.

With a sigh and a rather useless tug at his blankets, Remus settled back into bed. The situation was unsettling for him on several levels, he understood. There were their visitors and the whirlwind of events they’d brought with them. There was the very real chance that their endless fight against Voldemort and his followers would finally come to an end, and victoriously.

But Harry and the others had brought more than their knowledge about the horcruxes with them. They’d also brought the realization that this – their friendship, their lives, their world - , was a fragile, contingent thing, slave to coincidence and happenstance, and that everything could have been different. The thought felt like a punch to his stomach.

Almost absently, Remus’ hands sought out his pillow and prodded it into shape. Everything could have been different, and events he’d considered part of the natural order, like his marriage, like their friendship, were only a single option in a multitude of realities.

But it had been real, his mind protested. How they’d met on the train, Severus and Lily both as frightened as he was, and Sirius weighed down by the expectations of his family – he remembered it as if it had happened yesterday. He remembered how they’d waited for the Sorting Hat that night, nervous but still part of only one group of children, and how Lily had argued with the hat and demanded to be sorted with Severus, into Slytherin, because she wouldn’t be parted from her only friend.

Smiling, Remus remembered how he’d tried to comfort Lily, how he’d met with her and Severus and Sirius just to make her feel less alone at first. How they had grown together and then, sometime during the winter of their first year, they had slowly become aware of Voldemort and his crusade, of
the factions within their own houses.

They’d barely been friends, back then, more acquaintances from Gryffindor and Slytherin, bound together only by Severus’ and Lily’s strong friendship, and still even this vague inkling of what they might become had made them realize that, as members of competing houses, they would have to choose their loyalties.

“They’ll not destroy our friendship,” Lily had said one evening, mostly to Severus, after she’d endured yet another day of teasing from her Gryffindor housemates. “I won’t allow it. We’ll stay friends forever, and the world will just have to deal with it.”

Even then, when she’d been nothing but a scrawny red haired bundle of enthusiasm with a tendency to babble, Remus had believed her, and had begun to love her for it.

“We can’t just take a stand and expect everything to work out,” Severus, too thin, greasy haired and hunched over, had disagreed. He’d been paranoid back then, always waiting for an attack, always expecting that anything he had would be taken away from him and always resigning himself to the loss.

“If we want to do this,” his eyes had darted from his first and best friend, Lily, to the always grinning Sirius, to the mousy-haired, quiet Remus. “We’ll need a plan.”

Sirius had stared at his new housemate in disbelief.

“Don’t get all doom and gloom, Snappy,” he’d protested. “If we want to be friends, we’ll be friends. They’ll have to accept us or we’ll prank them until they give up.”

Remus wanted to shake his head over so much confidence. To him, even his presence at Hogwarts was a miracle, unexpected and still not fully trusted in, and the idea that he might have friends, that they would stick together through everything like the children he had read about in his books, seemed too good to be real. But if they truly thought that was possible…

“We have two choices,” he had offered quietly, afraid that they wouldn’t listen and yet hoping for it at the same time. The weight of three pairs of eyes on him had made him twitch uneasily. Perhaps he’d better just tell them what he really was, before they committed to this. Perhaps he’d better just leave and return to home schooling.

“Yes?” Lily had asked, as if she truly wanted to know his opinion, and Remus had gathered all his courage and continued.

“We can either be friends in the open and alienate our houses” – they had seen how that would turn out, when Lily had ended up with pumpkin juice splattered all over her blouse during breakfast. “Or we can be friends in secret, and pretend to hate each other so they’ll leave us in peace.”

This wouldn’t be difficult for him, he’d thought, since pretending was second nature by now, but for some reason the idea had made his chest feel heavy.

Remus had looked up and found Severus’ black eyes on him, keen and suddenly very interested. Too late, Remus had realized that this last thought had been entirely Slytherin, and that a good Gryffindor – like Lily – would never have uttered it in the first place.

Which had probably been why’d protested against it. Loudly.

“Or,” Severus interrupted her after a moment, and she had backed down the way she only did with him. “Or we could change the way our Houses think, until we are accepted.”
By then they had all been staring at him.

“We’d have to be sneaky about it,” he had continued, shooting a glance towards Sirius that everyone had been able to interpret. “And we’d have to take our time. We won’t change their opinions in a week. But if we can convince them that there’s worth in the others’ way, that Gryffindors can be clever and Slytherins brave, then we could…”

“Play the greatest prank of all times!” Sirius had cut in, all gleeful enthusiasm. “We could change Hogwarts forever, and they wouldn’t even notice!”

Remus sighed again as he thought about their youth and naivety – would they have done it if they’d known how difficult it would be? Would they have even tried if they’d been fully aware of the age-old feud between their houses, and if they hadn’t been such a bunch of misfits that wouldn’t let go of their first real feelings of belonging?

And could they have ended up like the dimension travellers, caught in a war too big for them, forced through things no one their age should have seen or done? Again he remembered the cold ruthlessness Hermione and Harry had displayed the day before, the way Neville and Luna had waved away the trauma of imprisonment and torture. Could their friendship have ended like that – no more than a crutch, a lifeline, binding together four broken and cynical people that only ever expected pain from the world?

The thought made other, darker memories rise in his mind, and suddenly he couldn’t bear lying motionless anymore. He rolled over and pressed a soft kiss to Lily’s forehead, who murmured and then fell back into a deeper sleep.

While he showered and dressed, Remus’ mind continued to circle around the past days’ events, combing them for new information, worrying them for logical connections that just wouldn’t build. He was painfully aware that he didn’t know enough about the dimension travellers to form a coherent explanation for their mad behaviour – he lacked data about their pasts, about their world, about their relationships.

But he was also very aware that, if things continued the way they’d been since Harry and Hermione had arrived, he wouldn’t get any of that. And more: The moment he met them again, they’d sweep him up into another mad jumble of actions and reactions that’d leave him breathless and entirely passive. So the only way to find out what he needed to evaluate the situation – a sane, calm conversation with them – was highly unlikely.

Severus had tried and been outmanoeuvred by Hermione, who’d managed to convert him to her side without giving up anything of importance. The Headmaster had probably found out a lot more, but seemed unwilling to inform the rest of them. And while Neville appeared to Remus to be the first glimpse of sanity in this whole situation, he was as tight lipped as his maniacal friends.

How he wished he could simply sit one of them down and \textit{make} them answer his questions!

“Nothing for it,” he murmured absently to himself and bent down to tie his shoelaces. To protect his friends and his wife, to somehow stay atop this situation, he’d have to do the thing most contrary to his nature – plunge into the situation head on and try to puzzle it out as he went along.

That said and accepted, he hadn’t expected the plunge to happen quite as quickly as it did, namely the moment he opened the door to their quarters and found Luna Lovegood waiting for him right in front of it, smiling patiently.

“There you are,” she exclaimed, as if they had agreed to meet here, at 7.30 in the morning, or as if
she’d somehow known he’d exit at precisely this time.

“Yes, here I am,” he answered lamely. “And why are you here?”

“To keep you company, of course!” she answered happily. “And to distract you from your worries. I’m a great distraction!”

There were many things Remus could have answered to that, not all of them quite complimentary. He settled for staring at her bemusedly instead. Already he was feeling overwhelmed, and he hadn’t technically even left his room yet. This was not a promising start.

“Aren’t there things you need to help the others with?” He asked carefully and finally stretched a toe out of his safety zone, only to have her fall into step with him immediately, as if they’d been walking to breakfast together for all of their lives. “Hermione’s probably in the library already, isn’t she? How come you aren’t doing research as well?”

What he really meant, but was much too polite to say, was this: Why are you bothering me, strange girl?

She threw her mop of blonde hair over one shoulder, looked up at him with slightly bulging eyes, and grinned, as if she’d heard his thought just fine.

“I have the most important job of all,” she confided to him, and actually, actually raised a finger to her nose to tap it meaningfully. “But it’s a secret.”

There’s only one of them crazier than Harry, and of course she decides to befriend me, Remus thought despairingly. But he was a good teacher, and a patient man. Too patient, he sometimes thought.

“Of course,” he therefore said. “Tell me if I can help you with that, then.”

“Oh, but you already are,” Luna answered mysteriously, then seemed to decide that he was boring now, and directed her attention to the castle around them. By talking to it.

“You look a bit chilly,” she told one of the outer walls. “I wish I had a nice warm tapestry for you! I swear you are higher than the one in my dimension!” she informed the ceiling above her, then turned towards the numerous paintings.

“You’re spectacular, d’you know that?” she whispered to one of them, a landscape, mind you, with no human figures that could talk back in sight. “I wish you were small enough so that I could hide you in my pocket and take you away with me! Oh, and you! You’re a charmer, aren’t you?”

This last one was directed at one of the many suits of armour lining the corridor. Remus would have sworn that it was trying to edge away from the girl. Very, very slowly.

As for himself, he tried to endure her one-sided dialogue in silence, telling himself that it was better than having all that madness directed at him, he really did, but after five minutes, when the doors to the Great Hall were in view and no end to her enthusiasm in sight, he just had to say something.

“They won’t answer, you know,” he commented, trying for common sense to hide his exasperation. “No matter how hard you try.”

Luna just gave him a winning smile.
“You never know, Professor,” she told him seriously. “If you talk to everything, anything might answer. Anything.”

They found Neville in the Great Hall, seated in the same chair he’d occupied yesterday, and it almost looked as if he was still eating, not eating again.

In between bites of toast and spoonfuls of porridge, he informed them that Hermione had hit the library almost an hour ago and Harry had joined her to prepare their presentation for the Order meeting later tonight. Remus’ heart sank. He’d somehow convinced himself that Neville would speak for the dimension travellers, giving Remus an actual chance to make sense of what would be said. But of course Neville, loyal to a fault, would leave the spotlight to his mad friend and leader.

“And would you bring Hermione something to eat, Luna?” Neville asked, downed the last of his tea and stood. Remus was dismayed. Again he’d missed his chance to talk to the sane person. “I don’t think she’s had any breakfast at all. I’d do it, but I’m going to search the school supplies for acceptable brooms. I want to take Harry flying this afternoon, before we go to the Chamber.”

Luna nodded.

“He’ll need to plunge to his death a few times before he can survive the evil snake,” she agreed, plopped down on her chair and reached for the eggs. “Don’t worry about me, Neville. Remus will keep me good company.”

Neville smiled slyly, as if he knew something Remus didn’t (probably how tiring Remus’ day would be, and when exactly had he volunteered to babysit the girl?), bent down, and captured Luna’s lips in a soft kiss that took Remus totally by surprise.

“You’ll do brilliantly as always, love,” he told her, and she nodded again.

“But of course, Neville,” she agreed. “Bye now!”

“So you’re in a relationship with Neville?” Remus asked carefully when he and Luna were walking to the library. Well, he was walking. Luna was skipping along, swinging the basket that held Hermione’s breakfast like the caricature of a harmless little girl.

“Everyone’s in relationships,” Luna answered carelessly. “They’re all over the place. They grow them secretly in chest cavities, then release them into the wilderness.”

“Ah,” Remus said.

“Yes. That is something important to understand, Professor,” Luna agreed. Her eyes were once again travelling, sweeping the corridors lazily, now and then fixing on walls, or floors, or thin air, examining something that remained invisible to Remus He was readying himself for another session of talking-to-the-castle, when, suddenly, she stopped, turned towards him, and for one moment, her blue eyes were on nothing but him, scanning him, piercing him. It was an unexpectedly uncomfortable feeling.

“Once upon a time,” she said slowly, with real weight behind the words, and Remus wanted to groan in frustration. He didn’t have time for fairy tales! He needed to find out more about their visitors. But when had any of the dimension travellers ever cared for their needs?
“Once upon a time, there were four children. One boy that had only a toad for a friend. One boy that had grown up in an ocean of red hair and never really learned to swim. One boy that had been hidden away in a cupboard. And one girl that spent all her time in an enchanted castle made out of books. When their chest cavities were ready to release their hearts into the wild, they met on a journey. It was, of course, a magical journey.”

She stopped, and looked at him invitingly. He stared back. What the hell was she talking about?

“The magical journey would take them to a magic castle, where they would find their true family, and of course they were excited. But what they didn’t know was that it was also taking them towards a monster that had been lying in wait for years, hiding in the woods and sniffing for tender young hearts it could devour. And that while their journey was carrying them closer and closer to the magical place, the monster was scenting for them, closing in.

“On their journey, the four children met two other girls, one that was the seventh Child of a seventh son, and one that could see things no one else could. Both had been laughed at and were so very lonely, but their chest cavities, too, were straining to release the hearts they’d grown, and so when they met the three boys and the girl, they were not afraid. They did not know that all hearts must break, you see?”

Luna smiled at him, again, but there was something in her eyes that made Remus’ own chest ache surprisingly, and suddenly he didn’t mind so much that he was standing in the middle of a corridor, listening to a nonsensical tale.

“But then the monster came, and it roared and roared, and huffed and puffed until the magic castle was all blown to pieces, and all the boys and girls were tumbling helter-skelter and lying on the grass like puppets without strings. And the monster stomped up to the three boys and the three girls, and in a terrible voice shouted: ‘I am the Great, Evil Monster, and you six will not stand against me! I have eaten your fathers and mothers, I have eaten your brothers and sisters, I have eaten your friends, and you can do nothing to stop me! Your power is not great enough!’”

Luna’s smile had vanished.

Remus wondered who had told her this story and what it meant to her. He wondered if he should end this. But then she tilted up her face, and he could see her eyes, fierce and proud, and somehow he knew it was important to listen quietly.

“But the boy who’d only had a toad as friend stood firm, and he released his heart, and it was a heart of strength. ‘I will stand against you, even though I’m just a small boy,’ he said.

“And the boy who’d grown up in a sea of red hair stood firm, and he released his heart, and it was a loyal heart. ‘I will never leave my friends,’ he said.

“And the girl who was the seventh child of a seventh son stood firm, and she released her heart, and it was a heart of courage. ‘I will fight you till the end of the world,’ she said.”

Luna swallowed, hard.

“And the girl that could see things others couldn’t stood firm, and she released her heart, and it was a heart of vision. ‘I see you,’ she said, ‘And I’ll never forget what you did to us’.

“And the girl that had lived in an enchanted castle made out of books stood firm, and she released her heart, and it was a heart of wisdom. ‘I’ll trick you,’ she said. ‘All your power is no match for cleverness.’

She stopped, and looked at him invitingly. He stared back. What the hell was she talking about?
“But the monster laughed at them, and it reached out for all their hearts and crushed two of them, and would have crushed them all, when the last boy stepped forward.

“‘No,’ he said, and stood firm. And he released his heart, and it was made of the greatest love the world had ever seen. ‘This love is your death, monster’ he said. ‘And we will die together.’ And he embraced the monster, despite its terrible teeth and claws, and his love burnt hotter than the sun, and together they died.”

As abruptly as the story had begun, it ended. Luna stood silently, the basket in her hand swinging back and forth absently, like a forgotten toy. She didn’t appear to be distressed, or even bothered, and Remus wondered how her story could have touched him so and yet left her entirely serene.

“What are you trying to tell me, Luna?” Remus asked carefully, hoping that for once she’d give him a clear, meaningful answer.

Of course, that hope was in vain.

“That it’s a good thing I’m not Little Red Riding Hood,” she answered calmly, turning away from him and beginning her examination of the corridor. “Or we’d be in real trouble, Big Bad Wolf!”
Chapter 16

While he spent the morning assisting Hermione and reading up on soul curses, Remus’ mind kept puzzling over Luna’s strange story.

He was aware that she’d been trying to tell him something, though whether it was important or not he couldn’t guess, considering her rather strange set of priorities. He could even imagine that the fairy tale had some kind of link to their reality – couldn't the monster she’d talked about have been Voldemort, and the magical place Hogwarts? The especially clever girl might have been Hermione – that at least would make sense -, and perhaps Luna’d refer to herself as a girl of vision. But why were there six children in the tale, not four, and what was that strange bit about love being the monster’s death?

“Luna told me a rather strange story, earlier,” he finally said.

Hermione half raised her eyes from the large tome she was currently devouring, but he could see from her expression that she wasn’t quite there.

“I hope you listened,” she answered absently. “It usually pays off to listen very closely to whatever Luna says.”

“It was a fairy tale, Hermione,” Remus protested. “A story.”

“There’s truth in stories. Especially in Luna’s.” Hermione could be as incomprehensible as the rest of them when it didn’t concern her research.

“Listen,” she then added, rubbed her face tiredly and closed the book with a snap. “Luna’s doing what she considers important. Can we concentrate on my work for the moment?”

“Of course,” Remus agreed quickly. “Horcruxes?”

Hermione sent him a glare.

“Not everything’s about your problems, you know?” she snapped. “I’m trying to find a way to send us back to our world, and none of you has been helping me so far. Can’t your horcruxes wait till the Order meeting tonight?”

Remus took in her irritated expression, the bags under her eyes, the frizzy chaos of her hair and the way her hands were, ever so slightly, shaking, and all of a sudden felt guilty. Their four visitors were infuriating and difficult, and not even trying to make themselves understood, but then the situation was even less easy for them than for the inhabitants of this dimension.

Remus tried to imagine how he’d feel, fresh out of a war zone and confronted with people he’d seen die, tasked with researching an impossible dimensional jump and, on the long run, the demise of a Dark Lord.

Severus and he himself might have been helping with Hermione’s research these past days, but they’d been more interested in their own horcrux problem. And they certainly hadn’t been supportive of the teenagers, at least not in an emotional way.

“I’m sorry,” he said abruptly. “You must be incredibly tired, Hermione, and it’s been hours since you had something to eat. Why don’t you take a break and a nap?”
But if anything, her glare grew even more irritated.

“I want you to listen to my theories, not mollycoddle me,” she said coolly. “We don’t have time for creature comforts, Remus, and Harry’s and Neville’s harassment is bad enough without you adding to it! I mean, really, we might be on the threshold of a major breakthrough in magical theory, here, not to mention that my world hangs in the balance, and I certainly can’t be bothered with eating and sleeping when…”

Signalling his defeat, Remus raised both hands in a gesture of peace. He’d tried. If she didn’t want to be treated like a human being, well, who was he to force it on her?

“What did you want to show me, then?” he interrupted her quickly.

She stopped her tirade in mid-sentence and reached for a leather-bound notebook near her left elbow, sliding it over to him.

“Take a look at this, will you?”

He took a look. Then another, longer one. Then he shook his head, pulling the notes closer and flipping through the pages one by one. Twice. He could feel his own eyebrows rising higher, his forehead creasing in a frown, and knew that he was wearing what Lily had dubbed his ‘paradigm-shift’ face.

“I don’t…” he began, then got lost in the notes again as their meaning slowly unfolded before his eyes. “How did you even… This is…”

This was a set of diagrams and formulae so complex as Remus had seldom seen, and never outside advanced magical theory books. Here and there notes were scribbled in the margins, the names of eminent researchers or important runic principles, but they were so short and cryptic that they didn’t help Remus much. Well versed in ancient runes and magical theory as he was, he’d never been an expert, and certainly not in transdimensional theory.

What made the whole thing all the more aggravating was that these highly complex thoughts were written out in the simplistic rune system taught at Hogwarts, not the more elaborate language used by researchers who actually worked on this sort of thing. It looked like the notes of someone who’d never received a formal education beyond sixth or seventh year, but had used raw genius to make things work for them, anyway.

It looked, in one word, impossible. And pretty much indecipherable, too.

Remus chanced a glance at Hermione, who was already working her way through another book, yet tapping her finger on the polished wood of the table in impatience all the same. He decided that stalling wouldn’t be of any use.

“Explain it to me. Slowly, as if I were your student” he therefore said, and, as it had been before with Luna in the corridor, was suddenly treated to having the full attention of one of the travellers directed at him. If possible, it was even more unsettling with Hermione.

Her eyes darted to his hands, his eyes, his mouth, to her notes and back to his eyes, and something softened in her face.

“You were probably the best teacher I ever had,” she whispered disconnectedly, but continued before he could latch onto this snippet of information.

“Okay,” she said. “As you can see, I have gathered a list of all documented and hypothesised
instances of dimensional rifts and organised them by their causes. There are no cases or studies concerning fiendfyre – unsurprisingly, since it is both illegal and almost never used -, but by extrapolating more abstract categories of transdimensional activity, I think we can pose the assumption that the reality-negating effects of fiendfyre interacted with an artefact possessing substantial transmogrifying powers. The resulting chain reaction of power release, comparable, perhaps, to a matter-antimatter-explosion, caused the fabric of realities to rip and form the tunnel that brought us here. Yes?”

Remus nodded. The numbers made more sense now and were solid, as far as a first cursory examination could tell. He was, in fact, surprised by how organized her research suddenly appeared. Despite her frenzied way of researching, she was certainly one of the more structured thinkers he’d met, but that didn’t surprise him much, considering the rigid control over her emotions she’d displayed more than once.

“So in a next step,” she continued. “I’ve worked out a typology of artefacts that might feature the necessary magical attributes. That’s were I got stuck.”

Again, Remus nodded.

“Because you don’t possess a comprehensive list of the artefacts stored in that vault.”

“Exactly.”

Remus hesitated for a moment, mentally working through the Orders’ contacts.

“I think I can help you with that,” he then offered. “With a bit of preparation, we might be able to enter the vault, or at least get our hands on such a list. This is, of course, assuming that the vault contents in both dimensions would be similar.”

Hermione agreed.

“The Lestranges are still allied with Voldemort and are traditionally labelled ‘dark’?”

“Yes. Although we could never sufficiently prove that they’re Death Eaters.”

“Then it’s something we can work with. More than I usually have, actually.”

She grinned.

“And you’ll have to enter that vault anyway, eventually. Unless things have played out differently in your dimension, it hosts one of Voldemort’s horcruxes.”

The urge to ask for more information was almost irresistible, but Hermione hadn’t reacted well to that before, so Remus resigned himself to waiting until evening.

“There’s one other problem,” he offered instead, and Hermione’s nod confirmed that she was aware of it, too.

“How to identify the two specific dimensions that have been connected and ensure that any dimensional rift caused by us would lead to our home world? Yes, I’m working on that. I haven’t got a solution, though. Not yet.”

Remus nodded. She’d come surprisingly far given the little time she’d had and with the invasion of Voldemort’s stronghold in-between.
“We have time,” he offered. “We can work it out together.”

He’d meant it to be a supporting comment, but instead of looking relieved, Hermione’s eyes darted towards the windows of the library that looked out towards the Quidditch pitch. They couldn’t see or hear Neville and Harry flying, but it wasn’t hard to deduce her trail of thought.

“No,” she whispered, all scientific enthusiasm gone from her voice. “Of all the things we don’t have, time is our greatest enemy, Remus.”

“They are late,” Severus remarked, exchanging a quick look with Sirius. “We shouldn’t have let them go on their own.”

“They insisted,” Sirius said sheepishly, visibly aware that this wasn’t a very good argument when coming from a seasoned auror and teacher. “Harry told me that we’d only be in the way and get turned into stone and then they would have to explain that to the rest of you. He was very positive about it.”

“…turned into stone,” Lily echoed. “You don’t think they were serious about there being a monster?” She sounded worried, even more worried than usual.

“I think ‘monster’ is their code for anything bad,” Remus answered to calm her. “Luna told me a strange story this morning, about a monster huffing and puffing down a group of children. We’d know if there was anything dangerous hiding in Hogwarts, wouldn’t we?”

“Yes, you wouldn’t,” Luna piped up from where she’d sat quietly for the past ten minutes, watching them fidget. She’d turned up seven o’clock sharp, wearing a very rumpled dress made of light blue cotton, and, for no reason discernible, a huge pink flower in her hair.

“That’s not helpful, Luna,” Remus said.

“No,” she agreed happily. “But it’s still true.”

“Then why aren’t you down there helping them fight the monster?” Sirius inquired a bit testily. As amused as he was by the other dimension travellers, there was something about Luna that seemed to put him on edge. “Don’t they need you?”

Luna, not hurt in the least, just shrugged.

“I try to talk to monsters, and sometimes monsters try to eat me because of that. So I’m not allowed to go near monsters. The others don’t want me to get hurt.”

“That sounds like a sensible precaution,” Severus commented. He was eyeing the clock on the mantelpiece again. Albus had left almost an hour ago, intent on getting the Order meeting started and informing their friends of the latest developments so they’d be prepared for Harry’s special branch of magic, but they’d planned for the rest of them to arrive at seven o’clock, and if they wanted the Order to agree that going after the horcruxes was the most promising course of action, being late wasn’t a promising start.
“A wizard is never late,” Luna piped up again. “Nor is he early. He arrives precisely when he means to.”

As if on cue, the door to the Headmaster’s office burst open and the three other teenagers tumbled in. They were still attired in their worn and ragged layers of muggle clothing, Neville’s eye was puffy and swollen, and Hermione’s hair looked as if birds had nested in it.

Remus’ heart sank again. How would they ever convince the Order of taking these people seriously?

“Right,” Harry panted. “We’re ready to go… sorry we’re late… that thing was even bigger than I remembered.”

“What thing?” Remus asked. He didn’t want to know, not really, but the monster-comment had been itching him all afternoon.

“Basilisk, from the Chamber of Secrets,” Harry answered absently, just as Hermione reached for his head.

“You missed a bit, there,” she said disgustedly, and carefully removed what looked like a piece of snakeskin from Harry’s hair before swishing her wand. “Really, Harry, your cleaning charms are a mess.”

“That’s what I have you for,” Harry answered, grinning, and she cocked her head.

“Really?” She asked. “I thought you had me for blinding giant snakes while you run them through?”

“Ah, but don’t you always tell me that women are able to multitask?” Harry grinned, then became aware of the rest of the room staring at them. “Right. Order meeting. Are we ready?”

Not really, Remus wanted to answer. He was reeling from this mad bit of dialogue, and from the looks of Sirius and the others, they didn’t fare much better. He remembered dimly that Harry and Hermione had mentioned the Chamber of Secrets before, but it had been lost in the whirl of revelations the four had brought with them.

He exchanged a helpless glance with Lily, who looked pale, and another one with Sirius, who just shrugged. Better take it in stride, his eyes seemed to say, or we’ll never get through the meeting.

But considering the way Hermione was scribbling into one of her notebooks again, the way Neville was dazedly staring into space and Harry was snickering madly, his hands gesturing wildly in a tale no one could ever have hoped to understand, the chances for reaching the Order meeting, not to mention a positive outcome, were slim to nonexistent.

Later, Remus couldn’t quite explain why he’d done it, but he found himself half turning around and sending Luna a pleading look. Luna, who thought talking to monsters was a fitting subject for conversation. What was he even hoping to achieve?

But Luna caught his eye, and a smile burst on her face like a sunrise, and she rose from her chair and walked over to her friends, catching Harry’s hands in hers and nudging Hermione with her elbow.

“You need to be grown-ups now,” she told them. “People want their mirrors to flatter them, not tell them the truth.”

And as if she’d used a spell on them, her friends changed abruptly. Harry ceased his antics, Neville snapped to attention, and Hermione closed her notebook, surveyed the two boys and then nodded towards Luna.
“Yes. Of course. I’ll take care of it, dear,” she said, and then, directed at Remus and the rest: “We can leave.”

Not quite sure what had brought about this change, but relieved that it had happened and hoping it would last, Remus strode over to the fireplace and had already raised his hand to throw the floo powder into the fire, when a rather worrying thought occurred to him.

“You do know that this meeting will take place at Malfoy Manor, don’t you?” he asked, thinking back to their first meeting with Lucius and the disaster that had turned out to be.

Harry and Hermione exchanged a long, unreadable look, then Harry half turned and glared at Albus’ desk, as if he could blame it for the Headmaster’s sins in his absence.

“Yes,” he said darkly. “That was explained to us. Don’t worry, we probably won’t kill anybody.”

He exchanged a look with his three friends, nodding for Luna to return to Remus’ side, then took Neville’s and Hermione’s arms to move them into another corner of the Headmaster’s office.

“Go on without us,” he told the rest of them. “We’ll follow in a minute.”

Severus and Lily looked ready to protest, but Luna simply took Remus’ hand and dragged him over to the fireplace, and after a minute, Remus’ friends followed and started to floo through to the Malfoys’ entrance hall.

“Why do they send you ahead?” Remus asked Luna. It was a strange decision for this close-knit group, to let Luna walk into what they probably perceived as the snake’s den with only Remus and the others for protection.

“They need to be lions tonight,” Luna answered solemnly, eyeing the mantelpiece and the floo powder as if it was whispering threats to her. “I’m not even a proper eagle.”

She looked up at him and smiled.

“More like a little sparrow,” she said conspiratorially. “that perches on monsters’ horns and wolves’ backs and can never be caught.”

She breathed in deeply, straightened her shoulders and repositioned the flower in her hair, then took a handful of floo powder and stepped towards the fire.

“Except for once,” she whispered. “Once I was caught.”

And then she was gone.

When Remus stepped out of the fireplace, into the grand and expensively furnished entrance hall of Malfoy Manor, he found her waiting for him right by its side, as if she’d only moved as far as absolutely necessary. She was hugging herself, gaze darting across the room with none of her usual confidence. Without thought, he reached out and took her hand again.

Her eyes snapped up to him, and for a moment she looked almost feral. But then her face relaxed into something like her usual dreamy expression. She squeezed his hand, and he squeezed back.

“This isn’t a good place for us,” Luna confided in him as she examined the black and white marble floors and the crystal chandelier with something akin to distaste.

“I always rather liked it,” Remus answered, attempting to steer them into the realms of polite
conversation before other Order members could overhear them. They were alone in the entrance hall for the moment, but that could change any minute, and he didn’t want the other members’ first impression to be that of a mad little girl. “It might be a bit intimidating at first, but it has a lot of charm once you get to know the place.”

Luna sent him a mild look of reproach, then smiled sadly.

“The last time I was here,” she said in her high, serene voice. “They killed my father in front of my eyes. I didn’t much care for it. Although the carpets were very nice.”
Chapter 17

Remus felt as if his brain had short-circuited. He knew that gaping at Luna in utter horror wasn’t the adult or appropriate thing to do, but he couldn’t think of any way to react – couldn’t think at all.

She looked so innocent and had spoken so matter-of-factly, and here he was, worried about the way these dimension travellers would make him look in front of the Order members and wishing secretly for her to go away.

While she’d been confronting the place where her father had been killed.

Some of his anguish must have shown on his face because she smiled again, happier this time.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “You said all the right things the first time around, Professor. And you tried to save me.”

Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to hug her and procure large amounts of ice cream for her, but before he could even proceed to put into motion the first part of that wish, the fire flared again and out stepped…

Not the people he had expected.

It was only Neville, Hermione and Harry who’d arrived, but it took Remus a moment to realize that, because where before they’d worn mismatched and ragged clothing, they were now encased in black battle robes that clung to their muscles (or curves, in Hermione’s case – since when did she have curves?) and looked, if he wasn’t very much mistaken, to be made of dragon hide. Their wands were prominently displayed in auror quality wand holsters, strapped to their forearms (and each of them had two wands, illegal as it might be), and from behind both Harry’s and Neville’s shoulders Remus caught the glint of sword hilts, while Hermione once more wore her double looped belt with potion bottles in it.

They seemed taller than they had minutes before, if only because they stood so very straight, every motion imbued with the grace of seasoned fighters, and their faces…

They looked like the faces of ancient warriors he’d seen on tapestries in Hogwarts’ halls, haughty, cool and slightly weary of the world, but with an implicit expectation that it would bend to their will. They looked old and young at the same time, both kind and slightly forbidding, and, strangely, unfathomably beautiful.

If these had been the people coming through the portal, he wouldn’t have doubted their stories for a minute. He’d also have been suspicious of them, and every so slightly awed.

“Have they started yet?” Harry asked, and his voice was deeper, rougher, commanding in a way Remus couldn’t quite explain. He himself wanted to stand straighter, and if he hadn’t been so averse to any kind of militaristic ritual, the instinct to salute would have risen strongly in him.

Luna nodded calmly.

Remus swallowed audibly.
Silently, Harry arched a questioning eyebrow at them. He looked impatient, and utterly in control.

“It’s alright,” Luna said, as if the appearance of her friends didn’t surprise her at all. What was it she’d said? That they’d need to be lions tonight? Well, they certainly looked the part. “The Professor’s world has to reboot a bit, but we’ll be in soon. You can start without us.”

She patted Remus’ hand comfortingly.

Instead of answering, Harry tilted his head slightly in the direction of Hermione, as if in silent order. Remus noticed that his lightning bolt scar, almost always hidden by his hair, was now visible and looked slightly reddened, while his hair was swept back in a way that made him look older and a bit wild.

“Highly complex protection wards,” Hermione’s voice, too, was different, clipped and precise and with a no-nonsense attitude that reminded Remus of Minerva McGonagall. Every inch of her was as under control as her carefully braided hair. “Crafted by Bill Weasley, funnily enough. The Headmaster’s in the other room, along with a group of about thirty people – we know most of them. There’s nothing here that could harm us.”

Again, Harry tilted his head without speaking, and Neville shifted his weight to stand in a ready-position that reminded Remus of Moody on one of his more paranoid days.

“Let’s go,” he said quietly, his voice as steady as his presence.

Harry’s eyes swept the room in a precise movement that somehow looked much more impressive than the diagnostic spells he and Hermione had fired off on numerous occasions before. Then he smirked, a cold, dangerous expression on his pale face, and his green gaze narrowed slightly.

“I always thought this much marble made the place look tacky,” he commented condescendingly.

Hermione smiled, thin lipped. The memory of her firing off a *Cruciatus* towards Lucius was suddenly very fresh on Remus’ mind.

“Watch out for the peacocks,” she murmured silkily.

And as Harry began walking towards the ballroom with easy, long strides that made the idea of anyone standing in his way seem ridiculous, Neville and she fanned out to his sides, flanking him, their black cloaks billowing out behind them and swishing around the heels of their polished boots.

They left the entrance hall in silence.

“What was that?” Remus finally asked, aware that his voice was less than steady. Despite all the things he’d seen these past few days, he hadn’t thought the dimension travellers capable of an entrance like that.

Again, Luna patted his hand.

“You wanted them to look like a miracle, didn’t you?” she asked lightly. “You wanted them to be the kings and queen of old. Well, tonight, they are.”

That had almost made sense, Remus thought absently, but most of his mind was busy trying to sort through his preconceptions and expectations that had gone haywire in the past five minutes, and so he didn’t protest when Luna grabbed his hand tighter and began dragging him into the other room.

They passed Severus and Sirius, both of whom wore identical expressions of shock on their faces,
and finally came to stand next to Lily, who was watching her almost-son up on the dais besides Albus Dumbledore in a way Remus couldn’t quite interpret.

She kept her eyes on Harry, but her body inched closer to him, as if searching for warmth.

“That was certainly unexpected,” she whispered, and he murmured an agreement into her hair.

He didn’t notice that he was still clutching Luna’s hand until Albus had finished his introduction, the murmurs had dimmed down and Harry had stepped forward, ready to take over the meeting.

This was the most important moment, Remus thought absently. Quirky behaviour would be tolerated later on, once Harry’s credibility and authority had been established, but if he came across as a nutter now, the Order would never listen to him.

But judging from the way Harry took centre stage, easily filling the room with his presence, examining the Order members spread out in front of the dais silently, then raising his hands just so, silencing even the last of them effortlessly, the most important moment had already passed, and Harry had convinced them.

“Good evening,” he now said in the same deep, rough voice that made him sound ten years older than he was. “Let me first thank you all for gathering here on such short notice. Headmaster Dumbledore has been kind enough to introduce us, and I hope there will be a chance to talk to you individually at a later time. For now, let us concentrate on the reason why we are here.”

He stopped, stretched out his open hand to the side, and with a fluid motion Hermione stepped forward and placed a glittering tiara in it.

As he touched it, Harry’s face seemed to twitch in pain, but the expression was smoothed away in a heartbeat, leaving only control behind. He raised the tiara above his head, its faceted diamonds creating light effects on the floor and the walls. It was one of the most stunning pieces of jewellery Remus had ever seen, and he wondered where they’d found it.

“This,” Harry said dryly, “is a horcrux. Despite its beauty, it is the most evil and dangerous artefact most of you will ever come in contact with. Hermione?”

At Harry’s side, Hermione had whipped out her wand and started a series of complex warding spells that separated the people on the dais – Harry, Hermione and Neville – from the rest of the room. Next, she added individual body wards for both Harry and herself, and gestured for Neville to step down from the podium and into the protection of the general wards.

“Headmaster Dumbledore has informed you of how a horcrux is made and what it means for the wizard who creates it. What he hasn’t told you is the effect a horcrux has on any given person that comes near it.”

Harry paused, still turning the tiara in his hands and calmly examining it, but now the light that played on it seemed harsh and glaring, no longer beautiful. Remus chanced a look to his left and right, and saw the wizards and witches around him staring up at the dais, hanging onto Harry’s lips.

There were many old friends in the crowd, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Arthur Weasley, Amelia Bones, Nymphadora Tonks, Lucius Malfoy – and in all their faces he saw mirrored the same twisted emotions he himself was feeling: fear, and revulsion, but also a strange, terrifying fascination.

“Horcruxes,” Harry continued, and this time there was urgency in the way he spoke, as if it was vital that they listen to him and take his words to heart, “are the essence of evil. They corrupt. They twist. They smother every good thing that is within you. Destroying them is physically dangerous, but it is
also a fight of the mind and soul. And believe me, it isn’t easy to destroy them. In fact, there are only two methods we know of, and be assured – we have done our research.”

He looked away from the horcrux in his hand, as if it was a toy he’d grown bored with, and out into the audience that answered his little joke/comment with a titter of nervous laughter.

Remus saw Lucius standing close to the dais, an eyebrow raised in silent appreciation of Harry’s ability to play a crowd. The Slytherin, who was himself a master at directing this sort of assembly, had no more expected it of their guests than Remus had.

The laughter having died down, Harry moved his other, free hand, and this time Neville stepped forward, away from his friends and towards Severus.

“Potions Master Snape,” Harry said – and there was no hint of the conflicted feelings he’d displayed towards Severus these past days, “would you confirm the nature of the substance this sword has been coated with? But be careful – it’s quite lethal.”

This was followed by an uproar, both because the sword Neville had unsheathed from his back was obviously the sword of Gryffindor (and Remus chose not to think of the identical sword Harry was carrying strapped to his back, and how they’d managed to acquire the sword from this dimension as well), and because Severus performed a few diagnostic charms that ended with a very surprised Potions Master and the words ‘basilisk poison’ floating through the room.

So the ‘great snake’ they’d slain right before this meeting had indeed been real. Suddenly, Remus felt quite nauseous at the memory of that bit of snakeskin Hermione had removed from Harry’s hair earlier. Lily in his arms shivered.

Hilt first, the blade resting on his arm like a knight presenting it to his liege, Neville handed the sword to Harry, who took it as if he had been born with a blade in his hand. He cut an unusual figure with the tiara in his left and Gryffindor’s mythical weapon in his right, but his face, stony in its seriousness, made him look anything but silly.

“What you will see will be ugly and horrifying,” he said matter-of-factly. “Keep in mind that it is the root and secret of Voldemort’s power.”

He tilted his head, and Hermione’s wand was out again. At her command, the tiara left Harry’s hand and floated into the air, Harry fell into a defensive stance, and then he was opening his mouth, and hissing something…

…and before Remus could come to terms with the fact that Harry was a bloody parselmouth, before he’d even fully realized what those sibilant sounds had been, a column of green, eerie smoke burst from the tiara, filling the air above them right to the spot where Hermione’s wards separated the dais from the rest of them.

A few people screamed, then, but on the whole they were controlling themselves admirably. They were seasoned fighters, most of them, and they’d seen worse than magic smoke. Remus had expected more from the curse he’d now been reading about for days, and almost relaxed, when suddenly, the smoke darkened, began to writhe, took on shapes that were not fully formed, not fully visible, but even that hint of what they might become filled his heart with dread.

And then two eyes seemed to blink into existence in the middle of the smoky column, and there were words, and now quite a few people did lose control.

“…Harry Potter…” a high, terrifying voice hissed, filling every corner of the room while sucking all
light and warmth right out of it. “… I see your heart… and it is a bleeding, shrivelled thing without hope. Give in to me. You have nothing left, no power, no strength, no hope…”

Remus was aware that the message wasn’t directed at him, that the consciousness inside the horcrux probably couldn’t even sense the other people in the room, but still the words seemed to reverberate deep within him, and he felt hopelessness well up, the realization that he was a failure, that he would lose to the monster in his chest, it was only a matter of time…

But Harry was standing wholly unaffected, his sword arm strong and steady, and his eyes were scanning the column of smoke calmly as if the thing’s words meant nothing to him, nothing at all.

“…why are you still fighting, Harry?” the voice hissed. “All you’ve ever had has been lost. All that love, that golden future. Now even your newfound mother thinks you are a freak, and your only reward will be death, Harry. Give in, and give up. You can never win…”

Lily in his arms moaned, her face tear-stained, and Remus felt a shiver pass through his body, stealing all the warmth he’d ever felt, until he was trembling like a leaf, holding onto his wife as tightly as he could.

Harry, however, half turned his face towards Hermione.

“They do become repetitive after a while, don’t they?” he commented, then raised his sword.

The thing in the smoke gave an evil, angry hiss, and then the light was changing, and the shapes were writhing harder, and suddenly a human figure appeared in the air, the form of a woman with long red hair, beautiful and full of youth, but her eyes smooth and lifeless like pebbles.

“I only ever chose you because you reminded me of him, Harry,” she whispered, cruelly amused, and this time Harry reacted, flinching visibly, his face paling. “I only loved you because there was a piece of his soul resting in your heart. But you’re a coward and failure compared to him, and in the end, no one will remember your name…”

Harry looked up at the mirage of the woman, and despite her terrible words, despite the malice that filled her face, there was something like longing in his eyes.

“I miss you,” he whispered, so quietly that only Remus’ werewolf senses could make out the words. “Every day I miss you, love.”

And then he brought down the sword on the tiara, and the echoing cry of the ghostly girl filled the room with terror.

When Remus opened his eyes again, the room was silent and the light had changed back into the warm yellow of candles and witch lights. Around him, Order members were cowering where they stood, arms raised to protect their heads, faces twisted with terror. Even Dumbledore had moved away from the dais a bit, and Lucius was paler than normal.

Of all the people in the room, only Harry and Hermione on the raised podium, and Neville and Luna in the middle of the crowd stood straight and fearless.

“That, ladies and gentlemen,” Harry said, and it seemed impossible that he should be able to speak in the aftermath of that apparition, let alone so calmly, “was a horcrux. It’s what we’re going to fight. And, as you’ve seen, it’s a fight we can win.”
A/N: I’ve modelled my description of the horcrux on the destruction of the locket in Book Seven. Although the tiara doesn’t need to be opened as such, my interpretation is that the horcrux needs to be activated before it can be destroyed, so that’s what Harry does. The red haired woman that appears in front of him is, of course, Ginny (didn’t really have to tell you that, did I?).
Chapter 18

The further proceedings were, as it was usually the case with the Order, quick and efficient. Decisions were made, votes were called for, results were documented, and in the end, the Order granted funds and support to the dimension travellers’ plan of hunting and destroying the horcruxes in secret.

Albus even managed to coax every single person present into a binding oath not to reveal the new information – some were grumbling about that, but there were simply too many Slytherins in the room for paranoia to be considered unreasonable.

About half an hour after Harry had killed a part of Voldemort’s soul with his mythical sword, the meeting was finished and house elves popped into existence with drinks and nibbles. A magical string quartet in the corner started in on Beethoven (Lily’s fault. She’d been the one who had introduced Lucius to muggle music).

Remus had expected the dimension travellers’ newfound authority to evaporate as soon as they came into contact with the other Order members, but to his surprise confidence and competence remained. While Neville was surrounded by those who had known this dimension’s Boy Who Lived well and wanted to gauge the differences, and Hermione delivered an impromptu lecture about soul curses and their history to the interested few, Harry was, for lack of a better description, holding court.

Clusters of people had gathered around him, introducing themselves, congratulating him on his destruction of the horcrux or questioning him. Whether it was the aura of danger that surrounded him, battle robes, sword and all, the very prominent scar on his forehead, or the friendly attention he gave to everybody, Harry managed the crowds with ease, and he made them look good with exactly the right level of flattery and condescension.

Of course most of them were not falling for that – they were experienced shakers and movers themselves. But the ability to push the right buttons and wear the right face was valued all the same, and it lent credibility to Harry’s status as Boy Who Lived, did, in fact shift the attention from Neville to him, because their Neville, when alive, had never been that smooth, and this Neville, while polite, was making no effort to engage with the crowd around him, orienting himself towards Harry instead.

While observing silently and exchanging whispers and glances with Lily now and then, Remus wondered where the young man had learned this, and how much of Neville’s and Hermione’s behaviour was natural and accidental, how much explicitly designed to flatter Harry’s role.

He wondered how the three could be so good at this and yet so incredibly inaccessible and infuriating most of the time.

During the long hour of talking and mingling, Harry faltered only twice. The first time when a young red head drifted over to the knot of dimension travellers and their admirers.

“Ron Weasley,” he introduced himself with the friendly ease that had endeared him to many Order members, and stretched out his hand in greeting. “Great to meet you!”

His handshake was steady and strong, but there was a good deal of hero worship in his eyes.

Harry seemed nonplussed for a moment, and Remus, who was standing next to him, saw him throw a worried glance at Hermione, who’d simply stopped talking in mid sentence and was making her way over to them in a less than inconspicuous way.
“Harry Potter,” Harry then introduced himself, and even twisted his lips into a smile. “A pleasure.”

Ron grinned.

“I can’t believe you just killed that thing!” He gushed. “And where did you learn to fight with a sword? I always wanted to, but it’s real difficult to find a teacher these days, and it’s expensive.”

Harry’s expression turned shell shocked, then unreadable so quickly that Remus almost missed the change.

“I picked it up on the go, together with a few friends of mine,” he answered quietly.

“On your adventures, eh?” Ron joked, but he couldn’t hide a certain longing. “I bet you had a bunch of them.”

“I never thought of them as adventures,” Harry said, sounding distinctly helpless by now.

“Actually, the term ‘quest’ would be more appropriate,” Hermione chimed in, her voice tight and nervous and as close to panic as Remus had ever heard her. “I’m Hermione, by the way.”

She stretched out her hand.

Ron’s eyes darkened.

“Yes, I know,” he said hoarsely. “I… kinda was there when you died… or your other self died… whatever.”

He took her hand, but only for a second, and let go as soon as was possible while being still polite.

“Anyway,” he then said in an obvious effort to change the topic. “Great warding you did there. My brother’s a curse breaker, so I know a bit about wards…”

“Yes, he provided the security for tonight, didn’t he? I noticed his special signature in the floo shielding, and there are one or two tweaks in the ward-anchoring that he must have picked up from Egyptian pyramids – I’ve only ever seen this type of warding in pre-modern graves…”

Now Hermione was downright babbling, and even Harry’s warning hand on her shoulder couldn’t stop the flood of words. Ron had recovered from the shock of meeting a dead year mate, and was now increasingly eyeing her as if she belonged in St. Mungo’s long-time ward.

“Yeah,” he said with an obvious lack of enthusiasm. “Sure. Listen, I’ve got to get back to my Mum, she was kind of shaken up by that horcrux-thing. But if you’d like to, Harry, we could get together some time, perhaps do some flying? I’m working for the Chudley Cannons’ public relations office, so I could get us permission to use their pitch? Think about it…”

He nodded to them all, shook Harry’s hand a second time, then retreated to the waiting group of Weasleys.

Harry wrapped an arm around the rapidly blinking Hermione and drew her close.

“When did I turn into Victor Krum?” he whispered hoarsely, burying his head in her hair for a moment.

“When I turned back into the insufferable know-it-all, apparently,” Hermione whispered and closed her eyes.
They stood together silently for a moment, Lily and Remus doing their best to shield them from the rest of the room. They had at least a vague idea what this meeting had to mean to both of them, and Lily quickly gestured for Lucius to come closer, intending, probably, to move Harry and Hermione to a more private room or send them home altogether, but in that moment, proving his incredibly bad timing all over again, James Potter walked over and right up to their group.

Two things happened simultaneously.

Harry looked up and stared, disbelieving, at the counterpart of his father. And Sirius and Severus appeared seemingly from nowhere, interjecting themselves between Lily, Remus and James. It was done smoothly and with many years’ practice, and no one outside their small group probably even noticed.

But Harry did, and his eyes widened as he took in the united front Sirius and the others presented to James, the way Remus was bristling with anger and the way Lily was looking anywhere and everywhere, but not at James.

Who sighed, a bit regretful but also a irritated, as if he found it ridiculous that they would even bother, and Remus’ anger racketed up a few notches. James moved forward and Severus actually stepped in his way, interrupting his path.

Nose to nose with his old tormentor, he raised a questioning eyebrow and didn’t budge. Not one centimetre.

“Snape,” James said, all his old enmity audible in his voice, and this time Harry visibly flinched. “I only want to introduce myself. No need to get your undies in a twist.”

“I don’t think such language is necessary, James,” Sirius said coldly. “We are all adults, here.”

It sounded like a normal comment, the kind of thing anyone might say to diffuse a strained situation, but to all of them it meant much more, years of taunting and teasing, years of trying to dominate the other party that had only ceased for the four friends when they’d won the battle once and for all, and never completely for James.

It also hinted at the catastrophe that had brought their enmity to a head, and Remus couldn’t help but growl deep in his throat, the beast inside him straining to get out and at this man that had been a danger to them all.

“Remus,” Lily said quietly, and it sounded so very tired. “Sirius, Severus. Stop this. Let him talk to Harry.”

Reluctantly, the wall of friends parted, although Severus and Sirius made sure that they were still flanking Lily and keeping in front of Remus so that he couldn’t lunge at James (not that that kind of thing had happened in years).

The tension in the room was thick, and both Harry and Hermione were still staring at the group, as if they couldn’t believe the level of antagonism they’d just seen.

But James Potter smiled at the two dimension travellers and, yes, even Remus had to admit the man could be charming, and stretched out his hand in a greeting, just like Ron had done.

This time, it was Hermione who took the hand and held it for a moment longer than necessary, while Harry pulled himself together.

“James Potter,” the man said. “I’m a senior auror, working for the Ministry. Actually, I’m auror
liaison with the Order.”

“That’s nice,” Hermione said weakly— an unusually short and insipid comment from one of the cleverest people Remus had ever met, and James sent her a confused look before concentrating on Harry.

“You’re a Potter, too, aren’t you?” he asked. “Any relation?”

Now it was Remus’ turn to stare. None of them had been in charge of talking to James, for obvious reasons, but he had simply assumed that Albus would tell the man about his son from another dimension who was destined to fight Voldemort. Really, what else could he have expected?

But Harry didn’t look surprised. Neither did Hermione, and Remus abruptly realized that they had decided against telling him, had, in fact, not told anybody outside the small group that had already known who Harry truly was.

Now, in the face of that question, Harry faltered. His eyes darted up and down, quickly examining the man that was almost his father, then moved on to the group of friends that were standing close, watching intently.

Only in the mirror of that gaze did Remus fully realize how strange they must look, how defensive. Only now did he notice how Sirius had stretched out one arm in front of Severus as if to shield him from any possible attack, how Severus stood straighter than normal, chin jutting out in a childish gesture that he had abandoned completely in every day life. How he himself had placed both hands on Lily’s shoulders, supporting her and restraining her at the same time, how Lily was watching James closely, her body thrumming with tension.

Remus would never know how much Harry read in the positioning of their group, or what he understood of their past in that moment, but he could see something in Harry’s face tighten painfully.

“No,” he said finally, voice still a bit hoarse but steady. “I don’t think so. I’m a muggleborn.”

Lily let out a breath that was more like a hiss, and Sirius shifted his weight uncomfortably.

James, unaware of what had just happened, still smiled.

“Pity,” he said lightly. “The Potter family has never been large, and my children would love to meet a cousin.”

“You have children,” Harry said quietly. “That’s nice.”

“Yes, two boys and a girl,” James answered readily. “The youngest is in his third year. The oldest should be about your age, actually.”

“Fancy that,” Hermione whispered weakly.

Harry’s hands had begun to shake almost imperceptibly. He raised the left one to brush back his hair, while the other gripped the stem of his glass tighter.

“What’s his name?” he asked.

“Peter,” James said. “Named after a good friend of mine who was killed by Death Eaters in our seventh year.”

He smiled sadly.
“I hope the place you come from hasn’t been as torn by the war as ours has, Harry.”

Harry’s grip on his glass loosened and it would have shattered on the floor, but Neville, who’d joined them silently and without drawing attention to himself, caught it just in time.

“If you’ll excuse us, Auror Potter,” he said with the easy authority of a general. “But there is an urgent matter I need to discuss with Harry in private.”

“Of course,” James replied jovially, but something in Neville’s face stopped him from trying to shake hands again. “We’ll have more time to talk at the next meeting, I suppose.”

“I’m sure,” Neville interjected smoothly, then touched Harry’s shoulders, shared a meaningful glance with Sirius and led his friend out of the ballroom.
“Why didn’t you tell James who you are?” Sirius asked as they led Harry and the others towards the library.

“We don’t need even more complications, I think,” Harry answered in a clipped tone that betrayed how exhausted he was. “You wouldn’t know, either, if it wasn’t necessary… and if I’d had time to think about it before I met you.”

Remus didn’t quite know how he should feel about that – relieved, because they did know, appalled, because Harry sounded very much as if he was using them, or slightly envious, because not knowing would have saved them a world of trouble… but he squashed the last thought before it could really form.

“But he’s your father,” Sirius argued.

“What does that even mean?” Harry asked wearily, and sent a look towards Severus, as if he knew exactly what his father had been like. “And anyway, he’s not. He’s the father of Peter, no doubt a star Quidditch player, an unbearable braggart and a poster boy for Gryffindor… Peter Potter…” he smirked.

Well, Remus thought, refusing to be distracted by this very accurate portrayal of Peter, at least they would now be in private with Harry and the others, free to ask all the questions that had been burning on Remus’ tongue for days, and for the first time, the four were in a mood that made answers likely. If only they would retain their composure for a little while longer…

But as soon as Lucius had ushered them into the library, closed the doors and raised silencing wards, the dimension travellers changed. They shrugged out of their dominating, heroic personas as if they’d been coats they’d put on, leaving only the four teenagers they’d come to know and be frustrated with.

Silently, Neville and Harry unstrapped each other’s swords, Hermione took off her potions belt, and Luna, with great ceremony, removed the flower from her hair. All four items vanished in Hermione’s and Harry’s belt pouches easily.

Then Harry’s shoulders slumped and he threw himself down onto the floor – the floor! –, where he lay spread eagled, eyeing the ceiling with the petulant expression of a small child.

“Merlin!” he moaned. “I’ve forgotten how much I hate speaking in front of crowds. One good thing about you all being dead, I guess – I don’t have to give speeches anymore.”

Remus stared at him, appalled, while Neville seated himself in one of the leather armchairs, chuckling softly, and Hermione drifted off to examine the bookshelves. Only Luna stayed close to the friends from this dimension, but her eyes, too, were focusing on something invisible and far off.

“That and the Christmas cards,” she agreed seriously. “I so dislike Christmas cards, and I haven’t had to write a single one since everybody died.”

“Also no one calls you Chosen One anymore,” Neville remarked dryly. “I’ve been surrounded by people eyeing my scar and trying to touch me all evening – Merlin, Harry, were we really that bad?
Why didn’t you punch us all in the face?”

“I simply didn’t get rid of Voldemort in time,” Harry answered lazily. “Much better revenge, don’t you think?”

Sirius finally found the words they’d all been searching for.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” He shouted. “How can you all be so damned weird?”

Harry closed his eyes and giggled. Hermione didn’t seem to even have heard him.

Neville just shrugged.

“I guess we stopped trying to be normal,” he answered. “I mean, everyone left was at least as weird as we are, and we understand each other too well to bother pretending.”

Dumbledore, who was still standing by the closed door, inclined his head and smiled.

“In that case,” he said lightly. “We thank you for the compliment.”

“What bloody compliment?” shouted Sirius, too unsettled by what they’d witnessed to calm down just yet.

“The others saw their puppet show,” Luna explained patiently. “You are trusted enough to be allowed behind the stage, where everything’s dirty and messy and true.”

Sirius looked ready to punch something at this renewed example of their guests’ mysteriousness, but Remus thought he’d actually understood Luna this time.

Was the time travellers’ erratic behaviour really that? A sign of trust? Proof that they felt close enough to the people in this room – well, apart from Lucius, who’d locked the door and was observing them all quietly – to not bother with pretending? And what did that tell them about the group’s relationships to their alternative counterparts?

“So that was a performance?” He asked weakly, meaning: And this is the truth?

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players,” Hermione intoned softly, no help at all, but Neville shook his head, then cleared his dry throat.

Taking this as his cue, Lucius opened his drinks cabinet and began to serve them with his very fine brandy.

Neville accepted with a nod that betrayed not a hint of his feelings towards Lucius, only his good breeding. Luna shook her head and asked for pumpkin juice instead, which was promptly delivered by a house elf, and Hermione was approached but half turned her head and glared at Lucius, belying her apparent distractedness.

Harry, who was still sprawled out on Lucius’ very nice carpet, moaning theatrically about the woes of public speaking, was simply ignored.

“Not just a performance,” Neville finally answered Remus’ question. “It’s a part of who we are. Harry became the leader of the Order of the Phoenix after Headmaster Dumbledore died, Hermione is well used to teaching under difficult circumstances, and I led the resistance from Hogwarts, after Harry…”

Now Hermione cleared her throat in warning, and Neville fell silent abruptly.
“…anyway,” he then said. “It looks as if the Order is, on the whole, convinced of our course of
action.”

“That seems to be the case, my dear boy,” Albus agreed, sipping the tea he had conjured for himself.
“Although I myself am not entirely convinced that it is necessary for you to go alone. We are all
trained wizards and witches, and we could help…”

“Your training won’t help a bit,” Harry interrupted him from his position on the floor, sounding
bored and on edge. “In fact, I can recall in great detail the way your arm shrivelled and turned black
because you failed to protect yourself from a horcrux. Forgive me if I don’t want to see that again. It
was gross.”

“Manners, Harry,” Hermione reminded him from her place by the bookshelves, but it sounded tired
and lacked any kind of conviction.

“Yes,” Harry murmured. “Sure. Dead people running around as if it’s necromancers’ central, but as
long as we keep our manners…”

He sounded bleak, bordering the desperate, and the way Hermione hunched her shoulders and
concentrated all of her formidable attention on the books reminded Remus that Hermione’s fiancé
had been called Ron, like Ron Weasley who’d shared a year and house with her, and that she’d
watched him being tortured to death in this house.

Suddenly, the only surprising thing about the dimension travellers’ reaction was that they’d kept it
together until the library doors were closed.

For the first time since they’d entered Malfoy Manor, Luna left Remus’ side and walked over to her
friend on the carpet. Carefully, she knelt by his side, then stretched out her hand and rested it on his
forehead, not quite touching the scar.

“That wasn’t Ginny,” she whispered. “Remember, that wasn’t her. That wasn’t your father, either.
Nor Ron. And remember that they aren’t gone forever. You’ll see them again.”

“Yes,” Harry whispered back, looking old and tired. “Sooner rather than later.”

In her corner of the room, Hermione dropped a book.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a tight voice. “But I really need to get out of here. The evening has been
productive, and you’ve all been lovely, but I think I’d better leave now.”

Quietly, Neville unfolded his long limbs and stood.

“I’ll come with you,” he offered. “Harry?”

“I think I’ll lie here for awhile,” Harry answered, leaning into Luna’s touch. “The carpets are very
nice, and I don’t think I could walk again just yet. Horcruxes drain me something awful, you know?”

“I know,” Neville said. “Stay with him, Luna?”

Luna nodded, and for a moment, Neville’s eyes rested sadly on his two friends. Then he walked over
to Hermione, gently took her arm and led her over to the door.

“The rest of you should probably mingle some more,” he said. It sounded like a command.

Lily exchanged a glance with Remus.
“We’ll stay with Luna and Harry,” she promised. “Go back to the others, the rest of you.”

In a surprisingly short time, the library had been cleared of anyone except Remus, his wife and the two teenagers occupying the centre of the floor.

For a moment there was silence, then Lily walked over and sat down besides Luna.

“That’s not what I’m thinking,” she said what she had probably wanted to say ever since the horcrux had started talking. “I don’t think you’re a freak, Harry, not at all.”

Harry blinked at her slowly and tiredly.

“Just keep getting to know me. You’ll change your mind soon enough,” he promised her wearily.

For a moment, Lily looked as if she wanted to argue with that, but then she realized that Harry was in no state for discussions.

“Who was she?” She asked instead. “The girl. She must mean a lot to you if he tried to use her against you.”

For perhaps the first time since they’d met, Harry found Lily’s eyes and held her gaze. Remus could feel his heart speeding up. This could mean so much to the two of them, and if they finally managed to forge a connection over this, if Lily could see beyond her painful memories and get closer to the boy that might have been her son…

But Harry’s eyes, while locked with hers, were blank, giving nothing away, and after a long silence, he turned his head and broke the connection.

“I’m going to go to sleep now,” he announced, closed his eyes and pretended not to be there anymore.

Lily’s shoulders slumped. She took a deep breath, half closed her eyes, and Remus was rising from his chair to go to her, when Luna leaned forward and softly began to pet Lily’s hair.

“Let me tell you a story,” she offered quietly. “About a hero and his one true love.”

Lily looked up and found Remus’ eyes, and he nodded. He couldn’t make sense of Luna’s explanations most of the time, but he was beginning to see how important they were.

“Yes, please,” Lily whispered, and leaned into Luna’s touch, just as Harry had done minutes ago.

“Despite the fame and glory that would await him,” Luna began in a prim voice. “The hero of our story grew up hated, never knowing love, so that, when he returned to the country of his birth and met a young girl that was both beautiful and kind, he did not recognize fate for what it was. For many years he remained blind, although the desire for love grew in him.”

Even as he tried to decipher the meaning behind her words, Remus couldn’t help but chuckle quietly. Where Luna’s last story had sounded like a fairy tale, full of repetitions and symbolism, this one had the makings of a nineteenth-century novel, misunderstood hero and all.

“When his eyes finally opened and he saw the young woman his girl had blossomed into, his heart was filled with sorrow, because despite his longing, he knew that his love was a forbidden one. For our hero had been cursed with a destiny so dark and dreadful that even the Gods dared not whisper of it.
“But despite his barren future, our hero embraced this boon granted by fortune, and allowed himself to love and be loved. For a few precious months, he found solace in the arms of his destined love, and their devotion to each other seemed strong enough to halt fate itself.”

Luna paused for a moment and smiled, her eyes seeing something that was far away and beautiful. Lily was leaning towards her, drinking in her words, but Remus was already bracing himself. He’d heard enough of Luna’s stories to know that the darkness would enter this one, soon.

“There came the day of her brother’s wedding, a day meant to be full of joy, a day that ended in heartbreak and destruction. They danced the day away, the girl’s long red hair drifting in the soft evening breeze, and for a few perfect hours, all was well.

“But then the guardian cried wolf, and the hordes of evil stormed in from all sights, turning the stage of love into a battlefield. The trapped revellers fought bravely, from the youngest child to the oldest woman, but one by one they were captured or slaughtered, until only a small group remained, protecting the hero, his friends, and his love. Of the girl’s large family, only three were left alive, the girl and two of her brothers. Even the couple that had been wed hours before would have died that night, had they not left already.”

Lily’s eyes had widened in shocked surprise, and Remus saw his own pain echoed in them. But Luna talked on in the same prim, flourishing way, as if she was recounting *David Copperfield*, not the life story of her friend Harry, who was lying right beside her, still pretending to be asleep.

“In the end, only the sacrifice of his most trusted guardians saved our hero and his friends, and as they were magicked away from the awful scene of all their lost hopes, their hearts broke inside their chests. So many had died, and even then they knew that more would die for them in the months to come.

“But they were still children, and they still believed they would have each other. And so through all the chaos and darkness and flame, our young hero held onto his love, clutching her tight and carrying her with him. He would not let go of her, he’d sworn to himself, not even if death came to claim him.”

Luna’s voice broke. She took a deep breath and continued, and if her hand sought out Harry’s chest, resting on it as if to reassure herself that he was still breathing, it was done quietly, with the implicitness of long habit.

“But in the end, it was not him that death came for. It would not be him for a long time. And so when he was finally safe, and dawn came, and he could see in the light of the new morning, the only thing he was clutching in his arms was a corpse, long cold, that would never dance again.”

Luna fell quiet. The clocks in the library ticked. Remus took a deep, desperate breath.

And from under closed lids that shut out the world around them, one single tear leaked out and marked a trail on Harry Potter’s dry, dry cheek.

Chapter End Notes

“All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players“ – Shakespeare, *As You Like It*
“I can’t get through to him, Remus,” an unhappy Lily said the next morning. “And most of the time, I get the feeling that he doesn’t really want me to.”

After the events of the last evening, Remus and Lily had decided that a private breakfast between them was in order. They needed time to talk – time for a lot of things, really. Merlin, it was the twentieth of December, and they hadn’t even thought about Christmas presents yet.

“I mean, look at last night. They go from manic in Albus’ office to scarily competent to depressed in just two hours. And then, after he lay on that carpet, crying for his dead girl friend, he just jumps up with a grin and returns to Hogwarts as if nothing happened!”

“I know,” Remus said. He’d been as taken aback by that as Lily. But there was also another problem working away in his mind. It seemed obvious now that Luna’s stories told the truth, as Hermione had said, and also that they were centring around Harry and the others. But if that was the case, and Ron and Ginny had been the two children that had died, and Hermione was the clever one, Neville the strong one, and Luna the girl who saw things, then what did the story about the boy and the monster mean for Harry…

He hadn’t found the courage to tell Lily about it, yet.

“He seems to expect me to reject him, while giving me no chance to get to know him in the first place,” Lily continued. “It’s like he’s waiting for disapproval.”

“Perhaps that is what he’s learned,” Remus offered quietly. He thought back to what the horcrux had hissed (All you’ve ever had is lost) and to Luna’s story from last night (The hero of our story grew up hated, never knowing love). “Perhaps he’s never had someone to look out for him.”

Lily shook her head determinedly.

“That’s impossible,” she disagreed. “I mean, no matter how different that dimension might be, I still would have had friends, and you and Severus would have taken care of Harry. Look at how he acts around Sirius. He clearly knew and loved him in his world.”

“Probably,” Remus agreed, but in his head he replayed the words of Luna’s very first story. One boy that had been hidden away in a cupboard, she’d said about Harry, and if that was true, if he’d spent his early years away from all of them…

“I think the more important question is whether you want to get to know him, Lily,” he said quietly. “They made very clear that they’re not going to stay, if leaving is at all possible. And he’s almost fully grown. It’s not as if he needs you…”

“Have you looked at him?” Lily asked angrily. “If ever there was a boy who needed someone, it’s Harry! I don’t know what’s happened to him, but it’s quite clear that he hasn’t had an adult he could completely rely on for a very long time.”

“And are you sure you could be that person for him?”

Many things lay in that question – Lily’s past and their own hurts, Lily’s temper and Harry’s apathy, and instead of just waving the question away, Lily kept quiet for a long moment, thinking hard.

“I’m not sure, Remus,” she then said quietly. “But I have to try. He could have been my son!”
They talked on for a while, comparing notes and puzzling over Albus’ behaviour, wondering why Lucius had been so cautious last night and whether Harry would seek out contact with either Ron or James.

But when Severus knocked on their door to accompany Remus to the library, they hadn’t yet found the answers they were looking for.

“… I think we should concentrate on the problem of identifying their home dimension for the time being,” Remus proposed as he walked with Severus. “As far as I can see, we’ve pretty much exhausted the library’s resources on soul curses, and I feel a bit stupid researching horcruxes when I know that the Headmaster probably knows everything about them already.”

“… Not to mention that it’s the least we can do while they are taking the horcrux-problem off our hands,” Severus agreed calmly, then added after a small pause: “Hermione is running herself ragged.”

“They all are,” Remus said, sounding as subdued as he felt. The last evening had been an eye opener in more than one regard.

“You saw it first, didn’t you?” he then asked Severus, who shot him a questioning look. “In how bad a state they were. You came back from that talk with Hermione, the very first evening, and you knew what they’d been through. That’s why you’ve behaved so protectively towards her. But how did you find out? She didn’t tell you, unless you left something out of your report.”

Severus shrugged and thought quietly for a long moment. Only when they’d reached the library and chosen a table invisible from the main reading space did he answer.

“I know what it feels like to be desperate,” he said quietly, and suddenly they were twelve again and Severus was crying his heart out because Remus had discovered the bruises on his back. “I know what it looks like. They hide it well, or perhaps they’ve been in over their heads for so long that they don’t even know it themselves, but they’re on the edge. They might break any minute.”

He shrugged, self-conscious as always when talking about feelings, old Slytherin that he was, and started summoning the books relevant to their research.

Remus felt a heavy lump build in his throat. He thought back to the way Harry had looked when he’d first seen Lily, to the way Hermione had hovered over her injured friends after the rescue, and to how Luna had grasped his hand last night, frightened to death and yet not even considering the possibility of escape.

“Well,” he said. “Then we just have to make sure that they don’t.”

They were hard at work half an hour later when the library doors opened again and in walked the four, deep in discussion.

“We’re taking quite a risk, helping this dimension,” Hermione said nervously, and Remus realized that they weren’t aware of Severus’ and his own presence, hidden by the bookcases as they were. “Perhaps too much of a risk. Perhaps we should just stick to getting back and let them get rid of their own horcruxes?”
Harry’s reaction was prompt and decisive.

“I won’t let Sirius get close to one of the horcruxes,” he hissed. “Nor my… nor Lily. They are not prepared for what could happen. They could get hurt.”

“But so could we,” Hermione argued. “I mean… I’m not saying we should let them deal with it alone, but perhaps we could give them a training course? We have enough on our plate as it is, Harry.”

In the ensuing silence, Severus and Remus exchanged a long, questioning glance. Making their presence known now would be beyond awkward, but not doing so felt like a breach of trust. On the other hand, this was a rare opportunity to find out more about their visitors’ motives, wasn’t it?

And, deep down, there was another thought Remus couldn’t quite suppress: The thrill that these four obviously felt safe enough in Hogwarts and with them close to not go through their usual routine of detection spells.

“A training course in what?” Harry asked mockingly. “Getting your heart ripped to shreds? Giving up hope? Expecting the impossible?”

“Teaching them what they need to know would take away what we want to preserve,” Luna said, and Remus was almost sure that meant she was agreeing with Harry.

“Look,” Hermione argued. “They’re not innocent children, alright? They are adults, and clever ones at that. They can make their own choices – they have a right to that as much as we should have, Harry!”

Another silence followed, and Remus could well imagine how Harry and Hermione would be staring at each other heatedly over the length of the table, how Neville would carefully watch both of them and how Luna would be gazing into the distance.

“Everything we’ve done these past years,” Neville finally said, in the calm, strong voice he always used when he had thought deeply about something. “Was about protecting our loved ones. About keeping innocent people safe.”

He hesitated.

“Well, our loved ones are dead, mostly,” he then continued. “But there is a version of them alive, here. Isn’t it worth the risk to try and save them from pain?”

There was a moment of quiet and then sounds that indicated agreement – reluctant from Hermione, perhaps, but agreement.

And what about your pain? Remus thought quietly.

But not one of them asked that question, so of course there was no answer, and maybe they wouldn’t have known what to say to that, anyway. And after a long moment, Harry and Neville left the library while Luna and Hermione wandered off into the Restricted Section, giving Remus and Severus a chance to sneak out unseen.
The next two days passed quickly and, where the actions of the dimension travellers were concerned, highly mysterious. They would spill into the library from time to time like the dirty, bedraggled leftovers of a flood wave, Hermione staying only long enough to keep abreast with Severus’ and Remus’ research, then would vanish for hours, refusing to tell them where they went and what they did.

Lily tried to reason with them in vain – Hermione answered all her arguments with counterarguments and finished with a rather snide ‘If you don’t want us to solve your problem, just tell us so’.

Severus tried to bargain with them in vain – promising them potions from his private store if they took someone with them, but Neville just shook his head at him and refused to even talk about it.

Sirius tried to follow them in vain – twice he was shaken off by tricks that left him speechless, twice he was hexed and once someone (Remus was pretty sure it had been Harry) agitated Filch against Sirius so that their friend spent a nerve-wracking half hour arguing with the caretaker about a new punishment-policy none of them had ever heard about. He gave up after that.

The four did take meals with them in the mornings and evenings, however even the snatches of conversation they managed to catch on those occasions didn’t help them much - whether Harry and the others were speaking in riddles on purpose or whether their frame of reference was just too different, they could make neither head nor tail of it.

“… turns out Myrtle is as flirty in this dimension as she was in ours,” Harry said during breakfast on the twentyfirst after he’d turned up with a dusty and water stained leather notebook that had a hole right through the middle, as if someone had stabbed it with a sword. “A few coy whispers in her ears and I had the thing.”

“And you didn’t even have to bathe in front of her,” Neville said seriously, and Luna giggled. In retaliation, Harry used what was very probably a former horcrux to swipe at his friend’s head, who ducked just in time and overturned a bowl of porridge. The situation might have degenerated into a food fight, if Hermione hadn’t swept in (she’d probably spent three hours in the library already) and reminded them all that they were scheduled to leave for “the Gaunts’ house” in half an hour. Wherever that might be.

That evening, Neville used his right hand gingerly, as if it had been wounded, and Harry bore the fading marks of a burn spreading across his left cheek. But they seemed in good cheer and spent dinnertime mercilessly ribbing Hermione about ‘being tempted by the ring’ and her hidden aspirations for world domination.

Hermione blushed beet red and excused herself early to get in another few hours in the library. Neville and Harry, however, clustered around the unsuspecting Sirius and began to ask him very pointed questions about his brother Regulus and his connection to the Death Eaters.

After Sirius had assured them several times that his brother, while tempted by the pureblood-ideology his parents had been spouting all their lives, had changed entirely during his first years at Hogwarts, where he’d come in contact not only with Severus’ and Sirius’ very different view of the world, but also a goodly number of muggleborns. In fact, Sirius explained to them with a proud grin, Regulus was now married to one of said muggleborns, and had with her help converted the house in Grimmauld Place 12 into a regular haven for them and their three children.

This bit of Black family history did not seem to go over well with the dimension travellers.

“Then the locket is still in the cave,” Neville said seriously, and Remus knew them well enough by
now to see that he was deeply worried. “And the protection spells will still be in place.”

Harry and Neville exchanged one of those long, unreadable looks they had perfected into an art form.

“Yes,” Harry then said, and it was much more than just an agreement to Neville’s words.

“Hermione won’t like that at all,” Neville said, and, after a long pause, added. “Neither do I, Harry.”

And Harry just nodded, and turned to Remus.

“We need to meet with the Headmaster and all of you. In thirty minutes?”

“This is Ravenclaw’s Diadem,” Harry said half an hour later and dropped said piece of jewellery on the table with a rather disrespectful thud. “You were there when we destroyed the horcrux inside.”

They had gathered in Albus’ office, the four dimension travellers, Albus, Remus, Lily, Severus and Sirius.

Harry next placed the leather notebook he’d brandished the evening before beside the diadem.

“This is Tom Riddle’s diary, propably the first horcrux Voldemort ever made. It was slipped in between Ginny Weasley’s possessions before the beginning of her first year by one of Voldemort’s Death Eaters and thus brought to Hogwarts.”

For one moment, an expression of grief crossed his face, but it was gone quickly, and Remus and the others knew him well enough by now to be aware that comfort would not be welcome.

“And this,” he finally said, adding a ring with a cracked black stone to the pile. “Is the Gaunts’ hereditary ring. Until yesterday evening, it was a horcrux. And it’s still a Deathly Hallow – the Resurrection Stone, to be precise.”

There was a long pause.

“Are you kidding us?” Sirius then asked. “The Hallows are just a legend, everybody knows that.”

“The Hallows?” Lily asked. There were few instances these days when her muggle background showed, but this was one of them. “Isn’t that from an old fairy tale?”


“The truth,” Hermione corrected him sharply. “As your Headmaster can testify. But anyway, that doesn’t matter. What matters is that, counting your Neville’s death, four horcruxes have been destroyed.”

“If this is indeed the Resurrection Stone, my dear boy,” Albus said calmly, ignoring Hermione’s attempt to change the topic. “Then it is a very valuable artefact. Are you sure you do not wish to keep it?”
Harry grimaced.

“No, thank you,” he said like a boy that had been offered another serving of spinach. “I have one of my own. And this Stone would probably only summon the dead from this dimension, which would be pretty much useless for me. I mean, I’d only have to explain who I am again, and that didn’t go so well even with the living of this dimension, did it?”

He let the silence between them grow, but just as Lily opened her mouth to answer, he talked on, cutting her off.

“Anyway, this leaves only three horcruxes in existence: Nagini, Hufflepuff’s cup and Slytherin’s locket. Voldemort keeps Nagini close to himself, so you should leave her till last or he’ll know what we’re on about. There’s a good chance that the cup can be found in the Lestrange’s vault, for which you’ve yet to get us permission to enter. If you don’t get moving with that, we might just break into Gringotts again, by the way.”

He shared a look with his friends, and for the life of him Remus couldn’t say whether he was joking.

“The locket we will deal with tonight. I’ll leave a pensieve memory of its location and what I know about it with the Headmaster, in case we don’t make it back.”

This statement caused peculiar reactions around the table. The people from Remus’ dimension, while still disagreeing with the four’s lone-hunter-mentality, had resigned themselves to passivity days ago, and so simply took this statement in stride.

But Luna looked outright shocked, and Hermione bristled angrily.

“No we won’t deal with it tonight,” she protested. “Since we don’t know how to get around its defences yet. Finding a way might take a few days, or perhaps even longer.”

Harry shook his head at her.

“If Dumbledore didn’t find a way despite researching for ages, do you really think you will, Hermione?” He asked. “No. We have a solution of getting around the defences, and I’ll be the one to do it. That decision is made.”

She stared at him.

“You can’t be serious,” she said quietly. “You know what that means better than anyone! How can you even think about it?”

Once again, Remus felt completely lost. He saw the feeling echoed in his friends’ eyes around the table. Even Albus had abandoned his serenity and was frowning at Harry and Hermione, but the two were locked in their own world, ignoring even the steady presence of Luna and Neville by their sides.

“I want this done, Hermione,” Harry whispered. “I want to finish it and go back to our world and finally rest. Is that too much to ask?”

“We’re not just talking about another dangerous mission, Harry.” Hermione was whispering, too, and her eyes were fixed on Harry with a pleading expression Remus had only seen once with her, when Harry had taken his Felix before going into battle. “We’re talking about the certainty of grave injury. And no one knows what long-term effects it would have – he died before anyone could examine him. This would be madness.”
Harry just shrugged.

“Only Voldemort can kill me, and as our past year has proved, traps laid by him don’t count. I’m damaged goods already, Hermione, so what’s a little more madness on top of that?”

“What are you talking about?” Lily cut in, horrified, but the two didn’t give any sign they had heard.

Harry was watching his friend with a sad expression, a little smile cradled in the corners of his mouth. And Hermione was white as a sheet, lips pressed together in an angry line, hands clenched into fists so tightly that her knuckles shone white.

She looked, Remus realized with worry, exactly as she had before she’d Crucioed Lucius.

And when she spoke, she did it with exactly the same voice.

“Outside, Harry. Now.”
“I want an explanation,” Lily demanded. “Now.”

This was the voice she had used to tell Lucius Malfoy that he had better get over himself or he’d be the laughingstock of Hogwarts – and he’d listened. It was the voice she’d used to threaten Barty Crouch junior – and he hadn’t listened. She’d broken every single bone in his body.

It was the voice that had Hogwarts students running in panic and made her friends – and husband – agree to anything - anything! - she might demand.

It apparently also worked on the dimension travellers. They should have tried it days ago.

Neville took one good look at her face and started talking.

“Slytherin’s locket is hidden in a cave by the sea. Apart from blood wards and a nasty army of Inferi, it is protected by a potion that must be drunk to the last drop – willingly. It causes… mental pain is perhaps the best description. The drinker remembers everything that went wrong in his life, every painful, traumatic moment as if he was there again, and he’s completely helpless.”

“A lot went wrong in Harry’s life,” Luna commented, entirely unhelpful. “The potion won’t know what to choose. Perhaps it will become confused and show him Wrackspurts instead?”

Neville reached out and took her hand.

“I doubt that, love;” he said quietly.

“So it’s like a liquid dementor without any chance of protection,” Sirius summarized. “And there’s no chance of simply vanishing it? No way of neutralizing it without someone drinking it?”

Neville shook his head.

“Dumbledore didn’t find one,” he said. “Although he looked for it extensively. Dumbledore’s portrait told us that he went to the cave several times to analyse the defences and find another solution. All his efforts were in vain. He didn’t tell Harry that, but he knew exactly what he would find and he walked into it.”

He took a deep breath.

“Dumbledore took Harry there and made him force the potion down the Headmaster’s throat. It must have been horrifying. And it was all for nothing, because the locket was a fake.”

Neville hesitated.

“Our Albus Dumbledore died that very night,” he then added, and for some reason, he was watching Severus very closely.
It was almost funny, the way all their eyes swivelled to Albus.

Who refilled his teacup and met their gazes without hesitation.

“It seems I was a different, harder man in their dimension,” he explained calmly. “I had lost much more than I have here, of course, and was fearing for the future, but still – I can’t deny a feeling of shame for my counterpart’s misdeeds.”

Severus put the clues together first.

“So Harry is planning to take the potion himself, tonight,” he said slowly. “And for the rest of you to destroy the horcrux?”

Neville shifted uneasily on his chair.

“Yes,” he admitted. “It’s a bloody dangerous plan, but it’s the best one we have, admittedly.”

“It might not be so bad,” Luna said, but didn’t sound entirely convinced herself. “Harry’s used to his worst memories. They won’t surprise him.”

“That’s a stupid argument,” Lily said scathingly.

Luna shrugged.

“Harry is often stupid,” she offered. “So the argument fits.”

“No,” Lily disagreed. “There must be other ways. We could share the potion, or create a magical container, or use a time turner and have one person consume it in steps…”

Neville just shook his head.

“Unfortunately, none of that will work. Harry doesn’t simply trust in Professor Dumbledore’s opinion, you know – the potion’s been well researched. Traces of it were extracted from the Headmaster’s body and analysed by Slughorn and later by Professor Snape – Snape even went out there and examined the cave and the spells around the potion’s container, since we thought Voldemort might use these sorts of protections again. Neither of them found any other way to satisfy the spells, and it appears to be impossible to create an antidote.”

Lily opened her mouth to argue on, but Neville interrupted her.

“Harry’s right. If Professor Snape, Slughorn and Albus Dumbledore himself didn’t find another solution to the problem, there isn’t one.”

“So you’re just going to let Harry drink poison?” Sirius asked, horrified.

Again, Neville shifted nervously.

“Hermione and Harry are having that argument that right now,” he said. “They are our leaders. I will accept their decision, whatever it may be.”

Though he didn’t look happy about it.

“I’m going out there,” Lily suddenly announced and stood, her chair scraping over the paved floor with a screech.

Neville shook his head.
“They wouldn’t want you there,” he disagreed.

“You know what?” Lily asked. “I don’t care. I understand that you’re used to doing things on your own, and I respect your abilities, Neville. But we’re adults, too, not children that are being led around by the hand, never questioning anything. And what the two are discussing out there is a decision they have no right to make on their own. I will decide who sacrifices himself for me. So I’m going out there.”

And she fairly stormed from the office, leaving a flabbergasted Neville, a smiling Luna and a very proud Remus behind.

Not too far behind, of course, since Lily’s exit had served as a signal for all of them. It usually worked that way – Lily would lose her patience, or make a decision, and they would all trudge after her (‘like ducklings’, Severus had said disdainfully one evening, but he too followed her gamely when she was in this state).

Despite what her mood might dictate, Lily didn’t get a chance to storm very far, because once again Hermione and Harry had only retreated around the corner and were standing in the middle of a corridor. But this time, Hermione was not sobbing into Harry’s arms. She looked, in fact, very close to committing violence against him.

Both were staring at each other intently, and both were completely ignoring the newcomers. It was in situations like these that Remus realized how close the two of them really were, as if they formed their own little world into which not even Neville or Luna were allowed.

“You’re the most valuable person on our team, Harry,” Hermione was arguing angrily. “Even from a strategic point of view, you taking the potion would be idiotic!”

“It’s gotta be me,” Harry did not budge an inch. There wasn’t even an ‘or…’ involved in the discussion. It seemed that he had decided and would stubbornly wait it out until everyone had accepted that decision.

Hermione however didn’t look willing to do that.

“You and your stupid saving-people-thing, Harry! You’ve learned nothing in all these years, have you? You’re still saving girls from trolls left, right and centre! There are other ways!”

“There aren’t, and you know it.”

“We could kidnap Umbridge, or maybe Lockhart – they’re both wastes of space, anyway. We could make them drink it, or maybe a Death Eater.”

Remus and others in the group shifted uneasily at this rather immoral idea, though one glance at his wife’s face showed Remus that she had considered the same option at least for a moment. He wondered if one of them should step in and interrupt the discussion, but Hermione and Harry were still ignoring them determinedly.

“The potion has to be drunk willingly,” Harry answered patiently. “Don’t be stupid, Hermione.”

“Well, that’s what Imperius is for, isn’t it?”
Harry chuckled, and looked at her with admiration.

“I always forget how bloody ruthless you are,” he commented.

“I’m as ruthless as is necessary,” she shot back. “Please, Harry!”

But he shook his head.

“I have seen someone else drink that vile stuff, Hermione, and I can’t do it. Not again. I’m much better at being the sacrifice than sacrificing others.”

“And you expect me to keep feeding you poison?” she shouted. “You will force me to make you do that, when you know exactly how awful it will be for me?”

He just shrugged, and grinned tiredly.

“I’m just selfish that way,” he said. “Please, Hermione. Accept this. For me.”

Even Remus could hear the finality in his words – to Hermione, it had to be entirely clear that he wouldn’t change his mind.

The knowledge seemed to calm her down and return awareness of their surroundings. She straightened, her eyes flickered around the room, then she concentrated on Harry again.

“If you make me do this,” she said quietly. “I will never forgive you for it. You would hurt me, Harry, deliberately. Is that what you want?”

Harry smiled at her sadly.

“What I want hasn’t been relevant since Halloween 1981, Hermione,” he said softly. “I’m sorry. But this is necessary.”

Hermione’s shoulders slumped. She looked about ready to give in, but Lily wouldn’t have that.

“We won’t accept it,” she cut in. “This is our world, Harry. Our horcruxes. We have the right to decide. And if you go to that cave, we will come with you. All of us.”

Harry sighed with irritation, and when he spoke, the difference in his voice told them that where Hermione’s objections had been at least worth consideration to him, theirs could only ever be a nuisance.

“That’s not an option,” he said.

“Yes it is,” Lily disagreed. “I know that you have this strange need to protect us, Harry, but I assure you, we’re all competent adults and can do our own protecting…”

“No,” Harry said, no room for argument in his voice. “That’s not the reason why you can’t come. It’s that I don’t want you there, Lily. None of you.”

Lily took a deep, shuddering breath. She looked as if he had slapped her. Remus wondered if he should step in, and saw the same question on Severus’ and Sirius’ face. But what could he possibly offer as an argument? What in his life could enable him to tell Harry Potter what to do and what not to do?

“A compromise, then,” Albus said, and the sudden reality of his voice, filled with power and experience and immeasurable kindness, seemed to change the atmosphere of the room. “The others
stay here. But I will accompany you.”

“No,” Harry said again, but even his finality was no match to Albus Dumbledore.

“Yes,” he simply said. “I am afraid I can be quite as stubborn as you, Harry. Until now I have adhered to my promise of non-interference, and I am aware that this promise was extracted as a test for me just as much as a necessity to you. But this is a situation my other self caused and was intimately involved in, and as you claim the right to drink the potion because of my actions, I claim the right to be present when you do for the same reason.”

“No,” Harry repeated, but his decisiveness rang thin.

Albus smiled. “Let an old man at least try to right his wrongs, Harry,” he said.

“No.”

“Yes, Harry,” this time it was Neville who spoke, calm and steady and with a conviction born of complete loyalty. “I can understand why you don’t want to take the others. But Professor Dumbledore could be of great help to us. Not taking him would be stupid.”

“There is a difference between a sacrificial lamb and a Judas Goat,” Luna said.

Still Harry was hesitating. But then Hermione lifted her eyes from the area of floor she’d been staring at intently, and met his gaze.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please, Harry.”

And Harry gave in.

Albus, Neville, Harry and Hermione left after lunch, with Neville looking grim, Harry acting entirely unconcerned, Albus giving them all an encouraging nod as farewell, and Hermione not meeting anybody’s eyes.

Luna was left behind without explanation, and she didn’t gather with the others to say goodbye.

Remus spent the first three hours of their absence with his friends, trying in vain to calm them down. Severus was fretting about how Hermione would deal with feeding Harry the potion, Sirius was angry that Neville hadn’t insisted they should accompany them, too, and Lily was suspiciously quiet. Only the fact that even Lily couldn’t trace an apparition trail hours after the deed stopped Remus from worrying that she would slip away and follow Harry and the others.

When twilight descended on the hills around Hogwarts, Remus gave up his friends’ peace of mind as a lost cause and went in search for Luna.

He found her on top of the astronomy tower. It was very cold up here, even warming charms only taking the edge off the icy gusts of wind, but the slight girl didn’t even seem to notice. Her hair was whipping around her head, her cloak billowing behind her, making her look like one of Tennyson’s romantic heroines, but all her attention was focused on the gates of Hogwarts, just visible from up here, where her friends would apparate when they returned.

“Why didn’t you go with them, Luna?” He asked, knowing her well enough by now not to start with
small talk and work his way up to the real questions.

She started, as if for once she hadn’t been aware of his presence, but she didn’t take her eyes off the gates.

“They don’t want me hurt,” she said quietly, her words nearly drowned by the wind. “Watching what Harry will have to do will hurt terribly, and I would never forget it. They don’t want that.”

“But it will hurt the others, too,” Remus objected, thinking of Hermione’s hopeless face. “Is it because you’re the youngest?”

“It’s because I’m better at looking innocent than the rest of us,” she said lightly. “They couldn’t protect all the others, so they try to protect me. Saving someone is far more important to them than another wand, so I let them.”

Remus thought he understood this, understood it and Luna in his head and his heart now, but as always, her words led to more questions than they offered answers.

“Why are they the way they are?” he therefore asked, painfully aware of his own helplessness to articulate what he really meant, but knowing that the question was important, was the key to understanding the four and to helping them. “I get now why you’ve been telling me these stories, Luna, and I’m thankful for it. You want me to understand you, all of you, but I don’t. I feel like I’m missing something here, something at the very heart of you four, and I’m afraid I will fail you and not understand it in time.”

For the first time, Luna turned her eyes away from the gates and towards him.

“You will,” she said, calmly and with utter conviction. “The threads will unravel for you. Trust Lachesis to steer you right.”

“But why? Can’t you just tell me what happened?” Remus repeated helplessly. “Hermione and Harry – they’re so broken. They seem to revolve around each other in a very unhealthy way, and it’s different than with you and Neville. Why? What happened to them?”

Luna stared quietly into the night, and for once her eyes were as old and knowing as those of the other three.

“Once upon a time,” she began in her usual sing-song voice. “There was a prince who owned a great, great treasure. One day, that treasure, the two parts that made him a Golden Trinity, was stolen from him by a great snake, and he…”

She paused, took a deep, shuddering breath, then suddenly shook her head with enough force that white-blonde hair whipped around her face, obscuring it.

“That won’t work,” she whispered to herself. A long silence followed, and somehow Remus could feel a change in the air.

“Harry, Hermione and Ron had been on the run for three month,” Luna then said, and her voice was so different, bare of expression, flat, broken, that Remus could only stare at her in surprise. “They were badly shaken by Ginny’s death, and by what happened at the wedding. They’d found the locket, but they had no idea how to go on. They were caught. Hermione and Ron managed to lead them away from Harry, but the two of them couldn’t escape and were taken to Malfoy Manor. They were kept in a cell next to mine, for three weeks. I never saw them, but I heard the screams, and I…”

Again she broke off and shuddered, and tightened her arms around herself in search for comfort.
“Harry tried everything to find them, but he couldn’t, he had no idea where to start or how to go about it. And so he snuck into Hogwarts, where Professor Snape was now Headmaster, still pretending to spy for Voldemort while trying to keep the students as safe as possible. He did his best, but there wasn’t much he could do, with the Order almost destroyed.

“Harry confronted him and demanded *Felix felicis*, thinking that with the luck potion he’d have a chance to find Hermione and Ron. He found out that Professor Snape was still loyal to Dumbledore’s side and got the potion, along with a warning not to take too much.”

A deep breath, another shake of her head.

“But of course he didn’t listen,” she whispered. “He took the potion day and night, for three weeks, and he went mad over it. He searched and searched, not sleeping, not eating, not caring for his own life at all. In the end he killed Lucius Malfoy, and found them, and me, but Ron was dead and Hermione was… broken. That was Harry’s last great loss, and he never really recovered from that. He doesn’t consider his life valuable, apart from its use for others. He has nothing to look forward to. He’s like the Fisher King, just counting the days till he can die.”

She fell silent, and abruptly, Remus was aware of the wind again, howling around him. He welcomed its force, numb as he was inside and outside.

So many parts of this story were unbelievable, unbearable – three teenagers on the run, on their own, Severus as Headmaster of Hogwarts, deceiving Voldemort himself, Lucius being killed by Harry, and Hermione… broken…

But as Remus’ mind slowly cleared from the images that had bombarded him, he found himself strangely accepting, as if he had suspected this or something like it all along, and as he watched Luna return her attention to the gates of Hogwarts, he realized that her earlier stories had laid the groundwork for this, had planted in him a seed of understanding that hadn’t come to bloom until now.

In his mind, the kaleidoscope of puzzle pieces shifted, re-assembled and offered him a new perspective on the four travellers. They were no longer strangers. He knew them too well now.

And for the first time he didn’t feel irritation at the sight of Luna, or pity, or confusion, but awe.

“Why did you tell the story this way?” he asked, because all the other questions needed time, needed thoughts.

She looked up at him with those large, blue eyes that were full of the things she’d seen and understood, full of things she remembered and could never tell.

She smiled. It was a very sad smile.

“Fairy tales, stories, prophecies, they make sense of things. They put them in a right order, first this, then that, the Queen dies and then the King dies of grief. They give a reason. But some things don’t make sense, and pretending they do is lying. I don’t lie.”

Again her gaze shifted away from him, travelled across the grounds of Hogwarts and found the place where her friends would make their return, as if her eyes could ensure it would happen, as if her silent vigil could make a difference.

And who knew? Remus thought. Perhaps the girl with the heart of vision could change reality just as she had changed him.
Remus flicked his wand to place heating charms on them both, then stepped behind her to shield her back from the cold.

“I’ll wait with you,” he said quietly into the darkness. “As long as it takes, Luna.”

“I know, Professor,” she answered calmly. “You’ve always tried to protect me. It’s not your fault that it never works.”

It was in deep darkness, close to midnight, that the travellers returned. Albus looked old and drawn, a horror in his eyes Remus couldn’t name. Neville’s face was like a stone, and no one dared talk to him. Hermione was crying, her face blotchy, her eyes streaming with tears.

And Harry was unconscious, lying on a floating stretcher, so still and so pale, as if he would never move again.

Chapter End Notes

There’s one contentious claim I make in this chapter, namely that Dumbledore had been in the cave at least once before he went there with Harry. In the book he says that he hasn’t been. If one looks at the way he prepared Harry for their adventure, however, I find that hard to believe. He makes him promise to follow every command, as if knowing what he will have to ask of him, and he knows exactly where to go and what to do. Given Dumbledore’s generally manipulative tendencies (he makes Snape kill him that very same evening, after all), and the fact that there are a lot of things he didn’t tell Harry beforehand, I don’t find it hard to believe that he’d lie. Even Harry seems to wonder himself (“Was this why he had been invited along – so that he could force-feed Dumbledore a potion that might cause him unendurable pain?”, Half-Blood Prince, British Edition, p. 532). But that’s just me. You can consider it an interpretation of canon or a slight tweaking of the facts – whatever you want.

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Luna’s alluding all over the place in this chapter:

Judas Goat = a practice in slaughterhouses that is, by now, extinct (as far as I’m aware): A goat would be trained to lead sheep and other animals into the slaughterhouse. Since the goat would be spared, it wasn’t afraid and the other animals would follow it without fuss, not suspecting that they would be killed.

Lachesis = second of the Moirai or fates. She’s the apportioner of the thread of life and in some accounts determines a person’s destiny.

The Fisher King = The Grail King in Arthurian mythology (esp. “Parzival” by Wolfram of Eschenbach), who is badly wounded and only awaiting a Chosen Hero that will take over the guardianship of the grail. The Fisher King expects to die once this is done, but is, in the end, healed by the hero’s question.
“The Queen dies and then the King dies of grief” = this is an inversion of E.M. Forster’s definition of ‘plot’ from his brilliant lectures on “Aspects of the Novel”
Chapter 22

Lily spent the night nervously pacing between their rooms and the Infirmary, thinking unhappy thoughts about Harry or sneaking glances at him while he lay unconscious.

Every time she visited, one of the Dimension travellers was sitting with him, patiently guarding their friend. Luna and Neville would send her a smile whenever she peeked through the door. Hermione would half turn around, make sure that she wasn’t a threat, then continue to stare into nothing.

Harry lay without moving for most of the night, calmed by the large dose of Dreamless Sleep Hermione had insisted on. He didn’t look younger in his sleep, as the cliché dictated, but rather older, exhausted, his skin so pale that she could see the blue outline of his veins, his scar like a red wound on his forehead.

As Lily stood watching him, she wondered how this tired old child, so vulnerable in his sleep, could elude her that easily and completely when awake, how it was that he erected walls between them she could never hope to climb.

How it was that she, who had never been daunted by a challenge before, could fail so utterly to touch him in any way that mattered.

During one of her silent pilgrimages to his bed she met Albus, presumably returning from the same journey.

“What happened in that cave, Albus?” she asked him, a bit shocked by her own pleading tone.

The expression in his eyes shocked her even more.

“I…” he began, the hesitation in his voice entirely atypical. Albus never hesitated. He seemed to navigate his way through each and every difficulty with blind ease, and she’d always admired that in him.

“Voldemort’s trap was indeed fool proof, the spellwork devious,” he finally answered. “We spent several hours examining it, but it was clear almost from the beginning that one of us would have to…”

He trailed off, staring into the dim corridor behind her.

“That boy…” he then continued. “I’ve never… There are quite a few things in my life I regret deeply, Lily, and some I will never forgive myself for. But I never expected that training a boy, a child not even of my own dimension, to consider himself expendable would ever become part of that list.”

“So he drank the potion,” Lily stated the obvious, but she needed to keep him talking, to get as close to the situation she’d been forbidden to witness as it was possible. “Did Hermione force him?”

Albus chuckled tiredly.

“She almost didn’t have to. Only the last cup needed persuasion. The rest… he simply drank it down. He was crying and crying, but he kept drinking without being prompted. I…”

He turned away, but not before she could see tears shining in his eyes.
“Will he survive?” she asked, her heart beating wildly.

“Yes,” Albus answered, face still averted. “He should recover quickly. Physically, that is. I dare not predict his mental state.”

“Who possibly could…” Lily murmured and left him standing there, in the middle of the corridor, lost in his own thoughts.

At dawn, Remus joined her in their living room. He had offered to stay up with her, but she’d needed time alone, and Remus understood that need as only he could and had gone to bed, his efforts to sleep most likely in vain.

For a long while he simply held her, until finally she could feel his warmth thaw the numb cold around her heart.

“This is all so twisted,” she murmured, and in answer he told her about Luna’s story and the way they had stood together for hours, waiting in silence, the girl’s whole being straining towards her friends, how she had gasped a good second before the group had apparated in, and rushed to the Entrance Hall not with worry or fear, but with delight. And how she had taken one good look at Harry’s slack face, patted his shoulder and smiled.

“He’ll be alright,” she had said with the utmost conviction. “I’m going to go to sleep now.”

It said a lot about Lily’s life this past week that such a story could actually help calm her.

But still, her mind and heart were in uproar, and she couldn’t even pinpoint the reason for it, something she wasn’t used to, and something she didn’t like at all.

If there were two things Lily had always been proud of, it was her family (which included her friends) and her ability to get things done. And now she was failing to connect to her newfound son in any way that mattered and did not, if she was entirely honest with herself, even know if she wanted to connect.

And whenever she closed her eyes, she saw Harry’s face as he rejected her (I don’t want you there, Lily), and his pale body, unnaturally still on his bed in the infirmary.

So the last thing Lily expected when she entered the Great Hall at breakfast time was to encounter an awake, aware Harry that looked exhausted and shaky but was grinning as if nothing bad had ever happened to him.

“Morning,” he said happily. “It’s Christmas, did you know?”

It wasn’t even a conscious decision. As if the gesture had been coded into her genes, Lily reached out and drew him into a tight hug, clinging to him as if her life depended on it.

His body went stiff at first, and he probably would have freed himself, but she simply couldn’t let go yet, couldn’t stop touching a Harry that was warm and alive and the opposite of the pale, still thing they had brought home on that stretcher. After about a minute, she felt Harry relax into the embrace, and when she finally let go of him, the look on his face seemed almost like regret.

“Okay,” he said carefully. “So you’re really happy that it’s Christmas?”

“I’m really happy you’re alive, Harry,” she answered, then reached out and punched him gently in the shoulder. “And never do that again, d’you hear?”
“I won’t have to, unless I was thrown into yet another alternate dimension, and that’s unlikely even with my kind of luck,” he answered, honestly confused, and she was very tempted to punch him again.

Instead, she led him over to the breakfast table and pressed a plate into his hands.

“Eat,” she said sternly. “You’re too thin.”

At that, his whole face softened and he almost gave her a true smile.

“Honestly,” he muttered nearly inaudibly. “Women.”

Lily had spent much of her life around infuriating men – in fact, many of her female friends had tried to convince her over the years that this was the root of most of her problems. How could a girl surround herself with three gorgeous men (her friends’ words, not hers, although she certainly agreed) and consider them all the family she needed?

Oh yes, her friends were infuriating. So Lily should have been prepared for the natural disaster otherwise named as Harry, Hermione and – in his silent, unwavering and therefore terrifying support – Neville. It was actually a sign of how unbelievably weird her life had become that she now considered Luna to be the most stable person in the group.

“So that’s almost all of the horcruxes,” Harry declared with satisfaction while inhaling a huge serving of scrambled eggs. “Only Nagini and Hufflepuff’s cup are left. Since the other Neville’s already dead, the horcrux in him won’t be a problem.”

He was slightly inconvenienced by the fact that Luna had latched onto his hand the moment he had sat down besides her and seemed entirely unwilling to let go of him again. Neville was sitting by his other side, slightly too close, as if he was afraid Harry would vanish the moment he let him out of side. He nodded mutely, although the mere mentioning of his Boy Who Lived-status made him look sick.

Hermione, who was demonstratively sitting at the other end of the table, said absolutely nothing. For once, she was not working her way through a book or a pile of notes but staring into nothing with an intensity that was quite frightening. She was not looking at any of them, but – in a feat of silent reproach that was truly impressive – especially not at Harry.

“So I was thinking,” Harry continued. “We could stake out Gringotts this afternoon, then perhaps go and do the extraction tomorrow.”

Correctly judging that Neville wouldn’t protest in a million years and Luna simply wasn’t listening, Lily decided that without Hermione’s input no one would put a stop to Harry’s madness. Since the others had not yet arrived, she supposed it would be her job, then.

“You nearly died, yesterday, Harry,” she said, trying for soft and patient and hoping that her anger (terror) wouldn’t shine through too clearly.

Harry nodded.

“It was awful,” he told her quite seriously. “Of all the near death-experiences I had, I’d rate it almost
an eight. The basilisk poison hurt more, and the possession was more unpleasant mentally speaking, but all in all it was one of the more impressive ones. You just can’t beat Voldemort’s flair for unexpected evil traps.”

Only the fact that Lily’s brain short circuited over the effort of choosing an appropriate response to that statement – crying, shouting, thumping her head against the table repeatedly, thumping his head against the table repeatedly – stopped her from embarrassing herself.

“I couldn’t sleep at all last night,” she therefore simply said after the mad impulse to scream had passed. “I was worried to death about you. I spent the night commuting from your bed to my living room and back, wondering how I could have kept you safe, Harry. I’d rate that as an eight on the scale of my ‘the people I love are in danger’-scale, too.”

For a moment, he stared at her. Then he ducked his head.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “I didn’t think again, and Hermione’s not speaking to me, so there’s no one to hit me and tell me to behave at the moment.”

Hermione didn’t look at him even more intensely. Her eyes were blood shot and the dark rings under them had gotten even worse. That girl really needed a good night with Dreamless Sleep, Lily thought absentely, reminding herself to give her a vial later.

“Anyway, now we only need to destroy the cup and then…”

He was interrupted by Severus, Sirius and Remus, who’d thrown open both doors of the Great Hall and were storming up to them in a display of dramatic flair that Lily had always known they were secretly longing for. The things you learned about men when there’d been copious alcohol and you had pretended to fall asleep on the sofa…

“We found it,” Severus shouted, and it almost sounded like ‘Eureka’ to Lily. “A way to identify your dimension and make sure a portal would connect to it! We found it!”

Harry actually whooped in shared excitement. Luna and Neville looked as if they weren’t quite so sure this was good news. And Hermione unfolded herself from where she’d fairly cowered on her chair, stood, and stretched out her hand.

“Let me see,” she demanded tonelessly.

She flicked through Severus’ notes quickly, nodded her head, and then, without another look back, left the Great Hall. Severus and Remus trailed after her like over-excited puppies.

Lily gave her husband’s back a hard stare, but if there was one thing Severus, Remus and she shared, it was this rush of elation at scientific discoveries. There had been instances of her sitting upright in bed in the middle of the night, shouting for pen and paper at the top of her voice, so perhaps being angry at him because of this would be a bit hypocritical.

But still. He could have at least told her what they had discovered before vanishing again.

“What was it they actually found, Sirius?” she asked sweetly, knowing that she’d have to wait for a sufficiently detailed response until she had finished breakfast and could join them in the library, but wanting at least a hint of what had her husband and friend so excited.

Sirius scratched his head and looked stupid. Lily knew for a fact that this was actually a clever defense technique he always employed when someone threatened him with academics, but it still made her want to smack him.
“Dunno,” he replied with the verbal equivalent of his stupid-act. “As far as I could tell, they
discovered that the horcrux Harry carries inside himself is connected to the other Voldemort, and that
they could use that connection to open the right portal?”

Brilliant, Lily thought, already mentally revising what she knew about transdimensional magic and
what Remus and Severus had told her about their research. That might indeed be the solution.

But before she could even begin to think it through, Harry jumped up from his chair, swayed, nearly
fell, was rescued by Neville, led back to his chair, and jumped up again. The whole episode didn’t
put a damper on his enthusiasm at all.

“That’s brilliant!” He exclaimed delightedly. “We can go to Gringotts right now, get rid of
Hufflepuff’s cup and catalogue the artefacts. Then Hermione can crunch the numbers and we might
go home tomorrow. Then we could…”

“No, dear boy,” Albus said, cutting through Lily’s rising panic before she could even open her
mouth. “I am afraid that is entirely out of the question.”

Lily sent her old Headmaster a look of silent, heartfelt thanks.

“But why?” Harry fairly whined. “I mean, once we’ve got the cup, we’re done here. There’s no
reason to put things off, is there?”

That comment hurt. Lily was painfully aware that she hadn’t managed to connect with Harry much,
but to be dismissed like that, with the wave of a hand – that hurt.

“A fair amount of reasons, in fact,” Albus disagreed, and as if to demonstrate to Harry that he had the
attention span of a ten-year-old, he actually raised his left hand and held up one finger after another,
counting off his arguments.

“First,” he said. “You are not yet recovered from yesterday’s ordeal. You will need at least two days
of complete rest or you might keel over in the worst possible moment, and that wouldn’t be fair to
your companions.”

Harry looked ready to argue with that, but Albus gave him no choice.

“Second,” he continued. “It is Christmas, and things can’t possibly get so bad that one cannot take a
few days off for Christmas. Unless you truly wish to break into Gringotts unlawfully, causing
unnecessary danger and pain for your friends, you will have to wait for one of us to accompany you,
and that will only happen after the holidays.”

Harry was looking frustrated now.

“And third, my dear boy, your friend Hermione has been running herself ragged trying to research
your situation, help you in your fights and use our fine library to extract as much knowledge as she
possibly could. Even if you can’t allow yourself a few days’ rest, does she not deserve some time to
breathe? Come with us to celebrate Christmas, and away from the library there is a good chance she
might actually sleep and eat for once. What do you say?”

If Lily hadn’t been busy watching Harry’s expression of grudging acceptance, she would have
walked over to Albus and hugged him for all he was worth.

No mention of his own state of health would have given Harry any pause, but Hermione was an
entirely different matter. He was always watching out for her, after all, making sure she got enough
to eat and actual time away from the books. But he, too, knew that she would never rest as long as
she was close to Hogwarts library. Forcing her away with a legitimate reason – that had to convince even Harry.

“Think about it,” she whispered. “It’s only sensible. Whatever the situation in your dimension, you won’t find much peace there. Give your friends a chance to recuperate before you lead them into battle again.”

It hurt to speak to him like this, as if he wasn’t a barely grown man but a general. It was, however, the only way to get through to him.

And as Lily watched him accept Albus’ decision, nodding with little grace and much impatience, she seriously began to wonder whether understanding him wouldn’t break her heart, in the end.
Chapter 23

Lily found Hermione in her usual place at the library. Remus and Severus weren’t to be seen, but perhaps they’d moved to another table or were taking a break – it was lunch, after all, and Lily had brought sandwiches to prove it to Hermione.

“Listen,” she said and sat down beside the witch. “Albus has persuaded Harry to wait with Gringotts till after Christmas so that you can celebrate with us. You need a break, all of you.”

She had expected Hermione to argue against a loss of time, just as Harry had done, but Hermione simply nodded, put down her pen and began massaging her fingers.

“That’s a good idea,” she agreed. She didn’t meet Lily’s eyes.

“I thought so, too, but there’s something I need to discuss with you,” Lily said. “Traditionally, we always celebrate Christmas at Malfoy Manor. We’d have dinner together tonight, then open presents together in the morning and tomorrow evening there will be large ball for Order members.”

Hermione gave no sign what she thought of this arrangement.

“So you need to tell me if that will be alright with you,” Lily continued after waiting in vain. “If you’re not comfortable there, or if you’d rather not spend so much time around Lucius, we can arrange for Christmas here and just visit the ball tomorrow. It wouldn’t be a problem.”

Hermione’s right hand reached out and pulled a book closer to her body. She began rubbing its spine absently, up and down, up and down, while her eyes were still fixed on the table in front of her.

“That’s very considerate of you,” she said tonelessly. “But Christmas at Hogwarts wouldn’t be a very good idea, especially not for Harry. And I’ve never actually seen that much of Malfoy Manor. As long as I don’t wander into the dungeons, I’ll be…”

Her voice trickled away before she could produce the word ‘fine’.

For a long moment – later, she would feel ashamed about how long the moment had lasted – Lily wondered if she really wanted to get involved in this, if she wanted to add another ache to her inadequacy to communicate with Harry.

This might turn out worse, actually, because Harry – despite or perhaps because of his madness, his mood swings, his callous disregard for his own safety – Harry she thought she might understand one day. Even if some part of her was afraid of that understanding.

But this girl-woman? This brilliant, unnaturally self-possessed witch with an unmeasured capacity for violence that reminded Lily of her husband on full moons? This general that spent her days researching a way back into a place of war and horror, just because she thought it was the right thing to do?

Lily had no frame of reference for her. And she was painfully aware of it.

But still. She could not see someone suffer like that and do nothing.

So she reached out, and took Hermione’s hand in hers, and was rewarded with a suddenly tense girl, whose eyes widened in surprise.
“You don’t have to do this, Hermione,” Lily said softly, careful not to speak to her like a teacher to a student, but like she would to Severus. “Carry it all alone, all the time, be the responsible one every single minute of the day. You need to give yourself some space to breathe!”

Hermione laughed, sharply, and withdrew her hand.

“Oh Hermione,” she said in an ugly tone. “Stop studying all the time. You need to learn to enjoy life more! Oh Hermione, stop being such a bore. Oh Hermione, don’t take everything so seriously! We’re just having a bit of fun! Something along the lines of that, perhaps?”

“No,” Lily answered. “Something along the lines of ’If you burn yourself out now, you’ll have no strength left for the battles to come.’”

This time, the sharpness was in Hermione’s eyes.

“What do you know about our battles,” she said quietly, with a lurking edge to it. “You don’t like us, Lily Lupin. You trust us least of your little family. You’ve been criticising every single thing we’ve done so far. You don’t care.”

Lily reeled back, the urge to flee from Hermione’s angry, calculating eyes almost overwhelming. There were so many layers to this moment that it made her dizzy, and her hurt was only one of them.

In the last minute, she’d learned more about Hermione, and perhaps about all four of the travellers, than in the whole week before, and while she hadn’t expected such hostility, least of all from Hermione, it was also an opening, a reaction more honest than the carefully applied masks she’d been wearing, a sign of interest in her and her opinions, where before Hermione had only ever treated their dimension as a further burden or a refuelling stop.

So she didn’t allow the hurt to overpower her thoughts. Instead, she reached out for Hermione’s hand again.

“Perhaps I criticise because I care,” she said quietly. “Perhaps none of us have any clue how to help you, because your situation is beyond anything we could understand. It took me far too long to get that, I know, but I’m here now, offering help.”

Again, Hermione withdrew her hand from Lily’s, but this time it was done with hesitation.

“There’s nothing you can do,” she said quietly, all aggression bled out of her, and Lily wondered when last an adult had offered her help, if anyone ever had, really, and if Hermione had had a chance to learn how to accept it. “We’ll be gone soon. We’ll be on our own again in the other dimension, and we can’t afford to rely on anyone but us.”

“But you can rely on the others?” Lily asked, perhaps because she wanted information, or perhaps only because she wanted to hear that this girl wasn’t entirely alone.

Hermione met her gaze, then. She held it for a long, long time, and Lily felt that this was a test, although she had no idea what it entailed or if she passed it.

“To do their parts, yes,” she finally answered. “But Harry has never learned to care for himself, and Neville would rather whisk us away and keep us safe, the world be damned, and Luna thinks that everything meant to be will happen anyway, so why should she be cautious, and so…”

“So the burden falls to you,” Lily finished the sentence for her.

Hermione did not speak or even nod, but the way her eyes flickered over books and piles of notes
was sufficient confirmation.

Lily felt her throat close from all that hopelessness.

“So perhaps we can’t help in the long run,” she said quickly, because she needed to say something. “But can’t we take over for a little while? Just Christmas? Just for a holiday? Malfoy Manor is at least as well protected as Hogwarts, Hermione, and we could keep an eye on Harry and the others for you. Just a holiday, Hermione. A few days of eating and sleeping and long baths. Reading a novel for once. Yes?”

And Hermione didn’t answer – not that Lily had expected her to, but there was longing in her eyes, and that was a good sign in Lily’s book. As long as someone could still wish for something, there was hope for them, wasn’t there?

They marched up from the Manor’s front gate in a long procession that was more tradition than necessity, because Lucius would of course have opened the heavily warded floo connection for them. But when Lily, Remus, Severus and Sirius had first come here for Christmas, they had walked the half-mile from the gate to the house in a veritable snow storm, laughing and joking and fervently looking forward to the Manor’s huge fireplaces, and so this walk had become a ritual of sorts.

In a way, Christmas wasn’t Christmas without this march up along the gravelled driveway that rolled through acres of neatly trimmed lawns and carefully positioned crops of trees.

The flower beds were all secured for the frost, of course, and the tree branches were bare and black against the snow hung sky, but the view was still majestic, perhaps even more beautiful in its grand simplicity than in the bloom of spring or summer.

“We’ve spent every Christmas here since our seventh year at Hogwarts,” she told Harry, who had ended up walking by her side.

Up ahead, she could see Severus deep in conversation with Hermione, Luna skipping along at Remus’ side, and Sirius eyeing the quiet Neville, who was, in turn, watching the landscape around them.

“It was the year Lucius’ father died in a duel, and so he became Lord of the Manor and was finally able to invite his friends. We would have stayed at Hogwarts, otherwise, because Severus and Sirius weren’t welcome at home, and things were… difficult with my sister. So we spent Christmas here, with Lucius and Narcissa, who were freshly engaged and had it bad for each other, and it was so wonderful a time that we’ve come back ever since.”

Lily was well aware that Harry hadn’t asked for her nostalgic ramblings, probably wasn’t even listening to her if she considered the tension in his frame and the way his eyes kept darting from one side of the path to the other. But she was looking forward to the next few days, the ease of companionship and well-known rituals, and as always, Christmas cheer overtook her and simply wouldn’t allow room for gloomy thoughts.

She was very surprised when he offered a comment out of the blue, proving that he had, in fact, been listening.

“I usually spent Christmas at Hogwarts or with the family of a friend,” he said quietly, not looking at
She felt a hitch of excitement. This was the first time he had volunteered information about himself to her.

“I love the tree in the Great Hall,” she answered softly. “But Christmas at the Manor is something else. You’ll…”

She was distracted from her thoughts by an almost inevitable part of their traditional Christmas trek – Sirius, having given up on the monosyllabic Neville, was levitating a veritable mound of snow over to where Severus was still talking with Hermione. Sirius looked back over his shoulder, making sure that none of them would miss this treat, then shot a conspiratorial grin at Neville and dropped the snow over Severus head.

Severus, caught in mid-sentence, stood stock still for a moment before yelling in protest, twisting around and retaliating with a slash of his wand that sent Sirius careening into the snow banks piled to the left of the path.

He strode towards Sirius in slow, menacing steps and only waited until his friend had sat up in his little snow cave, sputtering and shuddering, before magically lifting him by the ankle, levitating him until he dangled in the air, then dunking his head into the fresh snow for good measure.

Now it was Sirius who roared, or rather gurgled in protest, because his mouth and face were crusted with snow, and, as always, his sputtering confusion sent Severus over the edge. Soon, both friends were laughing hysterically, and when Sirius reached out and tucked Severus’ feet out from under him, Severus was too breathless to keep his balance. They ended up lying in the snow together, giggling helplessly, seemingly unwilling to climb to their feet again until Remus sighed, walked over and swished his wand at them, cleaning away the snow and drying their robes and hair with a spell he’d had much reason to use on them over the years.

“Honestly,” Lily whispered. “Those two will be the death of me one day.”

But then she noticed the grin on Harry’s face, bright and carefree, and the awed expression Neville sported. His eyes were glued to Sirius, and he was eager to stay by his side once they resumed their walk, where before he’d done his best to avoid the man.

Harry must have noticed her confusion, because he sniggered and once more offered an unexpected explanation.

“Neville used to be terrified of Professor Snape. When Remus taught us Defence in our third year, his boggart was Snape, berating him over potions. Sirius is going to be his hero now. I thought it was awesome, and I’ve seen Snape hopelessly drunk at least twice.”

“I don’t even want to know how often I’ve seen Severus drunk,” Lily grumbled, but in her heart she was glad for the harmless prank her friends had played. “It’s not a pretty sight.”

“That it isn’t,” Harry agreed, and they walked on in something like companionable silence.

Then the gravel path twisted one final time, bringing the main entrance into view. Candles stood in every window, beckoning for them. The columns that framed the large polished doors had been decorated with fairy lights, and the two large Christmas trees to their left and right seemed to glow with green and health and cheer before the warm backdrop of the Manor’s yellow sandstone.

As they approached, the large doors opened wide, releasing a stream of house elves that took possession of their floating luggage and whisked it up to their rooms, then returned to efficiently
divest them of their coats, hats and gloves.

As they did every year, Lucius, Narcissa and Draco were waiting for them at the foot of the grand staircase, and as he did every year, Lucius opened his arms wide at the sight of them, amusement and real warmth in his eyes.

“Welcome, my friends,” he gravely began a speech they all knew by heart.

But this year, it was to be interrupted by his son.

Draco took one long look at the group, his eyes widening at the sight of Hermione and Harry. Then they found Neville, and despite everything he’d been told this past week, his composure slipped away, he barrelled past his resigned mother, grabbed Neville and pulled him into a rough embrace.

“You’re truly alive,” he whispered, his voice breaking with the relief of it.

That was when things got really complicated.
Chapter 24

Later, Lily would think about the way Hermione’s wand had whipped out, how Harry’s spell had catapulted Draco away from Neville and bound him in conjured ropes, how Luna had rushed over to Neville and started checking him for injuries, and wonder why their reaction had been a surprise to her.

The mere sight of Lucius had spurred Hermione into a Cruciatus, after all. They were lucky that the perceived attack on her friend hadn’t ended with a Killing Curse.

But right now she stepped between Draco and Harry’s wand without even a thought, waiting only long enough until it seemed clear that Harry wouldn’t follow up his attack with something worse, then rushed over to Draco, who was already being released from the ropes by his mother.

“Hullo, aunt Lily,” he greeted her cheerfully, if a little dazed. “That wasn’t very clever of me, hmm?”

Lily grinned despite her worry, and her grin only widened when Narcissa, having finally determined that her son was still in one piece, began her inevitable scolding.

“No hugging without permission,” she admonished him, and he nodded sheepishly, but the pretend-humility vanished as soon as his eyes settled on Neville again.

This time, he was more careful, but his enthusiasm and delight shone through in the way every emotion played on Draco’s face, pureblood training or not, and when he offered Neville his hand, and received one in return, he pumped it up and down quite a while longer than was socially acceptable for a casual handshake.

“They probably didn’t tell you,” he said as if there had never been an interruption to their introduction, as if Harry hadn’t thrown him across the room minutes ago. “But I was our Neville’s best friend. We practically grew up together, so I am truly pleased to see you, truly, truly pleased!”

Neville seemed rather shaken by this welcome. He even sent a helpless glance towards Sirius, as if the other man could protect him from Draco. But Sirius just chuckled.

“Give them time to arrive, cousin,” he admonished Draco. “You can pounce on him soon enough.”

Neville turned pale at that. Hermione’s hand was gripping her wand tightly, and Harry was standing slack-jawed, obviously thrown by this turn of events. Luna, however, cocked her head slightly to the side, as if the new angle could explain Draco to her. Then she smiled, and nodded decisively.

“I like this version much better,” she announced, and as if that had been all the benediction needed, the rest of the group relaxed.

Which was a good thing, because Draco, following the Malfoy belief that no one could possibly resist his charm, grabbed Harry’s hand next, then Hermione’s, then finally moved on to Luna.
He squinted at her.

“Say, didn’t you attend Hogwarts a year below mine?” he asked. “Luna Lovegood, right? I remember you. Ravenclaw, brilliant, a unique mind. You were able to see the Thestrals from your first year on.”

Luna nodded, shook his hand with an enthusiasm echoing his, and answered without a hint of the hesitation the others were showing.

“My mother died in a lab accident,” she told him. “I was with her when it happened. It was very sad.”

Draco’s face softened.

“That must have been terrible. I am very sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” Luna said simply, reached out and tucked at one of his silver-white locks. “You’re a nice boy.”

Draco blushed.

Hermione made a sound suspiciously like a whimper.

“Okay, okay! What’s going on here?” Harry had picked up his jaw from the floor and was staring from Draco to Lily with a kind of wounded reproach she couldn’t help find hilarious. “Why is he being pleasant? Why does he call you his aunt? Why does he like Neville? Why is he wearing red?”

Severus gave a little sigh.

“Not that again,” he whispered.

“And why is he smiling all the time?” Hermione added in a mixture of fascination and horror. “I didn’t know his face could do that!”

Lily remembered what Severus had told her about Harry’s reaction to him and the colour of his robes. She took another good look at the outrage on his face and decided it best to defuse the situation for the time being.

“Let me show you four to your rooms,” she offered. “I’ll explain everything on the way.”

But even her best explanations were insufficient to dim the tide of shock the four were experiencing. It almost seemed as if this one change in all the people they’d met was unbelievable to them – the one drop that made their cup finally overflow.

Harry was staring into space, absently shaking his head in denial every now and again. Hermione was listening carefully to Lily’s explanations – that, yes, Draco had been Neville’s best friend and that, yes, they’d practically grown up together, considering that Malfoy Manor had been Order headquarters for two decades now and their Neville had spent a lot of time here. That, yes, he really was a very pleasant boy, if sometimes a bit too quick to speak and too slow to mistrust.

But whether Hermione believed a thing Lily told her was unclear. The only one who, as usual, had
no trouble coping was Luna. She nodded happily to Lily’s explanation, fairly squeed over the set of rooms the four had been given, and casually reached out whenever Neville twitched in delayed reaction (“He hugged me. Draco Malfoy hugged me”) to pat his back.

“There, there,” she’d murmur absently. “You’ll be the best of friends in no time at all.”

Which only led to more twitching.

When she finally left them and retired to her chambers, they’d still given no sign of assimilating the facts, and Lily wondered if they shouldn’t abort this now, while there was still time. Better no Christmas than a ruined one. Better a few quiet days spent with Remus than an awkward dance of formalities, where the travellers stared at Draco and Lucius and twitched, while Draco suffered whenever he saw his best friend’s face being worn by a stranger.

“They deal much better with unexpected enemies than unexpected allies, don’t they?” Remus commented when she relayed the past half hour to him.

They were both dressed to the nines and ready to go down for afternoon tea – another part of the traditional Christmas that would be shot to hell now.

“I never saw it that way,” she admitted with surprise. “But you’re right – they seem to have fewer problems with hostility than with kindness.”

Remus took her arm, and as always, his warmth and his calm assurance steadied her.

“They’ll get used to it,” he promised. “If there’s anything that will get you used to kindness, it’s Christmas with the family.”

She faltered.

“I don’t think we are their family, Remus,” she said quietly, and his arm tightened around her.

“But we will be,” he answered, his voice rich and full of confidence.

Then he smiled.

“You’re much too stubborn for any other outcome, Lily.”

She turned to him, and their kiss was slow and languid.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“And I love you. Merry Christmas.”

Tea and dinner went much better than Lily had expected. Although the four kept their distance from the Malfoys, the glances sent their way were not entirely hostile. It helped, of course, that Draco was his usual exuberant self, moving from one family member to the next with affectionate delight – talking potions theory with Severus, Quidditch with Sirius, teaching with Remus and Lily (he was apprenticed to one of the most renowned healers in Britain, who was famous for his no-nonsense policy concerning apprentices).
Lucius raised his eyebrow now and again in mock-criticism when the laughing and teasing offended his idea of aristocratic diffidence, and Narcissa kept shaking her head about his antics, but both were hiding smiles, and both were visibly proud of their only son. It was a good thing that Draco had turned out to be the kind, self-deprecating boy he was, Lily thought, or they’d have turned him into a little monster with their uncritical affection.

When dinner had come and gone and even their best efforts to diminish the mountains of deliciuous food provided by the house elves had proved in vain, talk turned to the past, as it always does when friends of a lifetime sit together in leisure and peace.

Sirius was the best story-teller among them, with Severus’ dry, witty humour adding just the right amount of snark to the tales, and soon they were roaring with laughter over remembered misdeeds and adventures, even Lucius Malfoy losing his composure over the memory of how Lily had marched up to him one evening, a third year that did not quite reach his shoulder, and had given him a talking-to of such outrageous character that even the silver-tongued Malfoy had been silenced.

“And then she turned around,” Sirius recounted with tears of laughter in his eyes. “Looked at the three of us, huffed and threw her head just so, and said…”

“THAT’LL SHOW HIM,” they all echoed the well-known sentence, and Lily blushed and giggled, and Severus reached out and slung an arm around her shoulders in a rare gesture of spontaneous affection.

“And we did,” he whispered to her. “We showed all of them, didn’t we?”

She smiled and leaned into his embrace.

Slowly, she let her eyes travel over the people gathered in this room, family in all but blood, chuckling and talking and sipping their excellent drinks. Luna had stretched out on the sofa, her head in Neville’s lap. He was stroking her hair and softly smiling down at her.

Lucius had grasped his wife’s hand, one thumb with its perfectly manicured nail stroking slow circles across her knuckles, while their son was settled at their feet, looking up at them with a smile. Sirius was still giggling into his firewhisky. Remus and Severus sat to either side of her, warming up all the little places in her heart.

And then she found Hermione’s face, filled with so much unexpected longing that she couldn’t help but gasp, and Harry, oh, Harry was crying, tears running down his face in perfect silence, but he was also smiling, his eyes glittering brilliant green in the firelight.

She didn’t want to direct the others’ attention to it, but as if her eyes had opened a door, the others began noticing, too.

“You’re crying,” Sirius remarked in surprise. “Why are you crying?”

Harry shook his head and brushed the tears away as if they were nothing worth noticing.

Sirius frowned.

“Is this a ‘you’re all dead’-thing again?” he asked carefully, and Hermione, her eyes suspiciously wet, shook her head roughly.

“No,” she answered. “No. This is a ‘we’ve never seen any one of you so happy’-thing, Sirius.”

“Oh,” Sirius said, clearly at a loss. “So I guess that’s a good thing, then?”
“A wonderful thing,” Luna piped up from the sofa. “A thing of silver bells and winter nights and fairy lights!”

Slowly, dreamily, Harry nodded.

When Harry slipped away, it took Lily a good while to notice, so quietly did he vanish from the room. But when she went in search for him, patting Remus’ arm to signal that everything was alright, she was just leaving for a bit, she found that he hadn’t gone far.

Just over to the dining room, where he sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the huge illuminated Christmas tree, looking for all the world like a toddler eagerly waiting for Father Christmas.

He didn’t react to her entrance, although she was sure he had heard her, and for a moment she considered retreat, not sure whether he’d want her here. She thought that they’d made a step forward today, and she didn’t want to risk progress by intruding too far, too quickly.

But then he cocked his head in her direction, although still looking at the tree, and she took it as permission to come closer.

“May I sit with you?” She asked quietly, and when he again cocked his head, then nodded, she settled down on the floor beside him.

Together they watched the tree in silence.

“So it sounds like your school years were quite an adventure,” Harry then said, and the lightness of his tone, the teasing words took her by surprise.

“Much less so than yours, I gather,” she answered, trying to match his mood.

“Well,” he replied, rolling the word on his tongue. “We did smuggle an illegal baby dragon out of the school, once.”

His wicked smirk widened into a grin at her shock, and it stayed on his face as he turned back to the tree.

“After I came to Hogwarts,” he said wistfully. “I loved this season most of all.”

Lily nodded.

“Me too,” she agreed. “I guess it’s because Christmas always seemed like the most magical time of the year. And what better place for magic than Hogwarts?”

She didn’t mention how drab her parents’ living room had seemed in comparison, how shrill and utterly boring the dolls her sister demanded as presents. She didn’t voice the thought that after the wizarding world, nothing could ever compare again.

“Before,” Harry continued, so quiet that she could barely make out his words. “I used to imagine what my parents – my real parents – would give me for Christmas, and that it would be so much better than what I’d ever gotten from anyone else. Wonderful presents, treasures. But when I came to Hogwarts, I realised that this was my real gift from them. Magic. I’m still thankful for it, even after everything that’s happened.”
Lily felt her breath catch.

He was talking about her. Or not her. Another version of her, one that had been his mother and yet unknown to him, one that he had lost before he was old enough to understand loss.

It shook her, that thought, and the confession made her want to give something back. Memories floated upwards, filling her mind, and without fully knowing it, she began to talk.

“I was pregnant, once,” she quietly said into the warm lights and colours of the Christmas tree. “Fifteen years ago. Remus and I were so excited, so proud, but I was determined that it wouldn’t take over my life completely. I kept doing work for the Order, and one night, when there was a full moon and Remus couldn’t be there, I took guard duty with Severus and James Potter.”

Harry at her side had gone entirely still, not looking at her, but the muscles in his neck were knotted with tension, as if he was straining towards something invisible.

“James… He didn’t hate us. Nothing so dramatic. He just didn’t get why I would be friends with a Slytherin, and in love with Remus, whom he considered boring, instead of dating glorious him. And he was like a dog with a bone, not letting go, needling and sneering and arguing and driving us up the wall.

“It was his job to keep an eye on the wards, and I don’t want to insinuate that he meant to overlook their being triggered – nothing about that was voluntary or planned. He just concentrated all his attention on Severus and me, like he always did, and when the Death Eaters appeared, and I took a curse to the belly – he was as shocked as we were, I think.”

She took a deep, steadying breath. This was all in the past. She could live with it, now.

“Severus rushed me to the hospital, but it was too late. Too late for the baby, and apparently reproductive organs don’t fare too well when pulverized. I can’t… we won’t ever have children, Remus and I.

“But we never forgot. I didn’t get to know his birthday, or what he would look like, or who he would turn out to be. But every Christmas, I’ve bought a present for him, every single Christmas.”

She hesitated.

“Except for this year,” she then whispered. “This year, I bought one for you.”

The Christmas tree stood silent, golden ornaments glinting in the fairy lights. They could hear soft laughter from the other room, Sirius’ voice raised in the climax of some rousing tale.

Harry’s eyes were unreadable. His lips were white.

“There was no need,” he said tonelessly. “You’re not my mother.”

To her shame, Lily felt her throat burning, tears clouding her eyes.

“I know,” she whispered hoarsely. “I know. But…”

She hesitated, not sure what to say, how she could ever express what she felt for this stranger slowly creeping under her skin.

“I would have loved you,” she told the son she’d never had, fiercely, with the conviction of her loss and its consequences behind it. “I never got a chance to give birth to you, to care for you and to raise
you, but I would have loved you so, Harry! More than anything else in the world! I would have died for you.”

It was spoken from the heart, but apparently it had been the wrong thing to say – she always did say the wrong thing to him, it seemed.

Instead of turning towards her, instead of smiling, or even acknowledging her, he turned pale. His face shuttered, a house with no one at home, and he rose on unsteady feet, his eyes not on her, not on the tree either.

He was staring into the darkness.

“Then perhaps it’s better that you lost your child before it managed to kill you,” he said.

He strode out of the room without looking back.
Chapter 25

Once again, Lily couldn’t sleep – motherhood was supposed to do that to you, but Lily had always assumed that was because of babies crying and irregular feeding times, not because your child’s unhappiness became your own and drove you up the walls – and so she found herself wandering the corridors of the Manor, surrounded by old memories and new worries.

When dawn finally came, she slowly made her way to the breakfast room, hoping that the house elves had at least prepared coffee, only to find that she hadn’t been the only one with that idea.

Hermione was sitting at one end of the table, a half-emptied cup of tea and a plate with only crumbs on it by her side, her nose buried in a book. Lily glanced at it and found to her satisfaction that Hermione had followed her advice. She was reading “The Wind in the Willows”.

But the true surprise was waiting for her at the other end of the table.

Draco and Neville. Sharing a pot of coffee. Talking.

Neville’s eyes had darted towards her the moment her foot touched the room’s threshold, but as soon as he had assessed her as a non-threat, his whole attention returned to the conversation at hand. Draco looked up considerably later and sent her a nod and a smile, but he, too, was fixed on their talk, and so Lily chose her morning beverage and a plate of toast and scrambled eggs quietly and joined Hermione at her end of the table, close enough to be able to listen in on the boys, but too far away to intrude.

“…I can’t remember a time when we weren’t friends, you and I,” Draco was saying, his voice earnest and absolute in a way only Draco managed. “We had our difficulties – I was seriously jealous of the whole Boy-Who-Lived thing – I was a jealous little brat in general, I think. But we got over that, thanks to you being long-suffering and too patient for your own good, really, Neville…”

Neville twitched a bit, but unlike yesterday, he didn’t seem on edge. Touched, rather, taken in by Draco’s tale of their friendship, and his way of listening seemed strangely knowledgeable, as if he’d seen events like these happen, though he hadn’t been part of the story.

“Anyway,” Draco continued, more quiet now. “When you… when the other Neville died, I just… Sirius brought his body back, there, in the middle of the tournament’s arena, and he was crying so badly… Sirius crying, I mean… I’d never even seen him not laugh, really, and here he was, cradling him, crying his heart out…”

“Yes,” Neville said, just as quiet, his voice painfully constricted. “I know.”

Somehow he did, and Lily wondered how that scene had played out in their dimension. Who had been killed, that night. Who had cried his heart out.

“That changed things,” Draco said. “It made me see things. I was missing you… him… so badly, but I also began to understand how lucky I’d been, being safe, being loved. Having Neville. Not many people get to have friends like that.”

He smiled at Neville, and without asking refilled his cup with steaming coffee. They seemed almost too close, considering they had only met yesterday and that their relationship had begun rather
violently.

“They’ve been talking for hours,” Hermione commented quietly, not even raising her head from the book. Lily wasn’t surprised. There wasn’t much Hermione missed. “I don’t think they slept at all.”

“Did you?” Lily asked, and while Hermione wasn’t smiling, the look she sent Lily was not entirely negative, either.

“After I dealt with an emotional wreck named Harry, I did, yes.”

“How is he?”

As she had done in Hogwarts’ library the day before, Hermione met Lily’s eyes for a long, tense moment, as if again this was a test that hadn’t been announced.

Belatedly, Lily realized that she’d just asked the most private, protective person she’d ever met (and she was married to Remus!) for inside information on her best friend’s psyche. A week ago, Hermione would have ignored the question. Three days ago, she’d have spit out a cutting remark.

Today, she answered.

“Overwhelmed. And mournful, angry, and ashamed of the way he treated you. He’ll probably try to apologize in a horribly clumsy way.”

“I should be the one apologizing,” Lily said quietly.

It had taken her a long moment of hurt and rejection and pure anger to understand what Harry had said and why he’d said it. Then the implication of his words had set in, and the guilt she’d seen in his eyes, and she’d been horrified of what he was carrying around with him. It explained so much, really.

“I didn’t mean to touch a wound, there.”

Hermione shrugged.

“With Harry, there aren’t many places where you won’t find a wound,” she said nonchalantly. “But that doesn’t matter. He likes the touch more than he minds the pain.”

She shrugged again, then added in a tone that made very clear how little she’d forgiven him for the cave-incident:

“Sometimes, I don’t think he minds it at all.”

Lily decided to let that one go for the moment.

“I didn’t realize he felt guilty about his parents’ death,” she said instead.

Hermione snorted.

“Have you met Harry? He feels guilty about everything,” she turned serious all of a sudden. “But his parents’ death was his first loss, and, apart from Sirius’, the one he never got over, really. That’s not something you can do anything about, Lily.”

Touched and surprised by the kindness, Lily nodded and then concentrated on her breakfast.

The boys at the other end of the table had been quiet, probably listening in on them as they’d been,
before, but now that Hermione’s eyes had dropped back to her book, they took up the thread of their conversation easily enough.

“And how did you get into healing?” Neville asked, honestly interested, the cup in his hand only a secondary thought. “I suppose that’s not a normal career choice for a Malfoy.”

Draco snorted.

“I suppose it isn’t, yes,” he agreed. “But I… needed to do something useful, you know? And I didn’t want to fight – I’m a bit of a coward, to be honest – you should have seen me during Order training.”

He laughed, amused about himself and easily including Neville in that amusement.

“Father is a major patron to St. Mungo’s, and after Neville’s death, I began to visit there with him. The things I saw… so many lives that have been ruined by this war, and never enough people to help. So that’s why, I guess.”

“I know,” Neville said again.

He shifted on his chair restlessly, hands rising to his cup, then discarding it for the table cloth. Splaying his hands on the exquisite cambric in indecision for a moment, before he continued to speak in a voice that was strangely hoarse.

“In my dimension,” he told Draco. “My parents were attacked, too. But they didn’t die.”

Lily could feel Hermione tense at her side, but she wouldn’t have needed that to signal the moment’s importance. Neville’s face did that all on its own.

“They were put under *Cruciatus* until they went mad. They stayed in the permanent ward at St. Mungo’s right until Voldemort attacked and killed everyone there. I’ve never… known them, in a way, and they’ve never known me. But I miss visiting them. I miss the little presents Mum handed to me, even though she probably had no idea who I was. I just… miss.”

His tone was detached, calm and steady, and still the longing shone from every word.

Draco was quiet for a while.

“My Neville,” he then said. “He… we had a thing that we did, every Halloween. We’d visit his parents’ grave, well, I’d mostly stay in the background, keeping an eye on him, but he’d sit there for hours, told them everything that had happened that year. Sometimes we drank a butterbeer to their memory. It seemed to do him good.”

He hesitated.

“I could take you there, if you wanted. I mean, perhaps it’s not your cup of tea, but he found closure there, I think, so…”

Neville smiled, and his hands, still splayed on the table, relaxed.

“I don’t know if there will be time for it,” he answered carefully. “But thank you, Draco.”

Draco opened his mouth, but his reply was interrupted by the sound of doors banging and feet stamping across the hall. Knowing what would come, Lily rolled her eyes at Draco, who gave her back a grin. Then the breakfast room’s door was thrown open and there was Sirius, staring at them all, still in his pyjamas.
“Presents, everyone!” He shouted. He was grinning madly, and his hair, standing every which way, gave him the look of a lunatic. “Lily, Draco, Neville, Hermione, presents! Come on! It’s Christmas!”

Hermione looked more than a bit sceptical, but Neville met Sirius’ eyes freely for the first time, then smiled broadly.

“Coming, Sirius,” he answered, and Sirius’ eyes widened in surprise. “Draco?”

“Absolutely,” Draco agreed, and together the three men barged from the room, leaving Lily and Hermione to follow.

As expected, Lucius and Narcissa were already waiting for them in the main living room. Lily suspected that Narcissa had instructed her elves years ago to inform her the moment Sirius stirred, so that he would find them prepared and presentable when he fairly burst into their rooms in the morning. Severus and Remus were there, too, the former still bleary-eyed, barely taking in his surroundings at all, the latter greeting her with a small, private smile that Lily answered happily.

Luna was dancing around the room in pyjamas printed with flying Christmas trees, whose branches were rotating around their axes in a fairly alarming way.

Only Harry was missing.

Neville’s body went from relaxed to tense in less than a second – a fact that had Draco staring at him in surprise and Hermione sighing with irritation.

“He’s in the kitchen,” she explained. “Stalking a certain house elf. I left him there about an hour ago – he was doing fine, Neville.”

But Neville wasn’t that easily convinced.

“It’s Christmas,” he said in his calm, steady voice. “He should be here.”

Hermione sighed again.

“None of the things he wishes for are in this room, Neville,” she said dully. “There’s no reason for him.”

“We are in this room,” Neville disagreed. “He should be here. I’ll go and get him.”

He left without another word, Luna skipping after him.

“What was that about?” Draco asked into the sudden silence, not at all perturbed by the glare Hermione sent him.

“Why you think this is your business, Malfoy…” she began a sentence that would most likely be as harsh as Hermione could get, but then her mouth snapped shut, she took a step back and blinked twice.

Confused, Lily met Severus’ gaze, who flickered his eyes towards Lucius, Narcissa and Draco, then across the room.
And Lily understood. For the first time since she’d come to this world, Hermione was in a room with the Malfoys, with none of her friends present.

Without conscious thought, she walked over to Lucius until she stood directly between him and Hermione. She saw Severus step to the girl’s side, so close that his arm was touching hers, while at the same time Remus’ soft, calm voice cut through the sudden tension.

“Why don’t you start opening your presents, Draco?” he proposed. “The others will be back in a minute, but I think we can start without them, considering that it’s Christmas, yes?”

Draco’s eyes darted to where Hermione was standing very, very straight and still. He looked at Remus, then Lily, and nodded. There was sadness in his eyes, an understanding that was incomplete and yet painful. For one short moment, he looked like the man he might become.

Then animation and humour snapped back into his face, and he began demanding his presents in a voice that was just loud enough to cover the hissing sound of Hermione’s breathing. Lily looked at Narcissa and saw fierce pride for her son in that beautiful, carefully made up face. Lucius let no emotion show at all, but he had leaned back in his chair, and crossed his legs, and had interlaced his fingers as if to demonstrate very clearly that he would neither stand nor reach for his wand without warning. From Lucius, this was akin to an acknowledgement of guilt.

With Sirius’ help, Draco kept the light-spirited mood going until Neville burst back into the room with Luna and a reluctant Harry, not ten minutes later. Neville’s first look was aimed towards Hermione, and he couldn’t quite hide his relief when he found her sitting calmly at Severus’ side.

“Sorry,” he said to the room in general, but it was meant for her. “I shouldn’t have rushed off like that.”

“It’s alright,” Hermione answered quietly, but Harry, pale, dark circles under his eyes and avoiding, brushed past Neville with a grim expression.

“Nothing’s alright,” he disagreed sulkily and plopped himself down on the floor in one corner of the room. “Dobby’s wearing a tea-towel and is in love with the Malfoys, I won’t get my sweater, and this place was less creepy after I’d burned it down.”

Awkward silence fell over the room. Narcissa raised one eyebrow.

“Charming,” she commented.

Despite her continuing anger at Harry, Hermione bristled, obviously getting ready to defend him. But Neville got there, first.

“Draco tells me that I spent most of my Christmas and summer holidays here, Harry,” he said quietly. “It seems that this Manor was the other Neville’s Burrow. So this is like getting a sweater. Only not for us.”

This made no sense to Lily, nor, judging by the confused faces around the room, to anybody else. But it certainly did to Harry. His shoulders slumped.

“A rotten Burrow, Neville,” he said sullenly, not raising his eyes to the room. “There’s not even a ghoul in the attic.”

“But there are family portraits,” Luna piped in. “And aged retainers, and content house elves. And ghosts in the dungeon, and they aren’t recent ghosts, Harry.”
Harry slumped further.

“Go ahead then,” he instructed them crossly. “Presents and spoonfuls of sugar. Yay to all.”

And so they went ahead, while Harry kept staring at the Christmas tree, the wall and all of them balefully. He refused to open his presents due to the lack of this mysterious sweater, but the other dimension travellers did, carefully, as if they weren’t sure the lovingly wrapped packages wouldn’t explode in their faces.

They hadn’t prepared any presents themselves and did not apologize for it, but they didn’t refuse the trinkets and helpful equipment Lily and the others had gotten for them, either, and Lily counted that as a victory.

*How my standards have changed,* she absently thought while she watched Neville try out a new wand holster Sirius had chosen for him. A week ago, she would have been insulted by the lukewarm reception of their gifts. Today, she saw the fours’ presence as something to be thankful for.

But then there had been so much she hadn’t known a week ago, so much she hadn’t yet understood about these four and their capacity to interact with other people.

*One has to consider each patient’s limits,* a healer had told her once, and from that point of view, the four were trying, reaching out as much as they could, and every moment in this house with all of them had to be an effort.

Again her eyes sought them out, resting on Luna, who was trying on the necklace made from colourful glass beads Remus had found for her, on Hermione, who was clutching the thick, woolly pair of socks Albus Dumbledore had sent for each of them with a strangely devastated expression on her face, to Harry, who was avoiding her gaze with sullen determination, and to Neville, who watched his friends cautiously while holding a conversation on medicinal herbs with Draco.

She remembered that first meeting in Albus’ office, Hermione’s dread of the situation and Harry’s mad-cap nervous energy, and realized that they had, in fact, come far.

When the presents had been unwrapped and suitably admired, Narcissa rang for hot chocolate and distributed it among them (Harry refusing his cup, of course, and Hermione performing a series of not-so-subtle detection charms over hers).

“As to the matter of the ball tonight,” Narcissa then informed the four guests coolly. “I took the liberty to procure a variety of dress robes in your sizes, since I do not assume evening wear is part of a fugitive’s luggage. You are aware of the relevant tailoring charms?”

Hermione nodded sharply.

“Thank you, but that wasn’t necessary,” she said, just as coolly. “We could have transfigured something.”

“No!” Luna protested from the other end of the table, surprisingly loud and determined. “No, no, no, Hermione! Tonight I’ll be a princess. And we’ll dance, won’t we, Neville?”

Neville didn’t look quite so happy about this revelation, but his eyes and voice were warm when he
replied.

“Of course, Luna.”

Narcissa’s lips twitched.

“Then I’ll send you my personal house elf, dear girl,” she offered. “She is an excellent coiffeur.”

“Can she make my hair look like a Nargle-Nest?” Luna inquired seriously. “With wings and claws and chicken feet?”

Narcissa seemed slightly perturbed by that mental image, judging from the way her nose twitched. But her composure held fast.

“I am quite certain she can,” she replied, just as seriously, and was rewarded with one of the slow, sweet smiles Lily had only seen a few times, that transformed Luna into a beauty.

Carefully, the girl untangled herself from wrapping paper, woolly socks and Neville, and walked over to the three Malfoys. With an air of ceremony, a *gravitas* not in the least reduced by the flying Christmas trees on her pyjamas, she embraced first Draco, then Narcissa, and, after a tiny moment of hesitation, Lucius.

“Thank you,” she said solemnly, her blue eyes wide and strangely wise. “I forgive you. You are not at all horrible, and your carpets are really exceedingly nice!”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Kudos to anyone who spots the Doctor Who-allusion in this one. I also need to apologize for the terrible pun on the British election system that I simply couldn’t help. Ahem.
“I hate balls,” Remus grumbled as Lily adjusted his robes. Again.

“No you don’t,” she disagreed happily, choosing to not go for the obvious word play. “You like them just as much as Sirius does. You just like complaining more.”

“No, I really hate balls even under ideal circumstances,” Remus repeated. It was what he always said before the Christmas ball, and, following tradition, Lily fluttered her lashes and glanced up at him cooly.

“Aww,” she chirped. “But don’t you want to dance with me, honeybear?”

He snorted.

“You,” he told her, grasping her by the waist and drawing her closer. “Are an awful, awful woman. I think I’ll just dance with Luna tonight. She will wear a Nargle nest on her head, after all.”

Lily grinned.

“Thwarted again,” she complained, then turned towards the door of their suite. “You’re coming? And what do you mean, ‘under ideal circumstances’?”

He opened the door for her with a flourishing little mock-bow, then closed it behind them and waited for her to hook her arm into his elbow.

“I mean Harry probably not turning up – which might be the safest solution for everyone, Hermione being herself, Sirius still stalking Neville, and all the Malfoys being thrown off by the whole situation. The Order of the Phoenix is an unstable mixture at the best of times. Anything might happen tonight.”

She leaned against him for a moment.

“You worrier,” she told him. “Or it might go splendidly. Luna and Neville will enjoy themselves, Hermione will find someone to talk magical theory, we two will dance all night and…”

She searched for a way that Harry might enjoy the evening and came up with nothing. Well. At least three of the four might have a nice time, and she had promised herself to find a way to reconnect with Harry tonight.

“Sure,” Remus agreed after a telltale moment of hesitation. “Don’t mind me, love. It’s just that I truly hate balls.”

She sent him a look.

“Do I need to do the honeybear-routine again?” she asked archly.

“Dear God, no, I might be scarred forever!” That was Sirius, joining them from the left hand corridor.

Almost in reflex, Lily looked to the right, and there was Severus coming towards them, resplendent in velvet robes of a deep, mossy green. Together they met at the head of the stairs, shared a long, silent look, then descended slowly, Lily’s silk robes swishing in the rhythm of her steps.
They broke formation once they’d reached the ballroom. Sirius headed for a cluster of his old auror colleagues, while Remus and Severus sought out the Ministry’s goblin-liaison for a last discussion of their upcoming visit to Gringott’s.

Lily decided on a detour to the buffet, then settled herself in one corner of the ballroom where she would have a good view of all the entrances, since she was on dimension-traveller-watch duty tonight.

The Christmas decorations in this most formal and elegant of the ballrooms were as resplendent as everything the Malfoys owned. Food and champagne were exquisite, and although barely started, the festivities were already in full swing. This ball was an old Order tradition – even families that valued a more private celebration like the Weasleys sent a representative – and it was just as traditional to enjoy oneself on this night.

Exchanging hugs with her many friends among the Order members, smiles and handshakes with acquaintances, and more formal greetings with current and former students, Lily watched the Order come together to celebrate the survival for yet another year.

She watched Severus dance gracefully with a pretty woman that had just completed her Mastery in potions and was gazing up at him with adoring eyes. She watched Neville and Luna enter the ballroom, both welcomed warmly and Luna complimented on her pink dress robes, watched Sirius wander over to them with a nervous set to his shoulders until Neville smiled gently at him.

She watched James Potter arrive with his son and wife, and for the first time, her heart didn’t give that painful twitch at James’ proud hand on Peter’s shoulder. She watched her friends and family with bittersweet happiness. Of Harry, there was no sign.

Hermione entered the room quietly, so inconspicuous that Lily nearly missed her, although she’d been looking for her. She had chosen a gown the colour of old gold with dark red embroidery around the square-cut neckline, and the colour suited her well, bringing out the caramel of her eyes and the glossy brown of her hair. Still she seemed subdued, and she kept to the corners of the room, like Lily.

For the first time, Lily wondered what kind of person Hermione was when not in charge or researching – how she interacted with people she wasn’t protecting or bossing around. Neville and Luna seemed perpetually true to themselves, not bothering to hide their peculiarities. She thought that she’d at least glimpsed a hint of the Harry beneath his multitude of masks. But Hermione was still a mystery to her, and to see her in this new setting, without her friends clustering around her, was a revelation.

For once, she actually seemed unsure how to deal with the people around her, lingering on the fringe of conversational groups, and when someone approached her, she visibly pulled herself together, snapped her calm, controlled persona quickly enough so that no one noticed. But Lily did. And this time, she could see the artifice in it.

For almost an hour, Hermione discussed horcruxes, dimension travelling and Order business with all and sundry while skilfully evading personal questions about herself or her companions. During this hour, Lily danced twice with Remus, twice with Sirius and once with Severus, encouraged Neville to go for the excellent finger food while Luna was giggling about Draco’s comments on Neville’s unending appetite in any dimension, and kept an eye open for Harry.

But part of her attention was fixed on Hermione and her reaction to the people around her, like a tracking charm she couldn’t finite, and so she noticed the change in her quickly enough to detach herself from Remus and inconspicuously drift towards the woman and her new conversational...
partner.

Bill Weasley had walked over to her, the seriousness of his expression entirely unsuited for the occasion. And Hermione was blinking rapidly, her hands clenched around her water glass, her lips slightly parted.

“Mr Weasley,” she said quietly, and it was a slip, the first mistake Lily had seen her make, to admit she knew him before they had been introduced.

He smiled tensely.

“Bill,” he offered. “A pleasure to meet you, Miss Granger.”

“Likewise. And it’s Hermione.”

Then a silence occurred, for once not the sort of speechless silence that was the usual result of conversation with the dimension travellers, but the strained quiet between strangers that didn’t know how to open a conversation.

“I have been meaning to congratulate you on your warding during the last Order meeting, Hermione,” Bill finally said, his voice unusually guarded. “The protocols were excellently executed. However, I couldn’t help but notice that one of your base runes was more than a bit… irregular. In fact…”

He trailed off, clearly embarrassed, but unfortunately Lily didn’t know enough about warding to make sense of his words.

Hermione, obviously, did. She blushed.

“Yes,” she answered quietly. “Yes. It’s yours.”

This seemed like information of tremendous importance, judging by the way Hermione’s fingers choked her glass.

“But how…” Bill was clearly at a loss. So was Lily, but she suspected for very different reasons.

Hermione squirmed.

“You taught it to me.” She squirmed again, and as if from instinct her eyes swept through the ballroom once, taking in positions and possible threats, before returning to Bill again. “When you apprenticed me.”

“I… what? But I’m not even thirty yet! No one apprentices under thirty! Are you even finished with school?”

Hermione blinked again.

“The circumstances were… unusual?” she offered, and the way Bill stared at her, curiosity mixing with fear and an almost instinctual rejection, hurt Lily like a blow to the stomach.

Did we all look at them like that? She asked herself. And if we did, why ever did they bother telling us anything?

“Unusual how?” Bill asked, and in answer, Hermione smiled tiredly.

“Believe me,” she said. “You don’t want to know. But anyway, how are your solutions for the
Devon Curse coming along?”

Again, Bill gaped.

“I told you about that?” he asked. “I really must like you a lot in your home dimension!”

This time, Hermione’s smile was a good deal warmer, and Lily could almost see the real Hermione peeking through, the woman that would forget to eat over her fascination with an old book.

“You do,” she confirmed, and the unguarded happiness surrounding that fact told Lily that for once, Hermione was talking about someone still alive in her dimension, a friend that hadn’t yet died a gruesome death. “Did you manage to re-code the sequences to help with the backlash? My Bill never quite managed that.”

“I had the same problem,” this Bill confirmed. “But then I got help from an Arithmancy master, who created a stabilization matrix that allowed me to…”

And off they were, plunging headfirst into a conversation of which Lily, despite her thorough academic background, only understood every other word. But she could see Severus from where she stood, who had obviously followed the same need to keep an eye on Hermione this evening, and he looked fascinated, both eyebrows nearly at his hairline, so she assumed that whatever they were talking about would advance magical theory quite a bit.

The longer they talked on, trading little tricks and tweaks, the livelier Hermione became. The usually tense line of her shoulders relaxed, her hands and arms began to gesture wildly, and after Bill’s first chuckle about a pun Lily couldn’t for the life of her understand (wards specialists were, as Severus had once put it, the anoraks of the wizarding world, no matter how many tattoos they got and that how insistently called themselves ‘curse breakers’), they seemed to trade jokes of an increasingly outrageous nature.

Then Hermione tossed her head to make a point, both hands on her hips, humour mingling with the heat of passionate discussion in her eyes. She looked alive, lost in the moment, and Lily’s breath caught.

So there you are, she thought. Nice to finally meet you, Hermione Granger.

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Lily’s eyes were on her husband. She was halfway decided to pressgang him into another dance, since Hermione was clearly amusing herself and didn’t need Lily to look out for her. But then the crowds close to them parted, and up stepped James Potter with his son.

Hermione stiffened. Her arms fell to her side and suddenly she was her old self again, cautious and watchful.

“Mr Potter,” she greeted James, and there was no hint in her voice whether she was glad or vexed to see him.

“Miss Granger, it is a pleasure to meet you again,” he said genially and shook her hand. “Your friend Harry not around? I wanted to introduce my boy to you two – Peter, this is Hermione Granger, a young lady that certainly knows her warding.”
Peter, a copy of his father from his tousled brown hair to the colour of his robes, took Hermione’s hand and eyed her appreciatively. Now in his seventh year, he was quite the favourite with the girls, and the expression on his face clearly said that he wouldn’t mind a flirt with this one. But Hermione’s handshake was short and to the point, and she didn’t meet his eyes longer than she had to.

“How do you do?” she asked, every inch the well-mannered muggle. Lily, who was aware that this expression was almost unknown to purebloods, could barely suppress her amusement when Peter gave a “Very good, thank you. And you?” in return.

“Listen,” James then said after a moment of polite silence. “I’ve been talking to a few Order members and they told me that you’re staying at Hogwarts and here at Malfoy Manor. I just realized no one offered you an alternative. I’m sure you love Hogwarts as much as we all do, and this place is certainly something, but perhaps you’d prefer not to stay with… Slytherins, so I just wanted to tell you that my home is, of course, open to all of you.”

*How dare he!* For a moment, Lily saw red, and only the knowledge that she would ruin the festivities for everyone stopped her from going over there to punch James in the face.

But how dare he assume like that, strutting into a situation he knew nothing about and playing the generous lion, as if she and Remus weren’t as Gryffindor as the best of them! How dare he!

(And they wouldn’t take his offer, would they? None of them had made much of the house question, but Harry and Neville hadn’t hidden their issues with Snape, and staying here *was* putting a strain on them, so what if…)

“You thought we wouldn’t want to stay with Slytherins?” Hermione repeated, and if nothing else, the silkiness of her voice and its underlying sharpness soothed Lily’s doubts. “How do you know Harry isn’t a Slytherin himself, Mr Potter?”

James looked at her in honest surprise, then had the gall to laugh.

“As if the Boy Who Lived could be a Slytherin in any dimension,” he chuckled. “It takes courage to be a leader of men, and the only thing you’ll find in the house of snakes and their would-be friends is cowardice.”

“Would-be friends?” Hermione repeated, her voice even colder. James didn’t notice.

“Those that hang around with them,” he explained, and his eyes flickered over to Remus and Lily. “Almost worse than the real thing. Did you know that all dark wizards came from Slytherin?”

“Is that so?”

Hermione’s eyes flickered to Peter in turn, and under different circumstances Lily would have wondered about that, but right now she was busy *not* crashing Lucius’s ball, not falling into the pool of memories those words had opened up, the remembered hurts of being slighted by their house, of Remus crying in a corner because he didn’t feel at home in his own dorm, of Severus sitting helplessly by their sides, offering to not talk to them anymore in public if it made things easier, and only the distance of twenty years spent happily with her friends could soften her fury.

But Hermione’s fury, it seemed, was softened by nothing. One moment she was listening politely, the next she was very close to James, up in his face, and the fact that her hands were steady and her voice quiet didn’t make her less scary. Not one bit.

“Le me make one thing very clear, Mr Potter,” she said calmly. Her eyes were like polished stone,
not willing to give an inch, and the memories of this woman casting the *Cruciatus*, slaughtering seasoned warriors with a sword, standing up to Albus and winning, were very real right now.

“In our world, you are dead. You died shortly after the birth of your son, and the only reason your boy is still alive there is because of these Slytherins and their ‘would-be friends’ that protected him. Despite the way you antagonized them when alive, they did not leave your son to his fate. They have cared for him, taught him and died for him where you couldn’t, and I can’t help but find that especially ironic considering what part you played in the not-birth of a certain other child.”

James took a shuddering breath. Whether it was the news of his alter ego’s fate or Hermione’s unexpected knowledge of the past, he seemed shaken. And from the way she bore down on him, dominating him easily even though he was more than a head taller, Hermione seemed bent on driving her point home.

“You owe them, Mr Potter,” she said, still so quiet that any bystander would believe the conversation intense but amicable. “And even if it wasn’t abundantly clear from this conversation alone, my dimension proves that they are the people you should look up to, and will be in any reality. Have a good evening, Mr Potter. I don’t think we will meet again.”

She gave him a very final smile, a short, sharp thing that flashed like a knife blade, then turned back to Bill.

“You were saying?” she asked, and to his credit, Bill stumbled through a comment about the use of jewels in foundation stones that lasted exactly as long as James needed to collect his son and vanish back into the crowd.

“Wow,” Bill then said. “I’m really glad I wasn’t the recipient of that.”

Hermione flinched.

“It was necessary,” she said dully, but she didn’t look at him as she lapsed into silence.

She looked miserable, but not as if she regretted the verbal butchering of James Potter.

Lily remembered the glass of wine in her hand and took a small sip. Her heart beat wildly, and she couldn’t quite determine if she was in triumph over Hermione’s cold dismissal of James or shocked by the ruthlessness the woman had displayed.

So this was how she could have used her knowledge of the alternate dimension if she had wanted to hurt them. Once again, she was profoundly reminded that Hermione was trying where Lily and her friends were concerned, and that things could have been very different.

“Ron, my brother, asked me to give you his best,” Bill finally said in an attempt to revive the conversation, and this time it was Lily who flinched, knowing very well that this topic would only deepen Hermione’s misery.

“He was meaning to talk to you and Harry, but Christmas is kind of a thing in my family, and Mum relies on him so much…”

Hermione blinked. For a moment, she looked worlds away.

“I understand,” she said quietly. “Family is the most important thing, especially to Ron. I get it.”

Bill eyed her with surprise, but there was also a slow realization growing on his face. Bill hadn’t been one of the youngest curse breakers ever employed by Gringotts for nothing. He was an
excellent observer.

“That’s good,” he then said, yet unsure what he was seeing. “Most people think it’s weird, actually, the way he cares about family. He was given grief over it in school, so he’s often worried others won’t understand…”

“Oh, no,” she interrupted him. “Ron’s always felt a bit unsure what his role in life was, and being the youngest son, he thought he didn’t really matter. It must have been a comfort for him to take care of your mother. I’m glad he found his place in your family.”

Now Bill was eyeing her with something approaching shock.

“That’s exactly what my father said,” he commented. “You must know him very well in your dimension.”

Hermione went pale, and her eyes flickered across the room as if searching for an exit.

“We…” she stuttered. “I… We grew up together, I guess. He was…” Her voice wobbled and nearly drifted away. “He was my… friend.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Bill said quietly. “After Ginny’s death, he became a bit of a loner. He’s got friends, of course, but sometimes I think they don’t know him very well.”

“Yes,” Hermione said, still in that dying voice. “It’s not easy, getting to know the real Ron. He’s hidden deeply.”

She paused, and half turned away as if to end this conversation, but then her eyes sought and found Bill again, and there was something pleading in the way she touched his shoulder.

“Bill,” she asked, “Is he… Is he happy?”

Bill’s face softened, for a moment echoing the grief visible in Hermione’s eyes. He reached up and covered the hand still touching him with his own, pressing down on it steadily.

“Yes, Hermione,” he said, and there was a new quality to his voice, an intimacy usually reserved for his brothers and his parents. “I believe he is. Although I’m sorry this Ron missed out on getting to know you. You would have made him a better person, I think.”

Lily did the only thing she could and left the two to their family business.

Three dances and an involved chat about the new scholarship programme Narcissa was kick-starting for Hogwarts later, Lily finally spotted Harry, way off in another room, halfway hidden by the shadowy arc of two enormous velvet curtains.

Slowly, so as not to direct the attention of the other guests towards him, she walked crossed over to him, taking step after measured step away from the brightly lit centre of the ballroom, away from the Christmas cheer of her friends and the boisterous dancing, until she blended with the shadows like he did, became as invisible to the rest of them.

His breath hitched when she came to stand by his side, hitched again when her shoulder bumped into his. They were almost of the same height with her in her heels. But he didn’t tense, and he didn’t slip
away further into the shadow, and so they stood together quietly for a while, watching life and warmth and happiness, couples spinning and friends drinking together, the joyful celebration of a day of peace.

“I’m sorry about yesterday,” he then said abruptly. “I wasn’t thinking again, and I shouldn’t have…”

“No apology needed,” Lily assured him calmly, although it did soothe away her hurt a bit. “I shouldn’t have dumped things on you like that.”

He hummed under his breath.

“As recompense, I could kick James for you,” he offered innocently, and despite herself she laughed.

“I think Hermione already took care of that, Harry.”

He smiled in a way that told her he knew all about it.

“Yeah, well, she’s always been quicker than me.”

They fell into companionable silence.

“Don’t you want to join your friends?” she asked after a while, and he twitched again, this time in surprise, as if he had forgotten she was by his side.

“No,” he answered slowly. His voice was a bit hoarse, but it was peaceful for once. “No. They’d only start worrying about me, making sure I had fun and was happy. It’s… it’s good to see them like this.”

“Like what?”

“Alive,” he answered without hesitation. “Being themselves. I dragged them down this path, and I couldn’t have done it without them, but sometimes I wish…”

He smiled.

“It’s good to see that they haven’t lost this yet. That they can get it back once everything’s over. That’s why I’m doing it, after all.”

“You haven’t lost this, either,” she reminded him softly. “You’re alive, too, Harry.”

His smile turned wistful, the corners of his mouth curling down. Lily suddenly realized that she’d never seen him so still before, so motionless, all nervous energy and mood swings gone.

“You should go back to them,” he said. “They’ll be missing you soon, and I’m sure your husband is looking forward to another dance with you.”

Her eyes swept from his face across the long stretch of silent shadows over to the other room, where there was light and warmth and music. The distance seemed insurmountable to her, and the moving shapes twisted, like seen through a pane of unevenly blown glass.

Her son. In darkness even when surrounded by light. Always on the outside, looking in.

“No,” she said calmly. “No. I think I’d rather stay here, Harry, with you.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So things were good. Christmas had been a success, on the whole, and there was so much harmony and goodwill and peace on earth in the air that Lily almost forgot how fast a situation could change when Harry and his friends were involved. She even allowed herself to relax.

Which was, of course, exactly when it all exploded in their faces.

They were sitting at breakfast, or, if that muggle-concept had existed in the wizarding world, brunch, and while Neville and Luna did not seem quite awake yet (they had done an awful lot of dancing the night before), and Hermione seemed content to sip her tea and nibble on a muffin, the rest of them were busy reviewing last night’s ball in great, dissecting detail.

This, Narcissa had once informed Lily in a long-suffering tone, was a part of social life at least as important as the events themselves. To Lily, it was gossip by another name, but that didn’t stop her from happily participating in the least. She wasn’t as good at it as Sirius, who seemed to know the dark and lurid secrets of every single pureblood family in existence, but she was a good observer, and so the latest drama unexpectedly caught her in the middle of a discussion of Mrs Peridonkle’s unfortunate wardrobe choices.

“I’ve had an idea,” Harry, having just burst in to the room, announced. His eyes were feverishly bright, and Lily didn’t need to hear Neville’s quiet ”Uh-oh.” from the other end of the table to know that the follow-up wouldn’t be good.

“So have I,” Hermione announced back and decisively closed her latest book (War and Peace – Hermione had strange proclivities in comfort reading). “I think that we can actually measure the relative magical positioning of our home and this dimension during the next crossing as a sort of ‘frequency’ of dimensional relativity. We only need to…”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s fascinating, Hermione.” Harry waved her away. “But listen: I had an idea! I don’t know why I didn’t come up with it before, but I’ve been thinking, and it’s the solution to all our problems, and it’s so easy!”

Something in the way both Hermione’s and Neville’s eyes were focused on Harry in an expression very close to worry told Lily that Harry’s ideas, especially the ‘easy’ ones, usually weren’t something good.

“Tell us, Harry,” Neville finally said. He sounded resigned.

Harry’s face took on an almost childish expression of excitement. He accompanied himself with wild gestures, as if they could lend his words more sense… or ease their impact.

“So I’ve been thinking,” he repeated, “and we really only have two horcruxes left in our world, plus me and Voldemort. He’s probably taken the cup from Bella’s vault already, anyway, so getting that and Nagini will be a question of stealth, not strength. It’s a one-man-job, really, and so I thought – why not officially make it a one-man-job? We only need my scar to find the right dimension, anyway, so there’s no reason why the three of you couldn’t…”

He was interrupted before he could finish the sentence, but they all knew what he was going to propose, anyway.
“Don’t you dare,” Hermione said quietly, icily. “Don’t you dare, Harry. This is our fight as much as it is yours.”

The implication of his words was slowly making its way through Lily’s relaxed mind, and her reaction was even slower. So that was what last night had been about for him? He’d seen his friends happy, or at least content, and his reaction was to cut himself loose from them? Did he even realize how ludicrous that was? What kind of monsters had taught him that his worth depended on his willingness to sacrifice himself?

But Harry was already talking again, and the atmosphere around the table, so relaxed a moment ago, had become stifled and nervous, like a brewing thunderstorm.

“I know that, Hermione!” Harry now protested, both palms raised to ward off her anger. “Don’t think I don’t know that! You’ve been invaluable, you three, and I couldn’t have done it without you, but there’s only one more plunge, and it would help me most to know you’re safe!”

“No, damn it!” This was Neville, his head lowered like a bull ready to charge, the tendons in his neck standing out. Draco was staring at him in surprise. They all were, really. “You don’t get to cut us out, Harry. We won’t allow it.”

Harry’s palms were still up, but he used them to press against the air in front of him now, as if there was a wall he could push back and make them see behind it, if only he tried hard enough.

“But think about it,” he demanded. “You like it here! The people you knew and loved are still alive here, and perhaps you could love them again. There are creatures to discover here, Luna, plants to grow, Neville, libraries to explore, Hermione, where our home is only a burnt forever. You could have a life here!”

“So could you,” Neville answered roughly. “And yet you haven’t even considered staying here.”

Harry waved this away.

“I’m different, and you know it. I’m needed there.”

“So are we.” It was clear from Neville’s tone that he wouldn’t budge an inch on this. “You need us. And we won’t leave you, no matter what you say.”

“This is not your last supper, Harry,” Luna added quietly, but her voice was laced with steel. “And we’re not sleeping. We won’t sleep a wink until it’s done.”

Not touched at all by the sentiment, Harry was turning angry.

“Don’t be stupid,” he told them. “You may think it’s your job to protect me, but when I tell you that job is done, it’s done.”

Lily could see that the discussion was ended for Neville and Luna. They would not move on this. But more than that, the way Neville closed his eyes tiredly, the way even Luna displayed irritation told her that this wasn’t the first argument of its kind among them.

Sweeping her eyes across the table, she saw the confusion on her friends’ faces, saw Draco’s shock, Narcissa’s quiet evaluation of the group, Sirius’ and Severus’ growing outrage. To them, this was Harry questioning the others’ loyalty, the worst insult any friend could give.

And she could see that, could understand how hurtful his words must sound for the others. She would even have agreed with their condemnation – if she hadn’t remembered a time when she’d
been desperate, in pain, and always exhausted, and the idea of pushing everyone away had suddenly made sense. Had been alluring, even.

She hadn’t wanted to see anyone in the hospital, after her child had died and her insides been turned into a warzone. And when they had let her go, and Remus had waited for her outside her room, his eyes red-rimmed and tired, she had tried to distance herself from him, because he was close to his breaking point already, and the only thing she would do was drag him down with her.

*This is my problem,* she had told him, and *I’ll deal with it,* and *I just need some time.* She’d said that this thing between them hadn’t perhaps been the best idea, after all, and that he had his own future to look forward to. She had – generously, as she’d thought – offered to let him go.

She had thought she was doing him a favour. She had decided not to hear his *It was my son, too.*

And it had taken her years to understand how much she’d hurt him, to realize that taking on all the grief by yourself, refusing to share it, was just another kind of selfishness.

She saw that same desperate selfishness, that stupid hope to protect by withdrawing in Harry now, and Remus’ hurt on Neville and Luna.

But Hermione’s face was hard, unreadable, and as she stood, pressing her hands down on the table, she was as immovable as a rock.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” she said quietly. “You don’t get to tell me when my job’s done. You don’t even get to tell me what my job is, Harry.”

Lily could almost see the tension in the air, like heat waves rolling out from her, whispering of anger and violence. But Harry was stubborn.

“I dragged you into this,” he said. “You’re helping me. And I can decide that I don’t want your help anymore, Hermione. I don’t. Stay here. I’ll do the rest on my own.”

“I’m helping you?” Hermione’s voice had turned sharp and brittle, a far cry from the controlled, dangerous persona she had projected before. This was ugly, and vicious, and very real.

“You wouldn’t have survived your first year at Hogwarts without me, Harry. You might have been the original reason I came into this, but things are far more complicated now. Don’t try to tell me you could do without me! I point and you charge, didn’t you say so yourself? What’s so special about you that you can dismiss us on a whim?”

His eyes darkened.

“I am the Chosen One,” he said.

For a moment, Hermione looked as if she wanted to hit him.

“And I’m the Clever One,” she hissed. “So stop this nonsense and tell me what you’re really on about!”

He opened his mouth to argue back, but even Lily knew Hermione well enough to see that it would be useless. So he adopted a different strategy. He hung his head, and his next words were spoken calmly, pleading in a way that cut at Lily’s heart.

“No.” Hermione’s anger didn’t change, and neither did her answer.

“I need you happy more than I need your help,” he said entreatingly. “Please, can’t you understand that?”

“Happy?” Hermione asked sharply. “We haven’t been ‘happy’ for years, Harry. ‘Happy’ doesn’t even come into it.”

“Not there,” Harry agreed quietly. “Not… at home. Everything’s too broken there. But here? You could be so many things here, Hermione!”

She made a swift, cutting gesture with her hand. Her face was all sharp angles and impatience.

“I am who I am, Harry. Nothing’s going to change that.”

Harry didn’t see her anger. His eyes were focused far away, on the future he had imagined for her. He only saw the Hermione of his hopes, not this one before him.

“Yes, I know, but think of your opportunities! You’ll miss me in the beginning, sure, but once you’ve settled in…”

The windows of the breakfast began to vibrate. Plates and cutlery rattled on the table. The room’s tension rose to an almost unbearable level.

“What do you think is going to happen, Harry?” Hermione yelled. “You’re going to leave and I’ll just… move on? Find a nice bloke, settle down, produce 2.5 children and work for the Ministry? You can’t be that naïve!”

“Of course I’m not, Hermione! But you have a chance for a good life. I want to make sure that you…”

“There is no good life for me without you! I will not let you leave me, like all the others did!”

Hermione was panting now, all control gone, no way left for her to detach herself, and Lily could see that even Neville was looking at her anxiously.

Harry just sighed.

“Let’s be honest about this,” he said, as if Hermione was a small child refusing to see sense. The exhaustion in his face hurt almost as much as the resignation. “I’m broken already. It’s too late. Even if the prophecy… even if things weren’t the way they are, I’m wrong in a way that simply won’t heal. But you will! You’re the part of us three that will survive this, and move on. You’re stronger than me, Hermione, you’ve always been stronger. I’m sure of that!”

For the length of one breath, all was silent around the table. They must make a strange picture, a tiny part of Lily’s mind mused, still like a waxwork display, all frozen in between this and the memories of a pleasant breakfast.

Then Hermione laughed, bitterly, coldly, as if the fact that her friend considered himself wrong was funny to her, and Lily didn’t know what hurt her more, his honest, entreatying eyes or her dark amusement.

“But don’t you see, Harry?” she asked. “I’m just as broken as you. I’m just as desperate. The only thing I’m living for is you, and the way things are going, I’ll be very tempted to walk into the nearest Death Eater camp unarmed as soon as you’re dead.”
No, Lily chanted silently. No, no, no, this isn’t how things are supposed to be; no one is supposed to think like that at their age; they can’t be saying these things and mean them; a world in which this conversation makes sense is not supposed to exist!

They can’t keep breaking my heart like that.

Harry was staring at Hermione as if seeing her for the very first time. Lily had observed so many emotions on his face this past week, so many mood changes, so many things that did not belong in the life of a man that young, but this kind of dread was new. It was frightening her.

“But you can’t,” he said stupidly. “You’re not allowed to. I… that’s not how it works. I’m willing to do what’s necessary, but I need to know that you’ll be happy and alright, you three, I need to know…”

“But I’m not!” Hermione interrupted him heatedly. “I’m not happy or alright - I’m messed up, just as much as you are. I have parents in Australia whose memories I erased, and I have Luna and Neville and you. That’s it!”

“Parents whose memories she erased?” Sirius whispered at Lily’s side, but he was talking to himself, or perhaps the need for something other than the sound of these two butchering each other had become too great. Lily ignored him.

“That’s it for now,” Harry still tried to argue, but he wasn’t looking at her, and a curtain of hair hid him as he hung his head. “But there’s the future! Once I’m gone…”

“Once you’re gone what?” Hermione shouted. “Tell me, what great thing is waiting for me? Loneliness? Nightmares? A complete inability to function in normal society? Tell me what I’m supposed to look forward to, here, because I really can’t see it, Harry!”

There was a long silence. When Harry looked up at her, there were tears on his face.

“But I’m doing this for you,” he whispered.

Again, she laughed.

“And I for you,” she said quietly. “And so we only have each other. Don’t leave me before you have to.”

Harry was shaking his head in denial, was shaking it wildly, and – whether it was an after-effect of the Felix brought out by stress or just that he had reached his breaking point – there was madness in his eyes.

“But it isn’t supposed to be like that!” he pleaded. “I… There’s good and bad, right? Fate? And ever since I heard the prophecy, I figured that there wouldn’t be a way out for me, and Snape’s memories were very clear… I get that, I’m not stupid, I know what will happen to me. But there’s a give and take, there has to be, and if this is going to be my life, if this is all it’s going to be, then the good things must happen to someone else! Someone will get that happy ending that I never got, and I know it will be you, I know it, because you deserve it, Hermione, you deserve it…”

“No, Harry,” Hermione interrupted him. A tear ran down the side of her face. Then another. “I don’t think there will be a happy ending for anyone. This isn’t a story.”

Again he shook his head, and his hands came up, fingers splayed, as if to ward off the truth.

“That can’t be,” he disagreed fiercely. “That can’t be it. We need to make sure that you’ll be alright,
Hermione. I need to know that after all the people that died on me, all the people I killed… I need to know that at least I managed to save you.”

Hermione leaned forward, caught one of his hands and held it tightly. Through her tears, she smiled at him.

“I’d lay down my life for you without hesitation, Harry Potter,” she said quietly. “But there are things even I can’t do for you.”

And Harry, who’d calmly contemplated to sacrifice himself for them minutes before, met her gaze with eyes that were wide with horror, then whirled around and stormed out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

“This is not your last supper, Harry. And we’re not sleeping. We won’t sleep a wink until it’s done.” – Luna is, of course, referring to the last supper of Christ and the fact that his apostles fell asleep instead of watching out for him as proper apostles are supposed to do.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After Harry had stormed from the room, the echo of the doors slamming shut behind him barely died away, Hermione turned her eyes on all of them.

“We’ll be leaving for Gringotts in three hours,” she stated calmly.

Remus couldn’t believe his ears.

“But…” he protested, gesturing around the table, meaning everything he’d just heard, meaning Neville and Luna, who were leaning against each other as if too tired to stay upright on their own, meaning the way his wife stood, hands clenched around the edge of the table, her knuckles white with tension.

Hermione cocked an eyebrow in silent mockery. There were tears on her face, still, shining traces that would dry slowly if not wiped away, but there wasn’t a hint of emotion visible in the rest of her.

“This changes nothing,” she said. “You can join us or stay – it’s your decision. I’m sorry we ruined your breakfast, but there really are more important things at the moment.”

And just like that she left, and Neville and Luna walked out after her, not protesting her announcement, as if things were business as usual for them, too. And Remus went over to Lily and hugged her tightly, only to be hugged by Severus right afterwards, while Sirius was comforting Draco and trying to explain what had just happened in his breakfast room, as if there was anything that could explain this.

The urge to withdraw was nearly overwhelming in that moment. He needed distance, needed perspective, needed calm and quiet to understand what he had seen and heard, what it meant for them and for the four.

But he could feel a pounding vibrate in his body, the frantic rhythm of a train gathering speed, carrying them all down, down, down, and he knew there wasn’t time to step back and analyse.

Christmas had been a lull in the storm, a plateau stretching out forward and backward in time, giving them space to breathe, to reconsider. But it had been an illusion, a gift none of them had appreciated properly, and now they were off again, hurtling towards Gringotts, towards a horcrux, towards the travellers’ return to their own dimension.

Towards an end not even Hermione seemed ready to name.

Remus needed a chance to think. He could see better from a distance. But since he would have neither, he calmed down the frantic, panicky part of himself and concentrated on his breathing. He would observe, and stay quiet, and there would be time, somewhere, in-between, time enough to make sense of it all and to find a way to tell the others.

Because he had finally understood.

Right there, in the middle of the breakfast room, while Hermione shouted and Harry cried, and Luna was clutching Neville’s hand as tightly as she could, Remus had understood.
Harry would die.

Not: Harry might die. Not: There was a good chance he could die. Not: They were all taking terrible risks.

Harry would die.

Willingly. Inevitably. And all four knew it.

Remus watched them in silence, these travellers from a different world, while this terrible conviction spread through his mind and numbed his body.

The four gathered in the Entrance Hall long before anybody else, once again clad in their ragged layers of spelled clothing. Neville had cupped the back of Harry’s neck and drawn him close. Harry leaned against his broad chest as if it was the only fixed point left in the world. Luna had nicked a few ornaments from the Malfoys’ Christmas tree and braided them into her hair, like mementos of a short happiness that was already fading.

Hermione stood apart, erect and calm, but her eyes were old, so old and weary as they rested on her friends, and the fingers she held interlaced in front of her belly were trembling ever so slightly.

Remus would have seen none of it a week ago. He would have thought them unchanged.

And perhaps they were. Who knew how often this kind of clash had happened in the past, after all? Already he could see Harry crawling back into himself, his shoulders relaxing, his face taking on the mixture of serenity and deranged danger so unique to him.

What had Luna been wearing in her hair when they had rescued them from Voldemort’s dungeon? Remus couldn’t remember.

Had Neville’s hands always clenched and unclenched like that, tense with the knowledge that none of his strength could keep his friends safe? Remus hadn’t noticed before.

Harry would die.

And one way or the other, he would take the three others with him.

All hearts must break, he thought absently, his thoughts going back to the very first story Luna had told him. All his answers had been right there, right then, but he had been too blind to see.

What can we do? he thought desperately. Is there really nothing we can do?

He stayed close to Lily when they reached Gringotts. She had gone quiet after the events of the morning, and he hadn’t yet the heart to talk it through with her, to ask whether she, too, had seen the elephant in the room and understood its implications. So he did the only thing he could: stayed close to her and watched her for signs of a distress he could soothe.

(But no, she couldn’t have. Lily would never accept a thing like that, she would rave and rage until her last breath and not allow such a tragedy to happen. Wouldn’t she?)
When they climbed into the transportation carts and Luna came to sit in front of him, his hand found hers and held it tightly.

So Harry survives the Triwizard Tournament, Remus recounted the known facts to himself as they began their descent into the caves below Gringotts. He’s friends with Hermione and Ron, who are attracted to each other.

As the downward curve steepened and their speed increased, Hermione began clutching the side of her cart, muttering angrily.

Harry learns about the prophecy. Then a lot of people die, including Ron, and they are on the run, hunting horcruxes. And then, at some point, they find out that Harry is a horcrux, too, and that to defeat Voldemort, he will have to die – but how would they discover this?

The ground dropped from under them, and Harry let out a whoop of delight, echoed by Sirius’ even louder whoop. Remus just held on tight, as always praying that he wouldn’t embarrass himself. But he also kept hold of Luna’s hand.

‘Snape’s memories were very clear,’ Harry had said. Hermione had told them that Severus had died in her arms, after trying to protect them as long as he could. But then…

Their Severus knew? But then, if they didn’t find out on their own… Then Albus must have known, too! But he can’t have. He can’t have!

The pressure of Luna’s hand in his drew him back to the present.

“Stop thinking, Professor,” Luna whispered. “Thinking doesn’t help. Have hope instead. It’s a much better feeling, fuzzier and warmer. Like a blanket, really. Do you think they sell hope-blankets somewhere, Professor?”

He swallowed, then cleared his throat. The carts were slowing down.

“I don’t know, Luna,” he said. “But please, don’t call me ‘Professor’ anymore. I’d wager I’ve learned more from you than you from me.”

Luna giggled.

“That title’s not about teaching, silly,” she said. “It’s about honouring. When we’ve all survived this, I think I’m just going to knit you a hope blanket. How hard can it be?”

“… all survived?” Remus echoed, and wasn’t it strange that the words of this fey girl could make him feel better. “But I thought…”

In answer, Luna leaned even closer to whisper in his ear.

“Hermione is very clever, but sometimes she tries so hard to see what is real that she forgets what is true. This is a story, just like all things are. And we can decide what kind of story it is to be.”

“But Harry seems to be so sure he will have to…”

Luna smiled, a secretive, beautiful smile.

“That’s because he needs to be sure. It’s part of the story. But why shouldn’t we yet find a ram before it’s too late?”

Remus opened his mouth to ask more, but a shout from Harry interrupted him.
“Luna, come on! We’re nearly there!”

“Right behind you! Keep an eye out for dragon-flies!” Luna called back and jumped from the cart. She had let go of his hand easily, and Remus realized that she had kept hold of it as a comfort to him, not because she needed it.

She turned back to him and smiled again.

“The night is always darkest before someone remembers to use a *Lumos*. Come along, Remus! We’re going treasure hunting!”

And so they were. Once the goblins and Hermione had cancelled most of the defensive spells placed on the vaults, taking careful note of their nature and position so that they could be re-applied, they made good time.

While everyone *knew* that the Lestranges worked for the Dark Lord, no one had been able to prove it yet. So while the Order was called as soon as someone sighted them, they’d had no legal right to seize their possessions. This expedition was more a result of their diplomatic efforts than anything else. The goblins had no interest in protecting Death Eaters (who brought little profit and much strife), but they would only cooperate so long as the Order didn’t cause any trouble and acted discreetly.

Remus sighed, watching Harry wade through heaps of gold and silver tableware with no regard for the things he trampled on. Both discretion and keeping out of trouble would be a challenge for the dimension travellers, and although Hermione was right behind Harry, flicking her wand and righting his chaos, Remus knew her too well by now to expect this state to last.

Once they had found the first artefact that might have caused the dimension portal, Hermione would be off in her little world, and they left to deal with Harry.

Said walking agent of entropy now raised a palm to his forehead and pressed it against his scar.

“Oh, he said. “It’s definitely here. Over there in that corner, I think.”

Remus hadn’t known that Harry functioned as a horcrux-detector, but he wasn’t about to complain when his surprising talents made his life easier for once. While Severus and Harry unearthed and secured a beautiful golden cup, he joined Hermione, Sirius, Luna and Lily on their search for the unknown object that had catapulted them into this dimension.

There were a lot of artefacts with transmogrifying powers in here. Over the centuries, the Lestrange family had gathered a huge collection of objects both dark and magical. Many of these were unfamiliar to Remus, and even more were dangerous. He caught Hermione’s longing glance towards the bookshelves, but to her credit, she kept herself in hand and concentrated on the parameters of their ‘treasure hunting’ instead.

Despite their organized approach to the search and the simple searching charm Hermione had developed, it took them almost half an hour to find three possible candidates for the rift’s cause.
This wasn’t helped by the fact that Harry, instead of joining them in their search as Severus had done, insisted on exploring the other cursed objects in the room, happily claiming that “Archaeology is not my division, no, thank you, I’ve no interest in transmogri-tralala, carry on over there, I’ll just poke this thingy here!”

It was as if this morning had never happened, or as if they had all snapped back into their quirks with a vengeance to forget about their confrontation. Harry was doing his mad hatter routine, Hermione was clear-eyed as she bossed them all around, Luna was skipping happily in her search for the artefacts and talking to everything she saw until Hermione pointed out that under these circumstances, she might have to invoke the ‘Luna is forbidden to talk to monsters’-clause of their friendship. Luna pouted after that.

And Neville? Neville kept himself apart, standing guard over them near the entrance of the vault. He stayed quiet while they discussed their approach and findings or talked nonsense in the case of Luna and Harry.

So quiet, in fact, that Remus had completely forgotten he was there. Right until Neville blocked the *Reducto* intended for Sirius’ unprotected back.

Chapter End Notes

“But why shouldn’t we yet find a ram before it’s too late?” = When God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son to him, Abraham complies and has already lifted his knife to kill Isaac, when an angel interrupts to tell him that it was basically a test of his devotion. In being willing to sacrifice his son, Abraham has made the actual sacrifice unnecessary (to put it roughly. Theologians would probably kill me for this summary):

"And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son." Genesis 22, King James Bible
The second he heard the telltale whoosh of a malignant spell, Sirius whirled around, wand ready, only to see the *Reducto* that would have turned him into splattered bits on the wall impact with a glowing blue shield.

His eyes sought and found Neville, who stood by the door with his wand raised, and for a heartbeat they looked at each other in perfect understanding.

Then the shield collapsed, Harry switched from crooning over a cursed dagger to battle-ready so fast it could give you whiplash, Hermione swished her wand once and collected the chosen artefacts in her belt pouch, and Neville, with a voice of thunder and fury that resonated deep within Sirius, bellowed two words:

“Bellatrix Lestrange!”

He threw himself out of the vault, and before Sirius had even reached the threshold he could hear the sounds of a violent duel from outside.

Neville was a good dueller, quick on his feet, but Bellatrix had twenty years of life-or-death situations under her belt, and while Neville held his own, fighting offensively and without a hint of regard for his own safety, it wasn’t until Sirius and Harry joined him that the tables turned.

Bellatrix cackled, but she looked worried and out of her depth.

“Neville Longbottom,” she hissed. “I heard you weren’t dead after all, but that you’d dare go up against me after I sliced your pretty little body to bits, that’s surprising.”

Sirius went cold. So she was the one who had killed his Neville. He might have known. His cousin had always had a taste for cruelty.

Neville bared his teeth in a snarl and his curses got that much nastier. Under the onslaught of spells, Bellatrix was reduced to keeping up her strongest shield, and her eyes were flickering left and right, looking for an escape route.

“And who’s that there? Sirius, dearest cousin? Always your faithful dog, wasn’t he, Neville? Always by your side. Sickening, how he cared about you. Was he saaad when he couldn’t save you, when he wasn’t there when it really mattered? Did he…”

A blue spell light sliced right through her shields, and with a shriek, Bellatrix collapsed, both legs broken, her wand flying towards Harry, who pocketed it calmly. Sirius winced at the awful snap of breaking bones, and then turned to the source of that particular curse.

Hermione stood to his right, her wand trained on Bellatrix, and by her side was Luna, who observed the fallen Death Eater with cold, clear eyes.

“Petrificus Totalus,” Luna said, unnecessarily, and watched as Bella’s body went stiff.

For a moment, there was complete silence save for their panting breaths. Sirius quickly swept the cavern and saw that everyone appeared unharmed. Lily and Severus were still standing close to the vault entrance – the whole thing hadn’t taken more than five minutes, after all. Remus was next to the Gringotts official who had brought them here. His wand was out, but he hadn’t gotten a chance to use it.
“Everyone alright?” Sirius called out and received confirmation from his friends and a disgusted grunt from the goblin. There went their cooperation.

“How the hell did she get in here?” he then demanded from the official. “And why didn’t your colleagues inform you the moment she entered Gringotts?”

The goblin shrugged. He seemed to derive a certain amount of satisfaction from the whole situation.

“No communication between the offices and the caves,” he told him gruffly. “Security protocol. And I assume she cast additional wards on her vault. Some customers do, usually the paranoid ones. We probably cancelled them and that alerted her to the fact that something was wrong.”

“And you didn’t think to tell us this might happen?” Sirius asked, furiously.

Bellatrix’s words had cut deeper than he’d expected. Even after all these years, he could remember the night he had found Neville with perfect clarity. The way the boy’s limbs had sprawled in unnatural angles on the rough dirt of the graveyard. The sticky sensation of his blood on Sirius’ hands.

He felt a touch on his shoulder and stiffened. It was Neville who’d stepped up to him, the other Neville, the one whose blood had never been spilt that night.

“Don’t let her get to you,” Neville said quietly. “She does that to everyone, but you mustn’t allow it.”

He nodded mutely. They had never reached this stage, Sirius and his Neville, one where they could lend each other strength, one where they were equals. His Neville had always been dependent on him, and although seeing what this one had grown up to be filled him with pride, the sight also ached like a wound. This Neville didn’t need him.

But then he looked again, and closer, and saw the slightly wild expression in Neville’s eyes. He noticed that the young man hadn’t yet moved his hand from Sirius’ shoulder. And when he saw Severus silently watching them, and caught the worry in his best friend’s eyes, who had, after all, almost seen him murdered minutes ago, he remembered.

Growing up didn’t stop the need for others. It just changed it.

So he leaned into Neville slightly, just enough to bump his shoulder.

“You did good,” he told him hoarsely. He didn’t talk to the boy he’d loved or to the hero he’d seen when he’d first met this Neville. He talked to the man he’d gotten to know these past days. “Thank you for saving my life.”

And Neville’s hand tightened on his shoulder for a moment before letting go. He turned away without lingering, but his eyes seemed clearer, somehow, and the lines of his body were steady and calm.

“Anytime,” he said quietly.

“Great,” Harry said, standing over the petrified Bellatrix like a big game hunter. The only thing missing was a boot resting on her midriff. “So who gets to kill her?”

“What?” Severus shouted in synchrony with Lily.

“We haven’t even begun discussing what we’re going to do with her,” Remus protested. “How did killing her come into this?”
Sirius just shook his head. They wouldn’t get far with the humanitarian approach, here. What they needed was a pragmatic argument.

“She might have good intel, Harry,” he therefore said. “We don’t catch enough Death Eaters that we could afford to kill one.”

But Hermione was shaking her head, too.

“Not this one, Sirius,” she disagreed. “Information might be valuable, but Bellatrix is too twisted for that. Too dangerous. We need to get rid of her.”

“But we can’t just kill her!” Severus looked honestly shocked, and Sirius kind of agreed. Killing indiscriminately during a battle was very different from killing a fettered and disarmed enemy. That was murder in his book.

“Course you can,” Harry disagreed happily. “It’s quite easy. One little curse and, oops, dead Bellatrix. Could happen to anyone, really. I’d volunteer, but I did her in last time, and everyone should have a turn at killing Bella. It’s only fair, right?”

“Harry, I don’t think that would be the right thing…” Remus began, obviously horrified by his nonchalance, but Harry interrupted him.

“She killed my godfather,” he said, suddenly stone cold sober. “She sliced through Molly Weasley like gutting a fish.”

“She Crucioed my parents until they went insane,” Neville said, stepping up to Harry’s side. “She nailed Susan Bones to a tree and laughed while she did it.”

“She killed my father,” Luna said. Her eyes were dark, and her voice deeper and harder than they had ever heard it. “And then she killed Remus, because he tried to protect me and gave me his food and stepped in front of me when they wanted to hurt me. She killed him with a silver knife.”

“She tortured me,” Hermione said, joining the other three as they formed a line between Bellatrix and the rest of them. The symbolism was very clear. “She watched Lucius Malfoy kill Ron and laughed. And that’s just some of the atrocities she committed in our dimension. From her words just now, she killed this Neville. Perhaps his parents. Who knows what else she did. We can’t afford to let her live.”

And there it was again, their old friend, the stunned silence.

“Right,” Harry then said, clapping his hands together. “Any other objections?”

Lily took a step forward.

“Yes, actually,” she answered. “I understand why you want to do this. I sympathise. If I had been there, I would have killed her myself to protect all of you. But this would be murder. It would be wrong. We can’t let it happen.”

Harry’s face hardened.

“Try and stop us,” he said, and Hermione opened her hand and threw a spell-charged stone to the ground. She snapped her wand once and around them a shield bubble blinked into existence, golden and strong.

“I’m sorry,” she told them, but she didn’t look it, and although both Remus and Severus cast
diagnostic charms and Sirius and Lily started slicing immediately, they all knew it would be of no use. To break through this would take them hours.

Still they tried.

“Together then?” Harry asked his three friends, completely ignoring the efforts to burst their shield bubble.

Hermione nodded, and something like a smile crossed her face.

“Together,” she agreed – where they really having a bonding moment over who got to kill Bellatrix Lestrange?

“Together,” Neville and Luna echoed, and they all turned their backs on Sirius, Remus, Lily and Severus.

Green light filled the cavern. The shield bubble flickered out of existence, but no one moved.

They all knew Bellatrix’ fate.

The trip back to Hogwarts was silent and tense.

Not for the first time, Sirius was glad that none of the students had stayed for Christmas this year. They had originally planned to strengthen Hogwarts’ defences over the holidays and therefore sent everybody home. Instead, the empty school had seen something very different. Now, even the thought of having students underfoot in a situation like this made Sirius shudder.

He and his friends were angry, and they didn’t bother to hide it. They had worked so hard this past week, stretched themselves far beyond any comfort zone to accommodate their visitors, to understand and support them. He’d really thought they’d built something together.

Only to have Harry and the others turn their backs on them the moment it suited them. Literally. Why were they supposed to do all the compromising? Why did they have to be understanding all the time, when the dimension travellers wouldn’t even bother to listen to their arguments?

Yes, they were furious. And as always when they’d reached this level of collective anger, they let Lily do the talking. She was best at her angriest. Even Albus apologized to her when she got like this.

On this occasion, she gave it her very best effort.

“That,” she said as soon as they had entered the Hall and gathered around a table, “was not acceptable. Not in any way, shape, or form acceptable.”

Harry shrugged.

“Needed to be done, though,” he said lightly, and Sirius could see both Neville and Hermione nod their agreement.

“That’s not for you to decide,” she shot back. “This is our dimension. We call the shots. You should have at least discussed this with us!”

Harry had the gall to smirk at her.
“Nope!” he announced, settled down at the table and conjured tea for himself and his companions.

Now, Sirius had been an auror for a good long time before he accepted his teaching position, and he’d been a member of the Order since he was eighteen. He knew that, although he preferred to keep smiling and joking until he’d drawn his friends back from the abyss they were staring into, there needed to be moments when you had to steel your heart and let the smile slip and do justice.

He knew about the realities of life, about necessity. And this wasn’t that. This was sheer obnoxiousness.

It seemed that Remus had come to the same conclusion.

“Do you have to act like this?” he demanded of Harry. It was rare for him to show his irritation that way.

Harry sipped his tea with obvious enjoyment.

“Yep!” he answered happily. Sirius could have throttled him.

He caught Neville’s eyes and raised a critical brow. Neville had the decency to blush over his chosen leader’s antics, but he didn’t look sorry, not in any way that mattered.

“What Harry means,” Neville said, “is that this was an operational decision we had to make. We got involved in your dimension when we started destroying the horcruxes, and we couldn’t risk Bellatrix escaping. This had to be done.”

He paused.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry that we overruled you.”

“More like steamrolled,” Sirius answered.

“And it doesn’t change the fact that what you did was wrong!” Lily added. She, too, had turned towards Neville in hopes of a rational conversation. “There were other options, other ways we could have dealt with this.”

Neville’s eyes darted to Hermione, then to Harry. But then he shook his head.

“No,” he said. “No other options. Not with this one.”

Lily fairly growled with frustration.

“You can’t simply…”

“There is nothing simple about this,” Luna interrupted her. Her usually airy voice had a very determined quality to it. “There’s threads and threads and layers and layers, and you can’t see which way the spider’s moving if you’re caught in the web, only guess the worst!”

Harry used the confused silence that followed to jump into the conversation again, happily driving his point home.

“Besides,” he said, “just think about how convenient this is! She’s only safe dead, you wouldn’t have been able to kill her with your funny little ethics in the way, and there we were! An opportunity! Just consider it an all-round service!”

Sirius didn’t even have to look at his friends to know that Harry had just made everything worse.
He’d been in enough ethics discussions with Remus and Lily that he could predict their next words.

“Right and wrong isn’t a matter of convenience,” Remus protested as expected. “You shouldn’t have gone over our heads, and you certainly shouldn’t have killed her. These facts aren’t changed because you don’t like them!”

Harry scoffed and sipped his tea, as if they were just having a pleasant chat. But his voice was hard when he answered.

“We also probably shouldn’t have destroyed your horcruxes for you – interference in other dimensions and all that rot – and I certainly shouldn’t mention that we have an undestroyed one in our possession, and that you really don’t want to upset me as long as the future of your world depends on my moods, do you?”

Stunned silence met that statement. Even Hermione looked a bit shocked. Then Lily drew a deep breath, and there was pain on her face, hurt disbelief, but also the kind of righteous anger that she’d never quite gotten under control, the kind that bubbled up no matter how hard she pressed the lid down.

“That is blackmail,” she said in the very calm, very quiet tone that was the most dangerous of them all.

Harry cocked his head.

“So?” he asked, as if he honestly didn’t know where she was going with that.

“So I can’t believe you’re just throwing this at us! We are thankful for what you’ve done for us, and we understand your situation, but we’re not going to jump through your hoops just because you helped, and we certainly won’t tolerate this kind of atrocity just because you think communication is for lesser beings!”

“That isn’t fair,” Hermione cut in. She was trying for reasonable, but her voice was a bit too shrill for that. “Harry may lack a certain diplomacy, but what we did was necessary, and if you’re too busy with your scruples to realize that…”

“Do you even listen to yourself?” Lily hissed. “What you did was murder, and Harry isn’t undiplomatic, he’s pressuring us into tolerating his immoral behaviour, provoking us like a teenager who doesn’t understand the concept of boundaries! This isn’t you! You’re better than this! You’re acting like you want to estrange yourselves from us! I thought we’d become closer, but here you are, suddenly behaving like people I don’t even know, and, to be honest, don’t want to know!”

Hermione flinched back at those words, and Neville took a step towards his friend.

Harry’s face just shut down.

“I really don’t care,” he said dismissively. “You can think of us what you want, as long as you stay out of the way and let us do our thing.”

But that wasn’t true, Sirius realized suddenly. He wasn’t as good with people as Remus, perhaps, but he had been an auror for a long time, and then a teacher. He knew when people where lying, and Harry most definitely was.

Lily’s words had hurt him. And, as if he’d just been waiting for the moment of rejection, he’d kept pushing them, needling and prodding and provoking, expecting the moment when it all collapsed and deriving a painful satisfaction from the failure. In that moment, he reminded Sirius of Severus
and the way he’d taken ages to really trust in their friendship. He wondered what that said about
Harry’s childhood.

But Lily didn’t share Sirius’ realization. She was too invested in making Harry see reason.

“We won’t stay out of the way! Not as long as your thing is killing people. We won’t allow such a
thing in this dimension, Harry!”

Harry chuckled, coldly, bitterly.

“Well, then I’m sure you’ll be glad to see us go,” he said lightly, but still with that undertone of hurt.
“It’s been good of you to tolerate us for so long, really. I told you I was a freak. And I told you you’d
change your mind about me if you got to know me properly.”

Shock spread on Lily’s face as she took in his words, but he’d already turned around to leave the
Great Hall and didn’t see it. Sirius found that he was shuffling a step forward to stop him, because
ending this here would be disastrous, and he saw Neville mirroring the motion. But Lily was quicker
than the rest of them. Rushing after him, she gripped his elbow, and although he did not turn back to
her, she held onto him.

“No, Harry,” she said beseechingly. “You’re not a freak. You come from a different world and a
different background, and we’ll always argue. But that’s a good thing. And it doesn’t mean I don’t
want to know you anymore. It just means I care about you enough that you drive me up the walls.”

Harry kept his head averted, but his whole body was straining towards her.

“Why would you care,” he murmured. It wasn’t quite a question, but Lily answered it anyway.

“Because I like you,” she answered, and Harry’s head turned as if she’d yanked it towards her, as if
he simply couldn’t stop himself. “Because I want you around. Because I’m proud of who you are
and what you’ve done, even if I disagree with some of your methods. It doesn’t matter that I’m not
your mother, not to me, but I’m sure she would have been proud, too. So, so proud of you.”

Harry stared at her.

Sirius had never quite noticed how green his eyes were, before, how they were shaped like Lily’s,
but filled with such a different blend of emotions, such darkness that it had been impossible to see the
likeness before.

But now, as Harry seemed to focus all of himself on looking at her, drinking in every nuance of her
face as if he wanted to fix this moment in his memory forever, Sirius could finally see the similarity
in them, their fierceness, their devoted loyalty to others. The quiet despair when they couldn’t
protect.

Harry was staring at Lily, and for the first time, Sirius was seeing a son and his mother.

“That’s good,” Harry finally said, and swallowed hard. “That’s… I’m glad. I’m glad I got to hear
that. It will hurt less, knowing that.”

Remus’ breath escaped him in a hissing gasp at that. Sirius frowned. He wasn’t sure what Harry was
talking about, but the words sounded foreboding, and the way Remus looked, heartbroken and
pained, made him feel quite worried, above and beyond their current problems.

Lily noticed the undercurrent, too. She reached out with the hand that wasn’t still gripping Harry’s
arm, and cupped his cheek in a gesture that would have been presumptuous only moments ago.
Now, it made Harry shudder and lean into her touch.

“What are you talking about, Harry?” she asked quietly. “What will hurt?”

He gave her a slow smile, softened by something Sirius would have called tenderness on any other face. Then he stepped back, detaching himself from her touch without hesitation, and with that step he seemed to gather his composure around him like a cloak.

For a moment, he looked almost regal.

“Dying,” he answered simply, and the word was spoken gentle like a breeze, like a caress, as if to soften the harshness of its impact. “I always knew my mother loved me, loved me enough to sacrifice herself for me. But to know that you’re proud of me, that she would be, that’s… I’m going to remember that, when I walk to my death. It will make it easier, I think.”

The look he fixed on her, on all of them, was kind and calm and with none of the feelings that were supposed to accompany a statement like that. There wasn’t a hint of anger in his face, not a grain of resignation. Just acceptance and a strange lightness, as if the words had lifted a burden from his shoulders.

Harry smiled one last, lingering, thankful smile. Then he turned around and left the Great Hall.

For a moment, they were all frozen in a tableau of disbelief.

Then Lily’s shocked breath echoed in the silence around them. She turned to Hermione. The fear in her face was awful.

“What did he mean?” she asked. “Tell me what he’s talking about!”

Hermione opened her mouth, swallowed, closed it again.

It was Neville who spoke, and his voice was a broken thing.

“Harry is a horcrux. The last one. To make Voldemort mortal again, Harry will have to let Voldemort kill him. He will have to walk up to him and accept his death without lifting a hand against it. He’ll die for us. We’ve known it for a while now.”

“No!” Lily said. “No, there has to be another way! There must be…”

“There isn’t,” Hermione interrupted her. All her knowledge weighed down on her words, all her frantic research and the exhaustion Sirius had seen her brush away time and again. “There is nothing we can do but let him go to his death.”

“But…”

“Nothing.” Hermione repeated, a scream hiding behind the word, and Neville stepped closer to her and pulled her into his side.

“He is the Chosen One,” he said quietly.

Sirius remembered that Harry had called himself by that name just this morning, during that awful fight with Hermione. He remembered the way Harry had looked, his eyes dark, his body tired.

But there hadn’t been a hint of doubt in him even then, no hesitation. No despair.

Only determination and a will as hard as diamond.
“But he could stay here!” Lily whispered. “He could stay safe. You don’t have to go back there, how can you, when you know…”

“And leave our world to the mercy of Voldemort?” Neville asked calmly. “He’d never do that.”

He paused, and his hand tightened around Hermione’s shoulder. To his right, Luna appeared and stepped smoothly under his arm. It wasn’t clear who supported whom as they stood together like three columns carrying this terrible truth on their backs, but together they stood without wavering.

“He didn’t choose this,” Hermione said. “But ever since Voldemort marked him, his path was clear. And while he never wanted this, while he fought against it as long as he could, his only choice now is to do his duty or abandon everyone. He’d never do that.”

“His love for us is greater than his will to survive,” Luna told them. The words were clear and without burden, floating up to the enchanted ceiling like little doves. “He is his mother’s son.”

Lily made a sound that was a sob and a moan and a wail of denial, then buried her face against Remus’ chest. And Remus folded himself around her, hanging on as tight as he could, as ever trying to protect them all from the hurts of this world, and, as ever, failing.

But his eyes were fixed on Luna, and when he spoke, he didn’t use his own words.

“But the monster laughed at them,” he said, strangely calm. Sirius recognized this as the first tale Luna had told him, the morning after they’d rescued her, the one Remus had been puzzling over for days. And he realized that Remus had known before the rest of them, and had kept quiet because he wanted to spare them. “And it reached out for all their hearts and crushed two of them. And would have crushed them all, when the last boy stepped forward.”

Luna smiled, sad and achingly beautiful, and as she leaned against Neville she took over the thread of the tale.

“‘No,’ Harry said,” she continued quietly. It was very silent in the hall, and the way the light fell through the windows and gathered in little pools on the ground seemed like the most peaceful thing Sirius had ever seen.

“And he stood firm. And he released his heart, and it was made of the greatest love the world had ever seen. ‘This love is your death, monster,’ he said. ‘And we will die together.’ And he embraced the monster, despite its terrible teeth and claws, and his love burnt hotter than the sun. And together they died, Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort. The Boy Who Lived and the monster who had wanted to live forever.”

She paused, then reached out and touched Hermione’s forehead, then Neville’s chest where his heart lay beating in its cavity.

“It is what it is,” she said calmly. “And in the end, love will always be more powerful and more terrible than any other magic in the world.”

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