Broken Chains

by Darth_Marrs

Summary

When Harry fell through the Veil of Death, that should have been the end of the story. But 40 days later he returned with a power never seen before, and a darkness in him that made both the dark and light fear him.

Notes

This is the original, unedited version of Broken Chains, the original, edited version of which is available under Darth Marrs on ff dot net.

This is a drama with a markedly Dark, sometimes even Evil Harry. It contains references to rape, torture and sometimes extreme violence (most done on Harry, but not all). You do not need to know the SW verse to read it since I try my best to describe what is happening. However, if you are familiar with the SW verse, please note that the Force mechanics and some plot elements for this story are inspired loosely by the Force Unleashed video games.

I would also like to give credit to Blank101 and his Son of the Suns Trilogy. His trilogy of stories about Luke Skywalker served as inspiration for some of Harry’s experiences in this story, and he deserves full acknowledgement of that fact. If you enjoy Star Wars fanfiction, his trilogy is required reading.

I’ve decided not to have this fic beta read, so please keep that in mind.
Cruel to be Kind

Not even Remus himself could say why he kept coming back.

There was every reason not to. The Ministry guard sneered at him with open contempt; the workers stared at him as if it were a full moon and he was going to rip out their very souls. And yet, every day, he made the dutiful trip, had his battered old wand checked, and filled out the suite of forms necessary to visit the Department of Mysteries Veil Room. He had the questions memorized and was even thinking about just copying the forms to save time.

Sometimes Tonks would come with him, and on those days when she couldn’t join him he found he missed her company more acutely than he would have imagined just a few weeks before. They rarely spoke more than simple greetings, but somehow the oppressive guilt felt less heavy when shared by her slender shoulders.

Harry was gone, and it was his fault.

Every day for the past 42 days, he came to stand before the Veil and remember every second of that dark, terrible night early in June. Every day he asked himself if he could have done more. He held Harry in his arms; he knew the son of his best friend would try to dive after Sirius. The moment he saw Sirius fall through the veil, he knew Harry would rush after his godfather.

And so Remus rushed forward to grab the boy. He wrapped strong, wiry arms around Harry’s thin frame and readied himself for a fight. Bellatrix’s insane giggles were ringing through the air as the Order Members and Dumbledore fought madly to contain the Death Eater incursion. The worst of the fight was over with Dumbledore’s arrival, save for this last, terrible act.

But Remus did not have time for his own grief, not when he saw shocked rage and disbelief flit across the face of his best friend’s son. And so he rushed forward, grabbed Harry, and hoped that it would be enough. It wasn’t, though. Harry went absolutely limp, and the suddenly dead weight surprised Remus enough that Harry fell through the werewolf’s tight grip to the floor. A split second later, Harry was diving forward after Sirius’s still visible leg.

Remus had heard accounts of time slowing down and dismissed them as nonsense: no longer. He stood in shock and watched as Harry flew through the air after his godfather, and knew instinctively that the trajectory the boy chose would take him through the veil right after Sirius. The instant seemed to go on forever, but when eternity ended, it did so with a rush of movement followed by profound silence.

Harry was gone. The Boy-Who-Lived was gone because Remus Lupin let him go.

Voldemort arrived at that moment, and the fight that followed was the stuff of legends. Dumbledore fought like a man possessed, employing magic so far beyond even the knowledge of the rest of them it seemed impossible that Voldemort should be able to survive it. And yet the dark lord did just that, fighting back with terrible viciousness. The ancient headmaster and his one-time pupil fought to a standstill while destroying much of the Ministry, and by the time Voldemort escaped with Bellatrix, not even Fudge could deny that Voldemort was back.

None of that mattered, though, because Harry Potter was dead.

Remus expected recriminations, and his expectations were met head on plus some. Molly Weasley screamed at him as if he were the one to kill the boy, and Remus let her. Harry’s friends were
surprisingly more understanding—they knew Harry better than Molly ever could, and knew he would gladly risk his life to save a loved one. Their tearful forgiveness was in a way a thousand times worse than Molly’s condemnation.

Dumbledore acted as if he had lost his only son. He had tears in his eyes throughout his fight with Riddle.

Now Fudge’s administration was teetering on the brink of complete collapse with no clear successor; Voldemort was openly attacking muggle towns and landmarks; and it felt as if the whole world were falling apart. His dark thoughts fled for a moment when he felt a soft hand take his, and looked down to see the shorter form of Tonks looking back up to him. Her lips were turned with the hint of a sad smile; her warm brown eyes were wide and accepting. There was no judgment in her face, only comfort.

“I was wondering when you would come today,” she said softly.

“It was a late night with the packs last night,” Remus admitted. “Few are brave enough to go against Fenrir.”

“You are.”

“For what good it does,” Remus said, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Tonks said nothing, for which he was eternally grateful. There was nothing left to be said that had not already been spoken. There were no thoughts he had not already thought. All there was left to do was stand, stare, and wonder.

“How much longer are you going to do this to yourself?” Tonks finally asked.

The tone of the question was completely neutral—she did not judge, but rather just wanted to know. She squeezed his hand, as if to say that any answer was fine by her. He looked down, and as always felt stunned at how beautiful she was; how wondrous it was that she came as often as she could to simply stand with him and hold his hand.

“Until his birthday,” Remus finally decided.

“Okay,” Tonks said. “And then?”

Remus took a long, ragged breath. “And then, I suppose it’ll be time to live again.”

“Good,” she said, this time with a genuine smile.

Before he could respond, the veil flashed. Brilliant, painfully bright white light filled the chamber. The two backed away, shielding their faces from the terrible, awesome light. With the light came an ear-shattering roar, like all the lions that have ever lived or ever would were all roaring at the same time. The sound reverberated through the chamber, rolling over the two hapless spectators with visceral power that brought both to their knees.

The light began to fade just enough that Remus could see Unspeakables and aurors pouring into the room, but the residual stars in his eyes did not allow for details. The roar was lessening, but he could still not hear what anyone might have been saying. He had eyes only for the veil, which he knew beyond doubt was the origin of both the light and the sound.

The roar came again, even louder than before, and abruptly something came shooting out of the veil like a missile. The moment the object emerged completely, all light and sound disappeared, leaving
Remus’s ears ringing and his eyes dazzled from the after-effects.

Only when the worst of the dazzling faded did he see the object crumpled at the base of the wall opposite the veil. With the remnants of stars still sparkling before his eyes, it took a moment to realize he was looking at a person. He took a stunned step forward, then another and another. His vision cleared with each step, and as it did he made out details—pants two sizes too big; a torn T-shirt; battered sneakers; black, unruly hair.

“Oh Merlin,” Remus whispered. “Oh Merlin. Harry? HARRY!” He rushed forward, sliding on his knees to cradle the boy when a shield appeared, stopping his progress cold.

“Don’t touch him, you fool!” an Unspeakable said. “He came out of the veil!”

“This is Harry Potter!” Remus yelled back.

“It could be Merlin’s blessed mother for all I care, do not touch him!”

Remus couldn’t help the angry growl that rumbled up from his throat, but stopped when Kingsley Shacklebolt grabbed his shoulder. Where did Kingsley even come from? “Remus, he shot out of that veil like a cannon. He’s probably broken every bone in his body, if he’s alive at all. That’s why you can’t touch him.”

Remus clung to the auror as if for his own life. “Is it him, Kingsley? Is it really Harry?”

“It sure looks like him. Unspeakable, is the boy alive?”

“Barely,” the Unspeakable said as he knelt over the body and performed a series of diagnostic charms. “He shouldn’t have survived the impact with the wall even with the wall’s cushioning charm.”

“As if he should have survived the Veil in the first place?” Shacklebolt snorted. “Place him in stasis and get him to St. Mungo’s.”

The Unspeakable stood, and though his face was hidden by his charmed cowl, they could hear the contempt in his voice. “Are you a fool? Someone just returned to us through the Veil of Death! We must study him.”

“Tell it to the head of the DMLE,” Shacklebolt said. “After you get him to Saint Mungo’s.”

Tonks joined them, and Remus realized there were many more aurors than Unspeakables in the room. The Unspeakable threw up his hands. “On your heads with it, then! Take him and leave the Department, now!”

Shacklebolt turned to Tonks and Remus. “Stay with him. I’m going to notify the others.”

After the auror captain was gone, Tonks and Remus, with the help of other aurors, placed the battered and broken body of Harry Potter in a stasis spell and levitated him from the chamber. As they did so, Remus found himself thanking magic and Merlin and anyone else who would listen, while at the same time trying to imagine what his young friend had experienced through the veil.
Dolores Umbridge was a changed woman. No one who knew her before her brief stint at Hogwarts could deny it. Unfortunately, none of those same people could say the change was for the better.

The syrupy voice that covered the hateful, stinging words grew thin and strained, until little was left but the hate. The woman now moved with short, jerky steps, and her left eye had a constant tic that made it very, very difficult for those unfortunate souls who worked for her to maintain eye contact for long.

Most of those who worked for her put up with it because of the general consensus in the Ministry that Umbridge was on the way out. Fudge was already gone, voted out following the inquest into the events surrounding the death of Harry Potter. Umbridge’s own trial was going to occur in a matter of days, pending the election of a new Minister. The original front-runner, Rufus Scrimgeour, was murdered the day before the election that was expected to see him assume office. Amelia Bones was also attacked, but somehow managed to escape.

Bones was now the only viable candidate, and even the most uninformed knew that the current head of the DMLE and Umbridge were not friends, in the same way Lucius Malfoy and Arthur Weasley were not friends, or Dumbledore and Voldemort.

However, until the inquest formally convened and the new minister was formally elected, Dolores Umbridge came to work every day with her short, jerky steps and a tic to her eye.

She did not actually do anything—all ministry work was actually being routed directly to the various department heads, circumnavigating her office entirely. Any large decisions were put off until after the election, though already some department heads were beginning to seek input from Amelia Bones. That was, to the Senior Undersecretary of Magic, a mortal insult. However, she did nothing about it. She came in, sat down at her immaculately clean desk and stared at the pink walls filled with photographs of her various kneazles. All were pure blooded kneazles, of course. She could not abide the half-bred monstrosities that occurred occasionally between magical kneazles and domestic housecats. In fact, it infuriated her that any self-respecting kneazle would lower itself to those standards. In the event one of her own animals did so, she simply put the creature down. Better dead than sullied, she reasoned.

So it was on one particularly warm day in early August that Dolores sat in her office behind her otherwise empty desk, carefully reading every word of a budget proposal from last year when she heard a knock on her door. She looked up in surprise to see Narcissa Malfoy standing at her door.

“Good day, Madam Undersecretary,” the all-but widowed matriarch said with a curtsey that was the true height of decorum. “I wonder, Madam, if you have a moment of time?"

Umbridge stood quickly, her left eye flinching rapidly much like a cramping muscle. “But of course, Mrs. Malfoy. Please, come in. How can I help you today?”

Narcissa settled herself on the edge of the seat, and waited until Umbridge was seated as well. “I came with news, Dolores. The Wizengamot met today, and it shocked me to see that you were not in attendance. Did you not receive the summons?”

Umbridge’s eyes widened and her tic suddenly stopped. “I did not.”

“I suspected as much, the blackhearts. Amelia Bones has been named as Minister for Magic. Even before she took the podium, she was calling for a more comprehensive inquest not just on Mr. Potter’s untimely death, but on all the circumstances beginning last summer until the battle that saw his end. Your name came up on three separate occasions.”
Umbridge seemed to sink in on herself, though it was simply an illusion caused by very broad, thick shoulders slumping to a degree. “Yes,” she said. “I knew the time was coming. Dumbledore is having his revenge on us all. First he drove out Cornelius, and now he has turned his attention to me.”

“It seems likely,” Narcissa agreed with a sad, sympathetic smile. “Of course, it’s all for naught since Mr. Potter is not dead.”

“Yes, I…” Umbridge paused mid-breath, blinked, and then leaned forward and latched her beady dark eyes onto the Malfoy matriarch. “I’m sorry, my dear, what was it you just said?”

“You didn’t know?” Narcissa artfully looked shocked at the oversight. “Oh dear, they truly have cut you out of the loop, haven’t they? Mr. Potter reemerged from the Veil ten days ago. They are keeping it quiet for now until he recovers, but Amelia Bones knows, as do Dumbledore’s people and the Department of Mysteries.”

“How is it that you know?”

“The Malfoy family’s influence remains even if my husband is unfairly detained. From what I understand, St. Mungo’s placed Mr. Potter in a magically-induced coma because of injuries he received when he returned, and an almost lethally depleted magical core. However, he is expected to wake any day now.”

“I see.”

“Oh goodness, look at that! I promised Draco that I would meet him in Diagon Alley for his school shopping. It astounds me how tall he has grown. Well, thank you very much for your time, dear Dolores. I hope whichever path you take leads to success—and power.”

With that, Narcissa Malfoy breezed out of the office. In her absence, Dolores stared at the opposite wall filled with the pictures of her kneazles. The creatures looked back at her, and in her broken, twisted mind, the animals were pointing out that Harry James Potter was a half-blood; that his father lowered himself to rut with a filthy mud-blooded whore to beget the most troublesome boy to have ever lived. The boy could not even die right.

What was right? The question bounced back and forth in her mind, echoing the words of her visitor. She wished to do what was right, but what was right? She looked down unseeing at the previous year’s budget, but in her mind’s eyes she saw Potter’s face as he and his own mudblooded trollop led her to that terrible place where those…. The tic in her eye throbbed and she dismissed the
memory. No, she knew what to do. She knew what was right.

She would have to kill Harry Potter.

It felt as if a great weight fell from her shoulders with the making of that one decision. She felt free, light and powerful as she knew what she would do. The interminable waiting for her doom dissipated as she stood and threw her pink cardigan around her shoulders. When she marched out of her office, her gait was not jerky any more. Her steps were still short, but this was more of a physical necessity than a state of mind, given that she was rather short and rotund. However, in her mind her steps portrayed confidence and strength.

“Madam Umbridge,” her secretary began, “an urgent memo just came in from the Minister’s office requesting your presence.”

“Of course, dear,” Umbridge said. “Please let the Minister know I am coming shortly.”

“Of course,” the secretary did not bother to ask how Umbridge knew there was a new minister—the girl despised her boss and secretly clapped in joy when she snuck a peek at the summons.

Umbridge walked out of her office, but not to the Minister’s office suite. Rather she walked quickly to the central atrium. The walls still bore scorch marks—silent testament to the monumental duel between the Dark Lord and Dumbledore that it could still not be removed. Witnesses saw the old man fighting with tears in his eyes, while Voldemort cackled madly with glee upon finding out that Harry Potter had fallen through the Veil. Though Dumbledore drove Voldemort off, it felt most assuredly as if the Dark Lord had won the day.

“St. Mungo’s,” Umbridge said once she reached the floo. With a flash of green fire, she emerged into the casualty admitting room. She did not see a witch with an obvious glamour follow shortly after her.

At St. Mungos, a harried mediwitch saw that Umbridge was unhurt and ignored her for the next person through, who was also unhurt and thus quickly dismissed. Umbridge was familiar enough with the hospital from her recent stay, and so moved confidently out of the casualty area until she reached the central information desk. “Good day,” she said in her most syrupy voice. “I am the Senior Undersecretary of Magic. I have been sent by the Minister to interview Mr. Harry Potter. What room is he in?”

The receptionist stared at her as if she had two heads. “May I…may I see your wand for security, madam?”

“Of course, dear,” Umbridge said. She handed over her wand and let the addle-brained girl register it into the hospital records.

“Madam, you should know that the head of the DMLE has placed security around Mr. Potter’s suite and issued very clear orders than no one not on a set list was to bother him. I must advise you madam that you are not on that list.”

“Don’t worry, child,” Umbridge lied with a patronizing smile, “the guards know to expect me.”

Although Dolores could not have been aware of it, at that very moment the witch that followed her from the Ministry walked calmly up the back stairwell to the top-floor where Potter was being treated. She burst onto the floor like a mad whirling dervish, lashing out with spells that did not give the four aurors on guard duty any time to respond. Once the four were stunned and bound, the figure tossed them in to the stairwell with negligent flips of her wand, and then left the same way she
Umbridge arrived moments later to find the hall in front of Mr. Potter’s room free from any guards. Rather than be suspicious, Dolores smiled happily at what she saw as a coincidence. She did not hesitate to enter his room and pull her wand.

And there he was. He looked thinner than when she last saw him, with shadows under his eyes. He was especially pale and wore a slight frown in his sleep, as if something bothered him. If only he knew. Part of her wanted very much to wake him so that he could see what was coming. But then again, that would have been cruel. Dolores did not see herself as cruel. She did what she did for the betterment of wizard-kind. Sometimes cruelty was necessary for the good of everyone. That’s what this was—a necessary cruelty. Better, she thought with a beneficent smile, to let the boy die in his sleep.

She raised her wand and summed the lifetime of hate necessary to cast the killing curse. She had never successfully cast an Unforgivable, but she knew in this one instant she would be successful. She began the incantation only to stop as a pair of bright green eyes opened and stared at her.

“Just as well, Mr. Potter,” she said with happy resolve. “It is appropriate this way, I think, for you to know where your death comes from. Not the Dark Lord or even his followers, but from the wand of justice. For all your crimes—for Cornelius—you deserve this most of all. Avada... aaaaahhhhhhh!”

Sudden, unexpected pain surged through her body, as if fire were burning her alive from within. She fell on the floor screaming in agony as the fire continued. On the bed, Harry Potter sat and continued staring at her as the pain multiplied until her mind shattered.
Waking Up

Chapter Summary

A Sith Lord Awakens

Darth Shaddix, Dark Lord of the Sith, opened his eyes and saw a strange sight. A squat, toad-like woman with a pink cardigan over her shoulders pointed a stick at him. He did not see anything else in the room but the woman. Nor could he understand why the Force was warning him of danger—the woman looked ridiculous.

And yet…he could not deny the danger she projected despite her abhorrently Hutt-like image.

She hesitated a moment upon seeing his eyes, but then bobbed her large flat head in what he took to be a resolute nod. “Just as well, Mr. Potter.” She sounded…happy. “It is appropriate this way, I think. For you to know where your death comes from. Not the Dark Lord or even his followers, but from the wand of justice. For all your crimes—for Cornelius—you deserve this most of all. Avada…”

He did not know who Mr. Potter was, nor did he care. What he did know was that this simplistic Hutt-slime dared threaten a Sith. He lashed out with his power, and this strange woman in pink screamed as she arched her back and fell writhing to the floor.

When he believed he had her full attention, he released his hold upon her. She continued to twitch and writhe like a juvenile Hutt on the floor, moaning pathetically. He swung his legs off the bed he was in and stood.

Or tried to—he actually fell right to the floor. The weakness he felt was like nothing he could remember, and he did not understand how or why he could be so weak. He started to reach up for the bed when he saw his arm—it looked thin and without muscle mass. He then looked at his withered legs; he even lifted up the strange, inadequate covering over his body to stare at an emaciated torso—he could count his ribs. More disturbing though was his pubic region; there was only a small thatch of hair there as if he were an adolescent himself.

This was not acceptable to the Dark Lord, not acceptable at all.

He crawled on horribly weakened legs until he reached the distressed Hutt in the pink cardigan. “Who did this to me?” he demanded. His voice came out shockingly high and hoarse, as if he were a child. “Where am I?”

The woman stared at him, blubbering something incoherently. He realized quickly that he had damaged her mind, making her of limited use as an informant. However, he could make other uses of her.

He placed a hand on her broad chest and pushed down between her massive breasts. Her eyes widened more, perhaps thinking in her pain and delirium that his need was sexual, as if he would ever satiate himself with an animal such as her. It was not. His need was for energy.

Red light splayed around his hand and then stabbed down into her chest. She arched her back, as if
to push her chest closer to him, though in fact it was an instinctive response to the pain of having one’s life essence sucked out of them.

The energy felt oily and dirty as it came into Shaddix. Of all the Sith arts his master taught him, this was the one he disliked the most. He had no problem killing, but stealing someone’s life energy made him feel filthy inside.

However, he could not deny the healing benefits. He channeled the incoming energy to his atrophied muscles, breaking them down and then rebuilding them as if he were weightlifting. It was a start, one he would have to follow through with hard work, but he was nothing if not accustomed to hardship.

Well past the point when she should have been drained, the woman’s life essences still flowed, as if she had a core of energy beyond that of just her physical body. This energy filled him even more strongly than before. By the time her last breath wheezed out, Shaddix felt as if he had just woken from a long, restful sleep.

He stood on legs that, though not as strong as he was accustomed, still felt no irritating weakness. He looked around the room now until he saw a mirror. The reflection stunned him and caused him to step closer to study the face he saw.

He was looking at a sixteen-year-old version of himself. His hair was longer and unkempt, and his face looked thinner and stressed by illness or injury, but he could not deny that he was in what appeared to be a younger body.

Suddenly it all made sense. His Master had punished him for some failing, so much so that his original body was destroyed, and then transferred his essence to this young clone body. The Emperor had done so before to others, though never before had Darth Shaddix displeased his master badly enough to warrant death once he received his true Sith name.

When the shock of his appearance shifted to acceptance, he walked to a window and opened it, expecting to see the cloning chambers on Byss or on Wayland. Instead, he found himself staring across a primitive city under a bright blue sky with a few lazy clouds drifting by.

Perhaps this was a new facility. His Master was nothing if not resourceful, and rarely bothered to centralize anything but political power. It did not explain everything, Shaddix knew, but it was the only theory he could come up with to explain how he could be in a younger body.

His ruminations ended abruptly when the door burst open behind him and four people rushed inside with weapons ready and resolve in their Force-signatures.

Darth Shaddix was Sith. His concerns dropped away as instinct and the Force guided his movements. He bent low and with a thrust of the Force summoned the bed over his head into the path of the startled newcomers. One woman made a startled cry as the bed slammed her into a wall. The nearest man managed to duck only for Shaddix to roll forward and kick up violently into his groin.

The large, black-skinned man’s eyes crossed in pain as he fell to the floor. Shaddix continued his roll, grunting in frustration at the effort it took to do so. He was so damned weak compared to his normal body! He had to draw on the Force to make up for the lack of trained muscles as he spun and removed the second man with a swift blow to the temple.

The fourth person was trying to climb over the bed. Shaddix gripped him in the Force and tossed him bodily across the room before he gave a final kick to the dark-skinned man’s head when he tried
to rise.

In a second, the fight was over and Shaddix stood with his chest heaving. Even with the stolen energy from the Hutt-like woman, he was still winded by what should have been a quick, easy fight.

After securing the door, he searched his attackers for idents, but found none. Of course, Rebel agents would not carry identification, but it was worth a try. He did find purses of what appeared to be gold coins that he liberated. Local currency, perhaps?

Finally he settled on finding clothes. Unfortunately, his body was small, so the odd assortment of robes, slacks and shirts the three men wore were useless. The woman’s clothing, though, might fit. This was especially true considering that her clothes appeared rather masculine in cut.

He began stripping her without hesitation. She had a lush figure, and he smiled in appreciation of it as he pulled off her slacks. The clothes were not a perfect fit—the waist was a little too large on his emaciated torso, and the shirt hung oddly from his shoulders, but when he threw on one of the open robes the shortest of the men wore, it covered up the ill fitting.

He then leaned down over the woman, by now clad only in her undergarments, and slapped her face. Her eyes popped opened, and then squeezed shut again in obvious pain. “Bloody ‘ell, Harry, what are you doing?”

He slapped her again, hard. The sound of the blow echoed in the small room. “I am Darth Shaddix, Dark Lord of the Sith. Who are you?”

Rather than look scared, she looked angry, and the anger denoted to Shaddix a sense of familiarity he did not feel for her. She scrambled quickly to her feet and pushed his smaller frame back. “You are going to pay for that you little…what’d you do with my clothes…argh, I’m going to…”

A burst of blue burst of Force lightning shot from Harry’s hand into her chest, blasting her to the far wall where she screamed in agony a moment. He let up after only a second and watched as she collapsed, crying and gasping, to the floor.

“I think it best if we start over, don’t you?” He spoke calmly. “I am Darth Shaddix, Dark Lord of the Sith. Who are you?”

She leaned back against the wall, too shocked to look angry. “Tonks.”

“Tonks. What world is this?”

“What world?”

She screamed as he pushed power into her—not Force lighting this time, but the same applied burning to her nerves he used to take down the Hutt woman. It was a power he developed early during his training, and not even the Emperor could duplicate it. Again, he let up after only a second. “I ask again. If I have to ask a third time, you will lose a limb. What world am I on?”

She was crying now; and in the Force he could feel her fear and frustration. She was unaccustomed to such dominance—which told him that she was in some nominal position of authority. Perhaps local law enforcement? Still, unlike his master, Shaddix took no real pleasure in her pain. For him, the application of pain was merely one tool to accomplish a task.

“You’re on Earth you crazy little fuck!” she shouted between sobs.
Letting the obvious curse go, he said, “What Sector?”

“I don’t even know what a Sector is!” she wailed. “What is wrong with you, Harry? How can you do this to me? The joke’s not funny anymore.”

He reached down and gripped her chin so hard the pressure pushed her head against the wall with a thump. He then kicked her feet out from under her and slammed her to the floor, where he sat down with his full weight on her lap and leaned forward until their noses almost touched and his chest pressed against hers. “I do not know anyone named Harry,” he said with a cold calm that seemed to scare her more than his violence. “I do know that I woke up in this room on an unfamiliar world and was attacked by rebel agents. The penalty for sedition against the Empire is death. So tell me before I execute you, Tonks, where I am?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” she sobbed around his powerful grip. “We’re on Earth. It’s the only planet I know of. I just don’t understand. Please…you’re hurting me.”

“Yes, I am. I could hurt you much worse. You’re an attractive woman; I could take you by force and make you scream until your vocal cords rupture. I could make your womb burn and then shrivel. I could rip your ass wide open and leave you bleeding and split open like an overripe fruit.”

Her eyes widened as she made a low keening sound, but he continued. “However, that is a rather primitive way of breaking someone. So, I shall be more refined in my approach.”

He then struck into her mind with vicious, unstoppable force, and Tonks screamed as loud as the Hutt woman as he raped her mind so thoroughly that by the time he was done she curled up into a fetal ball and began shivering.

Her mind at once confused and terrified him; an entire society hidden behind walls of magic? It sounded suspiciously like the Fallanasi witches his master and Darth Vader hunted to extinction. He wondered if the Fallanasi found a new world to settle, but then dismissed it. These people were too primitive for any space-faring race to have contacted them.

What he did know was that this woman called herself a witch; that with the stick she left on the floor nearby, she could wield Force energy in a way that the Sith could not, and that she thought he was someone named Harry Potter, whom she admired.

With a snap decision, he leaned down beside her and placed a hand gently on her temple. She convulsed at his touch and keened more. “Do you want me to make the pain go away?” he asked softly.

Tonks was so far gone from agony, she could only nod; she was past any possible speech. So he flooded her mind with the Force, not healing the damage he did so much as numbing it. The Sith could not truly heal, not like the Jedi. But he was still brimming from the life energy from the Hutt woman, and let that woman’s life force flow into Tonks, letting the energy itself heal as life energy was want to do naturally.

Tonks sighed in obvious relief.

“I am sorry I had to do that,” he said in a gentle, saddened tone. It was a technique he learned firsthand from his master. “I am lost and alone here, Tonks. I may carry his face, but I am not this Harry Potter you sought. But I still will need your help. If I promise to keep the pain away, will you help me?”

“Yes.” Her voice was thick with the mucus of her tears.
“Thank you, Tonks. Come, stand up.”

She tried, but of course could not. It gave him the perfect excuse to grip her firm body and help her to feet. He made sure to continue pouring the Force through his hands, so that to her they would feel warm and full of healing. Already, her mind was shunting aside the fact that he was the source of her pain since he was now the only source of relief from it.

“Shhhh,” he said, turning her until she leaned on him. “I will keep the pain away, Tonks. I promise. I just need you to help me.”

He reached his arms around her, trailing his fingers up the ridges of her spine while playing with her nervous system. Her breath caught at the sudden, intense wave of pleasure that came so very quickly on the tails of unbelievable agony. He pulled away enough to see her parted lips and half-closed, red-ringed eyes. Yes, it was done. His master’s approach was best—better to control through manipulation than through outright force. Controlling her mind directly would have required constant energy and attention. This way was so much better.

“Take the men’s clothes and dress, Tonks,” Shaddix instructed.

“Yes…”

“In private, you may call me Master. Until we know the lay of the land, in public you may call me Shaddix.”

“Yes, Master.” She shivered as she said it, and he could see under her thin brassiere her nipples hardening from the memory of his manipulation of her nervous system. She got dressed, wearing a larger man’s clothes. With her stick, she somehow shrank the clothes until they fit her.

At his request, she did the same for him.

“Amazing,” he said. “Can that stick make you fly?”

She shook her head.

“Can it make a hole in the wall?”

She nodded, flicked her stick and said, “Bombarda!”

The window and the wall disappeared with a crash. “Excellent, Tonks,” Shaddix said. He held his arm to her, and she came willingly. He led her to the edge, gathered the Force in his iron grip, and led Tonks into the open air.

She gasped as they levitated. “I am very powerful, Tonks,” he assured her. “I will protect you. You love me for that power, don’t you?”

“Yes, Master.”

They floated down to the alley floor, while behind them hospital staff and guards rushed into the room. With Tonks still in his arm, he said, “We need to go someplace safe, where none of your comrades will find us. Do you know of such a place?”

“I do. Harry Potter’s old home has been empty for three weeks after his relatives were murdered. All wards dropped and Dumbledore removed all tracking devices. I can apparate us there.”

“Apparate?”
“Magical travel.”

“Very well, Tonks. I trust you. Take me to this house.”

Shaddix was not prepared for the sudden squeezing sensation, nor was he prepared to find himself in the middle of a darkened room a few feet away from old, blood-stained carpet. A moment later light came on—Tonks stood next to the wall, staring at him with wide eyes. “This was the home of the boy you thought I was?” he asked.

She nodded mutely.

Shaddix quickly scanned the room. The walls were filled with pictures, all of the same three people in various stages of life: a thin horse-faced woman, a man of Hutt-sized proportions with a thick mustache, and a boy who grew steadily fatter with each picture. “This Potter was related to these people?”

“The woman was his aunt,” Tonks said. “His parents were killed by a dark lord.”

With a nod, Shaddix found the reference in her stolen memories. “Ahh, yes. Voldemort, your self-styled dark lord. Defeated by a child—how embarrassing.” He continued his examination of the room—the air trembled with remembered psychic violence. The relatives of this Harry Potter had suffered greatly before they died.

“Is there food here?” he asked.

“There should be, the utilities will be on for the rest of the month,” Tonks said. “Shall I check… Master?”

“Do so.”

With a shiver she turned and left the room. He watched her as she did so, speculating what she would be like when he did take her. His body was weak, but he could feel it responding to her as a man, so he was not too physically young to take her as he wanted. Moreover, in her current state she would welcome him.

He heard a humming sound that distracted him from his musings; he wondered toward the sound and found Tonks in what looked like a galley with a stoneware plate. A metal box over her head was humming until a ding alerted her to open it and remove a plastic tray that smelled of heavily processed food.

“Best I could do,” she said without looking at him.

“You should eat yourself.”

“I’m not hungry, Master. I ate not long ago.”

“Very well.” He took a seat at the nearby table and watched as she brought the food to him. “Sit, Tonks, and tell me about this world.”

She sat demurely, head down and hands on her knees. “What do you wish to know, Master?”

“Levels of technology. Does this world have space travel?”

“The muggles landed on the moon years ago,” she said. “There’s a space station I think.”

“No hyperspace? How many sentients live on this world?”
“Sentients? You mean, like people?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm, six billion I guess. Including magical.”

Six billion people living on a pre-hyperspace planet? From his studies of galactic history, this world was fast approaching a breaking point in its population carrying capacity, which would lead to massive religious and political upheaval until either the population was minimized or destroyed outright, or they found the technology to spread out. It was absolutely perfect for a young Sith Lord. With a population so large, it would be an easy matter to take it over, advance their technology and begin his own fledgling empire.

He took a bite of the food while reviewing more possibilities; only as he swallowed did he see the corner of Tonks’ mouth twitch. Suddenly he went very cold. “What did you do, Tonks?”

She started, surprised. “Master?”

With sudden violence he threw her with the Force across the room to the opposite wall, near the blood stains. She cried in pain as she slammed into the wall and then bounced to the floor. Shaddix followed faster than the human eye could follow, lifted her easily by her neck from the floor and slammed her back into the wall. “What did you do, Tonks?”

“You’ll find out you ruddy bastard,” she said. She then spit a wad of blood into his face. “If I wanted a master I’d have bowed to You Know Who by now.”

Shaddix stepped back, truly stunned that she had somehow withstood manipulations that would leave most people as putty in his hands. The shock burned quickly into anger. “That is too bad for you, Tonks. I had high hope you could be useful.”

A shower of blue Force lightning erupted from his hands. Somehow Tonks managed to raise her wand and summoned an energy shield, but the shield buckled quickly before the onslaught of Force power. Her screams rang through the home, echoing intensely. The echo kept growing louder, though, far beyond what her lungs seemed capable of. Alarmed, Shaddix released his power and watched as she folded to the ground sobbing while steam rose from her clothes. Still the echoes of her screams remained, growing louder and louder.

Sudden vertigo struck, so strongly it took all his will to keep his feet. “I will kill you for this!” he said, though even in his own ears his words sounded slurred.

He raised his hands again, content to quickly snap her neck, when a hugely powerful fist slammed into his back. With his obviously altered perceptions, he did not become aware of flying through the air until he slammed against a wall. He bounced onto a sofa and from there through a flimsy wood table. He felt wood and glass bite into his body, but suddenly lacked the strength to fight.

He fought to keep his eyes open as a Rancor-sized human with a heavily bearded face leaned over and stared at him with dark, beady eyes. “Not right, ‘Arry, what you’re doin’. Can’t have any ‘o that now, can we? Watcher, Tonks. Okay? Tonks?”

The huge man left Shaddix where he lay and went to attend to Tonks. It gave him time to examine his own body with the Force. Internal awareness was one area of his training he was weakest at. He had only three years of intense training at his master’s hands before he was sent to his task, and most of that training was offensive in nature. He did not know how to enter a healing trance; he did not know how to control his body’s metabolic rate to slow or reverse the effects of drugs. He realized
now it was a huge weakness that was likely to get him killed.

That realization became even more apparent when Tonks appeared over him. Her hair looked red under the lights, and her face was swollen and red with smeared blood and swelling. “You ruddy, fucking bastard!” she hissed. “You’re not my fucking master!”

“Tonks!” the huge man warned, but not before she brought her foot down on Shaddix’s face in a hard, shattering kick.
Hermione Granger put the book down when she realized she had read over the same page for the fourth time in the past ten minutes. Nearby, her mother looked up from the latest edition of the British Dental Journal. “You okay, hon?”

It took an effort of will for Hermione to summon a smile. “I’m fine, mum. Just tired. I’m going upstairs.” She loved her mother and father, more than ever, but the non-stop attention from the two since June was driving her mental. Every time she even blinked, her mum or dad was asking if she was okay, and it was pushing Hermione to the edge.

She understood why, and was touched that they loved her so, but it was still driving her to the brink.

The day she woke up in the hospital wing to find Luna sobbing at the side of her bed was the day she thought her heart would break. She had no memory after she was hit by the curse in the Department of Mysteries, other than a sensation of falling and a terrible, burning pain. The pain was still with her when she woke up two days later—a feeling as if someone had taken a red-hot brand and dragged it across her chest.

But what truly caught her attention was the slight, pale form of Luna Lovegood sitting by her bed, bent over with her face buried in her hands. She looked around for her other friends, but they must have either been in classes, tests or in the great hall.

“Luna?” she asked with a dry throat.

Luna sat up, and for the first time Hermione could remember, the girl’s normally serene expression was gone, replaced by a grief and pain-ravaged face. “Hello, Hermione,” she said dully. “You must be thirsty.”

She picked up a glass of water from the table at the head of the bed and maneuvered the bendy-straw for Hermione to sip out of. At first Hermione was irritated at being treated like an invalid, until she tried moving and realized for all intents and purposes she WAS an invalid.

“Where are Ron and the others?”

Luna stared at her vacantly a moment, as if listening to something else, and winced. “Mrs. Weasley took Ginny and Ron home early. Neville is in the Great Hall eating dinner. We take turns sitting with you.”

“Where is Harry?”

Luna’s expression broke again, as if suddenly struck. In a frantic, high-pitched voice she said, “He’s screaming. Hermione! He’s screaming and screaming and he’s hurting so bad, he won’t stop screaming.” She bent over again, clutching her head as if in agony.

The sound of Luna’s cries attracted attention, but not from Madam Pomfrey. Professor Dumbledore
himself stepped into the Hospital Wing, and it only took one look at his haggard, drawn face to realize what Luna was talking about. Tears sprang to her eyes as she said, “Harry?”

The ancient wizard stepped to the foot of her bed and laid a gentle hand on Luna’s sobbing shoulders, even while a single crystal tear ran down his cheeks.

“Harry has left us for the next great adventure,” Dumbledore said, and to Hermione’s astounding shock, the old man’s voice actually cracked at the end. “Sirius fell through the Veil of Death, and without realizing what the veil was, and because of his great love for his godfather, Harry followed him.”

“He’s screaming!” Luna wailed. “It’s not an adventure, he’s screaming! He’s hurting.”

”Sleep, child,” Dumbledore said, and with that simple word Luna sagged in her chair and would have fallen if the Headmaster had not levitated her into the bed next to Hermione.

“Professor, I don’t understand,” Hermione said as she wiped her eyes. “What does she mean?”

“Ms. Lovegood has a peculiar perception of the world, Ms. Granger. I cannot tell you if she is right or wrong, but she is not the first person to hear voices from the Veil.”

“But…but…”

“Harry is dead, Miss….Hermione. He and Sirius both. I simply cannot express the depth of my sorrow, not just for you, but for all of England. He was our greatest, best hope for a better tomorrow.”

Hermione stared at him blankly, for once in her life unable to understand a concept. Soon enough Madam Pomfrey came and told the Headmaster to leave before she sat and spent the next hour going over the potion treatments Hermione would require over the summer to counter-act the dark curse that came perilously close to taking her life.

Luna slept through it all.

The next few days were a blur—she remembered going through the motions of life, though of courses classes were over. With Ron and Ginny gone, and Luna ill from the voices only she could hear, Hermione simply pretended to live. The whole school seemed to be in a state of shock—how could the Boy Who Lived really be dead? The whole idea seemed preposterous. And yet, Dumbledore said so himself. She had never seen the headmaster look so very old and tired as he did when he announced Harry’s death, though of course by then everyone already knew.

The next day she quietly packed her things into her trunk and boarded the carriage to the train. She still could not see the thestrals since she missed what happened at the end, but knew Neville could by the expressions on his face when they reached the carriages.

She spent the entire ride home in silence, staring out the window. Neville and Luna joined her, though Luna simply stared forlornly into space and Neville read a herbology textbook. Even so, she was glad of their company.

The train ride seemed to take only minutes, though in fact it took much of the day, and they arrived back at King’s Cross as the sun was setting in the western summer sky. She said quiet good-byes to Neville and Luna. Afterward, she gathered her trunk and left the train, aware of the stares and whispered conversations from the rest of the school. She left the warded platform and with a disorienting step found herself back in the ordinary world. Her parents stood nearby with a few other muggle parents who could not pass onto the platform, and for the first time the numbness
seemed to crack as she saw their smiling faces.

“Mum, Dad,” she greeted them.

She accepted their hugs and let her dad take her trunk while she cradled Crookshanks in her arms and walked behind him, her mother at her side. They loaded into the car and her Mum said, “Do you want to go out to celebrate the term, Hermione?”

“Honestly, Mum, I’m rather tired,” she said with a reasonably light tone. “I think I’d rather go home if you don’t mind.”

"Oh, okay then. Are you feeling all right?"

“Yes, Mum. I’m fine.”

The rest of the trip home was uneventful as her mum discussed the new X-ray machine their office was using. Hermione made the appropriate noises to indicate she was listening, until they reached their nice home in Kew Gardens, in the suburbs of Greater London.

She was in the door when her Mum asked her the one question she had dreaded. “So, tell me how your friend Harry is?”

The storm of emotion that broke through her dam of control was so sudden and even violent that it knocked her to her knees. Her parents stood, dumbfounded, as their imperturbable daughter collapsed to the floor crying so hard she could not even breathe.

The tears did not stop, not for three days. She told them the whole story, and showed them her scar and the potions and instructions from Pomfrey, but still could not stop crying. It struck at the oddest times, too. She’d read some interesting spell she thought Harry might be able to use and when she went to write it down, she suddenly remembered he would never see it again and break down all over again.

On the sixth day home, just when she thought she might be able to breathe again, Hedwig flew through their kitchen window. Her parents could not understand the wild-eyed look Hermione had when she ran to meet the bird, hoping beyond hope that there was somehow a message tied to her leg.

But there was no message—Hedwig came to her because she no longer had anywhere to go. Her master was dead, and so she came to the person closest to her master. Instead of Ron, the majestic bird thought that was Hermione. She held the beautiful owl on her arm and cried again.

After a while the tears dried up and settled into a deep melancholy that she could not shake, no matter how hard her parents tried. Both being doctors, they took her to a psychologist for counseling, but of course Hermione could not talk about the details of what happened, and really had no desire to share. The pain was too close—too personal—to share with anyone at that moment.

“So you loved this Harry?” the psychologist asked during her third and last session.

Hermione did not answer, because she never asked herself the question. But as she lay in her bed that night, staring unblinking at the ceiling, she considered how very much her life revolved around that sad, beautiful boy. She realized that she did love Harry. She also hated him in some small way, if she were honest with herself.

She loved the boy who ran to her defense without a thought for herself—who looked at her with the simple expectation of her company, and a desire to share it with her. She loved him because he
accepted her without question or hesitation, because it was who she was he liked, rather than what she could do for him. The very best memory she had in the whole of his life was the way his face—his whole being—lit up in joy when he saw her Second Year, after she was revived from being petrified. At that moment, she was absolutely certain this was the boy she would one day marry.

At the same time, she absolutely hated how passive he was in his life. Things happened to him, and he reacted, rather than trying to take control of his own fate. She spent more than one night raging to Ron or Ginny that he refused to fight back against Umbridge’s diabolical torture. Treating his wounds was one thing, but the fact he allowed them to happen in the first place was simply hard to bear. There was no coincidence that it ended up being Hermione who tricked the Undersecretary, rather than Harry. In a small corner of her mind, she wanted him to be the boy who ran to her rescue, but more often than not she seemed to be the one to save him.

Only now that he was gone did she admit to herself what those feelings meant; why she felt so giddy when she clutched onto him on Buckbeak’s back at the end of third year; why she shivered when she hugged him before the first task of the tournament. It was only now she understood why she secretly wept when he asked Cho Chang out, but not her.

The melancholy deepened, and her parents became more and more concerned, until they announced that one or the other of them were going to stay home with her for the whole of summer. Now they were fast approaching the start of the next term, and Hermione was ready to strangle her loving but smothering parents.

She left her Mum in the living room and made her way up to the first floor to her bedroom and quietly closed the door. The walls were filled with childish posters of actors she fancied over the years; of rock bands she liked to listen to. Low, hand-carved oak book shelves lined every wall up to her waist and had further stacks of books on top of them. She looked around the room and felt overcome with a sudden need to tear it down.

Poster by poster, she cleared the walls, until in the end the only things that remained was an immaculately crafted cuckoo clock and a picture of she, Harry and Ron playing in the snow during the winter of their Third Year. She smiled at how very happy they all seemed with each other.

The knock alerted her to her mother’s presence just as the door opened. Her mother stepped in and looked around the room in surprise, then spotted the pile of crumbled posters on the floor. “Do you need any help?” she asked.

“No, thank you.”

Calliope stared intently at her daughter for the longest time, before saying, “Did you ever sleep with him?”

Hermione stared. “Mum…”

“I’m not asking to be judgmental, Hermione,” she said. “I was about your age my first time. I just…I’m trying so hard to understand what he was to you.”

Hermione sat on her bed and stared at the shredded posters. “Mum, witches can’t…we really aren’t supposed to do that before marriage.”

One eye rose in surprise. “Really? And why is that?”

“It creates a magical bond that will affect us for the rest of our lives,” Hermione said. “My second year, a Hufflepuff sixth year was actually expelled from Hogwarts because she had had an affair
with a Seventh Year. He was forced to take his exams early and leave. I heard that she’s had to leave the Magical world because she couldn’t find work anywhere—her magic wouldn’t allow her to take any binding employment oaths. So smart witches just don’t do that.”

“Oh,” Calliope said. “Well, I guess I should be happy about that. Anyway, there is an older gentleman here to see you, if you’re up to it. One of your professors, I believe. He said it was quite urgent.”

Hermione’s heart skipped a beat. Her first thought was not of Harry, but of her family. Were they in danger? Now that Voldemort was out in the open, attacks were coming more frequently with greater violence. She joined her mum and the two walked down the stairs until she saw Professor Dumbledore himself seated primly on an authentic Hepplewhite sofa made during the reign of King George III. She noticed immediately that he wore a strange, flesh-colored glove over his right hand, and looked as exhausted as he did the night he told her Harry was dead.

He stood when he saw her, and instead of the famous twinkle in his bright blue eyes, he gave her a sad, knowing smile. “Hello, Miss Granger,” he said gently. “I trust this isn’t a bad time?”

“No, not really,” Hermione said. “Is this…is there something you need to discuss with me alone?”

“Alone? No, in fact I think it wise for your beautiful mother to join us. I assume your father is working?”

“Edwin is at the clinic,” Mrs. Granger said. “Can I ask what this is about?”

“You may, and I will of course share everything I know, but it might be beneficial to take some tea perhaps? I find myself thirsty quite often during these waning days of mine.”

“Oh, of course,” Mrs. Granger said, blinking. “A good suggestion, actually, given the time. Please, come with me.”

They gathered in the sun room and in a trice Mrs. Granger had tea set out. Dumbledore helped himself, and as he did so Hermione was struck by how ancient his left hand appeared, and how very thin the gloved hand looked. “Professor, if it is not too rude, what happened to your hand?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Nothing to worry about, my dear. Just a consequence of being old.”

“And how old is that?”

“Hermione!” her mother said, aghast.

“It is quite all right, my dear,” Dumbledore said. “I was born, Mrs. Granger, on the summer solstice of 1881.”

The answer did not surprise Hermione at all, but her mother stared in amazement. “You’re a hundred and fifteen years old?” she blurted.

“Indeed. And if that amazes you, my dear, I should hesitate to mention to you that the woman who graded my OWL exams is in fact not only still living, but still grading OWL examinations herself.”

“Do you think Hermione will live that long?”

Dumbledore studied Hermione with a frank expression that made her cheeks color. “The lifespan of a witch or wizard correlates directly to their innate magical power. Given your daughter’s power, I think it very likely she will have a long life even by wizarding standards. She is, if I may be so bold,
a rather remarkable witch.”

“At any other time in my life, I’d take offense to anyone calling my daughter a witch,” Mrs. Granger said lightly, “but given the context, I agree that she is very remarkable. I just wish she did not have to suffer losses like this.”

“So she has told you about Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said, his expression turning somber. “Another remarkable student of mine.” The old wizard took a long pull at his tea, and then daintily dabbed at his beard and mustache with a lace napkin. “Thank you for the lovely tea, Mrs. Granger. I think now I shall come to my business for arriving here this fine morning. You see, Miss Granger, two weeks ago Harry Potter emerged back out of the Veil, weakened and broken, but still very much alive.”

Hermione could not breathe. It felt as if someone had punched her in the stomach; she bent over, gasping terribly for breath, before she felt a wave of gentle, soothing magic wash over her. She sat back up, taking a shaky breath, as Dumbledore placed his wand back in his sleeve, using, she noted, his left hand. He looked to her concerned mother and said, “A mild cheering charm to offset the shock.”

Hermione took another breath, and managed to say, “He’s really alive?”

“He’s alive, yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she demanded, suddenly angry. “He’s been back for two weeks and you didn’t even tell me?”

“I don’t understand, how could he be back?” Mrs. Granger asked. “I thought that he died.”

“As we understand death, yes, he died,” Dumbledore said. “There is an artifact in our Ministry that is as likely old as life itself, known as the Veil. It is believed, for good reason, that this Veil is a direct conduit to death itself. Those who pass through it, either by accident, or by intention years in the past, never returned. Those who even casually touch the Veil die instantly. Never, in the three thousand years of history that has been recorded about the veil, has there ever been mention of someone returning. As for why you did not know, Ms. Granger, the truth is we did not know if he would survive the experience. He was so badly broken physically from his ejection that we thought he would likely die on the spot. We did not wish to raise your hopes, only to crush them again if he did not survive.”

Hermione had difficulty faulting his reasoning there. “But you came, so that means he woke up. Where is he?”

“He is currently being held prisoner in the most securely warded room we could create in the cellar of the house you visited last summer.”

The answer was so incongruent with Hermione’s thoughts it took her a moment to catch up. “Wait, why would he be in a cell?”

“That’s just it, my dear. When he woke up…well, he is not the Harry Potter we all know and love.”

“What do you mean?”

“He does not know who he is, Miss…Hermione. He believes he is someone else—a violent and powerful persona named Darth Shaddix.”

“I don’t….”
On the day he woke, Dolores Umbridge somehow learned that he had returned and snuck into his room in St. Mungos when his guards were incapacitated by one of Voldemort’s people. We believe she deliberately went there to kill him at the prodding of a Death Eater. She never had the chance. Her screams were loud enough to wake the stunned guards, who included Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt, two highly skilled and capable aurors.”

Dumbledore took a breath before describing in detail what happened. Hermione listened in disbelief, before finally she said, “Harry would never do anything like that.”

“I agree. Harry would not. Unfortunately, this Darth Shaddix would. I attempted to use Legillimancy to break through the persona, but was…unsuccessful.”

“Unsuccessful?”

“It required most of the Order stunning him for me to escape with my life, Hermione. That is how strong this persona was. He has not responded to any person he’s met except with violence and contempt. His killing of Dolores has made the Ministry very nervous and we may not be able to shelter him for much longer. We are growing desperate; otherwise I would never come here.”

“What are you saying, Professor?” Mrs. Granger said.

“I am asking Hermione to come with me to speak with Harry. Everyone who is familiar with him—even young Mr. Weasley—agree that the two of them have always had a special rapport—a bond of trust and friendship which few other students can claim. I have witnessed this myself on more than one occasion. It is my hope, Hermione, that seeing you will break through his persona of Darth Shaddix to the soul of Harry Potter within. Otherwise, we may be forced to hand him over to the Ministry.’

“But you said he almost killed you…” Mrs. Granger launched into a very pointed and intelligent diatribe on how it was highly irresponsible to even think to bring her daughter into such a situation. Hermione did not listen at all as she went over everything the headmaster said, and everything she had felt and thought about for the past summer.

She loved Harry Potter, and as the still barely visible scar on her chest attested to, she was willing to fight for him. She was willing to die for him.

“I’ll do it.”

Her mother stopped mid-sentence and stared. “What?”

"I'll do it. I'd… I'd do anything for him, mother. You don't understand, but….”

“My God, you do love this boy, don’t you?” Mrs. Granger said, accusing.

It felt at once terrifying and liberating for Hermione to say, “Yes. Yes, I do.”

They arrived across the street from number 12 Grimmauld Place on a sunny, unusually warm day in
August. Despite the heat, Hermione shivered as the house appeared from nowhere. Knowing that Sirius Black was gone, the house looked somehow darker and more hateful than before. She did not know who the house actually belonged to now, but somehow the Fidelius charm still appeared functional.

Dumbledore smiled encouragingly at her as he led her across the narrow street and up the steps to the ancient brownstone. The door opened and Hermione stepped inside, quickly looking over the faces that were gathered in the sitting room.

She noticed immediately than Ron, Ginny and the twins were not there. Arthur Weasley was, but not Molly. Kingsley was there, obviously healed from whatever violence was done to him. She smiled briefly at Professor Lupin, who sat on a couch with his arm across the shoulders of Nymphadora Tonks. He returned her smile without the expression reaching his sad, kind brown eyes.

Tonks looked as if she had just been put through the ringer. Her hair was a dull brown color and hung limply from her scalp. She appeared to have actually lost weight and had a haunted, dark expression in her eyes. She saw Hermione without acknowledging her, which in a way was worse than being cursed at. She remembered the funny, vibrant young auror from the previous summer and shivered again.

There were others there, of course, most of whom she had seen but could not name. The Order of the Phoenix was not a huge organization, but neither was it a social club. Dumbledore pulled wizards and witches from all walks of life to assist in the effort, and with the outing of Voldemort the headmaster’s recruitment efforts had met with much more success.

Finally, a man stepped out of a door that led to the cellar. He had long red hair and a dragon-tooth earring. “Bill Weasley,” she guessed.

He blinked and looked her, before smiling sadly. “You must be Hermione. Ginny and Ron and talked a lot about you. How are you?”

“Confused. A little scared.”

His sad smile faded. “And for good reason. Albus, if he keeps up he’s going to break the wards.”

“Show me.”

Bill led Hermione and Dumbledore down a narrow, creaking stair into the cellar of the house. The room was lit with ever-burning lamps that cast enough light to ensure every inch was visible. The room was originally much larger, but the back half had been cut off by a line of large, heavy wardstones. In fact, they were larger wardstones than what was probably used to ward the whole house.

Beyond the line of stones raged a maelstrom.

Hermione could not speak as she raised her hands to her mouth and stared. In the center of the heavily warded room, Harry Potter demonstrated the rage of a titan. The air around him shimmered with glistening blue light and a glaring red that looked almost like pure plasma. He moved in the center of the room like a dancer, only with each outthrust of his hands, the blue or red light slammed into the wards and shook the whole room.

The wards stones glowed as they absorbed the attack, and Hermione noticed luminosity remained even between attacks, as if they could not keep all the power they absorbed within.
“He should be in a magical coma right now,” Bill explained. “But it’s not quite magic he’s attacking with. Its power, but it doesn’t seem to be coming from within him. He’s somehow pulling the ambient energy from the air itself, and there is no possible way to ward against that. By tapping that power, he’s virtually inexhaustible, and the ward stones are beginning to overload.”

“How long do we have?”

“If he keeps his attacks up, a day or two at the most. Albus, these are the strongest ward stones that can be transported. If this doesn’t hold him, then Azkaban would be the only other option.”

“You can’t send him to Azkaban!” Hermione said.

Whatever compassion Bill may have had did not show. “Hermione, I know he looks like your friend, but did you see Tonks out there? Do you know what he did to her? He raped her. Maybe not physically, but the Legillimancy attack he perpetrated on her was as bad as, if not ten times worse, than physical rape. To top it off, he then tried some type of wandless *Confundus* curse to turn her into a servant. He had her calling him Master, for Merlin’s sake! As far as I’m concerned, that’s not Harry Potter, and Azkaban is the least he deserves.”

“Mr. Weasley, enough,” Albus said tiredly. “Please.”

Bill took a deep, shuddering breath. “You’re right. Excuse me; I’m going to go see to my friend.”

“Can he hear us, Headmaster?” Hermione asked after Bill was gone.

“He should not be able to see or hear through the wards,” Dumbledore said. “However, he has been aware of anyone coming or going, so I have no doubt he is aware of our presence at the least. Beyond that, I simply don’t know.”

Power flashed against the walls of the cell again, and once more the ward stones lit up. Harry’s face was set in an expression of determination and anger that made her shiver again. Looking into his face, she hesitated for the very first time. She could never have imagined Harry looking so absolutely blood-thirsty as he did at that moment.

Perhaps sensing her hesitation, Dumbledore said, “Ms. Granger, please do not feel as if this is something you have to do. You do not. I and the rest of the Order would completely understand if you turned around and left this instant. I’m sure you noticed that Molly has not allowed any of her younger children near him for the danger he represents.”

“What happens if the Ministry takes him?”

“While Umbridge might have been quite twisted in her perceptions and actions, she was still a Ministry employee and we cannot prove she was attempting to take any action against him, while it is very clear that he killed her with what feels like the darkest, most vile magic. He would undoubtedly go to Azkaban, and likely because of this strange power he now possesses, the Ministry would have no choice but to administer the Dementor’s Kiss to him.”

“Did you know that the boggart showed him a dementor third year?” she asked, more to herself than to the professor.

“Harry did not fear monsters or enemies,” Dumbledore said as he gently placed a hand on her shoulder. “He feared failing others. His greatest fear was giving into fear itself, which the dementors represented. For that, he was in truth the bravest young man I ever met. To see him turned like this…”
Hermione turned to him in surprise when for the second time that summer she heard his voice crack, and stifled her shock when she saw a tear rolling down the side of the wizard’s nose. He smiled at her and wiped the tear away. “Forgive me, Ms. Granger. I am an old man, and sometimes emotions do get the better of me. Seeing Mr. Potter like this is a stark reminder of the many, many ways I have failed him through the years. It does break my heart that I have failed him yet again.”

The cynical side of Hermione thought perhaps that Dumbledore was playing with her emotions in an attempt to manipulate her into going through those wards. But the emotional side—that side she tried so hard to control—told her otherwise. This man’s grief was real, poignant and powerful. Just as he looked defeated even as he forced Voldemort away from the Ministry after they lost Harry, he looked defeated now. She realized then that the headmaster—the greatest wizard in a century whom she admired and respected—had completely given up. She was here because he was forcing himself to go through the motions, but he had absolutely no hope she would be successful.

“How do I get inside?” she asked.

Dumbledore looked down at her, furrowing his brows momentarily. “You mean to speak to him, then?”

“I have to at least try. It’s Harry. He’d do the same for me.”

Dumbledore beamed at her as he reached into his robes and removed a silver chain. “The chain is keyed for you, and you alone. It will allow you to pass freely through the wards. I will have the entire Order beyond the wards, ready to intervene. The only way we have had success in the past is to fire simultaneous, area-wide stunners. It should slow him down enough to summon you out before we raise the wards again.”

“The stunners only slow him down?”

“Yes. Whatever happened to Mr. Potter has made him remarkably powerful, Ms. Granger. But also exceedingly dangerous. Be very, very careful.”

She nodded and remained still while Dumbledore went to fetch the other Order members. Within the cell the storm of power continued to rage, unabated, while the ward stones continued to grow brighter and hotter.

Moments later, she heard the clatter of feet and turned to watch as most of the healthy Order members came back down, with Dumbledore, Bill Weasley, Shacklebolt and Lupin at the forefront. Others came as well, and all had their wands ready. Hermione felt glad that Tonks was not there.

“Everyone, wands at the ready,” Dumbledore said. “Remember that he can move faster than the eye can follow, so if we must drop the wards have your spells incanted as the wards themselves fall, or you will not have time to stop him.”

He then turned to Hermione. “Whenever you are ready, my dear.”

Hermione looked over the faces of the Order members and saw expressions of worry, fear and nervousness. She tried to give them a reassuring smile before she turned back to the warded off room. When she approached, she could feel the magical heat emanating from the ward stones. Inside, Harry was spinning again as he unleashed his power. This close, she felt the heat bleeding through not just the stones, but the ward itself.

When the attack was over and he began pulling his power again, Hermione Granger took a deep breath and stepped through the ward.
Echoes of Harry

Chapter Summary

Hope remains.

Walking through the ward felt like passing through a quill-thin line of fire.

It made her nose twitch and her hair curl worse than normal, but she pushed through anyway until she stood just inside the wards. She first became aware of the smell—the air tingled with ozone and smelled of a heavy male musk. It reminded her of the quidditch team after a long game in May.

Next she became aware of an almost electrical current in the air that made the hair on her arms and her neck stand on end. Her perceptions abruptly centered on a sudden, invisible force gripping her around her waist and pulling her through the air so quickly she did not even have time to scream.

She slammed into the back wall hard enough to leave her ears ringing and her vision blurred. When it cleared, she found two familiar and yet completely alien green eyes staring at her from a breath away. A heartbeat later the throbbing pain from where her head struck the wall finally caught up with her and tears of pain welled in her eyes.

"Are you the virgin they are going to sacrifice to appease the beast?" he whispered to her. It was Harry’s voice, but no words Harry would have ever said. The tone was more like Malfoy than Harry, cruel and contemptuous, with a leer. "Do they wish to watch as I take you on the floor like a beast? I can feel them out there, watching. Is that how your people entertain themselves?"

"Harry," she struggled to speak. "You’re hurting me."

"Oh, we’re just getting started. By the time I’m done with you, you won’t even be able to beg for death."

The invisible grip tightened until she screamed, and he abruptly released her so she slid to the floor, fighting for breath. She looked up and, because of her key, she could see through the ward that Bill was working on the stones. Though it took all her effort, she shook her head. Not yet.

Abruptly the invisible hand slammed her against the back wall again, leaving her ears ringing once more. "That wasn’t very smart, child," the monster with Harry Potter’s face said. "You should let them drop the barrier. Don’t you know how much you’ll suffer if you stay in here with me? How much I’ll enjoy it?"

"Harry Potter risked his life to save me," she managed to say, fighting for the breath to speak. "I owe him everything."

The leering, contemptuous expression warped into fury. "You stupid, foolish little schutta. I don’t know who this Harry Potter is, nor do I care. If you like his face so much, you can look at it while I rip your soul apart!"

He raised his hand and Hermione stared in horror as red, flickering light appeared around his fingers. With a certainty she had not felt since she caught the flash of yellow basilisk eyes in her mirror when she was twelve years old, Hermione Granger knew she was about to die. "I’m sorry, Harry," she
whispered. “I love you.”

She closed her eyes and waited, not wanting her last vision in this life to be of Harry’s face warped by alien rage. When the final blow did not come, though, she risked a peek.

Darth Shaddix was staring down at his own hand with a gaping jaw and brows furrowed by confusion. He looked at her, his eyes flecking now with a strange orange light. “What are you doing?” he shouted.

“I’m not doing anything,” she said.

He backed away, gripping his right hand as if it had mortally offended him. “Aarrrggggh!” he shouted, so enraged he could not find words. “What are you doing to me?”

He raised his left hand and the air trembled around his fingers. His whole body tensed as if to strike at her, but just as evidently happened with the last attempt, this try failed and he dropped his arm with the first hint of fear she had seen since she arrived.

“It’s some type of trick,” he finally said, snarling. “Some Jedi mind trick. You’re not just rebels, you’re Jedi!”

Hermione slid down against the wall as she watched him rage in the middle of the floor. The pain in the back of her head throbbed and she reached back to feel wet there—he slammed her so hard she must have split her scalp.

He stopped his rant and stared down at her bloody fingers. She could see under the unsparing light of the lamps that his eyes were now fully encased in a ring of orange that clashed horribly with the natural green color there, and his lips were plastered with flecks of spittle. Where before he looked angry and lethal, he now looked wild and completely out of control.

He raised both hands and instead of red sparks his hands took on a brilliant blue glow that crackled with pure energy. “Die, you Jedi whore!” he screamed. He unleashed a storm of lightning, but it never reached her. Though she could not explain how, the lightening storm seemed to turn in mid-air and flashed back against Shaddix himself, until his own attack turned on him and threw him against the ward line.

Despite the pain and terror, Hermione’s mind raced ahead until she realized what was happening. Whatever monster Shaddix might have been, Harry was inside him as well, and somehow that echo of Harry was protecting her.

“Harry!” she said. “Fight! I’m here for you. I love you! Please don’t let him win!”

“Shut up!” Shaddix roared. The air exploded with more of the terrifying blue lightning that came from his hands, but none of it touched her at all. The whole chamber crackled with unbelievable power, but the only person it hurt was Shaddix himself.

Finally he collapsed to the center of the floor, literally steaming from his self-induced injuries. “Get out,” he said. His voice sounded shockingly hoarse.

“Harry…” Hermione said.

“GET OUT!” He screamed it, sending spittle in his rage.

She had to use the wall to keep her balance, but eventually Hermione managed to get to her feet. She swayed but kept upright. “I’ll leave for now,” she said with quiet determination, “but I’m coming
back. I will never give up on you, Harry. Never.”

“Just get out,” Shaddix said.

She stumbled past him and through the ward line and into the waiting arms of the Order members beyond. She managed to stay up-right only a moment longer before Bill helped ease her to the floor.

“You, Hermione Granger, are insane,” the eldest Weasley child pronounced.

Hermione, though, looked up at Dumbledore. “Did you see?”

For the first time since he fetched her, she could see something beside despair on his face. “I did indeed, Ms. Granger. Harry is not quite as lost to us as we feared.”

With so many witches and wizards there to help, it took hardly a minute before the cuts on Hermione’s scalp were healed and pain potions were pressed into her hands. Mr. Weasley especially seemed to take a personal interest in her well-being as he guided her back up the stairs and down the long, narrow halls to the kitchen. Hermione was stunned to see Molly Weasley cooking away, while Ron and Ginny sat at the table talking softly. They had arrived while she was with Harry.

The two saw her enter and ran to meet her, hugging her before she had a chance to respond.

“Easy now,” Mr. Weasley said. “Let’s all sit down and have a spot of lunch, shall we?”

Dumbledore and Bill came in a moment later, while the rest of the Order members either returned to their homes or went to other rooms in the large house.

“Well, what happened?” Ginny asked.

“He couldn’t hurt me,” Hermione said, beaming. “Well, not later, anyway. That first throw hurt quite a bit, but I’m right as rain now.”

“I just don’t understand it,” Ginny said, shaking her head. “They won’t tell us all what’s going on; did he really hurt Tonks?”

Hermione looked to Dumbledore and then to Arthur to gauge how much they had told her friends. “Something happened to him,” she finally speculated. “Somehow, our Harry got buried under this Darth Shaddix. But he’s in there, we proved it today.”

“In the mean time,” Dumbledore said, “he remains very, very dangerous. For that reason I have placed an age line on the stairs to the cellar.”

Ginny and Ron both protested, but their protests died when Molly slammed plates of food before them. “Both of you hush!” she said with more anger than Hermione had ever seen from her. “You have no idea what he’s capable of! You didn’t see Tonks after he was done with her. I’ll not have any of my kids going near him, not like this. I’ll have your skins if you even try!”

“Kids,” Arthur said in a more conciliatory tone, “Harry Potter is a wonderful person that we all love. But the figure down there—for now I think it safe to treat Harry as if he is possessed. We are doing our very best to break the spirit that is possessing him, but that spirit is very powerful, incredibly violent, and appears to be absolutely evil. While I have no doubt that you would be willing to do
anything for him, all that would do is give the spirit in control of him leverage to either escape or to kill again. Your mother and I could simply not bear to lose either of you. Do you understand?"

Subdued, the youngest Weasleys nodded.

Hermione, though, turned to Dumbledore. “Professor, how was he able to do that? He was shooting lightning from his fingers. He threw me about like a doll without his wand. And his attacks on the wards… how could he do these things?”

“It is a mystery, to be sure,” Dumbledore said. “As William pointed out, he appears to somehow be able to draw on the ambient magical energy in the air. We cannot ward against that since all life adds to this ambient magical field, as do the wards themselves. I’ve never heard of any wizards or witches who could tap into this energy without elaborate rituals and a great deal of rune work. My mind trembles at what he must have gone through to learn such an amazing and powerful art.”

Molly put a plate down in front of Hermione—simple pub grub. She ate because she knew she needed the energy, hardly tasting the comfort food. The other kids ate in silence as well.

“Can I stay here tonight?” Hermione finally asked.

“Of course, dear,” Molly said before any others could answer. “Ron and Ginny will be staying as well. You and Ginny can have the same room from last summer. We’ll see about getting your school trunk.”

Hermione managed to force a smile, but her mind was already back in the heavily warded chamber under the house.

That night, as if sensing she needed to send a letter to her parents, Hedwig flew through the window of the room she shared with Ginny. Ginny had actually come in from a shower and was combing her hair when she stared gap-jawed at the white owl. “Is that Hedwig?” she stammered.

“Yes, she showed up at my house in June,” Hermione said. She fed the owl a bit of sausage left over from dinner, somehow even then knowing she’d be seeing Harry’s owl, and quickly jotted off the letter. “Thanks, girl,” she said as she tied it to Hedwig’s leg. A moment later, the owl disappeared back into the night.

When she turned around, she was stunned to see Ginny sobbing quietly, even while she continued to comb her hair. “Ginny? What’s wrong?”

“I was hoping Hedwig would come to me,” she whispered. “I prayed and prayed, because it would have meant that he loved me. Owls always go to either the next closest relative by blood, or if no relative, then whoever was closest emotionally. I…” She stopped and forced herself to look up at Hermione. “I had this picture in my head, you know? You and Ron would get together, and Harry would finally notice me, and we’d be a perfect family and we’d be so happy. I saw it so clearly it seemed more real than when I was awake sometimes. And then he fell through the Veil and it was like my dreams got blown away.”

Hermione quickly realized where it was going, but didn’t dare speak for saying the wrong thing.
Instead she just put an arm around the younger girl’s shoulder. “I’m sorry,” Hermione finally managed to say.

“Why does it feel like I cheated on Harry when I kissed Dean, Hermione? Why does it feel so empty inside? And now that I see where Hedwig went, it doesn’t really matter. He never did notice me, not like he noticed you.”

“Ginny,” Hermione said, “if he was so in love with me, why did he ask Cho to go to the ball? Hedwig probably came to me because I was just familiar.”

“And yet you’re here, now. You’re the only one they would let in. I used an extendible ear to hear them talking while you were in the back. He almost killed Dumbledore. Greatest wizard in the world and Harry almost killed him. And what he did to Tonks… But he couldn’t hurt you. They heard you, Hermione. They heard you say that you loved him.”

Despite all the pain in the young girl’s voice, there was no accusation. “When he fell through the Veil,” Hermione said, “it made me think about what he really meant to me. And I realized that…yes, I did love him. I didn’t think I would ever be with him, though. He looked at Cho and the other beautiful girls and I was just buck-toothed, bushy-headed Hermione. But I loved him. I love him. And I just couldn’t not try to help him, you know?”

Ginny took a deep, shuddering breath. “Yeah, I know.” She wiped both her eyes and looked down at her pajamas. “Ron’s going to be heartbroken. When you wrote back and said you didn’t want to come to the Burrow this summer, he actually cried a little.”

That made Hermione tear up herself—his invitation came just days into the summer, in the darkest days of her depression. “I’m so sorry, Ginny. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt him or you. Truth is… if things didn’t turn out, who knows? I love Ron too. He and Harry are my boys. My best friends. It was always going to come down to one or the other. Who else would have me?”

“Viktor Krum?”

“Who else would have me who can actually pronounce my name?”

Ginny snorted, and then laughed a little even as she wiped her nose. “His nose was ugly anyway.”

“Yeah, it was big. We kissed just once, and his nose poked my cheek. It was very distracting.”

Ginny nodded, and without another word turned and hugged Hermione hard. Eventually, the two decided to sleep in the same bed, hugging each other desperately until sleep finally claimed the youngest Weasley.

Hermione, though, lingered awake and stared at the canopy over their bed. Over and over again, she replayed the events of that afternoon, and the flickering orange in Harry’s eyes as he raged at her. Like he was possessed.

But by what?

She was out of bed before she even realized what she was doing. Ginny continued to sleep the sleep of the emotionally exhausted, and did not even stir as Hermione slipped out of the door with her wand, an evening robe, and the silver chain that keyed her and her alone into the ward scheme.

Her suspicions about the age line were correct—the chain keyed her through those as well—and she walked down the narrow stairs into the cellar. The room was not as brightly lit, and in one corner an old wizard (Elphias Doge, if Hermione remembered correctly) was sleeping with light snores.
The wardstones had lost their radiance, evidence Harry or Shaddix or whatever he wanted to call himself had finally stopped his attacks. The man himself sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor with his eyes closed. His cheeks looked sunken, and Hermione wondered if he had eaten anything since he was captured.

With only one deep breath to steady her nerves, she stepped through the ward line, and then sat down facing him from two feet away.

Without opening his eyes, he said, “Your either very brave or profoundly stupid, little chutta.”

“Probably a little of both,” she admitted. “Have you eaten?”

“I would rather starve to death than be fed by animals,” he said. He did not snarl or bite the words out, but instead sounded coldly determined. The tone sounded far worse than if he’d shouted them out in rage. It sounded like he would do what he said, no matter what.

“I’m an animal, then?”

“If even that.”

“And you’re not an animal?”

“I am an animal. I am the rancor among nerfs. I am the apex predator, and all other sentients are below me.”

“Because you are a darth?”

Finally his eyes opened—thankfully the ring of orange was gone. “You seek to parry words you don’t understand with me, little girl?”

“Have you looked in the mirror lately? You’re neither older nor larger than I am, Master.”

For some strange reason, he winced.

“I thought you liked to be called master,” she said. “Isn’t that what you forced Tonks to call you? Did you want to hear her call you that when you raped her?”

“I am Sith,” he said. “I command armies that burn whole worlds to glass. I am a master.”

“And do you not have a master yourself?”

“I serve only one.”

Hermione nodded. “Does he make you call out master when he rapes you?”

He once again shocked her with how very fast he could move. In a second he had his hand around her neck and her body pressed flat against the floor, though she noted this time he did not crack her skull. The grip was hard, but not as painful as it was during their first encounter. And yet the air trembled with danger. “Do not mock things you don’t understand, little girl!”

“What are you going to do, rape me?” she challenged. “Make me scream until I’m a rolled up ball, and then try and convince me I’m your servant? It didn’t work on Tonks, what makes you think it would work on me? I am a witch. I have my own power, and right now, I think I’m stronger than you.”

He reared back a hand as if to strike, but then growled in frustration when he could not deliver the
blow. “Get out,” he said.

“Make me.”

He spun about, stunned. He spun in place and suddenly the air shimmered into a solid wall that rushed at her with the speed of a cannon ball, only to pass completely by her with little more than a stiff breeze.

Hermione raised her chin and stood up; she made a show of dusting herself off. “You cannot hurt me. Harry won’t let you. He’s been protecting me since he was eleven years old, and he’ll never stop, no matter how much you Sith try to stop him. He’s inside you, and he’s stronger than you. Just like I am.”

“If I can’t hurt you, then I’ll have to choose different targets,” he said. She felt a sudden brush against her mind, and his confident sneer returned. “Perhaps that little red-head you slept with tonight. I bet her blood is delicious. Or your parents. I bet your mother would scream loudest if your father were forced to watch me rip her open, don’t you think…”

Hermione stifled a spike of fear, and then fought even harder to control the anger that stemmed from it. “Your evil is a lie. You are a lie. You’re a figment of some dark and twisted man’s imagination pushed into the mind of my friend.” Her words acted as a fuse to the anger that boiled just under the surface, and for a moment that anger boiled away any fear she might feel. The anger would not satisfy itself with anything less than a blow, and the ringing slap surprised them both. “I want Harry back. I will get Harry back. I don’t care how long it takes or how much you scream and yell, I will not stop until I have my Harry back.”

He stepped back from her, his own veneer of anger and rage melting a little to show a flash of concern. “Get out.”

Hermione took a deep breath, and then very deliberately sat down. “No.”

~~Broken~~

~~Broken~~

When Hermione woke again, the lights in the room were up at full blast. She sat up stiffly and looked at the ward wall—Dumbledore stood just on the other side of the ward with a deep frown of concern, along with Mad-Eye Moody and Shacklebolt. Opposite the wall, Shaddix sat cross-legged with his eyes closed. His cheeks were even more sunken than before, and dark rings circled his eyes.

She stiffly climbed to her feet and walked through the ward line. Before she even finished crossing the wards, she heard Moody saying, “What in Circe’s sweet womb were you thinking about, Granger?”

“Alastor, please,” Dumbledore said. “Ms. Granger, it was very irresponsible to come down here by yourself. Elphias said he did not even realize you were there until he woke this morning.”

“I was never in any danger,” Hermione said.

“That’s what Tonks thought, now, wasn’t it?” Moody snapped.

“Harry didn’t love Tonks,” Hermione snapped back. “He tried all night, professor. He couldn’t hurt me. He tried to hit me but he couldn’t. He tried to choke me, but he couldn’t. Harry’s inside him, and he won’t let Shaddix hurt me. Frankly I’m safer in there than I am in Muggle London.” She yawned. “I am hungry, though. And I need to visit the loo. Has he had a chance to relieve himself?”
“The wards are handling that,” Kingsley said. “Standard prisoner ward, it evacuates all waste.”

“How ‘bout food?”

“He’s thrown everything we’ve tried to give him back at us,” Moody growled. “Hasn’t eaten in three days now.”

She pursed her lips and looked back at Harry. “Professor Dumbledore, you asked me here to help. If I’m going to really get through to him, then you need to trust me. I need you to trust me completely. Can you do that, sir?”

“Miss Granger, I can say that you have never made me do anything else but trust you,” the headmaster said.

Hermione beamed, smiling freely for the first time that summer. “Then we need to keep everyone out of here but me. He can sense you all, somehow. He knows when you’re here. Whatever Shaddix is, he’s afraid of showing weakness in front of others. But the only way to get to Harry is to make Shaddix expose his weakness. Can we do this?”

“For now,” Dumbledore agreed.

Two hours later, after refreshing herself and dressing, Hermione walked alone down the stairs with a plate in one hand and a glass of milk in the other. She stepped casually through the ward, stepped past the sitting, quiet Shaddix, and sat against a side wall.

She then began to eat her breakfast.

“Get out, whore,” he said without opening his eyes.

“Make me,” she said by way of greeting.

She continued to eat, savoring every bite.

“You won’t trick me into eating,” he said.

Hermione laughed. “As if I’m going to share any of this with you. Do you know what this is? This is treacle tart and fresh cream. This is the best food known to humanity on this earth, and I had to beg to get even this much. I’ll be damned if I’m going to share it with a foul-mouthed, loathsome little cockroach like you.” She sipped her cold milk, and then took another bite. She closed her eyes in obvious relish.

After a few minutes, she put the half-eaten tart down next to a half-full glass of milk. “I’ve told them not to come down any more,” she finally said. “You can sense it for yourself. You’re my prisoner, now. You’ll eat or starve on my say so.”

“You’re just a child.”

“So are you.”

“I’m twenty years old, little girl. I am no child.”

The answer surprised her. She stood up enough to kneel before him, and smiled to herself as he very subtly scooted back from her. “You may think you’re twenty, but that body of yours is sixteen. In fact, you turned sixteen just a week or so ago. I know. I’ve known the soul in that body since we were eleven. When Harry fell through the Veil after his godfather, I dreamed of that face every night,
until I realized just how very much he meant to me, and how heartbroken I was that I never got to tell him that I loved him.”

She watched his face closely, noticing the muscle tics her words caused, as if she were slapping him. She leaned closer still, until she could taste his breath. It smelled oddly sterile, probably due to the wards. “Right now, Sith, you are the only thing standing between me and the boy I love. So, you are my prisoner, and you’re not going to ever see light until I see my Harry again. And don’t bother faking it, because I’ll know. That’s my power.”

She stood and walked out not just of the chamber, but of the cellar entirely.

When she returned that afternoon, the treacle tart and milk were gone, while Shaddix continued to sit in the middle of the chamber, cross legged, with his eyes closed.
Possession

Chapter Summary

He is not who he thinks he is.

Every day, Hermione took her meals with her to the cell and ate while Shaddix pretended to meditate. She always took more than she could eat herself, and always made sure to take Harry’s favorite foods. It was a battle of wills now, and she found it easier and easier to hate Shaddix while still loving her Harry.

She always made sure to leave her leftovers when she went to take a break or relieve herself, and she made sure her breaks were long. Sometimes the breaks involved chess with Ron, a game of exploding snap with Ginny, or talking about advanced transfiguration theory with Remus if he was there. Having just completed her OWLs, she had no summer coursework to speak of.

The days seemed to take on an air of the routine, is if this was always they way it had been. Shaddix did not talk to her most times, nor did she try to engage him. They both knew where they stood, and it was not just a matter of wills. In this battle, she was determined to win.

Unfortunately, time was not on her side.

On Hermione’s sixth day in Grimmauld Place, Dumbledore guided her into the library and sat her down before the empty fireplace. “You have made remarkable progress, Hermione. Much more so that even I hoped. He is eating now, and has not tried to overload the wards since your arrival. But…”

“Term starts in a week.”

“Precisely. You are not just a Prefect, Hermione. You are one of the true leaders in the school. Lower years from at least three of the houses look up to you, and not just because of your past association with Mr. Potter. You must return to school for everyone’s sake.”

Hermione accepted this silently. “What about Harry?”

“That is what I wish to discuss with you. Have you been reading the Daily Prophet?”

“Yes. Good riddance to Fudge.”

“Indeed. The new Minister, Amelia Bones, has a much more hands-on approach to the administration of the Ministry, and has taken a personal interest in this case. With my own political position having been weakened considerably, I don’t have much in the way of political capital left. It is my wish to move Harry to Hogwarts in a secured tower. The wards at Hogwarts are significantly more powerful than anywhere else in the country, and there is no danger he could overload them, even if he were to attack them non-stop for a year. But there is risk in the transport. Frankly, if not for Auror Tonk’s Occlumency and quick use of a potion, we would never have captured Harry in the first place.”

“Let me guess, Minister Bones does not want Harry around other kids.”
“More specifically, around her niece. Which is understandable considering how close the Minister herself came to death during Voldemort’s failed attack on her home this summer.”

“What can I do?”

“I would like you to meet with Minister Bones to plead our case. She knows you through her niece as a fair and good person. She might find your logic more appealing than my own, especially since you have demonstrated a level of control over Harry no one else has.”

“When?”

“Today. We can use the outing as an opportunity to obtain your school supplies as well.”

Hermione looked around the room. “I have begun feeling a little sick of being inside. Can Ron and Ginny come as well?”

“Of course. I daresay, Molly would insist. You would have escorts as well, of course.”

“I don’t have any money…”

“Pffft,” Dumbledore said with a shake of his hand. “My dear, you have been acting on behalf of the Order of the Phoenix. The very least we can do is purchase supplies for you.”

Hermione’s parents were quite well off, managing a large and successful dental clinic as well as coming into a nice inheritance from her father’s family, but for some reason she did not want to go home to ask for money at that moment.

“All right, thank you, Professor.”

Ron and Ginny were of course thrilled to get out of the house, and in a few hours Molly, Arthur, Shacklebolt and Moody assembled to go through the floo to the atrium of the Ministry of Magic. They emerged into the middle of a river of foot traffic as witches and wizards, goblins and vampires and every sort of magical creature milled about, all talking about the Post and stocks and trade deficits. It had a surreal image to it, as did the massive, expanded space of the atrium itself.

They checked their wands with security and were met just inside the line of checkpoints by Dumbledore himself. “Well, let’s to it, shall we?”

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Darth Shaddix, Dark Lord of the Sith, sank himself deeper into meditation as he fought for the thousandth time to get the irritating girl’s face out of his mind. The whole chamber reeked not just with her floral scent, but her Force presence, which was nearly painfully brilliant.

When meditation did not work, he stood and began pacing. When that did not work, he reached out his senses to ensure he was alone, and began a series of Sith katas designed to work his muscles.

It took only a few minutes for him to remember that he was in a cloned body, for his muscles were not responding with the strength they should have. So much more the need, then, he decided, and he kept working through the pain.

He was well into his exercises when he sensed a presence enter the room beyond the strange energy barrier they kept him behind. He went perfectly still as he tasted the familiar presence, and did not bother to hide his smile. “Have you come at last to submit yourself to your master?”
He could not see her face, but he could feel her presence clearly enough to know how the jibe hurt.

Her Force presence was clouded by continuing pain and rage, and confusion. He admitted now that he simply did not have his master’s skills at manipulation, but he also knew he had an impact on her. The woman felt a lingering desire for him that disgusted her, infuriated her and enflamed her all at the same time. She was there either to kill him, or to love him.

The wards dropped, and for the first time since he mind-battled the old man, he saw the rest of his prison. On the other side stood Tonks, her wand up and pointed at him. “You bastard,” she hissed. “You think it’s all a joke what you did to me, don’t you?”

“Joke?” He grinned. “No, no joke. I thoroughly enjoyed breaking you, and I would very much like to continue. If you think the pain I made you feel was bad, you could barely imagine the pleasure. The two are so closely related, after all. I could have you on the floor screaming out your pleasure until your throat ruptured, and even then you would want more.”

“I’m not interested,” she said flatly. “There’s only one thing I want you to do, you bastard. Die!”

A burst of dark purple light that screamed danger in the Force flew at him as fast as a blaster bolt. He gathered the Force to him and spun away from it, and then shot forward faster than Tonks could follow until he had one arm around her from behind, and one hand gripping her wand-wrist. He squeezed until her wand dropped and she cried in pain.

“Foolish little Nymphadora,” he whispered into her ear like a lover. “I know you. I’ve tasted your mind, your past. I’ve seen you give yourself to fools for the brief illusions of love. But you don’t understand—they ask you for different faces because they don’t want yours. You’re not a person; you’re a puppet with a twat. I won’t take your sex only because you’re not worthy of me.”

He shoved her with the Force and sent her flying into the cell with more than sufficient speed and momentum to break her bones. She fell to the ground screaming in pain and rage, while Shaddix lifted her wand and snapped it. “Thank you for your help today, Tonks. I sensed you cared for that man, Lupin. Before I kill him, I’ll let him know.” He tossed the broken wand to her, turned and walked up the stairs seemingly without a concern in the world.

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“When you graduate Hogwarts, Ms. Granger, look me up,” Amelia Bones said with a wry smile. “With your powers of oration, I have no doubt I will have the Wizengamot eating out of my hands in a week.”

Hermione blushed as she accepted the Minister’s handshake. “Thank you, Minister.”

Bones turned a more serious look to Dumbledore. “I meant what I said—a permanent contingent of hitwizards on duty at all times. I’ll not have your meddling in his life any more—frankly I place at least half the blame for his first passing squarely at your feet. We’re taking an awful risk here, Albus.”

“I know, Amelia. And I cannot thank you enough for your willingness to do so. I shall see to the warding myself. I will leave transportation in the capable hands of your staff, and his room will be ready for him when he arrives.”

“Very well. I hate to be rude, but I do have quite the schedule today.”

“Of course,” Hermione said quickly. “Thank you so much for seeing us!”
She had a hard time hiding the skip in her step when they left. In the waiting room, Ron, Ginny and the others looked up at her beaming smile. “So they’re doing it?” Ginny said.

Hermione nodded.

“Remember, none of this is for public discussion,” Arthur Weasley warned his kids. “The world doesn’t even know he’s alive.”

That served to dampen their spirits, but only until the Weasley patriarch said, “So! Lunch! Shopping! Ice cream!”

“Books!” Hermione chimed in. Ron moaned, causing Ginny to giggle. For a single moment, things felt almost as they should be.

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Shaddix stepped onto the sidewalk in the city and quickly strode away from the house. He turned and stifled his surprise when he found he could not see it any more. It was as if the whole house had been hidden. His Master told him about such things before—certain forms of Sith alchemy on Korriban that allowed for the hiding of whole structures in the Force. He had yet to make the pilgrimage there, but he knew he would before he was ready to learn the higher mysteries. He had to finish his final test before he was proclaimed worthy of visiting Korriban.

In the meantime, he was stuck on an incredibly primitive world. The vehicles all drove around puffing out bits of stench indicative of internal combustion of some type. They drove slowly, and stayed firmly on the ground.

Still, there were lots of people, and the planet appeared to be mineral-rich. Depending on what else the system had, he could see it as the stepping stone of a new Empire. A world as primitive as this would fall easily to a relatively small, well-armed force. He could easily create such a force from within the world’s own population, and arm them with advanced technology that would make them more than a match for this world’s militaries. Once he conquered this world, it would be easy enough to reach out to others. And a world with six billion humans had a great deal of value to the Empire. His master would be pleased.

His stomach growled, reminding him of the many hours since he ate the irritating girl’s leftovers. He ate to survive so that he could escape and have his revenge. Any indignity could be withstood with the promise of revenge. He might not have been able to hurt the girl, but his scans of her mind gave him lots of targets that would make her suffer. But for now he needed food.

He followed his nose to a circular drive with what looked like food vending carts in one side. He walked up to one, surprised he could read the text, which was obviously not in Basic, and said, “You wish to give me a hot dog.” It sounded patently absurd from the lips of a Sith, but with a push of the Force the thick-necked man in the apron pulled out what appeared to be local variant of a sausage and placed it on a type of bread made from some local processed grain. He handed it over with bottle of water, while other customers looked on in surprise that he cut and got what he asked for.

As Shaddix turned to eat his meal, another customer said, “You want to give me a dog all the way with a Coke.”

“And you’ll want to give me five quid, gov’nor,” came the snappy comeback.

Shaddix ignored the exchange as he took a bite of the “hot dog” as it was called. He tasted an
obscene amount of chemical preservatives, but there was also enough actual meat to satisfy. He finished it quickly and drained the water while he continued to explore the area. His eyes scanned every face; every bit of clothes. He knew he looked out of place, but that could not be helped. His first step would be in finding housing, then a source of currency to begin the process of building his own personal empire.

His ruminations suddenly ended when he felt a rush of warning from the Force, so much so it caused his heart to spike in panic. He quickly scanned his immediate area for danger, but could neither see nor sense any threat. However, the Force felt insistent, pounding at his mind. Finally he closed his eyes and reached out all his senses, until within his mind he saw a strange, twisting alley lined with primitive, quaint shops.

The girl who was his jailor walked down the alley, with two other teen-agers and several adults. She was smiling and laughing, looking like any typical human teen-age girl out on a lark. His anger flared, only to be put down when his vision trembled before a flash of light. Behind the group, a building exploded, throwing a pair of bodies across the street. The girl and her friends bent down and withdrew their wand weapons, while the adults formed a protective circle around them.

Lights began flashing back and forth across the length of the alley, seemingly right toward his jailor and her friends.

Just as quickly, the vision ended. Shaddix could not tell if it was occurring right then, or was about to happen, but he knew the danger to his jailor was real enough. He just didn’t care. “Good riddance,” he muttered to himself. “Foolish girl.”

He continued walking down the street and made a pointed effort to ignore the strange trembling in his hands. His head began to throb with a pounding headache, as if something were pressing his skull tight in a vice. Still, he kept walking, because he did not care about her.

Hermione.

No, he didn’t care. Just because the Jedi did something to shield her from his power did not mean she meant anything to him. He knew who he was. He was Darth Shaddix, Dark Lord of the Sith. He was born of two rogue Jedi who went to the Emperor to escape the other Jedi who wanted to destroy them. He did not have a name or any life at all until the Emperor gave him his name. He was a weak, broken No-Name before the Emperor showed him the true meaning of strength.

Before then he had no name.

The throb turned into a spike of pain so intense Shaddix had to stop and take a deep, calming breath. He ran through every Force cantrip he knew, but for some reason the Force did not sooth him, rather it battered mercilessly at his mind.

He was Darth Shaddix, Dark Lord of the Sith, and he did not care about any foolish little girl who got herself killed. He had killed before in the name of the Emperor, and his victims were no more special than she.

The vice turned. Though it might have been only in his mind, Shaddix heard a loud, distinct crack inside his skull and felt a welling of moisture pouring from his nose. The pain drove him to his knees.

He was aware of voices around him asking if he was okay—primitive people clinging to compassion since they had little else to offer. Weak, foolish people like the weak, foolish girl who thought she could control a Sith….

The vice turned again. The agony flattened him now, and in the midst of the pain he experienced a
vision that was not a vision. Rather it was a distant, hazy memory. He stood in a tent, talking to his jailor who stood without, until she rushed into the tent and hugged him tight. It felt as if she were there now, whispering in his ear, “Be careful, Harry.”

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The ice cream was delicious. There was no better way to start a shopping excursion in Diagon Alley than with a Florean Fortescue’s ice cream sundae.

“You know,” Ron said as they started toward Madam Malkin’s, “I really want to be where I can see Malfoy’s face when Dumbledore announces he’s back. I can just see it.”

“I would imagine he’d faint,” Hermione said. “He’s always been a loathsome little coward.”

“Maybe Crabbe or Goyle would have to give him mouth-to-mouth to resuscitate him,” Ginny said. “Git would probably enjoy it!”

Hermione laughed, but then made a gagging sound. “Ewww. What a disgusting image.”

Her laughter was lost in the roar of an explosion as Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlor evaporated behind them. A year of training in Dumbledore’s Army came to the forefront as she, Ron and Ginny squatted down and pulled their wands. Around them, Molly, Arthur, Kingsley and Moody did the same.

From the billowing flames of the shattered store came a line of black, silver-masked figures. The lead figure twirled a wand. A figment of flame snapped out from the store front, spun like a serpent in the air and then lashed out directly at Hermione’s group.

Shacklebolt and Moody together summoned a shield that at first deflected and then froze the fiery serpent. “Molly, Arthur, get them out. This is a targeted raid!” Moody shouted harshly.

Not needing any other encouragement, the elder Weasleys grabbed the teens and started pushing them into the nearest building. They did not even make it half way before that storefront exploded with the same brilliant flash as Florean’s. The concussion wave of the explosion knocked all five of them down.

Ron was the first to scramble to his feet and snap off a quick stunner. Hermione had a strange moment where she said, “Good show, Ronald!” just a split second before a black curse struck him in the chest and sent him spinning arse over teakettle to collapse in an unmoving heap ten feet away.

“Ronald!” Molly screamed, sobbing in terror. Hermione, though, looked where the curse came from and fought an urge to scream herself. A line of ten more lean figures in black robes completely cut off the street in front of them, while Moody and Kingsley fought a valiant but doomed rearguard action behind them.

“Oh God,” Hermione whispered.

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He sat up while the circle of people around him stood talking on their primitive communication devices. In the distance he heard a siren of some kind—perhaps the local medical emergency
services? He didn’t care. He knew only one thing for sure—he could not let Hermione die.

Instead of that, he scanned the street until he saw what he needed. With speed that left the primitives gasping, Shaddix flew across the street, grabbed a motorcyclist with the Force and tossed him easily into a row of bushes. The motorcycle kept rolling even without its rider, until Shaddix leaped ten feet through the air and landed astride the vehicle.

He had never ridden a motorcycle in his life, but he instinctively knew how it worked—it was after all little more than a primitive swoop bike. He gunned the engine and blasted forward, accelerating to the bike’s top speed. He let the Force guide him as he whipped and twisted his way through traffic, or in two cases, between two cars that just refused to get out of the way. More than guiding his instincts, he let the Force guide him to Diagon Alley.

In just minutes he was flying down Charing Cross Road despite the honks from other cars at his dangerous driving, until he saw the tavern. It was a small, dirty building completely at odds with the larger, more stately buildings around it. In the Force it shimmered with energy, promising much that lay hidden behind it.

He jumped off the bike before it even stopped moving and watched as several people came running out of the tavern with harried, terrified expressions. He pressed through the crowd, ignoring some of the startled expressions as people recognized him, until he reached the interior of the tavern.

The far door was open, as was the entrance to Diagon Alley, and wizards and witches were trying to funnel people through the narrow passage. The press was thick enough it would take more than just pushing to get through. So he did more than just push—he summoned the Force and with that power pushed dozens of people aside at one time, opening a passage for himself that he took at full speed.

It took a single gestalt moment to determine the situation. Twenty Death Eaters surrounded Hermione and the others, ten to a side, creating a lethal cross-five. So far no killing curses, but that was because the Death Eaters wanted to terrify first, and only then kill. The adults did their best to shield the children, though Shaddix noticed with dispassion that one of the children was already down.

“Hello again, Ms. Granger,” a chillingly familiar voice said from behind a silver mask.

Hermione raised her wand, while behind her Arthur and Molly tried to stabilize Ron. Ginny stood behind her, her wand raised. Against them stood a line of ten Death Eaters. “They let you out of prison, Malfoy?” Hermione gritted.

“Let? As if any prison could stop the Dark Lord? No, I am here for one reason and one reason only. I have a job to finish. Crucio!”

The pain was too intense, too sudden—Hermione could not fight it, or even think beyond it. She could do nothing but fall to the ground screaming in agony. Ginny shouted “Reducto!”

Her powerful curse was blocked by four simultaneous shields before a pair of stunners sent her flying back into her horrified parents. A second dark wizard stepped to the masked Malfoy’s side, pointed a wand at Hermione, and said, “Crucio!”

Hermione could not even scream any more as pain reduced her world to nothing more than fire.
Suddenly the pain was gone. From a distance she heard a yell—an impossibly loud, primal sound, as if all the predators in the world were roaring their defiance. She managed to open her eyes enough to see some invisible power hit the two dark wizards. It did not knock them back or make them fly away—it crushed them flat with a terrible, snapping, rending sound as if every bone and sinew in their body ruptured in a split second. Blood flew back behind them to splash against the shocked Death Eaters behind them.

And suddenly Harry was there, falling from the sky as if he flew. He landed right before the crushed lumps of Malfoy and his fellow Death Eater and crouched down before Hermione with both hands glowing with deadly, blue energy.

“Don’t touch her!” he screamed. His voice echoed across the alley with power. Harry Potter had returned, and the world was about to feel his rage.
Hermione watched, trembling with the after-effects of the *Cruciatus* curse, as Harry squatted low before her. Beyond him, the eight Death Eaters paused, unsure how to proceed after their two leaders were not just killed, but crushed to paste.

With trembling effort, Hermione turned her head and saw that ten more Death Eaters were closing in on them from the other side, using layered shields to render Moody and Shacklebolt's desperate offensive spells harmless. In moments, the small group was surrounded by eighteen dark wizards.

Harry did not seem to care. Hermione could see his head lower, as if bowing, but his muscles remained tense. Just as he could sense people through the wards, she had no doubt he was sensing all his enemies now. The air trembled in anticipation of violence, and it only took a single gesture to ignite the fuse.

A Death Eater raised his wand.

It was difficult, hurt as she was by the pain curse, for Hermione to follow exactly what happened next. The wizard flew forward so fast he had only time enough to make a surprised squeal before Harry spun in place and brought his hand around like a knife to the man's throat. The sound of snapping vertebra punctuated the man's somersault, until he landed unmoving on the cobblestones of the street at Harry's feet.

Harry raised his face then, and all those Death Eaters who could see him took a step back. The moment lasted only a second before Harry exploded into motion. The nearest Death Eater shot into the sky with another aborted scream, and then with a completely unnatural jerk changed trajectory and slammed into another dark wizard like a bullet, killing both instantly with the sheer, brutal speed of the impact.

By the time they collided, though, Harry had already moved on. He blurred, not just because of Hermione’s curse-warped perception, but because he was moving so fast. The Death Eaters seemed almost just to stand there waiting for him to come and strike them down with a fist or a foot. Sudden, explosive bolts of blue lighting enveloped one Death Eater, who screamed in a woman's voice before the impact of the attack sent her flying arse over tea kettle like a broken doll across the alley.

His violence was shocking; his movements were graceful and poetic; and in a small corner of her mind that she would never have admitted to anyone, Hermione exulted. The past six years of discrimination, abuse and hatred she had experienced at the hands not just of Voldemort's followers, but the wizarding world at large, gloried in this beautiful, deadly warrior that was her Harry. All the times she wished that Harry would stand up and say, “Enough!” came to the fore as he shattered the skull of a dark wizard with one awe-inspiring blow while sending another flying away at the speed of a bullet with a wave of his hand.

Her Harry was deadly; he was a weapon now.
The moment passed, though, as the smell of blood and the sounds of screams broke through the fragile shell of her perception caused by the lingering effects of the curse. She could not stand if her life depended on it, so instead she concentrated on crawling toward Ginny, Ron, Molly and Arthur. Molly was still sobbing as she fought to stabilize her youngest son, while Arthur was trying to spell Ginny awake. Multiple stunners could be deadly in and of themselves.

Between Molly’s sobs and Arthur’s frantic efforts to wake his daughter, the two glanced up at the maelstrom that was Harry Potter. More than half the Death Eaters lay broken and dead on the ground—Harry was not leaving prisoners, nor was he bothering with stunners. He killed everything in his path.

Suddenly, as quick as the violence began, it ended. Hermione looked up and saw Harry standing before one last figure. The figure floated a foot above the ground, grasping at her neck. With a flick of his finger, Harry sent the silver mask flying to reveal the face of Bellatrix Lestrange.

The dark witch could not curse or scream—he was somehow choking her. It was not until she collapsed to the ground that she managed to scream a few foul words at him. The screaming ended abruptly as he shot forward, again blurring with his speed, and slammed his palm to her forehead.

Her shrill screams filled the alleyway, as if he were subjecting her to something even worse than the Cruciatius, if there were such a thing. He lifted his hand and she rose with it, as if stuck there, until he held her off the ground again. Her feet kicked and her whole body convulsed as she clawed desperately at his arm, screaming all the while.

Suddenly the aurors arrived, at least forty of them. They arrived by apparition to find a figure in ratty robes obviously torturing a woman and responded accordingly. Ten of them raised their wands and shouted out stunners.

Harry responded with the same instant, blinding violence he used against the Death Eaters. He used Bellatrix as a shield and a missile, throwing her into the path of the stunners while at the same time launching himself an impossible twenty feet in the air to reposition himself for another fight.

Hermione understood in an instant that this new Harry did not distinguish between aurors and Death Eaters; that he would kill the aurors with the same skill and lethality as he did Voldemort’s servants. She knew that if he did there was no hope for him to ever be free.

She could not stand to save her own life, but she found with Herculean effort she could stand to save his; she had to save Harry from himself. She stumbled toward the aurors, fighting to keep her feet. Harry landed in their midst and with a shrug sent the Ministry people flying in all directions. He turned his attention to the next largest clumping, his hands already taking on a blue glow, when Hermione finally arrived in front of him.

“No!” she cried out. “Harry, stop!”

“They attacked me,” he growled. His voice sounded hoarse, primal, and filled with terrible power. His eyes were almost alight now with those same orange rings she saw back in Grimmauld Place. “No one attacks Sith.”

“They won’t attack you again,” she said, shouting in the hope the aurors would hear and understand. “But I won’t let you hurt them.”

“Stand aside, you stupid girl!” he screamed.

“No!” Her peripheral vision began to blur as the adrenaline started to run low. “Harry, you can’t…”
“I’m not Harry!” he screamed. The scream turned shrill as he clutched his head. Hermione took the opportunity to take a step toward him while the scattered Aurors tried to pick themselves and reform.

Her breath caught when he looked back up at her with a bloody face. His nose was bleeding, and she could see what looked like a thin trickle of blood running from his ear. “I’m not Harry Potter,” he growled. “I am Darth Shaddix, Dark Lord of the Sith!”

Behind Hermione, she could hear Shacklebolt and Moody both urging the aurors to back off. She could not see them, though; through the agony of the curse-magic still coursing through her body, it was by will alone that she could keep her eyes on Harry. She took another shaking step. “If you are just Darth Shaddix,” she said, for his ears alone, “why did you save me?”

“It’s a trick,” he snarled. “You’ve put some Jedi mind trick on me. You made me come, damn you!”

“Is that really it, Harry?” Hermione asked. “Is that all I am to you, a mind trick?”

Her knee buckled suddenly; she couldn’t catch herself as she started to fall. With a blur he was there, lowering to her to the stones with gentle hands despite the anger and rage on his face. “You can’t hurt me because you love me,” she said, fighting to stay conscious. “And you’re not going to hurt any more people today because I love you, and I’m asking you to stay with me. It hurts badly, what they did to me, Harry. Please stay with me. It hurts so much. Please…”

Finally, Hermione had no choice but to surrender to the darkness that came with the after-effects of prolonged *Cruciatus* exposure.

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Albus Dumbledore emerged from the floo at Saint Mungo’s hospital to find the Minister of Magic herself standing in a nearby atrium speaking intently to Auror captains Gawain Robards and Kingsley Shacklebolt. She looked up at Albus with a cool expression. “It looks like your little experiment went pear-shaped, Albus.”

“So it would seem. Is Tonks well?”

“Fourteen broken bones, two punctures to her right lung, a ruptured spleen and a ruptured kidney. Potter did it to her.’

“Yes.”

“He also killed nineteen Death Eaters and left the twentieth in a coma,” Amelia continued. “What in Morgana’s name happened to that boy, Albus? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It is a mystery, Amelia. Truly it is. Is he here?”

She shrugged. “He’s with Granger. The auror who initially tried to separate them is also here, being treated for multiple broken bones. The boy broke Howard’s arms in two places each, and then broke his legs, again in two places each, in the time it takes most of us to blink. He then blew a mediwitch out of the room with enough speed to crack three of the poor girl’s vertebra. Since then we’ve let him stay with her. Frankly the staff are terrified to treat her. She hasn’t even had a post- *Cruciatus* potion yet.”

Dumbledore shook his head in dismay. “Amelia, may I speak with him? I’ll take the potion.”
“Fine, second floor, last door on the left. The one ringed with half the hitwizards in the Ministry.”

“Indeed.”

“Albus?”

“Yes, my dear?”

“When this is over, we are going to have a long, very detailed discussion about what Harry means to Voldemort, won’t we?”

Dumbledore sighed. “Yes, Minister. I believe we shall. By your leave?”

The room when he reached it was indeed ringed by hitwizards, all of whom reacted nervously to every sound in the corridor. Judging by the many opened doors, Dumbledore suspected that the rest of the wing was left empty as a security precaution. They greeted him with raised wands before nervously dropping them when they recognized him.

“Is anyone else in the room?” Dumbledore asked.

The nearest hitwizard shook his head and snorted. “No one around here is that crazy, Headmaster. Ruddy bastard won’t let anyone else in. The only reason we haven’t called her parents is fear the boy’ll kill them if they come.”

“I see. Very well, thank you.”

Dumbledore moved past the young wizards and witches, placed his hand on the unwarded door, and with one deep breath to steady himself, he walked in.

His first impression of the room was one of moving shadow. Against the far wall of the spacious suite, Ms. Granger lay on a bed, still wearing the casual outing robes from the alley. Her face was held in an expression of lingering pain and her hair spread about the pillow. Her left hand twitched occasionally.

Harry paced the room in silence, like a great cat. Not a lion, but rather a Siberian tiger—huge, solitary and menacing. Yet for all the threat and promise of harm he gave off, he was still a rather small teen-age boy. He spun around and Dumbledore had no choice but to shield himself against the instantaneous attack both physical and mental. “Peace!” he shouted. “Please!”

“Get out!” Harry roared, bristling with angry power.

“I came to help Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said. “She has been struck with a most terrible curse. I’ve brought a potion that will ease her pain.”

The rage turned to confusion, and to Dumbledore’s alarm a trickle of blood ran from the boy’s nose. He wiped it away without notice. “You can help Hermione?” For a just a moment, it sounded like Harry Potter, rather than Darth Shaddix.

“If you allow me, yes I can. This is a magical hospital specially tailored to treat people harmed by magic. That is why she was brought here. Please, for her sake if no other, let me help her.”

“If you’re lying, I’ll make your death last for days,” he growled, once more every much the Sith lord.

Dumbledore nodded and walked to the bed where Hermione lay. He passed his wand over her, performing the medical diagnosis the healers were unable to perform because of Harry’s threatening
presence. “She bears no other wounds,” he reported. He removed the vial. “This is a potion designed to ease the inflammation of the nervous pathways. It was these pathways that were directly attacked but the _Cruciatus_ curse Mr. Malfoy used.”

The vial flew out of Dumbledore’s hands faster than the Headmaster could stop it. He went very still as Harry examined it. “It feels strange in the Force. What is it comprised of?”

“A variety of ingredients harvested from the magical flora and fauna of this world, and then brewed with a magical fire and a wand to solidify its properties.”

Harry popped the vial and placed a drop on his tongue. A moment later, he sent it levitating back to Dumbledore. “Give it to her.”

Dumbledore took the vial and then gently raised Hermione’s head to pour it down her throat. A simple wandless charm caressed her throat until she swallowed it down. Almost instantly the frown that marred her sleep eased to a more neutral, restful position. Dumbledore then took the opportunity to pull the sheets up over her shoulders.

“She should sleep comfortably now for the remainder of the day, and be fine tomorrow.”

“Get out.”

“I will, of course. But then what? What will you do next, Harry?”

"My name is not…!"

“Yes, yes. I’m old—you’ll have to give the occasional slip of the tongue. But that does not change the question. What do you think you’ll do?”

“I’ll rape this world of its resources and make it a suitable gift for my Master,” Harry snarled. “And I’ll make sure to kill you first.”

“Will you, now? And what will you do when Miss Granger steps in front of you and says no?”

“Enough of this. Leave before I kill you, old man.”

Instead, Dumbledore conjured a chair and sat down by the bed. Harry’s eyes widened. “How did you do that?”

“Magic, of course. I am a wizard, just like young Miss Granger is a witch. We can with magic conjure objects from nothingness, at least for short times, and change objects from one thing to another. We can charm brooms to fly and hide whole buildings not just from sight, but from mind. You have great power, my young friend, but if you honestly think you could single-handedly overpower the entire world, then you are gravely mistaken. Miss Granger, for one, would never allow it. And neither would I.”

“You dare challenge me?”

“I’ve faced other dark lords, you would not be my first.”

“I’d be your last.”

“Possibly, as I am quite old and, unfortunately, recently injured. But I think Miss Granger, who is a student of mine as well as a dear friend, would never forgive you.”

Harry spun away from the old wizard and resumed his pacing. “It’s all some stupid Jedi mind
“trick,” he muttered again.

“Or, my young friend, you are not who or what you think you are. For instance, I happened to be present at your birth. I was very close to your parents. In fact, I have pictures if you are ever interested.”

“Lies.”

“For someone with such great power, you seem oddly limited in your perceptions, Mr. Shaddix. All that power, and yet you can’t even tell the truth from the lies. I, for instance, am Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. And you are Harry James Potter, son of James and Lily Potter.”

The trickle of blood resumed from his nose, and as Harry turned in his pacing Dumbledore could see a fresh flow from his ears. A terrible suspicion solidified into conviction in the headmaster’s mind, and though he kept his face perfectly serene, inwardly he wept for what he was going to have to do. “Mr. Shaddix, look at yourself. You’re bleeding.”

Harry looked at the mirror on the wall across room. “So what?”

“Do you not find that unusual? Why would you be bleeding every time you consider the truth that you might be Harry Potter?”

“Stop!” A vase on a table by the door flew across the room and exploded in a corner, followed by the table itself. Harry clutched his head, bleeding profusely now from his nose and ears. “Just shut up!”

“Oh, but I wish I could,” Dumbledore said. “I begin to finally understand. My first mistake was in directly attacking your mental shields. It was a foolish move on my part, one that hurt quite a bit, I’m not ashamed to say. But there is a chink in all that mental armor, methinks—a chink named Hermione Granger. I remember to this day walking in on you, Miss Granger and Mr. Ron Weasley, and a dead troll. You had rushed in to protect her, of course, but before you could confess, she told a silly little lie to take the blame herself. Even then, as a twelve your old girl, she wanted to protect you as much as you wanted to protect her.”

Harry grabbed his head, almost sobbing at what must have been terrible agony. “Shut up!” he moaned.

“But of course,” Dumbledore continued, “that was the start of a remarkable friendship. Hermione was not a girl to you yet—you had no idea about such things. She was just a special friend, and with Ron Weasley the three of you had the most astounding adventures. But truly, when she fell before the basilisk’s gaze your second year, and you snuck in after hours to hold her hand, I found myself weeping in grief for you. Though your upbringing left you ill-prepared, we could all see how profoundly you loved her.”

Dumbledore paused, fighting back his self-disgust and alarm, as the graceful beast that was Shaddix stumbled and fell to one knee, clutching his head. He took a deep breath, and forced himself to continue:

“The very next year, you and Miss Granger had even more time to bond,” he said. “The two of you, by yourselves, saved your godfather Sirius from certain death. That was the first time you truly displayed that not only were you a good, brave lad, which of course I already knew, but that you were also extraordinarily powerful. You unleashed patronus charm that drove back hundreds of dementors. But what most tickled me was the way you and Miss Granger rode the hippogriff
together. You of course would never believe that I saw the two of you flying toward the tower, but I did. And what I saw was endearing. For as much as Miss Granger deeply despised flying, I could also plainly see how she held on to you. It was not just the grip of someone in fear. She held onto you because you made her feel safe, Harry. You’ve always protected her, just like you protect her now from the monster that you’ve been forced to become. That’s why you are going to take the pain you are feeling now, and you are going to use it to break the hold Shaddix has over your mind and soul. You’re going to do this now, Harry, because Hermione loves you more than her own soul, but she will never, ever forgive you if you fail her.”

Dumbledore’s words were like massive body blows, causing Shaddix to crumble and jerk with each syllable. He looked up and his whole face was red with smeared blood, tears and mucus. “Shut up!” he screamed. Around them, walls cracked and windows shattered. The door opened and hitwizards started to come in, only to find themselves flung back. The door swung shut so hard the magically reinforced wood cracked.

Albus wept openly, but kept his voice cold. “You’ve already failed her once, Harry. Do you remember how she looked when she fell to that curse in the Department of Ministries? She still bears that scar, Harry. She’ll bear the scar for the rest of her life to show where you failed her once. If you don’t break through that block, Harry, you’ll never see her again, and she’ll never forgive you. As much as she loves you, this last failure cannot be forgiven.”

Harry reared back on his knees, back arched. His howl shook the room; blue lightning seared the air around him, forcing the Headmaster to shield against it. And suddenly Harry’s eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed.

A moment later the door disappeared before a vanishing spell and horde of hitwizards and aurors rushed in, followed by a blazing Amelia Bones. “What in Morgana’s name is going on in here?”

She immediately saw the bloodied form of Harry passed out on the floor and spun on Albus. “What did you do?”

“I realized what we were dealing with as soon as I saw his nosebleed,” Dumbledore said with a heavy sigh. He removed a handkerchief and blew his rather large nose. “I apologize, that was quite difficult.”

“Stop bandying about and tell me what the hell happened!” Bones demanded.

“Harry’s personality was subject to a memory wipe of some kind,” Dumbledore said. “Either an obliviation or a psyche-wide block that completely suppressed his memories and personality. The persona of Darth Shaddix was built on top of the barriers holding Harry’s own personality back. They were completely separated, with no way to break through the one to the other, except for one weakness. Harry Potter was, is, and likely always will be madly in love with Hermione Granger.”

Amelia cast a speculative glance from the still, sleeping form of Hermione to the bloodied, seemingly broken form of Harry Potter. A hitwizard was already scanning him. Almost immediately he paled. “We need a healer in here now!”

“Why?” she demanded.

“His heart’s stopped!” The hitwizard, having received emergency training, placed his wand to Harry’s still chest and enunciated the resuscitation charm. Harry’s heart started beating, but only because of the charm.
“Great Asclepius’ ghost!” a wiry healer said as he was rushed into the room a moment later, “what are you people doing to my hospital?”

“Harry Potter’s heart stopped,” Amelia said.

The old wizard paled and rushed to the fallen teen. When he was being attended to, Amelia spun to Dumbledore with blazing eyes. “Come with me, now!”

The night of the Diagon Alley attack, in fact the moment Harry collapsed under the cool, calculated words of Albus Dumbledore, a high, brittle scream shattered the peace of the wizarding home known as the Rookery.

Xenophilius, Editor and Publisher of the Quibbler, sat up in his bed with groggy alarm. His mind addled by sleep, he did not immediately understand what was happening, only that something was wrong.

A second scream rent the air, and this time he was awake to recognize it as his daughter’s. He scrambled out of bed, grabbed his wand, and ran up the stairs until he broke into her room. Luna’s things were flying across the room in a display of the first accidental magic he’d seen from her since before she began Hogwarts.

The girl herself lay in bed, writhing in the throes of a terrible nightmare. Rather than rush to her side, Xeno actually had the wherewithal to first rush into her small bathroom to grab the potions regiment the mind healers from St. Mungos prescribed for her in late June, when, despairing for her constant nightmares, he had her treated. Returning to her room, he used his wand to clear a path through the shower of objects until he reached his daughter’s side and shook her awake.

Wide, silver-blue eyes looked oddly white in the dim moonlight slipping through her blinds. “Luna!” he said. “Wake up, Pumpkin! It’s just a nightmare! I have your potion.”

She continued to stare at him for the longest time in the sudden, shocking silence. Her voice when she did finally speak sounded hoarse. “I heard Harry screaming again,” she said.

“Oh Pumpkin,” Xeno said as he pulled his daughter into a tender hug. Ever since that terrible day in June when Harry fell through the Veil, Luna told him she could hear him screaming. She could hear voices, she said, and among them she heard the voice of her only true friend from Hogwarts screaming in unbelievable agony. “Here, drink this.”

She downed the potion without hesitation, and in seconds fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next morning, when Xeno’s lead reporter got the story of Diagon Alley to Xeno, the wizard hurried outside to where Luna was working in the garden. “Luna! Luna! Your friend Mr. Potter is alive!”

He clutched the report in his hands as he ran to tell her, and when he reached her she stood to read it. He was expecting her to reward him with one of her rare, brilliant smiles, but instead she read the story with an oddly pensive face.

“You see, he’s alive!” Xeno said, eager for his daughter to be happy. She had not been happy since June and he longed so terribly for her smile.
She looked up at him with a tear in the corner of her eye and said, calmly, “Well, that can’t really be Harry, you see, because Harry would never have killed those people, or tortured LeStrange. Even when people deserve bad things, Harry would never do anything like that.”

“But the Ministry confirms it’s Potter!” Xeno argued, perplexed.

Luna shrugged. “He has Harry’s face, but it’s not Harry. I heard Harry screaming last night, Father. I hear his voice all the time, screaming. It may look like my friend, but it’s not.”

Xeno’s shoulders sagged and he bit back a sob. “I’m so sorry,” he said, realizing it was inadequate, and that he did not fully understand what he was sorry for.

“It’s all right, Father,” she said, smiling for his sake alone. “I do not believe I shall ever see the Harry I knew last year again, and I think the new Harry will be quite frightening, so I’m not sure we shall be friends.”

“All right,” Xeno said, again failing to understand. He wanted to understand his daughter, but he could not, not since they day her mother passed. It made the love he felt for her that much harder to express. He turned with hunched shoulders and walked back to his work, while Luna returned to her gardening.
Living Shield

Chapter Summary

Hermione makes a hard choice

“Oh, my baby!” Calliope Granger said when Hermione woke.

“Mum? What are you…where am I?”

“Is she awake?” Edwin Granger asked as he walked in carrying two cups of coffee. A mediwitch followed on his heels

“Just woke up,” Calliope said.

“That’s good news then,” the young mediwitch said. She flicked her wand over Hermione. “Gave us a right scare you did there, love. Gettin’ up like that right after so long under the Cruciat. Horrid thing that curse is. Is it true, then? That ‘Arry Potter is back?”

The mediwitch chatted on in an excited garble as she performed her charms. “There now, another day of potion and you’ll be back on your feet, good as new you will. For today, just rest and relax.” The witch swept out of the room, leaving Hermione and her parents alone.

“That nice woman, Amelia Bones, told us what happened,” Calliope said as she held her daughter’s hand. “Oh Lord, Hermione, you were so brave! Your friend Ron is right next door—Arthur has been so kind getting us here.”

“Mum,” Hermione started, and then stopped. Her throat was so raw from screaming yesterday it hurt to speak.

“Here, drink this,” Calliope said. “They said it would heal your throat.”

Indeed, the syrupy potion did just that, coating her swollen vocal cords and bringing instant relief. “Thank you,” she said. “Mum, where’s Harry?”

Her parents shared a long, pregnant look. “He’s on another floor, sweetie,” Edwin finally said.

Something about his voice frightened her. “What’s wrong with him? Did he hurt anyone else?”

“Else? No, he’s just sick, they said.”

Hermione, though, was already sitting up. “I need to see him.”

“Stay right there, young lady,” Edwin said. “You’re not going anywhere. The nurse said to rest and that’s what you’ll…”

“I won’t rest until I see him. I NEED HIM!” The last came out as a scream that shocked all three of them, even Hermione. More calmly, she said, “I need him, Mum. Dad. I need to know he’s safe. Please, I have to see him.”

“We’ll ask,” Calliope said in a subdued tone. “Please, just sit back for now, okay?”
Perhaps it was because of the pain potion, or the lingering after-effects of the *Cruciatus* curse, but Hermione found herself losing control. “I love him so much, Mum,” she said. “I can’t lose him again. Please let me see him.”

“We’ll ask. Promise.”

Amelia Bones sat back in her chair from the pensieve. “Who else knows the prophecy?” she finally asked in a voice as cold as Azkaban.

“Severus overhead the first part,” Albus Dumbledore said.

Bones closed her eyes. The two sat alone in a charmed room in the Department of Mysteries. “Before he turned into your lapdog?”

“Yes.”

“And he told his master.”

“Yes. Without realizing who the prophecy referred to, he told his master. And when he realized it meant Lily Potter’s life, he turned spy for me and did everything he could to save her.”

“Which was nothing,” Amelia spat. She could not hold the anger and more; rage filled her with such energy that she could no more have stopped the stinging slap to the headmaster’s face than she could have stopped breathing. The past twenty years of fear, terror and loss suddenly fell together into a terrifying, enraging mosaic of Albus Dumbledore’s meddling.

Dumbledore looked stunned more than hurt. “You bastard!” she hissed. “They were my friends! James, Lily, Frank and Alice were my friends. They were my partners in training. They were good people. And you…you….” She spun away, unable to even articulate the overwhelming rage she felt. “You could have obliviated Snape before he shared the prophecy with Voldemort. That one act of sheer common sense could have saved their lives!”

“Amelia…”

“And then you sat on your fat, lazy arse for a decade and did nothing, when all this time you evidently knew he was coming back. You’re supposed to be smart, but by the spirits of my ancestors you made the most idiotic, asinine decisions I’ve ever heard of! You put my friend’s son with hateful, narrow-minded, abusive Muggles? You sealed his parents will? And then you sat around sucking lemon drops waiting for Voldemort to return instead of taking steps to stop him? How dare you! HOW DARE YOU!”

Dumbledore stood frozen by the sheer rage pouring off the Minister of Magic. She spun back away from him and bowed her head for the longest time. When she turned to face him again, her face was set in an expression of granite. She calmly sat down at the desk that was, beside the two chairs, the only furniture in the small room. “Professor Dumbledore, given what I now know, I think it would be highly inadvisable for you to attempt to retake your position as Chief Mugwump.”

“Minister, you don’t…”
“Let me be more succinct. If you do not immediately resign from the Wizengamot I will seize your assets and have you publicly disgraced, and I will not stop until I have your wand snapped and your soul consumed by a dementor. Do you understand?”

Dumbledore sat down, obviously shaken. He cradled his gloved hand protectively to his chest as he did so. “Very well.”

Bones placed both her hands on the desk. “Likewise, I believe the interests of magical Britain would be better represented at the International with someone else, so you will resign that position as well. I have no direct authority over Hogwarts and do not wish to follow Cornelius’s bumbling attempts to take it over, but rest assured I will share my grave, grave concerns about your ability to continue as headmaster with the governors. I suspect…no, I fully expect and will demand…that this be your last year there.”

With what pride he had left, Dumbledore nodded. “I shall announce my retirement after this year then, if you wish. It will give me time to attune Minerva to the wards. She would make a good successor.”

“The board will decide whether she is going to be a good headmistress, or a slavish disciple of yours. We will not tolerate both.”

“I think you will find, Minister, that she shares more views with you than she does with me.”

“Then I have hope for her, because frankly it is taking every ounce of control I have not to curse you where you sit. After the inquest I led this last summer, and now hearing that prophecy, I have come to the conclusion that as much as Voldemort, nearly every tragedy that has befallen the Potter family is directly, and immediately, your fault. James and Lily are dead because you failed them, just like you failed their son. For that, Albus, I will hate you until the day I die.”

Bones took a deep breath and then steeped her fingers together. She looked at the old man and did not change her expression when she saw him weeping once more. “How did Voldemort survive his body’s deaths?”

“I believe he made horcruxes.”

Though very few people in the world knew what a horcrux was, the former head of the British Department of Magical Law Enforcement was one of them. “You think more than one?”

“Sadly, I know so. It was a horcrux that possessed Ginny Weasley to unleash Slytherin’s monster four years ago and we know there must be others.”

“Another incident that should have been brought to my attention immediately.”

“Indeed. Unfortunately, the horcrux came from Lucius Malfoy, who at the same time owned Cornelius wholesale.”

“Perhaps,” Amelia allowed. “Do you have an idea how many?”

“Not with certainty, but based on the arithmetical properties, I suspect it will either be two or six.”

“To create three soul fragments, or seven,” Amelia reasoned. “And what is Harry’s role in all this aside from the prophecy?”

“I…I have this terrible fear that Harry himself might have accidently been made a horcrux. His scar, you see. He has actually seen through Voldemort’s eyes in the past, and had visions of his
activities.”

Amelia’s temporary ward chimed. She lifted the privacy charms and opened the door to find Shacklebolt outside. “What is it, Shack?”

“Granger’s awake, Minister. She’s been demanding to see Potter.”

“Demanding?”

“She’s…distraught, Minister.”

“Very well. Have Gawain take her and her parents to Potter’s room, but no one is to enter if the healer’s don’t give permission.”

“Do you want me to….”

“No, Shack. I’m afraid I have difficulty trusting people with divided loyalties, no matter how much good they think they’re doing. We might talk again once you decide who you serve. Until then, have Gawain escort the Granger family.”

Shacklebolt looked quickly over the Minister’s shoulder at Dumbledore, and then nodded. “Yes, Minister.”

Once the door was closed, Amelia turned back to Dumbledore. “Shut your Order down now. If any of your people wish to fight against Voldemort, have them apply to be hitwizards, aurors, or deputized citizens. That is an order.”

“Yes, Minister,” the properly chastised headmaster said.

“Now, let’s go see what’s happening with Mr. Potter.”

~~Broken~~

~~Broken~~

Hermione couldn’t help her cry of distress when she saw Harry.

The boy she loved seemed lost in a bed lined with cylindrical rune stones. The air around him seemed to shimmer with healing magic, while the rest of the room lay in darkness. “I’ll be right outside,” the kind auror captain said with a nod.

Hermione’s parents stepped just inside the door and watched as their only daughter, clad still in hospital gown and a robe, ran to the bed and took the boy’s hand. “What happened?” she said, weeping. “He was fine when he saved me!”

The door opened behind them, and a very old, tired voice said, “I’m afraid he is here because of me, Miss Granger.”

Hermione turned and saw Dumbledore there with a long, surprisingly red nose. Behind the headmaster stood a stone-faced Amelia Bones, and a healer she did not recognize.

Dumbledore crossed the room until he stood on the other side of the bed from Hermione and looked down at the boy’s sallow, sunken features. He then read the runes on the stones with a raised brow. “Aschels, has his heart stopped again?”

“Again? It’s never started on its own,” the old healer said. “The rune stones are the only thing
keeping him alive.”

Hermione turned to the man in horror. “What? How?”

“I realized what happened to him, Ms. Granger,” Dumbledore said. “And I realized how to defeat Shaddix.”

“What do you mean?”

“I used you. More accurately, I used his love for you. I told Harry that if he did not crush the Shaddix psyche in his mind, you would never forgive him. I told him he had already failed you once in the Ministry, and you would not be able to love him if he failed again.”

Hermione stared at a man she had idolized since her introduction to the magical world with eyes widened in horror. “How could you?”

“Because I believed it was the only way to save him. Because of his love for you, the Harry Potter we all know fought back against the Darth Shaddix he had become.”

“Yes, yes, all well and good, until you start delving into the fact that Darth Shaddix was built around a series of death traps and mental blocks designed to kill them both before allowing Harry Potter to resurface,” the doctor, Aschels, said irritably. “Albus, mind healing has never been your forte, and you really bungled this up. If you had brought him to us to begin with, we could have dismantled the Shaddix psyche one trap at a time without setting them off. Instead you forced the boy to plow headlong into a mental minefield. Now...now it’s a mess. I don’t know if we’ll be able to sort out Potter’s psyche from the other, if he survives at all.”

“I...I know we’re just muggles,” Calliope said. “But we’re also medically trained. What do you mean about traps and psyches?”

“Well, as far as we can tell,” Healer Aschels said, “Harry here was subjected to a fairly brutal personality wipe. We can’t know for sure because all those fancy scars on his body are essentially magically-induced, psychosomatic projections of his actual experiences, but based on the sheer amount of scar tissue both inside and out, I would be willing to bet that the boy was physically and mentally brutalized to a terrible degree. It is difficult to truly catalogue the horrors that Potter here evidently experienced. However, his body bears every scar, internal and external, to show that he was treated in unspeakable ways. And it was all for one very simple purpose—his jailors wanted to destroy everything that Harry Potter was in order to harness his considerable power—and his power is considerable, make no mistake. When mature, he’d easily be a match for Dumbledore here at his height.

“Anyway, our theory right now is that after they—whoever they are—crushed everything that was Harry Potter into a bloody pulp, they shoved that pulp into a corner of his mind, walled it off with mental traps so effective that they could have easily stopped his heart if he pressed too hard, and built up an entirely new persona on top of the barriers.”

He stopped when he realized that Hermione was bent over Harry’s bed, crying uncontrollably while her mother tried to comfort her.

Aschels coughed. “Sorry for the...I don’t get cases like this very often.”

“What can be done?” Amelia asked.

Aschels rubbed his chin. “Initial scans are a mess. We can heal the aneurysms easily enough...”
“Aneurysms?” Edwin said. “You can heal aneurysms?”

“Easily. In fact, we’re doing so now as we speak. We heal one every ten minutes or so, according to these rune logs. The problem is new ones continue to develop. His mind is at war, literally and psychically, with itself. The soul of Harry Potter is continuing to fight against the psyche of Darth Shaddix, even though it must be causing him unbelievable pain and is tearing his body apart.”

“Because you told him I wouldn’t love him if I didn’t,” Hermione hissed at Dumbledore through her tears.

“I thought it the only way. I am sorry.”

“Too late for that,” Bones muttered. “Can we do anything, Aeschels?”

“Ordinarily, I’d say no. Any mind-healer trying to enter that mindscape would likely be killed instantly, and I’m not just talking death of personality. The boy is bringing his entire magical core to bear on himself, and this Shaddix is employing some other power that I’m not familiar enough to combat. We’re using rune stones to heal him because he’d kill anyone trying to perform an active spell on him.”

Amelia sighed. “Aeschels, you were going to tell us what we can do?”

He scratched his ears and looked nervously not at Hermione, but at her parents. “Well, you see, the only other case similar to this was the long-term *Imperius* and torture victim in Bosnia who was used to kill some Muggle archduke seventy or eighty years ago. The man’s psyche was split between his original personality—that of a kind, loving man—and the cold-blooded assassin he was forced by Grindelwald’s lieutenant, Ilic, to become. The healers solved the problem by using an emotional—well, lightening rod might be good term—anchor to allow them to deflect the conflict within. It allowed a mindhealer to dismantle Grindelwald’s traps and for the base personality to emerge. It wasn’t a perfect solution—the man Princep became was not the same man he was before, but rather an amalgam of the two.”


“You mean the man who started the First World War was a wizard?” Edwin asked.

“Yes,” Amelia said absently. “He was a tool of Gellert Grindelwald, a Dark Wizard intent on world domination. The local wizards whisked Princip away when they realized he was a victim in all this and let the muggle authorities believe he died in prison.” She then looked at Aeschels. “If I recall, however, the healers used the old matrimonial rites and linked him with his girlfriend at the time, and the bond was recorded as a marriage.”

“Well, yes, they used a matrimonial bond at the time, but the circumstances were different, and both he and his betrothed were older and already engaged. I don’t think it’s necessarily required. We just need someone’s mental presence to deflect memories and psychic attacks away from the healer—in this case, me.”

“You’re talking about me,” Hermione reasoned.

“Absolutely not!” Edwin Granger declared immediately.

“She would most likely not be in any danger,” Aeschels assured the Granger patriarch. “Other than possibly seeing memories of what happened to Mr. Potter, she will not be harmed, and it is precisely because of that fact that she is the only one who could do this. Truly the only way she could be
Hermione’s mother shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“Even at his angries,” Hermione explained, “Darth Shaddix could not hurt me. He tried—he threw his power at me, he tried to choke me and hit me and anything else he could think of, but he couldn’t. His arms and legs locked when he tried to hurt me, and I actually saw his magic rebound back onto him or hit everything else but me. Whatever happened to Harry, there is enough of him inside that he won’t allow Shaddix to hurt me. If I understand correctly, because of that I would act as a living shield to protect the healers as they go in and try to save Harry.”

“Very good, young lady,” Aeschels said. “That is precisely the case. Miss Granger would act as a magical nullifier within Potter’s mind, and that is frankly the only way we could risk attempting any type of procedure. The risk is not to her, it is only to Mr. Potter and the healers.”

“What are those risks?” Dumbledore said.

“Psychic death, of course,” Aeschels said. “His mind could die despite our efforts to save his body. We are employing our most powerful runic arts to keep his mind from liquefying. If we are going to save him, we need to do it soon.”

“So what effect will it have on my daughter?” Edwin demanded. “You say she won’t be harmed—that can mean a lot to different people. What exactly will happen?”

“Miss Granger will enter Mr. Potter’s mind,” Aeschels said. “This act will serve as a way to ground the magical energy that he is employing against himself, since we have confirmed that he cannot hurt her. She will likely see his memories of what made him this way, since we have confirmed that he cannot hurt her. She will likely see his memories of what made him this way, and it’s possible depending on how bad those memories are that she might suffer some trauma, but it will be the trauma of witnessing something terrible, not actually experiencing them. The only risk is in the event of a catastrophic death of personality, in which case we would pull her out. There is some risk, I shan’t lie. We have to deconstruct this Shaddix personality matrix before we can free the Harry Potter one, but the risk to her is truly the only in the event of worst case scenario. The risk to the healers will actually be greater.”

“At the same time,” Dumbledore said quietly, “she could be helping to save a young man, who just in the past five years has directly, and personally saved three people, not to mentioned help protect many more. It is because of him that Ginevra Weasley is alive. It is because of him that your daughter is alive. And it is because of him that Arthur Weasley is alive. He is a hero, my friends. He regularly has risked his life for the sake of others.”

Calliope looked from her daughter to the pain-racked face of the boy in the bed, and remembered the letters they received week after week for the past five years. She remembered how their daughter collapsed in grief just inside their doorway at the thought this young man was dead. “You love him,” she said. “I know you do, sweetheart, but we can’t let you put yourself at risk like this without knowing the risk. At least… at least let us think on it, won’t you?”

Hermione bit her lower lip, but nodded resolutely. “I will,” she said.

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At midnight, four days before the start of term, Hermione walked into Ron Weasley’s room in St. Mungos. She originally just wanted a quiet place to sit and think, and realized sadly that she
hadn’t visited Ron yet.

The Hitwizards guarding everyone involved in the Diagon Alley attack all knew her after two days in the hospital, and knew that in a way she saved a many of them by stopping Harry. After reviewing the way he killed the Death Eaters, not an auror or hitwizard who showed up to the ally believed they would have fared better without her.

So the hitwizard on duty nodded to her; she gave him a sad smile and slipped inside.

She was not expecting to see Ron, Ginny and Mrs. Weasley in the room, all awake and quietly talking under the light by Ron’s bed. “Oh, I’m sorry!” Hermione said. “I didn’t realize you were…”

“Oh, do come in, Hermione,” Mrs. Weasley said quickly.

“I just wanted to see how Ron was doing.”

“I’m ’kay, suppose,” Ron said. “Got a wicked scar. See?” He lifted his robe to show a pale, skinny chest with a large purple welt running diagonally across it from shoulder to hip. “Bigger’n yours, I bet.”

“Maybe, but I’m still not going to show you mine.”

Ginny snorted laughter. “Sorry, Ron. Nice try, though.”

Ron turned bright red, and with that ice broken, Hermione walked over and took an empty chair across the bed from the two Weasley women. “I so glad you’re all right, Ron. It was such a brave thing to do.”

“Not very bright, though,” he admitted. “I heard you were tortured bit. Okay now?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Good.”

Hermione looked into the brown eyes of her second oldest friend, smiled, and then very quietly began to cry. She didn’t even see or hear Ginny until she was suddenly sitting next to her, with an arm around her shoulder. Through her tears, Hermione told them everything, including how Dumbledore had made Harry start fighting himself, and the only solution they had.

“And Mum and Dad said they wouldn’t give their permission, and I don’t know what to do now.”

She felt gentle lips touching her head. She looked up, stunned, to see Ron looking down at her with teary eyes and the most painful smile she’d ever seen on his face. “Only one thing to do, then—go save his sorry arse. It’s what you do; it’s what you’ve always done. You say he has a saving people thing, but you Hermione, you have a saving Harry thing.”

“But I thought you...”

“Fancied you? I do,” he said, not needing either to name his feelings. “Have since fourth year. So much, that I think I’d rather have my two best friends be happy together, then just have one to myself, but broken-hearted. I know you love him, Hermione—everyone did after this summer. I’ll be a real jealous prat when I get out of here, though. This being nice bit doesn’t sit right, you know?”

Hermione realized then that this was the last barrier—the last reason why she would not do whatever
it took to save her best friend and first love. She hugged her friend, kissing his cheek. “Thank you, Ron,” she whispered. “I'll always love you.”

“Yeah, I’m just lovable that way,” Ron said. “If you and Harry end up getting hitched, can I bit the sprog’s godfather?”

"As if we’d have anyone else," Hermione said, smiling and laughing despite her tears. She turned to Ginny, who simply hugged her.

“I’m jealous,” the younger girl said. “But if you do every get married, I bloody well better be the maid of honor.”

Mrs. Weasley came around the bed and hugged Hermione as well. “Dear, if the love is there, magic will take care of the rest. Harry has saved us all, now if you can save him, then Merlin bless you, child. Go save your boy.”

“Thank you!” Hermione said. She felt light, as if a great weight had been lifted of her with Ron’s blessing. “Thank you so much!”
Chapter Summary

She sees the truth.

Hermione’s parents were not happy at all.

The next morning, when Hermione announced that she was going to do the procedure, the Granger’s tried to put their feet down, only to learn that things were different in the magical world.

The Minister, who once again was visiting the hospital, happened to be talking to the healers when Hermione made her announcement, followed shortly by the Granger’s declaration that they forbid it. The Minister looked at them intently through her monocle before saying, “Ms. Granger, you turn seventeen next month, correct?”

“Yes, Madam.”

Bones nodded before looking intently at her parents. “Mr. and Mrs. Granger, while I completely understand your concern, Harry’s survival is actually a Ministry matter now. He must survive. Since Ms. Granger is less than a month from her majority under wizarding law, I will grant her majority early if it means saving this young man’s life. As long as she is willing, I will make sure she has opportunity.”

And so it was that Hermione found herself being led into a magical prep room in the hospital by a pair of mediwitches. After five years of sharing bathrooms, Hermione was able to hide her mild embarrassment at being naked in front of other girls, and the mediwitches made nothing of it as they performed a fascinating cleansing ritual.

“Is this Greek based?” she asked.

The Mediwitches, one of whom looked older than Pomfrey and one who looked only a few years older than Hermione herself, both chuckled. “We heard you had an inquisitive mind,” the older one said. “The ritual is actually Nordic. Most wanded magics originated with the Norse, including the rituals to shed darkness.”

Hermione settled down onto a rune inscribed in gold in the center of the floor—it felt cold against her bare buttocks—and closed her eyes as the two witches began chanting in Old English. She felt a shimmer in the air that seemed to seep into her body, and moments later the gold below her grew increasingly warm. The cleansing itself was almost impossible to describe. It felt like rain drops running down the inside of her skin, or a snowstorm in August. It was hot and cold and made her whole body sweat and shiver simultaneously.

Just like that it was over. The younger witch wrapped a thick white towel around Hermione and helped her gently to her feet. “Wow,” Hermione muttered, “I feel like I just ran ten miles.”

“It can be quite the draining experience,” the young woman said gently. “You know, what you’re doing is incredibly brave. I hope you’re able to save him.”

“Me too.”
Hermione remained in the terry-cloth robe as she padded barefoot through the short hall separating the ritual room from the healing chamber. Like the ritual room, the healing chamber was designed to augment magic. The room was built in the shape of a dome and the interior was lined in white marble inscribed with runes in gold.

Aeschels was there, also in a terry-cloth robe, as were two other healers—both women. In the middle on the cold floor, naked save for a thin white sheet, lay Harry.

Aeschels ran a hand over his thinning head. “Ms. Granger, as you have no doubt discerned, modesty is going to be a bit of an issue in this ritual. Because we are dealing with a magically volatile situation, our Arithmantic projections suggest we cannot afford the risk of any magically conductive materials in this ritual. While it might be somewhat embarrassing for all around—especially given the fact that I am the only man here, we are going to have to conduct this ritual skyclad. I specifically asked for Healer Shingles and Derlin here because they are woman, in the hopes that this at least will provide some comfort.”

Hermione took a deep, shaking breath and then let her robe fall. “Whatever it takes.”

The taller of the mediwitches, Shingles, nodded approvingly. “That’s a girl.” She let her own robe fall, revealing a tall, thin built. The second witch let her robe fall as well, before all three turned to Aeschels.

The older man blushed outrageously. “I’m more embarrassed at the trauma your eyes will endure than anything else,” he said, before letting his own robe fall. “Well, let’s get too it, then. Wanda, Leah, please take your positions. I will act as the nexus for the process. Miss Granger, if you would be so good as to lay down on the rune to Mr. Potter’s right. That’s a girl.”

The floor was again terribly cold. She turned to look at Harry as the healers removed the thin sheet protecting his modesty. As they did so, she couldn’t help but gasp; his body was covered in the most horrific wounds she had ever seen. His skin was black or blue, and lined with cuts and gashes. For some reason, none were bleeding, but it looked as if somehow had thrown the boy into a giant blender.

“Healer…” she gasped.

“The chamber itself is keeping him alive,” Aeschels said as he laid down between them, suddenly blocking her view. “What you are seeing are projections from his mind. They are real hurts, things that happened to him wherever he went through the Veil, that his mind is projecting on this body. That’s why we’re doing this—to save him from those terrible projections. Now, give me your hand.”

Without hesitation, Hermione took the healer’s hand. His other hand he reached over and took Harry’s hand. “What’s it going to feel like?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t know for sure, no one in recent memory has done this here,” he admitted. “However, I suspect there will be a brief sensation of falling. Now, Hermione, this is the last chance. Are you absolutely positive that you wish to do this?”

She looked the healer in the eyes, startled to feel a tear in her own. “I would do anything for him,” she whispered.

“Then let’s save him, shall we?”

He began chanting, this time in Greek. She recognized at least some of the words, if not the ritual itself, and almost immediately began feeling a pull of magic toward him. She straightened her head and stared up at the white marble ceiling of the dome. “Hang on, Harry,” she whispered. “I’m
A little falling? She had been falling for an eternity, it seemed. Only...she was not who she thought she was. All that she knew as Hermione was gone, though the prospect did not frighten her, because she knew she'd be able to find herself again. Instead, she let herself go and realized she was no longer a she. She was a he.

He was Harry Potter, and he was falling; had been falling, actually, for quite some time. He couldn't say really what he was falling through. Everything was black, so there was no frame of reference to judge his speed. In fact, it was only through his innate sense of motion honed through years of quidditch that convinced him he was falling at all.

At first he screamed for Sirius. The Veil obviously wasn't a gateway to death since he felt very much alive. He could think, and Hermione always assured him that if he could think, then he was alive. But now as he was falling through the Veil, he wondered what that made ghosts?

Eventually he grew tired of screaming. His voice never seemed to penetrate the air around him, if it was even air. He could breathe, so he assumed it was. Mainly, he just continued falling. For a while he became terrified. After all, he was obviously falling a huge distance. What would happen when he landed? He saw visions of a Harry Potter pancake flit rapidly through his mind until, after a while, he grew tired of that as well.

After the rage, after the anxiety, after the fear, came utter, complete boredom. And after that, came the floor.

Harry did not go splat when he landed, despite his fears. In fact, it felt like nothing more than a stumbling step before he tripped and fell. He looked up and around, but the blackness was just as unbroken as it was during his seemingly endless fall.

Before he could stand up, though, Harry folded back over with a surprised cry as the most exquisite, horrifying pain he had ever experienced exploded in his body. It was a thousand times worse than Voldemort's pain curse. It felt as if every single cell of his body was screaming out in agony. He did not even feel the cold, hard floor as he fell back in convulsions.

Time lost meaning as the pain washing over and through him, but eventually it ebbed away, leaving him panting in sweat on the floor. He wished he could have passed out, but he remained completely alert through the whole process.

Did Sirius suffer like that when he landed?

His own moans started to irritate him and so he forced himself to roll over onto his hands and knees. He picked himself up and stood, swaying unevenly in the blackness. Unconsciously he reached for his wand, only to remember that he dropped it during his brief tussle with Remus. Remus had been trying to keep him from going after Sirius when his godfather fell through the veil. But Harry was too fast, for either Remus, or Harry himself.

With no means of casting light, Harry reached out both hands and started walking forward using small, stuttering steps in case something was foot level only, like a ledge leading down into the depths of hell.

After an eternity that probably lasted only a minute, his hands made contact with a cold stone wall.
He walked along the wall, touching it lightly. He came to two corners before he found an entryway that led out into another space.

This one appeared to be a hall, since the far wall he followed did not end for quite some time. When it did so, the end came abruptly, and he realized it was a corner. So he turned the corner and continued.

At some point he found a set of what he guessed were stairs, and very carefully he began walking upward. He did not know how long he wandered, but knew just from his thirst and growing hunger that it must have been for several hours. For all he knew, he could have been going around in circles, though he doubted it.

As he continued walking, he became aware of a very distant yet persistent hum. He found himself pausing and holding his breath every few minutes to listen to it. Though it seemed to be coming from all around, if he listened hard enough it seemed to be louder in some directions than others, so he tried to follow the sound as best he could.

After who knows how many hours, a new sensation accompanied the hum. Harry at first thought it was just his eyes growing accustomed to the darkness, but eventually when he was able to make out some markings on the walls he realized that he was seeing a faint but pervasive light filling what he now saw was a hallway.

He hastened his steps as much as he dared and as the gray grew lighter, he began to see even more details. He saw strange scorch marks in the walls, and on the floor occasionally he saw dark stains in pools that had long since dried.

Finally he saw actual light ahead of him and began jogging on exhausted legs toward it. He turned a corner onto a room filled with white and blue light from floor to ceiling. It looked almost like a Muggle computer room.

But what grabbed his attention was the fearsome looking creature with horns and black tattoos all over his pale face who stood examining one of the lights. The man wore black and purple robes, and turned to look at the boy with appraising eyes.

“T ook you long enough, boy,” the creature said in a gut-wrenchingly deep voice. “I felt you wandering about for hours. Almost as bad as the other one. Who are you?”

“Ha…Harry Potter, sir,” Harry stuttered in terror. He began to wonder if the veil really was a portal to hell, because he was most certainly staring at a devil.

“You are too young to have been a padawan, boy,” the creature said, still in that inhumanly deep voice. It made Harry’s skin crawl.

“A what, sir?”

“Where are you from?”

“Hogwarts, sir.”

“How did you get here?”

“I don’t know sir. I fell through a veil in the Department of Mysteries after my godfather.”

“Your godfather?” the creature said. “Ahh, I see. The other human, then.”
Harry’s eyes widened. “Have you seen him?”

“Yes.”

The creature pointed with a sharp chin to a point behind and to Harry’s right. The young wizard spun about, ready to see his godfather’s smiling face. He saw instead a body sprawled haphazardly in the dust that covered the floor of the otherwise immaculate room. Harry could not see the body’s face, but he saw the same pants and jacket Sirius had worn when he fell through. In the center of his back Harry saw a blackened circle the size of his fist.

Sirius was dead. In the back of his mind, Harry heard laughter—the insane cackling of Bellatrix Lestrange. Righteous anger boiled up within him, and before he was even aware of it Harry flung his hand out at the fearsome creature and unleashed a burst of wild, uncontrolled magic.

The strange being looked surprised for a moment as the magical wave struck him and threw him violently into the bank of blue lights behind him.

Harry spun on his heel and ran as fast as his feet would take him to the nearest entrance that did not lead back into the dark. He emerged in what at first glance looked like a library, only a library as large as Hogwarts without any books. Dirty light streamed through broken windows, and the floor was littered with debris. The walls were covered in old scorch marks, and the place had the look of a once great space fallen to general disrepair.

At least he could see, though. He ran through the debris until he emerged from the library into an impossibly large atrium. For a moment he dismissed the debris and generally bad condition to let himself be lost by the sheer size of it. He had never heard of any building being so large. He was sure that muggles couldn’t even make spaces so large. Even the ministry looked small compared to the vast open spaces he found himself staring at.

“What’s this?”

Harry spun about and in the process tripped over a piece of rubble as large as his torso. It was a different figure than the first, looking at once more human and even more terrifying as Harry could easily see the danger in the man’s eyes. He was bald save for a short-trimmed Mohawk on his pale head, and wore a thinly trimmed strip of hair like a mustache and beard. Beside the man stood an attractive young woman with blonde hair pulled back in a severe braid. Both were wearing the same black and purple robes as the demon on the other side of the library.

“He’s awfully young to be a padawan,” the woman noted.

“He has power, though,” the man said. He held a cylinder in one hand. “Tell me, little boy, are you a padawan?”

“Please, I don’t even know where I am!” Harry said, crab-walking away from the two menacing figures. His escape was cut off by a fallen column that seemed to stretch across much of the hall.

“Don’t worry, child,” the woman said with a strangely intoxicating smile, “we won’t hurt you. Will we, Vrke?”

“Of course not, Drayneen,” the man named Vrke said with obvious sarcasm.

“Ware yourselves,” a deep voice called. Harry looked up to see the demon with the horns and the black tattoos striding purposefully across the room.

The two younger figures backed away and bowed. “Grand Inquisitor Yiaso, did you find what you were seeking in the Jedi archives?”
“No,” he said. “But I found this one and another. The man fought me with a variation of Force power I have not felt before. He was good enough that I had no choice but to kill him.”

“This one as well?”

“He knocked me down,” Yiaso said even as he stared at Harry with yellow eyes.

The two humans turned raised brows toward Harry, who swallowed audibly. “What shall we do with him, Grand Inquisitor?”

“We shall do nothing. You shall gather the body of the other for transport, and then return to the College of the Inquisitorius. I shall take our young mystery to my Master, and he shall decide.” With that, Ja’ce Yiaso, Grand Inquisitor of the Inquisitorius of the Galactic Empire, turned a cold, terrifying smile upon Harry Potter. “I’m sure he will enjoy our gift to him.”

~~Broken~~

~~Broken~~

Harry could not believe what he saw. Or rather he believed what he saw; he could just not understand it.

London was gone. Everything he knew was gone. Instead he found himself in a Muggle airplane without wings or even apparent engines soaring through a sky filled with thousands of other similar vehicles. He saw towers taller than anything he had ever heard of; saw beings of indescribable shapes and origins.

He saw another world completely alien to his own, and he could not understand how he got there. He was bound with thin wires that cut if he struggled. He sat in the back of the strange air car, next to the dead body of his godfather.

Some small part of him expected the fierce alien with the horns to ask him questions; to ask why Harry was there; where he was from; was he a wizard? Harry himself had so many questions: Where was he? Why was his godfather dead? Was he going to die too? The terror robbed him of his speech. It robbed him of everything and left him feeling broken and empty. It was all too much too quickly. He could not understand.

Through the window he saw a mountain taking up much of the horizon. As they drew closer, he realized it was not a mountain, but a building. He saw a single structure as large as all of greater London, and rising so far into the sky its spires did not just caress outer space, but pierced it entirely. Clouds gathered at its base since not even they could reach as high as the building.

It looked dark and felt incredibly foreboding. Harry turned and looked at Sirius, who had been casually tossed into the back like so much luggage. The casual ease with which the robed figures had levitated his body and tossed him into the car reminded Harry of the worst of the Death Eaters. These creatures showed no respect for human life because to them life had no value. It just was a commodity to be bandied about, or taken away at will.

The car parked in a cavernous bay filled with strange craft and whole armies of figures in white armor. As the car settled, a flurry of people ran forward and bowed to the Grand Inquisitor.

Harry heard him give a series of commands and almost immediately Sirius was pulled from the car and placed on a gurney that hovered as if charmed, though it did not seem magical. Next the hands roughly grabbed Harry and dragged him along with the body of his godfather.
Harry couldn’t have remembered the path they took if he tried. It involved super fast lifts and small cars that zipped them along without wheels at speeds that whipped Harry’s hair about.

When at last they arrived at their destination, the thick metal door slid back to reveal a white room. It was not just white-walled. Everything was stark white, even the occupants inside. There were a series of tables along the center of the floor, surrounded by robotic arms. The technicians casually tossed Sirius’s body on one table, and then strapped Harry to the next before leaving.

He watched in growing horror as a robot used a thin red laser to quickly and efficiently cut away Sirius’s clothes. The man’s ribs protruded, showing evidence of the lasting effects of Azkaban.

A moment later the laser grew brighter and began cutting into his body. “What are you doing!” Harry screamed, blasted out of his shock by indignation and fury. “You leave him alone!”

He felt a cold sting on his shoulder and spun about to see a hard-eyed woman just turning away from him. He opened his mouth to scream at her for help when he suddenly lost all control of his muscles. His head flopped back to the cold surface of the table, turned just so he could see the autopsy performed on his father’s best friend, and the only hope Harry ever had for a normal, loving family.

Even closing his eyes was hard, but he tried when he saw the laser scalpel cutting into Sirius’s skull. The smell when they hit the intestines was overpowering, but Harry could not even gag, his paralysis was so complete. All he could do was weep.

He felt more than saw a pinprick of heat running up and down his own body. Strong, cold, female hands ripped away the remnants of his clothes, leaving him naked on the table. He tried to brace himself for the pain of the cutting laser, but instead felt a thin line of heat run up and down his body, from the tips of his toes to the crown of his skull. He tried not to think of those woman’s eyes on his young, teenage body.

He heard a voice, then, and guessed it was the hard-eyed woman’s. It sounded cold and detached. “Autopsy on subject one complete; cursory examination of subject two confirms both subjects are distantly related by planet, species, genus and family grouping. Near human. DNA typing confirms a common grandfather through separate lines, indicating likely inbreeding in at least one line. Subject one showed signs of prolonged starvation and physical duress. Appears to have been recovering at the time of death by lightsaber. Second subject appears undernourished but otherwise healthy. Beginning cellular scan.”

Harry wanted so bad to ask for something to drink; something to eat. He wanted something to cover himself; he wanted to not open his eyes and see his godfather’s intestines splayed out by mechanical robot arms.

Though paralyzed, he could feel the needle that drew his blood. Then he felt cold, gloved hands touching him in his privates.

“Developed male sexual organs, minimal pubic hair growth indicating subject is in mid teens assuming normal humanoid development.” Harry’s cheeks flared as she casually pushed and prodded his penis and scrotum.

“Subject appears well groomed, no excessive body odor or parasite infestation. Scan shows multiple bone anomalies that could be very well-healed broken bones, but will require further research. DNA mitochondrial scan is unable to classify a world of origin. Most likely Unknown Regions. This is… B2, confirm this scan.”

Harry could not turn his head to look, but he heard a mechanical voice say, “Confirmed, Doctor.”
The woman continued. “Subject has a zero midi-chlorian count, however he has several extra base pairs with the same protein make up as midi-chlorians themselves beyond human norm. Subject is generating an unknown energy field analogous with scanned Force users. Given these facts, there is a growing possibility that subjects are extra-galactic in origin and may be Force-sensitive.”

Harry was aware of the woman walking back into his field of vision. She removed her mask to reveal a startlingly beautiful and yet frighteningly cold face. She reached to his neck with something white in her hand and moment later he felt a wash of warmth.

“What is your name?” she demanded.

Harry could not answer at first. His mouth was filled with cotton. The doctor held up a small white container with a straw. Harry sucked at it greedily, but did not get near enough to do more than wet his throat.

“What is your name?” she demanded again.

“Harry Potter,” he managed to croak.

“What world are you from?”

“Earth.”

“Where is it located?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said desperately. “We don’t have… space ships. Please, may I have more water?”

“Yes, might as well. I’ll need a urine sample to gauge your digestive process.” She held the straw closer and Harry took several more long pulls of the room-temperature water. He’d never tasted water that was so good at that moment.

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen. Sixteen in two months.”

“Are you sexually active?”

“What? No!”

“You’re about to be.”

“What…?”

Harry looked down in horror as a robot deftly grabbed his flaccid penis and slipped a strange hose over it. The doctor with the cold eyes did not even smirk as she pushed another white cylinder against his neck.

His body responded to this new drug as if he were watching Hermione and Ginny bathing naked together with an equally naked Luna giggling nearby, while Cho did naked jumping jacks. He hardened almost to a point of pain and gasped as the hose started pumping.

“What are you doing?” he cried.

“The Emperor has expressed interest in harvesting your gametes. Assuming you are a standard near-human male, this would be your sperm.”
“You’re raping me,” Harry realized in shock.

For the very first time, he saw a hint of an expression on her face. The quirk at the corner of her mouth might have been a smile. “Lay back and enjoy it, child. It is the last pleasant sensation you will have in quite some time.”

With that, Harry’s body betrayed him and he ejaculated for the very first time into a long white tube connected to a robot shaped like a giant vacuum cleaner. He could not stop his tears of embarrassment and anguish.

But the doctor was right, it was the best of what was to follow.
You must break eggs to make an omelet.

Harry was carted away, still naked, down a dizzying maze of corridors until he came to one long, darkened hall without only one door at the end. Two men in white armor roughly grabbed him and threw him into the room. It held a small toilet, a sink, and a slab of metal that looked like it was supposed to be a bed.

Crying in a sweltering storm of emotion he couldn’t keep bottled up, Harry laid down on the cold metal, shivering as he did so.

He wasn’t aware of falling asleep, but his eyes popped open immediately when he woke. He sat up, trying to cover himself, when the door opened. He scooted back against the far corner when two figures draped from head to foot in crimson stepped into the cramped room, followed by an ancient, wizened figure walking with a black cane.

One of the red-clad men removed a folding stool from somewhere, and the ancient figure sat. Harry stared back at the man’s orange eyes and stiffened as his mind immediately came under assault.

The assault was a thousand times more powerful than anything Snape did to him. It was even worse than the visions he shared with Voldemort. The mind that invaded his was terrifying in its power and its cold cruelty.

Even so, the young Gryffindor could not help but try to fight. He gathered what little occlumancy he knew and tried his very best to eject the powerful presence from his mind. It was a losing battle, but still he tried.

Suddenly the attack was over. Harry slumped over, gasping, as the old man cackled. “Yes,” he said in a sibilant hiss. “Yes. Yiaso was right. You are a worthy candidate. You have great power, and are filled with hate. I can taste it.” The old man closed his eyes as if to relish Harry’s turbulent emotions. “Yes. Alien power, but power nonetheless.”

He leaned forward and Harry could not help but lean back. “Tell me your name, boy.”

“Harry Potter.”

The blue lightening came so fast and so powerfully that Harry could not have defended himself even if he tried. The power ripped through his cells, fully as agonizing as theCruciatus curse. Harry fell from the cot, screaming in agony.

Just as quickly, the assault ended. Without a word, the old man stood and walked slowly out of the room. The guards followed, taking the folding stool with them.

A few hours later, a small hole appeared in one wall. Harry instantly smelled food and grabbed the tray. He did not recognize any of it, but he ate anyway. It had to have been at least a day, maybe more, since he ate. When he was done, he placed the tray back in the slot which disappeared, drank water from the small sink, and laid back down on the cot. He tried to keep the nervous twitching of
his muscles under control

Every day, the old man came. In fact, the visits became Harry’s clock. Always he sat and stared at
Harry, raping his mind as brutally as Voldemort or Snape ever did, and then asking his name.

Harry was not stupid and knew it was a test of wills. The second day, he screamed out his name
defiantly, and spent the next hour convulsing uncontrollably from the punishment.

The third day, Harry managed his first true wandless magic. He conjured a shield that managed to
block the lightening for a few seconds. Rather than enrage the old man, it seemed to delight him. He
cackled loudly even as the two red-clad guards viciously beat Harry until he could not move. He
stopped moving, but their assault grew even worse, brutalizing him in ways he could not have
imagined possible.

He did not eat his meal that night.

On a visit Harry could no longer count, the old man said, “What is your name?”

Harry, trembling in anticipation of punishment that had not even come yet, croaked out, “I don’t
know.”

The ancient figure leaned forward, piercing Harry’s brain yet again. Weakened by abuse of the body
and spirit, Harry could not even try to fight this time. “You’re lying,” the old man said, though this
seemed to please him as well.

The lightning came anyway.

When he managed to sleep, which was only in short fits before a shocking alarm would jolt him
awake every hour or so, he dreamed of falling endlessly through the dark. He saw faces of people
calling for him; he dreamt of hands reaching for him.

He dreamt of a woman with red hair and brilliant green eyes reaching out for him and calling for
him, even as an aura of putrid green light stole her away from him.

He dreamt of a young women in a periwinkle blue gown sitting on the steps, weeping. Even in his
broken sleep, she was beautiful. She looked at him with tears in her eyes and reached out for him,
calling his name.

They called for him and reached for him and he wanted so desperately to go to them, but he couldn’t
hear what they were saying. They were calling his name, but he couldn’t hear them. What was the
name they were calling?

What was his name?”
“What is your name?”

He couldn’t remember. The realization came slowly through his pain and exhaustion filled mind. He knew he had a name. But he could not remember what it was. He collapsed to the floor gasping and crying as he tried but failed to give his name.

“Soon,” the old man hissed. He stood, and for the first time since the boy arrived in the cell, he was left alone without punishment.

The boy would have preferred the lightning.

“What is your name?”

“I don’t know,” the boy admitted in a dull, dead-sounding voice.

The mental attack came, and he could do nothing more than reel before it. He did not resist because there was no more resistance to offer. For his surrender, the attack was quickly over. “You have no name,” the old man said.

“I have no name,” No Name agreed. There were no more tears, only broken acceptance and defeat.

“To have a name, one must be strong and unrelenting. You are weak and broken. You have always been weak, and you are weak now.”

The old one waited for an answer, and so No Name said, “Yes.”

“Tell me, child, do you wish to be strong?”

“Yes.”

“Do you wish to crush your enemies and feel their agony under the grip of your power?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps,” the old man said. “It is time. Bring him.”

The crimson guards gripped No Name’s arms painfully and dragged him into the corridor. He could not remember how long it had been, but he did not resist. Even if he wanted to, he could not even walk on his own. After an excruciatingly long way, he found himself back in the white room with the cold-eyed, beautiful doctor.

“Restore him,” was the old man’s order.

She looked at No Name as she would at any specimen. “He’ll need a full bacta immersion.”

“Then do so.”

No Name said nothing as the doctor forced a strange mask and diaper on him that had hooks in the
side. He did not resist as the hooks were connected to wires that lifted him into a cylinder that at first looked like water, but was thick and viscous like oil.

It was the first true rest he had received since…ever. He found his memories from before the cell clouded, indistinct and too painful to approach, so he did not try. He was No Name, and it did not matter where he was.

When he emerged from the cylinder, the doctor put him in loose black slacks and a thin black shirt that clung to his emaciated chest. Only then did he notice the Crimson Guards waiting for him. Without a word they grabbed him and dragged him through another maze of corridors until they literally threw him onto the soft mat in a large, open room filled with light. The walls were black or gray; the floor was a solid dark gray. Everything was painfully illuminated, especially the girl.

She looked familiar to him, and yet he was sure he had never seen her before: porcelain white skin; bright red-gold hair; green eyes. She stood lithe and strong, though she looked no older than he was. She wore an expression of disdain bordering on disgust.

“You’re it?” she said. “I got pulled off a mission to train you?”

No Name said nothing. He stood on still shaky legs. The girl strode forward, not sashaying so much as prowling like a predator. She was stunningly beautiful; and frightening.

“Well, I’ve been ordered by our Master to start your training. So defend yourself.” With only that warning she hopped on one foot and kicked the other out, catching him in the chin. He flew back onto his recently repaired arse and blinked in shock and pain.

“Yeah, you’re really impressing me,” she said with a sneer. “Let’s make sure we understand the ground rules. I’m here to train you to fight. I’m going to kick the living poodooout of you like you won’t believe unless you can stop me. So, try to stop me.”

No Name scrambled away from her next kick, fighting to regain his footing as this girl who was no taller than him and probably lighter than he attacked with vicious skill. She hit and kicked him, landing him on the floor each time. She did not wait for him to get up before she kicked him again.

No Name tried to fight back, but she was too fast and too well trained, while he was too weak from his many weeks of torture. She anticipated his attacks and countered with painful skill. For the first time since he could remember, he felt something besides fear and pain.

He felt anger.

The anger shocked him, but it did not frighten him—not any more. He let the fury wash over him even as he tried to scramble away from another lightning-fast foot. He was angry with her; he hated her.

He could not physically stop her—she was too fast and too skilled. But he knew he could stop her another way. He had the power; the Master said he did. She flashed a foot out for his groin—her favorite target—and he screamed at her.

Her eyes widened a moment before his power struck her and sent her tumbling wildly across the floor. His rage flared through his eyes and he stumbled after her, focusing his vision into two points of hatred.

She landed and rolled back to her feet in a fighting stance, until she saw his eyes. Her own eyes widened even further as his hate flowed into her. He wanted her to suffer; he wanted her to know what it felt light to have lightning wash through her body.
She threw her head up and arched her back before falling to the mat behind her. Her agonized screams echoed through the chamber as he made her suffer all the torment he had suffered in this new life. Her screaming made him even angrier. How dare she make him do this? How dare she scream when it was her fault he had to do this in the first place? Her screams increased in pitch. Froth gathered at the corner of her mouth and she began to convulse under the grip of his power.

“Enough.”

The old voice split through the air.

Conditioning broke No Name’s concentration. His legs gave out almost of their own accord as he turned and fell to his knees before the Master. In the corner, the girl cried and gasped before passing out.

“It felt good, did it not?” the Master said.

“Yes.”

No Name saw from the corner of his eyes as a pair of the crimson guards lifted the girl and carried her out. He wondered spitefully if she liked bacta any more than he did.

“You have great power, child. That is why you came here this morning, so that you could see for yourself the power you yield. But all the power in the galaxy is nothing if held in the hands of a weak child. You don’t want to be weak any more, do you boy?”

“No.”

“Do you wish for me to make you strong?”

“I do.”

“Then rise, my Hand. Rise, and I shall show you the true meaning of power.”

~~Broken~~

~~Broken~~

His name was Hand. He was not worthy to be an apprentice of the Sith; he was not worthy of freedom. He was an emptied vessel waiting to be filled. He remained in his cell by day, and at night he attended the Master. Sometimes he sat in a chair under a helmet that fitted to his head and fed memory engrams directly into his mind, literally filling his head with the knowledge that citizens of the Empire would have already obtained through their normal education.

Other nights the Emperor placed his hands on Hand’s head and shaped his mind with the Force, fashioning the foundation of the Sith conditioning that would someday, if he was worthy, make him more than a mere Hand.

After what seemed like endless months, the physical training started. Inquisitor Drayneen, the blonde woman who found him at the Temple, was selected to begin his physical training. She made him run until he threw up, and then run more. She put him through obstacle courses no human could possibly have finished, and then berated him for failing. Even worse, she then went through the obstacle courses herself with skill and grace.

Sometimes at night, she came into his chamber and beat him until he could not move, and he could not strike at her because his Master had commanded him not to, and so he could not defend himself
as she beat him to a pulp, and when he could no longer move, she laughed and pulled down his pants and with the Force caused his manhood to swell, and she took him on the floor, laughing at his rage and shame even as she took her pleasure from him.

Other nights, the Emperor continued to shape him. If he failed or hesitated in any task, he was brutally punished for hours on end.

It was not until just into his second year that he discovered the Force for himself—that he could harness it not just to his mind, but his body as well. With that breakthrough, he went through the obstacle courses with Drayneen; with that breakthrough came saber training. He was not worthy to build his own, so he was given a green saber.

“The weak tool of a pathetic Jedi I cut down on Antooine,” Drayneen said with her typical sneer. “Try not to cut your manhood off, if you can even find it without help.”

Hand said nothing; to speak back to her was to be punished. Instead, he learned all she had to teach, until by the end of his second year he realized she had nothing left to teach him. She was weak in the Force, whereas he realized early on that he was very, very strong—much more so than her. Her weakness came to offend him more than her continued attempts to control him. And so on the day she attempted to beat him down again, with that gleam of desire in her eyes she had whenever she sought to take her pleasure with him later, he gave himself to the Force. He knocked her blade away and sliced her sword hand off entirely.

She screamed in horror and backed away, collapsing to her knees before her triumphant pupil. From a far corner, both turned to see the Emperor walking toward them, laughing and clapping. “Good,” he said. “Good. You have grown strong, my Hand. She is beautiful, is she not?”

“Yes, master.”

“Kill her.”

“Master!” Drayneen said in horror. It was the last sound she made—the shape of the words remained frozen on her lips as her blonde head hit the floor with a dull, hollow thud. Hand then turned and fell to his knees before his master.

“Listen to these words, boy, and learn them well,” the Emperor said:

“Peace is a lie, there is only passion. 
Through passion, I gain strength. 
Through strength, I gain power. 
Through power, I gain victory. 
The Force shall set you free.”

Hand repeated the mantra, closing his eyes as the truth of the words settled about him.

“The oldest law of the Sith is the Rule of Two,” the Emperor said. “But others may be trained and tested to see who is most worthy. My old apprentice has wavered from the truth. He shackles himself with emotion and blood. I fear he is no longer worthy. I shall train you, boy, in the arts of the Sith. And when the time comes, you shall fight my apprentice, and whichever of you wins shall be worthy. Harness that passion of yours, boy, and in time your chains shall be broken and the Force shall set you free. Rise, DarthShaddix, and prepare to learn true power.”
The Emperor's Fist

Chapter Summary

A new Sith is unleashed.

He was Darth Shaddix, Dark Lord of the Sith. He was rage incarnate, and he left death and destruction in his wake. He was the Emperor’s Wrath given human form, and he was without mercy.

For two years he moved among the elite of the Empire, wreaking his Master’s vengeance on those who failed to stay within the limits imposed by the Palace. His first victim: a Moff in the Meridian Sector who was subverting nearly seventy percent of the sector tax revenue into his personal coffers. Shaddix landed his Sith Infiltrator on the garden of the man’s luxurious palace on Nyemari. The Moff was less than pleased at the intrusion and had the Sith Infiltrator surrounded by his personal marine guard for two hundred men.

An hour later, standing alone in a field of bodies, Shaddix commed the local garrison to inform them that the Moff was dead, his personal effects escheated to the Emperor, and that a new Moff would be appointed shortly.

His second victim was actually a Hutt crime lord on Keldooin. The Hutt ruling kajidics disowned Gorban for his violent actions against both the other Hutts and the Empire, putting at risk the fragile, unspoken agreement Hutt space had with the Empire for semi-autonomy.

Unlike his first victim, Shaddix did not have Imperially mandated security codes that would let him land in the creature’s gardens. Instead, he killed one of Gorban’s off-duty Klatooinian servants, donned a mask and a hood, and walked in casually as if he belonged there. He never fired a shot—rather he used the Force and literally crushed the criminal’s brain within his skull. Gorban screamed and writhed and struggled while his people stood around in disbelieving shock, and none of them ever realized they had a Sith within their midst.

He left the next day as the nearest Imperial Garrison moved in to complete clean-up operations.

So it went, mission after mission. He knew he was not the only agent of the Emperor—one on Nar Shadda he spotted the vibrant red hair of the girl he fought in the Palace before he had a name. However, he did not pursue her or even look twice. She was his Master’s Hand, while he was his Master’s Fist. She had her own mission, and he would not interfere so long as she did not interfere with him.

No one knew his name, but his presence and his actions did not go unnoticed. Word began to spread among the upper echelons of the Empire that the Emperor had a new servant as deadly as Vader, but quieter and more efficient. Vader was a mallet that crushed all before him, went the whispers; this new killer was a vibroblade that cut out the cancer before the body knew what was happening.

In the minds of those in power who had the most to lose, and the most to fear, they envisioned Shaddix as a shadowy nightmare in black robes or armor, like Darth Vader or the other Dark Side adepts the Emperor employed. In fact, Shaddix did own a black Ubiqtorate Uniform and armor that he used on occasion. However, it was hard to blend in like that. As he discovered with
his second mission into Hutt Space, Shaddix liked to blend.

It was for that reason he moved unnoticed among a crowd of civilians in brown slacks and a dull, faded blue tunic for his latest mission. He wore a thick utility belt—a common enough article among the working class—and there was no sign of a blaster or any other weapon hanging from it. To the thousands around him, he was just another worker returning home from a long day.

Home in this case was Gogun tower, a residential structure in the Archais Sector of Alsakan. It was Shaddix’s twentieth mission for his Master after two years as his acolyte. Though he carried the title of a Sith Lord, while Vader remained Shaddix could not be counted as the Emperor’s true apprentice. Not yet, at any rate.

Some of his missions over years saw him commanding whole battle groups, but most were like his current mission—infiltration or hunting. Today, he was hunting one of his own.

Like Imperial Center, Alsakan was an ecumenopolis—its planetary surface had long ago been lost under a planet-wide city that in some ways rivaled Imperial Center itself. The towers were just as resplendent, it’s under-levels just as dangerous. The difference was that Alsakan was ruled by monarchy under the auspices of an Imperial Moff Governor, while Imperial Center was ruled absolutely by the Emperor of the galaxy.

His mission brought him to this world after a solid month of searching. Clues and contacts finally gave him what he needed to pick up his target’s trail, and now that he had it, the Force itself guided him.

He took a lev train directly into the heart of the Gogun Tower, which like all those around it housed a half million or more low- to mid-level bureaucrats or private-sector employees who lacked the resources to move out or the ruthlessness to move up. The people who lived in this sector were Alsakan’s middle class.

Once off the unloading platform, he entered the park level of the tower. Most residential towers had them, usually flanked by shops for the residents, given the absence of open land on the planet. In this case, the park was rather run-down, with bare patches of soil where grasses had faded or died, and unhealthy looking trees struggling under the artificial lighting five levels overhead. Surrounding the park were the premium homes—those owned by the most well-to-do residents in the tower, who had enough for placement but not enough for escape.

Another lift took him down, rather than up. The tower rose up from the depths of the city underground, and the income levels could be traced predictably by floor. Though he boarded the turbolift with a crowd, by the time he reached his designated level, he was alone. He stepped into a poorly lit maze of plain grey halls, on a level that easily housed a thousand people in small loft apartments. This is where the young, single workers lived, or those who were older but had failed in their profession. Even so, these small apartments would drain them of their credits—housing was expensive on the Core Worlds.

He walked slowly, eyes closed and senses extended. Several times he turned around and backtracked, or walked in circles, until finally he reached his destination. The door looked just like any other; its number was 42-2546, only forty two levels from the base of the tower and the denizens that haunted the under-levels of the planet-wide city.

He knocked on the door since it would have no announcer or chime, not on this level. A moment later he heard a beautiful, contralto voice say, “Who is it?”

“Building services, ma’am,” Shaddix lied easily. “We have reports of a coolant leak on this floor. I
need to take an air sample from your apartment. Won’t take a minute.”

“Why haven’t I heard anything?” the woman asked.

“We’re not exactly eager to advertise it,” Shaddix said. “We’re hoping we can contain it without sanction. You heard about what happened over at Tangaretta Tower—had to double the occupancy fees to cover the fine.”

Behind the door, he heard a snort. “Right,” she said. The door locks clicked and it swung open to reveal a startlingly beautiful woman with thick, rich black hair and violet eyes. She wore only a night gown that barely reached the thighs of her long, well-toned legs, and did more to accentuate her breasts than cover them.

He took the sight of her in all in a second, as she did the same to him. And in that second, as her eyes widened with recognition of what he truly was, Shaddix struck. Blue Force-lightning blasted her back into the small apartment; he followed and paused only long enough to kick the door shut.

Despite the blow, she was already lifting herself to her feet. She reached out a hand and from a corner of the small loft a lightsaber came hurtling toward her. Shaddix ripped the saber from her control, activating it in mid-flight and spinning it like a rotor.

She screamed and tried to jump back, but even with the Force she was not fast enough. Her arm fell to the floor of the apartment with a dull thud, leaving her to stare down at the cauterized stump in shock. It happened so quickly she did not even time to register the pain.

A second later Shaddix was on her, pinning her to the floor and feeding agony into her body with a power not even his Master possessed. She convulsed and screamed, but with his hand holding her chest down, she could not escape.

Finally he relented and her convulsions stopped, her cries replaced by sobs.

“Our master is saddened by your actions,” he said to the sobbing woman under him. Disheveled and broken, he did not even hide his leering glance at her exposed breasts. He fondled one, saying, “Your skill as a courtesan won you prestige you have thrown away. You could have been his highest-ranked Hand, and yet you have betrayed him.”

“I am still loyal!” she said in a voice thickened by tears and screaming. “I serve the Empire!”

“But not the Emperor,” Shaddix whispered, leaning over until his lips brushed hers. “Where did you go when you left Imperial Center, Shili? You went without our Master’s permission, and then fled to this world, trying to lose yourself. Why are you hiding from Our Master, Shili, if you are still loyal?”

Despite her pain, the threat of death pushed Shili Atuun to use every power at her disposal. She arched her breasts up seductively, projected desire with the Force, and whispered in a husky voice, “Let me go and I could make it worth your while. There was a reason I was a favored concubine. I could make you melt with pleasure.”

“And I can make you burn with agony,” Shaddix whispered back, smiling grimly. “Where did you go, Shili?”

She wrapped her long legs around him and lifted her pelvis to grind against him. “Let me live, and I’ll tell you everything. I’ll give you everything.”

He pressed down with his palm, and again struck her with agony. She tried to fight the scream, but of course she could not. Even Vader himself would scream under this agony. Yet even in her agony,
she ground her body against his, and he would not lie to himself that he did not respond. She was talented girl, and a deceptively skilled fighter. The targets of her affections rarely survived.

When at last he released her, he said to her sobbing face, “You will tell me what I want to know, and I will take whatever I wish. Perhaps, if you please me enough, you might live a little while longer.”

Sobbing and trembling with the after-effects of his attack, she said, “Kamino! I was on Kamino. Vader summoned me to train his new pet project.”

“What?”

“Clones!” she said. “He cloned that dead acolyte of his, Marek. Hundreds of clones raised like clone troopers. Some he had the Kaminoans alter, some he did not. He’s building a whole army of troopers, Saber Guards and Sith Acolytes that are loyal only to him. He is the threat to the Emperor, not me! He ordered me to train the saber guards—how could I refuse him? He would kill me if I dared.”

With surprising gentleness, he reached down and cupped her cheek in his hand. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

She blinked back her tears. “Will you let me live?”

“Perhaps, if you give me enough reason.”

She squeezed her legs tightly around him, and despite the pain coursing through her muscles, ground herself against him again. “I can do that. I will do it!”

Of course, she knew he could not let her live, just as surely as he did. Disarmed and wracked by pain, she still demonstrated the skills of a learned and talented courtesan. Shaddix did not even realize what he was doing, at first, until he realized with a start that he had eased her pain with the Force, allowing her to move more freely as they coupled. When they finished, sweating against each other like lovers rather than enemies, she stared up at him with wide, knowing eyes.

“Thank you for being gentle,” she whispered. “Please make it fast.”

Feeling strangely numb, Shaddix leaned down to kiss her forehead. With the touch of his lips came a wash of Force energy that pulled her down into slumber. Her eyes blinked, instinctively fighting against it, before she realized what he was doing and succumbed to the gentle bliss of post-coital sleep.

Shaddix stood off her and pulled his clothes back on, all the while looking at her perfect, exquisite naked form. Once dressed, he pulled one of his lightsabers from his utility belt and lit it; its red light illuminated the dim room, making her skin look red.

With shock, he realized his hand was trembling. Why was it trembling? What was different about Shili than all his other targets over the past two years? The answer, of course, was simple. For a brief time, as they coupled, they shared a simple, ancient intimacy he had not felt before in his waking life. What happened with Drayneen was not sex, it was a display of dominance and hatred. But with Shili—she knew she was doomed. If not him, another would come and she would be just as dead. But for reasons not even Shaddix understood, he released her from the pain he had to cause her, and for twenty minutes they shared their bodies and gave each other pleasure. He knew she enjoyed it as well, he could feel it in the Force. For those brief moments, it was possible to forget that she was destined to die at his hand.
Now, having given her the mercy of a death in her sleep, his hand trembled and he could not understand why. “Damn you!” he whispered, though he did not know to whom spoke. Through sheer will, he forced his sword arm up and then down swiftly, ending Shili’s life in as gentle a fashion as any Sith knew.

He spun away, ignoring the sudden spike of pain in his skull, and started to leave. He paused, though, as he walked by a mirror and saw with shock a trickle of blood running down from his nose. He wiped it with the back of his hand and stared down at the dark red fluid in disgust. “Weak,” he muttered. “I’ve broken those chains. I will not be weak anymore!”

In his black Ubiqtorate uniform and armor, Shaddix knelt in silence before his master. The hour was late, but the Emperor rarely slept, and some meetings were best for those hours where only the dark dared to go.

“You showed her mercy,” the Emperor said in a flat voice.

“She served you loyally once, my Master,” he said.

“Are you sure your mercy was not for other reasons? She was a beautiful woman, and you are a young man.”

“I took my pleasure with her,” Shaddix admitted; he could not lie to his master, ever. Even the thought of lying caused shards of white-hot pain to lance through his mind. “Darth Vader as your apprentice commanded her, and her mistake was in obeying him without informing you. She knew she was to die, and asked for it to be quick. I gave her this last mercy.”

“The Sith do not show mercy, boy!” the Emperor spat. “She should have died in agony like the idiot little harlot she was! If you wanted her sex, then you should have taken it by force and left her screaming and ripped open for your pleasure. She was the courtesan, not you!”

There were no apologies, nor begging for forgiveness. In a dead-sounding voice, he said: “I was weak, Master. Please punish me so that I may learn to be strong.”

He was punished, for almost a solid hour. By the time the Emperor was done, Shaddix could not stand on his own. It was the Emperor who left the small audience chamber, sneering in disgust. When at last he could stand, Shaddix stumbled back to his own quarters to recuperate. Collapsing still clothed in his bed, he stared up at the ceiling and went over the mission’s events. Again and again, his mind went back to the look in Shili’s face when he dulled her pain and slipped into her.

At the time, he did not realize what her expression meant, but now, looking back, he realized she was looking at him in gratitude. For that brief moment, she was allowed to feel life and pleasure when she had no right to even hope for it.

“I was weak,” he said, wiping at his nose. He was weak, but though he could never admit it to himself, he was not sorry.
The next day, he knelt once more before his Master. Palpatine sat on his throne, flanked by a pair of Imperial Guards in the otherwise empty room.

“Lord Vader has had enough leeway,” the Emperor said flatly. “His game grows tiresome. He is growing his own clonedtroopers, based on new genetic material, as well as his experiments in cloning his former disciple. Consider this your test, Lord Shaddix. If you kill him, then you shall be my new apprentice. If you fail, then Lord Vader will have proven his worth to remain as my apprentice. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Know this, boy,” Palpatine said, leaning forward to stare intently with his Sith-orange eyes. “Lord Vader is strong. He cut down the very children he helped to teach years ago. No mere weakling of a boy can hope defeat him, only a Sith who is strong. Are you strong, boy?”

“Yes, Master.”

“I hope so for your sake, boy, otherwise my efforts in training you will be wasted. Go now.”

Shaddix stood, head still bowed, and backed from the room. Once beyond, he straightened with determination and strode purposely down the hall. His personal craft rested in a private hangar in the palace next to an old, unused Geonisian solar-sail ship and the Emperor’s personal shuttle.

He walked up the ramp as if the ship had always been his and he were coming home, and in truth it felt it. The ship was spacious, able to comfortably hold a crew of six, though automated for one. He dropped his satchel in his quarters before examining the holding cells and storage bays. The ship had nearly six months of consumables on it, and held enough fuel for just as long. It was originally built as a star courier, but adjusted by one of his predecessors to work as a personal ship similar to the Sith Spheres of old.

Finally, finishing his inspection, Shaddix settled into the pilot’s seat and stared out into the dimly lit hangar. He closed his eyes and meditated, surprised at how unsettled the Force seemed. Something important was about to happen, and it brought not just terrible danger, but also powerful hope. The problem was that Shaddix was still too young and inexperienced to be able to tell if the hope was for his success, or his failure.

In the end, he realized, it did not matter. He had to obey his Master, even if it meant walking into his own death.

~~Broken~~

~~Broken~~

Shaddix meditated while the ship flew, readying himself for his test. As he did so, he repeated the Sith Code to himself again and again:

*Peace is a lie, there is only passion.*

*Through passion, I gain strength.*

*Through strength, I gain power.*

*Through power, I gain victory.*

*Through victory, my chains are broken.*
The Force shall free me.

The power and truth of the words settled into his mind and body, sharpening both to a razor point. He was going to be ready, and he would either succeed and take his rightful place at his Master’s side, or he would die a Sith.

When his navicomputer told him he was at his destination, Shaddix settled into his seat and prepared the ship’s cloaking device. The moment he decanted from Hyperspace, he began to activate his cloak, only to be rocked by laser cannon fire. Startled, he looked out with shock at a full-scale battle in orbit.

Again his Infiltrator was raked by laser cannon fire, forcing Shaddix to roll away from the flurry of fire. The blinking red light assured him that the delicate cloaking mechanism was off line, but at this point he didn’t think it would matter. In the distance, he saw a Star Destroyer erupt in a brilliant, white ball of energy as its reactor went.

Had the Emperor known of this battle? Was this part of Shaddix’s test?

It only took a quick glance at the planetary surface to see something had cracked Kamino’s shields. Through the constant cloud clover, he could see a smoldering streak of darker smoke and the residual fires of something big scarring the surface. At least ten transports and couriers were making for the planet’s surface.

The four remaining star destroyers and their fighters appeared to be wavering under the Rebel assault, which infuriated Shaddix. The power of a single star destroyer should have been enough to withhold half the fleet assembled. Reviewing tactical information even while he flew the Infiltrator in and out of the battle, he began to see what was happening.

The ship that blew up was the Immovable, the strike force flag ship. Making a quick decision that could come back to bite him or confirm his readiness to serve as Apprentice, he flipped open a channel and quickly broadcast security codes that immediately identified him as having an Imperial Mandate. “Imperial fleet, who commands?”

“Captain Talaric of the Glory. Who is this?”

“Your new fleet commander,” Shaddix snarled. “Your ships are being torn to shreds. Reform your ships into a phalanx formation. I can’t find a single TIE bomber in orbit—get your bombers into the fight and target those enemy capital ships.”

“But we…”

“I speak with the Emperor’s voice, Captain. Shore up your defenses and do as you’re told, or it won’t be the rebels that kill you.”

“Yes, m’lord,” came the subdued voice. Shaddix saw with satisfaction that the two ships that were so badly out of line quickly moved into a position with the other four ships, forming a spear-shape that allowed for better overlapping defensive fire. Within minutes, TIE-bombers began spilling out of the four destroyers, flanked by Blastboats and TIE-fighters to ward off the rebel fighters.

Duty of the Empire’s soldiers done, Shaddix spun his ship to the planetary surface, coming quickly upon the thrusters of one of the rebel transports. Without hesitation he brought the two solar
ionization cannons up to power and began pelting the transport with fire.

The solar ionization cannons were rare because of the sheer power they required, but they were also effective for that very reason. He brought his ship higher against the plane of the transport’s passage to get past the reinforced plating that framed its thrusters, and started shooting into the ship’s engineering section.

From that angle, it only took six shots to take the transport out. When he blew past the billowing flame that rode the edges of the out-gassing oxygen, he saw that the other rebel transports were already in the atmosphere heading toward the scar that marked where they had cracked the planetary shields.

He set his course and followed.
Broken Chains

Chapter Summary

He learns what it truly means to be Sith.

His Navicomputer identified the platform structure as Timra City. Like all structures on Kamino, it was a floating platform on the surface. Although the Kaminoans evolved on land, a natural cataclysm thousands of years ago on their world resulted in melted polar ice caps which submerged their landmasses. Rather than leave their world, the Kaminoans built their own landmasses such as Timra.

It was this city that the rebel assault targeted. Shaddix could see the hulking remnants of what looked like a Nebulon frigate floating broken and burning on the surface near the city’s southern platforms, providing mute evidence of how the Rebels broke the city shields.

The first Rebel transport had already landed, and the flashes of interchanging blaster-fire gave silent testimony to the battle raging below. Rebel LAAT/i gunships raked the Imperial positions with devastating fire. The Stormtroopers responded with ground-to-air rocketry, taking out one of the LAAT/i’s.

What drew Shaddix’s attention most, however, was not the battle itself. Rather, it was the overwhelming feeling of the Dark Side that shrouded the whole city. If he had any doubts before that Vader was there, those doubts faded. More, he felt additional presences in the Dark Side, dozens and dozens of them. Those must have been Vader’s cloned saber guards and Sith acolytes.

No wonder the Emperor was displeased. Vader was assembling a Force-strong army that could challenge the Emperor himself.

Shaddix brought his ship down on a small platform on the far edge of the city away from the heaviest fighting. He was greeted immediately by a tall, thin-necked Kaminoan flanked by an even dozen stormtroopers. The troopers had an oddly uniform feel in the Force, making Shaddix realize they were cloned as well.

“Greetings, I am Cama Lu, assistant administrator,” the elegant creature said, blinking huge almond eyes that dominated her small head. Shaddix knew most of her cerebrum was actually located within her body. “I am afraid this city is longer safe to visit. We have fallen under attack. I urge you to…”

Shaddix silenced her with a slash of his saber. The troopers, conditioned to defend their creators regardless of who they were meant to serve, opened fire. A single blast of Force-lightning sent most spinning off the platform, and killed those that remained.

After a revolt on Kamino seven years into his reign as Emperor, Palpatine recognized that the cloners of Kamino would never be loyal to his Empire, and given that their clones took ten years to mature while a Spaarti Cylinder could produce a clone in one year, the Emperor saw Kamino as no longer vital to the well-being of the Empire. And so he opened the Imperial Forces up to recruitment and in some cases even conscription to cut down on his dependence of clones. Additionally, he adopted the more efficient Arkanian cloning technology using Spaarti Cylinders and had new cloning facilities created on Byss, Wayland, Imperial Center’s own moon Centax-2, and several clandestine GeNode
centers spread around the Empire.

Granted, the Spaarti clones were not nearly as skilled or capable as those produced by the Kaminoans, but sheer numbers made up for their lack in marksmanship or sense of self-preservation.

Thus Shaddix did not hesitate to slaughter every Kaminoan or Stormtrooper he encountered. This whole facility was Vader’s pet project, and presented a threat to the Emperor. He reached his first cloning spire when he encountered any true resistance.

The armored figure that stood in front of the spire entrance wore armor almost identical to that of his master’s Imperial Guard, but this armor was a dark green and black. Moreover, instead of a force pike, this figure wielded a pair of white lightsabers.

The figure’s Force signature felt warped, somehow, limited. This was a being of violence, not reason, and he saw Shaddix as a threat.

Before Shaddix even had a chance to attack, the Force warned him of immediate danger. He spun and jumped away just as streak of blue Force lightning raked the air he occupied only a second ago. He came to his feet and found himself facing a second opponent, this one in unique red armor. The new threat carried no sword, but was surrounded by powerful Force shield.

The saber guard stepped to the Acolyte’s side, proving they were paired fighters. “Fine,” Shaddix growled. He lashed out not with lightning or any other traditional Force power, but with his own unique gift—he gave the cloned attackers pain.

Both were startled by the sudden, unexpected and indefensible crash of agony that seared through their bodies. It took effort from Shaddix, but not nearly as much as manually fighting them. When he stood before them, he took two quick, efficient swings of his saber to reduce each by a head before moving into the cloning center.

He was just in time to see it explode. Using the Force to protect himself, he watched as the massive cloning tanks crashed down from the roof of the spire, destroying the tens of thousands of clones within. As he watched, a figure in Mandalorian armor flew around one of the largest explosions and landed in front of him. The man’s armor had carbon scoring on it, indicating recent combat. He raised a blaster in a threatening manner and said, “You gonna try and stop me?”

“Who are you?” Shaddix demanded.

“Name’s Boba Fett. Bastards used my DNA without paying me.”

Boba Fett, Vader’s pet bounty hunter, Shaddix realized. Then he also realized that this pet bounty hunter had just destroyed much of Vader’s personal army. Rather than attack the man, Shaddix found himself laughing. “You can go,” he said. “I am Darth Shaddix. Remember that name, because after today I shall be the Emperor’s chosen apprentice.”

“There’s a line in front of you,” Boba Fett said.

“Not for long.”

With a silent nod, Fett rushed past him, while in front of him the spire burned. Shaking off the irony of the situation, he pushed forward, bouncing through the wreckage with Force-borne leaps and speed.

He encountered two more pairs of saber guards and Sith acolytes. The first pair he decided to fight directly to test their talents. The saber guard was astounding with his blades but employed little to no
Force attacks, while the Sith acolyte employed nothing but. While it would have been a lethal combination against a Jedi, Shaddix was Sith, trained by Darth Sidious himself.

He killed the Acolyte first, using his speed and taking advantage of the man’s lack of sabers, before dueling the Saber guard. It took longer than he wished, but gave Shaddix the information he needed to know about their effectiveness.

The second pair he simply paralyzed with agony and beheaded before moving on to the highest of the cloning spires. What he found on the way was mute, powerful evidence of battle. Bodies littered the halls, of saber guards and Sith acolytes, and of dozens upon dozens of storm troopers. All were killed with a lightsaber using techniques not so dissimilar to what Shaddix himself used.

In fact, the devastation looked similar to what Vader’s dead apprentice, Galen Marek, did on the Death Star construction site two years ago, when Shaddix first began his training. The Force throbbed with Dark Side energy, and he had no doubt that someone was fighting Vader at the top of the spire.

“You can feel them, can’t you?” a low voice said from the shadows ahead.

Shaddix reared back surprised not to have felt the person sooner. The figure stepped out and removed the hood of his cloak, and Shaddix felt a chill when he recognized the face of Galen Marek. “A clone,” he finally said.

“Yes,” the Dark Apprentice said. “I have seen my original’s body. He died broken and alone because he allowed love to guide him. I will not make that mistake. Who are you?”

“Darth Shaddix,” he said. “Dark Lord of the Sith, Acolyte of Darth Sidious.”

The other nodded, a grim smile touching his lips. “I have no name, not yet. Lord Vader calls me his Dark Apprentice. I am what Galen Marek was supposed to be, but never was, just as you are what Vader was supposed to be, but never was. I am your test, Darth Shaddix, as you are mine.”

Shaddix shook his head. “You are no test of mine. I will destroy your master and you, and assume my place at my master’s side.” He lashed out with pain, expecting the battle to be short.

The Dark Apprentice quickly demonstrated the futility of that thought. The Force push that blew Shaddix back was as powerful as anything even the Emperor demonstrated. It took all his skill and training to spin in mid-air and absorb the momentum with his legs, before launching himself back at his opponent.

The Apprentice responded by using the Force to rip the wall open and slam a piece of metal into Shaddix’s flying body. The shock of the impact almost undid him, but he quickly cut himself free only to immediately have to block a vicious, fast attack of dual red blades. He gave ground before the onslaught.

He gave up all pretence of attack and surrendered to the Force as it guided his limbs. Four blades moved against each other so fast they became a blur of light in the darkened facility, shedding the walls around them.

As skilled as Shaddix thought himself, the Dark Apprentice matched him in both skill and power. For every Force attack he used, the Apprentice countered with his own. In minutes both were battered, bloodied and bruised, but still they fought.

Fear gave way to exhilaration, then to sheer determination. The Dark Apprentice fought with a blank face, either completely in control of his emotions, or lacking them entirely.
It was that lack of emotion that would prove to be his undoing. As they dueled, lashing at each other with blade and power alike, Shaddix began to get angry. No matter what he did, the Apprentice seemed to be able to anticipate and match him, as if their training was so identical they were essentially copies of each other.

But Shaddix had something that he soon saw his opponent did not have: passion.

Harnessing that rage, Shaddix broke the saber lock of the Apprentice, stomped his foot down, and unleashed his rage with a scream and a flow of Force power. In the first and only moment of surprise he had, the Apprentice’s eyes widened a split second before the wall of power struck. The man’s body flew back against a nearby bulkhead with such speed and momentum he could not completely shield the impact. The sound of breaking bone was lost in the echoes of Shaddix’s scream.

The clone fell to the ground, gasping in pain and grasping futilely for his dropped sabers. His legs behind him lay unmoving, paralyzed by his snapped spine. Shaddix stumbled toward the clone, exhausted by the outpouring of emotion and power. “Peace is a lie,” he said to the Apprentice. “Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory, my chains are broken.”

The clone looked up and spat. “Your chains are thicker than even mine,” he said. “The Force shall free me, but you will remain bound.”

“Never,” Shaddix growled, before taking the clone’s head with a single swipe of his blade.

With the battle over, Shaddix collapsed to his knees and pulled desperately at the Force to refresh himself. His armor was cut and broken, his cloak torn and burned. He could feel every bruise and cut on his body, and knew he was dangerously weak. The battle took far more out of him than he would have ever believed.

While he was meditating, a squadron of rebel soldiers poured out of a door nearby, fleeing red blaster bolts. Behind them came an older man, swiping the bolts back with a green lightsaber. A Jedi then, most likely Rahm Kota, Shaddix thought from his research on the rebellion.

Kota stepped clear of the door and then sealed it, before stabbing his saber through the control panel to lock it. He turned to join his troopers, but hesitated, sensing Shaddix. Slowly he turned clouded, blind eyes in Shaddix’s direction.

“I can sense you, Sith,” he called. He turned to face Shaddix entirely and stared walking toward him. “I sense you’re tired. Did you have fun playing with Vader’s toys?”

“You are a foolish man, speaking to me,” Shaddix said.

“You’re exhausted, and weak,” Kota said confidently. “And… something else. Something false.”

Shaddix rose to his feet, ready to attack, when suddenly Kota laughed. It was a short, barking sound devoid of any humor. “Just like Marek,” he finally said. “The Emperor thinks he’s destroyed who you were and made you into the perfect weapon. But the real you is still in there, fighting. I can sense your future, boy. It’s dark—Force knows that. They’ll be blood aplenty spilled. But you could be more than just a mere Sith. You could be great, you know. It’s all there in your mind.”

The words echoed like thermal detonators in Shaddix’s mind, carrying a profound and agonizing thought. He felt that same stabbing pain in his skull, like he did at Shili’s apartment, and felt hot fluid running down his face.
“Yes,” Kota said, losing his smile. “He twisted you up until the real you was buried under layers of pain. But I sense something else about you, a presence I doubt even you can feel. A girl. She’s listening even now.”

“What are you talking about, you fool?” Shaddix hissed.

“I’m talking to the spirit watching you, boy,” Kota said somberly. “The girl who dominates your future. You listen to me, child, wherever you are. You listen well. I’ve seen this so called Sith’s future. He could be the greatest hero in the history of the Force, or the greatest evil ever. The difference will fall on your shoulders.”

“Shut up!” Shaddix hissed, lighting his sabers and approaching. As he did so, sharp spikes of agony tore up into his skull, forcing him to pause.

“You’ll have power over him, girl,” Kota continued, staring with his sightless eyes at something only he could see. “But he will have power over you as well. He is rage and strength, and the darkness within him will seduce you. He’s your sun, burning and brilliant, while you are his moon. But his light is powerful and bright, with a terribly capacity to burn. If you cannot find a balance to him—if you can find a way to bring enough light to offset his dark—then rather than save him, you’ll be lost with him.”

“Shut up!” Shaddix screamed, clutching his head in agony as blood poured down his nose, and down his neck from his ears. “I’ll kill you!”

Suddenly, inexplicably, Shaddix heard a voice whispering beneath sound, beneath the real. It was the Force, and yet it was not; it was an echo of a time not yet.

Kota smiled sadly, completely ignoring the stunned Shaddix. “But child, you may not be enough by yourself—that much I see clearly. Your love may give him a chance to redeem himself, but the Emperor has damaged his soul. The Darkness will never truly heal. I hope you know that.”

I won’t lose him.

“No, child, you’ll lose yourself.”

Kota deactivated his saber and hung it on his belt. “I should kill you, boy, to release you. I can see you aren’t really even here. You’re a ghost; a promise of something to come. Only the Emperor could have twisted something so light into something so dark. But I won’t—you have one more lesson to learn before the Force will free you from this plane. Go to your test, boy. Go see if the Dark Side will really set you free, or if it will just bind you more closely. For my part, I’m done. We’ve lost the day, I’ve lost two good friends, and I want to fight no more today.”

With that, Kota turned and jogged away, secure against his blindness with the Force.

“I will not be weak,” Shaddix snarled in the silence that remained. “I will not!”

He jumped to his feet and walked to the sealed bulkhead. It glowed with the weapons the troopers beyond were using to break through. Harnessing the Force, Shaddix blew the glowing door in in the midst of those trying to break through, killing several of the troopers. He followed after, blades ablaze, until he stood alone among the bodies.

He continued up, toward the top of the spire. As he went, he found more cloning cylinders, broken and shattered by an angry hand. Mangled, deformed and failed clones littered the floor, all bearing the face of the Apprentice Shaddix just defeated.
Walking through the spire, he ran through three more specialized cloning areas. These tanks were different than those used to mass-produce the Stormtrooper clones, likely because of the inherent difficulty in cloning Force-users. Previously it was though impossible, but somehow Vader found a way.

Now, though, the equipment was smashed and the computers destroyed. Whoever did this was thorough—he did not just want the tanks gone, but all the data in the process as well.

Ahead of him, he felt the glowing darkness that was Vader calling him forward, and forward he went. The last of the cylinders held dozens of dead saber guards and Acolytes, as well as more dead Stormtroopers. He had no choice but to walk on bodies to reach the door onto the platform.

There he was, standing tall and black against the lightning that streaked across the sky. Nearby, Shaddix could see the wreck of the Rebel capital ship, but returned his attention to Vader. He stepped onto the platform, expecting Vader to attack immediately, but he did not. Instead, he stood looking down at something on the very edge of the platform.

As Shaddix walked further out into the rain, he saw what held his opponent’s attention: two bodies. One was a woman, blonde and slim, beautiful by any measure of the word, and dead. She lay on her back, staring sightless into the rain above. Next to her, with his arm thrown over her chest and his face buried in her neck, lay another clone of Galen Marek, as dead as the girl he clung to.

At last Vader turned to face him. The rain broke, if just for a moment, and in the silence Shaddix could hear the oppressively whirring, mechanical hiss of a respirator. Darth Vader stepped away from the bodies toward Shaddix. Shaddix noted that his cape was torn and burned, and his own armor bore the scoring from a fierce fight. Around them, the spire’s structure appeared to have been damaged from a titanic fight.

“My Master at last shows his new toy,” Vader said. His basso vocalizer rang over the platform, drowning out the distant storms.

“As you showed him yours,” Shaddix said. “I have killed your pet apprentice.”

“I can make others,” Vader said dismissively.

“The Emperor begs to differ,” Shaddix said. “He sent me to share with you his displeasure at your actions. You’re a fool if you think he will let you continue to build your pathetic, warped little army.”

“You are the fool, boy,” Vader said. “Tell me, when he sent you out into the Empire, did he have you recite the code of the Dark Side? Did he tell you that the Dark Side would set you free?”

“You know he did. And it will.”

“No, boy. The Dark Side does not free you. It enslaves you. Believe me, I know.”

“Talk,” Shaddix spat. He lifted both hands and unleashed a torrent of Force Lightening, bathing Vader in it. The other Dark Lord could not generate Force lightning, not with his prosthetics. However, he lit his saber and managed to block much of it, right before a broken lightning rod ripped itself up from the platform base with a groan of metal and flew at the younger Sith like a blaster bolt.

Shaddix turned and caught the two ton rod in the Force, but had to let it go immediately and spin out of the way of Vader’s blade. For all his prosthetics, Vader moved with surprising speed, grace and power. Shaddix met him head on, trading on his speed and second blade against Vader’s superior reach and power. He had trained for years for this moment—this fight was the culmination of
everything he was. He could not lose, for only by killing Vader could he prove to their master that he was worthy. He would not lose.

He swung his sabers with skill and lethal effect, and yet somehow Vader blocked every blow with an infuriating, negligent ease. He leapt, somersaulted and flew around the platform to gain position on Vader, and yet the larger Dark Lord managed to counter every move and avoid every trap. He blasted Vader again and again with Force Lightening, only to have the older Sith assault him with Force Storms of every loose object on the platform—even the bodies of the dead Marek clone and the girl.

It was with a feeling of rage that Shaddix realized that Vader was simply a better fighter than he was; that the other Dark Lord’s connection to the Dark Side of the Force was stronger than his. It enraged him, and he harnessed that rage just as he had with Vader’s apprentice.

He lashed out with pure, invisible power. Vader stiffened as agony poured through his aged, tortured body, and fell to his knees with a mechanical howl. “Now you know why the Emperor chose me,” Shaddix said. “I am Sith. And when you are dead, I will be the Apprentice.”

“And he will use you until nothing remains, just as he has used me,” Vader growled through the pain.

Shaddix increased his power, straining to overwhelm Vader’s nervous system with agony. Somehow, the older Sith remained on his knees, fighting the pain. “Just hurry up and die!” he screamed.

“Come finish me, if you are so eager,” Vader said. Even from behind his mask, Shaddix knew the man was grinding his teeth in agony.

“If you wish!” Shaddix flew forward, faster than the eye could follow, to finish his victim. Vader was faster. Somehow the Dark Lord overcame the pain and used the Force to push himself to one side of Shaddix’s blow, while at the same time swiping up with his long arm.

Shaddix stumbled and then fell. He rolled quickly to regain his feet, only to fall again. He looked down and stared at the stump of his right leg in confusion and shock. Then the pain hit. “No!” he screamed in anguished agony. “I will not be defeated! I am Sith!”

He lifted his hands and bombarded Vader with Force Lightning, only to scream as the Dark Lord threw his saber in a perfect parabolic arc that took both Shaddix’s hands off at the wrists before gliding back with the Force to the older Dark Lord’s hand. Shaddix stared at the stumps in horror, remembering the look on Drayneen’s face when he disarmed her.

Vader walked up to the now completely disabled boy. “You are not Sith,” Vader said. “You are a lie. A false life forced into the mind of a broken child. I saw you in your cell, little boy. I saw you crying for your friends at night when you did not think any of us heard. Your power is great, but you could never harness it all because the true power the Emperor wanted was inside the boy you used to be, not the lie you have become.”

Horrid pain a thousand times worse than the pain in his cauterized stumps pierced his brain. He felt blood flowing from his nose, but ignored it. “I am Darth Shaddix, I am Sith!”

Vader’s incredible Force-power gripped him and lifted him from the platform. Shaddix’s own power was broken by his wounds and rage. “If you wish to truly be Sith, little boy, you shall die like one. Alone and despised by all.”
Shaddix tried to gather his power, but Vader’s grip was too strong. He could do nothing but watch as Vader’s long red saber burned slowly into his chest. The pain burned away all other consideration, until it sank with deliberate slowness into his chest.

He had a brief sensation of falling and collapsed to the platform at Vader’s feet. “Just like Marek, just like all the other toys our master has discarded,” Vader said in a dead, mechanical voice. “You are nothing, Shaddix. Just a brief amusement for an evil old man. But this last gift I give you. I will let you die a Sith. Alone.”

With that, Vader turned and walked away as Shaddix tried to scream in rage. But he had no breath with which to scream, and no strength to summon the sound. He fell flat to the platform, and saw the body of the clone a few feet away, staring back at him with sightless, dead eyes.

The rain began to fall again, and Darth Shaddix, Dark Lord of the Sith, died.
Worst Case Scenario

Chapter Summary

Love means sacrifice

Hermione stood on a platform, her hands covering her mouth, as she stared down at the two dead men and the one dead woman nearby. Rain fell all around but did not touch her, since of course she was not really there.

“I hate him,” a familiar voice said.

Hermione turned, and felt her heart melt. “Oh, Harry!”

Harry Potter stood next to her wearing the same old shirt and baggy jeans he wore when he fell through the Veil. Even his hair looked the same, unkempt and shaggy, unlike the slicked-down locks of Shaddix.

“It this really what happened?” Hermione asked.

Harry nodded. “We killed so many people; we hurt so many people. I couldn’t stop him; all I could do is watch from a corner of my mind while the rest of me became a monster. Marek broke free—he was strong and he broke free even if it cost him his life. But I was weak—we couldn’t escape.”

Lightning flashed, and suddenly Shaddix stood across the platform from them. He stood taller than Harry, older with broader shoulders, but his face looked as if it had been molded and warped into a permanent sneer of hatefulness. In that regard, he reminded her of a competent, more lethal Malfoy.

On the edge of the platform, the Marek clone was once more draped over the body of his lost love, like they were before Shaddix and Vader fought. “Harry, what’s happening?” Hermione asked.

Lightening flashed and suddenly the wreckage of the Rebel ship was simply gone. The damage remained, but the ship was gone, as if someone had simply erased it. Shaddix also stood closer, having halved the distance between them. Now that he was closer, Hermione saw that the Sith stood somehow whole and untouched, his orange-rimmed eyes swollen with rage and hatred.

“You!” he snarled, lifting a saber not at Harry, but at Hermione. “It was you. You’re the one Kota sensed. It was because of you that I was weak!”

“You can’t touch her,” Harry said, stepping protectively in front of her.

“You can’t touch her?” Shaddix said, sneering. “Our master said I was weak because I showed Shili mercy. I will show him I am strong by ripping her apart. I’m going to rape her with my lightsaber hilt and make her scream for hours before I even begin to let her feel what true pain is.”

Hermione felt her stomach twist in knots in the face of such overwhelming malice. Unconsciously she moved closer to Harry, while behind Shaddix an entire cloning Spire disappeared. There was no sound, no indication of why or how, it simply disappeared.

She looked back at the two figures with Harry Potter’s face who stood like opposite reflections in a
twisted and wicked looking glass. Shaddix lit his lethal twin lightsabers, while Harry lifted his holly and phoenix-feather wand. From what she had seen Shaddix do, she should have been terrified, and yet she could literally feel the magic pouring off Harry as he grimly faced his darker self.

Lightning flashed, but then it too was gone—not just the lightning, but the rain and the clouds and the sky itself. Overhead she saw just white, with a hint of golden lines. Her attention was pulled back to the platform, though, as Shaddix raised his sabers and screamed his rage, while Harry raised his own wand and stood resolutely between the Sith and Hermione.

Shaddix charged, bursting into motion with terrifying speed, while Harry screamed “Protego!”

Behind them, another spire disappeared, as did the ocean itself. In fact, the city itself seemed to be disappearing until nothing remained but the platform. Even Marek and his dead love disappeared.

Neither Harry nor Shaddix appeared to notice or care—Shaddix flew toward Harry through the empty air and hit the magical shield, slicing through it with his swords. “Harry!” Hermione screamed as the twin sabers slid easily through Harry’s chest, even as Harry used his wand as a blade and stabbed it through an orange-ringed eye of Shaddix.

She suddenly heard a voice in the distance, barely discernible. Leah, pull out now! Wanda, for Merlin’s sake get the girl out! We have a catastrophic collapse!

She felt a pull, like a giant invisible hand grabbing her waist, but she resisted. “Harry!” she called. “Come with me! Harry!”

The lightsabers had deactivated as Shaddix fell, his head impaled on Harry’s wand. The boy she loved turned slowly toward her, his face warped by pain and regret. “I’m sorry, Hermione,” he whispered. “You have to go now. You have to live. I love you.”

He fell to his knees and suddenly blood started flowing from his eyes, nose and ears. “Harry!” Hermione screamed. “No, Harry! Stay with me. You have to stay with me! I can’t lose you again!”

“I’m sorry I was weak, Hermione,” he said in a voice that gurgled with frothing blood. “I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough for you. I love you.”

The invisible hand became a vice, and suddenly she found herself jerked violently up into the gold-lined white overhead, while the platform with Harry and Shaddix grew smaller and smaller. Suddenly, the white turned black as before her eyes the now distant platform exploded in a ball of such brilliance it made the white of the nothingness around her seem dark in comparison. “Harry!” she screamed.

His screamed name suddenly rang in her ears as she jerked awake in the dome of the healing room. She sat up and looked at Harry, and the two healers beside him. Wanda was passed out entirely, and Leah was wiping a rivulet of blood from her nose and shaking violently. Aschels was already on his feet and running for the ward-sealed entrance, heedless of his nudity, and slammed it open. “Code blue! We need help!” he screamed from the entrance.

Immediately more healers poured into the room, but they didn’t go to Harry—they started treating the other healers. Hermione crawled toward Harry and laid over his bare form, pressing against him. He felt warm to her—his heart beat and she could feel his breath from his nostrils. “Harry?” she asked. “Harry, wake up.”

From a distance, she heard desperate voices pronouncing a shocking spell and looked up to see a healer stabbing his wand at Wanda’s chest in a desperate bid to start her heart. Leah had collapsed,
pale and shaking, and two other healers were fighting to stabilize her condition.

Hermione looked back down at Harry. He looked so young and pale; unmoving. A slight frown marred his face, but otherwise he could just have been sleeping. “Harry?” she said. “Why won’t you wake up?”

She felt a touch and looked up in surprise to see her mother kneeling down beside her, weeping openly, while her father slid the robe over her shoulders. “Mum, he won’t wake up!” Hermione said.

The healers had stabilized Leah and levitated her out of the room at a run. Two more joined the two already working on Wanda. They had her heart started again, Hermione heard as if from a great distance, but she was still not stable enough to move.

Suddenly Aeschels knelt down opposite of Hermione, clad in his robe, and ran his wand over Harry’s head. A white mist formed, pure and gentle. “Why won’t he wake up?” Hermione asked.

Aeschels looked at her with reddened eyes. “I’m so sorry, child,” he said. “We thought… the Shaddix matrix was itself the last trap. We thought once you lived through the memories until Shaddix died, it would free the Potter matrix. But instead it freed the Shaddix matrix from any control Harry might have had. In that world, once Shaddix realized you were there, he targeted you. I’m so sorry, we didn’t realize.”

“You could have died,” Calliope said, sniffing.

“But Harry protected me,” Hermione said.

“He did,” Aeschels confirmed sadly. “He gave more than his life to save you, child. He gave his psyche, and even his soul. That spark of light you saw…that was the worst case scenario I told you about. All that Harry Potter or Shaddix were is gone. His body remains alive, but he has suffered a catastrophic death of personality. I’m sorry.”

“But he’s right here,” Hermione said, unable to accept or process what she was being told. She placed her hands on his chest. “I can feel his heart beating.” She couldn’t even recognize her own voice any more, for the tears choking it.

“I’m sorry, child,” Aeschels said. “I truly am. Harry Potter is dead, it is only a matter of time before his body follows his mind.”

“No,” she whispered. “No, I can’t lose him again. Harry!” She screamed suddenly, and slapped him hard. “Harry, don’t you do this to me again! Don’t you dare! I love you! Wake up, damn you! Wake up! Wake up! Wake…”

Muscles failed her, and she collapsed onto his chest as terrible, bowel-shaking sobs consumed her. “Please weak up.”

Harry remained still, beyond the reach of her love or touch.

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Hermione sat on a chair next to a bed in the long-term damage ward of St. Mungos, in a room guarded by three aurors. On the bed lay the empty shell that used to be Harry Potter. His hand felt warm in hers, but he did not respond at all.
She looked up to see her parents walk in, accompanied by Albus Dumbledore. The old wizard came and stood next to the bed across from her, while her parents came to stand behind her, her mother’s arm on her shoulder. “He seems peaceful,” she said in a dead-sounding voice.

“That much we can say is true,” Dumbledore said softly. “He will be well-cared for.”

“What?” she said.

“Why?” Dumbledore asked.

“Why care for him? Why is he here at all? If he’s dead, then let him die. This…this parody of Harry is wrong. Let him finally have some…” She stopped, and wiped her eyes.

There were no answers for her, and Dumbledore at least seemed to recognize this. “I know this has been a terrible time for you,” he said gently after a moment. “But I wish to know if you will be on the Hogwarts Express tomorrow.”

“What?” she asked again without looking away from Harry.

“Because you are special, Hermione,” Dumbledore said. “As much as Harry, you are a leader. The school looks up to you.”

She snorted. “They looked up to Harry, when they weren’t cursing him or calling him a liar. To hell with the school. I’m where I need to be.”

The old wizard reached slowly across the room until his good hand covered hers, and below hers Harry’s. “Though you may not remember it, during your second year in the hospital wing, he came to you every night. He held your hand and just talked to you, even though you could not hear anything. Without fail, every night until curfew, he sat beside you, held your hand, and told you secrets no one else has ever heard. He did this because, even then, he loved you. He clung to the knowledge and the hope that you would wake, and you did.

“But Hermione, as much as it hurts you, you cannot cling to that hope. Harry is not here; this is not the boy you knew. In many ways this is worse than his falling through the Veil, because this looks as if he is still with us, and makes it that much harder to acknowledge the fact that he has moved on to his next great adventure. I know for a fact he would not want you to waste away here, Hermione. He would want you at school, where you belong and where you can make the most difference. Let him go, my dear, and live your life the way he would want you to.”

He patted her hand before straightening, and with a nod to her parents, left the room.

In the silence that followed, Hermione pulled Harry’s hand to her head as if in prayer. “It’s just not fair,” she said. “It’s just not fair. He never had anything, never asked for anything. He deserved so much. We deserved so much.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Calliope Granger whispered, squeezing her daughter’s shoulder gently. “I know.”

Hermione stood abruptly, leaned over and kissed Harry on the lips. His lips were soft and pliable, but did not respond at all. She straightened and looked down at him, knowing deep inside that he was not there anymore. “Good bye, Harry,” she whispered, while wiping the tears away. “I love you.”

Not waiting for her parents, she ran from the room.
Hermione hated the cheerful smiles and happy reunions that filled platform 9 ¾ the next day. The sky overhead was a bright, crisp blue, the air was the perfect temperature, and the students of Hogwarts were once again going to school. The whole day seemed an insult to the pain she felt because every student was returning except the most important.

“Hermione?”

She turned around to see Ron walking toward her with Ginny in tow. Mrs. Weasley was there as well, looking sadly at her. “Hello, Ron, Ginny, Mrs. Weasley,” Hermione said. “How are you?”

“We’re doing well, how are you, dear?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

“I’m fine,” Hermione said, selling the lie with a forced smile.

Mrs. Weasley did not look convinced at all. To Hermione’s surprise, the older woman pulled Hermione into a startled hug. After a moment, though, she relaxed against the larger woman’s shoulder and fought against another storm of tears. When they parted, Ginny was wiping her eyes surreptitiously.

“As much as Harry, you are family,” Mrs. Weasley said. “I want you to know that if you ever need anything, that you are to ask. Ask me directly, or Ron and Ginny. You’re always welcome to visit.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Weasley,” Hermione said, her voice cracking.

“Molly, dear. Why, you’ll hit your majority next month. You’re a woman now, so call me Molly.”

“I will, Molly. Thank you.”

The matriarch gave a firm nod, before hugging Ron and Ginny one last time before leaving the platform. Somehow, the platform got a lot more noisy with her leaving. “Come on,” Ron said, “let’s find a cabin.”

The three friends went aboard and found their normal cabin in the last car. They had just barely settled when Neville arrived. “Can I sit here?” Neville asked.

“Come in,” Ginny said with forced cheer. “Wow, Neville, you’re as tall as Ron!”

Neville smiled sadly and took his seat. “How are you, Hermione?”

“I’m fine,” Hermione said automatically.

“She’s a terrible liar, isn’t she?” Ginny said to Neville.

Neville peered intently at his fellow Gryffindor before nodding. “Yeah, she is.”

“What am I supposed to say?” Hermione said. “We tried to save him, and failed, and now he’s a vegetable in St. Mungos?” She was not so upset as to not notice Neville’s wince. “Oh, Neville,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he said. “I know how you feel.”

Though his words said otherwise, there was a well-earned rebuke in his voice which she accepted
with a nod. She bowed her head and took a deep, shaky breath. “He’s gone,” she whispered. “It would have been better if he never came back through the Veil. All he did after her returned was suffer, and make others suffer with him. Better no hope at all than false hope, I suppose.”

The emotions she had been holding in that morning broke through her fragile controls as she bent over and softly wept. She did not even realize until her arms were around her that Ginny had moved to her bench. Though she appreciated their compassion, it did not really help. Harry was gone, and for the first time since she met him, she was going to Hogwarts alone. Her cabin could have had a hundred friends in it, and still it wouldn’t have mattered. Without Harry, Hermione was alone.

In the next car, with her head leaning against the wall and able to hear everything, Luna Lovegood wept softly herself.

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Where am I?”

"You are everywhere, and nowhere. You are one with the Force."

He becomes aware of existence, in so far as existence is an expanse of never-ending white. He spins around, searching for the other voice. On his second rotation, a figure stands before him where the first time around stood no one. The figure stands tall and straight, middle-aged with white hair pulled into a knot at the back of his head and a goatee on his long, scarred face. Brown eyes regard him with a cold, hard-won wisdom.

Kota.” He says the name without hatred or respect, but rather states it as a matter of observable fact. He feels nothing at all for or against the Jedi Master—he feels nothing at all. “Am I dead, then?”

Does that bother you?” the Jedi general asked.

“N o,” he says. “I remember…things. I see them in my mind, but they do not feel like memories. They feel like something that happened to someone else.”

Kota nods, and without obvious movement he now stands closer. “The wizards of your birth world are skilled in the mind arts—even the Jedi would have had difficulty healing you, especially as quickly as they did. They’re approach was unorthodox, but ultimately necessary.”

“I do not understand.”

“They killed you,” Kota said simply.

He stares at the Jedi; he realizes he should have felt a welling of emotion inside, but instead feels nothing. “If I am dead, then are you as well?”

“I’ve been dead for millions of your years,” Kota says. “I only survived Kamino by a matter of weeks. The main Rebel fleet broke in that assault; we thought we had them, but their commander formed into a defensive position we couldn’t break, and we had to retreat. I resigned my commission in disgrace in favor of a Mon Cal named Ackbar. Vader found me on Nar Shadda a month later.”

He wondered if he should have said words of sympathy, but felt none, so did not. “The Rebels?”
“Oh, they won eventually. It turned out Leia was Vader’s biological daughter. Can you believe that? Anakin Skywalker fell to the darkside. Arrogant bastard. But that’s the Force for you. Our galaxy ultimately died, torn asunder by war and raped of natural resources until our ancestors had to mine the stars themselves just for matter to live on. The Jedi were a failure, as were the Sith and all other Force users. It was an experiment of nature—imbuing sentients with a touch of divinity—and we killed ourselves for a million years with it until there was nothing left but ashes. The memories you hold are the last vestiges of our civilization.”

He considers Kota’s words. “So it is all gone?”

“The light you felt in that galaxy will not even reach this world for another million years. And by the time it does, all you know there will be gone, even the stars themselves.”

He looks out at the endless expanse of white around him. “Who am I?”

“That is something only you can decide,” Kota says with a wry, wistful smile. “In order to save you, they destroyed everything you were. Harry Potter and Darth Shaddix were destroyed, leaving all of their experiences and memories, but none of the personalities that were shaped by those experiences. You are unique, my friend, in that you can be whatever you decide to be.”

“If I wish to be strong?”

“Then you will be strong.”

“If I wish to be dark?”

“Then you will be dark,” the old Jedi says.

“If I wish to be both?” Harry said.

Kota places a hand on his shoulder. “You must do what you think is right, of course. But know this—the fate you make for yourself will affect not just your own destiny, but the destiny of your world. Choose wisely.”
Standing Up

Chapter Summary

Hermione is sick and tired, and will not up with it any more.

She should not have been surprised when Malfoy came on the train, not really. However, when he did show up with the entirety of Umbridge’s Inquisitorial squad from last year at his back, Hermione stared uncomprehendingly at the sheer gall of the boy. He asked her with a leering smile if she had spread her legs for Harry before he was rendered a vegetable. He actually said that.

Ron and Neville were both on their feet already, and Ginny was slowly rising to hers, all three with wands out, but Hermione was simply too stunned that anyone would be so emotionally depraved to say such a terrible thing.

“So how did it feel?” Parkinson said, taking Hermione’s stunned silence as assent. “Did he stick it up your arse? Did you like it? You know what they say—once between the hips, a harlot for life!”

If Harry were there—the new Harry—they would be dead, all of them. But he wasn’t there anymore—she was alone. She remembered the rage Harry fought with while defending her in the alley, and the exultation she felt watching him. Similar rage boiled up within her, and with the knowledge that her Harry was gone, she could not contain it as she might have in the past. Quicker than anyone could follow—faster than both her friends and those enemies who insulted the memory of the man she loved—Hermione snapped out her wand and shouted the first spell that came to her mind: “Bombarda!”

Malfoy had one second to look surprised before he and the other Slytherins, and some of the cabin wall around them, were blown back and out of the cabin, and in fact through the side wall of the train itself.

Hermione stared in shock at the destruction she wrought, while around her the others gaped. She lowered her wand and realized just what a horrid, terrible mistake she had made. “I don’t care,” she whispered resolutely. “They deserved it.”


“They deserved it!” Hermione said.

Suddenly Luna stood there in the hall, looking in with tear-swollen eyes at them all. “Harry’s not screaming anymore,” she said distantly. “But you are. You’re falling down, Hermione.”

“What are you on about?” Ron asked irritably, just as the train began to brake. Its many protective wards must have told the conductor that something was terribly amiss.

“Harry’s not screaming anymore,” Luna said again, before wiping her eyes and returning to wherever she had been sitting.

Hermione stared after her and lifted her chin. “I’m not sorry,” she declared. “They deserved it for everything they did last year. They deserved it!”
“Damn right they did,” Ron said quickly. He looked to his sister and Neville for confirmation, only to deflate under their doubtful, frightened eyes.

"Can I remake it into something better?" he asks.

“The question is whether it is yours to remake,” Kota responds. “Who are you to decide the fate of a whole world?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “Am I Sith or Wizard?”

“Magic or the Force, either is merely a taste of the cosmos,” says the long-dead Jedi. “The power we Jedi wielded was a weak, distant echo of that first moment of true power that saw the creation of this universe. The power that you wield as wizard or Sith was the same power that sparked the moment of abiogenesis in the universe—that moment of life’s first creation, when God—if you will—first breathed life into existence. It does not matter whether you wield it through magic spells or their mental cantrips—the end result is the same. You change the accepted pattern of existence to suit your own needs. It is an act of divine selfishness.”

He continues to stare down at the world of his birth while pondering the old man’s words. “If they continue as they are, the planet will drown in their numbers. They will run out of food and collapse into warfare and despair.”

“That is often the pattern for emergent worlds,” Kota agrees. “If they survive, they will be stronger for it and find a way into the stars. If not, then they, like thousands of other species before them, will cease to exist before anyone else knows they exist at all. It is the way of the Universe.”

“If I were Sith,” he says, “I would use the technology Palpatine forced me to learn to build an unstoppable army to enslave the population and force them to my will.”

“It is a lonely path,” Kota says. “Palpatine died by Vader’s own hand at the end—Vader chose to give his life for the love of his son, rather than serve evil. That is the nature of evil—often it is stronger in brute strength. Evil takes lives away from us, but those who commit evil will never know true happiness. The acts they commit twist them into something hardly recognizable as human, and because of this they can never know the joys unique to humanity, or in the broader definition to all sentient life.”

“Palpatine seemed pleased enough with himself.”

“But only with himself,” Kota says. “He was alone throughout his life, and he was alone when he died.”

"We are all alone when we die.”

“You weren’t, though,” Kota pointed out. “She was with you, that girl in your other life, in spirit if
not in body. She joined with you and lived your memories to save you. She would be here still, if others did not remove her. And her heart breaks so strongly for you that even now she slips into darkness because of it.”

He knows what Hermione does not—he knows the Slytherin students Hermione cursed will live despite their injuries. The protective charms of the train are more powerful than any one student and keep the worst of Hermione’s magic from killing Malfoy and his followers. But the consequences will still be drastic for the girl who said she loved him.

The girl loved Harry Potter, he reminds himself. Not necessarily who he is now.

If he even knows who he is.

“The world has given me so much pain,” he says. “And I have given it back so much blood. Will I be another sacrifice, nailed to a cross so that those like Malfoy can repent their sins and experience the happiness denied me?”

“Only you can decide that.”

He looks at the old Jedi, and then back down to the world. “You said wielding our power was an active of selfishness; that changing the world to suit out needs is selfishness. If that’s true, then selfishness is our prime motivator.”

“For most, that would be true,” Kota says. “One could argue that even those who act for the betterment or benefit of others do so because of the gratification of their own feelings of worth and accomplishment, rather than for the altruistic good of others. But on the opposite view, it could be argued that selfishness itself can be an altruistic feeling. If you were to expand your circle of inclusion, being selfish for yourself would also be selfishness for your group.”

“Or nation,” he says.

“Or world,” Kota says.

He stares at the orb below, at the billions of people wasting away on a slowly dying planet, and feels a distant, dull throb of emotion. He reaches up a hand, stunned, to feel moisture running down his cheek. “I don’t understand,” he whispers. “Why do I cry only now?”

“Because, finally, you do understand,” Kota says. “You know what to do now.”

Harry looks, but Kota is gone. The stars are gone; the Earth is gone. Instead he sees a slightly pink sheen and hears the distant, gentle beating of his heart that tells him he is alive.

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"Merlin’s Bones, Hermione!" McGonagall said, shaking her head in dismay. “Never, in all my days, has such a talented and promising student disappointed me as badly as you have today. How could you do this?”

Hermione said nothing as she sat before the Headmaster’s desk. Dumbledore looked drawn and exhausted, his gloved wand hand cradled gently on his lap. Beside his desk sat McGonagall, flushed with an anger the Gryffindor had never seen. She faced her head of house with a raised chin, secure in her heart that Malfoy and his gang deserved what she did, and fully prepared to pay the consequences.
“After speaking with the other students and Minister Bones,” Dumbledore began slowly, “the DMLE has decided not to press charges, so long as the situation is handled adequately internally. Minister Bones is familiar with some of the activities that Mr. Malfoy and his housemates participated in last year, and there is the matter of his father being exposed as a Death Eater, even if a dead one.”

Hermione could not help but sag a little from relief, until McGonagall spoke. “Miss Granger, for your vicious assault against your fellow students, I hereby strip you of your prefect status. You are no longer eligible to be Head Girl, which I assure you would have happened next year if not for this.”

Hermione nodded, surprised that it did not hurt as much as the news would have last year. She pulled the prefect badge off the front of her robe and placed it on the headmaster’s desk without comment.

“You are to serve one month of detention,” McGonagall continued. “All Hogsmeade’s weekends for the year are revoked, one hundred points will be deducted from Gryffindor, and you will be placed on formal probation for the remainder of the year. Any violation of this probation will result in your expulsion.”

“Since you have passed your OWLs, your wand would not be snapped if that occurs,” Dumbledore said, “but I would be most distressed.”

“Finally,” McGonagall said, “you are to make a formal apology to Mr. Malfoy and the other students injured in your assault in front of the assembled student body, as soon Malfoy and his friends are released from the Hospital Wing.”

Hermione felt her stomach clench as if struck with a closed fist. The rage that rose up within her on the train rose again and it was difficult to keep her hands from shaking as she stood and slowly pulled off her student robes.

“What are you doing?” McGonagall demanded sharply.

Still fighting to control the rage boiling inside, it was all Hermione could do to keep her voice level. “For the past five years, the staff of this school has allowed Professor Snape and Malfoy to bully and abuse Harry, Ron and me, not to mention all the other students. Neither you nor the Headmaster have ever done so much as lift a finger to stop this abusive behavior, which under no circumstances would have been permitted at any other educational institute in the developed nations of the world. I would rather die than apologize to that…. ” She closed her eyes, struggling with the emotions wanting so badly to make themselves heard. “I respectfully decline to apologize to the son of a Death Eater, a Death Eater who attempted to kill me and my friends last summer. If this means my expulsion, then I accept your punishment gladly.”

Finally she looked into the stunned face of the professor she once admired more than any other. “And frankly, madam, the fact you would even suggest that disgusts me, and has ruined any respect I may have had for you or this school. Malfoy and his friends came to our cabin. He sought us out to again attack us with the most vile and disgusting verbal abuse, just like he has done every day, every year, since we were eleven. But unlike all those other years in which you stood by and let it happen, I stood up for myself. No more! No more! I will never just stand by and accept that shite again!”

She bundled her Gryffindor robes and threw them onto the headmaster’s desk. “My best friend—the man I loved—is a brain-dead vegetable because of people like Malfoy, but also because of you, Professor Dumbledore, for sitting on your arse while children fight your battles for you. If there are any apologies owed, they are owed by you to Harry. And to me.”
McGonagall stammered a moment, genuinely overcome by Hermione’s display. Dumbledore simply stared up at her with watery old eyes. Finally, into the tense silence, Dumbledore said, “You are quite right, Miss Granger. I do owe apologies to both you and Mr. Potter. And if it comes down to you leaving this school or a public apology—I would honestly have you here, my dear. I will amend that portion of your punishment. In addition, for his actions in initiating the conflict, I will also strip both Mr. Malfoy and Miss Parkinson of their prefect statuses. Although you were the first to violence and rightfully deserve the harsher punishment, it is also true that they had a role to play in the altercation. Wouldn’t you agree, Minerva?”

McGonagall blinked, startled out of her seeming daze. “Yes,” she said after a moment. “Yes, I can agree to that.”

“Thank you,” the Headmaster said. “Please wear your student robes, Ms. Granger. In Harry’s absence, I’m afraid a burden has fallen to your shoulders. The light students have lost their leader, and they need a new one. This school needs you, Hermione. Please do not harm the others by forcing us to take further steps.”

Slowly, Hermione put on her robe. “I have never, once in my life, sought out a fight,” she said softly as she did so. “But you must know, Professor, that I will no longer let myself be a passive victim. And I’m going to push the DA to be the same. We will not let Slytherin get away with what they did last year—we can’t, Professor. And more importantly, the staff of this castle shouldn’t let them either.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Dumbledore agreed. “You will serve your detentions with Professor Vector.”

“Yes, Professor,” Hermione said, bowing her head in acknowledgment before she turned and left the office.

Behind her, McGonagall turned and said, “I can’t believe you, Albus! You just let a student dictate terms to you.”

“No, Minerva,” the old wizard said with a shake of his head, “I accepted blame for a situation that is truly, and squarely my fault. Please summon Severus to my office. Now that the First Years have been sorted and the others fed and in their common rooms, I think it best to set Severus’s snakes in line. We can’t afford to lose that girl, Minerva, not so soon after losing Harry.”

“That much I can agree on,” McGonagall finally said.

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Late in the evening of September 29th, as Hermione was trudging back to Gryffindor Tower after serving another night’s detention comprised of helping Professor Vector great Arithmancy quizzes from her Third Year class, a lone witch lay motionless on a bed in the basement of St. Mungos. Two hitwizards sat outside the cell, while a third sat behind a desk at the end of the corridor that separated the secure room from the rest of the hospital.

The wizard behind the desk, a fifteen year veteran hitwizard who joined the Force four months before the supposed disappearance of Voldemort, sat reading a muggle pornographic magazine. The pictures did not move, but Muggle women were much more willing to take their clothes off and engage in interesting activity in front of a camera than witches were.

The door opened without anyone coming in; the wizard did not even look up as he laid the magazine
down, stood without a word, and started walking down the corridor toward the additional two guards. “Falk, Horewith, what’s the status of the prisoner?” he called as he approached his fellow hitwizards.

“Same as before,” Falk, a rookie, said with a bored shrug. “Got fried right good she did. Too bad, she’s pretty in a twisted way. Nice tits.” He grinned. “You know, she’s a Death Eater and brain dead. Wonder why wouldn’t have some fun with her. Who’d know?”

“Her master, for one. *Avada Kedavra!*”

Falks had just a moment to look shocked before the killing spell stole his nineteen-year-old life. His partner, Horewith, stood with his wand out, but suddenly snapped his arms and legs together and fell over under the grip of a silent petrification spell.

The air shimmered as a powerful disillusionment spell gave way to show the Dark Lord himself. “You’ve done well, Devers.”

The hitwizard, Devers, knelt before the Dark Lord. “I live to serve, Master.”

“Take your portkey and go. For your service today you have earned a place in my circle.”

“Thank you, master.” The hitwizard turned Death Eater reached into his robes for his portkey, and a second later was gone.

Voldemort turned to the frozen, terrified hitwizard who remained and levitated him with a casual flick of his wand, until he rested on the stone floor beside the narrow bed that held Bellatrix Lestrange. “It is a great thing you do, my friend,” Voldemort said with a snake-like grin. “Giving your life for a damsel in distress. How truly heroic you are.”

He then started chanting a long spell in classical Greek, moving his wand in an impossibly intricate chain of magic. The paralyzed hitwizard tried to cry out in alarm, but he could make no sound at all as white wisps of vapor seemed to rise up from his body itself. His eyes widened as pain began to seep its way through his body; more and more of the vapor rose up until he was sweating profusely and thrumming under the paralysis spell in silent agony.

Suddenly his eyes rolled up in his head and his breath rushed out in a single, long sigh illustrated by a strand of white vapor that joined the rest in a ball that floated over his now dead body. Voldemort continued chanting and conducting a symphony of the darkest magic conceivable. The white mist began to fall like snow over Bellatrix’s body, flashing each time a flake touched her.

When the last of the vapor fell, her eyes snapped open; she bolted up-right and let out what would have been a blood-curdling scream if Voldemort had not thought to silence her beforehand. She continued screaming silently until Voldemort sat on the bed beside her and placed a pale, cold hand against her cheek.

“Enough, Bella. It is over. You are well again.”

She blinked and snapped her lips shut, but began shaking. He lifted the silencing spell. “Master,” she shivered. “It hurt so badly. Worse even than the *Cruciatus*. I failed you. Please forgive me. I failed.”

Anguish gave way to wild, uncontrolled tears. The tears were not of weakness, but of rage that she failed her Master. Voldemort knew this, and whispered, “Shhh” in a fashion that could be described as tender coming from anyone else. “You survived, Bella. All others died, but you survived. For this, I forgive you.”
“Thank you, Master.”

She clung to him until the shaking passed, and Voldemort allowed it with something approaching a smile. “Bella, I must see what happened. Open your mind to me.”

“Always, Master.”

Given the fragile nature of Bellatrix’s mind, Voldemort entered with but a fraction of his normal power, until he found the disastrous raid that was supposed to end the last of Potter’s friends and nail the lid tightly over the coffin of Dumbledore’s hopes. Instead it cost him several Inner Circle Death Eaters and a total of nineteen of his best fighters.

He watched through Bellatrix’s eyes as Harry Potter slaughtered his fighters as if they were mere mannequins and he a warrior born. His movement and speed was both beauteous and awe-inspiring, so much so he could not even bring himself to feel rage at the loss of his best fighters. No, it was obvious that whatever happened to Harry after he fell through the Veil had changed him. He was no longer just a thin lad with more courage than skill. Now he had the skill to back up the courage. More than skill—he somehow employed a wandless magic that was both direct and brutally powerful. He did not display any transfiguration or conjuration, just banishing, summoning, that odd but clearly powerful electrical attack, and a physical fighting style that spoke of intense training.

Voldemort began to wonder if the whole story of Harry falling into the Veil was a lie—an excuse to get Harry training. He did not recognize the boy’s fighting style, and he had studied abroad enough to be able to recognize most muggle fighting styles. But there was no denying it was effective.

He backed out of Bellatrix’s mind. “Are you ready to go home, Bella?”

“Yes, Master. Thank you. Thank you!”

Voldemort removed his portkey—the skull of an infant Muggle girl he used in one of his more interesting rituals—and placed it in her hand. “Go now, and I will join you in time.”

“Thank you!” she said once more before she disappeared.

Voldemort disillusioned himself again and left the secure corridor. There was no question what he was about to do was a risk—but it was a calculated risk. The boy that killed his fighters was too dangerous to play games with. So he walked through the doors of the security corridor and to the stairs until he reached the long term ward.

Two aurors stood outside the last door in the hall, while a third sat at the mediwitch’s station in a similar pattern as the basement. Voldemort silenced himself and cast an additionally scent-masking smell, trying his best to avoid detection.

Unfortunately for the Dark Lord, the aurors were more skilled and attentive than their hitwizard counterparts, and none were his agents. Unfortunately for the aurors, Voldemort was very, very powerful. The moment he stepped into the hall proper, a ward began wailing in alarm. The nearest auror stood with his arms raised and tried pushing one of the terrified mediwitches out of the way. That momentary delay allowed Voldemort to cast an explosive curse unopposed.

The desk exploded like a bomb, killing the auror and mediwitch instantly, and seriously wounding another that was nearby. The aurors at the end of the hall responded with surprising skill—one cast a barrage of detection spells that, despite Voldemort’s power, broke through his masking spells—the other instantly started casting killing curses.

Voldemort summoned stone walls and banished them at the aurors as he ran—the killing curses
shattered the stone into a powder that Voldemort continued to banish toward them. The first auror cast a wind charm, only to meet a conjured spike headfirst. The inertia from the spike drove the woman back against the wall and impaled her there, unmoving.

Her partner screamed out in alarm even while he continued to cast killing curses. He never noticed the conjured snake until the reptile latched its fangs into his leg. He screamed both in pain and terror and dropped his guard in doing so. That momentarily lapse was enough, and a second later he joined his partner in death.

Voldemort turned and cast a powerful temporary ward to block the hall off from the reinforcements that were undoubtedly on their way. Only when that was done did he turn his attention to the room the two Aurors were guarding. He pushed the door open and stepped into the small, private room, fully prepared to put Potter out of his misery.

Just on the inside of the door, he stood silently and stared at the empty bed. A part of him wanted to shout out his rage, but another exulted. Potter lived, somehow, and would eventually come after him. It would fall on Voldemort himself to be ready.

“Soon, Harry,” he whispered. “Soon.”
Chapter Summary

He is not who he used to be.

He called himself Harry, but only because he did not know what else to call himself. He did not feel like Harry Potter, any more than he felt like Darth Shaddix. Confusing matters even more were the memories he stole from Bellatrix Lestrange. He sensed additional memories from Delores Umbridge and Nymphadora Tonks, but decided those would not serve him and so did not incorporate them into this new, gestalt being he called Harry. The remaining three memories were all that remained of the personalities the mind-healers destroyed in their effort to heal him.

Although he did not physically awake, he was aware of many things. He was aware of the people who occasionally came and checked on his body, coating him in a balm-like magic that prevented sores from forming. He felt magic from the bed itself, constantly stimulating his muscles to prevent atrophy—a technique few in the Empire employed, save the cloners in Kamino.

He was aware of the passage of days through the sensation of sunlight on his skin each morning when someone opened the windows of his room.

He did not wake, because he was building himself; he took memories from each life and used them to create a new personality unique to him. As much as he disliked the childhood Harry Potter experienced, the neglect and occasional verbal abuse was nothing compared to the constant, vicious verbal abuse Bellatrix experienced, or when she was older the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her father.

Shaddix of course had no childhood, and so Harry retained Harry Potter’s experiences. He retained many aspects of Bellatrix’s memories, though—she was a brilliant student, although never given much credit because of her overly mean spirit. Being raised a monster, being a monster was all she knew. However, her mastery of magic was unquestioned and he retained every memory of it. He also sifted through and kept her memories of Voldemort—his confidence in her and his trust of her; he was the only one not to look at her as a sexual object, and for his lack of physical affection she loved and desired him above all, though she knew full well she could never have him.

Finally there was Darth Shaddix. He retained only those memories of his training and education—early on he was subjected to multiple rounds of direct cerebral implantation for the technical knowledge that anyone of rank had to know to survive. He kept it all in the building project that was Harry James Potter.

Although he was aware of the passage of time, he did not know how many days had passed when he became aware of a tremor in the Force that warned him of fast-approaching danger. This, he knew, was a sign that the time for healing and reconstruction was at an end.

Because of the magic of the bed he slept in, he did not experience any muscle atrophy from his long rest, though he felt stiff and sore regardless. Still, he knew it could have been much worse. He wore only a hospital gown, and a loose one at that. From Lestrange he knew a simple spell that could transfigure the gown into functional clothes, but lacked a wand.
His memories of the Force, however, made him wonder if a wand was truly necessary at all. He closed his eyes, centered his power, and with a wave of his hand pronounced the transfiguration. He could feel magic gathering in his fingers—enough to make his digits tingle with the power, but that was all that happened. Without his wand, there was no conduit to let the magic flow.

He would just have to make do. With the alarm blaring already from the incursion, he did not hesitate to throw the window open. He felt magical resistance, but for this his Sith power could flow, and with a burst of Force energy broke through the magical seals to reveal a dirty alley three levels down.

Harry did not hesitate and hopped out of the window, using the Force to cushion his landing in the alley below. Barefoot and almost naked, Harry concentrated on a cloud of misdirection around himself—employing a time-honored Sith technique—and walked stiffly into the street. Despite his lack of dress, none of the people on the street noticed him.

Glad as he was in only a hospital gown, he was hesitant to drop his shroud. Instead, he concentrated on one particular cab driver and summoned the man in the Force, careful to keep the illusion up of an ordinary, unremarkable young man.

“Where you go?” the bearded, turban-wearing man said in badly broken English.

“Surrey,” Harry said, drawing from his still distant-seeming memories. “Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey.”

“Long drive, cost much.”

“Fine.”

The car stared moving and Harry allowed himself a moment to relax. He could feel his muscles protesting his sudden movement after so long. He would need food soon, and a place to meditate and rest. Though many of his memories were still disjoined and haphazard, he remembered that Privet Drive was empty, and at least the last time he was there it had food, water and power. There he would obtain food and a place to rest and orient himself.

He did not even realize he fell asleep until a hard hand shook him awake. “You no got da money!” the driver was shouting at him, his face was twisted by anger. Harry looked around and saw they were in a familiar neighborhood.

The man pushed Harry again. Harry caught his wrist in a painful hold and then stabbed brutally into his mind. The man’s face went blank as he handed Harry his coins back, and then reached into his own wallet and handed over all the bills he had. Not a word passed between them, but as the driver pulled away with no knowledge of where he was or how he got there, Harry possessed a little more currency and the expectation of shelter. The question or right or wrong never entered into it.

Once he oriented himself, he realized he was facing the wrong side of the street and turned around until he was looking at his childhood home.

The memories of Harry Potter did not match the house he now saw. The lawn was overgrown; the shrubs untrimmed. The windows looked dirty, and across the door were several strips of yellow tape. He looked around in the dimming evening light for traffic before he walked to the house.

He removed the tape and tried the door, but it was locked. A brief touch of the Force fixed that and he stepped into the house. It was exactly as he last saw it. There was the broken tea table; there was the frozen dinner Tonks fed to him with it’s potion. He cleaned it up, wrinkling his nose at the smell
of decomposing food.

All the pictures were still there on the walls—of horse-faced Petunia, Walrus-shaped Vernon and whale-sized Dudley. All Petunia’s precious knick-knacks still maintained their vigil over the silent room. The sofas and chairs were still where Harry remembered them, as was the television, as were the three large blood stains in the beige-colored carpet. The carpet had tape around them. Colored needles marked various points around the room, tracing blood-splatter, Harry presumed.

The Durlseys were dead, and Harry felt nothing. His own abuse was a distant thing—a fact he knew but not an emotion he felt any longer. His disappointment was simply the loss of protection. But though the Dursleys were dead, the home remained, and possible shelter as well.

A check of the icebox showed that the house no longer had power. There was water, fortunately, but nothing left in the refrigerator was edible. A check of the pantry found a bag of crisps, a few cans of fruit and vegetables, and a canned ham.

At least he would not starve.

He ate in contemplative silence, staring at the kitchen where he spent so many hours cooking for other people’s enjoyment. He could see memories of the place as clearly as if they happened yesterday. Most of the memories were dominated by Aunt Petunia yelling at him, or hitting him with her frying pan. He saw it happen in his mind, but felt no lingering emotion from it at all.

When he finished eating, he made his way up the stairs until he reached his old room. The beat-up old wardrobe still had a few clothes that he gathered up. He then moved to Dudley’s room and began rummaging through his cousin’s things for useful items.

He paused at the collection of pornographic movies and magazines, but then threw them on his cousin’s bed. He had enough to think about without adding in naked women. He finally found what he was looking for—a stash of rolled up pound notes next to several bags of various drugs—marijuana and meth, most likely. Little Duddykins was quite the entrepreneur. He pocketed the cash and moved on as he uncovered various other stashes of fast food, and a gun.

Harry could disassemble, clean and reassemble a Blastech E-11 blaster rifle with his eyes closed in 30 seconds. However, he had never held nor fired any type of primitive projectile weapon before. Still, he imagined it might come in useful until he found his wand, or built a lightsaber.

He moved onto Vernon and Petunia’s room, and was not surprised to find another hidden cache of cash and a medicine cabinet filled with Vicodin and Percocet. Once he gathered as much money as he could, he stripped out of the hospital gown and tested the water—there was no hot water, but the Force was his ally in heating the water up.

He luxuriated in a long hot bath before he climbed out, toweled himself dry and got dressed in the oversized hand-me-downs from Dudley. He then went to the kitchen and ate the last of the crisps before he locked the doors, climbed the stairs and sought out the guest bedroom. He kept all the recovered money and a few bags of snacks in a worn backpack with Dudley’s gun by the bed and laid down, fully dressed, to sleep.

~~Broken~~

~~Broken~~

He had no idea what time it was when the Force alerted him that he was no longer alone in the house. The moment he felt the foreign presence he snapped fully awake and ready for action. He
reached for the gun before pulling the backpack on, and moved silently to the door of the guest room where he slept.

He heard a sharp creak from the stairs, followed by a harsh whisper to be quiet. He quieted his thoughts and reached out his senses until he felt four people coming up the stairs with another two remaining behind.

Straining his senses, he heard a gruff voice say, “He’s not in his bedroom.”

“The wards said someone came here,” a higher voice said—this one either female or a young male.

“Here, look at these Muggle monthlies!” another voice said. “They’re full of naked birds!”

“Lefier, you fool, get back here!” the gruff voice ordered. “Do you think the Dark Lord cares about naked birds?”

“He likes Bella enough,” another harsh voice said.

Harry recognized that voice. Like a knife in his skull, one of Bellatrix’s memories came screeching into his consciousness—of her wedding night, and a harsh voice looming over her, and that very same voice saying, “We share everything, girl, even our women.”

Rabastan Lestrange, one of Voldemort’s inner circle. These people were in the house to kill him. He relaxed then, settling into a cold calm as he gathered the Force to him. The door handle turned and he did nothing to stop it from opening as he flattened himself against the wall. A figure in black robes with a silver mask stepped in, scanning the room before him.

Harry did not hesitate; he pointed the gun at the back of the man’s head and pulled the trigger in the blink of an eye. The figure dropped, but before he even reached the carpet Harry spun into the second man’s wand, shoving the pistol’s barrel up under the second man’s chin and pulling the trigger. The weapon was too small to have accurate aim beyond a close distance, so he closed the distance as much as possible.

The two other wizards shouted in alarm. One of them was Rabastan—Harry kicked hard at the man’s groin, sending him to his knees, while he chopped down at the other man’s wand arm, breaking bone. Both men groaned until Harry shot each point-blank in the head. He was halfway to the stairs when the two back-up wizards arrived.

With a push of the Force, he sent both went flying backward down steps. Harry followed in a single leap and landed on one figure’s neck, snapping it. He put a bullet into the figure’s head to be safe, before somersaulting over the last attacker.

The startled wizard spun around, trying to acquire a target, only to have Harry’s pistol shoved through the eye-hole of his mask and a bullet through his brain half a second later.

The pistol was empty, and Harry had no means of getting more bullets. He threw it back into his backpack and then began searching the bodies for their purses and wands. He found one wand that responded at least a little, plus several galleons and sickles.

He knew that the house was no longer safe, if in fact it ever was. He ran back to the kitchen for food to take, and as he did so saw a series of hooks with keys on them, including one for Vernon Dursley’s Vauxhall Cavalier.

By the time the police arrived, Harry was already out of Surrey heading towards the A3 ramp. He drove the route they took to visit Aunt Marge. He paused at a petrol station to fill up using some of
Dudley’s stash of cash, and purchased a map. Back in the Vauxhall, he studied the map intently, following different routes north.

It was only when his eyes traced themselves into Scotland that he realized where he was going, and why: Hermione. Whatever else was true, he needed to find Hermione.

Eventually he reached M40 and drove north toward Birmingham, settling in for a long drive.

He stopped twice more for petrol before entering Scotland, and then a third time in Glasgow before he continued even further north. By the time he reached the small village of Dalchalloch, it was already late morning on the last day of September—he’d driven straight through the night.

Driving over the dam at the end of Loch Errachty, Harry looked across the stark, beautiful landscape through the eyes of a former Sith, astounded at the sheer amount of space the Earth still possessed. He had no doubt that in time this space would be buried under housing for the teeming masses of humanity that would eventually crush out the rest of the world.

The road ended a few miles north of the Loch at the base of a morse-covered range of hills and low mountains. The place looked thoroughly uninviting, except for the subtle but definite pull of magic over the hill. Pocketing the keys, he slung the backpack over his shoulder and started walking.

Harry Potter, Hogwarts student, never learned how to cast glamours. Darth Shaddix, Dark Lord of the Sith, did. Of course, it was not a glamour so much as it was a projection of the Force around him, altering the perception of others to his features. When he crested one low hill and felt the Muggle-repelling wards around Hogsmeade, he started projecting a bland, featureless and forgettable face around him in the Force.

The town looked at once the same as he remembered from his last sojourn there as a student, and completely decrepit and primitive. The town teemed with magic because the builders were not competent enough to build anything that could stand without magic to uphold it. It gave all the buildings a ridiculous, story-book appearance. Additionally, he knew the town employed extensive expansion charms, and so the buildings from the outside were all significantly smaller than they were from the inside.

There were a few people moving about the streets, but since it was not a Hogsmeade Weekend apparently, there was not the normal rush of students around. In fact, in the absence of the students the town seemed strangely empty. Harry suspected that without the students, the town itself would simply dry up for lack of funds.

He found the owl post near the middle of town—a narrow building that looked more like one of Aunt Marge’s dog houses than a human dwelling. However, the belfry above it teemed with dozens of owls.

The interior was occupied by a single elderly witch asleep behind the counter. He cleared his throat twice to get her attention, before finally slamming a galleon down on the counter. The old witch work with a snort. “What!” she asked.

“I’d like to send an owl,” Harry said.

“Right, two sickles.”

Harry removed the galleon and replaced it with two silver coins. He dug in his pack for a scrap of paper, and using a quill on the desk, penned a brief message. The owl, when it came, was a common barn owl which made him think of Hedwig for the first time.
As if his thought were enough, a large white owl, easily three times the size of the barn owl, swooped into the post with a strange, barking-like growl that send the barn owl scrambling. “What’s this, then?” the witch demanded. “That’s not one of mine.”

“No, she’s not,” Harry said, staring at the owl in awe. “Looks like I won’t need your services after all.”

“No refunds!”

“I don’t care,” Harry said absently as he carried Hedwig on his arm out of the post. He sat down on the porch and placed her gently on his leg. “You’re here. You’re really here.”

The large white owl stared intently at him, and through the rush of mish-mashed memories, he felt an old bond stirring. Though he never considered it while he was a boy, now for the first time he felt what it truly meant to have a familiar bond. Hedwig knew what he needed, sometimes even before he did. “Brilliant, girl,” he whispered, stroking her feathers. “I’m so glad to see you. Will you take this to Hermione? In her dorm room, if she’s there?”

The owl bobbed her head before launching herself into the sky. “Brilliant,” Harry said again.

Hermione had taken to studying in her room. It was easier that way, really, to avoid all the looks. She never appreciated how frustrating and difficult it must have been for Harry until that year, when the whole school knew what she did, and how she was punished for it. So, instead of the library or the common room, she studied alone in her bedroom.

She was there between classes when her dorm room window slammed open on its own accord and Hedwig flew in. She knew that the castle allowed owls to go unimpeded, but this was the first time she’d ever had an owl come to her room.

“Hello, girl,” she said with a sad smile. “Are you alright? Is anything wrong?”

Hedwig alit on her desk and held out her claw, in which she clasped a piece of lined muggle paper. Hermione stared at it in confusion for a moment, wondering who would be able to use Hedwig to send her a note.

Trembling, she took the piece of paper and read in silence: _Before the dragon, you told me to be careful. Where we first met Padfoot, 2 p.m. Bring everything._

It was not Harry’s handwriting. Harry had a scraggly, unkempt style. This hand was strong, with sure, decisive strokes of the quill. It was definitely a male hand, but not the one she grew so familiar with. And yet… only Harry would have known what she said before the first task of the TriWizard Tournament. She never told Ron, and doubted Harry would have either.

But Harry was dead. Dumbledore told her; the healers told her—hell, even the Minister of Magic told her that everything Harry ever was died that day in the healing chamber. And yet, someone who knew something only Harry could know sent a note using Harry’s bonded familiar.

_Harry’s been dead before, _she thought to herself. _That’s never stopped him from coming back._

With a sigh she stood and looked around the room she shared with three other girls. Her roommates had been sympathetic, but also distant and slightly nervous. The word of her actions against the
Slytherins was now legendary—the fact that Pavarti Patil was now the Sixth-Year prefect instead of Hermione was proof that even Hermione Granger could get into trouble. And because of that, despite Dumbledore’s insistence that she was a leader, no one was willing to fall behind her to be led. The others were afraid of her, and after so many days of that treatment, Hermione began to think it for the best.

She was seventeen years old as of September 19, meaning she was an adult in the eyes of the wizarding world. Having done her research on her options should she be expelled, Hermione knew that technically she could leave Hogwarts at any time now that she was over 17 and had her OWLs. She might not be able to come back, but she could leave. Somehow, she knew that was exactly what would happen if she went.

But did she want to? That question was why she was pacing, trying her best to decide. Lost and confused, she left her dorm and wondered down to the Common Room. It was not yet lunch, but the classes were over for morning, so the room was mostly full. She was not surprised to see Ginny talking quietly with Neville—she’d evidently given up on Dean.

Ron was playing chess with a Seventh Year, while Lavender Brown hovered nearby, her tie loose and hanging down around a scandalously unbuttoned blouse. It frustrated Hermione a little, seeing just how much cleavage the other girl had compared to Hermione’s thoroughly unimpressive chest. Ron was noticing Hermione’s roommate as well, glancing occasionally over and losing track of his game—it looked like Cormac was doing much, much better than he should have been.

The Creevey brothers were talking excitedly over photos (probably of Lavender’s chest), while the rest of the Quidditch team hovered around another couch, talking to Katie Bell, the new team captain. Everyone had someone to talk to, or at least be around—everyone but her.

She spotted Parvati, the newly appointed prefect, speaking to their other roommate, Fay Dunbar. As she did so, she felt a sudden release of tension she didn’t even know she had. Without even realizing at first, she made her decision, and somehow she felt lighter and freer because of it.

She walked across the room to her roommates. “Hello, Parvati,” she said with a half-smile. “May I ask you something?”

Fay, a slightly chubby girl with short brown hair but a truly beautiful smile, frowned at the interruption, while Parvati looked at Hermione for a full second before summoning a thin smile. “I suppose so. What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering if I could burrow, or maybe even buy, that mokeskin purse of yours. I have an allowance of fifty galleons for the year—I’d give it all to you for that purse.”

Parvati stared, lips agape—fifty galleons was a significant amount of money. Behind her, Fay blushed at the amount mentioned. “It’s only worth ten,” Parvati finally said.

“I can’t go get my own,” Hermione said with a shrug, “and I wanted to study the expansion charms on it. I might break it doing so, so I…well, would you be willing to sell it?”

“My father would not look kindly for me taking that much money,” Parvati said. Hermione had to admit that, whatever else was true, Parvati was a genuinely kind and honest person, despite being the gossip queen with Lavender.

“Then say fifteen—ten for the purse, and five for the trouble of having to replace it,” Hermione said. “Please…I’m going spare, Parvati. I need something to do, to keep my mind off…things.”
The other girl visibly relented—Hermione could see it in the slump of her shoulders and the way her frown changed from one of distrust to one of sympathy. “Sure, Hermione. Come on, I’ll show you where it is. Fay, I’ll be back down in a minute.”

Minutes later, Hermione held a ruby-red purse in hand. With a flick of her wand and the word “Pack!” every one of her belongings flew from her trunk and night table into the shrunken purse, each item shrinking itself to fit. She thought seriously about leaving a note to explain her absence, but truly she wasn’t ready to burn any bridges she did not have to burn. Instead, she left the room and walked up to the Seventh Floor girl’s room. It was not hard to find Katie Bell’s bed—it was the one festooned with Hollyhead Harpy posters. What really surprised Hermione, though, was the portrait of the Gryffindor Team from Harry’s Third Year. In the portrait, Katie kept ruffling Harry, much to his annoyance.

Hermione stifled a surge of jealousy of this one moment Katie had with him that Hermione never would. Instead, she searched until she found Katie’s Nimbus 1000, a good performing broom, according to Harry, and one Katie would never trust to the broom shed. She shuffled through Katie’s things until she found parchment and a quill to leave a note apologizing for borrowing the broom and telling the other girl where she would find it, and then walked to the open window.

“Oh Merlin, Harry,” she whispered as she climbed up onto the edge. It was cooling already, though fortunately the rain that day had already come and gone. Still, it was a two hundred foot drop down onto the roof of the second-floor corridor from the tower. In the distance she could see the lake, while opposite that she could see a few tendrils of smoke from Hogsmeade.

She secured the purse around her shoulder, said a quiet prayer to anything that might listen, and then biting her lip she jumped out the window with the broom clutched tightly between her thighs.

Damned, but she hated to fly.
Joined

Chapter Summary

Some choices are easier than others.

Hermione walked up the creaking wooden steps of the Shrieking Shack with her wand drawn, fighting to control her breath. Pausing on the last step, she closed her eyes, counted to ten, and then jumped into the first floor with her wand ready.

The moment she did so a strong hand caught her wand from the side and pulled it down, ripping it from her fingers. A foot somehow came around hers while the other arm pushed, sending her to the floor. She caught herself and spun around onto her back just as a figure landed on her, straddling her to the floor.

Harry towered over her, his hand flickering with blue light just about her head. “Tell me something only Harry Potter would know,” he demanded.

“I cast the spell that freed Sirius during our Third Year,” Hermione said quickly. “*Bombarda*. Sirius rode away on Buckbeak, a hippogriff.”

Harry lowered his hand and swung his leg off her, before handing her wand back to her. “You came.”

She scanned his face—his eyes; the flare of his nostrils as he breathed; the slight blush of his cheeks. “Harry? Is it really you?”

“Mostly,” he said, though again without smiling. “I remember most of his life; his abusive uncle and aunt, and the cousin who beat him. I also remember the way the Imperial guards beat him until Harry died and the Emperor made Shaddix from the ashes. I remember Bellatrix Lestrange’s life as well.”

Hermione reared back, covering her hand. “Harry, I don’t….”

“There was nothing left,” he admitted to her, looking her in the eyes and speaking somberly. “There were memories preserved in the Force, but the emotions that came with those memories seemed distant, as if they belonged to another. The personalities, Harry’s and Shaddix’s, were both destroyed. It was a good sacrifice, to save you.”

His words were impossible—he was telling her that Harry was dead, again. That made twice now that he was lost, only to have her hope rekindled and then cruelly crushed. The new rage boiled to the surface, and with an unarticulated scream she began hitting his chest, over and over again, until arms came around her shoulders and the rage melted into a deep, soul-wrenching grief. “He can’t be gone,” she sobbed into his chest. “Not again. Not again.”

“Not all,” he whispered to her. “Do you remember the Yule Ball? Do you know what he felt the first time he saw how you looked?”

Hermione closed her eyes. “He smiled at me and said I looked beautiful.”
“He said that to cover his pain. He felt regret, Hermione. Terrible loss, regret and pain that he would never have you as his own. Your Harry did not feel like he deserved you. He was never willing to take what he wanted because he was raised to believe he never deserved it. As brave as he was, your Harry was passive. He was shaped and raised to be a martyr.”

Despite her pain, Hermione could not deny that. “And as much as I loved him,” she whispered, “I hated that he would not stand up for himself.”

A hand grabbed her hair forcefully, but not painfully, and levered her head back until she was looking into his eyes. “I am not Harry,” he whispered, “but much of who and what I am came from him. When I look at you, I see what Harry saw; I see a young woman of stunning beauty and intelligence. I want what he wanted. But I am not Harry, Hermione Granger. I have the rage and power of a Sith Lord within me, and I will stand up for myself, and I will take what I can.”

They were still on their knees, facing each other on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, and yet at that moment they could have been in Notre Dame and she would not have noticed. All she saw was the brilliant, glinting green of his eyes as his lips descended on hers. It was not the groping, uncertain kiss of inexperience; his lips locked onto hers with firm, demanding expertise and a heat that blossomed within her stomach and made her suddenly wet.

Their lips parted, and for the first time Hermione saw a sliver of Harry in those beautiful green eyes of his. “Tell me you love me,” she whispered.

“There is too much of Harry Potter within me to not love you,” he answered. “I left the hospital last evening. I wasn’t even sure of who I was or what to do, but I was sure of one thing—I had to find you. Voldemort came for me in the hospital, and Death Eaters came for me last night. If I am to succeed and survive, I need you, Hermione. I need you. I want you.” As he said this he reached down and grabbed her arse, pulling her body even closer to his. “I want you.”

The last three months—since watching Harry follow his godfather through the Veil to watching him slaughter nineteen Death Eaters to defend her, and finally to see him bleeding out and dying in his shattered mindscape—all came boiling up into tidal wave that swept away conscious thought. She desperately kissed him even while she reached down to pull his shirt off. His own hands started making quick work of her pullover. She did not even notice her bra was off until he felt his lips on her breasts, setting fire to her body.

“Oh Merlin,” she gasped. Strong hands lifted her up off her knees before just as quickly laying her flat on the wooden floor. She lifted her hips as he struggled momentarily with her belt, before pulling her pants and knickers down. For the first time in her life Hermione was naked before a boy, and yet she felt no fear or embarrassment.

He looked down at her for a long second, his eyes devouring her body from her scalp to the junction of her legs. “You are so beautiful,” he whispered, before he bent down and tasted her sex.

When he finally entered her, the pain surprised her. However, it lasted only a moment, swept away like everything else by his passion and the sheer, overwhelming power of his body slamming into hers. He was not gentle, nor kind. He took what he wanted, and she gave everything she had without hesitation, crying out at the way he seemed to know just where to touch. She felt his mind in hers and opened her thoughts completely, and in so doing felt his power stroking not just her mind, but what felt like her magical core as well, until her body virtually throbbed with unbelievable, indescribable pleasure. Through the Force and his own body, Harry brought her into a state of prolonged orgasm that left her shaking and in tears when finally they both finished.

He began to roll off her, but she wrapped her legs around his arse and held him still. “Stay in me,”
she whispered. “Please don’t leave.”

With hot lips nuzzling against her neck, he whispered, “Where would I go? You are the only home I know.”

Hermione watched Harry as he drove; he drove with casual ease, though she knew for a fact he had never been behind the wheel of an auto before in his life. He told her about spending the night at the Dursleys and finding the cash and a gun in Dudley’s bedroom. He also told her of the Death Eater attack that netted him a few more galleons.

As he drove, she found herself touching him—his shoulder, his thigh. Sometimes she simply held his hand, while other times she had to restrain herself from snogging him senseless even as he drove.

They were going to a safe house in Newcastle Upon Tyne, a place that Hermione knew intimately but no one else in the wizarding world would. It was four in the afternoon, and they were an hour away.

Now that the rush of excitement was over, Hermione wondered how she came to be with this incredible, confusing boy. Even when she was just a girl of eleven, Harry made her do things she would never have imagined—things like brewing Polyjuice Potion to sneak into Slytherin or using a time-turner to save a wanted murder and a magical beast from the Ministry were not things Hermione Granger would ever have done on her own. But with Harry, anything was possible.

It was more than just thought, if she were honest with herself. Not only was anything possible, but she would do anything possible if he asked her. Even if it meant fleeing from the very authority figures who enlisted her help in the first place.

He made love to her. Her whole body seemed to melt into a pile of goo at the brilliant memory. He filled her up so completely, crushing her and loving her until she could not breathe, and she found herself wanting more. She wasn’t even sure it was her Harry she made lave too—her Harry would never have done that. Then again, she would not have done that with her Harry either, not like that.

Through the whole length of 5th year, Hermione raged not just against the injustice of Umbridge’s daily assaults on education in general, and Harry Potter specifically, but she also deplored Harry’s unwillingness to do anything about it. It absolutely infuriated her to levels of frustration she never experienced before that her friend just stood by and let himself be abused. The anger grew so unbearable that for the first time she began to think maybe Harry wasn’t the one for her after all.

She had only two boys in her life, and ever the practical one, she knew that her dating options were limited. It would either be one, or the other. She first began to suspect Harry would never work for her because of Cho Chang during Fourth Year. However, despite his apparent crush on the older Ravenclaw, Hermione and Harry spent more time together alone that year than ever before. With Ron being such a prat, it fell to her to support him and help him, and she cherished that time so much.

But then came 5th Year and Umbridge, and Harry’s absolute unwillingness to stand up for himself shattered her illusions. She realized for the first time that Harry would go through hell for anyone but himself, and that realization in a real sense broke her heart, because it also meant that Harry would never do anything for himself; he would never try for anything he wanted. The way he was raised broke something inside him. Instead of reaching for what he wanted, he passively accepted
whatever fate, Dumbledore or Voldemort threw at him—he didn’t try out for Quidditch, McGonagall saw him flying and just recruited him to the team. He did not try for the TriWizard Tournament, he was enrolled against his will. The one thing he tried for himself was an unmitigated disaster—Cho. And yet when others were in danger, he was astounding. Fighting Quirrell, the Basilisk, Dementors, and Death Eaters, Harry showed he was outlandishly brave, but only when it came to fighting for others.

Hermione knew more than most people thought. She knew Harry had a bad home life, and she knew Harry was unhappy. It wasn’t that he was constantly mean or upset. It was that he so rarely smiled. She could count on her hand the moments she had seen genuine smiles on his face. He seemed, more than anything, lost. She wanted to protect him, yes, but to a certain extent she also wanted him to stand up for himself. For years, he would react with astounding heroism and a willingness to sacrifice himself for others, but he would never actually stand up for himself.

She wanted him to stand up to Malfoy and punch the prat as hard as he could. She wanted him to stand up and denounce Umbridge for the evil fool she was. She wanted him to be the man she always thought he could be. But he would never do that for himself, only for others. It was at once endearing and frustrating. Because it also meant that he would never act on his own for a girl. Cho was proof of that. Harry acted like a scared little boy around her because he had no idea what to do. And that lack of confidence in himself is what finally convinced Hermione after fourth year that… that she would never be his. As much as she cherished him, Hermione needed a boyfriend who was strong enough to stand up for himself as well as for others. Say what she would about Ron, the Weasley was always willing to stand up for himself. Even if he frustrated her by his many, many unpleasant traits, he was strong-willed.

This boy beside her driving with such casual confidence was not her Harry. He was somehow better—as if all the best parts of Harry were distilled into something pure, and then injected into a stronger-willed man with Harry’s face. Looking at him now, she knew with certainty that she loved this boy. She loved him with every part of her being, and the thought of not being with him was painful. She loved him now because, due to whatever happened, he was willing to stand up for himself and be loved. He was finally the man she had always wanted him to be.

“Harry,” she said, speaking for the first time in fifty miles, “I need to call my parents. They deserve to know why I left school.”

He glanced at her with a reserved, speculative gaze before nodding. “Okay,” he said simply.

With that approval, she removed the gift her mother gave her—a brand new Motorola StarTac mobile phone from her endless purse. It did not work while at Hogwarts, but she used it on the train to let her parents know when to pick her up during the winter and summer hols.

She dialed and waited for the answer, smiling when she heard a familiar voice answer. “Hello, Granger residence.”

“Hello, Mum.”

“Hermione! Where are you? Your professor’s said you left school without even telling anyone!”

“I can’t tell you everything, Mum. Not yet. I will though, I promise. I just wanted to call and let you know I was safe. I’m with....”

“With who, Hermione?”

“Mum, he’s alive. He came back again.”
“Who, Harry?”

“I’m with him now, Mum.” With the phone still at her ear, she was looking at Harry, smiling brilliant with glistening eyes. “We’re safe, and I’m where I need to be. He needs me right now, and I’m not going to let him go through this alone. I’ll call again when I can. Just know that I’m safe.” She closed the phone before her mother had a chance to start yelling at her.

“I love you too,” he said softly without looking from the road. His hand reached down to take hers and squeezed it.

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Elspeth Howsham looked up from the pot of stew she was making when she heard the ring of her flat’s doorbell. She turned the fire down, wiped her hands on her apron, and made her way across her two-bedroom home and opened the door.

She stifled her surprise to find her granddaughter on the other side of the with a boy. “Goodness, Hermione! What are you doing here?”

Hermione gave an apologetic smile. “Hello, Nana. I’m so sorry to do this, but I wasn’t sure where else to go. Could we come in for a moment?”

“Well, of course. Who’s your friend there?”

“Nana, this is Harry Potter. Harry, this is my Nan, Elspeth Cressida Howsham.”

Elspeth blinked in confusion as she studied the strong-looking boy at Hermione’s side. “Well, hello there,” she said, taking his hand. “I’m a little confused, though. Wasn’t your friend Harry Potter… well, didn’t he die this last summer?”

“Yes,” Harry said, “but I’m feeling better now, thank you.”

“Nana, it’s a long story. Can we come in, please?”

Elspeth stood aside and let the young couple walk into her two bedroom flat. The two collapsed on the sofa, obviously exhausted by the day. They sat almost on top of each other, touching in an intimate fashion that meant only one thing to the grandmother.

The moment shattered when a large white owl swooped in through her open window as if the ruddy thing owned the flat, alit to the back of the couch, and spread her considerable wings over the boy as if in benediction.

“Hello, Hedwig,” Hermione said with fond familiarity. “It really is him. Amazing, isn’t it? But you knew that, didn’t you?”

The owl made a barking sound that did not seem to match its elegant appearance and then bobbed its head as if answering an affirmative to the question. “Hermione,” Elspeth finally said once her heart stopped threatening to beat out of her chest, “why is there a huge white owl sitting on my couch?”

“This is Harry’s familiar, Hedwig. Hedwig, this is my Nana, Elspeth Howsham.”

The bird ducked its head, as if bowing. Elspeth sank down onto the edge of her coffee table. “Why did you call that bird his familiar?”
Hermione looked at her, as if surprised. “That’s right, Mum and Dad never told you, did they?”

“Told me what?”

“That school I go to in Scotland? It’s a school for witchcraft and wizardry. I’m a witch, Nana. I have a wand and can do magic and even ride a broomstick, though I don’t like to. And Harry is a wizard.”

“Right, and I’m the ruddy Queen of England.”

“Your seventeen,” Harry told Hermione. “The Trace is off your wand. Show her.”

Hermione brightened. “You’re right!” She stood, slipped her wand from where she used it as a hair tie, and with a flick transfigured a glass kitten on the coffee table into a living cat. Elspeth’s knees gave way, depositing her in a chair as she stared at the impossible.

Hermione did even more—she removed a small red coin purse and reached in her entire arm before pulling out a black, leather-clad tome that said NEWT Level Potions Volume 2.

Elspeth stuttered. “What…what….”

“I purchased this at school this morning to hold my things. My whole school trunk is in here. There are statutes of secrecy that don’t allow us to divulge much about the magical world, but you’re family, so you can be exempted.”

“And Harry?”

“Well, almost eight weeks ago he fell through the Veil of Death—a passageway that supposedly led to the land of the dead. They had a funeral for him and everything. Well, he came out again but he was…different.”

“I went to another galaxy and was turned into a weapon by an evil emperor,” Harry explained succinctly. “When I died there, I returned here still thinking I was an evil weapon. Hermione saved me, but I died again in the process. I recovered once more yesterday, when a dark wizard came to kill me once and for all. I went to Hermione because she’s the only person I trust absolutely.”

“What do you mean?” Elspeth asked, still trying to play catch up.

"He didn’t trust those who have been controlling his life up until now,” Hermione said, “and I can understand why. I’m not sure I trust them either anymore. He asked me for help, and I agreed. I didn’t know where else to go, so, I brought him here.” Deciding that a half-explanation was not sufficient, Hermione stood and undid her blouse to show her scar from the Department of Mysteries fight. Elspeth paled. “Oh my God, Hermione, what happened?”

Hermione calmly and coolly told Elspeth about her adventures in the Ministry for Magic, and that in turn led to a discussion of her past adventures, and why Harry Potter seemed to be in the center of them all. She kept talking as Elspeth led her and Harry into the kitchen and the three ate stew with a few dumplings and, after the story of the basilisk, a bottle of wine.
Alive

Chapter Summary

Do not meddle in the affairs of the Sith

“We identified some of the bodies as Rabastan Lestrange, the Carrows, and three others we haven’t identified yet, but who are probably French,” Tonks said. Since her release from the hospital and the mandatory leave from the Auror department followed, the once vivacious young woman had lost weight and gained dark circles around her eyes.

Dumbledore regarded her sadly, knowing that that spark that made her unique and special was gone forever—innocence one lost could never be regained. Putting that sorrow aside, he considered the Muggle police tape that outlined the bodies that were found in Number 4 Privet drive. “Is it possible they were killed by muggles?”

“Headmaster, I’ve read reports of Rowle personally taking on whole armed gangs of Muggle boys. A simple shielding spell is enough to stop most small-caliber muggle handguns. It’s part of basic Auror training to be shot at and to shield against them. From what the forensics team said, these people were killed by point-blank shots to the head. That means whoever did it was able to avoid their defensive spell-fire, get inside their guard, and shoot them, one after the other, six times in a row. Not even you could do that without them at least landing a few spells.”

In this, Albus was inclined to believe her. Whatever else could be said about her, according to Moody, Tonks was a very promising Auror. “What is the Minister’s response?”

“She’s put a warrant out for Potter’s arrest,” Tonks said. “He and Granger are being called ‘persons of interest’, but word in the DMLE as that they’re to be captured at all costs. The boy’s dangerous, Headmaster. Believe me, I know.”

He heard the pain and anger in her voice, and again smothered his own sadness for her. “He is dangerous, my dear, that much we can agree on. Sadly, I’ve used up any capital I had in the Ministry, but I might at the very least be able to determine if Harry was merely defending himself, or if the person who left St. Mungos was the same that hurt you so grievously.”

“And if it is Shaddix?” Tonks said expectantly.

Albus shuddered at the mere thought. “If that is the case, my dear, then I fear there would be nothing else I could do for him that we have not already done. At that point it would be best for the Ministry to handle things.”

He would never come out and say he washed his hands of it, but Tonks understood that to be the message. “Any word from the Grangers?” he asked.

“Hermione called them using a Muggle mobile telephone. She told them she was safe. Beyond that, no word.”

Albus nodded, and taking Tonks’s arm walked with her toward the back garden of Privet Drive. “I have no doubt that I shall be able to find them,” he told the young Auror. “When I do, I will gather a
few former Order members to determine if it is Harry or Shaddix we are dealing with.”

He forestalled her open mouth with a raised hand. “No, my dear, you may not come. You are too close, and it would arouse Amelia’s suspicions if you were gone as well. No, you have done admirably, and I thank you. For now, please go home and rest.”

“Fine,” Tonks said angrily, before disappearing with a twist and a pop. Albus turned and looked back through the home that was supposed to protect and mold Harry before he too turned and disappeared.

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Hermione woke hours before her alarm was to go off the next morning, after spending the day speaking with Harry, or just resting. She sat up in the bed her maternal grandmother loaned her and looked at the clock: 4:12 in the morning. She did not feel the least bit sleepy, though, so with a sigh climbed out of the narrow bed wearing her grand mum’s borrowed sleeping gown.

Her grand dad had left her grand mum when Hermione’s mother was only five. He married a buxom Welsh girl, last Hermione heard, and started another whole family. Grand mum had a choice to go to work or live off the dole, and chose to work. What she had she earned for herself. Hermione always admired the woman, and would spend at least a week with her every summer if she could.

She slipped out of her room, trying to be quiet so as not to wake Harry, but her efforts were for naught. She saw Harry sitting only in a well-scurgified pair of transfigured pants in lotus position, his chest and feet bare. But what was most remarkable was the haze of objects floating in front of him. She saw no evidence of a spell—only Harry sitting cross-legged with his eyes closed.

Gently the objects dropped to the floor and she found herself looking into his shadowed eyes. “That was the Force, wasn’t it?” she whispered.

He nodded.

“You remember everything that happened?”

He nodded again.

She knelt down on the floor in front of him, staring intently into his eyes. “In your memories, there was a girl. Shili…”

“The Emperor’s Hand,” he said. “An assassin and courtesan. She was both punishment and reward, and the Moffs who received her attention never knew which until the next morning, when they either left her bed ecstatic, or did not leave it at all.”

“You…had sex with her.”

“Yes.”

She blushed. “Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes.”

“Was she better than I was?”

He stared at her intently for the longest time, so long she sank into herself a little. Finally, he said,
“She was trained in Sith techniques to maximize pleasure or pain. She could make a man orgasm in seconds, or scream for days. Being with her was pleasurable, but there was no emotion there, no connection. It was a physical pleasure only, and even that was tainted by what we both knew had to happen next.”

Hermione nodded, trying to understand what he was saying. He continued softly, staring at her so strongly she felt herself blush. “What we shared yesterday was not just physical. I could feel you, Hermione. All of Harry Potter’s memories are distant and faded, as if belonging to someone else, except for memories of you. Your face, your presence, your smell—every memory I have of you is alive and immediate. And yesterday, I could feel you touching me. That was something Shili could never have done; she was not capable of that, and never would be.”

Hermione, spurred on by a gut-level need, crawled forward. She saw Harry’s eyes devouring her, and knew with nothing but the loose gown she was giving him a show. Rather than be ashamed, the way he looked at her made her feel powerful. She leaned forward until their lips met. Surprisingly strong arms lifted her until she straddled his lap. She felt his bare chest against hers and his arms around her. “In some ways, you’re not the same Harry I knew before,” she said. “But sometimes you are. You’re everything I always hoped Harry could be.”

He nuzzled her neck, sending heat coursing through her body. “I would be anything for you,” he breathed. “I would kill for you; I would die for you.”

“I don’t want you to die for me, Harry. You’ve died enough. I want you to live for me.”

He pulled back and stared at her with fire in his eyes that made her ache with desire. “I do.”

Like at the Shrieking Shack, there was no single moment of decision; rather it was inevitable the moment she saw him. Her hands were pulling at his slacks even while his pulled down her knickers, and a second later she straddled him, staring intently into his eyes as they made love for the second time.

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At five-thirty that same morning, Elspeth woke to get ready for work. She made her way to the kitchen for a bite of breakfast and her morning tea when she noticed the couch was empty. She walked closer and saw her old sleeping gown on the floor.

Her eyes widened as she stepped to the guest room and opened the door. There she discovered her only granddaughter nestled, as naked as the day she was born, in the arms of a sixteen-year-old boy, with only a single sheet wound round their entwined bodies. She was about to give them a piece of her mind when she saw something that gave her pause. Hermione held the boy’s hand clasped firmly in her own, lodged between her breasts, and wore the most beatific smile Elspeth had ever seen on the girl’s face. Her expression spoke of more than happiness—it spoke of contentment and peace, a peace little Hermione had never had before.

Elspeth backed out of the room without saying a word and walked back to the kitchen. She wasn’t Hermione’s mother; and she couldn’t stand the thought of hurting the girl she loved more than life itself.

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At six-thirty that same morning, after Ellspeth went to work, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore opened the door of Ellspeth’s flat with a silent spell. Behind them, Moody, Shacklebolt and Remus Lupin stood apprehensively, looking into the flat.

Albus motioned them to remain and closed the door behind him without locking it. Once inside he immediately disillusioned himself, cast scent-negating charms, aura-dampening charms, silencing charms and every other means of masking his presence known to Western Magic.

Although few would know it, Dumbledore was adept at hiding in plain sight. The magic he employed was not so extraordinary—most aurors knew every spell he used. His skill lay in how he was able to incorporate all of them in layer after layer of protection, until by the end he was all but invisible to every human sense.

Thus he was able to move through the apartment without disturbing even the most sensitive occupants. He stepped through the partially open door into the guest room, and though he did not make a sound, he frowned in disapproval at what he found within.

Dumbledore was a true Victorian. Born just sixteen years after the end of the American Civil War, thirteen years after the last public hanging in Britain, and just eleven years after the Education Act of 1870 set the framework for compulsory public education, Albus Dumbledore did not, nor could he ever condone sex before marriage.

Dumbledore’s authority on the sexes, despite over seventy years as an educator, derived largely from the works of the Muggle scholar Dr. William Acton, who assured all readers that women were not troubled by sexual feelings of any kind, and that young boys could go blind if they masturbated too much. Indeed, among proper witches, it was the height of impropriety to do anything more than light snogging before marriage, which is why Dumbledore made sure all the prefects swept the broom closets on a regular basis. Muggles would have been astounded at how very little sex actually occurred at Hogwarts, considering it was a boarding school with teenagers. This was due in part to a strictly enforced morality clause in the enrollment forms, and Dumbledore’s own strict oversight, but due also to the terrible consequences to a witch who allowed herself to be used in such a fashion.

The occasional snog was not an issue—the kids quite often picked out their future spouse at Hogwarts, after all. Although it seemed foreign to his mind, Albus knew that some witches even performed oral favors, keeping their own virginity intact to avoid the consequences of their act. But any pre-marital vaginal sex was met with overwhelming approbation, quite often resulting either in the expulsion of the offending students, or if their families had any self-respect, the forced marriage of the young couple.

What he saw before him therefore was profoundly disappointing, not so much because Harry was wrapped around a naked girl. Boys would be boys, after all. No, what bothered Dumbledore was that a young woman of Hermione Granger’s upbringing and obvious caliber would reciprocate and engage in such activity.

Dumbledore saw absolutely no irony in adhering to a belief system from an era that would have condemned those of his own sexual orientation. In his view, his actions in his youth were a terrible mistake he had spent a lifetime paying for, so that the next generation would not have to. He was not homosexual—for such a label would have been inconceivable for a conservative man born into the latter half of Queen Victoria’s reign. Rather, he simply made a mistake in his youth.

However much he might condemn the obviously inappropriate act he saw before him, that was not why he was there. He had to know if this was really Harry Potter lying on the bed, or if Shaddix had won the battle to control Harry Potter’s body. Wizard hero, or evil dark lord—Dumbledore had to know, and there was only one way he could find out for sure.
At the same exact moment Albus cast Legillimens on Harry, a pair of piercing green eyes snapped open, and Dumbledore’s world collapsed.

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For Harry, there was no warning in the Force of the figure in the apartment. He knew when Hermione’s grandmum looked in on them, and could sense both her disapproval and confusion, and then finally her silent blessing. But because of the layers of magic, Harry never felt Dumbledore.

Instead, Harry dreamt he was back in his cell while the Emperor raped his mind over and over again, slowly dismantling everything that made him who he was and stealing his memories of his friends, his relatives, and of Hermione. “What is your name?” the wicked old man said again and again.

When he felt an actual presence intrude in his mind, he reacted as if it was the Emperor. Only, this time he did not fight back with the fledgling Occlumency shields of a confused, weakened fifteen-year-old wizard, but with all the might of a fully trained Sith Lord. He screamed his angry defiance and flew out of Hermione’s arms to unleash the full, terrifying power of the Dark Side.

Dumbledore made an oddly high-pitched squeal as he was blasted back from the bed under the torrent of blue lightning, flying with such speed and power that he blew through the wall of the bedroom and into the short hall where Shacklebolt, Moody and Remus waited.

Harry, lost in the depths of his nightmare, did not hesitate to follow his target. Moody and Shacklebolt made it worse by trying to defend themselves. Moody shot two powerful stunners and then a blasting curse, all of which Harry dodged with speed that left his outline blurry, and gripped the old Auror in the Force. Moody grunted before flying bodily down the hall, where he bounced twice before rolling through the door into the stairwell. Shacklebolt received a kick that took out both his legs with the loud, twin snaps of breaking knees, and then an elbow to his temple that knocked him out cold.

“Harry, wait!” Remus Lupin began before a single blast of blue lightening sent him flying back against the wall opposite the hallway. Dumbledore lay at his feet in the rubble, his beard smoking and his face bruised with the assault. He did not move at all.

A moment later Hermione emerged from the whole, clutching the sheet to her chest. “Oh Merlin!” she whispered. “Harry, that’s…”

“Dumbledore,” Harry said. “He attacked me. He tried to enter my thoughts.”

Hermione knelt down with her wand and passed it over the old wizard’s head, before doing the same with Shacklebolt and finally Lupin. “They’re still alive,” she said. She stood and looked back at Harry. “You didn’t kill them.”

“I wasn’t sure,” he admitted. “I was dreaming when Dumbledore attacked. I woke when Moody cast curses at me. But by then they were a threat.”

Hermione bit her lower lip, but nodded. “I understand, but we can’t stay here, not anymore. Come on, Nana left us some money. Let’s get dressed and get out—the Bobbies will be here in a few minutes as is.”

Staring down at the old wizard, and the Lupin, Harry finally nodded. “Alright, let’s go.”

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Minister for Magic Amelia Bones walked into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry late the next morning with a carefully schooled face. She was met at the main entrance of the school by the Deputy Head Mistress. “Minerva,” she said, forcing a smile for a woman she genuinely liked. “How are you holding up?”

“Best I can, of course,” McGonagall said with a thin smile. The two women made their way through the castle until they arrived at the hospital wing. Inside, they found its lone patient sleeping fitfully while Madam Pomfrey and a familiar healer from St. Mungo’s hovered nearby.

“Aeschels?” Amelia asked.

The older, balding wizard smiled at her, obviously pleased she remembered his name. “Good morning, Minister. Yes, when his Living Directive indicated he wished to be treated for any illness at Hogwarts, I came to assist Poppy here.”

“Do we know what happened?”

“Well, he was hit with an electrical-based spell and then tossed through a wall,” Aeschels said bluntly. “For you or me, that would be bad enough, but Headmaster Dumbledore was already old and infirm as it was. Did you know his hand has a lethal curse in it? The man was dying already.”

“I understood the curse to be fatal,” Amelia admitted.

On the bed lay the beaten, battered form of Albus Dumbledore. As she studied him, her old Auror instructor stumped through the door, growling angrily to himself as he came. “Amelia, lass, you’re still quite the looker.”

“And you’re still a pig, Moody,” she said without heat. “Was this your idea?”

“No, it’s his own doing, the old goat,” Moody said. “Thought he could sneak up on that Shaddix boy. And you saw what happened. First he killed those people at Privet Drive, then he took out Albus Dumbledore, myself, Shack and Remus Lupin so fast I didn’t even get a chance to piss myself.”

Amelia’s eyes narrowed. “I ordered your little club disbanded.”

“He had the Granger girl,” Moody said with a shrug. “You saw how she was at the hospital. She was sleeping with the boy, Amelia, completely out of her mind. We hoped to get in, check if it was Potter or that Shaddix character who woke up, and if it was Shaddix get Granger to safety. Throw us in Azkaban if you wish, but none could have done better. And we have our answer—Potter wouldn’a put the Headmaster in the Hospital Wing like that. Cracked Shack’s skull, nearly snapped my back and put Lupin down despite supposedly being the man’s friend. It was Shaddix, not Potter. A cold blooded murderer he is!”

“And yet,” Minerva McGonagall said, “you, Albus, Kingsley and Remus are all alive.”

“That bird of his must have stopped him,” Moody said. “Stood there in her birthday suit, plain as you like, while he took us out.”

“Alastor,” Minerva said, “I don’t pretend to know what’s happening with Mr. Potter, but I can assure you that Hermione Granger is not some foolish child. She has consistently demonstrated a level of competence few in this school ever achieve. I find it difficult that she has been duped as badly as you say.”
“She slept with Potter, Minerva,” Moody said. “The grandmum saw them. You call that responsible?”

“She loves him,” Minerva said with a shrug. “Even a fool could have seen that. First she learns he’s dead, and then by some miracle of magic he is returned to her, only for him to die again. If it were me, I can’t say I’d refuse a third chance at someone I loved. As much as I know it was wrong, I have a hard time condemning her for giving herself to the lad. Whatever they share, I promise it is more than just a one-night fling!”

“Whoever pegged you for a romantic,” Amelia said, smiling despite herself. “Regardless, I can’t just let this go, Minerva. Potter killed six people at Privet Drive, and came close to adding four more this morning. I stand by my order to detain them.”

“Just, please,” McGonagall said, “if you do find them, let me know. If nothing else, I might be able to help prevent anyone from being hurt. I like to think I still have some respect in Ms. Granger’s eyes.”

“We’ll get him,” Moody said. “All his friends are at school, so he has nowhere to run.”

They drove again, stopping only for Petrol on the way south. Half an hour from Birmingham, Hermione sat up and began cursing. “I am such an idiot!”

“What?” Harry asked.

Hermione pulled her and turned it onto herself while casting a simply detection charm. “They found you because of me,” she said. “Professor Dumbledore must have placed a tracking charm on me back at Hogwarts. Finite!” she finished, tapping her own neck.

She leaned back in her chair and pressed her hands to her eyes. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted. “Just away.”

Hermione stared out the window, lost in thought. “Harry, I think we need to ask for help.”

“From whom?”

She turned and looked at him earnestly. “I have an idea or two. Do you trust me?”

He looked at her flatly. “Do you even have to ask?”
They stopped for dinner at a burger kitchen in Cambridge, not because it was en route, but because Hermione loved Cambridge. “I always dreamed of someday going to Uni here,” she said.

They sat, years younger than the mostly college-aged clientele, and ate the overpriced burgers while considering their next steps. They were working on their shakes when Harry finally said, “Okay.”

Hermione brightened. “I think they’ll help, really.”

“It’s better than my idea.” His idea was going to the Muggles, until Hermione pointed out that the Ministry employed a whole staff of professional Obliviators whose job was to enforce the Statute of Secrecy at all costs, which from what Arthur Weasley had said had occasionally included the life of an unfortunate Muggle who found out more than he was supposed to.

They finished, refueled the Vauxhall, and in half an hour were back on M11 heading south.

It was dark by the time they reached London. They drove in tense silence through the crowded, busy streets. Being a workday, rush hour clogged many of the streets, including Charing Cross. Finally, they found a space. Hermione placed a Notice-Me-Not charm on the car before placing simple glamours on herself and Harry, followed by another pair of Notice-Me-Nots.

“Best we can do,” she said.

The two walked hand-in-hand through the Leaky Cauldron, past a heavy after-work crowd that fortunately did not seem to notice them, until they reached the brick wall in the back. A few taps of Hermione’s wand had that opened and they entered Diagon Alley.

It was hard not to see their destination. Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes dominated the alley with bright lights and a huge figure in the front that moved and lifted a hat. The crowd around the store was thinning, though, given the store was fast approaching closing time. The young couple hurried across the alley and reached the door just as Fred Weasley personally saw the last customer out with a smile of thanks.

He saw them and said, “Sorry, my friends, it’s closing time. We’ll open at nine tomorrow morning.”

“You’re closed even for a partner?” Hermione asked. She dropped her glamour and Fred’s eyes bulged.

“And Ron said you were smart, you daft bint,” Fred said as he grabbed her and pulled her into the store. She pulled Harry after her, only for them to stop under the point of George’s wand.

“Step away from him, Hermione,” George said. “It’s Shaddix. He attacked the Headmaster!”

“I know, I was there,” Hermione said. “Fred, George, Professor Dumbledore broke into my grandmother’s house and attacked Harry in his sleep. He defended himself. I was there, I saw it!”
“You’ve been bewitched,” Fred said, raising his wand, only to yelp when both his and George’s wands flew into Harry’s waiting hands.

“She’s not bewitched,” Harry said. Though he could not cast a glamour, he was able to cancel it with the Force. “I’m not the Harry Potter you know, but I’m not Shaddix any more either. Dumbledore cast a Legillimens spell at me in my sleep, and I defended myself. If I were still Shaddix, he and his companions would be dead.”

“Doesn’t matter,” George said. “They knew you were here the moment you stepped through our wards. Ministry charmed every place you might go.”

Harry and Hermione spun around as a series of pops announced the arrival of nearly fifty aurors outside in the alley. Witches and wizards scrambled away in fear from the large force. Harry leaned forward on the balls of his feet, ready to attack, but stopped when Hermione touched his arm.

“Harry,” she said quickly, “if you go out there fighting, I’ll lose you. Even if you win, I’ll lose you.”

From outside, a gruff man’s voice boomed through the store. “Hermione Granger, you and your companion are ordered to leave the building with your wands above your heads. You have one minute to comply.”

“I’m sorry,” Fred told them with a shrug. “Dad called a few hours ago and told us it was Shaddix who left St. Mungos and almost killed the Headmaster and ….well, seduced you.”

Hermione felt her cheeks redden, but didn’t give them an answer. Instead, she looked out at the line of aurors. “I won’t be chained,” Harry whispered. “I won’t be bound again. I won’t be. I’ll kill them all before I let them bind me again.”

“Harry, please!” Hermione begged, trying to forestall the violence she felt building in him like a gathering storm.

“Thirty seconds!” came the voice from outside.

Huffing angrily, she stuck her head out of the door and yelled, “Will you please shut up? I’m trying to convince Harry not to go out there and kill the whole lot of you like he did the Death Eaters last month!”

She pulled her head back into the store and slammed the door, not even bothering to look at the stunned, worried glances of the aurors in the Alley. She did so just in time to see Harry toss the twins their wands back. “We could still get out,” he said to her. “Disillusion yourself while I distract them, and we meet back at the car.”

“We have some Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder that might help,” Fred volunteered.

“We’re not going to make you accessories,” Hermione told him. “That could get your father in trouble too.”

From the alley came a new voice. “Ms. Granger, it is Professor McGonagall. May I have a word? I will approach by myself.”

Hermione gave Harry a hopeful look, and when he nodded, Hermione stuck her head out of the door again and called for the professor to come. A moment later McGonagall stepped through the door, prim and proper as always. Without being asked, she handed her wand to Hermione while looking at the girl intently.

“You gave yourself to him,” she said finally.
Hermione blushed scarlet, but said, “I was always his.”

Finally McGonagall turned and looked intently at Harry. “It is good to see you again, Mr. Potter. It is Mr. Potter, I hope?”

“For the most part,” Harry said cautiously.

She nodded before greeting the twins. “I see now why I’ve had so many more confiscated pranks this year,” she said archly, though her eyes sparkled. “Well, it appears we find ourselves in a situation. Professor Dumbledore is at Hogwarts under the care of Madam Pomfrey and a healer from St. Mungos. He is expected to recover, but between his attack and the bodies recovered from your former residence, Mr. Potter, Minister Bones felt she had no choice but to order you detained.”

“It was Dumbledore who attacked me,” Harry said, not relaxing at all.

“Attacked?” Minerva said, astounded.

“Professor Dumbledore broke into my grandmother’s flat and attempted to legillimize Harry in his sleep,” Hermione explained. “Harry…had a flash back to some traumatic events that occurred on the other side of the Veil and fought back.”

Professor McGonagall watched the interplay with pursed lips. “Mr. Potter, I cannot imagine what you have gone through, so I shall try not to pass judgment. But your circumstances are grave. While I have no doubt you could hurt a great many people, it would gain you little but misery.”

“Professor, I had a right to leave school!” Hermione said. “I’m legally an adult. And Harry was only defending himself. He…”

“I will not be chained again,” Harry said finally. “I won’t. I’ll see everybody in the alley dead before I let them chain me.”

“Even Ms. Granger?” McGonagall said softly.

“No, not her,” Harry said quickly. “Never her.”

“So what is it you want, Mr. Potter?” McGonagall asked. “What do you hope to gain?”


She nodded briefly, before holding out her hand. “My wand, please? I will go and speak to Mr. Robards. Perhaps we can arrange something more beneficial than a public debacle and lost lives. After all, most of them are former students of mine.”

They stood at the glass doors and watched as the professor walked back out to the line of nervously watching aurors. Finally, the aurors began to disappear, pop-by-pop, until only McGonagall and Gawain Robards remained.

The two walked back to the store front. “Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger,” McGonagall said, “this is Head Auror Gawain Robards. I have given the DMLE my personal promise that you will accompany us peacefully to the DMLE in return for certain promises. You shall not be bound or manacled, Harry, and given your recent…” She pursued her lips. “…relations, you will not be separated. Is this agreeable?”

“Harry, say yes, please,” Hermione begged.
“Fine,” Harry said darkly.

As they walked out, Fred looked at George. “Relations?” he said.

His twin shrugged. “About time, that. You owe me ten galleons.”

Diagon Alley was not a place to walk alone after dark, not with Voldemort alive and free. However, Hermione did not feel scared at all. Harry walked next to her, his hand in hers, and his eyes everywhere at once. Since Dumbledore was able to sneak up on him, Harry had been extra-alert, and despite having spent the whole day awake, showed no signs of flagging. Ahead of them Professor McGonagall walked with her chin high, while Gawain Robards walked behind them.

They walked past Gringotts, which was the furthest up the alley she had ever been, down a side-road that seemed lined with large, blockish buildings built in an odd parody of the neo-classical style, complete with columns and porticos, only all at slight angles, as if the builders could not be bothered with a right angle. The street ended at the edge of a solid wall of stone that was likely one large piece of white marble, but was not stained with exposure. In the center of the wall, which was easily thirty feet high and twice that in width, stood an old Muggle phone booth.

“Sometimes I think wizards are idiots,” Hermione muttered.

“That’s an improvement,” Robards said dryly behind them. “Up until the 60s it was slide. Ever go down a steep, spiral stone slide for ten stories?”

“Yes, actually,” Harry said. “That’s how I found the Chamber of Secrets.”

Robards stared a moment before shuddering. They all clambered into the booth, which obviously had an enlarging charm in the interior. “Welcome to the Ministry of Magic,” a female voice said. “Please state your name and reason for your visit.”

“Canadians, we’re invading England for your women and gin,” Robards said.

Instantly four badges emerged, all of which stated: “Canadian Invaders”.

McGonagall looked over her shoulder disapprovingly, but Robards smiled. “It’s a contest in the Department to see who can have the most outlandish badge. Shack wore one that said, ‘General Chihuahua McCoolyPants’ for two days.”

“I was wrong before,” Hermione said. “I know wizards are idiots.”

“Indeed,” McGonagall said primly.

As they spoke, the telephone booth lowered into the ground, dropping them rapidly into the Ministry of Magic. When the main cavern of the ministry came into view, they saw the floor ahead of them lined by aurors in red robes.

Harry tensed, sucking in his breath. “Mr. Potter,” Robards said quickly, “they’re here because of the Minister. They’re not here to arrest you, but to protect her. I swear it!”

Indeed, as the booth continued to drop, they could see the sandy-blonde hair and monocle of the Minister of Magic waiting for them flanked by two dozen aurors.
“I will also be staying with you,” McGonagall said.

“Thank you,” Hermione said earnestly.

The car started moving and the doors slid open of their own accord, leaving nothing between them and the force of aurors. Harry stood frozen, his body tense and the air around him shimmering with the potential of something terrible.

Making the decision for them both, Hermione stepped out of the booth and dragged Harry along by the hand. He did not resist, but he most certainly didn’t take the lead. She realized it was not him being afraid, but rather cautious.

“Minister Bones,” Hermione said to the stony-faced older woman. “Thank you for seeing us.” As she spoke, she flicked her eyes toward Harry, trying to communicate how close he was to violence.

Minister Bones, being a twenty-year-veteran auror, was quick enough to figure out the situation. “My pleasure,” she said with a falsely light tone. “I enjoyed our last conversation this summer. Mr. Potter, welcome back to the Ministry of Magic.”

“Thank you,” Harry said in a completely neutral tone.

“If you will come with me,” Amelia continued, “we have prepared a conference room so that we may speak in private.”

She turned and walked into the Ministry, leaving the others no choice but to follow. As they walked, Hermione said, “It’s alright, Harry. This is Susan’s aunt. Can you imagine anyone Susan Bones loves who is evil?”

He lowered his head, and said, “I don’t remember her.”

“Red head, very cute.”

He looked at her blankly.

“Biggest bust in Hufflepuff,” Hermione added with a roll of her eyes.

“Oh, yes,” Harry said, grinning despite the seriousness of the situation. “She was sweet on the Longbottom boy?”

“You mean our friend Neville? No, that was Hannah Abbot. Blonde, blue eyes.”

His grin faded. “It all seems like it happened to someone else, Hermione. The only one I remember for sure is you.”

The walk through the otherwise closed Ministry led through several twists and turns until they reached a bright opening against the darkened hall. When they stepped through, Hermione froze. “Mum, Dad?”

The Grangers were seated at the far end of an oval table and jumped to their feet when they saw her. For the first time, she let go of Harry’s hand to give her parents a hug. Harry, though, stared to the other side of the table at the still bruised and fragile-looking Albus Dumbledore. Next to him sat a balding man in blue healer robes, but it was the older wizard Harry studied. Dumbledore did not stand as they entered, but he returned Harry’s gaze intently.

“How could you say that?” Hermione’s anguished voice broke through Harry’s detachment. He
turned to see Hermione backing away from her parents, tear-struck. “How could you even think that? I did what I had to do for Harry!”

“He’s not worth you throwing your life away!” Mr. Granger said, raising his voice in response to Hermione’s. “The boy’s a bloody murderer! How many people has he killed?”

“Hundreds of millions,” Harry said into the sudden, deafening silence.


“As the hand of Emperor Palpatine, I was ordered to take the stronghold of a rebellious faction of a world called Stornick IV. I ordered the planet bombarded from orbit, and as a result of those orders, two hundred and fifty million people died. That makes the twenty-six people I’ve killed here seem rather paltry, doesn’t it?”

“I think, given the raised tensions here, it would be best to sit,” Bones said. “I’ve had tea prepared. Please sit.”

She took the seat at the far end of the table, facing the door. Harry moved to a seat on the side of the oval table where he could see both the Minister and the door. Robards sat at Bones’s side, while McGonagall at beside Dumbledore, opposite the healer. Hermione broke from the grip of her father’s hand on her arm and settled next to Harry, glaring at the rest of the table in challenge.

Instantly, steaming cups of tea appeared in front of each of them. “First off,” Bones began, “Mr. Potter, Healer Aeschels had a question for you.”

“Yes, boy, how are you even alive?” the healer asked. “You suffered a complete, cataclysmic death of personality—as far as we could tell, both Harry Potter and that Shaddix bloke were gone. You should not be walking, much less thinking.”

“I am not Harry Potter, and I am not Darth Shaddix,” he said. “I assembled myself using memories from both, and some from Bellatrix Lestrange. She knew a lot of magic, so it seemed foolish to discard those memories.”

Aeschels stared at him blankly. “You assembled yourself? That’s simply not possible. To take any action implies motivation which implies thought. You had nothing left.”

“Not in this body, perhaps, but my presence—my soul—continued in the Force,” he said. “I lived outside myself and it was from there that I rebuilt this current personality matrix.”

“And Miss Granger?” Dumbledore asked softly.

“As always, she was the base upon which I built myself,” Harry said simply.

“Those men at Privet Drive?” Robards asked.

“They served Voldemort and came to kill me,” Harry said. “I was still weak from waking up and wished to conserve my strength. Dudley Dursley kept a weapon as part of his drug dealing, and I used that to defend myself.”

“And Dumbledore?” Bones said.

Harry stared at the wizard flatly. “He snuck into the flat hiding himself with magic and attacked me. He should be grateful I’m not Shaddix any more—a true Sith would not just have killed him, but would have made him scream for days in the process for such a slight.”
“In truth, what he says is true,” Dumbledore admitted. His voice sounded reedy and weak. “I greatly feared that it was the Sith who awoke, and not Harry Potter, and so I did sneak in and attempt to perform Legillimency on him. Obviously I paid the price for my presumptuousness. I cannot truly fault him for defending himself.”

“So,” Bones said, “that leaves us with just one question: what next?”
“So,” Bones said, “that leaves us with just one question: what next?”

“Harry must finish his education, of course,” Dumbledore said after the Minister’s question.

“Why would I do that?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore jerked as if slapped, and even the Minister started. “You’re sixteen years old, Mr. Potter,” the Minister said. “What do you think you would do otherwise?”

“Do not let my face mislead you,” Harry said coldly. “I am no longer a child. I carry within my mind technologies tens of thousands of years more advanced than anything you or the Muggles can imagine. Within ten years I could be the richest, most powerful man on the planet. In fact, I likely will be. I’ll have fusion reactors and power cells providing unlimited, clean energy. I’ll develop space craft and hyperdrives capable of carrying humans to other worlds in a matter of days instead of centuries. I have fought in wars that spanned a galaxy. The conflict here seems …so very small. It is difficult for me to even entertain the limitations you wish to place on me. It seems that you need me far, far more than I need any of you. The only one I truly need is beside me now. Hermione should finish school—she has a love of learning that I don’t, but for my part I have no need nor desire to return to such a limited existence.”

“Ms. Granger may not be able to return,” Dumbledore said, though he at least had sense enough to say it cautiously.

“Why is that?” Harry asked with casual danger.

Bones coughed and sipped her tea. “Well, it seems as good a time as any to address this issue. Ms. Granger, it is clear from your magic that you have been intimate with Mr. Potter.”

Hermione raised her chin. “With respect, that is between Harry and myself, Minister.”

“Ms. Granger, you know better,” McGonagall said. “You asked about the morality clause in your Witch’s Health seminar, so you know very well what it means to engage in physical relations as a young witch. It is likely you’ll not be eligible for any Ministry employment, and will find it difficult to find employment elsewhere within our world.”

Edwin Granger stared at the professor as if she had grown to heads. “What are you talking about?”

Calliope, though, stared in growing understanding. “It’s about what you told me about, this summer.”

“What is that?” Edwin demanded.

Amelia Bones said, “Mr. and Mrs. Granger, there is a very real, very powerful magical component in…well, in sex. Witches who normally surrender to such urges outside of wedlock cannot later
make the necessary magical connections to form a marriage bond—in our world, that is a terrible and drastic thing. We are a rather small society and so marriage is not just held as important—it is in fact sacrosanct. The marriage oath is not just words—it is a magically binding contract that forces the parties’ own magic to enforce the bonds.

“Ms. Granger’s magic will not allow her to make any type of binding magical oath because of what she has done. And that is why she cannot return to school, and why it will be difficult for her to work. I’m sorry, but I felt you should know. I don’t have this conversation very often because most witches know the consequences of anything more than an quick snog or rub in the broom closet, and most young wizards do too. To engage in sexual relations leads inevitably to either marriage, or expulsion from the school and sometimes from society as a whole.”

As the Minister spoke, Harry turned and stared intently at Hermione, watching as her cheeks paled and her shoulders slumped. “Is it true?” he said softly.

She nodded, reaching up to wipe away a stray tear. “I don’t care,” she lied. And then looking him in the eyes, she added, “I don’t regret a thing. Not for you, not ever.”

“Then I guess we better make things right for you,” he said softly.

Her eyes widened a moment as color suddenly flooded into her cheeks. “You mean…”

He turned to look back at Bones. “What if we were to wed?”

“Given the time frames, that would resolve the magical oath,” McGonagall said.

“She’s only seventeen!” Edwin Granger said hotly.

“Which under our law means she is an adult, and legally able to marry,” Bones said firmly. “Given the circumstances, I agree that would be the best way to resolve the situation. Not marrying would be a waste of a very talented and capable witch.”

“Unbelievable!” Hermione’s father said.

Surprisingly, Calliope Granger put her hand on her husband’s arm and said softly, “Don’t you remember what my mum told us today? Besides, did you ever have a doubt? She’s been writing his life story in her letters since she was twelve.” Turning to look down the table, she said, “Hermione, do you love him?”

“I do, Mum.”

“And you want to marry him?”

Hermione smiled and wiped her eyes again. “More than anything.”

“You’ll be married before we leave tonight,” Amelia said. “And you can do a ceremony over the holidays if you wish. Now that that’s resolved, back to school again—Mr. Potter, I agree with Headmaster Dumbledore that you would be well served in returning to Hogwarts.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Because we do need you, Harry,” Dumbledore admitted. “Perhaps even more than you need us. The Prophecy, Harry. You have been chosen by fate to face Voldemort.”

“I wouldn’t know, no one bothered to tell it to me,” Harry said. “Instead you used six teenage
children to lure Voldemort out into the open, unheeding of our safety, only to act shocked when one
of us died.”

“Twice,” Hermione said.

“And who managed to come back both times,” Aeschels said. “Speaking of, I would very much like
to examine you at your convenience, Mr. Potter.”

“No,” Harry said bluntly. To Bones, he said, “If you need a fighter, I can fight. I don’t need to go to
a primitive back-water school to do that.”

“Perhaps...perhaps you could let us engage in independent study, Headmaster,” Hermione suggested.
“Not to be immodest, but I’ve been studying NEWT level magic for years.”

“Like a polyjuice potion as a second year,” Harry said.

McGonagall smiled. “Yes, I remember Pomfrey mentioning that adventure. Personally I would not
object to independent study.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said. “I would be amenable to that.”

“And it might be that we do need you to fight for us,” Amelia said. “Perhaps a deputized auror or
hitwizard position until you finish school? That would give you a certain protection from your
actions against Voldemort’s people, and give you the right to leave school if necessary.”

“Actually being married would do that,” Hermione said. At the looks of the Minister, Dumbledore
and McGonagall, she blushed and said, “I was curious when I heard about the married quarters.”

Harry, though, was looking intently at the Minister. “If I fight for you, I will kill your enemies. I will
not take prisoners, nor will I have mercy. A part of me is Harry Potter, but another part of me is a
Dark Lord of the Sith. The Sith make Voldemort look like a schoolyard bully—my master initiated a
war that killed untold trillions and reduced dozens of world to dust just as a means to take power. So
do not call on my services unless you are sure you wish to use them.”

“I would be fascinated to view those memories,” Bones said.

“They were awful,” Hermione said, shuddering. “What they did to him; what they made him do. No
one should live through that.”

“But I didn’t, did I?” Harry said. “I suppose in a sense that was actually my second death, which
means that the last was my third. Does that mean I only have six lives left?”

“In the interests of time,” Dumbledore said, “may we say then that we are agreed? Mr. Potter, you
and Ms. Granger will be joined in matrimony tonight, and return to the school on the morrow as
married students. You will be allowed to pursue independent study, the specifics of which will be
determined by Professor McGonagall, and Minister Bones, you shall grant Mr. Potter an appointed
as a deputized auror at large?”

“Hermione too,” Harry said. “She fought at my side before.”

“And bears a scar for it,” Edwin said darkly.

“Which means I’ll have to make sure she’s better prepared next time,” Harry said.

“I think we are in agreement,” Bones said. “We’ll need ten magicals to witness the marriage.”
“I’m sure Arthur and Molly would be glad to assist. Perhaps their eldest and his betrothed as well,” Dumbledore suggested. “And I’m sure a pair of your aurors would be willing to stand witness as well.”

“We’re really going to do this?” Hermione asked breathlessly. “I’m really going to be married?”

“If you are willing, then yes,” Bones said.

At ten o’clock that very night, Hermione Granger walked between her parents into the Number 10 courtroom of the DMLE wearing simple, transfigured off-white wedding dress. She did not wear gloves or a veil, or heels or stockings, but rather walked barefoot. She did not even wear make-up, though she did have a coronet of flowers woven into her hair by Ginny. In further adherence to custom, she wore a silk sash knotted about her waist. “The knot of Hercules,” Molly explained as she helped Hermione before the ceremony. “An old wizarding custom.”

To those who waited within the room, she looked beautiful.

McGonagall did not hesitate to fetch Ron and Ginny from Hogwarts to stand with Arthur and Molly, who also came. Bill Weasley and his newly betrothed, Fleur Delacour, also came. Between them, Aeschels and McGonagall, they had their ten witness. Dumbledore actually chose to return to school, citing his weakened condition, and no one doubted his word. The man could barely stand when he left.

Harry stood at the foot of the Wizengamot stairs, near the very same dais Fudge used to try him the summer before his Fifth Year. Only this time, it was Amelia standing behind the podium. “You look lovely, dear,” Bones said by way of greeting. “Come stand beside your promised. Molly, do you have the rings?”

“I do,” Ginny said brightly.

Amelia nodded. “Very well. Mr. and Mrs. Granger, while some elements of this ceremony may seem similar, in fact this is an ancient, magical event following forms almost unbroken since before Rome was founded. However, the matrimonial bond which is a part of these rites is considered the most powerful form of a wedding bond as a blood rite is a part of the ceremony. Because Hermione’s magic is in flux, it is necessary to follow the old forms.”

The Minister removed her wand and waived it over Hermione and Harry. “We gather here today to witness the bonding of Hermione Jean Granger, a witch of great power and of marriageable age, and Harry Potter, a wizard of great power and marriageable age, in the sacred rites of matrimony. By the bonds of magic they both share, I witness and approve this bonding.”

Around the room, the assembled witnesses lifted their wands and chanted, “We witness and approve this bonding.”

Hermione felt a tingle in her chest, as if she could feel the magic gathering around them.

“Hermione,” the Minister intoned solemnly, “if you truly wish to take this wizard as your husband then repeat after me: I, Hermione, Daughter of Edwin, do hereby vow upon my magic and soul to take Harry, son of James, as my husband.”

Hermione concentrated on her magic as she repeated the vow.
“To honor and obey, to love and to lead, until magic’s end. Where Harry goes, there I go as well.”

She repeated the vow and felt her magic responding, seemingly flowing through her hands into Harry’s.

“The vow has been accepted. Harry, now it is your turn.”

Without waiting for the minister, Harry looked deeply into Hermione’s almost eyes. “I, Harry Potter, son of James, do hereby vow on my magic and my soul to take Hermione, daughter of Edwin, as his wife. To honor and obey, to love and to lead, until magic’s end. Where Hermione goes, there I go as well.”

Magic welled out from Harry’s hand into Hermione’s, sweeping through her so powerfully her knees buckled. Harry caught her, and did not let go.

“What’s wrong?” Edwin asked worriedly.

“Nothing at all,” Bones said, sharing a pleased smile. “It means that they are doing the right thing after all. The vow has been accepted. Miss Weasley, the rings?”

Ginny handed Amelia the rings. The Minister took Hermione’s ring, a beautiful affair of gold, diamonds and rubies, but instead of slipping it on her finger, she lightly cut the back of Harry’s hand with a silent slicing spell. She dipped the ring in his blood, and then slipped it onto Hermione’s ring finger. She then did the same with Harry’s gold band using Hermione’s blood.

“The rings symbolize the endless circle of love and life. They go on the third finger of your left hand because of the magical conduit from that finger to your magical core. By the mingling of the blood, the sharing of the vows and the bonding of your magic, as witnessed by ten witches and wizards of good standing, I hereby declare you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride, Harry.”

He was kissing her before she even said her name, and in that instant no one else in the room even existed.

~~Broken~~

~~Broken~~

After a brief discussion, the Minister and Professor McGonagall agreed to let Harry and Hermione spend the night with her parents, rather than returning immediately to the school. And so it was that they spent their honeymoon in Hermione’s bedroom, just two doors down from her parents.

“Thank Merlin for silencing and locking spells,” she said with a happy grin before wrapping her arms around his neck. “My husband.”

“My wife,” he said, before lifting her and carrying her to bed.

With no need for silence or discretion because of Hermione’s spells, the two luxuriated in each other’s bodies. Hermione actually screamed at one point, driven by Harry’s power of touch, and by the delicious feel of his tongue on her. And after, satiated and truly happy for the first time, she curled into the curve of his body with his hands cupping her breast, and sighed in contentment.

“You know I will kill people,” he whispered into her ear.

She felt a chill wash across her body at the feel of his breath, and the darkness in his words. “Death eaters?”
“Enemies,” he said. “I am going to change the world, Hermione, and you’re going to help me. But we’re going to make enemies, and we’ll need to be prepared to deal with them.”

She turned enough to face him over her shoulder and saw his smoldering look. “Not as Shaddix,” she said softly. “Not as Sith.”

“No, not entirely. A part of me will always be Sith, though. When I look around me, I don’t feel anything for these people. I know that Ron and Ginny were my friends, but that part of Harry that loved them is gone. I don’t care about any of them, only you.”

She turned to face forward again, holding his arms. “Then you’ll need to let me care, to make sure we don’t go too far.”

“Yes,” he agreed, kissing her neck. “There is a darkness still in me, Hermione. I can feel it. I wanted to kill those men who attacked us at your Nana’s flat, I wanted to kill them so badly. Even Lupin. I recognized him, and knew that Harry cared about him, but I didn’t.”

“But you didn’t kill them.”

“Because of you. I need you in so many ways.” His hand left her breast and slid down her stomach, to cup over her hip where he caressed her sex. She instantly felt her body responding.

“You’re touch is like magic,” she whispered as she lifted her leg and pushed back against him, easing his entry into her body. “Love me, and I’ll do anything for you. Anything at all.”

“I know,” he whispered, thrusting deeply within her.

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That morning, over eggs, bacon, toast and baked beans, the family tried to adjust to the addition of quiet, green eyed young man. The moment they came downstairs they were met by Hedwig, who sat atop Harry’s school trunk. A brief note from Dumbledore congratulated him on his marriage and assured him all his school supplies and personal belongings were in his trunk. It further stated McGonagall would be by at noon to escort them back to Hogwarts.

After an awkward breakfast, the two settled at the kitchen bar for tea while Edwin and Calliope sipped coffee. They all waited in awkward silence for McGonagall. However, after a few minutes Hermione noticed that Harry seemed to be taking an unnatural interest in her parent’s stainless steel refrigerator.

Quite abruptly a silver torch flew from the side of the refrigerator into Harry’s hand. The casual use of power startled the rest of the family. Harry did not notice any of them; instead he stared at the torch with single-minded determination. He switched it on and off several times. When he broke the silence, it was in a distracted, absent voice. “Hermione, have your people discovered diatium yet?”

"Your people? Calliope mouthed.

Hermione grinned at her Mum and then said, “I don’t think so, Harry. Can you tell me what it is?”

A biro came flying from the small stationary organizer they kept by the telephone into his hand, along with a pad, and Harry began writing furiously until in just a few moments he had drawn a diagram of what looked like a battery. “A diatium power cell. It’s a basic power component for blasters, glowpanels—you name it. And it’s the basic power unit for a lightsaber.”
Hermione stared at the diagram in stunned silence, before she remembered some of the horrors she saw through Harry’s memories. It was hard for her to remember that it was not just a fantasy or flight of fancy; that Harry really did travel among the stars on ships the size of cities.

“Dad, can you look at this?”

Edwin, a former electrician in the British Army before going back to school, took the drawing in interest and then stared at it with a gaping jaw. “What is this?”

“That was the basic power cell that operated almost all hand-held devices in the Empire,” Harry said.

“How do you even know…” Edwin began. “I mean…this diagram is pretty advanced, Harry. I studied this stuff in the army for two years and I can barely understand this.”

“This I learned through direct neural interface,” Harry said. “The Empire had the technology to shape and implant artificial memories and knowledge. Part of his conditioning for me, I suppose.” He started scribbling; Hermione noticed his scribbles took the form of more diagrams and were written in a completely alien language.

Edwin put the diagram down. “I don’t think we have batteries like this yet, Harry. But we might be able to make it. What’s this over here?”

“Depleted deuterium molecules in a solid-state base.”

“Deuterium?”

“The cell generates power through the artificial distention of the proton and neutron of deuterium atoms. The distended state creates a high, constant yield of energy. When activated, a portion of the energy is bled back into the cell to recharge the energizing fields that cause the pull. Good cells can conceivably last almost forever. Lightsabers with these cells have remained charged for centuries.”

“Amazing. And you know all this?”

Harry stared down at his diagram. “I remember everything,” he said blankly.

Hermione took his hand. He looked back down at the torch. “I could probably find the materials. Lightsaber technology is twenty-five thousand years old—they’ve refined the technology a great deal. I’d need to build everything from scratch and either find or make my crystals. The cycling field energizers might be a problem, but I could Force-infuse coils of duranium or the Earth-equivalent dense metal. Do you know of any metals on Earth eighteen times or more denser than water?”

“I have no idea,” Hermione admitted.

“There’s something you don’t know?” Calliope teased.

“When would I have opportunity to study metal density, Mum? I’m a witch.”

Harry continued to study the diagram, distracted again. “Should I even bother building this, though?” he finally asked.

“Harry, let me ask you a question,” Hermione said seriously. “You were found in a temple for Jedi, right?”

“Right.”

“And the Jedi had lightsabers too, right?”
“Yes.”

“Then maybe, Harry, you should try being a Jedi. They were the good guys, right? You have this incredible power, and you have the knowledge. Use it, but use it as Harry Potter would, not Darth Shaddix.”

He looked at up her with a startled expression, and then kissed her so hard her parents blushed. “You are brilliant, you know that, right?” he said.

“Yes, I know. But it never hurts to tell me occasionally.”
They flooed directly to Professor McGonagall’s office from the Leaky Cauldron, traveling under glamours for security.

The Daily Prophet, Witch Weekly, and every other publication in England, the continent and every other magical community in the world knew that somehow Harry Potter had returned not just from physical death, but a second time from a certified psychic death of personality. Though Amelia refused to let the Ministry issue any statements, too many people witnessed the Aurors ordering Hermione Granger to surrender, and those same witnesses heard her shout back something about Harry.

Those in Hogwarts knew exactly what that meant.

When they arrived by floo directly to McGonagall’s office in the castle that afternoon, McGonagall took a deep breath. “I fear your return may be difficult.”

“We’ll survive,” Hermione said resolutely.

“Very well,” the professor said. “I’ll show you to your new quarters.”

She stepped out of her office into the hall outside Gryffindor tower. They passed the entrance to the common room on to a series of doors in the corridor. “Mrs. Potter, since Mr. Potter does not yet have his wand, please place your wand against the door and state a password you wish.”

The two looked at each other for a long moment, before he said, “Sithspit.”

Hermione smiled. “Sithspit,” she agreed as she touched the picture. “No one here could possibly know what that means.”

The door opened onto a spacious two room suite. The sitting room had two writing desks, a bookshelf, a comfortable if older sofa, and a large fireplace in the wall that separated the two rooms. Stepping through, they discovered a large four poster in the Queen Anne style, another sofa, and two wardrobes on either side of the bed. A door in the corner led to a washroom. Harry’s old trunk, and Hermione’s empty one, rested at the foot of the bed.

“I will remain your head of house, and you still have Gryffindor tower privileges,” McGonagall told them. “Because of your married status, you do have the right to leave the grounds on your own prerogative, so long as you inform a staff member where you are going. Mrs. Potter, your Hogsmeade ban has been abated. While you can take your dinner in your rooms, I would suggest taking your meal this evening in the Great Hall. Get the suspense over, if you will.”

“We will,” Hermione said, smiling weakly. “Thank you, Professor.”

“Yes, thank you,” Harry said absently as he stared down at his trunk. He opened it and stared in fascination at his wand. “How do you have this?”
“Mr. Lupin managed to recover it before you were lost through the Veil,” McGonagall said. “There is something else, Mr. Potter. As much as it pains me to say, you’ll not be able to participate in Quidditch this year.”

He blinked at her in surprise. “I had not even thought to,” he said.

McGonagall nodded, fighting an obvious flood of relief. “Very good. Now, if you will excuse me, I do have a great deal of work to do. Tomorrow morning at eleven I have set an hour aside to discuss your studies. I shall expect to see you then. Until dinner, please make yourselves at home.”

They waited until well after dinner started before they left their quarters. “People are going to be staring at us,” Hermione warned.

“I know,” Harry said.

“Are you going to kill anyone?” She asked with a smile, but an underlying worry.

“Not tonight,” he assured her, straight-faced.

They went to the closed doors of the great hall. “I hate those doors, they’re so heavy,” Hermione said. She stared to pull the handle, when Harry stopped her with a touch. He pulled her back a few feet before raising his hand and pulling it back abruptly.

The heavy oak and steel doors swung open so violently they caused a rush of air that lifted Hermione’s hair from her shoulders. Beyond, the entire student body of Hogwarts stared at them, many with food still in their gaping jaws.

Every the consummate performer, Dumbledore stood up from the table as if expecting them that very moment. “If I may have your attention,” he called into the silence, “as some of you may have heard, Mr. Potter by the grace of magic has been returned to us. As grateful as we are for his return, we have the additional celebration of his recent nuptials to Ms. Hermione Granger. The two were wed by the Minister of Magic herself in the ancient forms. Welcome back to Hogwarts, Mr. and Mrs. Potter.”

Harry and Hermione, holding hands, walked slowly to the Gryffindor table, only to be met by Ginny, who hugged them both. “Welcome back,” she said.

Next came Ron, offering his hand. Neville and Dean followed, while Parvati actually gave Hermione a hug. Lavender oohed and aahed over the rings, and in minutes they were sitting back at the table as if Harry had not died and being brought back to life twice.

Harry shook the hands and pretended to smile at faces he only dimply remembered, and kept a firm lock on Hermione’s Force presence. Still students came, smiling and talking, their words blending into a hateful cacophony that left him shaking with sudden, uncontrollable rage. His hand reached for a lightsaber that wasn’t at his waist, and power gathered at his fingers to strike these presumptuous fools down. How dare they crush upon him as if he were their friend? How dare they…

He blinked and looked down at the hand holding his. Blue power flickered over his fingers, obviously hurting the hand holding him. He looked up in momentary shock and saw Hermione staring intently, for a moment forgetting the crush around them. Her eyes narrowed from the pain of touching his hand, but otherwise she did not look away.
“It’s okay,” she said softly, for his ears alone. “They’ll leave us alone now.”

He tore his gaze from hers and looked around at the children who had backed away in alarm from him, then back down to his wife. “I’m fine,” he said tightly.

“I know, love. Let’s eat, shall we?”

He watched her throughout the meal, eating with her off hand while pretending her right hand did not hurt. As he ate, he also noticed their classmates staring at him with wide eyes, now keeping their distance. Exactly as they should, a part of his mind whispered.

That evening, after dinner, Harry walked Hermione to the hospital wing. “Goodness, dear, whatever happened?” Pomfrey asked as she ran a diagnostic spell. When the spell results floated in a mist above Hermione’s hand, the mediwitch looked up at Harry with narrowed eyes. “This looks exactly like what happened to the Headmaster.”

“It was an accident,” Hermione said. “One I did, not Harry. Can you help?”

“A pain potion and a mild burn cream,” the mediwitch said. She stepped to the nearby medicine cabinet for the salve and the potion. Hermione downed the phial while Pomfrey applied the salve. “There, should be put to rights by morning. I hesitate to say this, but you should know that if injuries like this persist, I will be required to report it.”

Harry stared intently at her. “What injury?”

Pomfrey blinked, “Indeed, what were we discussing?”

“Birth control potion,” Hermione said quickly. “I’ve used muggle methods for my period, but I thing magical would be better now that I’m married.”

“Oh, quite right, quite right,” Pomfrey said absently. “A good decision, really. The Muggle method—you forget one pill and ‘pop’, you’re pregnant. Wait here, I’m sure I have a batch.”

When she was gone, Hermione turned and looked at Harry; he looked back and said, “I’m sorry I hurt you.”

“Better me than the whole of Gryffindor house,” she said lightly. “Thank you, for Pomfrey. It was my choice, after all.”

“And thank you,” he said softly.

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The two left after breakfast the next morning for their meeting with McGonagall. “Mr. and Mrs. Potter,” she said when they were seated, “how have you settled in?”

“Fine,” Harry said.

“The quarters are nicer than I imagined,” Hermione said. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure. Now, Hermione, have you given thought as to what classes you wish to pursue independently?”

“Yes, I’ve decided to continue with Transfiguration, Charms, DADA, Potions, Arithmancy, Ancient
“Excellent choices,” McGonagall said. “Of course, all your professors have indicated eagerness to work with you. The staff will develop academic goals for you over the next two years, and any tests or assignments will be designed to determine if you have reached those goals. And you, Harry?”

“I read Hermione’s notes last night,” Harry said, “and – “

“Wait, when did you read my notes?” Hermione asked.

“While you were sleeping,” Harry told her.

“Didn’t you sleep?”

“A little,” he said. “I have the Force, sleep is not as important for me as it is for you. I am fully rested after a few hours of meditation.” He looked back to McGonagall. “I believe I will pursue the same coursework as my wife, save for Herbology.”

McGonagall blinked in surprise. “You’ve never taken either Arithmancy nor Runes, Mr. Potter, and neither are easy subjects.”

“I know, I read through Hermione’s notes.”

“Which year?” Hermione asked, still curious.

“All of them.”

Hermione stared. “Harry, I had close to six hundred sheets of notes for Arithmancy alone.”

“I know. Your notes were better organized and written than the text. Thank you.” He leaned over and kissed her stunned cheek before turning back to the equally stunned McGonagall. “Professor, please do not continue to treat me like the Harry Potter you knew before. That Harry Potter was beaten as a child into believing he was stupid, and because he believed it, he became what he believed. I know better.”

“Yes, yes of course,” McGonagall said. “You’ll be pleased to know that Potions this year will be taught by Horace Slughorn rather than Professor Snape.”

“He’s actually quite good,” Hermione said. “I’ve enjoyed my classes with him.”

“And I heard at dinner Snape is teaching DADA,” Harry noted.

“That is correct,” McGonagall said. She didn’t bother to correct his means of addressing Snape.

“Good,” Harry said with a feral grin.

“Please do not hurt him,” McGonagall said, suddenly alarmed.

“If he is loyal to Professor Dumbledore, I will not. If he is not, I’ll leave nothing left.”

McGonagall shuddered. “Very well, thank you both. Mrs. Potter, if you could stay a moment I do have a few notes from Professor Sprout about a project. Mr. Potter, your self-study sheet should be ready by lunch.”

“See you in a bit, Harry,” Hermione said, flashing a smile. Harry nodded to the two witches and left the room.
When he was gone and her office was warded for privacy, McGonagall said, “Can you explain what happened last night?”

“What do you mean?”

“Hermione, even at the staff table we could feel the power he was releasing. I’m sure you noticed how the students backed away from him. They were terrified. And I don’t know what that light was, but I know when you took his hand it hurt you. Care to explain that?”

Hermione slumped a little in the chair. “It wasn’t his fault. Everyone just started crowding around him. He started feeling just like he did when the Emperor’s guards were torturing him. It did hurt when I took his hand, but that’s what he needed. It’s okay, now.”

“Did he tell you this, Hermione?”

“He didn’t have to, I knew,” Hermione said. “He really isn’t the same as the old Harry. He’s just as brave, and I think in some ways just as broken. But old Harry’s instinct was to hide or curl up to take the blow. This new Harry’s instinct is to destroy whoever tries to hurt him. That’s what happened with Professor Dumbledore at Nana’s house.”

McGonagall pursed her lips in thought. “Hermione, I ask this out of concern for my students. Can you control him? Can you keep him from hurting others?”

“Professor, it’s not like that. I can’t control him, I just…” She looked down at his hand. “I ground him. I guess you might say I balance him a little. But I’m going to need your help. Do you remember what I said, after I cursed Malfoy and his crew? If Harry had been with me on that train, every one of those Slytherins would be dead. That’s not something I could stop, and honestly I’m not even sure I’d want to. We’re going to stay in our quarters mostly to give him time to assimilate all of those memories of his. But please keep Malfoy and his ilk from us. Please, for their sakes.”

McGonagall regarded her favorite student intently. “Professor Dumbledore has already advised Professor Snape to rein his students in. I’ll make sure this message is reiterated.”

“Thank you.”

“And, of course, Professor Sprouts notes,” McGonagall added with a smile, handing over a scroll. “Please don’t hesitate to come to me if you need anything.”

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“Harry?” Hermione said as she looked up from her Arithmancy text, “are you done already?”

Harry nodded and closed the Sixth Year Transfiguration Book. “Yes, my essay is done. It feels so odd writing an essay like a child.”

The two sat in the small living area of their quarters. Hermione stood from her desk chair and walked over to the second of two desks that also occupied the room. Harry remained sitting, staring into space as he lost himself to his thoughts. He’d been doing that each of the four nights they’d spent together in school so far.

Unthinkingly, she placed her hands on his shoulders and rubbed his muscles as she looked over his shoulder at the essay. After a few moments of reading casually, she knitted her brows and lifted it to read better. “Harry,” she said, pausing her shoulder rub, “this is…really good. I think you touched on
ideas and concepts not even I noticed.”

“I’ve become used to writing detailed, exhaustive reports for my… the Emperor,” he said, though he did not break his intensive staring at the wall.

“You started this just two hours ago, though. Did you read through the whole chapter?”

“Chapter? I read the book.”


“Force training,” he said with a shrug, as if it were a simple thing. “All Sith, Jedi and Dark Adepts must learn how to learn before their true training can commence. It is a combination of a low-level meditation and a mental cantrip to aid the absorption and retention of knowledge.”

She gently spun the chair around until she was able to lean over and look him in the eyes. “Harry, I need you to listen to me. I am a good, virtuous girl, but I swear I would sell myself as a ten yen whore in China to learn how to do that. Can you teach me?”

“I don’t want a ten yen whore from China,” he said. “But I would teach you for a kiss.”

She kissed him, and after dragging him to their bedroom, shagged him hard for an hour. When they finished, panting and coated in each other’s sweat, she said, “Will that do?”

“That’ll do,” he agreed.

The next day they began their independent studies by going to whichever classes they wanted to. For Hermione, this meant nearly all of them. However, because of their status, she could pick and choose which assignments to complete depending on her own understanding of a subject. On independent study officially, they only wrote essays or responded to quizzes they chose to for their own edification regarding those goals the professors set for them, skipping those classes they did not need or did not feel like attending.

Although the changes at Hogwarts that year were shocking to most, Harry’s perceived absence of four years, and the trauma that occasionally made it difficult to remember everything, actually put him in a better position to accept that Severus Snape was now the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, while Horace Slughorn returned from his long retirement to teach Potions. It was made even easier by his not having to attend Snape’s classes at all.

Slughorn, of course, was thrilled to have Harry visit his class despite his lackluster OWL results. The fact that he was, so far, earning perfect marks on independent study just made Slughorn convinced Harry was his mother’s son. Hermione, though, knew the truth—Harry was far more than he used to be. True to his word, that night he started teaching Hermione meditation, while she in turn shared her texts and first year notes from Runes and Arithmancy, since he was growing quickly bored with those courses he had been able to take following his OWLs.

In fact, as October progressed, Hermione actually felt very good about all her subjects, except the one she cared about the most: meditation. “I just can’t stop thinking,” she said, as if the mere idea was ludicrous.

“You can’t feel what the Force is trying to tell you if you don’t stop thinking yourself.”

“The Force speaks?”

“Not as you or I understand it,” Harry explained. The two were naked on their bed, cross-legged and
facing each other before the open fireplace that also warmed the living area. “The Force is made of life itself, Hermione. It has the same base intelligence all life does—to survive. Only it expresses that instinct through those who can touch it and understand it. This gives Force adepts limited precognition; it enhances our speed and strength. The knowledge I have I gained because the Emperor gave me no choice, but the Force was always there. Turn around.”

She did so, and at his prompting scooted back until her bare back rested against the muscles of his stomach. She half expected him to wrap his arms around her to fondle her breasts—he seemed fond of them. Instead, though, he lightly reached up and touched her temples with his fingers. “Close your eyes,” he whispered.

She obeyed, trying to control the shiver his touch caused her. “Do you feel me?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” she breathed.

“What do you feel?”

“You’re feeling my Force presence,” he said. “It is the first step toward feeling the Force itself. For the next few days, concentrate on this feeling, Hermione. Feel my Force presence, even if I’m not near you. Reach out like you’re performing a finding spell, and try to find me. And then try to sense and find others. When you can do that, we’ll start meditation exercises again.”

He removed his fingers, and then before she could say a word, he lifted her off the bed and on to…

“Oh yes,” she breathed as she arched her back to wrap two arms around his neck, “I definitely feel that.”

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During Hermione’s elementary Force training, she in turn gave Harry all of her previous year’s notes and texts on Arithmancy and Runes. He began reading the Arithmancy before snorting. “I always thought Arithmancy was the art of using equations to predict the future.”

“Well, that’s one aspect of it,” Hermione said. “However, it’s also the root behind spell creation. It is literally the expression of magic through math. It took me a while to understand why there were so many symbols on top of the Arabic numerals we use, but that was because magic expresses itself in a base 13 numerical system, and uses runes to symbolize the additional numbers, rather than Arabic numerals. Additionally, those runes have a corresponding meaning to them on top of the numerical value. It gets rather complex, but you would know that, since you…you’ve read through the whole book, haven’t you?”

Harry smiled. “Someone is outside the door. Can you feel them?”

Hermione closed her eyes and concentrated. “I feel…something. A girl—is it Ginny?”

“Very good,” Harry purred. “Soon we’ll start meditations again, and this time you’ll do much better.”

Hermione smiled. “Harry, do you think all witches and wizards could learn the Force?”
“No, I don’t think so,” Harry said. “I would never have been able to, except for how the Emperor destroyed the wizard in me. And once he refashioned me, I never had use of my magic again.”

“But I’m learning it.”

“You’re the exception, because of our bond,” Harry said. “You followed me in and saw how I became what I am. More importantly, our bond shares emotions and magic. I doubt anyone else could learn to do even what you have learned so far. I could be wrong, but I don’t believe so.”

“So I’m special,” she said as she leaned over to kiss him.

“You always have been,” he kissed her back. “Now let’s see what Ginny wants.”
New Associations

Chapter Summary

Not your Dumbledore's Army.

They opened the door just as Ginny stood with her fist raised to knock. “Hi!” she said brightly, to cover her surprise.

“Hi, Ginny,” Hermione said with a genuine smile to the younger girl. “How are you?”

Ginny blushed a little when she spotted Harry at his desk. “I’m okay. I was wondering if I could talk to you guys a little?”

“Come in, please,” Hermione said.

“Thanks,” Ginny said. She stepped in, admiring the room. “This is really nice,” she said. “People were wondering what it was like. No one’s used the married quarters since Bill was a First Year, and then it was a pair of seventh years.”

Harry did not rise from the desk, though he did at least smile thinly. “What can we do for you tonight, Ginny?”

Ginny looked from Hermione to Harry, blushed again and looked back to Hermione. “We were…I mean, some of us, anyway, were wondering if you were going to do the DA this year again.”

“Ginny I don’t…” Hermione began, before she felt a presence in her mind she recognized as Harry’s mental touch. “I guess it’s really up to Harry.”

Harry chose that moment to stand and walked toward Ginny. “When you look at me, you feel loss,” he said softly to the younger girl. “Why is that?”

“I had a crush on you,” Ginny admitted softly. “Last year I thought I was over it, and I tried just to be your friend. But now that I know I can’t have you…well, I guess I wasn’t over it as much as I thought. I’m sorry, this was a mistake.”

“Thomas Dean is not good for you,” Harry said softly.

Ginny stopped mid-step. “Hermione, you promised!”

“I sensed him around you,” Harry said. “Hermione never said anything. Dean can dull your pain for a moment, but he can’t provide you what you need.”

“What if what I needed was you?” Ginny asked in a small voice, without turning around.

Harry leaned forward until he was almost breathing in her ear. “The Harry Potter you loved died screaming in agony,” he whispered. “He will never return. Who I am now is not the Harry you knew—Hermione has accepted that, and you need to as well. If I gather a new DA, it will be only those students who can accept that I am not the Harry they knew before, and what I teach will not just be defense. You are strong, Ginevra. You have the potential to be a powerful witch. When you
decide what you need, and you wish to be a member of a new DA, then come. Bring only those you trust, who wish to fight for something more than just themselves.”

Ginny squeezed her eyes shut, and still without turning, left their room.

“And you think she’ll come back?” Hermione asked. “Harry?”

He spun around and tackled her, kissing her and virtually carrying her to the bed. She laughed as he managed to magic her clothes off, and moaned as he plowed into her body aggressively. The power and near violence of his lovemaking was both exhilarating and terrifying. There was no refusal—she could only give herself fully to him.

*He is rage and strength,* she remembered the odd, blind Jedi said, as if he were speaking directly to her through the ages. She remembered his words as she wrapped her legs around her husband’s arse and held onto him for dear life as he pounded into both her body and her very magical core. The ecstasy approached such heights she could not tell any more what was pleasure or pain; *the darkness within him seduces you.*

She looked into his eyes as he plowed into her and saw rage there: anger, confusion, loss and pain. Dark emotions whirled around in him, and over it all she sensed an intense, terrifying desire to do harm. He loved her not just because of desire, she realized. In fact, she could not even call what they were doing as making love. He was fucking her like an animal, taking the aggression the Sith left infesting his soul and instead directing it to plow into her body.

He was fucking her to keep from killing others, she realized with shock. And so she spread her legs wider and thrust her own hips to meet his and held on for dear life, knowing by doing so she was giving him a release he desperately needed.

“I love you, Harry,” she said.

She felt him finish with her words, and she saw as the hatred and anger drained away from his face until it was her Harry who looked back. “Did I hurt you?” he whispered.

“I’m stronger than I look, Harry,” she said.

“Stronger than I am,” he whispered. His sounded nearly dead. “Promise me, Hermione. Promise you won’t let me hurt you. I don’t think I could live with myself if I hurt you.”

He started to pull out, but as always she stopped him. Even more than when they had sex, she enjoyed the feeling of him in her body afterward. “Stay,” she ordered. She took his face in her hands and kissed him passionately. “I am here for you, Harry. I love you, and I love the feel of your body in mine. You won’t hurt me, and whenever you need me, I am yours.”

He leaned down and kissed her neck, making her body shiver. “Thank you,” he said to her.

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Two days later Hermione came in from after classes and dropped her satchel just inside the door to their suite. Harry sat at his desk, which now included a wide credenza piled with parchments and paper. Curious, she walked up behind him. “What have you been working on?”

“Plans,” he said. He sighed and leaned his head back against her stomach, and moments later reached up to wrap his hands around her back, hugging her to him. “I’m not sure where to start.”
“I suppose it depends on where you want to end up. What are you thinking?”

“Before I sensed you were in danger, I escaped that house and walked the streets for a little while. I was struck by how… primitive everything was. At your parents, we watched the television and the news talked about wars and oil. So much of the world seems dependent on oil. And six billion people? Almost seven billion? That’s too many people for one planet to support, at least a pre-space flight planet like this. At best this world is facing massive warfare or critical shortages of necessary supplies—likely both. Remember what we spoke about, when we woke? The world—the whole world—is broken. I want to fix it.”

He did not sound anguished at all by his grim assessment; rather he sounded much like Hermione herself when she was studying an interesting subject. She came around until placing herself on his lap—she loved to sit on him and feel his arms holding her up. “So what are you thinking?”

“How to help humanity survive,” he said softly. “To grow up and leave the cradle. This is a critical juncture in development—this I know from my training. Most societies with this population density begin to aggressively pursue space travel and off-world colonization, otherwise they have to enact population control methods. Other than China, I don’t see either of those avenues being pursued. If the world falls into war… I don’t want to risk losing you.”

“So what do you plan?”

“Shaddix was going to conquer the world with force of arms,” Harry said, “and brutality. He could have, too. Other Sith have conquered worlds single-handedly.”

“You’re not Shaddix, though, Harry.”

He stared into space a moment before he said, “So what if instead of just conquering it by force, I controlled it by another power. Economic power?” He pulled up a diagram, this one much more detailed with a list of chemicals on one side.

“What is that?”

“A solar panel that can convert one hundred percent of sunlight into usable wattage, and a capacitor that can preserve that energy for days on end. It absorbs energy from all wavelengths of EM radiation, rather than the limited wavelengths of this world’s solar power technology,” Harry said. “The capacitor is probably more important than the panel itself. It will store energy like a battery with less than one percent energy loss over any given twelve-month period. Two of these could power a house, day and night. Four of these could power a car at 200 kilometers hour around the world. Six would power a bus, even in a temperate climate.”

“Is that what you’ve been working on all week?”

Harry nodded, before nuzzling her neck. “I know how the Sith would do this,” he said. “But I’m not sure how we should.”

“We?”

“Where you go, I follow,” he said.

Hermione looked over the diagram. “How expensive would it be to make these?”

“I’m not sure, but probably not much once the infrastructure was set up. Perhaps forty to fifty pounds sterling per unit. The first units would be more expensive, though.”
“But these could power a car forever?”

“Yes.”

“Harry, my parents pay over two pounds for a gallon of petrol. Their auto holds 10 gallons and gets twenty miles to the gallon. So, that’s roughly a pound per every ten miles. My parents drive fifteen, maybe sixteen thousand miles a year, at a guess. If you sold this thirty-pound unit for a thousand pounds, you’d still save my parents six hundred pounds a year, and then sixteen hundred every year after that. Harry, that’s a huge profit margin.”

“The problem is where to start?”

“Well, with money, of course,” Hermione said. “The DMLE invited you to their testing grounds this weekend, right?”

“Yes. You’re coming?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. And when we’re done, maybe we can sneak away and visit Gringotts.”

Alastor Moody fought hard to keep his good eye from twitching.

The twitch, he knew, was his worst ‘tell’ and the reason he was not good at any type of gambling, muggle or wizarding. When he became agitated, his eye began to twitch. It was a remnant from his last bout of prolonged 

Cruciatus

exposure.

However, it was hard not to twitch while watching a newly-turned sixteen-year-old demolish the advanced Auror training ground.

“Bloody hell,” Shacklebolt said beside him. Then he looked at Mrs. Potter, who was smirking at their expressions, and said, “Sorry.”

“It’s all right. He’s amazing, isn’t he?” Hermione said.

Potter did not climb the obstacle walls—he leaped them in a single bound. He flew up into the air as if on the wave of a banishing charm, only the banishing charm was silent, wandless, and motionless. He moved as if the magic were a part of his every motion, allowing him to accelerate to inhuman speed, or jump further than the most powerful vampire. It was at once exhilarating and terrifying, given what they knew of the boy.

The trials were more than just obstacles, of course. Forty of Moody’s hand-picked aurors were spaced around the grounds in either black robes (hostiles) or red robes (friendlies). They were not holding back, either.

Potter used his wand at the last, but only to shield. His shields were very strong for a teenager—as strong as many adult hitwizards, in fact—but he rarely had to use them. Rather, he chose evasion over defense, along with a terrifying attack. Some of Moody’s hand-picked, seasoned aurors actually screamed when Potter closed in on them and put them down with a quick, point-blank stunner that usually sent them flying.

The boy reached the end of the trials in five minutes. It took Moody forty minutes during his test when he was twenty—Shack took over an hour.
When done, the young man walked without any sign of exertion back to Moody, Shacklebolt and his wife, who greeted him with a searing kiss that made the older men shuffle their feet uncomfortably—well, feet and peg in Moody’s case.

“Where did you learn to do that, boy?” Moody asked.

“A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away,” Potter said with a blank face. “Teach Hermione and myself to apparate. Unfortunately that’s one skill I don’t seem to have.”

“What, now? You’re underage.”

“My wife assures me marriage is an emancipating event, and she’s much smarter than you are. Teach us to apparate.”

“Say please,” Moody growled.

“Teach us before I cut off that last testicle of yours,” Potter growled back.

Shack paled, but Moody guffawed suddenly. “Aye, that’s a good one. Not even going to ask how you knew.”

Shack stared from one to the other. “What, you mean…?”

“Same curse took my leg,” Moody said. “Thank Merlin my balls are big enough one’s all I need! Hah! Come on, Potters, I’ll teach you. That way you can spread more chaos! Shack, you go tell the boss woman about Potter’s trial results.”

“Right.” Shack disappeared with a pop, while on the field the on-site healer went onto the field to begin Ennervating the fallen.

“So, you’ve become a right bad-arse, have you?” Moody said. “I still think you’re trouble, boy. It takes a hard man to take down a friend like you took down Remus Lupin. Girl, you were supposed to control Potter here, not cheer ‘m on.”

“I have no interest in controlling my husband,” Hermione said primly.

Harry, having taken the man’s measure, said merely, “You can’t win a war by dying for your side.”

“Bloody right, make the other side die for theirs. Albus is a good soul, but he just doesn’t understand that.”

“But you do,” Harry said. They reached the apparation combat field where aurors were taught to apparate in combat conditions. “Did they tell you what happened to me?”

“You fell in the Veil, Death got scared of you and spit you back out.”

“Close enough,” Harry said. He then described some of what happened, but mainly concentrating on his condensed military training, and then his actual command experience, including how he wiped out an entire Rebel during his first year.

Moody listened with a twitching eye. “So you’re telling me that, even though you look sixteen, you’re actually almost twenty in your head with a full year of experience as a general.”

“Yes,” Harry said. “I’m sure you can guess why I’m telling you.”

Moody snorted. “You think the Order would follow you?”
“What Order?” Hermione asked with faux innocence.

Harry smiled without humor. “Do you actually think I care about the Order? Or your little war? I’ve waged wars that left whole worlds in ash. I’m talking about the world, Moody. Muggle and magical alike, led into the stars. And it won’t take a Dark Lord to do it, nor any world wars if I can help it. Military might, yes, but properly applied force can be more devastating and effective than the largest armies.”

Moody stood very, very still and studied the boy. “You’re dark, Potter. I can see it in your face. Merlin’s ballsack, I can feel it in you.”

Harry took a step closer to the aged auror. “The Shaddix personality I was forced to wear is dead, but everything that made him dangerous is still in me. I’m not talking about genocide or slavery or any of the other things a dark lord might do. I’m talking about introducing technologies to lead the world into a new era. I will lead through wealth and power, not terror. But make no mistake, Alastor Moody, I will lead. For those that follow, there will be riches, power, and the opportunity to make the world a better place.”

“Do you think Tonks’ buys into your better place?”

Harry’s confident expression broke a moment, and in that moment Moody was sure he saw genuine regret. “No, I’m sure she doesn’t,” he said. “Nor could I blame her. I won’t hurt her again, that much I promise.”

Hermione took his hand but said nothing.

“And assuming I bought into this vision of yours,” Moody said, “what of Albus?”

“His body reeks of death,” Harry said in a neutral voice, as if he truly did not know how to feel about it. “His hand is cursed, and it will kill him before the year is out. I can see that he has made no plans for continuity upon his death, even though Voldemort will surely act at that time.”

“So?”

“So I will be the continuity. When Dumbledore dies, I will assume command of those that oppose Voldemort. When Voldemort throws the Ministry down, I will assume control of the residual Ministry forces. And after I’ve dealt with Voldemort, I will use my position to revolutionize the whole world.”

“Bloody arrogant you are,” Moody said.

“Yes.”

The old auror’s eyes twitched again. “Fine, I’ll give you your shot. But the moment I see you going dark, I won’t hesitate to stick a knife in your back.”

“Good,” Harry said. “Now, teach us to Apparate. Please.”

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Harry and Hermione popped onto the designated apparition point in Diagon Alley with the loud pops of the newly trained. Each carried a provisional license from Moody, who promised he would file the full license approvals the next day.
Being in the middle of the school term, the alley was not bristling with potential Hogwarts students. However, it was the center of wizarding commerce for the majority of England and Wales, and so was doing a bustling business as the young couple walked through the street holding hands.

Each wore a slight glamour that proved just enough to keep people from looking at them as they made their way up the alley to Gringott’s Bank. The bank itself was reasonably busy without being too crowded. Goblin tellers weighed stacks of gold, silver and copper, while a short line of wizards waited with various levels of patience for their turn.

Harry and Hermione joined the line, until at last they reached the teller. “Remove the glamours,” the goblin growled.

Hermione removed their glamours, while Harry said, “I wish to speak to someone about the Potter vaults.”

The goblin glanced at Harry’s scar. “Do you have a key?”

Harry handed his vault key over, recently obtained from Mrs. Weasley in the hospital. “This is your trust vault,” the goblin sneered. “If you wish to discuss the Potter vaults, I will need the family key.”

“I do not have it,” Harry said. “Which is part of what I wish to discuss. This is my wife, Hermione Potter. It is my understanding that marriage is an emancipating event. Do the Goblins recognize that?”

The goblin grimaced, revealing a row of sharp teeth. “Our treaty requires that we acknowledge such foolishness.”

“Then I wish to claim my vaults and all properties I may be entitled to,” Harry said. “Who do I speak with?”

“Nutcrusher will help you,” the Goblin said.

Harry stared at the short, stout goblin that arrived, while Hermione bit her lip to keep a straight face. “Nutcrusher?” he asked.

“Shall I show you why I am called that?” the new goblin growled. “Come.”

They followed the goblin into an office off the main floor and took two seats, while the goblin walked up a short flight of steps to sit behind a desk that was situated to put the much shorter creature at a definite height advantage. “To prove you are eligible for the Potter vaults, you must do a blood test.” He removed a lavishly ornate gold knight and said, “Present your palm.”

With a glance at Hermione, Harry did so and made no expression as the goblin pressed the knife into his palm deep enough to draw blood. He placed the droplet on a parchment before nodding. “Very well, Mr. Potter. You are acknowledged as the sole heir of the Potter Estates. You have also been named as sole heir of Sirius Black. Given the fact you are no longer dead, these vaults have been reactivated. There is a fifty galleon charge for reactivating the vaults, which has already been deducted.”

“And what is the fee to have a full accounting of my assets?” Harry asked.

“Fifty galleons,” the goblin said with a toothy grin.

“What about statements?” Hermione said. “Aren’t you required to provide statements?”
“Why would we do that?” the goblin said with a snort. “What concern is it of ours how much gold you wizards keep in your vaults. Count it yourself, or be prepared to pay us to do it for you.”

Hermione started to object, but this time it was Harry who calmed her. “Quite right,” Harry said. “It is good to remember that Goblins are not friends of wizards, which is why you give us such ridiculous names. Nutcrusher? What were you called last week?”

“Bonecruncher,” the Goblin said without pause. “True names hold power, and we will give you no power to hold over us.”

Hermione’s eyes took light. “I see.”

“We will do our own accounting,” Harry said. “Once the key is provided at what I’m sure will be a reasonable price.”

“Fifty galleons is very reasonable,” Nutcrusher, formerly known as Bonecruncher, said with a toothy, unfriendly grin.

They left the bank ten minutes later without bothering to visit his family vaults—his trust vault provided him sufficient gold for his immediate needs. Hermione followed along, until she realized he was heading toward the Ministry of Magic. Once more they entered the silly Muggle phonebooth.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and reason for visiting.”

Hermione touched Harry’s hand and smiled. “Mr. and Mrs. Merlin, and we’re here to take back magic,” she said.

The name badges came back: Mr. Merlin, Magic Reclaimer, and Mrs. Merlin, Magic Reclaimer.

“Canadians was better,” Harry said.

Hermione slapped his shoulder. “Shush you. So, we’re looking for an accountant?”

Harry looked down at her, before kissing her. “You’re brilliant. If we going to pay that much, let’s actually get our money’s worth.”

“I can’t believe those…those…goblins! They were so rude.”

“Imagine giving over all of Europe’s financial institutions to the Nazis right after the second world war,” Harry said.

“Why on Earth would anyone do that?”

“You tell me. It’s what wizards did with the goblins after the last Goblin Rebellion. Why is it that a hostile enemy was given all of wizarding Britain’s gold?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because Wizarding Britain didn’t win,” Harry said. “Read the accounts more closely. The reason there were so many ‘rebellions’ was because there was never a clear victory, and the goblins would be happy to continue fighting until every last one of them died. So the Ministry gave in to their demands. Goblins wanted gold, and they got it.”

“Harry, that’s not in our history book,” she said.
“I’ll bet you the contents of our vaults that it is in the Goblins’ books.”

After weighing their wands, the two made their way to the Ministry Department of Licensing. The witch just inside the door looked older than Egypt. “Yes?” she asked in a tremulous voice.

“Hello,” Hermione said brightly. “We’re looking for a listing of certified accountants?”

“BARNEY!” the woman screamed, shockingly loud given her ancient, frail appearance. A young man stepped out of what a second before seemed to be solid wall.

“Hello,” he said brightly. He looked to be in his thirties. “What can I do for you, Guv?”

“We need a listing of certified accountants,” Harry asked.

“Right-o. Want magic only, or magic and muggle certified?”

“Magic and muggle,” Hermione said quickly.

The man disappeared back into the wall and appeared a minute later. “That’ll be ten sickles.”

“I thought you’d say fifty galleons,” Hermione said.

“What, do I look like a goblin, then?”

Harry and Hermione took the list to Fortescue’s for an afternoon ice cream while they perused the list. It was, predictably, short. Only ten men and no women at all served as accountants in both worlds, and of those only four were CCAB-qualified on the muggle side.

“So do we interview all of them?” Hermione asked.

“Close your eyes,” Harry suggested, “and pick one. I’ll do the same.”

When they opened their eyes a moment, both their fingers were on the name Lawrence Bartleby. “As the Force wills,” Harry said simply.

“Good enough for me. An OWL to him, then?”

Harry nodded. “We should be getting back. But before then, I need you to help me look like a Muggle professional.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up. “I think I can do that.”
Harry and Hermione returned to Hogsmeade with a pop, each holding bags of clothes for the other. “I love magic,” Harry said.

“Did they have apparition where you were?” Hermione asked.

“No, teleportation did not exist in the Empire in any capacity. The technology to explore that type of technology was banned by the Jedi when they came to understand that technological teleportation was nothing less than the destruction of the original and the reproduction of a duplicate somewhere else. While the individual going through that process might not be aware of it, the Force imprint evidently was, and the Force itself cried out against it.”

Hermione giggled. “You sounded smart.”

He glared down at her, then reached back and pinched her bum. She squealed. “Don’t you dare!” she said, seeing the light in his eyes.

“Dare what?” he said, nipping her again, but this time with the Force.

She pulled her wand, lips trembling. “Don’t make me use this!”

“Do I need my wand too?”

“I’ll hex your wand off if you…Haarrryyyyyy!” He had flown by her side and wrapped her in his arms, lifting her from behind while mercilessly tickling her ribs. He finally stopped when she threatened to pee on him, and he sought peace with a long, searing kiss.

Neither were very surprised to find Dumbledore waiting for him at the gates of the castle, a frown marring his face. “Mr. and Mrs. Potter,” he said by way of greeting when Harry arrived, “I was informed by the Ministry that your testing was done over four hours ago. May I ask where you were?”

“No,” Harry said lightly as he walked past the old wizard. “Tell me, Headmaster, could I sit for OWLS in subjects I did not initially study?”

Dumbledore appeared bemused. “I’ll answer yours if you answer mine.”

“Honestly, Harry,” Hermione said. “We were attending to personal business, Headmaster. We are legal adults now, and must attend to adult responsibilities occasionally.”

“And where would your business take you?”

“I was planning the orbital bombardment of Canada,” Harry said. “I’ve determined that they represent a direct threat against my growing Empire.”
“Canada?” An arched white brow lifted high into his forehead. “As to your questions, Mr. Potter, you can sit for any OWL subject you wish. The tests are only administered at the end of term, and at the end of first term only by request.”

“Then please make the request, as I intend to sit for OWLs in Runes and Arithmancy. I find Arithmancy to be remarkably similar to the physics of hyperspace, once I take into account the different numerical base. Hyperspace dynamics operate on a base eight system due to the dimensional interchanges necessary to achieve hyperspatial entry speeds. Quite amazing, really.”

“Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said. “Harry, please…”

Harry stopped and turned to view the old wizard. “Yes?”

“Don’t forget your purpose in being here,” Dumbledore said. “There are things I must show you. Things I must teach you if you are to truly defeat Voldemort. Right now, he is functionally immortal—killing him is not enough.”

“Yes, Bellatrix knew about his rituals,” Harry said dismissively. “It is an ancient Egyptian ritual designed to sheer one’s soul off and store them in a container of some kind. The Sith had similar rituals. The weakness, of course, lay in the containers selected. In fact, I can sense one of the horcruxes somewhere in the castle, but I’m not sure where. I’ll find it soon enough. First, however, I need to be properly armed. Now, if you will excuse me, my wife and I would like to go to dinner.”

“Yes,” Albus said. Harry walked away, and only as he did so did Albus realize he’d completely failed to address Potter’s tardiness.

Given that they were still in their one month “detention”, they elected to have dinner in their rooms, served by a trembling and ridiculously happy Dobby the Elf. As they ate, they drafted their first letter to Bartleby. Hedwig was flying by nightfall, and the newlyweds celebrated their day in each other’s arms for the remainder of the evening.

Hermione woke up alone, her arm stretched across the cool depression of the bed where Harry should have been. It was an experience that seemed to be happening more often as October bled toward November.

Her analogue alarm clock told her it was five. With a sigh, she climbed out of bed and draped a robe over her otherwise naked form. They had made love last night for almost an hour before drifting off to sleep. She could still smell him over her body.

She could feel him in the Force nearby, his presence agitated. It took less and less effort to find him that way as her own meditation exercises advanced. She already discovered that her reading and retention rate had doubled, just with what he taught her.

She stepped silently into the small living room and found him pacing like a caged animal, as naked as she was under her robe. He looked lithe and beautiful and deadly. He was talking to himself in a low whisper, his face warped by vacillating expression of rage, anger and loss. She knew he exercised in the room—she could see it in his broadening chest and thickening arms and legs. She felt it when he crushed into her during sex.

Yet, moving as he did, she was struck by how wild he seemed—how angry and wounded.
“Harry?” she whispered.

He stopped mid-stride and looked at her with wide, alarmed eyes. “I woke you?”

“I know you didn’t mean too. Do you want to come back to bed?”

“Of course,” he lied. She could tell when he was lying, simply because of how flat his voice became.

She walked to him, placing a hand on his arm. He was trembling under her touch, though his face was as emotionless. “What’s wrong?”

“This place…is starting to feel like a prison,” he said, his voice low. And yet, for all the smooth calm of the sound, she sensed rage behind it.

“It’s morning,” she whispered. “Get dressed, and go out. You’ve met the terms of the curfew for the night. Go out and do what you need to.”

He looked at her in surprise, and as he did so she could see Shaddix fade and Harry come back. “You’re right,” he said in wonder. “I never thought of it.” He turned to get dressed and was gone a moment later.

Hermione went back to bed and slept, until two hours later she felt a hot, sweaty body slide into bed behind her. Hot lips pressed into the nape of her neck, causing gooseflesh to crawl up and down her spine. Hands reached around not to cup her breasts, but to press down between her legs, light and gentle yet insistent. He did not touch her like he did when the Sith in him grew too strong. He touched her like a lover who wanted to bring her pleasure.

“Yes,” she breathed, lifting her leg for him to slide into her body from behind.

“I love you,” he breathed into her ear as he made her forget for a moment his anger that morning.

Later that morning, the young lovers showered and dressed before heading out to breakfast in the Great Hall. Surprisingly, Draco Malfoy and his ilk wisely left them alone after their experiences with Hermione on the train. On the flipside, their other friends seemed a little distant as well. Neither had seen Luna in more than passing, while Ron, Ginny and Neville seemed a lot more reserved.

However, on November first, Ginny and Ron both cornered them. “I thought about what you told me, Harry,” Ginny said. “And I spoke to Ron.”

“We want in,” Ron said with a tight grin. “I think Dean is in too.”

“But not with me,” Ginny said with a blush. “We had a good talk.”

“Who else?” Hermione asked.

“A few Hufflepuffs, a handful of Ravenclaws,” Ron said.

“Meaning Terry Boot,” Ginny said. “I talked to Luna but…I don’t know, she’s been really strange this year. I mean more than normal. She said she didn’t want to.”

“It’s a start, still,” Harry said. “It’ll be another week before we can meet. When we do, we’ll talk more about just what we want from the club.”

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Luna watched Harry run in the mornings. Before the sun rose, cold or hot, rain or dry, he ran. She usually sat in the crenellations of the clock tower, curled in a blanket, while Harry ran around the school grounds. He did not have a set path, varying it every day. From her height and distance, it did not seem that he was moving that fast, until he grew closer and she could see he was going faster than anyone in school could possibly move.

Then there were his exercises. His jumped impossible heights and tumbled like a born acrobat. He conjured a steel blade with his wand and went through extravagant, unbelievable routines with the blade before vanishing it and continuing his other exercises.

Some mornings, Hermione stepped into the pre-dawn grounds and watched him. Luna blushed when, on her second such morning, he almost tackled her in his haste, pulling down her jogging bottoms and fucking her like an animal right there by the quidditch pitch. Hermione did not protest—even from her distance Luna could see from the way the girl reached her arms around his neck back and arched her back to press her arse into his thrusts that she enjoyed every second of it. But from Luna’s limited experience, it did not look like they were making love. Their interactions then were almost violent, and she heard rumors of Hermione visiting the hospital wing for bruise salve.

Luna trembled as a vision struck her then—of Hermione standing on a balcony, covered in blood, as Harry took her roughly from behind. She was smiling even as someone else’s blood dripped from her fingers. He made love to her angrily, and she accepted it with a joyous smile, as if his anger were brilliant and long overdue.

As the days fell into a routine, Luna watched Harry go through his days, auditing classes without bothering to take exams. He actually audited her Fifth Year Arithmancy and Rune classes, but rather than listening to the lecture he read the texts from sixth and seventh years, speaking only after class with specific questions on things he did not understand from the books.

He and Hermione ate together in the Great Hall during breakfast and lunch every day, though they took dinner alone usually. Luna noticed that their old friends were starting gradually to gravitate back to them. Initially there was a separation resulting from the implied threat of violence Harry carried around with him and the confirmed violence Hermione had committed. But as time wore on the sharp edge of his threat blunted with familiarity, and Ron, Ginny and others gravitated back into their sphere. However, things were different now.

Ron, for instance, was now dating Lavender Brown, who seemed fascinated with the scar on his chest. Like all the witches in the school, Lavender knew not to give Ron her virginity, but unlike most she was willing to do other things for him in the closets or long-abandoned classrooms.

Luna thought she should feel guilty about watching them, but it was hard to feel guilty watching Ron be orally pleasured by such a beautiful as Lavender. For the longest time Luna had a crush on Ron, and seeing his rather large member sliding in and out of Lavender’s mouth, she thought he would have at the least been a filling lover.

She knew from the look on Ginny’s face when she finally did the same for her current boyfriend, Terry Boot. Terry looked exceedingly pleased and tended to smirk whenever he looked at the redhead Gryffindor. Luna did not think her former friend was very happy with Terry; Boot was a nice enough fellow, but he did not have the same spark Ginevra did. But she was obviously making Terry exceedingly happy.

Luna wondered if Ginny finally gave into orally pleasing Terry for some of the reasons Harry was so rough with Hermione. Perhaps they were both angry in their own way. Still, Luna felt sad for
her old friend—Ginny was using sex as a crux for her emotions, and it was not really working, because of course how could you really know if your lover loved you, if you never lifted your head above his waist?

Though students were becoming familiar with Harry again, Luna doubted any of them really understood just what he was, not until the end of that first week in November, when the whole school learned firsthand that not only was Harry a murderer, but that Hermione was becoming one as well.

It was the Slytherin boy’s fault for starting it, of course. On the second day of Harry’s return, Luna took it upon herself to warn Draco, not because she liked him at all since he was rather a bore, but because she did not want to see anyone else die.

He sneered at her like normal, but she noticed that his eyes were blood-shot and ringed with shadows of long, sleepless nights. She felt a touch of sadness for him—his father was dead after all. “What do you want, Loony?” he said.

“Please stay away from Harry,” she said to him.

“Why, do you have a crush on Potter? Wish he’d stick it to you like he does that mudblood whore of his?”

Luna debated whether to admit that, indeed, part of her wished he would do that to her. Instead, she said, “That’s not Harry any more. What came back from the Veil is not-Harry. He is angry and dark. He will kill you, Draco. He doesn’t care about rivalries or games any more. If you bother him, he will kill you and your friends without blinking an eye, just like he killed your father. Please, leave him alone.”

Draco stared at her in horror for a long, silent minute. “You stupid, fucking bint,” he snarled.

Luna said nothing, since sometimes she did think she was stupid, especially when she found herself dreaming about Harry sticking it in her just like he stuck it in Hermione. Still, she stared at the pale Slytherin until he turned away and left. Her message must have hit home, though. It was a week into November Draco had not done anything stupid like talk to, or even approach, Harry.

Unfortunately, he did not appear to share her message with the rest of Slytherin. Miles Cratchly was the proto-typical Slytherin: pure-blooded back at least eight generations or more, hateful and leering to anyone not in Slytherin, and most importantly the son of a Death Eater. This last fact was a poorly hidden secret, as many in Slytherin were the children of Death Eaters.

Miles did not play Quidditch and did not otherwise distinguish himself in any way. His grades were rather lackluster and he was only studying for three NEWTs—the bare minimum to remain a student after Fifth Year.

On Tuesday mornings, Harry audited a seventh-year Ancient Runes class. He had been doing so for the past week. Hermione had a free period since she was still auditing the sixth year class while she concentrated on seventh-year arithmancy and sixth-year potions. Really, Luna admired them both for pursuing independent study, and wished she could do so as well. After all, she was studying sixth year arithmancy herself as a hobby.

She was in the cafeteria, finishing an essay for Professor Flitwick, when Miles Cratchly sauntered into the hall, a leering smile on his face, and walked directly to the Gryffindor table. Behind her, she heard Malfoy snicker and say to his cadre of followers, “Watch this.”
Luna watched in concern as Cratchly sat down across from Hermione at the Slytherin table. She had no idea what was being said, but Hermione’s face blushed angrily as she started packing her books to leave. But then Miles made the last mistake he would ever make: he pulled his wand on her.

Not even Luna saw when Harry came flying through the doors, his face warped by an inhuman rage. Miles had enough time to make a startled, grunting cry before an unseen force acting under the direction of Harry’s outstretched, wandless hand, jerked him up from the Gryffindor table and threw him like a rag doll across the width of the entire Great hall, where he slammed into a stone wall behind the Slytherin Table.

At the table, Snape was the only staff member present and stood in alarm, his own wand out, but Harry ignored him. Those students in the hall watched disbelieving as Harry jumped forty feet into the air in an arching path toward the stunned Slytherin, and in mid-flight jerked both hands forward to produce a devastating barrage of blue lightning.

Cratchly was screaming in agony even before Harry landed.

Snape fired a stunner that Harry dodged while maintaining his attack on Cratchly. He finally relented on Cratchly only to turn, stomp his foot, and scream loudly in Snape’s direction. A wall of shimmering air shot toward Snape with the speed of a bullet. The Potions Master’s eyes bulged in a near humorous fashion while he whipped his wand ineffectually to try and dismiss a spell that was not really a spell at all, before the wall struck him and sent him flying against the wall behind the staff table with even more force that Cratchly was thrown.

Harry turned his attention back to Cratchly as Hermione walked across the hall to join him, her book back over her shoulder. “He has a Dark Mark,” Harry said in a voice that rang through the hall. “That means he’s mine.”

Luna’s stomach heaved as Cratchly started screaming as if under the *Cruciatus*. More concerning was the fact that Harry didn’t move, lift his wand or give any indicating that he was the one doing it, other than to stare intently at his victim. Luna turned to see Sue Bones scrambling out of the hall, probably to fetch help.

Finally, Hermione said, “Merlin, Harry, if you’re going to kill him just kill him.”

“Yes, dear.”

The sound of snapping bone shattered the echoes of Cratchly’s screams. The present Slytherins moaned in terror, as did several other students, when they saw Cratchly’s head spun all the way around until it faced backward, his expression still warped by the agony of his last moments. His body tumbled lifelessly to the floor.

Luna managed to turn away from the table to be sick on the floor, and saw others sick as well. It was to the smell of vomit and the sight of death that Dumbledore arrived, looking sickly and sallow. “What is happening here?”

“Miles Cratchly threatened me,” Hermione said clearly to the old professor. “Harry sensed the threat and came, and in the process we learned that Cratchly bore the Dark Mark, so Harry killed him. That was the agreement with the Minister, wasn’t it?”

Dumbledore came to a stop, and Luna watched the play of emotions across his face—from shock to a profound, soul-rendering disappointment, and finally to a deep sadness that made her want to cry. Dumbledore was not perfect, this she knew well enough, but she believed that he was at heart a good soul, and because of that when confronted with true evil, he felt sullied by it.
“Mr. Cratchly was only seventeen years old,” he said softly.

“He raped and killed a muggle woman this summer as part of his initiation,” Harry said coldly, but loud enough for all to hear. “I could see it in his mind. Anyone who takes the mark has to either kill, or make a binding vow to do so. I wonder who else in this hall has a dark mark.” He turned and looked straight at Draco, whole paled the color of bone, climbed from his table, and ran from the hall.

“And Professor Snape?” Dumbledore demanded, pointing at the professor who was just then recovering his feet.

“He cast a spell at me,” Harry said. “And he also bears a Dark Mark.”

“He is mine,” Dumbledore said.

“Let’s find out, shall we?” Harry said. He spun faster than the old professor could follow, and with a grunt of surprise Snape flew through the air until Harry caught him by his forehead and slammed him onto the floor.

Dumbledore began to pull his wand as Snape screamed, but it was only for a moment. Harry stood, his face darkened. “Before this war is over, you will die, Snape. If not by Voldemort’s hand, then by mine. I know my parents are dead because of you.”

“Come on, Harry, let’s go back to our room,” Hermione said. Harry took her offered hand, and the two walked out of the Great Hall with chins held high, as if they had not just tortured and slaughtered a seventeen year old boy, and tortured a professor as well.

That night, as she sat in her corner of the common room furthest from the fire and wept, Luna could no longer deny that the first boy she ever fell in love with was all but lost. Hermione was not saving him, she was being dragged into the darkness with him.

“What’s your problem, Looney?” Marrietta Edgecomb said, standing suddenly in front of her.

“My friend has become a murderer,” Luna said as if that should explain everything.

“Year friend’s a blood raving lunatic,” Edgecomb said. Her forehead still bore the acne scars from Hermione’s curse the previous year. “And so is that bint of a wife of his.”

“Yes,” Luna said, not bothering to defend them.

That night, Luna woke to a hand pressing down over her mouth, while nearby she heard a girl’s voice whispering the silencing charm. She tried to scream anyway, despite knowing no sound would come out. For her efforts she received two quick punches—one to her lip, one to her eye.

“Do it,” another girl’s voice said. Edgecomb. Poor Marietta, the pimples that formed the word “SNEAK” across her face would not go away—further proof that Hermione had a vengeful streak about her even before Harry opened that streak up permanently.
Her thoughts were shattered when rough hands grabbed her sleeping shift and ripped it off. She struggled, but more hands held her down as someone else grabbed the edge of her knickers and ripped them off as well, hurting her as they did so. She closed her eyes, fighting back the tears from the pain and embarrassment.

“Alright, let’s go,” the voice belonging to Marietta said.

Luna felt magic lift her from her bed and carry her out of the common room, and into the halls beyond. It must have been very late, or very early, as no one was about, it was cold, and it was dark.

“There,” Marietta said. “That should do.”

The magic deposited her into the closet, while another spell ended her silencing charm. She looked up to see hooded figures in Ravenclaw robes standing in a semicircle outside of a very small broom closet.

“Not much without your Gryffindor friends to protect you, are you?” That was Orla Quirck, Luna’s roommate. Orla did not like her either, sadly.

“I didn’t do anything to you,” Luna said, hoping to reason with them. She could hear her own voice again—they must have lifted the silencing spell.

“Your friends did enough,” Marietta said from within her hood. “You can stay in there until you rot.”

A low-grade banishing spell smashed Luna painfully against the back wall, causing her to fall over a pile of old mops, while they slammed the door closed in front of her. The darkness that resulted was absolute, and unrelenting.

Luna tried righting herself as best she could, but the darkness pressed in so close around her. From the darkness she heard laughter, and the sound of Muggle guns and a higher, thrumming noise, followed by screams.

Then, as clearly as if she stood before her, she saw Hermione in the darkness standing over her not with a wand, but with a glowing blade the color of electric blood. Her pupils were ringed with orange as she stared down at Luna.

“Please,” Luna begged. “Please help me.”

“You’re weak,” not-Hermione said, before raising the sword and slashing down violently.

It was at that point the door opened, and Luna looked up in shock to see real-Hermione standing there, brows furrowed in concern. “Luna?”
Hermione sat up in bed, gasping for breath. The bed was empty again; her clock said it was three in the morning.

The young Mrs. Potter missed her husband the previous night—he was working on a project with materials their new accountant Bartleby purchased for him. As she climbed out of bed, her eyes ringing with the screams from her nightmare, she saw Harry sitting in front of the desk, a pair of magically lit lamps providing light on either side.

She saw the desk littered with the debris of mechanical things—an array of tools that Harry conjured or built himself, and in the middle of it, two silver cylinders, ten inches long each, covered in a black leather wrap.

With a deep breath, she said, “Harry, are those the swords from…”

“Lightsabers,” Harry said.

“Are they done?”

“They’ve been done for the past hour.”

“Have you tried them?”

He shook his head. Hermione walked up behind him and rested her hands on his shoulders.

“What’s wrong?”

“I shouldn’t have built these,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because I want to use them,” he said, and Hermione could feel him trembling under her touch. “I want to go to Slytherin and cut Malfoy down. I want to take Snape’s head and mount it on a pike. I want to find Voldemort and his ilk and kill them all. I want to kill Dumbledore and the rest of them, until it’s only us.”

“Harry…” Hermione hugged him, feeling a spike of rage emanate from him in the Force, though it was not directed at her. “I had a nightmare.”

“Oh?”

“I dreamed I was a Sith,” she said. “And I found Luna Lovegood squatting down in a closet. She was naked, strangely enough. She looked up at me and asked for help, and instead I cut her down. It was terrible.”

Harry pressed his head back against her shoulder and said, “I dreamed a naked blonde girl was
thrown into a closet by those who hated her for no reason. Luna. I remember her, but I haven’t seen her since I came back. She is in the arithmancy class I audited my first week, but she did not speak or even look at me.”

“You know, I haven’t seen her much either. How sad—I think she was happy having us as friends last year. I feel bad now that I realize I haven’t sought her out and…” Hermione stopped. “Harry, you dreamed she was in a closet?”

“Not a dream,” he said. “I can feel her in the Force, suffering. Her roommates pranked her again.”

“Could you find her?”

“Yes.”

Hermione stood straight with decision. “Come on, then. Curfew be damned, I refuse to just stand by and let our friend suffer.”

Harry stood, and with one quick glance gathered up the pair of cylinders and tucked them into the folds of his robes. “I’m ready.”

“Wait,” Hermione said, going into their room to dig through his trunk until she came back holding his invisibility cloak.

Harry stared at it a moment with a wistful, distant smile. “I forgot about it,” he admitted.

They made their way out into the castle, secure in the invisibility of the cloak. Harry led them with a sure, confident step, his eyes seemingly able to pierce the gloom of the castle with ease. Hermione practiced her own burgeoning power, reaching out with her senses like Harry taught her. She could sense Filch’s cat three floors up, while Filch himself was snoring in his small room on the ground floor of the castle.

Surprisingly, she felt Malfoy on the seventh floor, and near him something profoundly dark.

“Harry?”

“Yes, a horcrux,” Harry confirmed. “I’ve been feeling it for a while.”

Then Hermione became aware of a feeling of terror, smashing into her suddenly like a hammer blow. “What…?”

“She’s projecting into the Force,” Harry said, amazed. “We need to get that door open.”

Hermione realized they had arrived at the broom closet from her dreams. She stepped out from under the cloak and brandished her wand with an unlocking spell, but it failed. She tried three more until she spotted the blackened, inscribed locking rune under the door handle.

“Oh bugger,” she muttered. “They locked her in with a rune—it’s going to take something on the order of a blasting charm to get her out.”

“Let me,” Harry said. She stepped aside as he lit his lightsaber.

Hermione froze as the silver beam of energy burst from the cylinder—not red like in the memories she saw, but a scintillating quicksilver color. “Oh,” she said, wondering why she was surprised.

And yet…for the very first time since she bonded with him, she had actual, physical proof that what happened to him was real. A small corner of her mind always wondered if what she saw, and what
he experienced, was simply a fantasy brought on by the veil. Despite the plans he drew up, she never had any way of knowing that the plans worked. But this…she could not deny that her husband was holding a lightsaber in his hand.

He made a quick slash of the blade at the lock of the door, and a second later had the blade off and stored back in his robes. He moved away to allow Hermione to open the door. Inside, they saw a shivering, naked Luna Lovegood wiping blood from her upper lip. She blinked up at them with wide silver-blue eyes and suddenly, inexplicably, screamed. “Please don’t hurt me!”

Nonplussed, Hermione took the invisibility cloak from Harry’s shoulders and wrapped it around the younger girl. “Oh Luna!” Hermione said. “We’re not going to hurt you.”

“You were going to kill me,” Luna sobbed, pulling away even as Hermione wrapped her up in invisibility. “You had orange in your eyes and a sword of red fire, and you said I was weak. You were going to kill me.”

Hermione continued to hold the trembling, sobbing girl, but could not help but feel a spike of fear. What Luna described was exactly what Hermione had dreamed herself before she woke. She looked up to see Harry staring down at Luna, and even in the dim light of the distant ever-burning torches, she saw his face warped by rage. She knew if she had better light she would see flecks of range in his irises.

“Who did this to you?” he said in a cold, flat voice.

“It doesn’t matter,” Luna said as her sobs faded. She wiped tears from her eyes and snot from her red nose.

Harry knelt down, and in doing so allowed Hermione to see that indeed, the rage had colored his eyes. “It matters to us. Who did this?”

Luna also saw the orange of Sith rage and reared back as if struck. “No!” she said as she shook her head. “If I tell you, you will hurt them. You’re not the Harry I followed to the Ministry last year. You frighten me. I do not want anyone hurt because of me; I am not that important.”

Harry stepped back, startled by her determination—in that moment the rage faltered. “You fought with us,” he said. “I remember that. I remember you could hear voices through the Veil.”

“And Harry’s voice joined them,” Luna whispered back. “Harry was screaming.”

Hermione remembered, then, first waking up after the Ministry fiasco, and seeing Luna next to her, weeping because she heard screams no one else could hear. Beneath her arms, Luna was trembling violently. “I heard Harry Potter screaming until he died. You are not Harry Potter.”

Harry frowned, but with confusion rather than rage. “But I’m…I’m not Shaddix anymore.”

Luna, clutching the cloak, stared intently at him with her tear-swollen eyes. “You will be. You’ve already started, I can see it. You have murder in your eyes, Almost-Harry. Real Harry would have just stunned Cratchly, he would never have done what you did. And real Hermione would not have told you to kill him. If I told you who put me in that closet, you would use it as an excuse to kill, not because it is just, but because you just want to kill.”

“I wouldn’t let him do that,” Hermione said.

Luna turned to look at her, seeing her as if for the first time. “But you would, Hermione. You already have. If Harry had not fallen through the Veil and become what he is, would you really have
loved him? You like what he has become. It always made you angry how Harry let people control his life, even if you were the one doing the controlling. Now that he has power, he makes you wet. Just now you liked the idea of him hurting or even killing the ones that did this to me. You can’t lie—I see it in your eyes. You’re already becoming the girl who kills me in my dream.”

Hermione shook her head, too stunned by the girl’s conviction to speak.

Luna, though, suddenly sobbed. The grief hit so fast and so powerfully that she felt to her knees. Hermione knelt down beside her while Harry stood nearby. “Luna!”

“I loved you,” the Fifth-year said. “Both of you. You were so brave and selfless, and you were my friends, and I loved you so much. But you’ve changed. You frighten me.”

Hermione looked up at Harry, her eyes moist with heartbreak. “But Luna, that’s not fair…I…”

Harry leaned down, and with surprising gentleness, lifted the girl in his arms. “Let’s go back to our rooms,” he said to Hermione. “Luna can spend the night there for now.”

They started back, only to meet Snape halfway there. “Out after curfew I see. Is that… Lovegood?”

“She was locked in a broom closet,” Hermione said, not bothering to hide her anger. “They hit her and put a runic locking ward on the door. We’re taking her back to our rooms to take care of her.”

Snape stared hard at the three. “Take her back to her dorm.”

The air around Harry grew colder. “Make me.”

“I’ve had enough of your petulant, childish arrogance, Potter!” Snape said as he began to draw his wand. Hermione stared at the wizard’s brazenness. “You think you can get away with anything, murdering students and assaulting staff, but there is a price for everything!”

Harry virtually threw Luna into Hermione’s arms and raised his hands. Snape had a curse on his lips when his world suddenly exploded with pain, a pain wholly as bad as anything the Dark Lord ever made him experience. The Potions Master could not hold it in and screamed in agony even while he fell to his knees.

Behind him, Luna grabbed Hermione and said, “Stop him!”

Hermione, though, stared as if mesmerized. “If anyone deserves it…”

Luna stood between the two, caught between a Scylla and Charybdis, until with a cry she threw herself between Harry and Snape. Her scream pierced the air, and in that one second pierced the rage Harry felt over his former instructor and a constant source of his torment.

Harry stopped his assault immediately as the naked, bruised Ravenclaw fell sobbing to her knees. “Oh Merlin,” he whispered. “Hermione?”

Hermione shook herself as if emerging from a dream and rushed forward. She jerked away when Luna shouted “Don’t touch me! You’re evil! You were going to let him torture the Professor to death!”

Shaking his head, Harry knelt down to help when Luna caught his wrist in a surprisingly strong grip. “You’re still angry, Harry. Are you going to fuck me now until I’m so bruised I can’t walk? She’s all that’s kept you from murdering people here before. Is she enough?”
Snape moaned but did not move. Hermione, looking from Luna to Harry, walked to the professor before she lowered her wand and said “Obliviate!”

“Do you think that will make it not have happened?” Luna whispered.

On her way back, Hermione grabbed the cloak from where it fell and wrapped it once again around the still trembling blonde. “Luna, I’m sorry,” she said. “We’re sorry. We never wanted you to get hurt. We just wanted to help you. We sensed your pain and wanted to help.”

Luna sobbed and bent down. “I heard you screaming from the Veil, Harry,” she whispered. “You were in so much pain.”

“I was,” he agreed. “Evil men turned me into a monster. Hermione saved me.”

She looked up at him, her face drawn into a grimace of agony. “She’s failed, Harry. She didn’t save you from being a monster, you’ve turned her into one.”

“Harry, we can’t just leave her here,” Hermione said.

Surprisingly Luna said nothing as Harry gathered her into his arms again. She even wrapped an arm around his neck as the two carried her to their suite. Eventually she rested her head against his chest. “I used to dream of you carrying me off like this,” she whispered as they entered the suite. Hermione closed the door while Harry carried her to the roaring fireplace. “I dreamed you would sweep into Ravenclaw and carry me away from all the mean girls there. You were sweet and wonderful and confused, just like last year when we spoke. But then you died and I heard you screaming.”

Hermione settled into the chair across from Harry and Luna, her hands over her mouth and tears in her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Luna.”

“I am too,” Harry said. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“But you meant to kill Professor Snape,” Luna said. “You were going to make him scream until his heart exploded. You were going to kill him just like you killed her—the woman across the Veil who hurt you and taught you to channel your anger into sex. I see it all.”

“Luna, you don’t understand,” Hermione said.

Silver-blue eyes turned and stared at her in the firelight. Slowly she stood from Harry’s lap, reaching up a hand from under the cloak oblivious to her state of dress, and touched Hermione’s cheeks as the older girl leaned forward from her chair. “I watched you last year, you know,” the blonde girl said. “You and Harry and Ron. I saw how you raged in the halls at Harry because he let Umbridge hurt him. I saw you looking at Ron, wondering if he would defend himself better. Harry would only fight for others. But now…” She turned those bright silver eyes to Harry. “And you. Hermione pulled you back to the edge of the abyss, but she can’t pull you clear. Instead she distracts you from the darkness with her sex and you try to tell each other it’s love. It was love once, maybe. Now it’s just a distraction from the dark in each of you.”

“That’s not what I want,” Harry said.

Luna bowed her head and pressed against his chest. “You can’t help it, and Hermione can’t stop
you. You will become Sith again, both of you, and the world will burn because of it.”

Neither even questioned how she knew the word. Somehow, she seemed to know everything.

Harry stared into the silver blue of her eyes, frozen by the horror he saw in them. At the same time, though, he stiffened as he felt a tendril of thought touching his mind. It was tentative, but substantial enough that he realized she was touching him through the Force.

“How…” he began.

“You can heal me,” she whispered, eyes growing glassy with tears. “Oh Merlin, you know what’s wrong with me.”

“How?” Hermione said. “What does she mean?”

“She has the Force. But it’s not controlled. It’s like her mind has been ripped open and she can’t close it.”

“When Mum died,” Luna said. “I saw it. I was there. The magic hurt us both, but she died protecting me. But you could make it whole, couldn’t you?”


“Luna…” Hermione began, but Harry stopped her.

“Wait, she’s not here,” Harry said.

“What do you mean?”

“Close your eyes, Hermione, and feel her.”

Hermione did as he asked and almost reeled back from the storm that seemed to coalesce in the Force around Luna. The energy was not like the violent power that Harry wielded, but was rather like a series of storm fronts carrying powerful gusts of air and rain. From the vortices of Force-energy that swirled around her, she caught glimpses of people and things. She saw tanks firing on terrible hovering machines raining death down in green blasts; she saw a figure in black spinning through police with red lightsabers—she thought the figure was Harry, until the last man fell and she saw herself standing there brimming with power, while blood soaked her black robes.

She saw her and Harry on a balcony, looking on while the world burned below them. They were both soaked in blood and rutting together like wild, vicious animals while humanity screamed in agony all around them.

Hermione shied away from the vision in horror, only to be caught in another vortex of energy. She glimpsed another future that made her cheeks burn and her heart skip a beat—of Luna rocking gently on top of Harry, while Hermione crouched over his face. She and Luna were kissing as Harry brought pleasure to each. They were still on the tower, but the city below did not burn, it gleamed with the promise of an incredible future.

She felt herself growing moist from the vision, and only at Harry’s touch was she able to pull back entirely. “Harry, what in the bloody hell was that?”
Harry, though, was still staring at the girl with wide eyes. “There was a great Jedi Master, one of the last my old master defeated, who claimed to perceive places in structures that could bring them down, or even moments in time that could change the course of history. He called them Shatterpoints. I never believed in them, until now. Do you see it, Hermione? She’s a living Shatterpoint! Her sight is powerful, but her mind is ripped open and she can’t control them. She’s living and seeing every potential future we could have.”

“You mean—those images of us killing—that could be our future?”

Hermione felt like she might throw up when Harry nodded solemnly. “How do we stop it?” she demanded. “Harry, I don’t want to be a killer! The woman in those visions was a monster! I don’t want to be like her! Please, what do we…”

She stopped because Luna had stopped. It seemed odd that Hermione felt no embarrassment to have the teenager standing naked between them. Her lips were parted, her eyes wide. She was not a heavily endowed girl, but her hips were already widening with womanhood, and the tuft of hair between her legs was a fine, silver-blond so light they could see the lips of her sex.

They could also see her trembling, either with Force energy, the cold, or anticipation, they could not tell. “I know,” she said. “I know.”

“Know what?” Hermione asked.

Luna turned to her and stared intently as she spoke: “If you cannot find a balance to him—if you can find a way to bring enough light to offset his dark—then rather than save him, you’ll be lost with him.”

Hermione stifled her shock. “A blind Jedi told me that, in Harry’s memories. He was in Harry’s memories of a long time ago, but he was talking to me like he could actually see me there.”

Harry started to rise, but Luna continued. “You are not strong enough. You’ve already failed, and the darkness has started to turn you. You were not enough to balance the rage. That ghost from Harry’s memories said it. Remember? ‘You may not be enough by yourself—that much I see clearly. Your love may give him a chance to redeem himself, but the Emperor has damaged his soul.’ He said that, Hermione, because he saw as clearly as I do. Harry will never be truly of the light—he cannot be. Without balance, the world will suffer and die at his hands. Two moons to his sun.”

“Luna, what are you…”

Hermione stopped, shocked when Luna bent over and kissed her. It was a clumsy, amateur kiss, but passionate regardless. Narrow, nearly translucent fingers began pulling at the buttons of her school clothes. “Two moons to his sun,” Luna said again when they parted. “His passion burns you alone. He hurts you, no matter how you lie to yourself. You’re not enough for him. Not enough. But both of us…”

And suddenly Harry was there, his hands joining Luna’s as he quickly, urgently divested Hermione of her school robe. “I understand now,” he said, his eyes dark in the shadows of their room. He grabbed her, not content to just unbutton, and with a wave of a wand that appeared in his hand with the Force, he banished her clothes, and then his own. He fell back onto his chair and pulled her onto him, kissing her neck in the way he knew excited her so much. Hermione felt heat billow through her body, accelerating a thousand times as his fingers slipped into her.

Luna sat on the chair, her silver eyes wide as she watched Harry burn Hermione. She rode him, and
yet even from below he pounded deeply into her. Hermione did not protest, but instead moaned in deep, overwhelming pleasure. Suddenly Luna wasn’t watching anymore; rather she was touching Hermione and kissing her with the same heat as Harry. She touched the same places Harry did, until Hermione thought she would explode from the feelings assaulting her senses.

Her orgasm ripped through her body with frightening, almost painful intensity, leaving her no choice but to lift off Harry before collapsing onto the chair, trembling from it. When she looked up, Luna had taken her place, gasping with a flush that ran from her forehead down to her navel as she slowly lowered herself onto Harry’s still rock-hard penis. It was a testament to how powerful her own orgasm was that Hermione could not even find the energy to feel jealous.

“Luna, you’re magic!” Hermione yelped, genuinely alarmed.

Wide, silver-blue eyes stared at her as the girl said, “Where you go, I go. For the future, I bond myself to you from this day …oh. OH!” Words failed her, but in her stomach Hermione felt that odd tingle of magic she felt when Harry and she were married. She did not understand how, or even why Luna did such a thing, but she could feel Luna’s magic bonding with her and Harry just as surely as Hermione’s magic bonded with hers.

Luna did not move with the surety of experience—in fact she did not move at all, though she did grimace in discomfort. After a few moments, though, she began to bounce up and down with Harry’s hands on her hips, guiding her from behind as she bounced on his lap. Soon her breathing accelerated and her flush grew more pronounced. Hermione saw the small trickle of blood and realized that Luna had just given her virginity to another woman’s husband.

The two sped up, slapping together now. Luna closed her eyes and moaned, until finally Harry slammed into her with a grunt. Spent, the blonde girl collapsed back against Harry, her legs wide open to Hermione so that she could see her husband’s sex still joined with this other girl’s.

Somehow, it was the most wildly erotic thing Hermione had ever seen in her life, and the sheer sight of it was enough to send another orgasm coursing through her body. As she came down from it, though, she saw Luna fold her legs together, still firmly impaled on Harry, duck her head into his shoulder, and start to cry.

Harry looked down at the girl on his lap with an unreadable expression, while Hermione crossed the gap between them. “Luna, what…”

“I dreamed that Harry might love me some day, ” the girl sobbed. “But he died.” She looked up at Hermione, and said, “It will never be easy, Hermione. Our old Harry will never come back. He died screaming. It will take the rest of our lives to keep this Harry from being evil. It’s not what I wanted. It’s not what I dreamed of.”

“Then why do this, Luna?” Hermione asked, again feeling tears in her eyes.

The other girl looked up at Harry, then over at Hermione, and said simply, “Because I love you too much not to. And if I don’t the world will die.”
Vulgar Language

Chapter Summary

Comedic interlude

Hermione woke the next morning slightly stiff and with the feeling of having drunk enough alcohol to be buzzed without enough to be hung over, despite drinking nothing. It was actually a wonderful, luxurious feeling as she stretched naked along Harry’s side, rubbing her body against his. For once she was not sore or bruised, and though she had accepted that Harry’s passion was necessary to keep his murderous rages in check, the bruises hurt regardless.

This morning, though, there were none.

She propped herself up on one elbow, and in doing so saw Luna snuggled up on his other side. There were still flakes of dried blood around her now-healed lip, and in the unforgiving light of morning she saw bruises on the girl’s cheeks and nose where her assailants hit her last night before throwing her into the broom closet it, but which she and Harry never got around to healing.

Slowly, as if aware of the gaze on her, Luna’s silver-blue eyes opened and stared right back at her. “Good morning,” she whispered softly. She slowly reached a hand out across Harry’s bare chest, and despite herself Hermione reached over and took it.

The younger girl smiled at the contact, weakly. “Will you make me leave?” she asked, still speaking in a whisper. In that instant, Luna looked so very lost and afraid it was almost heartbreaking.

“If I did, where would you go?”

“I don’t know,” Luna admitted. “I can’t see anything beyond right now.”

Hermione understood, now, finally. She understand what Luna was, and more importantly why she was the way she was. She tried to imagine having her mind ripped open to the greater world of the Force, and shuddered at the thought. “He’s my husband, Luna,” Hermione said.

Luna nodded. “I belong to you as much as to him,” she said softly. “It will take both of us.”

“I’m right here,” Harry growled.

“For a man who got shagged by two girls last night, you have no business being grumpy!” Hermione snapped, breaking the calm of the morning.

Harry opened his mouth a moment, then blinked and looked from her to Luna. “For a moment I thought it was a dream,” he admitted.

“Were you this sore the first time?” Luna asked Hermione.

“Merlin yes,” Hermione said. “We did it three times in the first hour.”

Luna’s eyes widened; she propped herself and stared intently down at Harry. “I don’t think I can do that three times an hour.”
Hermione giggled. “Luna, not even Harry can have sex three times every hour. We don’t even have sex every…well, yes, I suppose we do have sex every day.”

“Even during menses?”

Hermione blushed almost to her roots. “Harry…really needed to.”

Harry looked at his wife, pushing himself up to sit upright. “Hermione, you promised you wouldn’t let me hurt you!”

Hermione ducked her head and pushed a strand of hair from her eyes. “Harry, it’s not that bad, really. Yes, it’s a little uncomfortable. But when you’re angry, I can see the Sith in your eyes. It’s like I’m riding a storm. It’s terrifying and exhilarating at the same time, and I know that if I tried to get off before you finished you would hurt me, whether you intended to or not.”

As Harry stared at her, Hermione could see a touch of horror in his eyes as realization set in. “I do hurt you,” he whispered.

“You do,” Luna said from his other side. “And the reason I am here, Harry, is because she has begun to like it. I saw it all, you know. The rough sex will turn into rough play, and then into abuse. The abuse will become subjugation which turns into apprenticeship, until she rises up and destroys her master, just as you wanted to destroy yours.”

Harry virtually jumped out of bed, pacing the bed with the same alluring, animal grace. “He is so beautiful, isn’t he?” Luna whispered.

“Yes,” Hermione agreed.

Harry stopped his pacing and stared at the two girls in his bed, oblivious to the lack of clothing on any of them. “I don’t want to hurt either of you.”

“And we don’t want you to let the Sith rule you,” Hermione said.

Luna climbed out of bed, tired and sore and yet luminous in the early morning light as she walked up to Harry. He was a head taller than she was; she pressed her hands against his chest and looked up into his eyes.

“Someone evil taught you to cause pain when you had sex, Harry.”

“Drayneen,” he snarled. “I killed her.”

“I believe you,” Luna whispered. “And as much as I hate the idea of you killing, I have a hard time feeling sorry for her. In a way, I think what she did to you was as evil as what your old master did. Because she took something that was supposed to be beautiful and gentle and turned it into something brutal and mean. Hermione and I love you. We both understand why you are the way you are. And we’re going to try and help you be something else.”

Hermione scooted to the edge of the bed, touched despite herself at the vision of the smaller Ravenclaw looking up at Harry. “Harry, what are we going to do about Luna? We can’t send her back.”

Harry glanced at Hermione. “You are my wife. You tell me. Is she a part of our family?”

The word ‘family’ made both girls flush deeply. “At this stage, I don’t see how she could be anything else,” Hermione said. “She said the vow, Harry, and somehow…somehow our magic
accepted it. She’s as bound to us as I am to you.”

Harry nodded and looked back down at Luna. She stared right back up at him, unblinking, as if she were trying her best to absorb every aspect of his face. Leaning down into her, he took her face in his hands and kissed her, opening his mind to hers in the Force.

He felt the chaotic swirl of her Force presence, and in his mind saw a little girl screaming in soul-rending agony as her mother jumped in front of a catalyzing spell. The magic ripped through the woman’s head like a cleaver, but in doing so weakened from a stream of dark purple to a strand of pink light that pierced the little girl’s skull as well.

It emerged on the other side of young Luna’s head in a wisp of pre-adolescent magic, leaving Luna’s mind permanently scarred and opened to the Force. He sank his own power into that gap, building walls of thought and power, until when he emerged from the kiss, he found himself and Luna both on their knees, with Luna trembling and crying.

Hermione was kneeling next to them, a hand on each. “Harry, did you…?”

“I healed her,” Harry whispered, strangely affected by the parallels between his own past and this strange, courageous and beautiful girl.

Luna closed her eyes, smiling blissfully. “The voices are gone,” she said, swaying. “Oh Merlin, everything is so peaceful. Is this what it’s supposed to be like?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “When you control what your mind senses, this is what it is supposed to be like.”

Luna looked back at Hermione. “You’re teaching her to use this…power.”

“I am,” Harry said. “And I’ll teach you too.”

Luna hugged him, placing her head against her chest. Backing up, she looked at Hermione and said, “Would you come with me for salve? I would love to have sex with you again, Harry, but I am quite sore.”

They showered together, fitting easily into the large shower stall. It was a new experience for all of them, and yet given the powerful, emotional release they all went through the previous night and morning, each felt absolutely comfortable in the presence of the others.

They spoke as they showered, discussing how their relationship would work within the context of the school and society at large. “Well, I suppose I could ask Daddy what we can do. I truly do not wish to return to my dorm.”

“You won’t have to,” Harry said.

“Well, I do,” Luna said. “To collect my wand if nothing else. But…”

“You won’t go alone,” Harry promised.

~~Broken~~

They skipped their morning classes, spending time just talking. The addition of Luna into their conversation was a new dynamic for Harry and Hermione. It forced them to actually articulate many things they simply assumed from their own long friendship. The conversation often veered into the
odd, however, especially when Luna looked up at them both and said, suddenly, “I can’t see nargles anymore.”

“Your mind is closed for the first time since you were nine,” Harry noted. “Perhaps you were perceiving something through your Force senses. After I’ve taught you to meditate and harness your abilities, you may sense them again.”

“Or they may not exist,” Hermione pointed out.

“In the absence of proof to the contrary, I prefer to believe they do exist,” Luna said brightly.

They took lunch together in the room, skipping any classes they might have gone to, and after they finished, decided it was time to fetch Luna’s things.

The three of them stepped into the Ravenclaw common room together. Most of the house was there, revising before their afternoon classes. Around one particularly crowded table, Harry saw the seventh years studying for their NEWTs, including Cho Chang and Marietta Edgecomb.

Ravenclaws scrambled out of his way as he marched to the table, while Luna and Hermione stayed near the entrance. Cho saw him first and started to stand to greet him, but he ignored her, reached out a hand, and made a squeezing motion.

Marietta gasped and rose into the air, clawing desperately at her neck, while her friends and fellow Seventh Years stared in horror. Just as quickly, Luna rushed forward and pulled his arm down.

“You promised, Harry. You promised not to kill any of them.”

With a sigh Harry let Edgecomb fall, but then spun around and pushed his hand, slamming the common room door shut before any of the panicked ‘Claws could escape. Hermione didn’t even flinch as she stood in front of the door.

“Hello, Cho,” Luna said with her trademark serene smile. “Could you please collect my things into my trunk and bring it down? I will be living with Harry and Hermione from now on.”

“What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing, you loony cow!” Marietta said, screaming at Luna rather than Harry.

“She’s saving your life, Marietta,” Hermione said from the door. “Harry wanted to kill you, along with the rest of you that hurt Luna so badly last night. For five years you have been torturing her. Why? Because she’s different? Because she sees things differently than you? Did any of you stop to think that there was a reason? That she really could see things you can’t? No, instead of being the house of the wise, you were the House of the Cruel and Childish. Harry wanted to come in here and tear this bloody tower down with all of you inside it, and honestly I agreed. But Luna proved she was the better person. So you go and get all the things you stole from her, you put those things whole and unbroken in her trunk, or the money to replace those items you did break, and you bring it down now.”

Cho looked genuinely horrified, while Marietta vacillated between fear and rage. Beside the two, another Seventh Year pulled his wand. “You can’t just walk in here and threaten the lot of us,” the boy said. “The professors would…ahhhhh!”

The boy flew through the air into Harry’s hand, while his other hand easily pulled his wand away. “This one is a Death Eater,” he said to Luna. “The Ministry says I can kill him, as long as I prove it. Like Clatchly.”

Luna looked sadly up at the boy. “I’m so sorry you’re going to die, Anthony,” she said. “All of
You-Know-Who’s followers will. Harry is going to kill all of you. But not today, please, Harry. Please don’t kill him today. He’s going to die next semester by another’s hands. You’ll see.”

Harry dropped the horrified student to the floor. “I believe you,” he said. “Your sight is clearer than mine.” He looked back up to Cho. “Bring her things now.”

Students scrambled about to gather Luna’s things, and in less than five long, uneasy minutes, Cho levitated Luna’s trunk down from the girl’s dormitories. She looked sadly first at Harry, then Hermione, and said, “I didn’t know how bad it was, but then… I guess I never wanted to know. I’m so sorry, Luna.”

“It’s quite alright, Cho,” Luna said. “I’m sorry for your losses.”

“Losses?”

Luna, though, had already turned and started toward the door. Harry nodded at the girl he vaguely remembered having a crush on at one point, and without his wand levitated the trunk to follow him.

They were not even halfway back to the married quarters when Flitwick found them. “Mr. and Mrs. Potter! Miss Lovegood!” Flitwick squealed. They turned and studied the little half-goblin. Harry remembered liking the man when he was a child.

Luna smiled and said, “Hello, Professor. How are your bollywogs?”

“They’re fine, Miss Lovegood,” Flitwick said dismissively. “Mr. Potter, I was just told that you threatened my whole house and assaulted two of my students!”

“Yes,” Harry said.

“That will be detention for a month and one hundred points from Gryffindor for each assault!” Flitwick squeaked indignantly. “And you can bet we will be speaking more about this with the Headmaster. Now, Miss Lovegood, kindly gather your things and return to your dorm with me.”

“I’m sorry, Professor, truly I am, but I am going to live with Harry and Hermione now. I have bonded with them. Harry healed my mind, you see.”

Flitwick stared at her, sputtering. “Miss Lovegood, you cannot move out of your dorm.”

“Try to stop her,” Harry said.

The small half-goblin looked up at Harry and gripped his wand. “Mr. Potter,” he said carefully, “I am not Professor Snape. So that we are clear, are you threatening me?”

“If you try to force her back, then yes I am.”

Hermione quickly stepped between the two. “Professor, did your ‘Claws tell you that they stripped Luna last night, beat her, and then threw her in a closet behind a locking rune? Did they tell you that this type of behavior has been happening for the last five years?”

“Harmless pranks never hurt…”

“They hurt, Professor,” Luna said softly. “I had a choice to accept them or let them beat me worse. So I accepted the pain. They were not, however, harmless. Most especially not last night.”

“Luna is a part of our family now,” Harry said. “As part of the healing, we formed a Force bond last night. She is as bound to me as my own wife, and I will kill anyone who attempts to take her away.”
Let Dumbledore consider that. But I will say this—leave her be, and I’ll forget about those who harmed her.”

“Forget, Mr. Potter, or forgive?” the still obviously upset Flitwick said.

“I do not forgive,” Harry said.

“But I do,” Luna said, touching Harry’s arm again. “Moon and stars, Harry, Hermione. The Professor is a good man. Please don’t hurt him.”

Harry frowned, but then bent over and gently kissed Luna’s scalp. “As you wish.”

“Good day, Professor,” Luna said.

Flitwick said nothing as the three students walked away with Luna’s trunk floating behind them.

Luna ate with them in their room that evening, since none of them wished to deal with the other students. Although she was still somber, Luna seemed much more collected as she quietly discussed arithmancy with Hermione, while Harry finished his meal and began perusing Bartleby’s audit results of his finances.

“Huh,” he finally said, drawing the two young witches from their conversation. He looked up at their expectant stares and said, “I own Grunnings. Or at least a sizable share. It was a private shares company, and it seems my maternal grandfather was majority shareholder. Rather than be liquidated, the shares went to my Aunt, and upon her death, they reverted to me as the only surviving issue.”

“Grunnings was where your uncle worked, wasn’t it?” Hermione said. Her eyes widened. “A manufacturing company.”

“Exactly,” Harry said with a grin.

Luna looked from one to the other. “I do not wish to be a bother, but I don’t understand why you would wish to own a Muggle company.”

So they explained to her Harry’s goals, originally born from a desire to conquer, now born from a desire to lead. When they were done, Luna stared into space a moment with unfocused eyes. “There is still blood on your hands,” she said softly. “Both of yours.”

“And the piles of bodies?” Hermione asked worriedly.

“Not as bad as before,” Luna breathed. “Not as many. It…is…” She bowed her head and sobbed. “If you did nothing, we all die eventually anyway. The future is so dark.”

Hermione looked at Harry at this independent confirmation of his analysis of the world. “The planet can only supply so many materials at this level of technology,” he said. “We’re fast approaching the planetary carrying capacity. Once that is exceeded, people will begin to suffer and die, on scales impossible to imagine now. I’ve seen it happen to other worlds, and read detailed accounts of it throughout history.”

Hermione looked to Luna. “Will you help us?”

Luna took a deep breath to calm herself and said, “I have no choice. Your fate is mine now.” Suddenly she gave them a blinding smile and added, “And of course, I have decided that sex is quite fun. I would very much like to try it again, please.”
Their fire crackled and turned green, before the Headmaster’s head appeared. “Mr. and Mrs. Potter, would you please come to my office? Miss Lovegood should come as well.”

“Moon Flower!” he said when he saw his daughter.

“I received a most interesting floo call from Filius here, stating my only daughter has moved in with you,” Xenophilius said.

“Yes,” Harry said simply. “I wasn’t aware this was a DMLE issue.”

“Mr. Lovegood, Harry Potter. This is my wife Hermione.”

“I was just my misfortune to have arrived on other business. I am here, Mr. Potter, to give you and your wife these.”

Harry accepted the envelope. Inside he found an Auror badge and an apparition license for himself and Hermione. “Thank you, Auror Robards,” Harry said. “In the event of Death Eater activity, will I be notified?”

“That is up to Minister Bones,” Robards said. “But the likely answer will be yes. Auror badges are charmed to transmit information as needed. Those badges and Miles Clatchly’s Dark Mark are the only reason you’re not in Azkaban.”

Harry stared at the man without speaking.

Robards nodded stiffly before also leaving via Floo. In the proceeding silence, Xeno said, “You’re an auror, Harry?”

“The Badge says Special Agent,” Harry noted.

Behind the desk, Dumbledore said, “An unassigned, free-floating Auror assigned to tasks that fall outside normal auror or hitwizard duties. Have a seat, please. It seems we have some things to discuss.”

“Indeed we do,” Xeno said with wide eyes. “So how was sex, Luna?”

The rest of the room, even Harry and Hermione, stared open-mouthed at the man. All, that is, save Luna herself. “Oh, it was quite exhilarating. Harry has this power much like mine—you remember when Mum died and the magic ripped my mind open? He’s like that, only he can control it. When he was filling me up, I could feel his mind against mine, and he made everything feel even better.
than if he were just fucking me. It was ever so exciting. But this morning Hermione and I had to go to bruise salve because, well, Harry is actually quite well endowed. And he healed me, Daddy! He sank his mind into mine and made it whole again. I can’t see Nargles anymore, but I can also block out all those ever-so-pesky voices. And then after I had some bruise salve he fucked me again and it was so wonderful. Sadly his first sexual experiences were being raped at the hands of a vicious Dark Lady, so he tends to pour a lot of darkness into his fucking, but now that Hermione and I are both there to fuck him, I’m sure we’ll be able to keep him from become a raging, genocidal global tyrant!”

Not only could one have heard a pin drop, in the silence that followed Luna’s answer, one could actually hear hair growing.

“How fucking marvelous!” Xeno explained, so loudly McGonagall actually jumped a little in her chair and Flitwick squeaked. “Your magic feels stable as well. How did you manage that?”

“Oh, well, I made the marriage vow to them both, and their magic accepted it,” Luna said.

“Oh Merlin,” Flitwick moaned.

“Indeed,” McGonagall said, glaring at Hermione.

“What was I supposed to do?” Hermione said defensively. “She kissed me!”

“And so that meant you have to let your husband have sex with her and bind her in an illegal polygamous marriage?” McGonagall snapped back.

“Well, yes, of course,” Luna said, blinking. “Whatever else was she to do?”

The odd wizard looked at the stunned faces of Harry and Hermione. “Her magic is stable. That means that as far as her magic is concerned, she did give you her virginity within wedlock. And that also means that you accepted her. Is this true, Harry Potter? Did you accept her into your marriage?”

Harry looked at Hermione, who bit her lower lip before nodding. “Fine, but you’re the one telling my parents.”

“How fucking marvelous!” Xeno said, as if in a voice of wonder. Back to his daughter, he said, “But you told me this Harry was evil and you would not be his friend.”

“I’m not his friend, Daddy. I’m his fuck toy and a counter-balance to his potential evil. It was really quite remarkable, you know. When Harry died in the veil, he was transported millions of years ago to an ancient galaxy where he was tortured into an evil Dark Lord. But while he was there a wise old wizard could actually see Hermione in his memories, and spoke to her. He said Harry would drag her down into evil, because, well, he is quite dark. But if she could find a balance, then she could keep him from becoming truly evil.”

“And you’re the balance, like two moons to a world,” Xeno said sagely, eerily echoing what Luna said earlier. “How amazing. Well, since that’s the case, then you of course have my blessing. Being a fuck toy to save the world—what a noble calling.”

Behind Xeno, Dumbledore held his head in his good hand and was shaking it, while McGonagall and Flitwick both were staring in horror at Xeno.

“Mr. Lovegood,” Dumbledore said, “you realize that the Wizengamot does not officially recognize polygyny or any form of polygamy?”
Xeno blinked. “The Wizengamot has made no affirmative ruling on it at all. Muggle law forbids it, but since the Wizengamot has not made an affirmative ruling to forbid it, previous law remains in effect.”

“The previous law remains the old Roman Code,” Flitwick said. “It hasn’t been used in hundreds of years!”

“But it has never been affirmatively overwritten and remains on the books,” Xeno pointed out. “Under that rule, Luna is a bound concubine, given that by all parties their relationship will be of a longer term and stable. Yes, she is only fifteen—for a few months longer—but she has my utmost blessing to do whatever she must to be happy. This is especially true since I myself was not able to make her happy.”

“It’s not your fault, Daddy,” Luna said as she hugged the man. “Harry is the only one would could heal my mind and fuck me sideways at the same time!”

“Would you please stop cursing in this office,” Dumbledore said.

“Cursing?” Xeno asked, genuinely confused. “Who the fuck is cursing?”

“It’s like watching Monty Python,” Hermione whispered.

“Who?” Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head. “I’ll show you later.”

Meanwhile, Xeno was speaking again. “Truly, Dumbledore, we both know that Fudge had a concubine for years before she finally developed a spat of sense and left him. And do you remember Adelaide? So, it’s not as if Mr. Potter is doing anything original. And if the rumors I heard were true and he stands to inherit both the Black and Potter estates, he could appoint any children from Luna as Blacks. It’s bloody fucking brilliant!”

Dumbledore sighed. “Xeno, we will not voluntarily allow an underage witch to cohabitate in a sexual relationship outside of marriage with other students…”

“Without parental consent and orders, perhaps. I was a solicitor, once, a long time ago. But in this case Luna has my consent and blessing, and you have my orders to allow her to live with Mr. and Mrs. Harry Potter in any capacity necessary for her continued well-being, as determined by magic, Luna and Mr. and Mrs. Potter. My statement has been witnessed by the portraits of this room and all else present. Is that sufficient?”


“My pleasure.” Xeno turned to his daughter, Harry and Hermione. “And know that you can come visit the Rookery any time you wish. Be well, Moonflower. Stay on the potion until you’re ready to make babies.”

“I will,” Luna promised brightly. “And bruise salve too.”

“Marvelous!” Xeno said. With that, he stood, waved at the parties in the office, and left through the floo.

“Ms. Lovegood, please do not take this wrong,” McGonagall said in exasperation, “but your father is quite simply insane.”
“Yes, I know. But on the other hand he makes lovely Strudels.”

Flitwick shook his head and left the office muttering to himself. Behind the desk, Dumbledore was cradling his broad forehead in his good hand again, while McGonagall shook her head.
A Good Lawyer is Hard to Find

Chapter Summary

And other oxymorons.

Lawrence Bartleby was that rare man of many, many talents. He was a certified, chartered accountant; he was a certified actuary; and in case he did not have anything else to do, he was also a licensed corporate solicitor.

His wife was, unknowingly to either, the daughter of a wizard (one she never met, and more sinister, one her mother had no memory of). Though she herself was not magical, all three of their now adult children were, which was why he was aware of the magical world. Additionally, because of his credentials and sheer competence, he was hired by the Ministry of Magic to do an audit of its Gringott’s holdings following the first war with Voldemort.

Because of his relationship with the Wizarding world, he knew of Harry Potter, but not a great deal about him. His children assured him that Potter was quite famous and, because of his own exploits, well thought of by many. He also died, more than once it seems, although evidently his deaths did not last long.

So when Bartleby received an OWL through his Diagon Alley satellite office from the one and only Harry Potter asking him to audit his Gringott’s accounts, Bartleby decided to accept the commission. After all, given the absurd exchange rate the goblin thieves offered, a galleon was worth twelve pounds, so 50 galleons equated to 250 pounds.

The accounts were not the largest he had ever seen in the Wizarding World, but were oddly touching when he and his granddaughter/assistant presented his signed contract and key to the Goblins. He allowed his granddaughter, who herself was interning prior to continuing her own Muggle education in law, to count money while he inventoried the other items, being most careful not to touch anything that looked the least bit suspicious. Not being magical himself, he had to depend on his granddaughter if magic was needed.

What he saw was the contents of a once loving home destroyed by violence. Photos, furniture, personal effects for the Potters, and many other items gave mute testimony to the tragedy of Harry Potter’s youth. But then they got down to the heart of the matter—the Potter’s financial standing.

He was surprised to find that the Potters, through Lily’s father, held quite a bit of Muggle stock in several companies. The money from this stock was not going to Gringotts, but rather appeared to be directed into a trust fund managed by Bank of London.

Finally, he wrote up a full summary of his cash holdings (203,456 galleons, 123,000 sickles, 5,463 knuts, for a total value of 210,702 galleons), or at the ridiculously undervalued exchange rate, £1,053,510. Non-cash holdings, in the forms of real properties, rental incomes and stocks actually made up the majority of the Potter portfolio, totaling over £2,540,234.

After a discreet inquiry at Bank of London, Bartleby discovered that the trust the Potter stock earnings were deposited into also held the dwindled but still viable fortune of Walter Evans, co-founder of Grunning’s Drills. The fortune was sitting in a trust without a primary beneficiary since
the death of the Dursley family. While Harry was eligible to receive it as a grandson of Walter Evans, the Dursleys never listed him as such, and the Potters by that time were in hiding.

Acting as Harry’s power of attorney, Bartleby was able to provide sufficient evidence to have Harry listed as the sole beneficiary of the Evans Trust, adding easily another million pounds to his portfolio, along with Evans’ stock in Grunnings. Bartleby strongly suspected that Vernon Dursley’s marriage to Evans’ eldest daughter was what led to his high-ranking position in the company.

In the second week of November, he received a response from Potter requesting a full audit of Grunnings. Being a purely mundane company, Bartleby assigned a team to it and reviewed the results himself a week later.

It was not surprising that he received a request to meet with Harry Potter personally the day after he reported his findings by owl. Knowing his granddaughter would be interested in meeting the boy as well, Bartleby accepted the first available slot in his calendar and made sure Evelyn was available from her own classes.

When Potter and his companions arrived not in Diagon Alley, but in his normal offices on the north side of Lincoln’s Inn Fields, he was surprised despite everything to see how very, very young he appeared.

Youth or not, Potter was dressed sharply in a pinstripe suite with vest and a green tie that brought out his eyes well. His two companions—a pair of attractive girls five years younger than his granddaughter—wore silver and blue respectively, both in a conservative A-line pattern. None of the three had the normally mismatched look of magicals pretending to be Muggle.

“Mr. Bartleby, thank you for your time today,” Potter said with a firm shake. “My I introduce my wife, Hermione, and our dear friend Luna Lovegood.”

Bartleby studied the two young women with honest interest—his granddaughter told him all about the scandalous relationship Potter maintained with the young blonde girl—evidently it was the stuff of legends in the magical papers. Both women were still in their teens, though Potter’s wife was obviously older, however they all three held themselves with a stillness he was accustomed to seeing only in older people.

“It is my pleasure, Mr. Potter. Please come in, all of you. May I introduce my assistant for the day, Evelyn Graham? Evelyn assisted me with your account audit, Mr. Potter, and is sitting for law studies.”

Evelyn blushed wildly as introductions were made, before they settled down to the conference table after tea was served. When everyone was settled, Potter began by saying, “Mr. Bartleby, is it possible for me to take full, active ownership of Grunnings?”

“Well, in terms of assets you likely could, provided of course that Mr. Grunnings was willing to sell. The Evans Trust did not have an age stipulation, only a clause indicating reaching one’s majority. Since you are married man of means, regardless of your youth, you are considered by the Crown as an adult.”

“Would you be willing to represent my interest in buying Grunnings out?”

“I am not cheap, Mr. Potter.”

“And I am not poor, Mr. Bartleby,” Harry said with a thin smile. “I would like your firm on full time retainer, and if your service continues in the same line as I have experienced to date, I anticipate you
gaining a great deal of wealth from your association with me. So, will you feel out Grunnings?"

“I will,” Bartleby said. “And if he does not wish to sell?”

“Then I will step in and help him understand the urgency of my request.”

“It is good to have ambition, young man,” Bartleby said with an approving nod.

Then oddly, Lovegood looked intently at Bartleby and said, “Ward your home.”

“I’m sorry?”

The girl blinked absently. “Sorry for what?” she asked absently.

“Luna, would you like to go across the street to the park?” Hermione asked suddenly.

“Oh yes, that would be lovely, thank you.”

The two women left, and in their absence Potter looked troubled. “Mr. Bartleby, since you are also a man of means, I recommend you or a family member purchase the best magical wards you can for your home, offices and all family homes. You may also wish to have your granddaughter or another magical purchase emergency portkeys. Do so tonight.”

“I don’t understand…” Evelyn began.

“Luna is a powerful seer. If she suggests you need wards, it is because you will die without them. I have very powerful enemies, Mr. Bartleby. And when the world realizes what I am doing, I may have even more. Protect yourself and your loved ones. Now, that said, what do you need for us to get started? I ask because I also have a design I will need patented, and I understand you can assist me with that as well.”

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Harry watched quietly as students slowly came into the small, magically expanded warehouse on the outskirts of Hogsmeade the Hogsmeade Weekend. Originally built when the normal population at Hogwarts was eight times what it was today and included whole families, the space was intended to store food and supplies for the castle.

Now all the supplies Hogwarts needed fit easily within the castle itself, and of course into a series of outbuildings near the lake. The warehouse was sold to the rail, which in turn sold it to Charlus Potter, who envisioned it as a hotel for Muggle families to visit their wizarding children. That idea fell flat when he proposed it in the Wizengamot, but he kept the property regardless. Hence, it was Harry’s now, and Harry’s alone.

The group that arrived was not as large as before—Katie Bell came, but Harry noticed several of the Hufflepuffs were missing—among them Susan Bones. For this he was grateful; he did not want to have the niece of a Minister he might have to one day depose sitting in his private army.

“More came than I expected,” Hermione said.

Beside her, Luna merely shrugged. “The people who came believe in Harry.”

“Is that a good thing or bad?” Hermione said.
Luna smiled serenely at the older girl. “Is it better to be on the tiger’s back, or under its claw?”

At the end, eighteen students showed up. The biggest surprise came when five alumni showed up. Fred and George Weasley burst dramatically into the room and announced, “Everyone can relax! The grown-ups are here!”

Even more surprisingly, though, was that Lee Jordan, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet also came despite having graduated. Harry waived at them before he stepped to the front of the room and said, quietly, “Thank you for coming.”

The fact that his quiet, calm voice reached every single ear in the room proved more effective than the loudest shout. It sounded as if he were standing next to each and every one of them, and immediately got their attention, mainly because it was not a spell, but rather the Force.

When eighteen pairs of eyes looked at him, he said, “I appreciate you coming. Last month, Ginny and Ron approached me about restarting the DA. At first I did not wish to, because my goals have moved to more broad horizons. However, I realize that the horizons I am looking at are so broad that there is room for anyone who wishes to join me. But I also know that for a variety of reasons, I have been very secluded this year. I wish any relationship we begin from this point forward to be based on trust. I need you to trust that I will not lead you into a disaster like I did with my friends last year, and I need you to know that the threats we face are real, but that we will be victorious.”

“Trust goes both ways, though,” Hermione said, stepping beside her husband. “Last year, we signed a parchment that vowed we would keep the DA secret, and we all saw what happened when someone ratted us out.”

“That goes both ways,” Harry said. “Hermione and Luna have prepared a new parchment with some very powerful enchantments on them. I had these enchantments reviewed by my solicitor and a ward crafter. I wish each of you to read this parchment, because it is a binding magical contract. Essentially, it says that you will not disclose anything you learn here to anyone not approved by Hermione, myself or Luna to receive such information. It does not bind you to any course of action, nor does it require that you remain a member of the organization. Simply that you vow on your magic to keep what you learn here to yourself and to not use them on behalf of our enemies or against us. Hermione?”

She conjured a table, using a NEWT level spell, and placed the parchment down. Ron was the first to step toward it. “If I hear what you say and walk away, but keep my mouth shut, will anything happen?”

“No,” Harry assured the boy who was once his first friend.

“Good enough for me,” Ron declared before signing the parchment unread.

Some read the parchment carefully, while others signed on faith. Harry preferred those that read it entirely. The last to sign were both Creevey brothers, who each signed without bothering to read it.

“Thank you,” Harry said with a tight smile. “So, you’ve shown your trust in us. It’s my turn. For the next hour, you can ask any question you want, and we will do our best to answer honestly.”

“Right, what’s this with Luna?” Terry Boot demanded.

“I have a question for you,” Hermione countered. “Were you aware what the girls were doing to her?”

Terry shook his head. “No, none of us boys did. The Ravenclaw girls are a bit scary, to be honest.”
That roused a chuckle from Michael Corner and Ernie McMillon, both of whom nodded in agreement.

“I have taken Luna as my concubine with her father’s permission and blessing,” Harry said.

“I’m Harry’s fuck toy!” Luna declared brightly.

“She’s also the most powerful seer I have ever seen, or even heard of,” Harry added when the nervous laughter died. “She saw that my solicitor would need wards last week. Two days ago, his home was attacked by a pair of unidentified wizards. They were not in Death Eater robes, but were almost certainly servants of Voldemort. The wards saved his life, and the lives of his family members. You called her Looney because she saw things no one else did—the truth is she saw things no one else could because her vision was clearer than theirs. Next question.”

“Why did you kill Miles Clatchly?” Neville asked.

“He insulted Hermione.”

“But you said he was a Death Eater,” Ginny said.

“I determined that after he insulted my wife.”

“What happened to you, Harry?” Parvati finally asked. “The paper said you fell through the Veil, but then you came back. Then you had a Death of Personality, but revived. What happened?”

Harry told them. He held back certain things—like having to watch his godfather be dissected before his eyes, or Drayneen. Instead, he told them about what he was forced to learn and become; he told them about his role as a general and warrior. He then told them with brutal honestly what he did when he arrived, and how Hermione not only risked life and limb to confront Shaddix, but how she then bound her very life and future to him to save him.

Finally, when he was finished, Anthony Goldstein cleared his threat. “Harry, that’s an amazing story. But I have to ask…do you have any proof?”

Harry lifted a lightsaber and lit it, allowing the hum and light to fill the room. “This is a lightsaber. The one I wielded before was red. I could not find a ruby of sufficient size and quality in my vaults to serve as a focusing crystal, but my great, great grandfather had several large diamonds from South Africa that worked. Before you ask, I will not make these for you. A lightsaber is a deadly weapon, as much to the wielder as to any victim. If you do not have the Force, then you're as likely to cut your own leg off as you are to hurt the enemy.”

“So what are we here for?” Dean Thomas said. “Paper said you killed nineteen Death Eaters by yourself. What good are we?”

“Because I don’t intend to stop with Voldemort,” Harry said. He deactivated his blade and slipped it back into his robe. “Luna has seen this world die—wars of such magnitude the dead are beyond counting as anything more than percentages of the whole human race. There are too many people and the science that would relieve the pressure has not kept pace. Sooner or later they are going to have to fight over the dwindling available resources the world has to offer. Oil, water, metal and food—information and infrastructure. The next world war will not be fought just with tanks, planes and battleships. It will be fought with computers, nuclear missiles, weaponized diseases and armies in the millions. It will be a war of ideology, religion and desperation. Casualties won’t be a few hundred in this neighborhood or that—they will be counted by cities and in the millions, or hundreds of millions. And do not doubt for a moment that IT WILL HAPPEN. And the wizarding world will
“not survive it.”

“What are you saying?” Ginny whispered.

“I carry in my mind technology that could provide cheap, unlimited energy to the world,” Harry said. “I have the technology in my mind to build ships that could carry us to the stars in search of new worlds to live on. I have in my mind twenty-five thousand years of history of space flight, societal development and technology. You’re here because, if you’re willing to join me, I’m going to remake the whole world into a single, unified, federalist government. Not muggle, not magical, but a blending of the two. There will be some disambiguation regarding how wizards are described, but the world will know that there are some in the population who can do things the rest can’t. By the time I die, I want Earth to be the united center of a whole wave of human-colonized worlds which assure our continuation as a race. And you, if you join me, will be the lieutenants in the new world to oversee the change.”

“What, so we can have some lebenraum?” Goldstein asked. “You’re rhetoric sounds familiar, Harry.”

Hermione bristled, but Luna stopped her. “You’re right, Anthony,” Luna said. “But there is one major difference between Gindelwald, Hitler, and Harry.”

“Oh, and what’s that?”

“I don’t blame anyone,” Harry said. “I’m not going to use ethnicity or religion as a tool to unite people under a wave of hatred. I’m not naïve enough to think there won’t be violence. There will be. There might even be wars fought. Most great nations were born from ashes and blood. That’s what I’m building, Anthony. A Nation of Humanity—a single world, a single government, for all people of the planet. No one group will be persecuted, and if I ever mention the idea of a concentration camp, well, you’ll be there to make sure it never happens, won’t you?”

Goldstein swallowed. “You’re talking really big, Harry. But we’re just a bunch of teenagers. What can we really do?”

“Right now, not much,” Harry admitted. “I’ve enlisted the help of an auror who will agree to train you in combat magic. The immediate goal is for you to stay alive in the event you are attacked. Voldemort is real, he is alive, and he is recruiting. Don’t let the fact he lost people make you feel safe. He has far more people to lose, and he doesn’t care about them.”

“Can you beat him, Harry?” Neville asked.

“Yes,” Harry said. “But that doesn’t mean it won’t be a fight. The new Minister has done a lot to try to stem the tide. He’s going to try and take her out first. Dumbledore used to have an organization dedicated to fighting Voldemort, but he had to disband it at the Minister’s orders, and because of his own health. If the Minister falls, there is no safety net. So, to answer your immediate question, you’re here to become that safety net. Auror Moody?”

Alastor Moody pulled off an invisibility cloak from the corner, making half the people in the room jump in surprise. “Constant vigilance!” he roared.

“This is the real Alastor Moody,” Harry said. “He conducted my assessment at the DMLE, where they gave me a badge. Technically I work for the Ministry. With the disbanding of the Order of the Phoenix, I convinced Moody here to work for me. He’s going to assess each of you for your kills, and more importantly your temperament. Not everyone here is going to be suited for the missions I have in mind. But those that are will be hired by my company. Yes, I own a company, recently
registered as Phoenix Industries. As employees, you will receive a salary and benefits. I will not hire anyone below age seventeen, but even if you are not seventeen, you can still be a member of the new Order of the Phoenix. We will save as many people as we can from Voldemort and his supporters until we are in a position to destroy him utterly. We will aid the Ministry if asked, and if it falls, we will be there to catch the people of England.”

“And after that?”

“After that, we fix magical England before we move onto forcing magical Europe to follow the same route as our Muggle counterparts—a magical European Union. A single voice that large will have a huge sway over the ICW, so the next step will be to recreate the International into a real, Federalist common government for all magical beings. And when the entire magical world speaks one message, we will turn our attention to the mundane world, not as conquerors, but as friends. There will never be enough of us to conquer by force of arms, but if we show them a better way, they may just agree to come with us.”

Harry stepped back and cleared his throat. “So, that’s my spiel. If you want to just train for your own protection and those of your loved ones, you’re welcome to. If you want to be more, or are interested in joining me long term, prove you’re worthy and I’ll take you on. The only rule is what you agreed to: none of this leaves this building. So, what say you?”

“I’m with you all the way, Harry,” Ron declared.

“We’re with you,” the Weasley twins said. Not everyone shouted out there agreement, Harry noted, but none turned to leave either as Moody started barking out orders to begin his personal assessment.

“Who do you think we’ll get?” Hermione asked.

“Lee Jordan, Anthony Goldstein, Angelina Johnson, Terry Boot, and Ron, of course,” Luna said. “Ron will be seventeen in March, by the way. Seamus Finnigan may also wish to join, as will Katie Bell.”

“Not the twins?” Hermione asked, surprised.

“They have their own business,” Harry said. “They will act more as subcontractors. We will benefit from a good relationship, but they will not want to work for me directly. You don’t think Michael Corner will want to join?”

Luna studied the Ravenclaw, but shook his head. “No. He is jealous of Terry’s relationship with Ginny and would not be suitable. However, I think Justin Finch-Fletchley may wish to join as well. He comes from Muggle peerage. He could have useful connections, and has a need to prove himself.”

“That’s amazing Luna,” Hermione said. “How can you know all that?”

“The portraits like to gossip, and I’m the only one who listens,” Luna said.

“That and you’re Force-sensitive,” Harry said. “This was a good start.”

“Just don’t get them all killed,” Luna said.

“Well, yes, there is that,” Harry agreed without smiling.
On the last Saturday of November, Harry, Luna and Hermione met Dumbledore on the seventh floor before the portrait of Barnabas the Barmy. “The Room of Requirement, Harry?” the Headmaster said.

“I believe so,” Harry said. “I’ve been feeling it for months now, but only when Draco was in working on his plan to kill you. That’s when I figured out where it had to be.”

Harry paced in front of the room three times and a moment later the door opened. They stepped into a cavernous room many times larger than could fit in the space it actually occupied. “There’s the vanishing cabinet he’s planning to use to bring Death Eaters through,” Harry said, pointing casually at the large cabinet. “I come up and break it again every few days, but I plan to let him finish it in May or June. I’ve told Snape, and now you, that if you truly wish him to live you will simply get him out of the country. Otherwise he will die when that cabinet opens.”

Dumbledore stared at the cabinet with an open expression of dismay.

Harry lifted his wand and closed his eyes. A moment later, a silver diadem came flying into his hand. “And here it is,” he said. He placed it on a nearby pedestal. “So, Professor, what are your suggestions for destroying it?”

“That’s Rowena Ravenclaw’s diadem!” Luna explained.

“Yes, it is,” Dumbledore whispered. “Well, I know Fiendfyre and Basilisk venom will destroy them.”

“Hmm, I wonder if a beam of plasma in a magnetic containment field will work?”

“What?”

Harry activated a lightsaber, flicked it quickly over the Diadem, and stepped back as a howling dark cloud of smoke rose up from it. “And that’s that,” Harry said with a satisfied nod.

The Headmaster stared at the lightsaber in shock. “Amazing, isn’t it,” Hermione asked the old wizard. “That everything he’s spoken of wasn’t a delusion, but real.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore whispered.

“So, the diary that almost killed Ginny,” Harry said. “And this. What else?”

“The ring that did this to me,” Dumbledore said, holding up his hand. “Also destroyed. Next is the Hufflepuff cup.”

“That’s in Bellatrix Lestrange’s vault,” Harry said, drawing on Bellatrix’s stolen thoughts.
“Of course you would know that, having read her mind,” Dumbledore said. “There is also the snake you told me about. I suspect there is a locket hidden in a cave he used to terrify his fellow orphans. And, of course, the last was you, yourself, the destruction of which allowed you to return to us.”

“A shame, that,” Harry said lightly. “I wanted to use the Chamber of Secrets this morning, thinking it would make a good base of operations for the Order once I take it from your cold dead hands. It wouldn’t open for me.”

Dumbledore closed his eyes. “Are you really so eager to see me die, Harry?”

“Not at all. I just utterly, completely despise pointless suicide, which is what you are doing.”

“I see.”

“I’ll miss you when you’re dead and rotting, Professor,” Luna said solemnly. “I’ll make sure the Quibbler prints a lovely article about your role in the Rotfang conspiracy.”

“That is quite the comfort, Ms. Lovegood. Thank you.” Dumbledore sighed bitterly. “Well, the Diadem is gone. Amelia can handle obtaining the vase. And you and I will seek the locket. Perhaps this weekend?”

“I can’t, I’ve got another meeting with my solicitor. I think the locket will keep for the moment, to be honest.”

“Fine. Good evening, then.”

The headmaster left, pausing only to glance at the Vanishing Cabinet a moment. “I feel sorry for him,” Hermione said.

“I don’t,” Luna said. “He has given up fighting and is choosing instead to lay down and die.”

“I thought you said you weren’t a fighter?” Hermione said.

“Did I? Well, truly I am not. I cannot kill, but that does not mean I will not defend. Professor Dumbledore does not even wish to do that any longer.”

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On the first weekend of December, Archibald Harrison Grunning III rolled ponderously into the conference room of Grunning’s Drills for a meeting with the sole surviving grandchild of his good friend, Walter Evans.

At seventy-seven years of age, Archie Grunning was well in decline physically. His great girth over much of his life had given way to rolls of fat that hung loosely off his wide-set bones. His large lump of a head was marked by liver spots, burned off melanomas and two rolls of fat at the back of his neck that gave him a slightly grotesque, ribbed appearance, most especially when he perspired from between the rolls.

For all his decline, however, Grunning’s small, close-set eyes were shrewd and thoughtful as he settled with an explosive groan behind his desk. In minutes, he would finally meet Dursley’s dirty little secret—Walter Evan’s last living grandson.
“Mr. Grunning, your guests are here,” Delores said from the receptionist area.

“Thank you,” he said as he pulled out a cigar. “Send them on in two minutes, please.”

He cut his cigar, lit it, and blew a bellow of smoke into the air of his already musty office. It was a common tactic he used to put potentially hostile interviewees off their guard. In fact, he rarely smoked any more, since his doctor assured him it was killing him. However, everything else also appeared to be killing him, so at the moment he didn’t rightly care.

Two minutes to the second from when Delores called, the door opened and that damned solicitor walked in, dressed as if he walked right off Saville Row. “Mr. Grunnings, Lawrence Bartleby. It is a pleasure to finally meet you in person.” He did not even blink at the smoke.

He stepped forward and offered a hand. Obliged by politeness despite his normal inclination, Grunning stood and met the grip as firmly as he could. Bartleby stood to the side after shaking and said, “May I also present Mr. Harry Potter, his wife Hermione Potter, and their friend Luna Lovegood.”

*And so we finally meet,* Archie thought. Potter too was dressed sharply, as were the two young ladies at his side. His first thought was that Harry had his grandfather’s sharp green eyes, and he could also see Walter in the turn of Potter’s nose and the shape of his chin. And then he realized what it was he heard. “Wife?”

The wife, Hermione, appeared to be a girl in her mid- to late-teens with curly brown hair held back in a tightly controlled bun that highlighted her sharp cheekbones. She had the beauty of youth, but with a sharp, intelligent glint in her brown eyes that reminded Archie of himself. But for her to be a wife… “Good Lord, lad, you’re not even eighteen. What’s this about a wife?”

“It is a long story,” Harry said. “Suffice it to say, we are happily married. Thank you for seeing us.”

“Sit,” Grunnings said, doing so himself with a grunt. On cue, Dolores walked in with a tray of tea and biscuits, which Archie took immediate advantage of. “Please help yourselves. Nothing like a spot of tea to aid conversation.”

Potter and his wife politely declined, but the wisp of a blonde girl with the buggy eyes happily poured herself tea and piled half the biscuits onto her saucer. “And what’s your story, lassie?”

“I’m Harry’s fuck toy,” the girl said with a beaming smile.

The wife shook her head and closed her eyes, counting to herself, while Harry just grinned. “It’s good to be me,” he said simply. At that moment, he looked just like his grandfather back in ’52, when he nabbed two birds in one night. If he were a ginger and did not have that black hair, the boy could have been Walter’s twin.

“I’d say so,” Archie said. “God lad, you look like your Papa just now.”

Harry’s smile faltered. “You mean Walter Evans? Truly? I didn’t even know his name until I found out about these shares.”

“Aye, probably not,” Archie said. “For fifteen years, I heard nothing but what a bother you were—a thief; a liar; a drugged-up layabout. Dursley never had a good word to say about you. But I never believed him—the man never told a straight truth in his life. He helped drive this company into the ground with his brash manner. We weren’t any different from any other company—what put Grunning’s apart was out hands-on touch. But Dursley…damned his black soul. If he hadn’t married Walter’s daughter and taken control of those shares, I’d have sacked the bastard years ago.
Walter would have turned over in his grave if he saw what kind of mother his little Petunia turned out to be.”

Potter sat speechless. “What kind of man was he, Walter I mean?”

“A bloody spitfire, old Walt was,” Grunning’s said. “The man could walk into a bar on any given evening and walk out with any girl he wanted, and at least two blokes bleeding on the floor. We grew up together, he and I. Born during the war, grew up in the rubble after. We went in together right after school—I had the money, he had the brains and the ideas, and together we built this company up from the rubble into something that made things; that put people to work. And now… now we’re a year away from closing the doors for good.”

Grunnings ground his cigar into the ash tray on his desk, stood slowly and walked across to the window that looked over the production lines. “Twenty years ago, we had five production lines moving five days a week. Now we have two. The roof has leaks all over that I can’t afford to repair, and two of the doors in the back won’t even open. Haven’t posted a profit in three years.”

He turned rheumy eyes back to Potter. “So why would you want to buy me out, lad?”

“I need a production line,” the boy said. “I have a design for a photovoltaic cell that could revolutionize energy production, but I don’t want to sell the patent or license it. I want to own it and build it myself. Bartleby here has the patent pending.”

“Just like your Papa. Old Walt wouldn’t even consider taking the company public, so it remained a private share company, just the two of us.” Grunning walked back to his desk and sat. “I have a son, Robbie. I never did right by him, despite what my wife says. The lad’s racked up gambling debts galore. He’d sell Grunnings in the blink of an eye just for scrap and gamble it all away.”

“I won’t,” the boy said. “I will make it great.”

Grunnings pressed his intercom. “Dolores, send in the new manager, will you?”

A few minutes later, a narrow-shouldered Indian man with a magnificently large, bristling mustache and bottle-thick glasses that between them completely dominated his face, walked in. “Yes, Mr. Grunning?”

“Junjeelal, meet Harry Potter and his girls, and their solicitor Mr. Bartleby. Potter is the grandson of Walter Evans. This is Jaleel Chandrakar—I just hired him to replace Dursley. He’s done as good job as he can; maybe bought us six months of operation or more, but Dursley dug a deep hole and it’s been hard to climb out.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” Chandrakar said with a clipped Indo-Anglo accent.

“Potter here was about to tell me why he wants to buy out the company.”

The boy did not even bat an eye. “Mr. Chandrakar, are you familiar with photovoltaic technology?”

“In passing, yes,” Chandrakar said. “I have a degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Mumbai and studied some designs.”

“Excellent,” Harry said. “I have designed a photovoltaic cell that is able to derive power from 100% of the solar EM spectrum. It has a total photon to electron conversion rate of 99%, and in conjunction with a capacitor, sensing field and transmission system, it has the potential to revolutionize energy production around the world.”
The engineer stood speechless for a moment, before he reached up and twirled his thick mustache. It looked vaguely sinister in a cartoon-like fashion. “That is…quite the claim, Mr. Potter. Quite the claim indeed. How old are you?”

Harry stood from his seat and walked to the skinny man’s side. He spoke directly into Chandrakar’s ear; when he sat, Chandrakar was stammering.

“Well, Junjeelal?” Grunning said. “Is the lad onto something?”

“Excuse me, Mr. Grunning. Yes, yes. If the design meets his claims…it would be quite the breakthrough. Something like that, when proven, would have a huge profit margin.”

“Thank you, Junjeelal. You can go.”

The production manager gave a curt nod and left, muttering to himself. “What’d you say to him, lad?”

“I told him a little bit of what makes my design different. I intend to keep a closed lid on this. I want the design as patented and protected internationally as possible, and I’ve already built-in some protections that will make it very difficult for someone to copy the design. But rather than build a new facility and hire new staff and go into debt in the process, I want to start in the black. This company would let me do just that.”

Archie nodded, casting his thoughts about. “Dursley told me you were going to a reform school.”

It was Potter’s wife who snorted. “Harry and I met at an exclusive school in Scotland that his parent’s trust fund paid for.”

“Not a surprise,” Grunnings said. “Last valuation of this company was six million sterling—mostly for materials and the premises. You own half of it already through the Evans’ shares. What do you have for my half?”

“Two million,” Harry said. “Every penny from the Evans trust and a good portion from my parents, but it’s my cash.”

“Quite the gamble to put your own money on the table,” Archie said. “You buy these shares, you’re liable for every penny you put in if the company fails.”

“It’s a gamble I’m willing to make,” Harry said.

Archie finished his tea. “You make this company great, Mr. Potter, and I’ll give you my shares for a million and a half. Use the rest to lay down what you need to get started. Our sales staff is weak at the moment, so you’ll need to hire a new sales manager.”

“I can do that,” Harry said with a confident smile. “And now that we’re in agreement…would you be willing to tell me a little about my grandfather?”

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The paperwork to transfer the shares arrived two days later via owl. They were accompanied by a letter from Bartleby giving a comprehensive summary of the contract along with all the necessary petitions to change Grunning’s Drills to a privately owned company under the joint ownership of Harry and Hermione Potter. Luna was not listed simply because concubine (nor fuck toy) status was
not recognized in her Majesty’s government as family relation.

In school, they continued to go audit classes while Harry trained Hermione, and now Luna, in the meditation techniques necessary to open their mind to learning. Luna actually mastered it much faster than Hermione, given her history with the Force.

They received correspondence from Chandrakar two weeks into December that they were ready to look at the solar panel design and determine the necessary production facilities. This time, Luna stayed alone in the castle while Harry and Hermione left after dinner, taking Harry’s broom to the ward line through a heavy snow before they apparated to Grunnings in Little Whinging.

Chandrakar met them at the doors of the building, smiling and chatting happily about company morale. Grunning himself made the announcement earlier that he had accepted a buyout from the grandson of his deceased partner, and foresaw the company doing great things. The production lines were closed for the day, but they walked by them regardless to one of the defunct lines.

“I read through your business plan and congratulate you on it,” the engineer said. “The empty lines are a good place to start.” They met a second man there—a tall man with Nordic coloring and a second chin despite being thin. “This is Nils Baar. Nils, this is the new owner, Harry Potter and his lovely wife, Hermione.”

“Ah pleasure,” Baar said.

“What is your position here, Mr. Baar?” Hermione asked.

“I am the assistant production manager under Junjeelal here. It is my job to acquire the necessary materials and ensure we have the appropriate facilities while Junjeelal oversees all day-to-day production matters, since we intend to continue our current product line for the moment.”

“You’re new,” Harry guessed.

Baar looked surprised a moment. “Well, yes. I worked with Junjeelal at Aston Martin, but left a year or so after Ford purchased it. He told me that he needed me here for an exciting new opportunity.”

Harry nodded and then pulled out his diagram. “Well, here it is. Bartely managed to expedite the patent and has others pending overseas, so we are ready to go.”

He spread the diagrams out, and then gave them a notebook listing the needed materials. The two engineers studied the diagram in silence for the longest time. “This is…remarkable if it works,” Baar said. “I’ve never seen this type of chemical combination used in photovoltaics. What made you veer away from silica?”

“Silica only absorbs a specific range of EM wavelengths,” Harry said. “This synthetic material absorbs the full range from the infrared to ultraviolet without the need for the boron and is very easy to fabricate from carbon. It also has a ten year senescence—meaning a built-in market to replace it—and it dissolves into biodegradable material and hydrogen. To outsiders attempting to see how we’re doing it, it will look like we’re using silica just like most other producers. So what we will need is a clean room to create the absorbing material and the individual cells, and then the production line for the assembly of the modules themselves.”

“Soleil Industrie,” Baar said immediately.

Chandrakar smiled. “Indeed.”
“Share, please?” Harry said.

“A small solar energy company went into receivership in France six months ago,” Baar said. “Junjeeal mentioned that you planned on exploring photovoltaics so I did some ground research on production methods when news about Soleil came up in a trade periodical. Their management was embezzling government grants. But the point is, they have a fully automated production line they purchased on grant from the European Union that they can no longer use. Most importantly, it was an EU grant rather than a French grant, so we qualify to file for the equipment under that same grant. We could get the robots for less than it will cost to set up the clean room here.”

“How much do you think they would take for it?” Hermione asked.

“We would have to dip into the company funds heavily since it is a matching grant,” Chandrakar admitted. “But it would give us almost instant production capability once we create the first cells. We’re talking four separate manufacturing robots plus the actual production line itself. A hundred thousand pounds out of our own company funds to match the grant.”

“Do it,” Harry said.

“What do we have to do for the grant?” Hermione said.

“Show that we will be producing a clean energy source,” Chandrakar said. “Even with the grant, there will be a steep expense. We are talking about three hundred thousand pounds of machinery. We must prove that we have sufficient capital to make the purchase. Still, we can also look into local grants. The Crown has grant programs for clean energy.”

“Send everything you can think of to Bartleby.” Harry said. “In the meantime, Baar, I need you to go visit the bank that owns the defunct factory. You’re right—it’s too good an opportunity to pass up. We might even consider purchasing the facility for future expansion. Gentlemen, you are on the ground floor of something significant. Make this happen, and you’re careers will skyrocket.”

They continued to make plans late into the evening, until at last they had a solid plan of business written up. As Harry and Hermione apparated back to Hogwarts and mounted Harry’s broom for the return to the castle, Hermione was silent. “What are you thinking?” he asked.

“We’re going to run into logistic problems,” Hermione said. “We want to maintain control of the company, but we can’t do that at school, especially at a school where they can’t contact us. The kind of hands-on management we want is a full-time job.”

Harry considered it as they flew. Moments later, they flew not to the castle doors, but directly to the window of their room which they had left open for just that reason. Luna was inside at their small dining table, food laid out and charmed to stay warm.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“Very well,” Harry said. “Any ideas how to set up a communications line into Hogwarts so we can actually run our company?”

Luna shrugged. “A charmed mirror combination made to look like a muggle video phone?”

Harry and Hermione stared at the girl as Luna calmly started piling food onto their plates.

“Luna, how do you even know what a video phone is?”

“I saw a video phone when father took me to see a most wonderful Muggle cinema called Total...
Recall. It was quite funny, actually. The actor did not speak English very well, I’m afraid, but he made such funny faces at the end of the movie. It looked like Nargles were eating the back of his eyes.”

“That movie came out six years ago,” Hermione said.

“Yes. It was not a very nice theatre we saw it in. There were other movies with the same man. Did you know he also got pregnant in one movie? What a silly idea, men having babies. Why, the whole race would grind to a halt if men had to have the babies, and where would the babies come out?”

“You know she’s brilliant,” Hermione said to Harry. “I like to think I’m a smart witch, but Luna frightens me, sometimes.”

“We’ll get it done,” Harry said. “And after dinner, I think we owe Luna a reward for her suggestion.”

“Oh,” Luna said, wide-eyed. “Really? Because I would love some pudding.”
“Fred, George, you’re as brilliant as Hermione,” Harry said. Beside him, Hermione nodded her agreement.

“Well, yes,” Fred said, while George nodded.

It was Luna’s suggestion that they farm out their communications problem to the Weasley Twins. Hermione drew up their specifications, but otherwise left it in the hands of the twins themselves.

This it was a surprise when just two days later they received an owl telling them the project was done. Harry and Hermione flew to Hogsmeade and then apparated directly to Diagon Alley to see. What they found was simply ingenious.

It looked like a very large-screen muggle computer or even a television. The twins went shopping in the muggle world and found a newly released large, flat-screen television. The television cost almost twelve thousand pounds. So, instead they bought a cheap mirror for a tiny fraction of the price, put black wood framing around it until it looked vaguely like the large but expensive muggle television, and mounted it on top of a large metal box that also looked vaguely like a muggle computer. With a little film over the mirror, it looked just like the television.

They then attached to it a simple muggle computer keyboard, but with individual buttons charmed to activate certain functions. The box held a tray to hold paper or parchment on one side, and after feeding that parchment or paper through the duplication charm chamber, it appeared on the other side.

They then capped it off by writing a wildly obtuse and impossible to understand technical manual, taking much of the text from an actual Muggle computer manual, while also providing a one-sheet “short-cut” guide that was in fact all that was needed to work it.

Now two units awaited Harry and Hermione. They took the units to separate rooms in Weasley Wizarding Weazles and gave it a try.

“The picture quality is astounding,” Hermione said through the mirror.

“And the sound it perfect,” Harry agreed.

They tested the “fax” functions and found the duplication charm to be perfect as well. All in all, it was years beyond anything the muggles were going to produce, and suited their needs perfectly.

By the time Nils Baar returned on the second week of December from his negotiations with the French, they had a communication center installed in the now empty office that for thirty years belonged to Archibald Grunnings. Harry brought the equipment personally, wrapped securely in a box that said “IBM”. It was a final touch to convince the office that there was no magic involved in a patently magical device.
That afternoon they held their very first conference call from Hogwarts. Hermione took the liberty of conjuring a background in their room that made it look like an office building, rather than a drafty old castle. It was by this conference call that Delores the secretary announced she wished to join her old boss in retirement. Bartleby, who was on-site for the call, suggested a replacement.

Surprisingly, the interview for the new executive assistant took place in Hogsmeade two days later, since Martha Whitehall was a squib. Though twenty-four years old, she held a two year degree from London College and had almost five years experience at Lincoln Fields, where she met Bartleby while working for another solicitor. She came highly recommended not so much because of her legal background, but because of her demonstrated flexibility. Plus, being a squib, she knew who Harry Potter was.

Luna, who sat in on the meeting, beamed at the young woman and said, “If muggle police came to arrest Harry, what would you do?”

Martha blinked a little, taken aback by the odd question. “Well, I suppose I would tell them he was out of the country and that I did not have his phone number since he wished to vacation undisturbed. Then I would probably send an OWL or other magical means to let you know they were after you.”

Harry smiled, both at Luna’s pertinent question, and at Martha’s excellent response. “Very good. You’re hired. Can you start tomorrow?”

“Well, yes, I suppose I can.”

“Even better.”

“Do you have any experience in human resources matters?” Hermione asked.

“My previous employer handled several HR cases,” Martha said.

“Excellent, you’re also the new acting HR representative until we can hire someone,” Hermione said. “Please place an ad. We won’t be on premises every day, obviously, but we have established a magical communication center that looks remarkably like a computer video phone. We’ll speak as often as required. I’ll let Mr. Baar and Chandrakar, the two production managers, know you start tomorrow.”

And like that, they had their new executive assistant.

In the meantime, Baar did manage to obtain the entire assembly line with an annual contract for maintenance from the company that made the robots, and they already had material coming in, while Chandrakar continued to milk the existing production lines for all he could to create a supply tools to continue to sell.

While there that weekend, Harry had his first meeting with Grunning’s sales staff, and realized that he was going to have to bring in new blood. The four men were old, grouchy, and completely unwilling to work with a “boy” not yet out of school, especially one their old friend Vernon Dursley told them was a complete waste of flesh.

“Martha,” Harry said, “put out an ad for an experienced sales person, preferably with experience in energy savings and production equipment. Also, how do I fire my current staff?”

“Well,” Martha said, “if you want to avoid an industrial tribunal, you’ll need to give them all a verbal warning to do better, followed by a written warning and only then a letter of dismissal. I’d suggest
thirty days between each. You never know—some of those blokes have been with the company long enough to retire. You might be able to offer them a buyout.”

The next weekend, Harry visited with the four salesmen again. “I have an offer for each of you,” he said. “We are going to completely change the focus of this company. Within 12 months we will stop producing drills entirely and will focus solely on photovoltaics, followed over the next few years by other technologically oriented products. I know some of you may not like that, but Mr. Grunnings told me you had been with the company for a long time, and I don’t wish to see you mistreated. So, in return for your voluntary and permanent retirement and a relinquishment of any claims against this company, I will offer each of you a full year’s salary in the form of a lump sum payment.”

The next day they started aggressively advertising for a new sales staff. Meanwhile, Luna also sat her OWLs mid-term, having already been ahead on her studies even before Harry taught her the accelerated learning meditations.

Dumbledore did not even bother fighting when Harry told the headmaster that Luna was going on independent study as well.

Two weeks before the Christmas holiday, a small group appeared in a park across the street from a row of Georgian houses. Lord Voldemort stood in an immaculate silk three piece suit in the Muggle fashion, replete with a bright, cherry-red tie. No one noticed the fact he had no body hair, nor nose, nor did they see the red reptilian eyes that peered at Numbers 11 and 13 of Grimmauld Place. They did not notice because a powerful aura of magic did not allow them too.

“This is the place?” he asked.

“The thief said so,” his most faithful Bellatrix said. She spoke in a half-whisper given the damage to her vocal cords during her meeting with Potter.

“Very well. Bring the thief here.”

At Bellatrix’s signal, two more Death Eaters dragged the semi-conscious Mundungus Fletcher forward. The few Muggles in the park felt a strange compulsion to leave and did so, until after a few moments the park and the street were completely cleared.

“Although the thief is not the secret keeper,” Voldemort said, “he has the secret within him, locking inside. I shall unlock that secret, and I shall have admittance. Come with me.”

He crossed the street as his servants followed, dragging Fletcher in their grip. “Place him between Eleven and Thirteen.”

Two of the Death Eaters—Rudolphus and Rabastan Lestrange—placed the doomed Order of the Phoenix member on the line of the sidewalk between the buildings. When done, they stepped aside, ready to witness the impossible. Voldemort was about to break the unbreakable Fidelius Charm.

At least, that’s what Voldemort wanted them to believe. In fact, he was not going to break the charm so much as he was going to slip under it. The spell used, however, was as dangerous to Voldemort as it was to Fletcher.

“Are the note pad and pen in his robe?”
“Yes, master,” Bellatrix said.

He stood over the thief, and with his wand dis-apparated not into another location, but into Fletcher himself. Pain dominated the Dark Lord’s essence—painless and wonderful as the exquisite agony of his rebirth. He felt Fletcher’s mind screaming in horror, and used the pleasure derived from the lesser man’s mind to fuel his own power, until with a final crack of mental energy, Voldemort completely possessed Fletcher’s body.

Slowly, he stood in the short, weak body. His perceptions were limited solely to sight, given his need to concentrate on maintaining his possession. However, he was able easily enough to see where his wand fell and reached down to lift it. When he looked up, before him stood Number 12 Grimmauld place, as clear as it ever was. Fletcher could not divulge the secret, nor could Voldemort have extracted it from him, so instead Voldemort joined with Fletcher directly.

“Wait for me,” he hissed in the lesser man’s voice. Unsteadily, he made it up to the stairs and walked inside. Almost instantly he was confronted by a small, wizened elf.

“Thief should leave now,” the elf said in a threatening manner.

Voldemort removed his wand, which looked odd in another man’s fingers, and wordlessly killed the vermin. Nearby, he heard a portrait bellowing at the elf to know who it was. Voldemort recognized the grating voice of the deceased Black Matriarch, but ignored her as he walked stiffly into the Black Library.

Once upon a time, Voldemort entered this home as the honored guest of Walburga Black. Her husband pledged his support and the support of his family. Since that time, their eldest son actively fought him, and their youngest betrayed him by trying to flee. Now the entire Black Family was gone.

However, because he visited this home before, Voldemort knew about the real Black Library. He entered the study with its shelves of scrolls and books, but ignored them as he walked toward the narrow wall that framed the fireplace. He placed his wand against one of the flour de lis that decorated the faded wall paper, and said, “Toujours Pur.”

The hidden panel swung open to reveal the true library of the Black Family—a library of the darkest arts ever amassed in the British Isles—a library Malfoy would have loved to get his hands on. Through theft, pillaging and murder, members of the Black family beginning five hundred years ago managed to amass magical texts from around the world.

It was one such text Voldemort sought. With his eye-sight limited to that of the thief, it took him a long time to peruse the shelves. Though his followers would never realize it, the scholar in Voldemort wanted desperately to take all the texts, but his magic was limited to what the thief had, and he knew that little bit of magic would be necessary to overcome the wards protecting the text.

Finally, after ten minutes of searching, he found what he was looking for.

It was a book, not of parchment of vellum, but of sheets of papyrus bound together by strings of human sinew. Not daring to touch it, Voldemort levitated the ancient book to a reading stand against the wall. A source-less light appeared over the stand, illuminating the scowling figure of a Black ancestor in his portrait.

Voldemort ignored the figure as he placed the book down and with the gentle caress of a lover, he opened the book. The papyrus was covered in faded but still perfectly legible Hieratic script, and if the mention of this book was correct, the book was easily over three thousand years old.
“Here is the account of the Sed of Ramesses, God-King of the Land of the Nile.” Voldemort stopped, disgusted by the sound of Fletcher’s voice.

“You read Hieratic?” the portrait asked. “You’re nothing but a common thief.”

Voldemort looked up at the portrait. At first he was going to dismiss it as unimportant, but then he remembered the history of the man in the portrait. “I am Lord Voldemort. This body is simply a means to an end.”

“Are you now?” the portrait said. “You had the allegiance of the Black Family?”

“If you doubt me, ask Walburga Black.”

“Aye, I will.” The figure walked out of the portrait, only to return moments later. “She says to help you.”

“And so you shall,” Voldemort said. “I wish to take this book with me.”

“Only a Black by blood can remove the books from this library,” the portrait said a trifle smugly. “Nor can the books be copied. That particular piece cost Theodosius Black his right leg and his second son when he raided the Heliopolis. It’s one of the family’s greatest treasures. How often can you claim to have the notes from the wizard-priests who helped make their king an actual god?”

“How often indeed,” Voldemort whispered. “And yet I have need of this ritual.”

The portrait made a show of thinking, hands to his chin. “Do you perchance have a pensieve? Just look over the pages carefully, and then go back and read them and made notes from your memory.”

Voldemort sneered. “Or I can make my notes now.” He reached into the robes of the thief and removed a notepad and self-inking dictaquill, expanded the notepad, and started to read aloud again, reading of the ritual devised by the wizard Priests of the Nineteenth Dynasty of Egypt to elevate their king from a mere wizard ruler into a god to celebrate his jubilee. It was dark because of the sheer brutality of the methods described in the simple, matter-of-fact and straightforward description of the ritual disembowelment and murder of a hundred adoring servants so that the life-blood could mingle with the magic of the holy sites of the ancient kingdom to create a being that was more than just a man.

The fact that Ramesses went on to rule for a total of 66 years and lived to his nineties three thousand years before modern medicine was proof of how potent the ritual was for the remaining 36 years of his reign. He died not from old age, but from a treacherous wizard priest and one of his sons. For generations after, his descendants referred to him as “the Great”.

What made Voldemort realize his need this book, however, was a note made by the philosopher-mage Xrystaiphares, who served in the court of Aegeus, King of Athens. Xrystaiphares attended the great Sed of Ramesses as a guest, and described Rameses becoming one with the gods, as if the power of divinity actually entered the mortal body of the Pharaoh. After the ceremony, Xrystaiphares wrote that Ramesses rose into the air as a god, and that all the peoples of the Nile bowed down before his might.

One with the gods. In other words, Ramesses infused his own body with natural, raw magic.

He read of the account as a youth in the warded, restricted Library of Alexandria, and since that time had been looking for the Sed of Ramesses since then. And now he had it, and the rituals it described were horrifying and beautiful at once. The people of ancient Egypt loved their God-king so devoutly they gladly died for him. Fathers and mothers held back the hair of their own sons and daughters to
ease the priests in cutting their throats. Mothers gave up their infants and husbands their wives, so that the ritual floor of the Heliopolis of Pi-Ramesses held blood deep enough for the great pharaoh to bathe in it.

What was a dark ritual of the blackest magic today was, at the time, a celebration of love and loyalty on an unimaginable level. For a moment, Voldemort lost himself in the fantasy of living at that time, when he would be revered as both king and god. His dreams, however, shifted his godhead to modern times, and it was London he ruled over with the might of divine magic. He summoned bolts of magic to destroy Big Ben. He shattered London Bridge and sent people scattering in terror, while his faithful servants bowed to him.

*And standing before him, wielding a blade of fire, stood Harry Potter. “This world is not yours,” the Boy-Who-Lived declared with a disdainful laugh. “It is mine.”*

With that Voldemort broke from his daydream and looked back to see exactly where he stopped reciting the ritual. With a dark look at the portrait, which said nothing, he continued reading the rituals. It took nearly two hours to read it all, but finally he finished and placed the book gently back in its shelf.

“All done, then?” the portrait asked.

“All done,” Voldemort said. “Your family is dead. The last Black male died this summer.”

The figure in the portrait stared at him in silence for a moment, before nodding. “And yet the wards have not failed entirely. Someone owns the home. Good day, Dark Lord.”

Voldemort left the Black Library, struggling to maintain his control after so long. He left the house without even stopping to look at the bloody smear that used to be Kreacher, and staggered outside. He just cleared the ward before he was magically ejected from Fletcher’s body. The Dark Lord staggered further, clutching an iron gate to keep from falling.

Fletcher, meanwhile, fell to his knees before he was loudly, boisterously sick all over the sidewalk.

“His use is at an end,” Voldemort said. “Kill him and dispose of the evidence.”

Fletcher looked up, eyes blood-shot from his ordeal, and started to beg for mercy before Rabastan Lestrange casually cast the Death Curse, ripping the man’s life from his body. A moment later the body was vanished, as was all evidence of his sickness.

~~Broken~~

~~Broken~~

On the last Hogsmeade Weekend before the holidays, Harry, Hermione and Luna invited Anthony Goldstein, Terry Boot, Ron Weasley, Justin Finch-Fletchley and Katie Bell to join them for lunch at the *Witch’s Garden*, a better-than-average restaurant in Hogsmeade. Seamus decided he was more interested in helping his family than a long-term struggle.

They arrived at the restaurant to find Angelina Johnson and Lee Jordan waiting for them in the thick snow, steaming under warming charms. “Glad you could make it,” Harry said as he shook their hands.
They received a private room and began the first course of a very good lunch. “So, we’ve had two months of DA training,” Harry said to his friends. “What do you think?”

“Moody’s a right sadistic bastard,” Terry Boot announced. “But the man knows his business. I think I’ve learned more in the past two months than five years of DADA combined. Snape’s starting to get suspicious.”

“Snape is a non-issue,” Harry said. “Lee, Angelina, how are you two holding up?”

“Good,” Lee said. “We’re both helping Fred and George at the shop and business is booming. But things are getting nervous. You read the Prophet?”

“I do,” Hermione said. “Despite her best efforts, I don’t believe Minister Bones was able to clean things out as much as she wanted. Voldemort is marking his people in different ways, so even if they wanted to check forearms it wouldn’t necessarily work. People are starting to disappear.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Harry said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out seven badges. The badges said: “Phoenix Security”. “These are all charmed to provide instant communications,” Harry said. “You can speak to me, or to each other. Just touch it with your wand and name who you wish to call, or say ‘Allcom’ and it will activate all our badges. With the badge comes an employment contract with Phoenix Industries. You’ll be paid for all training time and on-duty time. You won’t be on duty unless there is a need. If you accept these, you’ll also serve as my lieutenants for the larger DA, and will be in the lead for any leadership positions as the company expands.”

“How are you affording this, Harry?” Justin asked.

“You ever hear of Grunnings Drills?”

“I have,” Anthony said. “My father says they’re pieces of shite.”

“Yes, they probably are,” Harry said with a snort. “I own the company. I’m converting it over to a different product line, and we already have multi-million pound contract pending. Plus I came into some inheritance. When the company truly takes off, we’ll have all the money we need to fund the war effort.”

“What are you selling?” Justin asked.
“A solar panel nearly five times more efficient than anything on the market,” Harry said. “And when I saturate the market for that, I’ll ‘discover’ an energy-based, non-lethal weapon that instantly stuns without causing any long-term harm or even pain, or some other piece of technology beyond current means. That will open the door to major government contracts.”

“My father has some experience with business,” Justin said. “Our title may be inherited, but our money he earned.”

“I’d be honored to meet him,” Harry said. “Perhaps a dinner sometime?”

“I’ll check,” Justin said, pleased.

“So, what do you say?” Hermione asked everyone.

“We wouldn’t be here if we didn’t agree,” Katie Bell said. “I do have one question, though. Luna, Hermione—is he all that?”

“All that and more,” Luna assured the Gryffindor chaser.

Bellatrix Lestrange lay nude in the center of the circle of stones near the village of Little Salked. In a large circle, standing between the stones of the circle, stood the black-robed followers of Lord Voldemort. In front of each Death Eater stood the naked, shivering, Imperious’d forms of one hundred muggles.

The grassy fields between the stones had been charmed smooth, like stone.

Voldemort himself knelt beside her, also divested of his robes. At first glance, once might think them lovers. Bellatrix trembled, her nipples erect with excitement, her sex engorged under the thick, black thatch of her pubic hair. However, the image ended at the scarred, sexless expanse of pale, inhuman flesh that wrapped unbroken between Voldemort’s legs. Rebirth had come at a price—with immortality came the ultimate sacrifice. However, the Dark Lord took his pleasure through other means.

Bellatrix was not trembling through ecstasy, but in agony as Voldemort continued the slow, steady cuts down her leg. The cuts were deep—all the way to the bone, nor were they restrained to just that one leg. He had cut her to the bone down the length of her other leg, both her arms, along each rip
and along the ridge of her thighs and a broad line split her forehead. Only magic kept her from bleeding out—only insane lust kept her from screaming.

At last Voldemort finished cutting. “Almost, dearest Bellatrix,” he said to her, almost lovingly. “Your sacrifice will bring you great power, and will ensure your place as my most precious. Are you ready?”

“Yes, Master!” Bellatrix ground out from between gritted teeth. “Fill me with your power!”

“Not just my power, dear Bellatrix,” Voldemort said. “The power of magic itself.”

He raised his wand and from it shot a shower of red sparks. At that signal, the Death Eaters standing in the distance between the stones known as Long Meg and Her Sisters reached around the front of their kidnapped muggle victims, and as the muggles under their control lifted their chins, Death Eaters cut their jugulars. With magic, the Death Eaters then grasped the muggles and held them upside down to ensure all the blood flowed.

The dark red fluid seeped down the charmed slops to the center indentation, where Voldemort knelt beside the prone, bleeding Bellatrix Lestrange. Even as the Death Eaters continued to bleed their victims, they began to chant the ancient Eryption spell last used in the apotheosis of a pharaoh in a god.

The air took on the taste of ozone while the ground beneath Voldemort’s feet began to shimmer and flicker with phantom lights as the blood began to pool around Bellatrix. The Dark Lord stood and stepped back from the filleted form of his most loyal Death Eater as the lights seemed to coalesce around her. Voldemort himself raised his head and started chanting as well, but his chant was in Aramaic—a spell of resurrection known only to the most powerful of necromancers. It was his own personal addition to the original Egyptian spell.

The Egyptian spell caused the blood to flow faster and burn with the power of life itself. It pooled around Bellatrix, rising up above the level of her own cuts, until her very bones were caressed by the life’s blood of a hundred muggles.

A dome of green light grew up from the ground directly underneath Bellatrix’s body, expanding outward until it covered her entirely. Before it could expand any further, though, it exploded with such violent power even Voldemort was thrown from his feet.

Slowly, he stood and healed the broken bone in his arm from where he landed awkwardly, and approached his most loyal servant.

She lay on the now darkened and magically drained ground, still trembling. However, every single wound was fully healed, leaving a pattern of scars all over her body as tell-tale marks of the ritual.

“Rise, Bella,” Voldemort said.

Her eyes opened and burned with an inner light. She placed her hands out to either side, and with barely a move of her hands she lifted herself from the ground with the grace of a floating feather, until she stood next to her master.

“You are now one with magic,” Voldemort whispered to the beautiful witch. “You have no need of a wand or of spells. The magic has been infused into your very being. You are its master, just as I am yours. Can you feel it?”

“Yes, Master,” she breathed.
“We will train you to use this new power,” Voldemort said. “And then, when the time comes, you will be more than a match for Harry Potter.”

“I will make him scream for you, Master,” Bellatrix whispered. “Just like he made me scream.”

“Of this,” Voldemort said, “I have no doubt.”
Chapter Summary

Happy Sith-mas.

At the end of the student’s last day in the castle before the Winter holiday, Dumbledore stumbled tiredly back to his office after yet another wrenching meeting with Harry and the two girls under his thrall.

Ostensibly, the meeting was to discuss Riddle and his horcruxes. Instead, somehow, it devolved into a shower of contempt from Harry that had the Headmaster ready to pull his wand. Except, he knew he would not survive. For the first time in his life, Albus Dumbledore knew with certainty that there was someone he could not defeat, and the knowledge not only humbled him, but infuriated him as well.

For the last semester, the man who for the past sixty years was heralded as the most powerful wizard alive and the leader of the light found himself subject to the dictates of a boy of sixteen, regardless of what ever hellish experiences he might have gone through. First he and his wife all but declare they are on independent study, next they take an unstable fifteen-year-old girl and all but make her a sex slave, and then the girl’s insane father agrees!

That said, not even Dumbledore could argue with the Lovegood girl’s OWL scores. Marchbanks often gave him a preview of scores and according to her Lovegood scored perfect in every area. Surprisingly, Potter also scored perfect in his Runes and Arithmancy tests, however he found the time.

With a sigh of pain, he settled back into his chair. “Tally, a brandy, please.”

The truth was that Dumbledore was facing his end, and it was not going to be the martyrdom he envisioned. The Headmaster had a flair for the dramatic—he always did even as a youth. He wanted his death to mean something. The idea of dying to save another’s soul was as meaningful as could be. But then Potter came along and ridiculed him and ripped that meaning away by pointing out the fact that the soul he tried to save was not as deserving as might be desired, and that his death would cause hardship to far, far more people than it would serve.

In other words, Harry took Dumbledore’s vision of martyrdom and skewered it without mercy. Plus the boy was so violent he made the old wizard wonder if he would end up being as bad as Voldemort.

Dumbledore winced as the constant fire from his hand intensified for a moment, and dealt with it by downing his brandy. Somehow, as if sensing Dumbledore’s pain, his wards alerted him to Snape’s presence outside. “Come in, Severus.”

The door opened and the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher entered, looking every bit the dark wizard. “Headmaster,” he said. “You look peaked.”

“Another evening with Potter and his…companions.”
Snape sneered as he took a seat. “Granger was always his, I just never thought he had the wherewithal to realize it. But Lovegood—the girl’s as insane as her useless father.”

“And yet Potter accepts her word as law,” Dumbledore said.

“I learned that Draco plans to use the *Imperius* to force a Hogwarts student to bring you a cursed amulet,” Snape said. “If the students touch it, it could kill them.”

Dumbledore raised a brow. “He told you this?”

“I did not bother asking,” Snape said. “Draco’s encounters with Potter this year have shaken him even more than his meeting with the Dark Lord. He’s no longer convinced his master will win, and he is absolutely terrified of Potter. Moreover, as you have seen, Potter seems somehow to know exactly what Draco is doing.”

“He does,” Dumbledore said. He took a long drink of his brandy, wincing at the mild burn. “I fear for him, Severus.”

“Draco needs……”

“Not Draco, Severus. Harry. His new pet ‘seer’ has said he will actually conquer the world, at the expense of whole nations. A man who could destroy nations would have no problem killing a rival in school.”

Severus sat perfectly still. “Potter is a danger to everyone, Headmaster. I’ve said this before.”

Dumbledore finished his brandy and contemplated asking for the bottle. “We must convince Draco to give up his foolish assignment and flee. If he and Narcissa go to the Ministry, Amelia would get them out of the country to Australia or the Americas, out of Voldemort’s current reach. Otherwise I fear Draco’s life will end before it has a chance to even begin.”

Severus considered this a moment. “I will speak to Narcissa. Only she has any hope of getting through to Draco. In the meantime, there is something you need to be aware of. My old master performed a power enhancing ritual on Bellatrix, within the past few days at the least. She has gone into seclusion since then, but from what I understand he drained the power of Long Meg and her Sisters to complete the ritual.”

Dumbledore stared at his friend for some time, considering “Do you know what he did to her, exactly?”

“I was not there, of course, but my contact said our master flayed her to the bone on her legs, arms, ribs, forehead and back and bled a hundred muggles dry, but that when done she was whole with only healed scars to show the cuts. I’ve not talked to her, but from what I understand she is different—much more powerful.”

“Of course,” Dumbledore said. “He is seeking a way to counter Harry’s new power, but he won’t do the ritual on himself until he has confirmation that it will work. Interesting. This doesn’t change my immediate concern, though. Talk to Narcissa, Severus. Try to convince her to take Draco and flee. I do not wish to see bloodshed in this castle if we can help it.”

“And what of my Vow?”

“You vowed to assist Draco in killing me. I can tell you, Severus, doing so will be a mercy.”

“Do you need more pain potion?”
“For what good it will do, yes, I do.”

“Very well,” Severus said. “Good night, Headmaster.”

“Good night, Severus.”

“Very well,” Severus said. “Good night, Headmaster.”

“Good night, Severus.”

“My parents owled and said they were flying out to Australia to look for a new home over the hols,” Hermione said.

She, Harry and Luna were snuggled up together under a thick down blanket, since even with their fire the cold was numbing. Under the blanket, though, heated through sex and natural body warmth, the three of them were wonderfully warm, satiated, and unusually for Harry, at peace.

He sensed the grief in his wife’s voice, knowing that with her marriage to him, her relationship to her parents had changed forever. He hugged her a little closer, feeling her loss.

“Where will we live?” Luna asked. There was no doubt in her mind she would be with them; and the other two never questioned it either.

“Where will we live?” Luna asked. There was no doubt in her mind she would be with them; and the other two never questioned it either.

“I own Grimmauld Place,” Harry said. “It’s not the nicest home, but it’s ours.”

“And we can use magic now,” Hermione said. “No more Mrs. Weasley to force us to clean by hand.” Thinking of the Weasley Matriarch, she said, “I wonder if she’s going to invite us to the Burrow?”

“I don’t believe she will,” Luna said. “Mrs. Weasley never approved of my father or me, and given that our relationship has been in the papers, it will cause her to reconsider her relation with you and Harry. She thought you would be a good wife for her son, and hoped Harry might find a spouse in Ginny. Since that is not going to happen, and you are already married, her emotional investment in you has not paid off.”

“Emotional investment?” Harry asked.

“Mrs. Weasley is not a nice woman by nature. But she does love her family very much, and is loyal to them. While you were family, she invested her emotions in you as if you were her own. But since you both married each other, you can never truly be family, and so her loyalty to you is waning. I do not believe this is necessarily a bad thing, but rather a natural consequence of us taking a different path. We might receive an invitation for dinner, but not for anything longer.”

“Well, the house will take work,” Hermione said.

“Kreacher!” Harry called. Surprisingly, the ancient elf never appeared. “Hmm, okay. Dobby?”

The girls jumped a bit and pulled the blanket up a little higher as the hyper little elf appear. “Yes, Mr. Harry Potter sir?

“Dobby, I’ve inherited the ancestral home of the Blacks. I attempted to contact the elf there, Kreacher, but he did not come. I was wondering if you would like to work for me?”

Dobby trembled like a big-eared, bi-pedal Chihuahua. “Oh yes, Harry Potter sir, Dobby would love to work for you.”
“Excellent. A galleon a week, one day a week off no matter what.”

Dobby drooped his ears. “That is too much money and time off, Mr. Harry Potter sir.”

“It’s for me, Dobby,” Hermione said gently. “Harry knows I don’t like how wizards treat elves.”

Dobby bowed his head. “For Harry Potter’s Hermy Ownee, I accept,” Dobby said.

“Excellent,” Harry said. “Dobby, I own Number 12 Grimmauld Place. It is under the Fidelius Charm, but with ownership it appears the secret transferred to me. Please check on Kreacher and clean the house and prepare it for us over the holiday. The master bedroom should be the first priority. I would also like you to make sure all the property of the house remains in the house. The Order of the Phoenix previously used it as a headquarters, but no more.”

Dobby began bouncing on the bed. “Dobby gets to clean the whole house?”

“Yes.”

“Oh thank you, Harry Potter sir! I go clean now so you can make your Loony and Hermy Ownee happy! And check on bad old elf Kreacher!”

With that the elf disappeared.

“I’m just not sure what to think about that,” Hermione said.

Draco Malfoy looked sullen as Snape led him into the Headmaster’s office the morning he was supposed to go home. He looked up in surprise to find his mother there, looking pale and haggard.

“Draco, son,” she said, rising from the seat where she had been conversing with Dumbledore.

“But my mother is here, what is happening?” Draco asked.

“Mother,” Draco said. “What are you doing here?”

“Sit, Draco,” Snape ordered.

“The office has been sealed,” Dumbeldore said, “and all portraits rendered deaf and dumb. None shall know this conversation occurred.”

No longer as sure of himself, Draco took a seat next to his mother. He wanted to ask her what was happening at their house, since she looked so worn and tired, but did not dare express his curiosity in front of the headmaster.

But then his world turned sideways and vomited when Dumbledore said, “Harry Potter knows about the vanishing cabinet in the Room of Requirement, Mr. Malfoy. He has been purposefully sabotaging your efforts, but plans to let you finish so that he will have the justification he needs to kill you. And before you say anything, young man, rest assured than he can and will kill you. He came perilously close to killing me this last summer. He is not the Harry Potter you have been taunting these last five years.”

Draco tried very, very hard not to throw up. Potter knew? But how? “How could he know about the cabinet, or anything else?”

“Mr. Potter seems to have a new power,” Snape said. “He can detect where others are. He admitted plainly that he intends to kill you—eagerly so, I might add.”
“Draco, my son,” Narcissa said, “this task given you… it is a punishment.”

“What?”

Narcissa bowed her head. “Lucius failed him. At first, losing the prophecy in the Department of Mysteries seemed like no large matter, given Potter’s fall into the veil. But when he emerged and killed so many, including your father, Voldemort raged at Lucius for his failure. He gave you the task of killing the headmaster knowing you would fail. He is punishing your father’s memory through you.”

“But I…” Draco was about to assure her he would not fail, when he remembered that his target was sitting right in front of him, watching him intently. They knew everything; he was lost.

“Draco,” Dumbledore said, “do you truly wish to kill me?”

“Yes!” Draco said, yelling his frustration. “My father is dead because of you and Potter! I want you all dead!”

Rather than be upset, the headmaster merely smiled sadly. “For all your pain, my boy, we both know you are lying.”

Draco sank back into his chair. “Potter took my father away from me.”

“And now the Dark Lord is trying to take my son from me,” Narcissa said. “Listen to the Headmaster, Draco.”

“I have been in communication with Minister Bones,” Dumbledore said. “In return for what intelligence you can provide in the form of memories and testimony, the Ministry is prepared to give both you and your mother new identities in a country of your choice. I would recommend Canada, the United States or Australia, but the decision will be yours. If you decide to accept the offer, you will ride the Hogwarts Express as normal back to London, but rather than return to your home, you will go to a safe house where your testimony will be taken. From there you will leave the country.”

Run. They wanted him to run like a coward, rather than facing the task assigned to him—a task, Draco knew in the dark recesses of his mind—that he could never carry out.

“Mother,” he said, “what should I do?”

“Live, son,” she whispered. “Your father and I…we never truly wanted this life for you. We want you to live.”

“You’ll come with me?”

“I will,” she said. “I would do anything for you, my son.” She turned and looked Dumbledore in the face. “Anything.”

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~~Broken~~

Harry, Hermione and Luna claimed not one, but three cabins in the last carriage of the train. With some fancy wand work and runes from Hermione, they even removed the interior walls of the cabin to make room not just for their friends, but for the paperwork.

The Lord Mayer of London saw a demonstration of the first solar cells, accompanied by a city
engineer, and was fast-tracking a massive order. Bartleby already reviewed the contract and blessed it, so now it was time for the company owners to review and sign.

Their core group lounged in the cart with them, snacking. With them were girlfriend/boyfriends, which for Terry Boot meant Ginny Weasley, and for Ron meant Lavender Brown. Katie was talking Quidditch with Ginny, while Justin played chess with Ron and held his own remarkably well.

Every single person in the enlarged cabin looked up in surprise to see a pale, exhausted-looking Draco Malfoy staring around in confusion at the extra-large cabin. No surprisingly most stood up with their hands on their wands, but Draco made no move to go for his own. Instead he scanned those in the room until he finally spotted Harry.

“Potter,” he said. His voice sounded hoarse and ill-used. “A word?”

“How! How in Merlin’s name can you know? How could you know about the cabinet?”

“I know.”
“I raped your aunt’s mind,” Harry said.

Draco blinked in surprise. “Aunt Bella? In Diagon Alley…”

Harry leaned forward until his eyes pierced Malfoys. “I am not the Harry Potter you knew, Malfoy. I do not hesitate to kill my enemies. The only reason I didn’t kill you at the beginning of term was because I knew I would have opportunity later.”

Draco reared back as if struck. “So what makes you better than the Dark Lord?”

Harry smiled, but it was a chilling expression. “I’m smart enough not to let a baby defeat me. Run away, Draco. Go with your mother. Live your life. You might like the power that comes with following Riddle, but you’re not prepared for the price of it. Go, and maybe I won’t kill you when it’s all done.”

Draco turned and ran from the vestibule, and Harry drifted back to their cabin. “All right there, Harry?” Ron asked.

“Just fine, Ron,” he said with a firm nod.

Harry, Hermione and Luna arrived at Grimmauld Place and were immediately met by Dobby holding the tattered rags of Kreacher in his hands. “Kreacher was being killed by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,” the little elf said. “I honored Kreacher best I could.”

Indeed, the old elf’s head was on the wall. Harry closed his eyes and searched with the Force, but found nothing. “Do we know what he took?”

“No, Harry Potter. Portraits won’t tell Dobby.”

No surprise there, Harry thought. Despite the alarming news that Dumbledore’s old protections had been breached, Dobby’s work was obvious. Though the memories seemed distant, Harry did remember how much work he and his friends put into cleaning the house with minimal effect to show for the work.

Dobby, though, put them all to shame. The walls were free of dust and grime, though the absurdly overdone floral wallpaper was still there. The curtains all were immaculate without any sign of
doxies or other pests. The floors glistened with fresh oil, and the whole room had lost that musty, death-like smell.

Unfortunately, Dobby could not remove the portrait of Sirius’s mother, who started screaming the moment Harry and the girls entered. With one look at Hermione, Harry lit his lightsaber, and finally the house was free of her barbs as well.

Hermione made a point of thanking Dobby for his excellent work, while Harry and Luna started exploring the home more thoroughly. The house itself was much larger on the inside than on the outside. Harry guessed the house had at least five to six thousand square feet of space, if not more, on three living levels and an attic.

Buckbeak was gone, having returned to Hagrid at Hogwarts, but the attic still had a strong animal scent. It was a surprisingly large space, though unfinished, with ceiling struts rising fifteen feet off the floor at the center of the house. The space also held boxes and boxes of family belongings, from old sleeping portraits to furniture and whole reams of clothing.

They spent the first day mapping out a floor plan of the house to better prepare for renovations. After all, the home was located in the middle of London, where that much square footage was quite the find.

On their second day of vacation, they took the floo to the Leaky Cauldron before heading directly to Knockturn Alley. Hermione could not help but notice an aura of menace that surrounded them, not so much directed at them, but originating from Harry. He walked with his head high and his eyes straight, with his mouth in a firm line that was not a frown, but seemed very unfriendly.

Hermione edged closer to him, aware of the many unfriendly glances directed their way. Yet, as menacing as the alley was, Harry was worse.

Finally, though, they reached their destination: Havorth and Sons, Warding and Muggle Works since 1654. The owner, a tall Muggleborn named Sam Findley, greeted them with a friendly smile before asking why they didn’t just take the Muggle entrance from the other side of the street.

“The Goblins didn’t bother to tell me,” Harry noted wryly.

Findley laughed. “Well, I do take work away from them, so it makes sense. Unfortunately I have a hard time advertising.”

“I should think it would not be necessary, if your family has been in business so long,” Hermione said.

Findley winked at her. “Yep, a whole ten years, we’ve been up. Don’t let the sign fool you, Dearie. If you don’t tell anyone you’ve been around since before Merlin, they won’t respect you. You think Ollivander’s family’s been making wands in England since 382 B.C.? Wandlore didn’t even exist in 382 B.C. The people on the isles were still using oak staffs or bones. Wandlore didn’t immigrate into England until the Saxons. So, what can I do for you?”

“We want to ward our home for electronics,” Hermione said. “Phone lines, data lines, electric lights and appliances.”

“How old is the house?”

“It is an original era Georgian house,” Hermione said.

“Ever been wired?”
“No, it’s the ancestral home of the Blacks.”

Findley nodded. “Good. Easier to lay new cable and wire than to upgrade old stuff. It won’t be cheap, though. I use a special sheath of insulating rubber soaked with a proprietary potion that protects from magic, and I’m the only one in Britain that has it.”

“We’re rich,” Harry said. “Do whatever my wife asks, no expense spared. How soon?”

“Given you’re my only clients?” Findley said with a smile. “How ‘bout we get started this afternoon?”
Bellatrix has issues.

The Grunnings Drills sign came down two days before Christmas, the day after the City of London announced the contract with Phoenix Industries to install new solar panels on all metropolitan area buses and city buildings.

The contract was for millions, but the city budgeters announced the contract would pay for itself within three years from reduced electrical and petrol expenditures. Even with London’s temperate climate, enough solar radiation fell for the panels to derive significant energy.

Either Harry, Hermione, or both went into the office in person every single day. Sometimes Luna came, though more often she simply showed up with food at lunchtime since she truly had no desire to run a manufacturing company.

Martha had been busy, as had the company. With the successful contract in London, other cities were taking a hard look at what set Phoenix Industries solar panels apart from all the rest. The answer was the sheer amount of electrical output each panel was capable producing, and when the first buses rolled out with six panels on their roof and a petrol/hybrid electric engine from Boyoda Motors and proceeded to drive non-stop all day long on two gallons of petrol, people realized Harry’s company was producing something special.

They held a Holiday Party at the company, and at Hermione’s suggestion Harry authorized a bonus for each employee. The bonus was very happily received, and went a long way to helping people get over the youth of their employer. It was also a chance to meet some new additions to the company that Bartleby talked Harry and Hermione into.

Harry attended the party in a custom tailored suit from Saville Row with a new gold pocket watch and a pair of black Oxfords. Behind him, Hermione wore a stunning blue dress cinched at the waist by a wide black belt and black pumps. Luna spent half an hour that morning turning her friend’s hair into a curling cascade that made her as breathtaking as at the Yule Ball her fourth year.

Luna herself wore a silver dress, but with a shocking pink belt and a gold phoenix brooch Harry purchased for her. Hermione wore the same brooch, also from Harry’s generosity. The fact Harry never realized he was buying such wonderful gifts was irrelevant—Hermione had access to his vault, after all.

When they arrived, the name Grunnings was already gone from the roof and workers were removing the D from the word Drills. Lining the ground in front of the brick building were the first letters of Phoenix. They were greeted by Bartleby and Martha White, done up nicely in a red party dress. Chandrakar was there with his wife and three children, as was Nils Baar and his partner.

Harry managed to say a few words to open the party, thanking Archibald Grunnings, who took his retirement to Majorca, and the staff for all their work.

Soon after, Harry, Hermione, Luna, Bartleby, Chandrakar and Baar went into a closed door meeting
with their newest staff members. Shirley Applewhite, formerly of the PMs office, was hired to wear both the HR and public relations hat. It was she who drafted the News Release about the London Contract. A woman of forty-five, she nonetheless presented a slim and attractive figure, which even Hermione agreed was perfect for the public spokesperson of the company. It was her first week with the company, and she started with helping sign the city contract.

“Mr. Potter, an honor to see you again,” she said, beaming. “And Mrs. Potter. And though I have seen you in passing, dear, I’ve not met. I’m Shirley Applewhite. I know Mr. and Mrs. Potter are co-presidents of the company. What is your role, if I may ask?”

Luna grinned, and for one brief, irrational moment, Hermione was certain that Luna was going to announce she was a fuck toy. Instead, Luna said, “I specialize is certain mathematical projection techniques that can be useful for long term policy development,” she said without blinking. “Aside from being a close friend to the Potters, I also serve as an unofficial consultant, or whatever other position they require me to fill or assume.”

Yes, it was a wild double entendre, but Hermione had to admit it was better than what she feared.

Also joining them was Tuvo Johnson, a hulking man of African descent with the most beautifully perfect articulation of the English language Hermione had ever heard. His voice was so mellifluous as to be a living lullaby, and his smile was infectious. A former rugby star, Johnson also held a degree in marketing and had four years’ experience with a large insurance provider before his good friend Martha White convinced him to enter a ground-floor company on the rise. He did so, and along with Shirley helped quick-set the contract with London.

Martha brought in drinks before settling in to take notes.

“Well, it’s been a very successful transfer from drills to solar panels,” Harry opened the meeting. “Before we close for the holidays, I wanted to get a quick run-down on where we are. Mr. Chandrakar?”

“Given the success of our first contract,” Chandrakar said, “we have decided to shut down production on the remaining drill lines. We have six months of inventory left of the old units, though we are playing with the idea of offering the whole lot at a bulk discount to local retailers to make room in storage. We have already contacted Armistace Robotics concerning a second production line for panels. With the city contract in place, we are shipping the panels out as fast as we are making them. We’re also hitting some bumps in terms of human resources since the maintenance contracts require technical assistance.”

“We already have advertisements out,” Applewhite said. “Given that motor vehicles appear to be a main target, we are advertising in auto industry magazines.”

“That’s good, because my people are being run ragged,” Baar said. “I have shifted my focus to maintenance and installation, and it is a good thing.”

Harry remembered approving the change in duties.

“Well, that’s all very good,” Tuvo Johnson said, “because business is about to get a lot more interesting. Since the news release hit, I have received serious inquiries and price quote requests from seven other city metro systems.”

“And a call from the PM’s office,” Applewhite added with an excited smile.

“It gets better,” Bartleby said. “This morning, I received a call from Boyoda Motor Corporation
itself. The fact that we used a Boyodo hybrid motor with the London busses caught their attention, and they are interested in developing a hybrid sedan. In case you were wondering, Boyoda sells three million hybrid cars a year worldwide.”

“Well, that’s certainly something to raise a toast to,” Harry said.

Draco sagged back, exhausted, in his seat.

The safe house was some place in Wales, though Draco did not know exactly where. What he did know was that he was tired, and his head pounded from the veritaserum and non-stop questioning.

The price of his safety was hours upon hours of testimony under potion, while his mother stayed somewhere else in the house, pouring out her life for the amusement of low-level Ministry Aurors.

John Dawlish walked into the small room where Draco had lived the past few days with a butterbeer in one hand, and a vial of potion in the next. “Here, lad, pain potion.”

Draco took it without comment and then washed the bitter taste down with a swig from his butterbeer.

“Better?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Draco said.

Dawlish settled back in the wooden chair he and the other interrogators used and studied Draco for a few minutes. “Not easy, is it? Trying to get out, I mean.”

“Of course it isn’t,” Draco said, indignant.

“Not what I mean, boy,” Dawlish said, “and you need to watch that attitude. Wherever you end up, they’re not going to put up with that like people do here. What I mean is making the decision. I had a friend from the first war who did that—turned against You-Know-Who and his family and tried to do the right thing.”

“Oh, and what happened to him?”

Dawlish smiled, but it was a dark and humorless smile. “Killed, of course. Rumor has it he screamed until his ripped his own voice box apart before they finally killed him. Reggie was a good lad, he just got caught up in something bigger than he was, and when he realized how bad it was, he didn’t have a lot of options. Back then, the Ministry was so broken there was no one to turn to, not like you and your mum. You should be thankful, lad. Minister Bones runs a good, tight ship. She’ll treat you fair.”

Draco bit back the sharp, angry retort on the tip of his tongue and instead sighed as he slumped back on his bunk. “How much longer?” he managed to ask in a semblance of a civil tongue.

“Two days max,” he said. “Then you and your mum will be out of here.”

“Do we know where?”

“Not yet, nor will I. As I understand it, we’re going to give you funds and four random portkeys to four different locations around the world. We’re not even going to know for sure where you end up,
and if you’re smart, you won’t stay long wherever you do wind up.”

Not even Draco could fault that plan, given the Dark Lord’s well-known powers of legillimancy. However, as much as he was frightened of the Dark Lord, it was Potter that made him feel most angry, and most afraid.

_I am your death_, he said, and Draco believed him. Even Snape believed him, or else he wouldn’t have worked so hard to convince Draco and his mother to leave the country. Whatever happened to Potter changed him, and not in a good way. The Champion of the Light seemed just as dark and twisted as the Dark Lord himself.

Dawlish pushed himself to his feet and opened his mouth to say something when the whole house shook violently. Dawlish squatted down, eyes wide. “What the bloody ‘ell was that?” He rushed out of the room, and in his haste failed to close the normally locked door behind him. Draco, unable to help himself, stood and looked out into a narrow hallway in an obviously muggle home. He heard screams and spell fire from down the stairs to the ground floor.

He rushed into the hall and knocked on the nearest door. “Mother, are you in there?” he asked urgently.

“Draco, is that you?”

The doors were locked from the inside only, so all it took was a twist of the handle to open the door. His mother wore a plain, utilitarian dress of black cotton. She climbed to her feet and rushed into his embrace. “Do you know what’s happening?”

“I don’t,” Draco said.

Both turned at the shrill scream of a dying man.

“Come, we must go,” Narcissa said.

“What about our wands?”

“Wands are important, but lives more so,” she said. Taking his hand, she led him further down the hall, away from the stairs and the screams. The last door in the hall was not locked, and as the two rushed in they found themselves in another bedroom, this one unmade and quite filthy. The air had the taint of a man—musk with an overlay of cheap cologne. However, unlike the rooms that housed Narcissa and Draco, this room had a window.

Unfortunately, as they found out a second later, it was a window that did not open.

Behind the closed door of the auror’s room, they heard the sound of creaking wood; the air itself seemed to tremble with the promise of something terrible. “Oh Cissy!” a familiar voice said. “I have something for you! I have your wand, sister!”

“Oh Merlin,” Narcissa said, paling the color of bone. “Bella.”

Bellatrix—Draco fought hard not to lose control of his bladder. Aunt or not, he knew Bellatrix would not hesitate to kill them if such was the Dark Lord’s orders. Narcissa was desperately scanning the room for some way out, but there was none.

Suddenly the door exploded in a shower of wood. Draco threw himself onto his mother and both fell to the ground amidst a shower of splinters. His terror and adrenaline were so strong he barely felt the bite of the wood in his skin. Instead, he looked up and saw Bellatrix Lestrange standing in the
opening.

She looked different. For one, her face bore hideous, almost primitive-looking scars on her forehead and cheeks. Her hair was frizzier than normal, as if she had been struck by lightning. However, her eyes nearly glowed with a magical strength so powerful it made the air around her body shimmer.

“Hello, Sister,” Bellatrix said. Her voice sounded shrill and rushed. “How have you been doing? We’ve missed you so terribly over the holidays. You and dear nephew are my only family, you know. Well, except for that traitorous bitch and her freakish offspring, but we’ll deal with dear Andromeda soon enough.”

“Bella,” Narcissa whispered, “what happened to you?”

“The Dark Lord has made me his most favored,” Bellatrix said proudly. “He has given me power—you can’t imagine the power, Cissy. It fills me up, so much. Remember those boys in Seventh Year? Those muggles we found and played with? Remember how they filled us up so much better than our promised? This is a thousand times better than that. It is wonderful.”

Draco tried very hard not to think of his mother and aunt rutting with Muggles like filthy animals, but it was a hard image for the boy to shake—until Bellatrix turned black eyes onto him. Her dark gaze pierced his rudimentary Occlumancy barriers like a knife slicing through parchment, and she latched onto the images her words had summoned.

“Oh no, dear nephew, it was like this,” she whispered.

Suddenly Draco saw as clear as if he were watching in person his mother and Aunt Bellatrix, naked, young and stunningly beautiful, each writhing and bouncing with abandon on a pair of large, muscular Muggle men. It was powerfully erotic, so much so Draco couldn’t help but feel his body respond.

Suddenly Bella was there, rubbing against him. The air around her felt like the air right before a thunderstorm, filled with electricity that made the hair on his body stand on end. “Do you want me to ride you, Draco? Like we rode those boys?” Her voice dropped as she nuzzled his ear. “Do you want your mother too, Draco?”

“Bella, stop this, please!” Narcissa begged. “We’re your family! Please!”

“You don’t understand the power,” Bellatrix whispered, eyes distant. “I must obey my master.”

With neither wand nor word, Bella banished Draco to the far corner of the room. He slammed into the wall so hard breath rushed from his lungs and he heard as much as felt the snap of at least one rib as he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

He looked up to see his mother frozen with wide eyes much like an animal caught in the sites of the hunter’s bow. Bellatrix stood before her, gently caressing her cheeks as she leaned forward and kissed her. Face to face, Draco saw their resemblance, even as he saw the differences. Narcissa spelled her hair blonde for her husband, while Bellatrix did not care about her hair at all. Bella was not as tall or as buxom, having never had children. And yet their faces, locked together in that perverse, disgusted kiss could almost have been a mirror image.

Suddenly Narcissa’s body began to tremble, and from within the kiss Draco heard his mother screaming. Tears burned his eyes as she stumbled back from Bellatrix, trembling, eyes wide and blood-shot, as she screamed in unbelievable agony.

“Mother!” Draco shouted as a spot of white heat appeared in her stomach. The white fire began to
spread, faster and faster, until it consumed the whole of her, leaving nothing but ash that drifted with terrible slowness to the floor.

Bellatrix turned to Draco, her face ravaged by tears even as she grinned savagely. “That’s what happens to betrayers!” Bellatrix screamed. “My family has betrayed me! None are loyal. Not even you, are you, little dragon?”

The last dropped from a scream to a childish murmur, as if she were speaking to a dragon. She gestured and Draco felt invisible hands yank himself back to his feet, wrenching his broken rib. Those same invisible hands ripped his clothes off violently, leaving him bare before this sick perversion that used to be his aunt.

She grinned down at him, her dark eyes burning. “Yes, just like your father,” she whispered. “You’ll be loyal to me, won’t you, Little Dragon? You’ll give me the love only family can give, won’t you?”

Draco could only whimper. Then he screamed, and screamed more. And then, two hours later, he was silent forever. Draco Malfoy, not yet seventeen, lay naked and dead while the safe house burned around him.

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~~Broken~~

Shortly before Christmas, the Weasleys received an invitation to visit Phoenix Manor, as it was called now, on Boxing Day. The whole family was nervous, especially Ron.

Ron’s sixth year had been like nothing he could have expected. For one, he truly, honestly thought he would be dating Hermione Granger by now. The idea occurred to him during Fifth Year, watching how angry she seemed with Harry all the time, as much as she was angry with Umbridge.

He also knew that his sister had a deep, abiding crush on the Boy Who Lived, and when he was honest with himself, the thought of his best mate with his sister didn’t bother him nearly as much as he might pretend. He loved Ginny, and he knew that Harry would never, ever hurt her. In fact, he doubted she would have let him.

But that was before…everything.

The Harry who returned was different, and not always in a good way. The new Harry was colder, and sometimes just outright cruel. Worse yet, so was Hermione. As much as it thrilled him to see Draco, Crabbe and Goyle blown out of the Hogwarts Express, that night when he thought about it and replayed the episode in his head, it scared him a little.

He would never, in a million years, imagine her throwing herself at Harry like she did. Agreeing to marry him at seventeen? Was she completely insane? Ginny told him that Hedwig had gone to Hermione after Harry fell into the veil, and that was a well-known sign of mutual love, but still…she seemed so angry at him for being nice Fifth Year, but when he watched her on the train, she did not look angry at Harry for almost killing three students.

It was then Ron realized Hermione had changed as much as Harry had. Or had she? He remembered Third Year—Hermione did not curse Malfoy, she punched him hard. At first he thought it was brilliant and scary, but now in light of what happened, Ron settled just on scary. It scared him to think that this violent core had always been a part of their friend, but the truth was undeniable. There was a reason Hermione Granger, now Potter, was sorted into Gryffindor. It
wasn’t bravery—it was a willingness to do violence that the more academic Ravenclaws were less likely to engage in. After all, Gryffindor was known as much for his fighting skills as his bravery.

And then Luna somehow landed right in the middle of the married couple! Where the bloody hell did that come from? Luna’s appearance with the Potters blindsided not just Ron, but also Ginny, Neville—in fact the whole school. More astounding was the fact that the professors seemed unwilling or unable to do anything about a fifteen-year-old girl living full time with a married couple. Not just living, either, but apparently having sex with them.

Ron shook his head at the thought of his best mate having two women.

But then, Harry wasn’t really his best mate any more, was he? That was the worst of it all, for Ron and Ginny both. Harry had Hermione now, and Hermione had Harry, and Luna had them both. They were a complete unit and did not seem to need anyone else. They did not spend any time at all in the Common Room, and Ron found himself hanging out more with his roommates and Lavender than he did with Harry, Hermione or Luna.

Of course, Lavender helped make the absence of his old friends more bearable. She liked his curse scar—she said it was sexy and manly, and would kiss it sometimes. One time she actually ran her tongue over it.

Yes, things changed and lives moved on. But when Harry agreed to a new DA, Ron was the first to jump at the chance to join again. This new Harry was a lot harder than the old, and Ron knew he would get no second chances. If he acted like a git again, he knew he would not be welcomed back by his first, best friend. Of course, there was always Lavender…

“Ready, Ron?” Molly said, breaking Ron’s train of thought, which had turned almost exclusively to Lavender by that point.

“Oh, yeah, sure.”

Though the whole family was invited, it would only be six of them—Molly and Arthur, Ron and Ginny, and the twins. They went by floo, and emerged in a completely different home than the one they saw the previous summer.

“Oh my goodness!” Molly exclaimed.

“Hello, Mrs. Weasley!” Hermione said, greeting them just inside the door. “How are you?”

She wore a stunning blue evening gown that accentuated a figure Ron had only guessed at. He tried not to ogle, but Merlin, when did Hermione grow up?

“I’m well, how are you, Hermione?” Mrs. Weasley said as she soaked in the radical changes she saw to Sirius Black’s dilapidated old house and it’s new matron. “What have you three been up to? It’s like a completely different house!”

“We’ve been renovating a little,” Hermione said. She hugged Ron and Ginny, and then surprisingly the twins as well, before she backed away. “Well, you can see the first changes already.”

Indeed, the long, narrow entryway was gone. Instead the whole left wall opposite the stairs was gone, with a low, heaving beam supporting the ceiling along its length, with only a single elegantly carved and stained oak support columns to mark where once the wall ran. In the wide, open space beyond they saw the fireplace they emerged from, surrounded by tastefully understated plush sofas. Molly noted with approval that the portrait of Mrs. Black was gone, as was most of the wall paper. Instead the walls were half paneling and half painted plaster, in a sandy, earthen color.
Most amazingly, though, was the electric lighting. “Is that a light bulb?” Mr. Weasley asked, enthused.

“One of several, in fact,” Hermione said. “We found a company that borders Knockturn Alley and a Muggle street specializing in Muggle electronics. They wired the entire house with warded cable. We have a Muggle telephone and television, computers with high capacity data lines, and electric lighting.”

“But why would you need all this?” Molly asked.

“It’s all part of our nefarious plot to take over the world,” Luna said as she walked into the room. Her father followed a step behind with a large, stunned smile plastered on his face.

“Molly, Arthur! Wonderful to see you,” Xeno said enthusiastically. “I hope you had a nice holiday? Is this home not amazing? A working floo and a computer. I just spoke to a person in the Americas with that machine. It is snowing in Ontario.”

“And here,” Molly said. “Always nice to have a white Christmas.”

“Oh yes!” Luna said enthusiastically. “I’m afraid we are still renovating the upper floors, so it may not be safe for you to go up there, but please come.”

Lagging behind, Molly turned to Hermione and said, “Hermione, dear, is Luna really living here?”

“Well, yes,” Luna said, turning around to address the question before Hermione could answer. “We were going to call this place the Seraglio when Hermione pointed out that Harry lived here as well. A true seraglio would house just the harem. And of course, we’re practicing polygyny rather than forming a harem. There will be no one else, just Hermione as his wife, and me as his…”

“Luna,” Hermione warned.

Luna blinked innocently. “I was going to say concubine. I know very well that Mrs. Weasley does not appreciate foul language, so of course I would never refer to myself as a fuck toy in her presence.”

“But it is fucking brilliant, isn’t it?” Xeno said, eyes bright. “My daughter is a concubine. How marvelous!”

Molly closed her eyes and forced herself to take a deep breath, while Arthur patted her shoulder. “You never change, do you Xeno?”

“Why would he?” Luna asked.

Dinner was brilliant—a combination of Dobby’s cooking and, surprisingly, Luna’s. The petite Ravenclaw proved to be a brilliant cook, having had to prepare meals for her father since her mother’s passing years before.

Ron watched not his friends, but rather his mother. Molly Weasley watched everything like a hawk, taking into account the easy camaraderie between Hermione and Luna, and the way both girls seemed to dote on and, oddly, defer to Harry. He treated both with equal graciousness, and the three of them moved around each other with all the skill of dancers.

Most important, though, was that the three of them looked happy, even Harry, whose smiles—if not as bright or broad as before—seemed more genuine because of his new restraint. Finally, the meal finished and Molly and Arthur thanked their hosts before they entered the newly expanded living
area for an aperitif and small conversations.

Finally the evening wound down and Molly announced it was time for her and Arthur to be on their way. As they started to head for the floo, however, the fire billowed out in green flame to reveal the form of Alastor Moody. After him came Fred’s girlfriend, Angelina Johnson, and their friend Lee Jordan. To Molly’s surprise, several more students arrived.

“Alastor!” Molly said, surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“Playing chaperone,” Moody said abruptly.

“We were hoping,” Hermione said, “that Ron could stay for a little while longer.”

“What about me?” Ginny demanded.

It was Harry who spoke. “I’m sorry, Ginny, you’re not seventeen yet.”

“What’s this about?” Molly asked.

“I work for Harry,” Ron said quickly. “Took a part time position with his company.”

“Yeah, we all do,” Lee Jordan said, being as familiar to Mrs. Weasley as anyone in the room.

“It’s a company get-together,” Harry explained. “We had one at the office before Christmas, now we’d like to just get together to go over business for the coming term.”

Before Mrs. Weasley could refuse, Mr. Weasley patted her arm and smiled at Ron. “Well, you are an adult now, Ron, and I’m very proud to hear you are working. You can stay of course. But Mr. Potter is quite right, Ginny. You are not even sixteen yet, so it is time to go. Fred, George?”

“We have our own business,” the twins said with outrageous winks at Hermione.

Molly looked to Moody. “Are you sure it’s no trouble, Alastor?”

“None at all, Molly,” the auror said. “Everyone here’s an adult, save for the fuck toy.”

Molly sighed and shook her head. “Fine. Thank you for dinner, Harry, Hermione. It was delicious.”

“And for letting me see your comptator,” Mr. Weasley said.

Out of nowhere, Xeno appeared to wrap Harry in a strange side-ways hug. “Thank you for making my little girl a woman, and for making her happy,” the odd man said, before he left via to the floo.

“Come on, Mum,” Ginny muttered. “We’re not going to top that.”

When they were gone, Harry looked at his gathered friends and smiled grimly. “Well, let’s get to work, shall we?”
Chapter Summary

The oddest things show up at your door.

As soon as the Weasleys and Xeno were off, the Floo lit up again, and another man appeared. He was of medium height, with thinning, sandy blond hair, intense blue eyes and broad, powerful shoulders.

Moody greeted the man with a firm handshake before turning to introduce him to the others. “Potters, Potterlings,” - this to the DA core group - “this is Thomas Derkins, CEO of Blackwand Security.”

“Mr. Derkins,” Harry said as he shook the man’s hand, “this is my wife Hermione Potter. She is my partner at the company and serves as co-president with myself. This is our concubine, Luna Lovegood.”

Derkins didn’t bat an eye as he shook her hand. “The seer Moody told me about?”

“And a looker too,” Harry said.

Luna smiled brilliantly. “Nice to meet you. I do believe you’re the first mercenary I’ve ever met. How exciting.”

“Mercenary?” Ron said, his stomach dropping.

“Let’s go to the conference room,” Harry said.

Conference room? Ron looked at the others, who shrugged. They followed Harry through a door underneath the stairwell into a brightly lit, white-walled room dominated by an oval teak table large enough to seat twenty. One wall was dominated by a black screen that Ron couldn’t immediately identify, while other walls had white-boards. There was also a nice wet bar in the corner.

“Moody, help yourself,” Harry said. “You as well, Mr. Derkins.”

“Anything for you, lad?” Moody asked.

“No thank you,” Harry said.

“Butterbeers for the rest of us, please,” Hermione said.

Ron hid his shock when Alastor said, “Right you are, lass,” rather than yelling at her to get it herself, like he would have last year.

Ron sat beside Terry Boot. Since Terry and Ginny started dating, Ron was trying to get to get know the Ravenclaw a little better, and had to admit despite his own feelings, found the young man to be acceptable, if just barely. The others filled in around them, while Harry sat at the end of the table facing the black screen with Hermione on his right and Luna on his left, while Derkins and Moody finally took their seats the other side of the table.
“Moody, what can you tell us? We all sensed a disturbance.”

Moody snorted. “Disturbance my one nut. Bellatrix Lestrange waltzed into a heavily fortified, warded safe house, killed ten seasoned aurors, then killed Narcissa and Draco Malfoy.”

“Why’d she do that?” Ron said.

“Draco was doing a runner,” Harry said. “He realized he could not win, so he left. But not very far, it seems.”

“Dumbledore and Snape both think Bellatrix has undergone some power-enhancing ritual,” Moody said. “And I’m inclined to believe them. She went through every auror without a wand, from what the surveillance spell could capture. Closest thing I’ve seen to you, Potter. I daresay she may even give you a run for your money.”

“She might,” Harry allowed. “If nothing else it will at least make the contest more interesting. Now that we have real money rolling in through Phoenix Industries, with a lot more to come, it’s time to talk hard policy and planning. First off, everyone here should know that Dumbledore is dying.” He told them about Dumbledore’s curse and the horcruxes. The tale ended when he tossed a blackened, split locket on the table.

“That’s one of the last,” Harry said. “We found it here, in this house believe it or not, where the old elf was hoarding personal mementos. I’ll let Dumbledore check the cave he thinks holds another sometime, but that would be one too many. We’ll check to be safe, but I believe this locket was the object originally in the cave.”

“Amelia is having trouble getting to the one in Lestrange’s vault,” Moody said. “The goblins are refusing to cooperate.”

Harry nodded grimly. “We’ll deal with that one another time.”

“Other than the cup, then, that leaves just the snake,” Hermione said. “And then Voldemort is mortal.”

“So that’s what all this is about?” Ron asked. “You-Know-Who?”

“No, it’s about much more,” Harry said.

“We’re thinking a benevolent dictatorship,” Luna said, smiling. “Before I joined it was going to be a genocidal tyranny, but it’s amazing how you can mellow a man out through endless amounts of sex.”

“Finally worked for Ron,” Katie Bell laughed. “Nice to know Brown’s good for something!”

Ron blushed brightly, but didn’t say anything.

“I am also going to push for a break in the International Statute of Secrecy,” Harry said. “I need control over both worlds, and it will take both worlds to accomplish my goal.”

“Which is a dictatorship?” Justin asked with a slightly sickened expression.

“In a sense,” Harry said. “I want one, unified world government from which to launch humanity into the stars. We are increasing out population by one billion people every ten years. There will soon be too many people on this planet for it to continue to support us all. Our race faces extinction through overpopulation. The only way we our species to thrive is to expand beyond the world of our birth. But for that to happen, we are going to have to bring the peoples of the world in line with
a unified government, and it will take in some cases applied violence to do it. However, I don’t see myself as a king, but rather as one of many voices on the stage.”

“Or more likely the choir director,” Hermione amended.

“Yeah, I could go with that,” Harry said. To Justin, he said, “I have no intention of becoming a Hitler or Stalin. I want to be a Churchill, leading the world through a time of genuine crises. But we have to start here, and now. We think that Voldemort has infiltrated the Ministry more than Minister Bones realizes. And that’s in part why Mr. Derkins is here. Mr. Derkins is, as Luna pointed out, a mercenary.”

“I prefer the term Independent Security Contractor,” Derkins said. “But yes, mercenary is a fair assessment. Aside from a five year stint in the United States military, I also trained with the American War Mage units and saw action, both magical and Muggle, in South America. I founded Blackwand to provide magical security to both sides of the Statutes, and I have Muggles and wizards working for me.”

“We’re in negotiations with Mr. Derkins to buy Blackwand wholesale,” Harry said to his friends. “With the new funds rolling in, and a large deal with Boyoda on the horizon, we have the cash to do so. It is my intent to form a Quick Response tactical force to counter both Voldemort’s forces, and to provide security to the interests of Phoenix Industries both here and abroad. Mr. Derkins, if he accepts, will assume a Vice President position within the company, since it is my intent that this force be an important part of the company.”

Harry looked intently at those gathered DA members, focusing on Ron. “If you’re interested, we would like you to be a part of that group as well.”

“What’d you mean?” Ron asked.

“I want you to train with Derkins and Moody,” Harry said. “I want you to be able to fight and defend yourself against all threats, and if you want, there will be an important place for you in Phoenix Industries.”

“Sounds like you’re building an army, Harry,” Justin noted.

“I am,” Harry said simply. “First to defend the magical UK from Voldemort, and then our interests as we take Phoenix Industries international. Rest assured, when the world at large truly understands that I am shifting the entire economy away from oil, there will be violence.”

“When would all this start?” Ron asked.

“Main training would occur over the summer,” Harry said. “Or as soon as Dumbledore dies, whichever comes first. Those in Sixth Year should not count on returning for seventh year. Your training will include all necessary core subjects so you can test for NEWTs when you’re ready. You’re training will also cover Muggle subjects so that you can function effectively in both worlds. And you would be placed on salary even during your training.”

“I have quite a few witches in my employ,” Derkins said, looking at Katie and Angelina. “Not many women on the muggle side, but magic is a great equalizer, if you’re interested.”

Katie grinned brilliantly. “I am.”

“The Order of the Phoenix effectively ceased operations when term started,” Harry said. “We strongly suspect the Ministry will fall soon as well. We’ll do our best to save those we can, but I don’t think we can save the Ministry as it currently exists. The whole structure is so archaic and rife
with corruption that we can’t keep Voldemort out. Destroying Voldemort will simply be another of our assignments, but not our ultimate goal. As powerful as he may be, the future is larger than just him. And I would very much like you to be a part of that future. Will you join me?”

Ron, for his part, shrugged. “Never could say no to you, Harry.”

“We neither,” Katie said. She winked at Hermione. “Good thing for your girls that you never asked me out. Any room for a third?”

“Sorry,” Harry said, though he did smile at his former Quidditch teammate. “Hermione and Luna are the balance I need. Any more women, and you pass a point of diminishing returns. Besides, you know you could never share.”

“True enough,” Katie said. “Well, I’m with you, Harry.”

“I think Ginny would kill me if I weren’t with you,” Terry said. “Moment she turns seventeen she’s signing on. I’m a half-blood myself—my mum would be targeted if You-Know-Who ever took over. Frankly I don’t think you’re going to take over the world, but I do believe you’re going to go far, and I’d like an opportunity to go with you. So I’m in.”

“Well said, Terry,” Justin said. “Like him, I’m not sure about your plans of world conquest, but you will be great and successful, and it will be my honor to be a part of it all.”

“I’m in,” Lee said. “The twins will help too, but they put too much into their store to walk away.”

“I’m in too,” Angelina agreed.

“Then we’re agreed,” Harry said. “When term starts, Moody will continue with broad DA training. We’ll think of them as the reserve. You six will train with Derkins.”

“What about Hermione and Luna?” Ron asked.

“They train with me,” Harry said. “Although we might test each other occasionally, to see where we are.”

“~~Broken~~

“~~Broken~~

“The Force isn’t the same thing as magic,” Harry’s voice told Hermione. Though she was thoroughly blindfolded, she could feel him five feet away to her left. “Magic responds to your desire and guidance; it cannot guide your movements or actions. But the Force can. The problems you’re having now is the same problem you had the first time we tried the learning cantrips. You’re refusing to let the Force flow through you. You have to surrender to it.”

Hermione fought to keep the frustration out of her voice. “I’m trying, Harry. I can’t just let go!”

She felt him move—not just in the Force, but through the rush of air announcing his arrival. She felt his hand on her breast, pushing through the sports bra. “But you can,” he said huskily into her ear. The hands pushed hard against her, running down until with a quick pull he had her pants down around her knees. She barely had time to even breathe before he was in her from behind, filling her and blinding her with his power and touch.

She let go, as she always did when he loved her. She had to, because if she tried to hang onto herself, she would go mad. He wrapped one hand around her chest and another around her hips as
He pushed her into him, and whispered into her ear, “Do you feel the Force flowing through you now?”

“I feel you pounding into me,” she said.

“Not enough.”

He thrust harder, like he used to before Luna came and helped to blunt some of the anger in him. It hurt a little, but at the same time the touch of pain made the ecstasy that much more powerful. However, she also felt his mind in hers, flowing through her body. He began thrusting faster and faster, and with each impact of his flesh against hers, the strange power he introduced to her seemed to wash through her like a wave, until in a strange sense it almost controlled her, forcing her to subtly shift her hips so that his pounding did not hurt, only felt wonderful.

With that subtle shifting, she came quickly and profoundly, gasping and falling to her knees from the power of it. She started to lift her blindfold, but Harry stopped her with a touch. “Not yet,” he said.

She felt his power yank her to her feet—not painfully, but definitely ruling out resistance, and slip her pants back up. The power was still in her, lapping at the edge of her mind like the waves of the lake at Hogwarts. Suddenly the waves lapped higher, and she found herself lunging to the right. She felt something pass centimeters from her ear with a whoosh of air.

“Perfect,” Harry said. “Again.”

The waves rose again and she lunged to her left as another object passed near enough to her ear for her to feel it. Exhilarated and terrified of the guiding force, she next ducked, then jumped, and then found herself cartwheeling off to one side as a whole line of projectiles passed through the air she occupied a split second before. It was almost like when Harry was shagging her, the feeling she had of being at the will of this invisible power.

“You can take the blindfold off, Hermione,” Harry said.

She did so, and found him smiling at her so brilliantly she thought her heart would melt. “I can see why you wanted someone else training the D.A.,” she said. “I think your approach would offend the boys and leave the girls piles of jelly on the floor.”

Luna laughed uproariously. Hermione didn’t even realize she was there until she laughed.

“It makes me want to train!” the blonde girl said, enthused. “Will you fuck me to make me feel the Force, Harry?”

“You already feel it, Luna.”

“Will you fuck me anyway?”

“Luna,” Hermione said, “why do you and your father curse so much?”

Luna blinked and stared. “Who’s cursing?”

Hermione shook her head, then looked down and realized she was leaking. “I’m going to go shower,” she declared.

“And then you’re coming back,” Harry said, his voice serious. “You’ve had your breakthrough, Hermione. Now it’s time to see if you can let the Force flow through you without me having to pound it into you first.”
“Yes, sex might make fighting difficult and distracting,” Luna pointed out wisely.

When Hermione returned a few minutes later after having cleaned up, she honestly expected to find Harry and Luna shagging like rabbits. What she was not expecting was to see them dancing with all the grace and power of ballet dancers.

Granted, they were dancing with wooden sticks held like swords. The air rang with the percussion of their sticks banging against each other. There was no real strength behind it, and yet their speed was breathtaking. Luna moved like a girl possessed, her eyes half closed and her face glowing with a serene, breath-taking smile as she spun, jumped and danced in perfect time to Harry.

After a moment, feeling the two in the Force and watching them intently, Hermione realized she was not moving against him so much as she was mirroring him. Not only that, she was matching his moves with such perfection she could have actually been a reflection. Finally, he came to a stop, and she did as well, breathing heavily but smiling.

“Luna, that was brilliant!” Hermione gushed.

“Thank you,” she said, before plopping tiredly down onto the floor where she stood. “Why am I so tired?”

Harry made a sweeping motion, and Hermione could feel a surge of power as he summoned the smaller girl to his arms. Luna did not move at all, other than to adjust herself to fit into his arms better. He carried her over to a couch in a corner and laid her down on the cushions. “Meditate,” he said. “Gather the Force into your body until you feel stronger.”

“I was sort of hoping you would pound it into me, Harry,” she said.

“I will, soon, but not right now.”

“Promise?”

He leaned over and kissed her. When he straightened her eyes were closed and her smile back in place. Harry walked back to Hermione and grinned. “Are you ready?”

“I’m not sure I can do what you and Luna were doing,” Hermione said.

Harry tossed the sticks—non-magical broomstick handles sawed in half—to the side. “We won’t do that. Instead, I want you to dance with me.”

Hermione quirked a brow. “Dance? Your new power and willingness to kill everything around you wasn’t enough before, but now I’m truly convinced you’re not the same Harry as before.”

Still, she couldn’t help but smile as he took her hands in his and slowly started to dance to music only he could hear. It felt awkward at first, until she realized there was no one there to see her embarrassment, so she started dancing. Her body swayed, her hips moved and her arms swung about. She felt sensual and sexy and beautiful, still glowing a little in post-coital bliss.

She felt more than saw Luna join them, moving in time with them, even though they were following no rhythm. Suddenly Harry had one of the sticks in his hands and he swung it at her. It was not a powerful swing, but it was fast.

Like before, she felt a wave moving inside her, and with a speed she could not believe she somersaulted backward away from the swing. He came at her, stomping as if still dancing and swinging the stick with each one; Hermione found herself bending at impossible angles to avoid the
swings, and then cartwheeling away.

Luna swung at her with a stick too. “Luna!” Hermione said.

“It looked fun!” the other girl said.

Harry and Luna continued to move in time, swinging at Hermione with fast but light strikes. The waves that directed her movements came so quickly that it stopped feeling like a wave so more as a complete infusion in every part of her body, as if it were directing not just her muscles, but her magical core as well.

Even moving as fast as she was, the two managed to back her into a corner. The infusion of power surged upward, and with a startled, excited yelp Hermione found herself jumping higher than she had ever jumped, flipping over each of them and landing in a role she could never have managed on her own.

“Oh yes!” Hermione said, feeling both exhausted and exhilarated. “Is that what you feel?”

“Yes,” he said. He walked to her and hugged her, before kissing her with such intensity her knees buckled.

He turned then and did the same to Luna, who melted against him. “Will you fuck me now, Harry?” she begged.

“Oh, go ahead,” Hermione said. “I’m still glowing from mine, plus I’m really hungry.”

Luna jumped into Harry’s arms and said, “Take me, Sith boy!”

Hermione smiled to herself as he carried her out of the basement training room. When she could no longer hear them, she considered the changes to the room from their last visit. Gone was the warded cage that held Shaddix captive—now they had a brightly lit, open room with a lightly padded floor room perfect for their exercised.

She trudged up the stairs and to the kitchen to find a plate of cucumbers sandwiches and tea waiting for her. “Thank you, Dobby,” she called to the air.

“You is welcome, Missus Harry Potter sir!” a disembodied voice called back.

She ate nearly the whole plate until she heard a knock at the door. She reached out with her newly opened senses and felt anguish, fear and pain. Startled, she ran to the door and opened it. Remus Lupin fell across the threshold, bleeding profusely in torn, ripped clothes.

Given his connection to the wards and his own powers, Harry arrived a moment later without having to be summoned. Luna came a step behind, pulling on a robe over her still glistening body. “I’ll contact Healer Westick,” she said without being asked.

Westick was a young healer from St. Mungos recommended by Pomfrey for Hermione’s personal healer. In the meantime, Harry levitated the beaten and bloodied Lupin to the couch. Moments later, Ann Westick arrived amid a billow of green flame with a bag in hand. “What happened?” she asked.

“A family friend,” Harry said. “He just showed up.”
“He looks like he was beaten and bitten,” Hermione said.


“He’s already a werewolf,” Harry said. “This is Remus Lupin.”

“Right,” Westick said. She removed a pair of charmed surgical gloves and a white mask over her mouth before she began her diagnostics. “Oh, he’s been stabbed too,” she said. “Can you get him on his stomach?”

Harry floated Lupin off the couch and rolled him until he faced down. Only then did Hermione see the three large blood stains. Westick banished the man’s tatted shirt to expose the three stab wound. “It doesn’t look like the blade or blades were cursed,” she said. She muttered a series of Greek spells and the cuts began to close. “Over, please.”

Harry complied, and Westick administered a blood-replenishing potion before she continued healing his cuts and bruises. “Well,” she said, “ordinarily I’d be worried about the bites, but that’s rather moot now. You can put him down.”

When Lupin was down, Westick removed a few pain and blood replenishing potions. “They did a fair job trying to kill him, but I did not detect any overt magic, which is consistent with werewolf brawls. None of the attackers appeared to have been in their lupine form, so those bites are human. I’ve cleansed and sealed them, and healed the broken ribs. He’ll need that pain potion tonight, but with his physiology he’ll probably be back to normal by tomorrow. Give him those blood replenishing potions, though.”

“We will,” Hermione promised.

“Dobby, twenty galleons please,” Harry said.

The elf appeared with a stack of gold coins. Harry gave it to Westick and said, “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“Well, I’d say it’s my pleasure to help anyone opposed to You-Know-Who, but I’d be lying if the double-fee didn’t help. Call me if he doesn’t show improvement by tomorrow.”

With that, Healer Westick disappeared, leaving three teens wondering what to do with their beaten werewolf.
Taking on the Big Bad Wolf

Lupin woke to a strange sight the next morning—a pair of young breasts hovered just over his face. They were very pale, so much so he could see the veins running beneath the near translucent skin, with slightly protruding areolas. They were a nice enough pair of breasts—Lupin was male enough to know that any bare breast was a nice breast. However, he decided that their owner was much, much too young for him to even be looking.

“Luna,” another female voice said, “why aren’t you wearing your top?”

“The detergent Dobby used did not feel very comfortable,” responded Luna, supposedly the owner of the breasts. “He is washing them again for me, the dear.”

“You could have worn your robe, at least. And why are you leaning over Professor Lupin like that?”

“He’s had a very bad night. I thought he might appreciate seeing at a pair of baps when he woke up.”

*Luna Lovegood*. Harry’s concubine. “It was a nice thought, Ms. Lovegood,” he said, “but rather inappropriate, don’t you think?”

“Surely you’ve seen breasts before, Professor,” Luna said.

“Luna, please get your beautiful baps out of Lupin’s face.”

Lupin sighed with relief when he heard Harry’s voice. Immediately Luna moved, allowing Remus to sit up with sigh of pain. He looked up in time to see Harry hand Luna a top, which she pulled on. Harry himself seemed taller than the last time Remus had seen him, with broader shoulders and a more definite cut to his chin. He looked more mature, and even more dangerous.

“Remus,” he said with a nod. “You remember Hermione. And of course you’ve been thoroughly introduced to Luna.”

“Yes, I think we’re on a first name basis now,” Lupin said dryly. “Thank you for helping me last night, Harry. I couldn’t make it back to Hogwarts or the Burrow—I had nowhere else to go.”

“I’m just glad you made it,” Hermione said. “You were stabbed in the back.”

“Yeah, my mistake,” Lupin growled darkly. “I tried to convince the pack to stay out of the fight. I turned my back on Greyback to address them. It is protocol in the pack to be able to speak freely. Before I had a chance, Greyback stabbed me in the back three times, and only then started to beat me.”

“Remus,” Harry said, “where was Tonks? Wasn’t she supposed to be your partner?”
Remus shook his head ruefully. “She wasn’t the same after you…I mean, Shaddix, hurt her. It just got more pronounced after Dumbledore disbanded the Order.”

“Who were you working for, then?” Luna asked.

“I accepted a deputy position with the Ministry,” Lupin admitted. “Amelia called me an unofficial ambassador to the werewolves. You might say my negotiations failed.”

“Perhaps it’s time to pursue a more aggressive negotiation style,” Harry said. “How many werewolves are in the pack?”

“Fifty at least,” Lupin said.

“How many are loyal to Greyback, and how many just follow him because they’re afraid of him?”

“He has about ten who regularly go with him on raids. The rest just want to live in peace. At least, I hope so.”

“One last thing, Remus,” Harry said. “Do you think you could take him?”

The grin on their former professor’s face was anything but gentle. “Yes.”

“Alastor?” Lupin said, surprised after a day of rest and potions.

“Remus,” Moody said with a nod. “Heard rumor you got stabbed in the back last night.”

“I was,” Remus agreed.

“Damned fool thing to turn your back on an animal like Greyback,” Moody said. “Remus, this is Thomas Deskin, Head of Security for Phoenix Industries. These are his men—don’t know their names, don’t need to. We’re going to escort you to the pack and ensure you have a chance to more effectively engage Greyback in negotiations.”

There were only five men, but they to a man looked dangerous. Each wore a plain black Muggle jumpsuit with an earpiece running to a small radio in the black, multi-pocketed vest each wore. They carried a Muggle carbine over their shoulders, with a wand tucked into arm holsters partially hidden under their sleeves. “They look like mercenaries,” Lupin said.

“They are,” Harry said as he arrived into the living room of Number 12 Grimmauld place. “Voldemort has been recruiting mercenaries from the continent by the droves. I thought it only fair to do the same. These are the best the Americas have to offer. Deskin, are we ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry gave a sharp nod. “Our job is to take out Greyback’s support structure, but not Greyback himself. We want to set up a fair fight between Greyback and Remus here so that he can claim leadership of the pack.”

“And if he fails?” one of the mercenaries asked.

“Then we wipe the pack out,” Harry said.
Remus stared at his best mate’s son in horror. “What? Harry, we didn’t…”

“If you fail, they die, Remus,” Harry said without even a hint of compassion. “End of story. We cannot afford to allow potential hostiles to continue unchecked. Think about that when you’re fighting Greyback. You’re not just fighting for your life, but the lives of the rest of the pack. And after you win, if they still give you trouble, promise them the Ministry and her allies will supply Wolfbane potion at a tenth the market price.”

“Minister Bones wouldn’t do that,” Remus said.

“But I will,” Harry said. “So, we understand? If you die, all werewolves in England die. You live, you’ll lead their pack.”

“Albus was right about you, Harry,” Lupin said bitterly. “You have gone dark.”

“And you should be thanking your skinny, hairy arse he has,” Moody said, “or else we’d be doomed. Now, are we going to do this or not?”

~~Broken~~

~~Broken~~

The werewolves did not, despite song and movies to the otherwise, live in London. Instead, the majority of werewolves in the British Isles lived across the Swale in Sheerness, on the Isle of Sheppey in north Kent.

Werewolves were on average stronger and hardier than their normal human cousins, but were drawn and tired one week out of each month. Given this combination, they found it difficult to maintain Muggle employment. It was all but impossible to work in the magical world. Industrial muggle jobs requiring physical labor were the best they could hope for, and between the Docks at Sheerness and the other industrial companies that took advantage of the cheap land on the isle, it was the best work for the pack as a whole.

Most of the Muggle workers commuted on the rail; the isle did not have a large native population, which again leant itself to the werewolves. So the pack lived in a commune outside the city, sharing resources to better survive in a hostile world.

Harry, Moody, Remus, Deskin and his five men arrived by apparition just after ten that evening. They appeared on the edge of the commune, where Harry could feel wards through the Force.

“Most werewolves can’t apparate,” Remus explained. “They aren’t allowed to get licenses because most can’t go to Hogwarts, and so they can’t take their OWLs, which is a requirement for apparition licenses. So Greyback or another of the wanded werewolves will lay down a ward to at least warn them of trouble.”

“How many routes out?” Harry asked.

“Too many to guard, and that’s the point,” Remus said. “You have to understand, Harry—you’re not the first person to threaten the pack. The Ministry tried to wipe out the pack after Voldemort’s first rise. They’re scared.”

“Then you’d better fight well,” Harry said. “Let’s go.”

The commune was actually four terraced houses on the edge of the village, all of them looking run down and weathered. Lupin led the way to the middle door and knocked.
“Who’re you?” a voice growled on the other side.

“It’s Lupin,” Remus said.

“Back for more, are you?”

“I wasn’t done speaking.”

“Who’re your friends, then?”

“Harry Potter,” Remus said.

The other voice said nothing for the longest time before the door opened. Even with the Force as his alley, Harry was surprised to see that the speaker was female—a tall, willowy black woman with wildly unkempt hair and bags under her eyes. “He’s going to kill you this time, Remus,” she said. Her voice was very low for a woman.

“He’ll try,” Remus said. “Harry and the others are only here to make sure I get a fair hearing.”

“He’ll kill them too,” Della said. “There’s a price on Potter’s head.”

“He has to deal with me first,” Remus said. “Let us in, Della, and call the pack. I have a right to speak.”

“Fine,” she said.

The interior of the house was not what Harry was expecting—the walls were torn out between each home, resulting in a vast open space broken only by support columns. He saw what had to be a large kitchen with industrial ovens and dishwashers, a dining area that looked like a cafeteria more than a dining room, and a common room decorated with old, second-hand sofas and chairs. Despite the obvious wear on everything, the space was clean and pleasant, filled with the smell of the sea.

Slowly, people started drifting down the four separate stairs that led to the individual rooms and living spaces above. Adults came first—most looked remarkably ordinary. Men and women of various ages, all dressed Muggle since it was the Muggle world most had to live in. Then came the children—ranging from teens to newborns.

With a start, Harry realized that not all the children were infected with lycanthropy. That was a question for another day. The last to arrive were the fighters—men and women who carried themselves with a more animalistic grace. They did not look hunted, but instead angry and eager. Harry could tell these were the ones who fully embraced their lycanthropy and reveled in it, at the expense of all around them.

With a start, Harry realized that many of the people in the pack were likely infected by the fighters.

Greyback was the last to come, and of all of them he was clearly the most vicious. He sauntered down the stairs with a smirk on his face that reminded Harry vaguely of a Malfoy—a resemblance augmented by his slicked-back hair. However, after so many years of embracing his animal side, Greyback’s features had been changed by the animal within. His lower mandible jutted out, giving the impression of a muzzle, and his canines were much longer and more pronounced than normal.

“Remus Lupin,” Greyback said. His voice sounded like an iron pipe dragged against slate. “The first time you came, I might have called you brave. Now you’re just stupid—and you brought friends. The Dark Lord will be pleased. Take them, boys.”
Deskin raised his carbine in a single, practiced movement as the first werewolf surged forward and squeezed off a single shot that made everyone in the room jump. A red dot appeared in the werewolf’s head, though the bullet did not penetrate all the way through, being made of silver. The man jerked and fell, convulsing before he died.

“You just signed your death, you bastard,” Greyback said, pouncing forward with greater than human speed. Behind him, the nine other fighters did as well.

Harry reached up and with a flick of the Force sent Greyback flying back while Deskin and his men dropped to their knees and sprayed bullets. The werewolves, though, were not as unfamiliar with Muggle firearms as most wizards would be. They jumped over the field of fire or spelled themselves to the ceiling.

Deskin’s people were nothing if not professional, though. They continued to fire, picking one after another. When three of them got to close, Harry leaped over his men, lightsabers flashing, until a second later the werewolf fighters lay dead. He deactivated his blade and looked back at the other werewolves, all of whom had formed a wall of adults to protect the children.

Greyback had also picked himself up, frothing in rage. “You brought murderers into the pack, you traitor!” the old werewolf said.

“I brought friends to ensure our fight was fair,” Remus countered. “You stabbed me in the back, Fenrir. I’m going to give you a chance to try from the front. I challenge you for the leadership of the pack. You and me, to the death.”

Without hesitation Fenrir removed a foot-long, viciously curved blade from underneath his jacket and charged. Harry expected Remus to use his wand, but instead he whipped out a seven inch long Ka-Bar and crouched down to meet the charge.

From Harry’s perspective as a Sith dueler, it was an ugly fight. Greyback fought with rage and bloodlust, strength and speed, but no trained skill. Remus was just as angry, but his rage was the anger of the just. He was faster than Greyback, but in straight confrontations not quite as strong. Within minutes both men were bleeding from several cuts.

Harry looked at Deskin and nodded once. The mercenary gathered his people and quietly left the building while Lupin and Greyback tore each other to shreds. He knew the five men would be establishing lethal fire wards around the structure that would kill anyone who tries to escape.

He returned his attention to the fight just in time to see Greyback power through Remus’s defenses and shove his knife deep into the former professor’s gut. The older werewolf cried out in joy at the blow, only to have the cry cut short as Lupin used his last strength to shove his own knife under Greyback’s chin and directly into the man’s brain.

The two fell apart, Lupin clutching his stomach to hold his intestines in, and Greyback dead to the floor. The silence that followed was deafening, until the tall, black woman named Della rushed forward not to Greyback, but Lupin. She slid to him and lifted his head onto her thighs and ran her fingers through his head. “Oh you fool,” she said bitterly.

“Well, lad?” Moody asked loudly to Harry. “Has Lupin won? He the new pack leader?”

Harry walked forward and knelt down beside his father’s friend, but it was Della he looked at. “If he lives, will the pack accept him as the leader?” he spoke quietly.

“Probably,” she said. “What happens if they don’t?”
“I kill them all,” Harry said. “Starting with you.”

“What happened to Albus Dumbledore’s golden child?” she said, for some reason more resigned than angry.

“He died and went to hell. I’m what the devil spit back.”

She looked back down at the now unconscious Lupin. “Heal him, please. I’ll make sure the others follow him.”

Harry nodded and stood. “Moody?”

The old man stumped to Lupin’s side but did not kneel down for obvious reasons. Instead he handed a vial to the woman. “Phoenix tears from Dumbledore’s own phoenix. Pour them on the cut.”

She did so, and they watched as the deep cut began to boil up from the inside as the magic of Fawkes’ tears forced the bile up and out of the wound, until at last it healed to not even scar. A moment later Lupin gasped and sat up. He quickly came to and saw Harry’s hard expression, and Della’s hopeful one.

“Della?” he asked.

“You’ll need an alpha to keep everyone in line,” she said with a shrug. “Marge was Greyback’s.”

She pointed to one of the female weres that Deskin’s people killed. “If you’re going to lead the pack, though, you’re going to have to choose. You can’t have both worlds, Remus. You can’t be a wizard and a werewolf—the wizards won’t let you.”

“Not yet, anyway,” Harry said. He could see the older man’s anguish at the choice, and knew that despite his falling out with Tonks he felt an attachment to the metamorphmagus. However, Harry could clearly see that Della was more than a passing acquaintance, and was herself a strikingly beautiful woman.

“I’ll stay,” Remus finally said. He looked up at Harry. “Will you keep your word?”

“I will. Hell, I’m probably going to own a shipping line that I’ll even hire your people on.”

“What promise?” Della asked.

Harry, though, spoke loud enough for all to hear. “My position was simple. I’m going to fight Voldemort, and I could not afford to have potential hostiles involved. So, either Remus won and took the pack, or I wipe the pack out. Remus wasn’t fighting for his life, he was fighting for all of yours. I also promised that if he won, I’d make Wolfsbane potion available at a heavy discount. I’ll keep that promise as well, plus I’ll accept muggle money for it.”

That last actually elicited a few hopeful smiles. While the exchange rate from Galleons to pounds was twelve pounds to a Galleon, the exchange rate from pounds to Galleons was in the hundreds, since the Goblins charged muggleborns the Muggle-market price of the actual gold.

“That decides it,” Remus said. With Della’s help he turned to look at the pack. “You know me. I’m the only Hogwarts trained wizard here. I have defeated the pack leader in single combat and claim his position. Do any here challenge me?”

“No, Remus,” a huge, bulking man said in a surprisingly gentle voice. “We won’t. You’re the only one who ever tried to teach the pups magic.”
“Do I have your word that the werewolves will stay out of the fight?” Harry asked.

Remus turned and stared at Harry. Any affection he might have held for the young man was long since gone, but there was respect. “Yes, you have my personal promise that no werewolf in this pack will help You-Know-Who. Any werewolf who does will not be a part of this pack, and you have our blessings to do what you must.”

Harry offered a hand, and Remus took it. “You made the right decision,” Harry told him with a nod to Della. “Not just for the pack, but for you. She has the strength you need. I’ll also use whatever pull I have to get authorized escape portkeys for you, just in case Voldemort comes knocking.”

“Thank you,” Lupin said.

Harry handed over a business card. “Martha White. She’ll help secure the potion. Good luck.”

With that, Harry and Moody walked out of the building to find Deskin waiting. “Situation nominal?”

“Yes. Cancel the wards.”

Deskin parroted the order through his radio, and Harry could feel the wards dissolving. “Would you have done it, lad?” Moody asked.

“Yes,” Harry said. “In fact, I’m thinking about killing them all anyway. The situation is still potentially unstable.”

Moody studied his face closely. “Why don’t you, then?”

“Because my feelings aren’t strong enough to be able to justify it to Luna and Hermione. Hermione alone, yes. But both of them?”

Moody chuckled darkly. “So you’re saying your pussy-whipped?”

Harry shrugged. “My old master burned away my conscience, Moody. All I have left is blood and death. Those girls aren’t just a lay to me. They are my conscience, my reason. You’d better pray to Merlin nothing ever happens to them, because if it does this whole world will burn. Deskin, good job. We’re done.”

“Right.” Deskin and his people disappeared with a series of pops. Harry looked back at Moody, who was watching him carefully.

“Well, then, lad, we’d better make sure those pretty lasses of yours are safe.”

“Exactly my thought.”
Dirty Fighters

Chapter Summary

There's no such thing as a fair fight.

_He had them!
_

For the latter half of the first term and into the second, Severus Snape knew Potter was doing something with several students. They were doing too well on their practicals, and in class demonstrations they showed mastery of spells no sixth or seven year students should know. The fact Snape was teaching those spells in the first place was of no matter to the former Potions Professor.

That’s when he decided Potter and his wife had restarted Dumbledore’s Army. It was the only explanation.

When he voiced his concern to Dumbledore, the aged, failing wizard merely shrugged. “And what would you have me do, Severus? Those he is instructing are doing better, even by your own admission. To my knowledge they have broken no school rules. And given the fact that Harry has asked to take his NEWTs early, it will not be a concern after this term regardless. Let it go, my friend.”

But Severus could not let it go. It galled him on every level that Potter was literally getting away with murder. He and his whore seduced the addle-brained Lovegood girl into their clutches, and now were leading a whole class of students astray.

Finally, though, he had them. A simple tracking charm on the Weasley girl’s bag was enough to show that she was leaving castle grounds entirely. Being early March in Scotland, it was bloody cold with snow still on the ground, but Snape braved the conditions as he followed the tracking charm to an isolated stretch of beach cut off from view of the castle by a large copse of trees.

He turned the blind corner and stifled his shock when he saw a sizable, camouflaged tent running up to the edge of the forest. His timing was perfect as he watched the Weasley girl and a pair of her friends slip in the front of the tent.

Curiosity well and truly roused, Snape disillusioned himself, silenced himself, and then started forward toward the tent. He felt warm air flowing from the seal before he even reached it, and could feel the warming charms even from a distance. He could also hear teenagers shouting spells and this close, could see the flash of spellfire from within.

Still disillusioned and silenced, Snape slipped inside.

He stood, frozen in place, as he watched Katie Bell and Anthony Goldstein dueling. No, not dueling —fighting, with completely silent spells, while the famed Alastor Moody and another ordinary looking wizard watched. Behind the two, Terry Boot, Ron Weasley, and three alumni also stood watching, while behind those two lines of kids from mixed houses (but no Slytherins, he saw with a sneer) were practicing seventh year curses and shielding charms.

His attention returned to the two older students fighting before him. Bell had a physical fighting style
—bouncing around, rolling, with telegraphed movements of her arms. She was also silently mouthing the spells even if she did not pronounce them out loud.

Goldstein’s face was set in a stony mask, his lips pressed together. He did not move as fast as Bell did, but he appeared to have a larger repertoire of skills. He shielded, transfigured and conjured with natural aplomb. However, his lack of speed finally caught up as Katie snuck a silent stunner through his defenses.

“Good!” Moody called. “Bell, you’re still mouthing and telegraphing. Tone down your arm movements and keep those lips shut. Goldstein, sweet Morgana’s baps, boy, move! Dumbledore stands still because he’s got more power than Merlin and bad knees. You don’t have his power nor his excuse, so move. Before we go—Severus, drop those silly charms, man. I know you’re there. Come in and make yourself useful.”

_Damn that magical eye._ The whole tent had fallen silent as Snape ended his concealing spells. “So I take it the headmaster knows of this exercise?” Snape said.

“Take it however you want,” Potter said from behind him.

Snape fought down the urge to scream like a little girl and turned slowly to face Potter. The boy was dressed in a black Muggle-style track suit, and flanking him were his girls, dressed in similar attire. All three had pale cheeks with small spots of red color, and red noses, as if they had been out in the cold for their exercises.

“We’re not going to kill him, are we?” Luna asked, wide-eyed.

“Maybe not, maybe we’ll just obliviate him,” Hermione said. “It worked last time.”

Snape struggled to keep his composure. _Last time?_

“He’s Albus’s pet,” Moody said as he stumped across the tent. “Say what you will, Potter, but Albus isn’t as big a fool as you sometimes think. If he trusts Snape here, it’s because he has a reason to. Blackmail, maybe. Supposedly, though, he’s on our side.”

“I know why Dumbledore trusts him,” Harry said darkly. “As much as he’s loyal to anything, he’s loyal to the headmaster. He had a thing for my Mum, but he’s the one who ended up getting her killed. He tried to make it right, but he was too late.”

“Damn you, Potter!” Snape roared. “You arrogant ass!”

“Harry?” Hermione asked, ignoring Snape’s uncharacteristic outburst.

“I knew from Bella’s thoughts that Snape was the one to share the prophecy with Voldemort,” Harry explained. “And I found out about his relationship with my mother when I scanned his mind last semester. It’s even possible she might have had feelings for him.”

“Until what?” Hermione asked.

“He pulled a Draco.”

“Well, that’s fun,” Moody said. “So, what do you want to do, Potter? I won’t deny the man’s a right bastard, but he has given us some good information and he’s not bad in a fight.”

“He’s a liability,” the ordinary looking wizard with thin sandy hair said. “I say kill him.”
“I’m considering it,” Harry said.

Snape slowly stood, and in that instant, looking into Potter’s cold face, he realized that none of the people around him were joking—that they were coldly and calmly discussing his death.

“Oh, on the other hand, to play Slytherin’s advocate,” Lovegood said, “he is an accomplished dueler himself. Professor Flitwick even said he was quite good. He also said he was a pond-scum sucking Poofer, but I don’t believe he intended for me to hear that.”

Potter chuckled. “If he was a poofer, he wouldn’t have lusted after my Mum so much, or Draco’s mum either for that matter. That’s the real reason you took the vow, wasn’t it, Severus? You wanted Narcissa as well.”

“My affairs are not subjects to be discussed by you or anyone else in this tent,” Snape said, trying his best to project his best ‘I am dangerous’ persona.

It didn’t work. “Right now, Professor, I am your judge, jury and executioner,” Potter said coldly. “You will not leave this tent alive unless I give the say so. You made an Unbreakable Vow to kill Albus Dumbledore. I know Mrs. Malfoy released you from the vow before she was killed. Now I want you to make another. I want you to make the Unbreakable Vow to me, here and now, that you will not disclose anything you learn of me or my people, for any reason, to any person, without my expressed consent, and that you will obey my direct orders even at the expense of your life. If you make that vow, I might let you live.”

“You wouldn’t dare kill me,” Snape bluffed.

A second later, Potter hit him with a wandless, silent Crucio. It was the only thing that could explain the sheer, terrifying agony that ripped through his body. It lasted only a moment, but it was enough. Snape looked up when he was able and saw that Potter’s expression had not changed at all. His wife stared at him with an expression of grim determination, while Lovegood’s hands covered her mouth and she wept.

“He’s not bluffing, Professor,” the thin Ravenclaw said. “He doesn’t bluff. Please make the vow. Please don’t force him to kill you.”

“What do you think you’re doing here, Potter?” Snape spat when at last he could talk.

“Make the vow, and you’ll find out. I have need of a Potions Master. If you do well, and prove you’re trustworthy, you might even survive when the rest of the Death Eaters die.”

Snape looked to Moody, who shrugged. “The lad’s not joshing you, boy. He took out three of Greyback’s fighters without blinkin’ an eye, and you know what he did in Diagon Alley last summer.”

Snape felt a sense of shock. So that rumor was true, that Potter had a hand in Remus Lupin’s sudden elevation to pack leader. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll make your damned vow.”

“Good,” Harry said. “My lieutenants need a better target. Your timing is excellent.”

Snape took the Vow, bound by the man with thin hair who introduced himself as Thomas Derkins, an American. “And what do you do for Potter?” Snape asked.

“I kill people he tells me to kill,” Derkins said with a pleasant, urbane smile.

“Welcome to Phoenix Industries, Severus,” Harry said.
“That’s Professor Snape, Potter.”

“That’s Mr. Potter, Severus,” Harry came back. “I am your boss now, at least outside of the classroom. The Order of the Phoenix is gone. This is what’s replacing it. If you want in, accept the order.”

“Why would I want in?”

“Because you’ll be dead in ten months if you don’t join,” Lovegood said. “You’re very unhappy, but I know you don’t truly wish to die.”

“The lad has plans, Severus,” Moody said. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t believe him. He’s proven himself so far, and he’s done more to fight Voldemort than Albus did even in the last war.”

“So, first order of priorities,” Harry said. “I need Wolfsbane potion. Tell me what ingredients you need, and I’ll pay the price, along with a salary for your time. I’m not expecting volunteers, and I’m not going to ask anyone to starve for the cause. Second, you’ll be a good measuring stick for my lieutenants. Jordan, you up for a duel?”

“Always, boss,” Lee said. It was the term the core students started using in January, and in time all the DA started using it.

“Excellent. Severus, I’d like you to fight Lee. No lethals or Unforgivables, but otherwise don’t hold back.”

“You’re joking,” Snape said. It was not a question.

“I’ll make it interesting,” Moody says. “Five galleons says Jordan lasts three minutes or beats you outright.”

“A fool and his money are easily parted,” Snape said.

“As you’ll soon find,” Moody smiled.

“Fine.”

The other students cheered raucously as the recent Hogwarts alum bent his knees and assumed a ready position while Snape did the same. “And go!” Moody barked.

Snape started with a barrage of stunners in a broad pattern. Jordan snapped an impressive shield in place, and with his left hand threw a knife.

_A knife?

The knife sank into Snape’s wand arm with a dull thud. The pain and shock of it momentarily forced him to drop his guard, long enough for Lee to hit him with both an _Expelliarmus_ and a _Stupify_.

When he came to a minute later, it was to see Moody pulling five gold coins out of his purse. “Oy, Snape, didn’t I mention they were being taught to fight by a mercenary?” Moody said, grinning like the madman he was. “Anything goes.”

~~Broken~~
On April 1st, Harry and Hermione were both finishing a potion in Slughorn’s Seventh Year NEWT course when he felt a vibration in his robe pocket.

A second later Hermione felt a similar vibration in her on robes. “Is something quite the matter, Mr. and Mrs. Potter?” Slughorn asked.

“I’m afraid there is something that requires our attention,” Harry said. “I apologize that we will not be able to complete the assignment. Excuse us.”

Slughorn’s mouth opened and closed, but he said nothing, for there was nothing to be said. The Potters were auditing only, so there was no grade to be assigned regardless. The Potters ran through the hall until they reached their room—Luna was there waiting for them, her normally serene smile absent. “Someone tried to blow up the company,” she said without preamble. “Derkins is in your office waiting for you.”

Harry summoned his broom. “We’re on our way. Stay here to handle things?”

“I will,” Luna said.

Hermione rode behind him until they reached the castle’s wardline, and both apparated a second after he landed.

Thomas Derkins stood in the Potter’s executive office, arms cross, when they arrived. His face was stony as always, but there was a hard glint to his eyes. “Thomas,” Harry said. “Situation?”

“Four gunman and a suicide bomber,” Derkins said. “They came screaming about Palestine, but we know better.”

“Anyone hurt?”

“The wards stopped the explosives and gave us ample warning that they were armed. Martha was shot.”

“Oh Merlin,” Hermione breathed. “Is she okay?”

“Yes, we were able to stun the men before they got a second shot off. Because she is a squib, we were able to heal her quickly. I sent her home.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. “Who else knows?”

“We caught them in the lobby. Two workers saw it as well—we’ve Obliviated both and they are now working like normal. Chandrakar knows something happened, but that I’m handling it. The suspects are bound in my office.”

Harry made a snap decision. “No police. Bring Chandrakar up—it’s time he’s made aware of just who he is working for. It’ll be a good test of his loyalties.”

The production manager was not surprised when he arrived a few minutes later to find the five attackers bound in chairs, glaring at the people in the room. “We are not going to call the police, then?” Chandrakar said.

“Is that a problem?” Harry asked, staring at the man intently.

“I am from Bombay,” Chandrakar said. “My brother and his family were killed in a bomb attack by Pakistanis. I understand that sometimes we must act above the law to protect what is ours.”
“Well said,” Harry smiled grimly. “Then there is something else you should know about us. Thomas and I are wizards. My wife is a witch.”

Chandrakar shrugged. “As you say. Such things are not unknown in India.”

“I knew I liked him,” Hermione said, beaming.

“Excellent. We’re handling this internally—not just against these men, but against those who sent them. We will be employing magic extensively.”

“Thank you for inviting me,” Chandrakar said. “It will be interesting to watch.”

Harry nodded once before he walked to the first man and ripped apart his mind. He repeated the procedure on all five before nodding grimly. “This was supposed to look like an Islamist attack. It isn’t. These men are all native-born. They were sent by English Petrol.”

Chandrakar whistled. “Surely not!”

“EP is looking at potentially catastrophic loss of income,” Hermione reasoned.

“Time to be Sith,” Harry said, turning to look at his wife. “Derkins, get some recording equipment.”

Within ten minutes, a video camera was set up and recording as Harry interrogated the prisoners. However, even Hermione had to admit it was not even remotely fair since he held all five under the Imperius Curse. They said what he wanted them to say, admitting that they were hired by an associate vice president to slow production of the solar panels and score points with his boss. They claimed that they surrendered out of remorse for accepting the funds, and that they all hated English Petrol for its policies overseas.

The recorded interrogation ended, Harry considered the next step. “We should send them back to EP to give them a taste of what Martha experienced.”

“Possibly,” Chandrakar said.

“Luna would say that EP has their own Martha Whites who would be hurt or killed if we did that,” Hermione said.

“She would, wouldn’t she?” Harry muttered.

“We’re the victims,” Hermione continued. “If we escalate to violence and it is ever discovered, we would lose any sympathy. What were you planning on doing with the video?”

“Blackmail in the future,” Harry admitted without blinking an eye.

“Why blackmail them later when we can destroy the now?” Hermione said. “Harry, this is huge news. I know you don’t have a lot of experience in the Muggle world, at least not this one.”

Chandrakar looked interest at that but said nothing. Hermione continued. “But if this leaks out, it will be a huge blow to EP, and a huge boon for us. Think of all the massive, free publicity this will give us. We’re the Davids against the Goliaths. We could ride this all the way. That contract with Boyoda would be just the beginning, if people realized our product was so good that it was scaring the oil companies.”

“After all,” Chandrakar said, “nobody likes oil companies.”

Harry looked at Derkins. “Thoughts?”
“I try not to involve myself in policy-making.”

Harry smirked. “Smart man. Fine, you’ve convinced me, Hermione. You’re better at Obliviation. Erase their memories of this interview, and then add in a truth compulsion, please. Derkins, store the tape for future reference. In the meantime, let’s bring Shirley Applewhite in to handle the turn-over and PR aspect.”

Minutes later, Applewhite, a former aide to the Prime Minister, listened to the detail with a pale face. “Good God,” she finally said. “Well, Mr. Derkins, I have to say I wasn’t sure why Mr. Potter was spending so much on security, but now I have to say I admire and am thankful for his foresight. How do you wish to play this, Mr. Potter?”

“For now, I would like to keep my wife and I out of this. Otherwise, no mercy. Plaster the media. The men will testify unconditionally.”

“How do you know?” she said.

“We promised not to kill them,” Harry told her.

She blinked. “If you don’t mind, I’ll keep that bit of the story out of the news.”

“Yes, please,” Hermione said. “They will not mention that part either. Harry can be very persuasive.”

Applewhite was thinking, though. “You know, there has not been very much news outside of the industry regarding what you’re doing here. I think this is the perfect time. I know Don Perkins at the *Times*. It might be time for a full expo on Phoenix Industries and our goal to revolutionize the world.”

“I think you’re absolutely right,” Harry said. “I trust you to do everything you can to advance the company’s position, and to give EP a big black eye.”

“You can be assured of that, those arrogant swats,” Applewhite said. “They pranced about the PM’s residence liked they owned it. It’ll be nice to sock one to them for a change. Gentlemen, Madam, I have work to do.”

By the time Harry and Hermione left London, the police were already at the company taking the men in custody. By midnight, the men would confess to being hired by EP purposely to sabotage Phoenix Industries, and by morning the news flew around the world that a solar technology company in England produced a solar panel so good it was scaring the oil industry into acts of violent sabotage.

The news of course was completely ignored in the magical world, except for one Ravenclaw fifth year who received a copy of the *London Times* via owl from her father. She read the paper atop the Owlery. Slowly she walked down the tower until she reached the rooms she shared with her lovers. Hermione and Harry were both meditating when she arrived, floating feet off the floor and levitating several books around them. Luna ignored them as she walked in and entered the bedroom. A moment later, though, she re-emerged sky clad and beaming with tears in her eyes.

Hermione lost her control and fell to the floor. “Luna, what’s wrong!”

Luna answered by padding past Harry, wrapping her bare arms around the older girl, and kissing her soundly on the lips. By the time she turned around, Harry was also standing, his expression bemused. She did the same to him regardless, before pulling off his jumper and pants as she did so.
“You need to make love to me now,” she explained as she divested him of his boxers.

“Not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but what’s the occasion?” Harry asked.

“I read what you did,” Luna said. “With those men who attacked our company.”

She had him naked and jumped into his arms, forcing him to catch her as she wrapped her legs and arms around him. She reached down only long enough to guide him inside her, sighing with pleasure, even while she wept. “You could have killed them,” she said. “Worse, you could have sent them back to EP and had them kill innocents. But you didn’t. You actually…hmmm…did the right thing. You made me happy, Harry. You and Hermione have made me so happy.”

Harry carried her into the bed, Hermione trailing along with a smile on her face. They skipped classes that day to celebrate Luna’s wonderful mood. Several hours later, curled up in each other’s arms, Luna said to both, “I know you are going to kill people. It cannot be helped. But when you have a choice, and you choose not to, you will always make me happy.”

“And if we had sent them back to EP to execute their plan for us?” Harry asked, since that was his first inclination.

“It would have broken my heart,” Luna said, “but I still wouldn’t leave. Better a broken heart that none at all.”

“Better a shattered conscience that none at all,” Hermione echoed.

Harry said nothing, considering their words he luxuriated in the feel of their flesh against his. “Then thank you, Hermione, for channeling your sister wife,” he said.

“Wife?” Luna asked.

“I don’t care what the laws say,” Harry told her. “In every way that counts, you are as much our wife as Hermione is mine.”

“He’s right,” Hermione said. “I don’t even think of you as not being a part of this family.”

Luna blinked back tears. “That’s twice you’ve made me happy. Thank you.”

“You’ve thanked me already,” Harry assured her.

“Twice,” Hermione said with a snort.
Lost Things

Chapter Summary

Losing your soul is never fun.

April blew past so quickly it was hard to grasp where it went. Harry, Hermione and Luna were exceedingly busy with auditing classes in preparation for their NEWTs. One of their major coups was seducing Lawrence Bartleby to the dark side. They named him Executive Vice President of Phoenix Industries with a salary larger than what Harry or Hermione were claiming personally for themselves, and so were able to step back from the day to day responsibilities of the company to concentrate on school.

With a solicitor, actuary and accountant in charge of the day-to-day operations, and a former politico from the Prime Minister’s office in charge of public relations, Phoenix Industries was riding the scandal of English Petrol to the top of the media. Nearly every city in the United Kingdom was making inquiries into the panels, as were municipalities in Europe. Even American companies were becoming interested, while Parliament grilled EP executives with ruthless glee.

With Harry’s approval, Bartleby purchased the defunct textile mill next to Grunnings and began renovation work immediately to set up another five production lines for the astounding demand.

It was Harry, though, who decided to keep all of their assets in the Muggle world rather than converting it into Galleons. Instead, for their wizarding needs the three lived exclusively off the remnants of his inheritance from his parents and Sirius Black. Even then, he emptied out the family vault of all family heirlooms and housed them at Grimmauld Place.

“You don’t trust the goblins,” Luna said.

“I don’t blame him,” Hermione said. “They were rude. I can’t believe wizards keep all their gold with the goblins, but receive no interest. No interest! And their exchange rates were criminal. My wand cost seven galleons. That cost my parents almost a thousand pounds sterling. We justified it at the time because, well, it was my wand. It’s the most important magical item I’ll ever own. But for a wizard, it costs the equivalent of less than ninety pounds sterling!”

“Well, yes,” Luna said, “the goblins are quite evil. There is a reason our wars with the goblins take up so much of our history. Historically goblins have killed more wizards than any other magical creature, or non-magical for that matter. The last Goblin rebellion in 1723 resulted in the deaths of five hundred witches and wizards and their families, since Goblins do not distinguish children from adults when fighting enemies. The Treaty of Gringotts was essentially a surrender on the part of the British Ministry of Magic. That is why America does not have a common trade agreement with us or Europe—the goblins will not allow it since the Americas never permitted goblins to cross the ocean.”

“Why is none of this in our history books?” Hermione raged. “I looked in the library, and nothing talks about this.”

“In this case, the losers rewrote the history,” Harry said. The three were working on their various subjects in their office. “Luna, I hope you realize that we’re going to have to destroy the goblins at one point or another. They’ve refused outright to relinquish the horcrux in Lestrange’s vault.”
She sat up from her Arithmancy book, and nodded sadly. “I know, Harry. I knew the moment you told me what you were after.”

“The goblins have purposely held the wizarding world to a pre-industrial economy,” Hermione realized. “But why?”

“To keep their enemies in check,” Harry said. “By stunting the social and economic growth of wizards under the gold standard, they are able to prevent wizards from advancing and integrating into the Muggle economy. But that is a war we are going to have to tackle after Voldemort, since we’re going to have to involve the Muggle military. Not all the wizards in England would be enough to route the goblins out, unless there was a way to cut off their travel method between their branches.”

“There are so many?” Hermione asked.

“When we were in their bank, I felt hundreds of thousands of minds,” Harry said. “All below the bank. I suspect that all the goblin banks are connected throughout Europe through magically bound warrens.”

Hermione’s eyes widened in alarm at the thought, and it took several minutes before she was able to calm herself enough to slip back into the meditative state most conducive to learning.

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Anthony Pendergast of Ravenclaw House slipped out at midnight following the last of his NEWTs. He felt emotionally and physically drained from two straight days of testing, and knew he did not do nearly as well as he should of.

He and the rest of the seventh years were distracted by the presence of sixth years Harry and Hermione Potter, and Looney Lovegood, a bloody fifth year for Merlin’s sake! And yet there they were, taking NEWTs in every core subject as if they were seventh years themselves. It was more than just unfair, it was a travesty.

Not that it would matter for much longer.

When Anthony went home the summer after his sixth year, having read all about Potter’s death, the last thing he expected was to have his father drag him to Malfoy Manor to meet the Dark Lord in person. In fact, it was the last thing Anthony wanted. The Pendergast heir would have been perfectly happy to be left alone in a library to read, or a potions laboratory to experiment. He was the top potions student of his year, and Professor Snape told him on several occasions that he was not an incompetent dunderhead, which from Snape was high praise indeed.

But when he found himself looking into those terrifying, inhuman red eyes, Anthony knew his life as he knew it was at an end. His father sold Anthony to the Dark Lord in penance for some mild infraction, condemning his only son to a life of slavery to a monster.

Still, he was able to return to school, and not much was asked for him at first. Things seemed to be going well, even with Potter exposing him as a Death Eater in the middle of the Ravenclaw Common Room. After that, the only people who would speak to him were Slytherins, and for the most part Slytherins were brutal and stupid, but he enjoyed being alone so he did not let it bother him too much.

But in March, he received a summons to Hogsmeade for a new assignment. That’s when he met...
Anthony tried not to shiver as fear and desire warred within him.

He could never have imagined that a woman just short of forty could be so beautiful, and yet Bellatrix Lestrange was beautiful. Her scars were fascinating for the rituals they implied, and her power was intoxicating. He knew after just a moment of speaking to her that the woman was certifiably insane, and yet he did not resist when she said she wanted to “feel” him better and with that incredible power stripped him and shagged him like he’d never been shagged. She never even bothered to take her dress off—evidently she went regimental down there, as she simply squatted over him and rode him until he finished in a moan.

Witches in Hogwarts would never do anything like that, for fear of having their magic latch on and prevent them from every being able to marry or take oaths in the future. And so Pendergast lost his virginity to a woman old enough to be his mother, who was also a homicidal maniac.

She leaned over him and stared into his mind with black eyes that filled his world. “You’ll help little Bella, won’t you?” she whispered to him.

“Yes,” he said, as much from terror as a desire to shag her again in the future.

“Then you’ll finish what little Draco could not,” she said.

Anthony saw memories then, but not his own. In his mind’s eye he saw a vanishing cabinet, and the old man from Borgin and Burkes talking patiently on how to fix it. Suddenly the vision ended, but the memories remained in his mind. Somehow, with neither wand nor spell, Bellatrix implanted memories in his mind of how to fix the cabinet, and exactly where to find it.

“Do this for me, and I will reward you,” she said, wiggling her arse suggestively over him as she did so.

“I will,” he promised. Whether she promised to shag him or threatened to kill him, the result was the same. He would have to do what the chosen of Voldemort asked him to do, or he and his father would die.

The problem was Potter and his women. They trained in the Room of Requirement almost every night when they weren’t working in the library or shagging like bloody kneazles in their rooms. He never saw them just relaxing; they were always working. Moreover, it wasn’t always school work, either.

Like the other Ravenclaws, he heard that Lovegood sat her OWLs early and achieved Os in every subject, while Potter sat two OWLs for subjects he never even took classes in, only to pass those as well. All three were on independent study, and only came to classes if they had specific questions. The obvious special treatment they were receiving was blatant and frustrating to more than just their enemies. To top that off, Potter was also training several other students, including Ravenclaws. Sometimes they also used the Room of Requirement, though more often they left the castle.

So it took many long, sleepless nights for Anthony to make progress, but progress did happen. Anthony was no Draco Malfoy—he was much, much more intelligent and capable. On Hogsmeade weekends he met with Bellatrix, and she took his progress from his mind just as she placed the instructions there. He could not lie to her, nor would he even try.

But because he was making progress, she rewarded him, eagerly and energetically. She stripped herself the second time and all but made him perform services for her, which he did willingly. She
was as beautiful in bare flesh as she was in her dresses. And every time, he became more and more her servant.

If Anthony were to ever meet Nymphadora Tonks, she would have been able to tell him that what Bellatrix was doing was exactly what Darth Shaddix tried unsuccessfully to do to her. What saved Tonks from sexually-reinforced conditioning, though, was her Occlumency and her stronger will. Anthony had neither, and so by April was completely robbed of independent will as surely as if he were under the Imperius Curse. He belonged—mind, body and soul—to Bellatrix, and she used him without mercy.

So he slaved away for her into the early morning hours, skipping classes and sliding in his subjects. No one questioned him or offered to help because he was a Death Eater, after all. It didn’t matter that he never had any choice—his fate was sealed.

But now he knew the time had come. He did the requisite three paces in front of the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy until the door opened to reveal the Room of Lost Things.

The cabinet was there, untouched from where he left it. He lifted his wand and incanted the final spell to activate the once broken cabinet. A moment later, it opened and SHE was there, alive and smiling that manic, terrible smile of hers. “Oh well done, Anthony,” she purred.

The reward came quickly, and he trembled in anticipation as she ripped his clothes away, lifted her skirts and rode him hard against the rough stones of the floor. His body, conditioned now, lasted several minutes longer than he ordinarily would, long enough for Bellatrix to grunt in satisfaction. She stood off him without bothering to wipe herself, and as she did, Anthony saw another person standing at his feet. This man was tall and gaunt, his face warped by rage.

“Pet, meet my husband. Rodolphus, meet my little poppycock. A nice little cock, yes?”

Enslaved as he was, Anthony knew that he was about to die, and remembered Looney Lovegood as much as saying so last term. This man—Bellatrix’s estranged husband—could not hurt his wife. She was too powerful now, and too highly ranked. Instead, he turned his rage to the only target available.

The piercing curse sliced not just through Anthony’s stomach, but his spine as well. It was a curse that could not be healed, and Anthony did not even try. Maybe a quick death was the best he could hope for.

And yet, he was alive enough to see Bella reach down into her skirts and pull her hand out, glistening in the distant torchlight. “Can you smell him on me?”

“You sick bitch,” Rodolphus said.

“Don’t you want me anymore, Rodolphus, love?” she said with a high-pitched giggle. “After all, you’re my family. Aren’t you?”

“Let’s just get this done,” the angry wizard said.

The cabinet behind them opened, and more Death Eaters emerged. Then more, and more. “What’s with the kid?” one asked, still in a silver mask.

“Bella’s fuck toy,” another said.

“Let’s go, then,” Bella said. “We have places to be, people to kill!”
They left Anthony where he lay, naked and dying, soon to be yet another broken item forgotten in the room of Lost Things.

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Nymphadora Tonks was not there to warn Anthony Pendergast what his enslavement to Bellatrix meant, because while the Ravenclaw was firing the last spell to activate the cabinet, Nymphadora was helping Albus Dumbledore find and destroy a horcrux.

The young Auror had returned to active duty after the holidays. When the Department of Magical Creatures sent out a memorandum announcing that Remus Lupin challenged and killed Fenrir Greyback to assume control of the British werewolves, she stared at the piece of paper for the better part of an hour. She had been an auror long enough to know what that meant: pack leader was a full time job in a world as different from hers as the Muggle World was.

She’d lost him forever.

She went through the motions at work, ignoring the steadily increasing paranoia and fear in the Minister. She went home, slept and ate, came back and did what she was told with half a heart. That was why when Albus Dumbledore, thin and exhausted, came to her asking for her help to do something he did not trust to do with Harry, she jumped at the chance. She had profound respect for Dumbledore, and honestly was willing to do anything for him she could. This was doubly true considering he felt it so important he would trust her over his twisted golden boy.

With a fully qualified and talented auror at his side, Dumbledore was able to make it to the cave with little difficulty. It was the conversations he had with Tonks during their travels that was most important, though, for like Harry he suspected that whatever was in the cave was a diversion.

The two boarded the decrepit boat and crossed the underground lake while speaking softly. “I have come to believe that Harry Potter is as great a threat to the world as Voldemort.”

“You’ll get no argument there from me,” Tonks said.

“Nymphadora, you don’t understand,” Dumbledore said with a tired sigh. “He has openly declared that he intends to conquer the world!”

“And with respect, I already know that,” Tonks said. “He raped me, Professor. Maybe not physically—though I’m sure he would’ve in time—but he raped my mind. I’d rather he just rape my body. Frankly it would have hurt less and I could have recovered faster. But what he tried to make me a slave. I don’t care if Granger’s convinced he’s the bloody second coming of Merlin or Arthur from Avalon, he’s a bloody rapist and murderer.”

Dumbledore slouched in the boat, clearly unhappy with Tonk’s vehemence. “What does Remus have to say about that?”

“Remus is lost to me. Didn’t you know he’s killed Greyback and assume the pack leader role?”

“Really?” Dumbledore sighed, and she was surprised to hear bitterness in his voice. “Truly, I am no longer in a position to receive intelligence as I once was. I am glad Remus was able to exact some justice for the crimes Greyback committed against him, at the least.”

The old wizard leaned over, cradling his ruined hand. “Nymphadora, there is something I must ask of you. It will be very difficult, but unfortunately my time is fast approaching. After I am gone, I
need you to establish a new Order of the Phoenix. I have already informed Kingsley of my choice and asked him to support you. Not only must we aid in destroying Voldemort, but we must then insure that Harry himself never becomes the greater threat.”

“You mean kill him,” Tonks said flatly.

“Only if absolutely necessary,” Dumbledore said. “He was a good person once, Tonks. He fell through the Veil out of loyalty and love for his Godfather. What happened to him was not truly his fault. His experiences were beyond what any of us could have survived intact.”

“Are you trying to say his raping me wasn’t his fault?”

“You misunderstand me, dear. I merely ask that when you face him, do not view him as the monster he became, but as the extraordinary boy he once was.”

After a moment, Tonks said, “Is that how you look at Voldemort?”

Dumbledore said: “Sometimes, yes. Here we are, now.”

After discussions, Dumbledore drank the poisoned contents of the basin until at last the locket was exposed. Tonks yanked it out and opened it without hesitation, and saw the note inside proving that the entire adventure was in fact a waste of time.

Of course, that’s when the Inferi made their presence known. Fortunately, this was not the young auror’s first time dealing with Inferi. She first cast a spell to freeze the surface of the lake to stop new inferi from rising, and then cast fire rings at neck-height to deal with those who had already emerged. The rings slashed out like garrotes, decapitating most of the zombie-like creatures that emerged first. Those she missed she destroyed with severing curses to the neck.

With a flick of her wand she transfigured the boat into a sled and pulled the semi-lucid Dumbledore on, while she continued to cast freezing charms into the water to slow or stop the Inferi altogether. While terrifying and dangerous, Inferi were neither particularly strong nor fast. Three inches of ice was more than they could break through, and six inches was enough to see the sled safely to the other side of the cavern.

Once across the lake she grabbed Dumbledore and apparated back to the clock tower at Hogwarts using the Headmaster’s own magical signature to slip through the wards. However, she would never have believed that she would appear inches from her dear Aunt Bellatrix.

“Hello, niece,” she said with a manic smile before she flicked a hand.

Tonks’s eyes bulged as a powerful wall of magic struck her like a Bludger and sent her flying off the top of the tower. She tried to scream but the blow was so hard she could not even draw breath as she fell to the rocks at the base of the tower.

Suddenly her motion slowed as she felt her body enveloped by magic. She came to a gentle rest between two large, sharp boulders and sat up just in time to vomit out her dinner. When she recovered, she looked up to see Hermione lowering her wand, her face marked by concern.

“Tonks!” she said. “Are you okay?”

Hermione was the last person Tonks wanted to speak to, but it appeared no one else was nearby. “Bellatrix is in the castle!”

“We know,” Hermione said. “We’re dealing with her and her people.”
Both looked up as a monstrous flash of lightning struck the clock tower. Within the rain of debris another body fell. This time Tonks caught the body with her wand, and she recognized the scorched beard as that of Dumbledore. She sat the man down gently while Hermione deftly shielded them against the rest of the debris. However, Tonks knew before she even reached him that the Headmaster was no more—his chest smoked from a six-inch wide, blackened hole blown clear through his rib cage.

“Oh Merlin,” Hermione whispered.

“Is that Potter’s whore with my niece?” Bellatrix’s voice crashed down on them from above. “Don’t go anywhere, dearies, Auntie Bella has a gift for you both!”

Then, to the horror of the women, Bellatrix stepped off the tower and floated toward them, shimmering with impossible power. Hermione grabbed Tonks and pulled her away from the Headmaster’s body. “She’s had a power enhancement, we can’t take her,” Hermione said.

This was brought home by a huge bolt of lightning that should have killed Hermione, if the girl had not somehow pushed Tonks away and flown off to the left. The strike hit the soil making the ground rise and flare for a moment. The magical outburst sent Tonks tumbling, while Hermione cartwheeled back to her feet with the grace of a gazelle.

Tonks picked herself up and stared in shock—Hermione moved just like Harry did!

“Ohh, the krup has a new trick,” Bellatrix said, clapping in delight. “Show me how you can dance, you ugly cow!”

The sheer amount of magic Bellatrix shot at Hermione was enough to make Tonks scream in shock. No one witch or wizard, short of Dumbledore or Voldemort himself, should have the kind of power to saturate the air itself with death. And yet a wave of green magic that had the stench of death launched out in an arc not just toward Hermione, but to either side of her, making escape by running or rolling nigh impossible.

What Hermione did, however, was equally impossible. The witch jumped fifteen feet into the air without the use of a spell, and while there shot a volley of blasting curses at the dark witch.

Bellatrix snarled in rage as she casually batted the curses away, but the fact Hermione survived that first attack was simply astounding. It was then that Tonks realized what it meant—Harry was training her in his own special magic.

The fight was momentarily interrupted by a body. Bellatrix danced to the side as if she could sense it, just in time to see the armless, legless torso of her husband slam into the rocks with a wet thud. She stared at the body for a moment with a dull, empty expression, while other bodies rained down around them. Tonks did not recognize the faces, only that they were Death Eaters. She saw flashes of light from other parts of the castle and realized another group was fighting.

Still with that oddly blank expression on her face, Bellatrix turned and looked up at the tower just as Harry Potter stepped off. Like the dark witch, he levitated down to the ground, but unlike her he held two strange, glowing white swords.

“Hello, Bellatrix,” he said, as if discussing the weather. “I’ve been wondering when you would come. Did you like my present? After all, you took my godfather away, so I thought I’d let you know how it feels to lose the last of your family.”
Tonks fought to tear her eyes away from Bellatrix to watch as Hermione backed away from the deranged, powerful witch. When she was far enough away, she burst into motion faster than should have been possible for any person, witch or muggle, to move. She stopped running only after she was behind Harry.

“You killed my husband,” Bellatrix said in a dull voice

“Yes,” Harry agreed coldly. “Just like you killed Sirius. Like you killed Narcissa and Draco. And like you killed Dumbledore.”

“Narcissa is dead?” Bellatrix said, for a moment a note of sanity returning to her voice. “Why would she be dead? She is loyal to the Dark Lord.”

“She was more loyal to her family,” Harry said. “And because she loved her son more than your master, you killed her, and destroyed her son.”

Bella’s face warped at the memory. “Traitor!” she screamed. “All of them are traitors! Only I am loyal! I love him the best, most loyal!” she said. “And I will kill you!”

Death magic poured out of her hands in a wave. Behind Harry, Hermione somehow transfigured the rocks into a stone barrier, while Harry leaped himself thirty feet into the air. He reached out a hand as he somersaulted and an invisible force struck Bella and threw her to the side.

She somehow cast a cushioning charm and landed with a bounce, while at the same time launching a huge wave of flame at the still airborne Harry. He pushed the flame apart and landed with a flex of his knees. Suddenly he burst into motion even faster than Hermione moments before, but Bella apparated with a massive pop not just of displaced air, but of shattered wards. Bellatrix shattered the anti-apparition wards of Hogwarts itself.

Tonks spun her head in time to see Hermione jump to the side and Bellatrix to pop into existence right where she used to be. How the hell did the girl know Bellatrix was going to appear right there?

Harry was already responding, and with a silent summoning jerked Bella into the air. “Arrrghh!” she screamed as she flew toward him, only to stop mid-flight. She threw a fist at him, and from her knuckles came the crack of lightning.

Rather than block the lightning, Harry somehow caught it in one hand, stamped down his foot and sent it shooting right back at her with his other hand. Bella’s eyes widened comically before a hastily formed shield dulled the impact. Even so, the power of it struck her shoulder and sent her flying arse over teakettle into the wall of the castle.

Once again, her magic seemed to act of its own accord and cushioned what should have been a lethal blow. She fell to her feet and stood swaying with one hand clutching her shoulder. “You hurt me!” she screamed. “You can’t hurt me! I hurt others, no one hurts me!”

The sky exploded with a torrent of lightening. Tonks fought down a sense of satisfaction that this attack even made Harry take note. He somehow deflected some with his odd glowing swords and bounced about like a rubber ball, but the sheer volume of the attack was too much even for the great Harry Potter. Mid-jump, a bolt struck his shoulder and slammed him to the ground where he lay unmoving.

“Harry!” Hermione screamed.

She rushed forward, but Tonks stopped her with a simple, silent Petrificus. The petrified girl fell
forward onto her face in the dirt and rock.

Bellatrix ignored them both as she stumbled, still clutching her shoulder, toward the unmoving figure. “So much for the Chosen One,” she sang in a horrid parody of the Hogwarts theme. “Potter is our King, Potter is our king. Here I come with a great big sword to kill our blessed king. Long live the king!”

Harry exploded into motion so fast, it seemed as if one moment he lay unmoving on the ground, and the next he squatted down with his arm extended, and a glowing sword flashing through the air directly at Bellatrix.

As powerful as she was, as fast as her magic was, it was not fast enough. The silver blade flashed through her neck, and without another word her head fell from her shoulders in an explosive release of magic that threw Harry back like a rag doll.

The concussive wave of magic struck Tonks like a Bludger and tossed her several feet back where she landed on her back. After she managed to catch her breath, she slowly climbed to her feet. Harry was struggling back to his feet as well, but he was obviously badly hurt by the battle and the explosive aftermath. Behind her, battered and burned, lay the dead body of Albus Dumbledore.

Tonks would never get another chance at this—another chance to make things right. With his horcruxes all but destroyed save for Nagini and the vase in Lestrange’s vault, Voldemort was no longer wholly immortal. Bellatrix just proved that even those with immense power could be killed.

Even those like Harry.

Tonks levitated the still petrified Hermione and carried her toward Harry, who had given up trying to climb to his feet and was now resting on his knees. He was clutching his own shoulder just as Bellatrix had, from a near identical wound. He looked up tiredly at Tonks, but did not seem to realize the threat.

“Thank you for keeping her back,” he said, as if she were his friend and not a victim of his mental rape.

“And thank you for being too hurt to resist,” Tonks said. She dropped Hermione to the ground, lifted her wand, and shouted, “Avada Ke…aaaaa….”

Her wand fell from nerveless fingers. She looked down at the silver tip of light that had emerged from her chest. Immediately the light disappeared with a snitck; she turned slowly to see Luna Lovegood staring at her with tears in her eyes and her hands to her mouth, sobbing. “I’m so sorry!” the thin girl said. “I’m so sorry. Oh Merlin, I’m so sorry. I couldn’t let you… Why did you do that? Why did you make me do that? Why did you make me into a killer! Oh Tonks, oh no…”

Luna continued to babble even as Tonks fell to her knees. The waif of a girl rushed forward to catch the auror in her arms, gently brushing hair that flashed various colors away from her eyes. “I’m so sorry,” Luna continued to sob, as Tonks died.

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In the center of Stonehenge, his body flayed along every bone, Voldemort screamed as the magic of the most magical stone circle in England and the blood of a century of Muggles rushed into him, making him a thousand times more than he ever was before.
Chapter Summary

The hardest shards of innocence to lose are the last.

Earlier.

Luna woke with a gasp.

She felt the heat from Harry’s body snuggled next to her, and the male musk of his scent filling her nostrils. The musk was overlaid by the more feminine smell from Hermione, and the two combined to make a heady soup of scents that filled her senses. However, that was not what woke her.

The air thrummed with danger. She closed her eyes against the familiar shadows of the room that had become their home over the last nine months and reached out her senses as Harry had taught her. It was still a new and exultant experience, so very different from the uncontrolled battering her mind took before Harry taught her how to close her brain to the world. This was intentional, determined and effective.

She felt a presence in the Force unlike anything she’d ever felt before. It was twisted, evil and dark, and yet so powerful its darkness seemed to glow with some perverted, Miltonian darkness made visible.

“Harry!” Luna said, shaking her lover.

Harry came awake immediately—there was no sleepy transition with Harry. He was asleep or awake, never anything in between. “What?”

“Something has come into the castle,” Luna said. “Death Eaters.”

She felt Harry’s sure, powerful touch caress her mind and then follow her mental images. She could feel his body stiffen as he too sensed the threat. By then Hermione was awake as well. “What is it?”

“Bellatrix is in the castle,” he said. “With two dozen Death Eaters. She’s already killed a student; feels like they’re splitting up. Luna, gather the DA and alert the professors. Hermione, call Deskin and get his people here. I’ll handle Bellatrix.”

No hesitation, no anguish—Harry analyzed the situation and immediately determined a course of action. All three jumped out of bed to quickly dress before they went their way. For Luna, this meant taking their Phoenix Industry Badge and touching it with her wand. “Allcom,” she said. “All Core members, this is an emergency. Respond now.”

Hesitant, sleepy voices responded. She could hear Hermione on the communications center calling Deskin from the other side of the room, but tuned it out. “Death Eaters have entered the castle,” she said. “This is neither a drill nor a joke. Gather all DA members in your individual houses and alert the professors. Meet on the third floor by the boy’s bathroom.”
Harry was already gone. Hermione joined Luna leaving the room. “Deskin’s people are coming, ETA ten minutes or less,” she said. “I’m going to the front gate to meet them—otherwise they could never get in. You’ve called the DA?”

Luna merely nodded, and as soon as they left the room the two young women split up. By the time Luna reached the rendezvous spot, the DA was also assembled, along with Professors McGonagall, Fлитwick and Sinestra.

“Ms. Lovegood,” McGonagall said, “what is the meaning of this?”

“Death Eaters are in the castle,” Luna said. “Bellatrix is with them. She’s…not human any more. If anyone goes against her but Harry, they’ll die. Harry’s assigned me to lead the DA until his people arrive.”

“His people?” Flitwick said.

Terry, though, ignored the professor as he looked at Luna. “Orders, then?”

“We detected two dozen Death Eaters with Bellatrix. They’ve split into two groups, five with Lestrange, the rest are currently one floor above us heading for the Gryffindor Dormitories. We think they’re going to kill as many students as possible as a distraction and a message.”

“How can you possibly know that?” Flitwick said.

“She’s a seer,” Ron said absently. “So we intercept them?”

“You most certainly will not!” McGonagall said. “You will return to your rooms or…”

“Professor, with all due respect, if you are not with us, we will stun you,” Luna said with an unfamiliar note of steel in her voice. “We cannot afford to have any interference. Lieutenants, form your squads. Shielders at the fore. This is a lethal force mission—do not play with these people. They are not very nice.”

McGonagall sputtered, Sinestra gaped and Flitwick grinned. “I say, Ms. Lovegood, you have changed. Very well, who shall I accompany?”

“You’re with me, Professor,” Boot said. “ETA on reinforcements?”

“Ten minutes until Deskin’s Tactical Squad arrives,” Luna said.

“Tactical squad?” Aurora Sinestra finally managed to say. “What in Merlin’s name is going on here?”

“War,” Luna said, without her normally serene smile. “If you don’t think you can fight, then stay behind to aid with the wounded. Move out now!”

There were seventeen members of the DA, including the lieutenants. With Luna, Fлитwick and a flustered but still capable McGonagall, that made twenty. There was no attempt at setting up an ambush because there was no time. Any second they wasted gave the Death Eaters time to blow through the Fat Lady’s portrait and get into the common room.

The Death Eaters came on five-abreast, menacing in their black robes and silver masks. They carried their wands in front of them, and the air around them crackled with ill-intent. The lead wizards saw groups of students run around the corner of the corridor and laughed. “No need to go into the dorms, lads,” one of the dark wizards said with a leering laugh. “Dumb little runts are coming to us.”
Ron Weasley, who hadn’t quite mastered silent casting yet but was still quite powerful, answered by yelling, “*Reducto!*” while behind him, the Patil sisters cast shielding charms around him and themselves.

The lead wizard did not have time to cast a shield charm before Ron’s blasting curse struck the man in the head, killing him instantly. Beside Ron, Terry, Katie and Justin did the same, casting lethal blasting or severing curses while behind them the other DA members cast joined wall-shields to protect their lieutenants from answering fire.

Beside the first, the other four lead wizards all died in an instant before any of their fellows could respond.

The followers of Voldemort were not the crème de la crème of the Wizarding world—some had never attended Hogwarts, while others never made it past their OWLS. They enlisted for the sake of hurting others, and for no other reason. They made up for their lack of education with viciousness and a willingness (even eagerness) to do harm to others.

However, like all bullies, they were best when unchallenged. Facing them now were sixth and seventh year students who had all undergone six to seven months of intensive training at the hands of both a retired Auror and a professional soldier, and the results were astounding.

McGonagall and her fellow staff members watched in stunned shock as students and Death Eaters opened battle in the middle of the school. Potter’s “lieutenants” acted as the main offense, while the rest of the DA members worked on shielding and protecting them. It was a lethally effective combination, even against criminals who had no problem using Unforgivables.

They were not even a minute in when the first Killing Curse was cast. McGonagall felt a wash of cold terror that one of her students was about to die, when once again they surprised her. The shielders dropped their *Protego* charms and instead conjured a brick wall that intercepted the killing curse. Those same students then banished the remnants of the shattered wall back at the Death Eaters.

In the confusion that followed, McGonagall was stunned to see Ron Weasley of all people conjure and then banish an entire storm of arrows that arched through the high, buttressed ceilings of the hall and fell onto the Death Eaters from above their shields. The Transfiguration Professor didn’t think Weasley capable of conjuring water, much less arrows.

His attack was not lethal, but she soon saw that was never his intent. Rather, as Dark Wizards cried out in pain from the attack above, their fellows let their shields drop as a result of the distraction.

“Fire!” Ron cried.

Once more the lieutenants cast lethal spells, while the rest of the DA fired less deadly but still effective stunners and disarming spells. More Death Eaters cried out in pain as their front ranks died. Of the nineteen, now only nine survived, and they were quickly retreating back up the stairs.

As they did so, the whole castle seemed to groan around them as a distant crash of thunder echoed through the halls. Minerva gasped and paled as she felt the ward controls wash over her. “Albus!” she screamed.

Luna too, stopped, sensing Bellatrix moving above. She also sensed Hermione on the grounds within sight of the Dark Witch, waiting for reinforcements. “Ron!” she said.

“Yeah?”
“You’re in charge. Terry is second. No prisoners.”

“Understood.”

“Ms. Lovegood!” McGonagall said, only for Luna to turn and run toward the front of the castle.

“Ahhh!” McGonagall turned and stared in horror as Ernie McMillan screeched and clutched as the stub that used to be his arm. A Death Eater cried out in triumph, only to fall as Justin Finch-Finley fired of a silent, deadly blasting curse.

“Get Ernie to the Hospital Wing—don’t forget his arm,” Ron ordered. “Everyone else with me!”

The fight outside was already over when Luna arrived. She saw Harry on his knees, clutching his shoulder and fighting to control the agony and exhaustion she could feel emanating from his body. The decapitated body of Bellatrix Lestrange lay a few feet away from him.

So why did the Force continue to thrum with danger?

A moment later Luna’s eyes came to rest on an unexpected figure. Why was Nymphadora Tonks there? Luna had not sensed her at all, and even now she seemed oddly out of flux with the Force. She walked slowly toward Harry, levitating a petrified Hermione behind her.

Luna drifted toward them, her stomach clenched with a feeling of dread she could not identify. She never took her eyes off Tonks, and as she approached it happened suddenly and without warning. Tonks’ body took on an intense white glow and then suddenly cracked. The cracks spread into the air around her, spreading as if the world were glass, until suddenly visions pierced through Luna’s mental shields as if she were a child again, before Harry healed her.

Her face twisted into a grimace of agony as vision after vision of death flooded her brain. “You mean kill him,” Tonks.

“Only if absolutely necessary,” Dumbledore said.

Tonks saw an opportunity, and Luna knew that even with the Force Harry was too injured and exhausted to stop her. He put everything he had into fighting Bellatrix and had nothing left. If she succeeded, Voldemort would rise more powerful than any wizard to live since Ramses the Great. He would quickly overwhelm Magical Britain, and soon after the whole of the ICW, before he plunged the world into a war from which none would emerge alive. Though he was powerful, Voldemort did not fully understand the true effects of nuclear war, and would die like the rest while condemning the whole human race.

If Tonks failed—Luna would break her spell on Hermione and Hermione would cast the killing curse on the Auror. The dark magic would stain her soul and her Force presence, and in time the stain would become a cancer until Hermione embraced that darkness. Having learned all she could from Harry, she would strike him down to rule a terrified world alone. She would turn on Luna as well, before striking her down. “You are weak,” she would tell the young Ravenclaw.

Two terrible choices, each so powerful they crushed Luna’s spirit. She walked toward Tonks, and then ran, dreading every movement of the Auror’s body as she raised her wand and said something
to Harry.

Luna saw two terrible choices, and could not live with either. She had no choice...no choice.

Harry’s lightsaber—the one he flung at Lestrange—slapped into her palm. She heard Tonks begin the killing curse as Harry looked up at her—anger and resignation on his features—when Luna pressed the activation switch and thrust it forward.

Neither choice could work—so she had to make her own choice.

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Six bloodied, exhausted Death Eaters ran out of the courtyard of Hogwarts toward Hogsmeade, chased by fifteen angry students and three shocked professors. Michael Corner had fallen as well to a piercing curse. Professor Sinestra took both he and MacMillan to the hospital wing.

The Death Eaters barely made it out of the courtyard when they were met by a hail of bullets. The ambush came without warning, and so none of the Death Eaters had time to shield against the fully automatic fire.

The six black robes crumbled to the ground as five hardened wizards wearing black Muggle tactical uniforms appeared from either side of the walls. “Who goes there?” Ron called.

“Phoenix Tactical One, call sign Bulldog. Identify.”

“Core DA, call sign Bishop,” Ron called back. He then sighed and sat right down in the middle of the courtyard. Around them, McGonagall and Flitwick watched as the other members of Potter’s training group collapsed as well. Only then did the professors realize how much magic the group had expended fighting the Death Eaters.

“I am Professor McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress,” she said. “Who are you?”

“Thomas Deskin, ma’am,” the American wizard said. “I am an employee of Mr. Potter’s. We were advised there was an attack on the castle. Do you know where...”

“I know where he is.”

Deskin and McGonagall turned to see a mud-stained, tear-streaked Luna Lovegood standing behind one of Deskin’s people, who yelped in surprise at obviously not detecting her earlier.

“Status?” Deskin asked.

“Severely injured, but he’ll survive,” she said. “Professor Dumbledore is dead—Bellatrix Lestrange killed him. Harry killed her.”

“Orders, Ma’am?” Deskin asked.

McGonagall stared in shock that this obviously capable man would ask orders from a fifteen...no, sixteen now—year old girl.

Luna swayed on her feet. “Attend to the Potters, please. Professor McGonagall, Phoenix Industries has cleared the castle. Please see to the safety of the students.”

“Do you need us, Luna?” Terry Boot asked.
“No, you’ve done wonderfully. You should rest now. Thomas, this way please.”

Luna continued to sway as they walked out of earshot of the professors. “Are you injured?” Deskin asked.

“My soul is, but my body is not,” she said. “I had to kill an Auror, Deskin. I had to kill a young woman who thought she was doing the right thing. But we cannot allow anyone to know she died by our hands. Her death needs to be that of a hero.”

They arrived to find Harry passed out, his head resting in Hermione’s lap while she stroked his hair. “He’s entered a healing trance,” she said. “Luna, are you alright?”

“No one can know, Hermione,” Luna said with forced calm. “Dumbledore convinced her that Harry was going to be a dark lord—she was doing what she thought was right. I just couldn’t…she did not understand.”

Hermione looked back at the body of Nymphadora Tonks. “Deskin, do any of your people have brooms?”

“We all do, Ma’am,” he said.

“Take Tonks’s body to the top of the clock tower. There should be some Death Eater wands up there—use one to fire a blasting curse into her chest and then let the body fall. She tried to save Dumbledore and gave her life doing so.”

“Harks, go,” Deskin said.

One of his men removed a shrunken broom, expanded it, and with his wand flew the levitated body of Tonks to the top of the clock tower. Neither girl watched the operation. “What now?” Luna asked.

“We’re done with Hogwarts,” Hermione said, her voice sounding dull. “We’ve finished our tests, and Dumbledore is dead. It’s time to go home, Luna.”

Luna nodded before assisting Hermione with levitating Harry. “Would you prefer me to?” Deskin asked.

“Thank you, but no,” Hermione said. She winced at the sound of a dead body striking the rocks at the base of the clock tower. “However, we would appreciate an escort to the wards. We will apparate directly to our home and contact our healer.”

“Very good, ma’am,” Deskin said.

With his grisly task done, Harks rejoined the other four men, and they formed up around where Hermione and Luna levitated Harry’s sleeping body between them. They were not even halfway to the wards when McGonagall arrived, accompanied by Auror Gawain Robards and a squad of five other aurors.

The aurors eyed Deskin’s squad suspiciously. “What’s going on here?” Robards said.

“We’re going home,” Hermione said tiredly. “Harry killed Bellatrix Lestrange after she killed Dumbledore. She underwent some power-enhancing ritual. It was terrifying to be honest. Harry was injured, so we are taking him home.”

“Mrs. Potter,” McGonagall said, “school has not been released.”
“We finished our NEWTs today,” Luna said. “You’ll find our scores more than satisfactory. We will send our elf to collect our things.”

“You won’t be returning?” McGonagall said, eyes wide.

“Not as students,” Luna said.

“Ms. Lovegood, we can’t just let you walk out of here after what happened,” Robards said. “We need to take you into custody for questioning at the very least.”

“Try it,” Deskin said. He spoke with a cold smile as he fingered his carbine in one hand and his wand in the other. “I am responsible for the Potter’s personal safety. I will not remand them into your custody.”

“Are you threatening a licensed Auror?” Robards asked incredulously.

“Are you threatening to take my employer into custody?” Deskin snapped back.

“Gentlemen!” Hermione snapped. “Auror Robards, at this time my husband, sister and I are going to return to our home. Tomorrow, after we have rested and recuperated, we will be glad to make ourselves available to the DMLE for questioning. Our people just defended this school from an incursion of two dozen Death Eaters, we would rather not have to fight the Ministry as well. Now, good night.”

As they walked away, Luna looked with shining eyes at Hermione. “Sister?”

“I refuse to call you anything else, not anymore,” Hermione said. “In all but blood you are my sister and I love you.”

“I love you too, Hermione,” Luna said.

In their wake, Robards looked back at the castle and the bodies there, then to McGonagall. “What in the hell just happened?”

“I’m trying to determine that myself, Gawain,” McGonagall said. “I’ve yet to determine at what point I lost control both of this castle and my students. But rest assured, I will find out.”

Both looked as Professor Sprout came waddling toward them with Hagrid on her heals. The giant was crying profusely. “It’s true!” Sprout said, her own voice cracking under her emotions. “Professor Dumbledore is dead! And I found Nymphadora Tonks with him. She must have been fighting at his side.”

“Sounds like Tonks,” Robards said, shaking his head at the loss of such a brave auror.
Harry woke early in the morning in his bed at Grimmauld Place. He could feel Hermione next to him, her back against him as she slept. However, his left side felt cold with the absence of someone he had grown accustomed to.

With a gentle caress of his wife’s mind to ensure she stayed asleep, Harry climbed out of the bed. He saw school trunks against the far wall—Dobby must have fetched them from the castle. He walked outside their room, down the hall and stairs, until he reached the library.

Luna sat tucked into one of the few pieces of furniture they retained from the original house—a stately plush chair in green upholstery. She had a thin blanket draped around her shoulders as she stared into the fire. “Hello, Harry,” she said without looking away from the flames. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Me too.” He walked to the chair, and watched with a bemused smile as Luna stood to let him sit, and then immediately climbed back onto his lap again. In doing so, he realized she was nude, though it should not have surprised him. In the privacy of their home, Luna preferred to be bare unless it was cold.

While it was a little chilly in the house, it was not cold. Nonetheless, he held his Ravenclaw closely, running his fingers through her hair. Without a word, Luna turned her face into his bare chest and very quietly began to weep.

Harry did not speak—there was nothing he could say and they both knew it. Instead, he simply held her as she wept, until the sun came up.

“The body was cursed after she was dead,” the healer said.

Kingsley Shacklebolt stood perfectly still and tried his best not to look down at the desecrated body of his former partner. Tonks for him was the very best Hogwarts had to offer—smart and loyal to a fault, fast and powerful enough to hold her own against most foes. She’d had a very hard time since the last summer, he knew, but she was still an outstanding Auror and a lovely person.

Now she was reduced to a cadaver with a blackened, gaping hole where her chest used to be. Her skin had a chalky pallor of death, though he could see bruising gathering at the back where blood had settled.
“How can you tell?”

“No bleeding,” the healer who acted as the DMLE coroner said with a shrug. “And see the cuts and bruising from her fall? No bleeding there either to speak off. Her heart wasn’t beating when this curse hit her. But most importantly is that there is no sign of the Bonham Effect at all.”

Kingsley raised one brow at this single, most telling aspect of his friend’s death. Named for Mungo Bonham, the founder of St. Mungo’s who discovered it, the Bonham Effect was the result of a witch or wizard’s magical core trying to resist a lethal or offensive curse. It usually resulted in a shattering of the witch’s or wizard’s bone marrow, where it was commonly accepted the magical core was charged from.

If there was no Bonham Effect from the blasting curse evidenced in Tonks’s bones, it meant her magical core did not resist the curse. That was the clearest and most telling indication she was already dead when the curse struck.

“Thank you, Cal. Write up your report, but make it to the Minister’s eyes only. We need to keep this under wraps.”

“I understand, Kingsley.”

Kingsley left the basement of the DMLE and went back to the Minister’s office where he found Amelia Bones contemplating a tumbler of Cognac. “Sit,” she said the moment he walked in.

“Tonks was already dead when that blasting curse hit her,” Shacklebolt said as he sank into the chair opposite her. “There was no Bonham Effect at all, so whatever killed her was not magical. The CE says there’s no way to say what did kill her for sure, though, because of the post-mortem damage.”

“What was she doing there, Shack?”

“She and Dumbledore were trying to find a horcrux. He asked her specifically to help, though, because he wanted her to reform the Order of the Phoenix.”

He sat perfectly still as Amelia looked up and glared. “I ordered it shut down.”

“He wanted to reform it because of Potter, Minister. He warned me, and I presume he warned Tonks, that Harry was dangerous. Maybe even more dangerous than You-Know-Who.”

“You think he killed her?”

“He, or maybe one of his women,” Shack said. “It’s been remarked that Granger has become just as dark as he has.”

“Then we’re going to have to…what the devil was that?” Amelia half-rose from her desk while Shacklebolt did the same, pulling his wand as he did so. A moment later the door opened and a wide-eyed young Auror fresh out of the academy rushed in. “Minister, he’s here! He blasted through the main entrance with an army of Death Eaters!”

There was no need to ask who “he” was. Blanching, Amelia tapped her wand to her forehead, pulled out a stream of thought and memory, and stored it in a glass phial. She opened a cabinet drawer and placed it inside.

Shacklebolt watched without a word until she was done, and then followed as she led the way out of her office toward the DMLE, where loyal aurors and hitwizards were engaged in a full-out battle in the halls of the DMLE with a line of black-robed wizards.
“Morgana,” Bones muttered.

Before she could say more, HE arrived. Amelia could feel his power from across the atrium as he floated a foot off the ground, black robes billowing behind him in an invisible wind. He looked like a pale-skinned dementor as he approached the line of fighters. He raised his hands—without a wand—and suddenly a torrent of white lightning flashed across the line of defenders. Men and women screamed in agony as they were blown clean off their feet.

“Dumbledore was wrong,” Bones muttered. “Potter’s not anywhere this bad. *Avada Kedavra!***

The fact the Minister was willing to cast a killing curse did not surprise Shacklebolt. During the first war Amelia was one of the most capable and ruthless aurors in Crouch’s force. What surprised Kingsley was the ease with which Voldemort blocked the curse. He smiled—the monster actually smiled—at the sight of the killing magic flying at him. The air before him shimmered as he wandlessly conjured a steel plate which absorbed the magic.

Instantly he banished it again, all the while continuing to float toward the Minister. “Dear Amelia,” he said. His voice sounded raw and terrible, as if his vocal cords had been shredded. “So nice to be welcomed. We are going to have such interesting times, you and I. Although, I have no need for your helper.”

Shacklebolt’s last sight on Earth was the flash of green before his eyes.

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Hermione read the morning paper in drawn silence as she, Harry and Luna sat around the breakfast table in Grimmauld Place. Wordlessly she handed the paper to Luna, while Harry stared into the corner. Moments later, they heard a chime. Harry reached the door first and opened it to reveal a battered, bruised Mad-Eye Moody.

“Come in,” Harry said calmly. “Dobby, breakfast for Mr. Moody, please.”

Dobby did not even become visible, though by the time they reached the breakfast nook a fourth plate appeared piled with a proper English fry-up. Moody sat with a half-articulated groan and started eating without a word to anyone there. Only after he was done did he sit back and take a long swig from his ever-full flask. “Bad spot yesterday,” he finally said.

“Did any get out?” Hermione asked.

“Handful only,” Moody said. “The High Bastard himself came flying in like Mary-Fucking-Poppins and wiped out every auror and hitwizard on duty with his bare hands. He blasted Shacklebolt apart and the…gods above, I won’t even tell you what he did to Amelia. All I’ll tell you is her niece won’t be coming back to school, ever.”

Luna wept silently, while Hermione stared in shock. “You mean he killed Susan?”

“You could say that.” Moody took another long swill, and for a brief moment his single, blood-shot eye looked moist. “Fucking bastard. Bloody, fucking bastard.”

“Who’s Pius Thicknesse?” Harry asked, referring to the article in the paper.

“A stooge. He’s a weak-willed pillock and a puppet for the Great Bastard so he can make the other governments think Riddle’s not in complete control already.”
“You’ve been listed as Public Undesirable Number One,” Hermione said to Harry. “I’m sorry, you’re only number three. I’m number two.”

“Remus?” Harry asked.

“I’ve warned him,” Moody said. “Moving the pack isn’t easy.”

“I’ll help,” Harry said. “I had plans for them regardless.”

A moment later Thomas Delkins appeared with a pop in a corner of the kitchen. “Mr. Potter,” he said. “Ladies.” He included Moody in the last.

“Takes one to know one, ya great pansy.”

“Status?” Harry asked.

“Much like you described. Floo Network has been shut down and there’s a general ban on portkey usage. I have more men flying in today by Muggle means. The company is secure—no one magical has made the connection between Phoenix Industries and Harry Potter, but it is public so don’t be too surprised if it happens eventually.”

“We’re about to use that connection,” Harry said.

Hermione studied him for a moment. “What do you mean?”

“Do you remember our talk about goblins? That we would have to tackle that problem, but only after Voldemort?”

“Yes,” Hermione said cautiously.

“I’ve changed my mind. I think we can tackle the problem in such a way to make it work for us. Before, we were concerned about the collateral with the Ministry. Well, now Voldemort is the Ministry.” He turned to Mad-Eye. “Moody, I’ve set up a temporary safe house in Portsmouth. Gather up supporters and their families and get them there. Use Muggle-means—rail, busses. Nothing magic should get close to the safe house. Thomas, go with him. Contact me if there is any trouble.”

“Where will you be?” Moody asked.

“Well, if Shirley Applewhite still has any pull in the PM’s office, I’m going to be at Number 10 Downing Street.”

They drove to the office that day in a black Mercedes Harry purchased on the fly. The moment he walked through the door, he was met by a pale Lawrence Bartleby. “Mr. Potter…”

“Is your family safe?”

“Terrified, but nothing has been done against them yet. But…”

“Get them to the safe house,” Harry said. “Same for any friends or supporters. Is Shirley in?”

“Yes. Harry…”
“Go, Lawrence,” Harry said. “Take care of your family first, and then come back.

With a grateful nod the lawyer ran out of the office. Martha stood behind him, pale herself. “Alright?” Harry asked.

She nodded. “Shirley’s here. I think senior staff knows something is up, but not what.”

“You might be getting contacted by magical beings,” Harry said. “If you do, route them to Hermione or Luna, okay?”

With that, he and his two companions walked up the stairs that looked over the five busy production lines until they reached the new refurbished administrative offices. He nodded briefly to Chandrakar, who was on the phone, until they reached Applewhite. She looked up in surprise. “Mr. Potter! Good to see you. You’ll be pleased to know that EP has offered a very, very large settlement.”

“Very good,” Harry said. “We’re going to need it. Shirley, what are the odds of getting in to see the PM today?”

“Before the English Petrol scandal, I’d say low to nil,” she said. “But seeing as EP funded the Labor Party and almost had him removed, we might be able to parley that into a quick meeting. Can I ask why?”

“Sorry, covert operations,” Harry said. “I’ll only need ten minutes of his time, if you can secure it.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Her best was better than most, and after pulling every contact they had, Harry had an appointment that afternoon to meet with the Prime Minister. He, Hermione and Luna all arrived an hour early to go through extensive security. Harry was loathe to leave his lightsabers behind, but he had his wand, as did his wives. Dressed in their best, the three went to meet the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland John Cochran, the leader of the Conservatives, which at that moment maintained a slight lead and so controlled the government, was a handsome man in his fifties with light brown hair going grey at the temples, and a charming smile.

“Harry Potter!” he said as Harry entered, acting as if he was Harry’s best friend. “I’ve been reading about your company, and I must say I am truly impressed. Not even nine months, and you’ve gone from a bankrupt drill manufacturer to a true empire. Remarkable. Shirley also spoke very highly of you.”

“Thank you, Minister. My I introduce my wife, Hermione Potter, and our dear friend Luna Lovegood.”

Without missing a beat, he shook Hermione’s hand and then Luna’s. “So,” he said after leading them to a small sitting area. His aide hovered nearby. “Do you wish photographs? I must say I’ve enjoyed Shirley’s work in the press lately.”

“Thank you, no, Prime Minister,” Harry said. “I came to let you know that Amelia Bones and her niece were both tortured to death last night, over the course of several hours. Her government has collapsed, her supporters in our Ministry were killed, and those that escaped are fleeing for their lives.”

His and Hermione’s plan was dependent on the well-known tradition of each Minister of Magic contacting the Prime Minister’s office. From the shocked look on the PM’s face, it appeared Amelia
maintained that tradition. “Oh, goodness,” he managed to say. “Lindsey, I’m very sorry, but could you clear my schedule this afternoon? Also have the Baroness join us, please.”

The aide stared in shock a moment at the unusual request, before nodding to do his bidding.

When they were alone, the Prime Minister looked back to Harry with a frank, speculative gaze. “So you’re that Harry Potter. To be honest, I rather thought you just shared a common name. How is it that a young wizard came to be such a financial genius?”

“It is a rather long and painful story,” Harry said. “As for the genius—that would be my wife. Shall we wait for the Baroness?”

Before the PM could answer, they heard a knock at the door. A moment later a woman that reminded Harry a great deal of Amelia Bones stepped into the room. Slim but fit, with immaculately styled brown hair and the wrinkles of a forty-year-old on her fifty-year-old face, Harry was impressed with the woman immediately.

“Mr. and Mrs. Potter, Ms. Lovegood, may I introduce you to the Right Honorable Baroness Margie Anton,” the Prime Minister said, “the Minister of Defense. Margie, Mr. Potter and his lovely ladies were telling me some distressing news.”

“Potter?” Margie said, one brow raised. “Then this wouldn’t be about the reports of smoke rising up from the streets of London, would it?”

“It would,” Potter said. “A Dark Wizard has successfully overthrown the Ministry. Minister Bones, her family, and most of her supporters are dead.”

The Minister of Defense came to a chair, while the others around her stood in respect until after she was seated. “How could that happen? Amelia assured me that she had the Ministry well-guarded.”

“Vol…” Hermione began, until Harry stopped her. “Think about the name,” he told her. “Open your senses. What do you feel when you think about it?”

Hermione did as he asked, and felt her eyes widen. “Danger.”

“During the first war,” Luna said, “he made his name a taboo. The power and human sacrifices required to do that were immense, but that is the reason why people feared to speak his name.” She turned to the two Muggle officials. “I strongly urge you instead to refer to his birth name, Tom Riddle.”

The PM nodded, but looked to Margie, who obviously was his expert in magic. “Very well, Mr. Potter. Now, can you tell me what happened?”

“Not definitively,” Harry said, “but I know that one of his followers underwent a power-enhancing ritual that made her incredibly powerful. She killed Professor Dumbledore of Hogwarts and came perilously close to killing me before I was able to destroy her.”

“And you’re how old, Mr. Potter?” the Prime Minister said.

The Baroness, however, touched the PM’s hand. “John, Amelia told me that something happened to Mr. Potter last summer that made him quite dangerous.”

“He is dangerous,” Hermione said. “But he’s also the only recognizable force in Magical England who has any hope of standing up to…Riddle.”
"I asked to meet you through normal channels, Prime Minister," Harry said, "to demonstrate that I am a man of means and leadership, despite my apparent age. Right now, I am the only hope the United Kingdom has."

"What exactly are you suggesting, Mr. Potter?" the Prime Minister asked.

"Please forgive me if I’m wrong," Hermione said, "but in researching the historical archives of the Ministry of Magic, I found that the Ministry of Magic as it existed until yesterday was formed in Article 26 of the Treaty of Union, in which the magical peoples of England and Scotland were granted an autonomous parliament and legal system, and were exempted from the common currency standard. According to the original treaty, which has not actually been amended by the Wizengamot since its effective date in 1707, the magical peoples were to select from among their number a Minister for magic to serve as representative to the crown. In the absence of such an election, the Queen or her Prime Minister may, at her pleasure, appoint a Minister."

"So what happened to poor Ireland?" Anton asked with a wry smile.

"They remain independent under their own magical ministry," Luna said brightly. "They also have their own school of magic, though the two Ministries do have an unspoken agreement that those who can afford to may attend Hogwarts."

"So, in essence you want me to appoint you as the Minister for Magic?" the Prime Minister asked.

"It lends legitimacy for what needs to be done," Harry said. "Minister, I wish to be honest. Magical England is in a state of full-out civil war, and very, very soon you will begin to see that war spill into the streets. Tom Riddle despises you—not because you are inferior to him—but because he himself is the child of a Muggle father who he feels abandoned him. His personal vendetta colours his perceptions, and right now he is possibly more powerful than the combined might of your entire military, barring nuclear weaponry."

"And you think you can fight him?" the Baroness asked.

"I do," Harry said. "I must. But more important, your honors, by having a Crown-appointed Minister, you will have the right to receive reports at your leisure. It is my long-term goal to abolish the separate currency, which means the Wizarding world will have several hundred metric tonnes of gold to convert. Additionally, I wish to revise the tax-structure of the wizarding world to bring it not just in line with a modern economy, but to also be an actual part of the United Kingdom. Being a Crown-appointed Minister, I will be in a position to enlist your aid in doing so."

"Won’t the other magical ministries stop you?" Margie said.

"Indubitably," Luna said. "But this is Harry Potter. Their resistance will last only until they actually meet him."

"What you are proposing is quite radical," the Prime Minister said. "But I have to admit there is a certain appeal to actually having your lot pay your fair share to the Crown. While Minister Bones made great efforts to inform us of the situation in your world, her predecessors were less than forthcoming."

"That’s the point, Minister," Harry said intently. "It is not our world. It is your world too—one world, one government. Appointment me Minister of Magic, and in essence you will be bringing the magical world into the Cabinet. But if you agree to do this, there is something even more radical that I will need from you, although this falls more under the Baroness’s purview."
They spent the next few hours shaping the future.
Coup de grace

They came to Hogwarts in a small trickle at first. Arthur and Molly Weasley were among the first, and they only came for help from Poppy. Arthur took a cutting curse to his shoulder during his escape from the Ministry and despite Molly’s best efforts she could not stem the bleeding. With Ginny and the twins in tow, they took Arthur to the hospital wing with Minerva’s blessing, though she was as aware as the rest of the terrible, terrible risk she was taking. No one even knew where Ron was.

Unfortunately, Arthur was the first of many.

The Ministry of Magic employed a total of seven hundred witches and wizards, being the largest single employer in the magical United Kingdom. Another hundred or so served on the Wizengamot. When Gawain Robards arrived, bloodied and pale, he said he personally saw a hundred bodies lined up in the atrium of the Ministry.

“Most of the Aurors died defending Amelia,” he said, tears in his eyes. “The rest…they were killing the Muggleborn employees right in the atrium, in front of the rest of us. Thicknesse made us watch. They made them all kneel down with their hands behind their heads, then they cast petrifying charms on them before Yaxley just walked down the whole row, casting severing curses point blank at the back of their heads.”

Minerva listened with her hands to her mouth, horrified by more than just the description of her former students dying. She was horrified because those were the same tactics Grindelwald and his Nazi allies used.

After hearing what was happening, Minerva could not turn anyone away, despite the risks. Most that came were Muggleborn or Half-bloods, while still others were known light-side families. The day after the Ministry’s fall, the Daily Prophet released an edition that lavishly, and with an abundance of spelling and grammatical errors, praised the elevation of Pius Thicknesse to Minister of Magic, while vilifying the wicked Amelia Bones and her followers, who were justly and mercifully brought to justice.

“They made her watch as they killed Susan,” a tear-struck Percy Weasley said. “How did they even get her? She screamed so much….” He could not continue. He arrived later that second day, a once proud young man so thoroughly broken by the horrors he witnessed that he could not even find words. His family, from whom he had been estranged, welcomed him back without any comment.

Late the afternoon of that second day, Minerva called a meeting with Gawain Robards, Arthur and Molly Weasley, Augusta Longbottom (who arrived with Neville and several of Neville’s friends from Potter’s training group), and the rest of the staff to try and discuss next steps.

“We can’t fight,” Robards said. Being the former head of the DMLE, a seasoned auror and one of the few aurors not to be killed instantly because of his pureblood status and quick thinking, such a statement was chilling. “I witnessed You-Know-Who wipe out the entire Auror corps without even
using a wand. We can’t fight that.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Arthur asked. “He’s going to kill all of us—my family and I for actively supporting Dumbledore, and you for even coming here.”

“I don’t know,” Robards admitted. “No, our best bet is to leave. We need to evacuate the UK. Perhaps to America, or Australia. I know how we could get out of the country safely.”

“I refuse to let that monster take my home without a fight,” Augusta Longbottom said. “The Longbottoms have stood for the light for the past thousand years, we will not stop now!”

“Well said, Augusta,” Pomona Sprout said.

“The castle’s defenses are strong,” Minerva said, “but I’m not sure would fare any better than the Ministry should You-Know-Who come here.”

“I’m telling you, we have to flee!” Robards said. “We can’t fight him like this!”

“Then flee, you sniveling coward!” a new, gruff voice said. Those gathered around the faculty table at the end of the Great Hall looked up in surprise as Alastor Moody stumped in, flanked by Remus Lupin and his entire pack of werewolves. “Potter here yet?”

“Harry?” Arthur said, perplexed. “No. Are we expecting him?”

“I am,” Moody said. He reached the table and nodded gruffly. “Minerva, Arthur. Robards, I have one thing to say to you. Stupefy!”

The others stared in surprised as the Auror flew back against a wall. Remus made a motion with his hand and a pair of his weres grabbed the man and carried him out of the hall.

“Bastard made a deal with Thicknesse,” Moody explained. “He was going to lead you into a trap and get the whole lot of you caught.”

“How did you know?” Arthur asked.

“Potter has spies in the ‘new’ Ministry,” Alastor said. He jumped then for no apparent reason, and then cursed. “Bloody contraption.” He fumbled in his robes before he removed a black box that fit snugly into his hand. “This is Alastor, go.”

The box squawked before a man’s voice said, “Potter is on his way in.”

“Right. I’m here with them now.”

“Understood.”

“What is that?” Arthur said, fascinated.

“Magic radio,” Moody said. “Mimics muggle wireless, but can be used anywhere in the world. All Potter’s people have them now.”

“How many people does Potter have?” Minerva asked.

Alastor’s grin did not make any of them feel better. “Enough.”

They heard voices from outside the great hall, followed by roars of approval and cheers. A moment later they saw Harry Potter step confidently into the hall flanked as always by his wife on one side
and their lover on the other. Following him in came a phalanx of his lieutenants, including Arthur’s own son Ron.

“Arthur,” Harry said when he reached the table. “Glad to see you made it. Ron was worried.” Ron nodded a strong affirmative from his position in line. “Moody, do we have a count of everyone who made it?”

“Not yet.”

“See to it, please. Deskin’s people are setting up the point defenses around the castle. I’ll need a rough idea of how many occupants in the castle will fight, and what the castle’s magical defenses are.” Harry finally looked to Minerva and the others. “Ladies and gentlemen, an hour ago I was granted an audience with Her Majesty, the Queen. By her pleasure, and with the approval of the Prime Minister, I have been appointed as Minister for Magic in accordance with Article 26 of the Treaty Of Union of 1707. Pius Thickness is not recognized by the Crown as the legitimate Minister of Magic, and every member of his government, as well as You Know Who and his supporters, have been declared guilty of high treason against the crown.”

“Your humor leaves something to be desired, Mr. Potter,” Augusta Longbottom said.

“Laugh on your own time, we have work to do,” Harry said, dismissing the old witch to her shock.

“Minerva, please work with Hermione to outline the castle’s defenses. Frankly I don’t think You-Know-Who is going to attack immediately. He wishes to solidify his position at the Ministry first. That gives us time. Also, I have confirmed that his name is taboo. Do not say it aloud until I give the order.”

As he spoke, more and more of the refugees were streaming into the Great Hall to hear what was happening. Harry turned, and with a Sonorus charm addressed them all. “I am Harry Potter, and by the pleasure of Her Majesty the Queen I have been appointed Minister for Magic. Those of you who looked outside no doubt saw my forces establishing defenses for the castle. Please offer to help where you can. Those of you who can fight, please find Alastor Moody. If you don’t know who he is, look for the ugliest son of a bitch in the castle—the other one, not Filch. I know things seem bad, but I’m here to tell you that the war is not over—in fact it is just getting started.”

People started to cheer, and Minerva realized that, whether Harry was telling the truth about the Queen or not, the people here had accepted him, and that would have to be good enough.

An hour later, touring with an attentive Hermione Potter while discussing the magical wards and defenses of the castle, she saw what Potter’s “people” had done. Every twenty to thirty feet along the castle perimeter were holes dug large enough to house four to five men. And at the lips of each hole angled away from each other, were large Muggle guns.

“What are those?” McGonagall asked.

“Browning heavy machine guns,” Hermione said matter-of-factly. “Harry believes that Tom will have giants and trolls as well as dark wizards when he finally attacks. He calculates that a prolonged burst of fire from a .50 caliber heavy machine gun should be sufficient to take down even large magical creatures. We’ve also positioned mortars and heavy caliber snipers along the towers and battlements. Our defense wizards assure us that even a powerful, prepared wizard cannot shield against a .50 caliber sniper round. Since the weapons are mechanically driven rather than with electronics, the ambient magic of the castle will not be an issue.”

Minerva stumbled. “Mrs. Potter, you’re honestly planning on using Muggle military weapons against British wizards?”
“Professor,” Hermione said, “Harry is planning on winning. He has no intention to continue with tactics that fail. He is going to utterly destroy Tom Riddle’s forces, and then we are going to destroy Riddle himself. Make no mistake, Professor. Harry is going to win.”

They fielded the Ministry Militia on the Quidditch pitch. Deskin’s mercenaries walked among the hundred and ten volunteer witches and wizards willing to fight for their freedom. Some were off-duty Hitwizards or Aurors, a few were former Unspeakables. The rest were just men and women who felt strongly enough about their country that they were willing to fight for it.

Harry, meantime, was talking with Deskin and Moody. “Snape says the Ministry has established commissions to detain any Muggleborns on charges of magic theft. They’re being sent straight to Azkaban and left to die. They have hunter squads in the field,” Harry said.

Moody studied Harry’s face. “I know that expression.”

“We’re going to use the Taboo,” Harry said. “We say his name with a squad standing by for ambush, and take the team out. Hostile interrogations for the survivors. We’re going to force You-Know-Who to attack before he’s ready. But before that, we need to deal with the goblins.”

“And how do you propose to do that?” Deskin asked.

“With some help, my friends.”

Diagon Alley was empty. Shops were closed and boarded up, while those few that remained open had no business. Harry walked alone through the middle of the alley, invisible under his father’s cloak.

In his ear, a piece of magic-hardened Muggle technology beeped at him. “Birds in-bound five minutes,” a clipped voice said.

“Understood,” Harry whispered back. He continued walking through the empty street until he reached a clear path to Gringotts bank at the very end of the alley. He crouched down behind the corner of a building and lifted a large laser pointer housed in a camouflaged green case. He slipped on a pair of charmed far-see glasses and pulled the trigger.

Although the laser was invisible in the air, he could see a red dot appear on the bank. “Target acquired,” the voice said. “Fox 1 inbound.”

Twenty seconds later, “Fox 2 inbound.”

Twenty seconds after that, “Fox 3 inbound.”

The goblin guards, looking fierce as they stood near the doors to the bank, barely had time to look up before the first 2,000 pound Paveway III guided, bunker-buster bomb slammed into the bank. Designed to penetrate hardened targets, the first bomb bullied its way through all the floors of the bank and into its sublevels before it explode.
The building shattered like a dropped egg. Before the debris cleared, the second bomb struck, piercing through the debris pile and even further into the sublevels before it, too, exploded. This time debris shot up higher into the air as the more focused explosion punched further down. The third bomb was not a Paveway at all. In fact, it was borrowed from the Americans.

The GBU-43 Massive Ordnance Air Blast Bomb fell like a tank from the air. Over 21,000 pounds of explosives fell into the heart of Gringotts encased in a 30 foot long shell. The bomb fell right through the shattered holes into the cavern that sheltered the true heart of the goblins. The explosion, when it hit, shattered every window in Diagon Alley and made the Earth shake as if it were a major quake.

Harry waited a few minutes before he removed his cloak and started running toward the debris. He briefly caught glimpses of terrified wizards coming to see what happened, but he ignored them as he continued running through the slope of rubble that surrounded the crater that was once Gringotts. He reached the lip of the crater, but with the billowing dust, he could not see anything. However, he could feel waves of heat billowing up from the fires that were still undoubtedly burning below.

He tapped his far-see glasses to thermal sensing, cast a Featherlight charm on himself, and then summoning the Force jumped into the abyss. It was actually Hermione that suggested the combination, and it was so effective it made him feel as if he were flying as he let himself float down into the chaos.

He saw four shattered levels under the bank proper where Gringotts kept its low-security vaults. Soon though he broke into the main cavern that not only contained the family vaults, but also the city of the goblins themselves. His strike was not designed to destroy the vaults—he knew from personal memories that the vaults lined the upper walls of the cavern and were accessible by charmed carriages. Instead, the whole attack was on the goblins themselves.

The goblin city was built up from the floor of the cavern, and was more of a vertical city than most human dwellings. Essentially the goblins lived in what might be described as a giant termite mound, a single communal structure—a structure that the largest conventional bomb in the world had just hit point blank.

Smoke filled the cavern, but after breaking through the chimney-effect the holes above created, the air in the rest of the cavern cleared enough for Harry to make his way to the far chamber passage where the older vaults were located.

He alit near the rail, seeing as he did that most of the rail system was shattered by the explosion. Debris littered the floor even in the passage, as well as a group of dirty, stunned-looking goblins. Harry did not hesitate for a second—the creatures screamed as Harry caught them in a Force-grip and threw them out into the seeming endless chasm into the fires that used to be their city.

With the passage cleared, he ran further into the cavern. He did not take ten steps before the Force warned him. He had both lightsabers lit and swinging when the first shots came; the goblins were using guns. Not archaic weapons, either, but modern automatic machine guns.

He waded into them, deflecting or vaporizing the bullets with his sabers while using the Force to knock them back. Because of their short stature and wide bodies, the goblins were amazingly resilient, but when struck by a lightsaber, they fell just like any other living creature.

Harry wiped out the squad of ten save for the last. This one he gripped by the head and ripped into his mind. He did not pull information out—he knew exactly where Lestrange’s vault was from his attack on her the previous summer. Instead, he blurred all memory in the creature’s mind and superimposed it with an image of Voldermort destroying everything around him.
He continued down the corridor without further resistance, until he reached the dragon that guarded the Lestrange Vault. The massive, pale, blind beast raised its lorry-sized head and sniffed the air.

Harry did not hesitate—with a short run he launched himself into the air until he landed on the creature’s long, sinuous neck. Magically resistant scales could not resist the heat of Harry’s lightsaber as he shoved it to the hilt at the base of the dragon’s skull. He struck so quickly the dragon did not even have time to realize it was dead before it fell.

Harry rolled free before leaping up to the second level of the underground courtyard that housed Lestrange’s vault. The enchantments on the door prevented him from touching it, but he was betting that the goblin’s magic had never encountered high technology before.

He thrust his lightsaber into the edge of the circular vault door. The blade cut easily through the ancient iron, and continued to run smoothly through the seams between the door and the wall. He levitated himself to complete the circuit, until at the last he cut through every bolt holding the door in place.

He stepped back, and with the Force gripped and opened the door. It did so with a squeal not just of metal, but of severed enchantments. Because of his stolen memories from Lestrange, he was familiar with the curses on the vault. Rather than try to enter, he used the Force to levitate a large silver platter and floated it to the back of the vault, where the cup rested.

He guided the platter behind the cup, and then with all his might pulled the platter, striking the cup and sending it flying. It clattered to the floor at the edge of the vault, within easy reach of Harry’s lightsaber.

The magical release of the destroyed Horcrux was much stronger than the diadem, but even so it only pushed Harry back a few feet. He levitated the shards of Hufflepuff’s cup off the floor before swinging the door closed again, and began to run back the way he came. Not even halfway there he pulled out his cloak and hid himself again.

While levitating himself back up to the hole, he let the shards of the cup fall into the maelstrom below before he once more found himself in the midst of the smoke rising up out of the bank. He levitated off to one side and wrapped the cloak around him as he saw dozens of wizards and aurors gathered around the hole. Harry noted that the supposed aurors all had the feel of Voldemort’s mark on their arms.

Seeing an opportunity, and still hidden by his cloak, Harry forced pulled half a dozen of the aurors into the gaping hole, listening to their screams as they fell. Given the banks ward scheme was destroyed, they could have apparated, and he suspected some at least would, but somehow he knew most would not.

The only Horcrux that remained was Voldemort’s snake.

Harry apparated away, pleased with the day’s work.

~~Broken~~

The True Ministry watched from Hogwarts as the Goblin Nation rose up in rage at Voldemort’s False Ministry. The only Goblin to survive the assault clearly remembered Voldemort leading the attack. Given his recent demonstration at the Ministry, no one doubted the Dark Lord capable of such monstrous magic.
It was a gamble—Moody told him the attack would either infuriate the goblins into attacking, or cow them into submission. However, Luna simply shrugged and said, “You don’t cow a scorpion from stinging you. It stings you, or you kill it first. The goblins are not capable of being intimidated—fear like that does not exist in their racial memory.”

Luna was never—not ever—wrong about things like that, and as the Goblins of Europe put together the clues Harry left for them, Luna’s words became prophetic. The bodies of the aurors found in the wreckage of the Goblin city—Aurors who bore Voldemort’s Dark Mark—corroborated the eyewitness testimony of Voldemort’s attack. The fact he attacked the Lestrange vault just a week after Bellatrix’s death lent additional credence to the theory of the Dark Lord’s role in the attack.

The fact that Voldemort was still a hidden power and could not publicly repudiate the claims just added fuel to the fire.

On July 2nd, three weeks after the attack, the Goblin Nation declared war on the British Ministry of Magic. The Goblins swarmed through a quickly evacuated Diagon Alley like locusts, burning down or destroying everything, even Weasley Wizarding Wheases, until they came to the Diagon entrance of the Ministry.

The battle in the Ministry lasted two days. Voldemort’s supporters actually fought valiantly, if the honor of fighting goblins could overcome the evil of their past deeds, but the Goblins poured in by the tens of thousands, consuming Voldemort’s Ministry in sheer numbers.

Until, that is, Voldemort himself arrived.

“Damned frightening thing,” Moody recalled the next day in Grimmauld Place, where Potter held his executive meetings. “According to our spies, he called down Fiendfyre from the sky and just let it loose. Goblin magic tried to control it, but it was too powerful. There were so many Goblins that they filled every foot of the Ministry, and he killed every one. A good sixty thousand or more. Took a good portion of the Ministry with them, but he’s in the open now. The whole world knows it’s Voldemort ruling the Ministry, since his stooge didn’t last the first day.”

“That’s what we wanted,” Deskin said blankly.

“Indeed,” Harry agreed. “The world knows—now it’s time for them to know who’s fighting Voldemort. We’re setting the stage for the future right now, my friends. Let’s make sure every shot counts.”
The Goblin Wars

Chapter Summary

Kicking anthills and other fun activities.

The first attack on Diagon Alley was only the beginning, but not just of the Goblins efforts in England. Following Voldemort’s successful defense of the British Ministry, Goblin armies poured out of every Gringotts Branch in Europe, fielding numbers that boggled the minds of the local magical ministries.

“You kicked down a wasp nest,” Derkins noted as they looked over the map in the Grimmauld Place conference room. Beside Harry, Hermione was charming more numbers over the magically updating map, while Luna sat nearby listening to the Wizarding Wireless for reports from across the Channel.

Moody was there, as was Arthur Weasley, surprisingly, who Harry tapped as Senior Undersecretary because of his previous experience. It was Arthur who seemed most shocked. “You mean to say that you did this, Harry?”

“Of course,” Harry said absently. “The Goblins have been building up their armies for the past three hundred years, just waiting for an excuse. As powerful as he is, Voldemort simply can’t dismiss the Goblin armies. They may not have the magic Wizards do, but they have numbers.”

“The Bulgarian Ministry has held off the latest attack,” Luna echoed the wireless.

Hermione waved her wand over the map, changing the map accordingly. “Any word on the Roman Ministry?”

“Lost all contact,” Luna said. “The reports out of France and Spain are encouraging, but it’s believed the Roman Ministry has fallen.”

“It was bound to happen,” Harry said. “Thomas, have our reinforcements arrived?”

“Two hundred fighters got off the plane this morning,” Derkins said. “That brings your total fighting force up to six hundred.”

“It’s not enough,” Harry said. He looked up at Hermione and smiled. “Love, do you speak Italian?”

“No,” Hermione admitted. “Only French and a touch of Spanish.”

“I do,” Luna said. “But it doesn’t matter—just take a language potion. I assume you’re going to go recruit some Italians?”

“A favor for a favor,” Harry said. “We’ll let Tom deal with the goblins here for the moment. Alastor, you’re in charge. Make sure our people are safe, feel free to use the castle or any assets you need. Bartleby is back in the office and our Muggle operations are proceeding, so we have cash flowing. Use it if you need it. Derkins, you’re with me. It’s time to take the Grand Tour.”

He turned to Hermione and Luna. “I want you to stay here.”
From the wireless, Luna laughed. “You don’t think we will, do you?”

His smile was grim. “No, I guess not. But if you’re coming, you’re going to be wielding more than just wands. It’s time to build your lightsabers.”

“They better not be red,” Luna said, no longer smiling.

“No, I still haven’t found the gems I need for colors, but I have sufficient diamonds to work.”

Voldemort reclined tiredly in his office in the Ministry of Magic. Only half of the underground structure remained usable following the first two attacks. The Goblins had retreated, but he had no doubt based on their history that they would be attacking again.

He knew Potter was behind the attack on Gringotts; his spies reported that Potter had assumed the mantle as Minister of Magic under the aegis of the Muggle government, and that the poor, deluded sheep that adored Dumbledore now adored him. He sat behind his fortifications at Hogwarts, preparing for a battle he had no hope of winning, while giving the discontent somewhere to flee.

The boy had become surprisingly useful in dividing those that Voldemort wanted in his new world, and those he did not. The people who remained in the major magical areas were the purebreds and half-breeds, those who feared the Goblins so much that they would rather follow a known Dark Lord than risk obliteration at the hands of beasts that would not just kill them, but eat them during their victory celebrations.

Unlike most, Voldemort understood that the goblins were the greatest risk to the magical world currently in existence. The fact that they were able to attack so quickly, and in such numbers, proved that the Goblins had been planning for this contingency for many years. He previously left the Goblins alone because he wanted to solidify his hold on the magical world first.

However, the goblins attacked, and the fact that Voldemort in and of himself was able to hold them off, had not only a polarizing effect in magical society, but also had the effect of consolidating Voldemort’s own power. People overcame their fear of him because they also had respect for his incredible power. It was that power they needed to hold off the goblin hordes.

So, despite Potter’s presence, Voldemort was content with the situation. Yes, it would slow his conquest of the world, but then again by the time he was done with the goblins of England, the whole world would be ready to accept him as the savior he was. Yes, there would be some losses, but he had no doubt that in the end he would be victorious, and Potter’s efforts to delay the inevitable would come to naught.

His wards alerted him to a presence outside the door of his office. Snape. The door opened and the Potions Master bowed from the waist. “My Lord, the Goblins are attacking again. Twelve hundred are descending on the magical enclave at Holyhead. The local aurors have been overwhelmed.”

Voldemort stood, strangely pleased to be playing the part of the hero. “Let them know I am coming, Severus. Lock the Ministry down in my absence.”

“No, Severus, not for only twelve hundred goblins,” Voldemort said. “It is a trifle.”
“Yes, Lord.” Severus bowed as he backed out, making room for Voldemort to stride imperiously from his spacious office toward the floos of the central atrium. As he passed, workers and cowering civilians alike reached up toward him, imploring his protection.

It was good to be the hero. He felt he understood Potter more now.

~~Broken~~

The Roman Ministry of Magic was the oldest magical Ministry in Europe, dating back to the days of the Empire when Augusta Fausta Flavia Maxima, wife of Emperor Constantine I, used her position and power to appoint an office under the Emperors to administer the wizards and witches of the Roman Empire in 325 AD.

The Ministry itself was located on the opposite side of the city from the Vatican, which had a rather unsteady and tumultuous relationship with the magical ministry over the centuries. To Muggles, the Ministry itself looked like the ruins of the famed Caracalla Baths. In fact, the ruins were preserved by magical charms just for that reason, while behind the same type of expansion charms that allowed Diagon Alley to exist in a space that ordinarily would have held only a few empty alleyways, existed the Magic Quarter of Rome, a space twice the size of Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade combined.

Harry, Hermione, Luna, Derkins, Harry’s core group comprised of Lee Jordan, Anthony Goldstein, Angelina Johnson, Ron Weasley, Terry Boot, Justin Finch Fletchley and Katie Bell all arrived with a force of two hundred American mercenaries in the Portkey receiving pad to be met with the raised wands of a dozen yellow-robed Cacciatores, Italian aurors.

“Pace!” Luna cried out. “Pace! Siamo amici!”

“Your Italian is terrible,” one of the men said.

“Your English is terrible,” Luna said right back, smiling.

“Who are you?” the Cacciatore demanded.

Harry stepped down from the platform. “Harry Potter, English Minister of Magic. We lost contact with you and came to help. I have over two hundred fighters to help.”

The Italian snorted. “Two hundred fighters? The Goblins attacked with twenty-thousand!”

“Sounds about even, then,” Harry said with a grin. “You see, my friend, Goblin magic is incapable to shielding, correct?”

The older man nodded. “So?”

“So, we brought heavy weapons,” Harry said. “And we have a lot more than twenty-thousand rounds of ammunition.”

While Voldemort unleashed fiendfyre at Holyhead, obliterating the Goblins but also most of the magical enclave that he was supposedly protecting, Harry directed his fighters to set up a crossfire using a series of heavy-caliber machine guns at the entrance to the last human-held portion of the alley.

“Ladies,” Harry said to Hermione and Luna, “ready to go bait the enemy?”
The two young women removed their wands and lightsabers and smiled at him nervously. “Ready.”

Harry turned back to the startled, confused Italian aurors and Derkins. “Thomas, hold the line. *Cacciatore*, your name?”

“Adalgiso Giordano,” the man said.

“Mr. Giordano, my associate Mr. Derkins is a professional soldier under my employ. May he count on your cooperation in keeping the remainder of your people safe?”

“Yes, yes,” the man said. “We fought, we lost. But what do you think you and your *bambine graziose* can do?”

“We can kill Goblins,” Harry said. “Ladies, let’s go.”

The three walked into the main part of the magical quarter, looking with interest at what must have been an amazing and beautiful collection of buildings dating back centuries before Diagon Alley was founded. Unfortunately, many of the buildings were either burned out or reduced to rubble.

Goblin magic was tactile in nature. Rather than projecting magic in the form of spells, Goblins imbued their tools with their innate power. Goblin swords could cut through almost anything; goblin shovels sliced through the earth with ease. Goblin arrows exploded like Muggle hand grenades, and Goblin ballista were as devastating as Muggle missiles. Goblins also had no prejudice against using Muggle weapons. When Harry and his ladies turned a corner of the alley and came face to face with an entrenched Goblin army, they knew they faced an uphill battle.

The goblins attacked without hesitation, launching twenty large, enchanted ballista at the trio. Harry raised a hand, caught the giant wooden spikes with the Force, and threw them right back at the barricades. Angry goblins roared as the projectiles hit and exploded with their enchantments, shattering the defensive lines. Instantly arrows and bullets began raining down at them.

Harry caught the arrows and sent them back, while Luna and Hermione interlaced magical shields, which could more easily cover the three of them than trying to deflect the bullets with their lightsabers. Though both had practiced with Harry’s weapons, neither felt as proficient in defense as he was.

The arrows Harry deflected back exploded with angry pops among the goblin forces, until tiring of their failed tactics the small, vicious beings began to swarm out around their barricades. “Time to go,” Harry said, leading the two back to their own fortifications. On their heels came thousands of angry goblins.

Unlike Diagon Alley, the Roman Magic Quarter was comprised of wide, spacious boulevards that allowed easily two hundred goblins to run side by side. Line after line of such numbers came around the bend of the boulevard behind the three magicals. “Wait until they’re at the barrier to start firing!” Harry shouted to Derskin as they ran past.

To the Italian’s amazement, Harry, Hermione and Luna leaped the ten feet up the conjured barricade to where the main forces waited and turned to meet the Goblin charge head on. Within a minute, the entire boulevard before the barricade was filled with thousands of goblins. They started climbing the barricade, using each other as ladders.

“Now!” Harry cried in a Force-magnified voice.

Six pockets of heavy machine funds set up along the roofs of the burned out buildings on either side of the alley opened up with the sound of staccato roars. At the barricade, Harry unleashed a huge
blast of Force lightning, throwing the Goblins back from the barricade to allow Derskin’s men to open up with their small arms fire or spells. The Italians, quickly overcoming their shock, joined with their own spell fire, using blasting and slicing curses mainly.

The goblins died, in numbers never seen before in magical warfare (where Voldemort was not present). The forces nearest the barricade melted under the Italian’s fire, while those further away fell where they stood before the sheer number of heavy caliber bullets being fired into their midst.

In the midst of this, Harry summoned his own Fiendfyre, wielding his wand for the first time since the fight started. He did not let it go uncontrolled, though, wielding the animal-shaped flame carefully through the larger clumps of goblins and dissipating it when the largest clumps were gone.

The fighting lasted less than thirty minutes, and when they were done easily eighteen thousand goblins lay did in the alley.

“Il mio dio nel cielo,” Adalgiso Giordano. “So many dead.”

“Better them than us,” Harry said. He turned and looked at the Italian auror. “Voldemort attacked the Gringotts branch in London and two days later Goblins attacked every many magical enclave in Europe in numbers were never believed were possible. According to the London ministry, there were only thirty thousand goblins in all of England. Sixty thousand attacked with just the first wave. They have been planning this for centuries, keeping their true numbers hidden. They used Voldemort’s attack as an excuse to wipe out all wizards. You know this, right?”

The older auror ran a hand through his thinning hair. “Si, si lo credo. I believe you. But what can be done?”

“Who’s left at your Ministry?” Harry asked.

“Who? Me. I am the highest remaining official. I was head of Polizia Magica here.”

“In the absence of anyone else, that makes you acting Minister,” Harry said. “We’re on the precipice of change, my friend. Voldemort started this war to try and legitimize his rule in England before he attacks the continent. He hoped the Goblins attacking you would weaken the other ministries to make it easier for his forces to invade. The only way to stop that from happening is to work together.”

Giordano stared intently at Harry for a long moment. “I have read of you, Harry Potter. The papers say you are a killer of men.”

“I am a destroyer of evil men,” Harry said. “And goblins, evidently.”

“But this dark lord of yours,” Giordano continued, “I have read he has the power of a god.”

“I’ve not met enough gods to form a comparison,” Harry said, “but he is powerful. More powerful than any one wizard. And that is why we must work together, or we will never win. The Ministries are fighting the goblins one at a time instead of in a unified fashion, and that is why the Goblins are doing so well. Stand with me in Geneva at the International and help me form the international force necessary to take the Goblins out of the equation, and finally to remove Voldemort from England.”

“Siete soltanto un ragazzo,” the Italian said softly. “Only a boy. How can you do even this much?”

“By the grace of magic, I have gone beyond the veils of death itself and learned war from a master,” Harry said, staring at the man. “Do not look at my face to gauge my ability. Look at my results.”
Giordano looked back across the field of dead goblins. “There remain thousands within their cave,” he said.

“Fiendfyre,” Harry said. “History shows the goblins will never quit and will never surrender until the last one is destroyed. We gained peace after the last war through capitulation. Today has proven that is no longer an option.”

“We have many wounded,” Giordano said. “Our infrastructure has been destroyed. We will need help.”

“I have received some assistance from the English Muggle government,” Harry said. “It is time, my friend, for us to break free of the Goblin hold on our economy. It is time to adopt the Muggle currencies. It is the only way we will survive. After we speak in Geneva, we will begin plans for integrating into the Muggle economy. In the meantime, I have enough money to make loans to you for food and shelter for your people.”

He turned to Hermione, who nodded. “I’ll contact Bartleby to make the arrangements.”

“Very well,” Giordano said. “Italy will stand by you in Geneva.”

The International Confederation of Wizards Office in Geneva occupied a stately mansion off the Route de Pregny just in front of the western shores of Lake Geneva. From the outside, it appeared to be an exquisite mansion in the Grecian style, three stories with a colonnaded portico and a beautifully kept garden on its spacious grounds. A guard kiosk stood at the entryway to the building, shielded from public view by a row of pine trees.

It was to a pad in front of the kiosk that Harry, Hermione, Luna, and Adalgiso Giordano appeared by portkey. A moment later, Ron Weasley and Justin Finch Fletchley appeared. The two seventeen-year-old boys wore matching black slacks and gray robes with the Phoenix emblem on their breasts. Hermione and Luna wore their Phoenix brooches.

“Halt!” a guard called in English. The man sounded patently nervous as he emerged from his kiosk with his wand at the ready. “Identify yourselves!”

“I am Adalgiso Giordano, acting Roman Minister of Magic. My companion is Harry Potter, Minister for Magic of England, and his entourage.”

“I’ve never heard of you, Mr. Giordano,” the guard said. He sounded Australian. “And Mr. Potter is a child.”

“I was head of Polizia Magicka when the Goblins attacked the Roman Ministry. I am all that is left,” the older man said. “And Mr. Potter came with two hundred men and killed the goblins that wiped out my Ministry. He wishes to address the ICW as is his right as a Ministry head.”

Behind the first guard, a second was on a telephone, speaking rapidly. Before anyone could move, an ancient wizard appeared in front of the kiosks. In perfect, unaccented English, he said, “I am Werner Hasseldorf, Assistance Secretary of the ICW. The ICW is currently in lock-down because of the goblin crises. For me to admit you, I must conduct a security screening. Would you submit to veritaseum to ascertain your identifies.”

“So long as an antidote is made available immediately after,” Harry said with a grim smile. “It is not
wise for any head of state to be forced to tell only the truth.”

The gaunt old wizard smiled back. “Indeed, Mr. Potter.”

He and Giordano took the requisite drops. The Italian confirmed his position as a result of seeing all those in the order of ascension before him die. Harry confirmed his appointment by the Queen of England and the Prime Minister in accordance with English law.

“How interesting,” the old wizard said after Harry took the antidote. “The newly arrived ambassador for England insists your dark lord is by rights Minister of England. Whatever shall you do?”

“Adjust his understanding of the situation,” Harry said. “May we enter?”

“You may,” the secretary said before leading them through the charmed gates.

The moment they stepped through the lavish chateau, they left the Muggle world entirely. The interior of the chateau had more space than a Muggle sports dome, and shone down with the illusion of a perfect summer day. They crossed a spacious circular walkway that appeared to circumscribe the whole structure to a wall that rose thirty feet into the air but ended abruptly, well short of the distant ceiling. Through this door they entered the ICW courtroom.

It reminded Harry very much of the courtroom where he was first tried by Fudge. The representatives were seated on a hemisphere of stands, each wide enough for a large, comfortable desk, looking onto a raised platform where the Supreme Mugwump of the ICW sat with his support staff. In this case, the newly elected Supreme Mugwump was an Australian wizard named Dominic White.

He turned to see the newcomers, as did the seated members. “Witches and wizards of the ICW,” the elderly secretary said, “I present Mr. Adalgiso Giordano, who by right of survival and order of precedence is confirmed by Veritaserum as acting Minister of Magic for the Roman Ministry. His companion is Mr. Harry Potter, confirmed by Veritaserum as having been appointed English Minister for Magic by Queen Elizabeth II and her Prime Minister. As master of ceremonies, I confirm that despite belief to the contrary, the English Minister can be appointed in such a fashion, therefore his claim is just.”

Immediately the whole body began to shout in alarm, until one voice rose above the others, augmented by magic. “That boy is a traitor and a murderer!”

“Augustus Rookwood,” Hermione said to Harry. “Former Unspeakable, Derskin had his file.”

“Thank you,” Harry said.

“Harry Potter has been named Undesirable Number 1 by the British Minister of Magic!” Rookwood continued. “This body welcomes him at its own peril!”

“Your master isn’t here, Death Eater,” Harry said as he started walking down to the stage. “He’s busy celebrating his successful initiation of war.” He turned and looked at the other wizards and witches that filled the stands. “Voldemort attacked Gringotts, killing thousands of Goblins, knowing full well it would start a war. He has used that war to try and solidify the gains he made when he captured and tortured Minister Amelia Bones and her sixteen-year-old niece to death. Voldemort and his supporters are the traitors and the insurgents, and when I have finished dealing with the Goblin problem here on the continent, I will remove Voldemort once and for all.”

“Brave words for a little boy,” Rookwood said. “You’re here because you are too weak to do anything back home!”
“I am here to help those who need help,” Harry said.

Stepping forward, Giordano said, “I am Adalgiso Giordano. Minister Potter came with a small force of men and saved my people! His people wiped out twenty thousand goblins and destroyed their burrow in Rome! Italy affirms its alliance to Mr. Potter’s Ministry, and rejects the claims of the dark wizard Voldemort to authority!”

“Most interesting,” the Supreme Mugwump said. “Secretary Hasseldorf, do we have precedence in situations like this?”

“In 1583, the Minister of Bulgaria was deposed,” the older wizard said. “The new Minister sent a representative here who challenged the original to a duel. The original representative won the duel, and the pretender was eventually removed from office by joint ICW proclamation and a force of two hundred wizards. The duel was fought in accordance with the ancient laws.”

“Then I challenge Augustus Rookwood, traitor to England and a marked Death Eater of the Dark Lord Voldemort,” Harry said. “I challenge him here and now to mortal combat, the winner to represent the interest of the English Ministry.”

Rookwood, a tall, gaunt man, smiled grimly. “I am not a fool like those you faced before, Potter. I am an Unspeakable. Do you really think you can take me?”

“Let’s find out,” Harry said.

The old wizard made his way down the stands until he stepped onto the platform between the Supreme Mugwump and the representatives. He slowly pulled his wand and his eyes glittered darkly. “Very well, Potter. On the count of three. Supreme Mugwump, if you will?”

“Fine,” the old Australian said. “Three…two…one!”

Before Rookwood could pronounce his first spell, his head spun around one hundred and eighty degrees, shocking the room with the sound of snapping bone. He crumbled lifelessly to the ground, where Harry walked calmly to lift his wand. He then carried the wand to the Supreme Mugwump’s desk before facing the stunned wizards.

“I am Harry Potter, Minister for Magic of the United Kingdom. I came today to tell you a hard truth —Voldemort started a war with the Goblins to solidify his power in England, and in the hopes that the war would weaken the European ministries. The tragedy in Rome is proof that his strategy is effective. The ICW gained peace with the goblins last by total capitulation. We gave them our total economies, condemning ourselves to a slow, stagnant economy that had no hope of every growing. The Goblins control our currency, and by doing so they control our ministries. The only way to win this war is not just to destroy the goblins, but to destroy their hold on us. I am here now to tell you that I can win this war for you, but that’s not enough. We cannot continue to stagnate behind the galleon, my friends. It is time to leave behind the willful retardation of the gold standard and move into the new world. It is time to destroy the goblins, and it is time to join the muggles in the greater world of finance.”

He smiled as the representatives exploded in a furor of discussion and shouting. Things were moving very, very fast.
Setting the Field of Battle

Chapter Summary

Preparation is half the battle.

The Goblin Bogrod groveled on his belly, exposing his neck. He was the last Clan leader alive in England, and behind him squatted the last of his clan—a few dozen Goblin females and their kits.

“I beg you take my life only, dread lord,” the Goblin said. “I beg of you to spare the last of my clan.”

Voldemort stood in front of the crater that once housed Gringotts Bank, in the shattered, burned remnants of Diagon Alley. The only thing that kept the battle from spilling into Muggle London were the ancient blood wards of the alley itself, powered by every death of every wizard who had ever lived and died there for the past seven hundred years. The alley itself was completely destroyed, as were portions of several other magical alleys around the British Isles.

Moreover, despite the Goblin’s unthinkable losses, Voldemort had suffered losses as well. More, he had suffered injuries. A Goblin had managed somehow to sneak an arrow through Voldemort’s powerful defenses as he and his Ministry fought the last battle against the Goblins. Not only did Voldemort lose almost a hundred and fifty of his best fighters, he had suffered personal injury.

“I might have been merciful if you had surrendered sooner, worm,” Voldemort hissed. “Yaxley, wipe them out.”

Bogrod keeled in mourning while behind him the last Goblin females and young barked in terror before being silenced by Yaxley’s band of fighters. Voldemort killed Bogrod himself with a simple killing curse, wishing to end the miserable creature quickly so as not to listen to that horrid racket.

Voldemort spun away to face his tattered army. With a roar, he raised his wand, and the dark wizards did the same. Though the cost was high, Voldemort did what no other wizard had ever done in the history of the magical world. He had defeated the Goblin nation once and for all.

“The day is ours, my friends,” the Dark Wizard said, smiling despite the pain in his thigh from the cursed arrow. “Today, the true future of Magical Britain begins. Yaxley, begin the work to bring up the gold. We shall store it at the Ministry of Magic.”

“Yes, m’lord,” Yaxley said, before he turned and motioned for his squad to being the process of breaking down the lingering wards that continued to protect the older vaults that survived the initial destruction.

“The rest of you, return to the Ministry atrium for leave assignments,” Voldemort said. “We shall take our rest before we turn our attention to the last of those who still defy us.”

More cheers accompanied the Dark Lord’s departure. Unlike the others, he had keyed the new Ministry wards directly to himself, and so he was able to apparate directly into his chambers deep within the ministry. Once he was alone in the room, he let go his newly cultivated persona of the benign dictator and screamed his rage. His desk he destroyed with a flick of his wand before limping
painfully to the exposed seat beyond it.

He sat and lifted his robe to show the blackened puncture wound. The poison on the arrow was deadly—goblins were known as much for their poisoned blades and arrows as for the exploding ones. Only his enhanced magic had kept the poison at bay while he finished the last of his enemies.

Grimacing now, Voldemort harnessed the greatest magical core the world had ever seen and directed it like a scalpel at the poisoned part of his leg, burning not just the poison, but the flesh it touched with the sheer power of it. He conjured a rag and bit down on it, thrashing despite his magnificent will at the agony the burning caused. Finally, though, the poison burned away.

Gasping, the Dark Lord caused his wards to chime for assistance.

The door opened and a young witch fresh out of Hogwarts fell to her knees just within the frame. “You summoned me, my lord?”

“Essence of Dittany, girl. Be quick!”

“Yes, lord!” She jumped to her feet and sprinted out of sight. He was about to get angry at the girl for her delay when instead Severus Snape walked into the door.

“You’re injured, m’lord?” he asked with that prime, overly controlled voice of his.

“A trifle, already dealt with,” Voldemort said.

“Nonetheless, I offer my assistance,” Snape said. He reached into his robes and removed a phial of the essence Voldemort needed. “I’ve brewed this myself—it is exceedingly potent and should serve you nicely.”

Voldemort did not bother with his wand as he summoned the potion. He poured it over the burned portion of his thigh, sighing in relief as it sloughed away the dead flesh and regrew it afresh. With the pain gone, Voldemort was able to relax for the first time in two months. The war against the Goblins had taken longer than he thought it would, but it was done forever now.

“You’ve done well, Snape. Any news of our friends in the north?”

“Yes, m’lord. Harry Potter has returned to the castle and has managed to put together a fighting force of nearly three hundred wizards. The werewolves have formally joined his side and are also living at the castle.”

“Lupin,” Voldemort spat. “I shall eat his liver myself before this battle is done. What defenses do they have?”

“The castle wards, of course, plus Potter has been putting in Muggle defenses. I’ve viewed them—ditches in the dirt around the castle walls and a few Muggle guns that will perhaps tickle your giants. The boy may be valiant, but he is young and inexperienced in magical war.”

“And yet he defeated my Bella,” Voldemort said softly.

“With help, Master. I have learned that he did not defeat her single-handedly, and in fact was nearly defeated and badly wounded by the encounter. Her magic was a match for his. Given how much more powerful you are than her, you should be more than a match.”

Given this was exactly what Voldemort himself thought, he nodded in agreement. “You’ve done well, Severus. Return to gather what additional information you can. Now that the Goblin menace
has been dealt with, we will take some time to rebuild the essential parts of the Ministry, and then we shall destroy Potter once and for all.

“Yes, my lord,” Snape said with a waist-deep bow.

“~Broken~

~Broken~

“And he doesn’t realize that he ran out of Goblins to fight because we killed them all?” Harry asked incredulously. “I thought he had a better intelligence network than that.”

“Most of his best spies died fighting goblins,” Snape said with a grim smirk. “And with your work with the ICW, he does not have any international contacts, not any more. He has no way of knowing what happened across the Channel.”

What happened, of course, was a continent-wide war against the Goblins. At Harry’s insistence as Supreme Commander of the International Confederation Defense Force, each Ministry of Magic informed their Muggle counterparts of what was happening, and more importantly, of why. Many were concerned when their counterparts already knew what was happening because of Harry feeding information constantly to the British Prime Minister.

Harry didn’t care—he wanted Muggle military support, and with the threat of a horde of Goblins spilling into Muggle civilian areas—he got it. He discovered early on that Fuel-Air Explosives were especially effective against the Goblin burrows, and the standard goblin attack method of a large, bundled rush. In the past, this tactic allowed them to overwhelm magical shields by sheer weight of numbers. Goblins bred like rabbits, with a single goblin female able to produce forty kits during her lifetime, and always depended on numbers in any conflict. However, this tendency to group together when they attacked made them especially susceptible to large-scale Muggle weaponry. The other benefit of involving the Muggle military, even in a limited role, was to show his counterparts at the ICW just how deadly the Muggles were. Where just weeks before every Ministry teetered on the brink of collapse against waves of Goblin armies, now they stood over the burned, charred remnants of the entire Goblin nation.

And they had Harry Potter to thank.

Harry knew from Palpatine’s teachings that the media was a fickle friend at best. He let Hermione and Luna handle most of the public relations. Between Luna’s vision and empathy, and Hermione’s intellect, they were able to cull the best of the PR machine from each of the ministries and put together a Public Relations Department for the unified European Magical Command better than anyone Ministry would have been able to field.

They virtually took over the different papers that were overrun and destroyed by the Goblins, printing the same stories with slightly different slants and opinion pieces that argued over irrelevances, while agreeing on the main points as inevitable and necessary, thus further fooling the populace at large into thinking they had some modicum of control or say in what was happening. They didn’t, of course, but Harry knew how dangerous it could be if they ever realized that.

The end result was that Harry was essentially in command of not just the Magical military, but all of the magical population of Europe itself, since like the Americas, the Asiatic magical ministries never allowed the Goblins a foothold. Harry had done what not even Grindelwald had been able to do—unify all of Europe and Britain, while making the populace believe he was the good guy.

At the same time, Phoenix Industries secured the contract with Boyoda Motors, and already solar-
powered vehicles were starting to ship around the world, capable of driving hundreds of miles on a single gallon of gas, if even that much in sunnier areas of the world. Harry’s company, under a variety of shell corporations, had already made loans to the separate magical Ministries to help them rebuild, furthering their dependence on him.

The only thorn left for him was Voldemort.

Though Voldemort never knew, Harry himself witnessed three of the Dark Lord’s last battles in his own efforts to route the Goblin menace from England. Harry knew he himself was powerful, virtually unmatched in the world for sheer destructive capability.

Voldemort was more powerful.

It was sobering to watch this wizard slaughter tens of thousands of Goblins single-handedly. His followers, the original group, now considered the man a god. After all, he had all the ear-marks of godhead—he had died and been resurrected. His power was such that he could vanquish the enemy from underground, while protecting those who worshiped him and destroying those who did not. For all intents and purposes, he was a god, and Harry did not have the personal power to destroy him.

“What are you thinking about, Potter?” Snape asked.

Harry blinked and came to himself in the Headmaster’s office, which he had taken over when he returned to England with his forces. Snape’s report to Voldemort was of course completely wrong—Harry had over a thousand wizards in and around the castle—currently twice the number Voldemort had surviving the war. But those thousand would not be able to survive the Dark Lord’s Fiendfyre, even if they could beat his forces by themselves easily.

“I’m thinking about the Jedi,” he said.

“Jedi?” Snape had heard some of Harry’s experiences just through his acquaintance with the deceased Dumbledore.

“Warrior monks, the most lethal fighting force their Galaxy had for over twenty-thousand years. They harnessed the Force to guide their steps, their hands and their minds, and it made them near impossible to kill. And yet a single Sith Lord, my old Sith Master, managed to wipe out almost the whole Order within a single day.”

“How?”

“Treachery and guns. Lots and lots of guns.” Harry said.

Harry could, from memory alone, build a primitive hand-held blaster. He did not have the components or technology to make it self-contained, but he could hook it up to a power pack the size of a modern car battery that would provide the gun four or five shots before it exhausted its power supply. The problem simply came down to power—Earth technologies were already experimenting with the materials that would be used. It just came down to power.

“You don’t think you can defeat him,” Snape said with narrowed eyes.

“I know I can’t defeat him, not in single-combat,” Harry said. “But just like Sidious destroyed the Jedi, I know I can defeat this Dark Lord. It’s just a matter of preparation.”

Harry stood abruptly. “You’ve done well, Severus. Get us through this alive, and I promise you’ll have your own laboratory with your own hand-picked assistants, and you’ll never have to teach a
brat again. I’ll even ignore the fact that it was your actions that started my path by murdering my parents.”

“I’ll hold you to your word,” Snape said, nodding his head before leaving.

He was just out the door when Hermione and Luna walked back in. “Sales just started for the Boyoda cars in the Americas,” Hermione said.

“We are very rich,” Luna said.

“Good, that’ll give us the capitol we need to start on the fusion reactors,” Harry said with a smile. “Girls, I have an idea, but it’s going to need some coordination with our friends on Downing Street. I’m going to have to work with the Baroness quite a bit.”

“I think she likes you,” Hermione said.

“I think she’s terrified of you,” Luna corrected. “She has the feel of a trapped animal when you’re in the room. She is smart enough to know how dangerous you are.”

Harry too had that impression of her. “Do you think that will be a problem?”

“Yes,” Luna said. “She is starting to worry about just how much power you’ve amassed in the Magical World, and how quickly you’re amassing wealth in the Muggle one. She may start to resist you out of sheer caution.”

Harry walked to one of the windows looking over the school grounds. “I hadn’t thought of that,” he admitted. “I will need military assistance, though. Suggestions?”

“Remus,” Luna said without hesitation. “Aside from being intelligent and kind-natured, he is a handsome man and very soft-spoken, but also strong enough to take a stand if necessary. He would be an ideal spokesperson for your magical ministry when working on subordinate issues.”

“Not Arthur?”

Hermione snorted. “Arthur is a good man, Harry, but he can’t help but be patronizing to Muggles. He thinks of them the same way we think of chimpanzees. Something to be cherished, protected, and laughed at.”

He turned and looked intently at the two women who, he realized, kept him sane. “Alright,” he said. “The battle is coming soon. I don’t believe I’ll be able to destroy Tom Riddle single-handedly, so instead we’re going to set the stage to ensure I don’t have to. We’re going to be treacherous and very Slytherin about it, as well.”

“We’ll stand by you,” Hermione said resolutely.

“I know,” Harry said, smiling. “And that’s why I know we’re going to win. Now, what can you tell me about wards powerful enough to hold gods. And when we’re done with that, then we’ll talk about setting the stage. It’s going to take more than a one-on-one fight to kill Voldemort.”

~~Broken~~

~~Broken~~

Three weeks later, a band of ten Snatchers appeared in the Welsh countryside, looking for the poor sods stupid enough to say the Dark Lord’s name. They didn’t have a chance to even make a sound
when twenty stunners hit them simultaneously. When the leader was enervated a few minutes later, it was to find himself staring into the intense green eyes of Undesirable Number One himself.

“Hi there,” Harry said with a tight smile. “You’re going to tell me all about where all of Voldemort’s prisoners are being kept, aren’t you?”

The Snatcher gulped audibly.

Fifteen miles east of Sunderland, in the heart of the North Sea, rose the most forbidding structure the world had ever seen. Azkaban Fortress was built of black basalt and misery. The wards of the castle were literally powered by death and despair, leaching away the magical energy released whenever a magical being died.

These wards constrained the Dementors, who had returned to the fortress following Voldemort’s victory over the Ministry, and were feeding happily on the thousand or so Muggleborn prisoners the Dark Lord kept in the fortress.

The human guards were those who had failed in one task or another, but not so badly as to warrant the Dark Lord’s full wrath. Instead, Azkaban was used as a last chance of redemption. The guards were grateful for that, given what normally happened to the Dark Lord’s servants who failed, and as a result took their jobs seriously.

So it was an attentive young Death Eater named Canton Brood, formerly of Slytherin, who saw the sleek gray Muggle vessel that came closer to the fortress than should have been possible, given the island’s wards.

Aldarius Singleton, the garrison commander, walked slowly up clutching his cigarette. “What’s this, then?” he asked.

“Muggle boat, sir,” Brood said, pointing.

The ship was only visible because of its lights, but because of those they knew it was way too close. They saw a flash of light, followed a second or so later by the muffled sound of an explosion. Following that was a burst of fire that killed both wizards instantly and shattered the wall upon which they walked.

In the space of twenty seconds, ten more 4.5 inch shells struck the wall of the fortress at various intervals with astounding accuracy, punching holes in the fortress defenses without destroying the interior cells.

Before the last shell hit, a fleet of four hundred broom riders descended on the castle, ruthlessly unleashing Fiendfyre against the dementors and those few garrison fighters willing to try and defend against the overwhelming odds.

Harry did not even lead the attack—he left that honor jointly to one of the former aurors-turned-officers he picked up during their fight in Bulgaria—Captain Viktor Krum.

The muggleborns were taken to the HMS Liverpool by portkey for medical support by the fifty healers waiting for them, while the crew of the Type 42 Destroyer looked on dumbfounded at the appearance of a thousand injured civilians.
The first blow had been struck. The final war had begun.
Chapter Summary

Not all power is through force of arms.

Voldemort walked the shores of Azkaban, staring at the shattered walls of the impenetrable fortress.

“Muggle weapons, m’lord,” Yaxley said. “The survivor said the Muggles sent a ship that fired canons at the fortress, and it was through those holes that the enemy was able to breach the Fortress. Almost all the dementors were destroyed by Fiendfyre.”

Voldemort’s face remained cold and calm as he examined the damage. The bodies of his men were laid out on the cold rocks of the island. The only survivor was himself badly injured, and his memories showed that he fought valiantly, thus buying himself some reprieve for his failure.

“Potter is in line with the Muggle government,” Voldemort said.

“Yes, my lord,” Yaxley said. “Our spies said he gained his appointment as Minister from the queen. Perhaps…perhaps he was being serious.”

“His mistake,” Voldemort said darkly. “I’ve done my best to keep this war from the Muggles until we were ready to deal with them, but perhaps that was a mistake. Perhaps it is time to show the Muggles just what happens when they interfere in things beyond their understanding.”

“M’lord?”

“Find where the Queen is in residence and then burn it to the ground. Take as many men as you need.”

Yaxley smiled a dark, hungry smile. “It shall be as you wish, m’lord.”

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Being late January, the Queen took residence in her private estate at Sandringham House near the eponymous village in Norfolk.

Yaxley gathered a squad of fifty wizards with the intent of razing the palatial home to the ground with the queen inside. His men apparated to the coordinates only to be caught inside wards easily as powerful as those at Hogwarts—it never would have dawned on either Yaxley or Voldemort that the Queen would know of the magical world she ruled over, and would have her personal residences warded. The wards redirected them into the lower lake on the royal grounds.

Yaxley swam to the shore, more furious than confused about how he was redirected from his target. He started to pull himself out of the water when he pulled up in shock.

Harry Potter himself stood in front of him, flanked by easily a hundred witches and wizards. “Hello,
there,” the boy said. “Her majesty does not appreciate unannounced visitors. She is quite put out with you, you know.”

Pansy Parkinson, Voldemort’s personal assistant as of two hours ago, quailed before the angry Dark Lord as Voldemort paced the conference room. Repair work on the Ministry had faltered due to a lack of labor. Most of his staff were Death Eaters, and the predations of Potter’s people were taking a toll. Moreover, the slave labor pool he’d been conditioning at Azkaban was gone.

His wards chimed, and with a mental flick of magic, his door opened to admit his trembling, terrified secretary. Pansy knew the girl—Tracey Davis, one of Daphne’s friends. She fell to her knees just inside the door and prostrated herself. “M’lord,” she said in a trembling voice, “we…we received word of Mr. Yaxley.”

Voldemort stood, alerted by her terror. “What news?”

“His forces arrived at the atrium, m’lord,” Tracey said.

“Why is he not here to report, then?”

She started blubbering.

“Answer me, girl!”

“They’re dead, lord!” she wailed in terror. The wail was cut off abruptly by the sound of tearing, violated flesh. Pansy fought the urge to be sick as she stared at the unidentifiable spray of red that suddenly covered the floor, walls and ceilings of the front of the Dark Lord’s office, where once knelt one of the friends she used to play Exploding Snap with and talk to about boys. Dead at the Dark Lord’s hands—just like Draco.

Voldemort just stood and stared at the bloody mess, red eyes narrowed with trembling rage. Pansy did not dare move or speak—such was his rage lately than anyone could share Tracey’s fate. She then watched as a red flame flicked up from the blood and quickly spread over the walls, ceiling and floor, burning away the blood and mangled tissue before disappearing. When the last flame dissipated, all trace that the girl had ever existed was gone.

“Potter is beginning to irritate me,” the Dark Lord growled. “Tell my soldiers to assemble, Parkinson. All of them. This ends now.”

The Doe Patronus pranced into the Headmaster’s office where Harry worked with Hermione and ten Rune Master’s from both England and the Continent. The Rune Masters, having never seen a messenger Patronus, stared in surprise when the magical construct spoke in Snape’s voice. “The word is given. You have three days.”

With that, the doe faded into a magical mist. In the silence that followed, Harry looked at the Rune Masters and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, the clock is ticking. If Voldemort is coming in three days, that means we have only two to get this done. You’ve told me this is the most powerful, ancient ward in existence. Don’t disappoint me, or your countries will be next after Britain falls.”
The seven wizards and three witches all nodded silent affirmations before they bend back to their tedious and time-consuming work. He turned to Hermione, who said: “Remus has worked miracles, Harry. We’re getting everything we asked for.”

“He’s a good man,” Harry agreed. “And you’re a brilliant advisor for recommending him.”

“Is that all I am, your advisor?”

“Until tonight,” he said with a grin.

The Armies of Lord Voldemort, all two hundred wizards, twenty giants, fifty trolls and two hundred acromantulas, gathered at the edge of the Forbidden Forest and looked at the castle three days after the Dark Lord made his call. Most of the time to gather was spent collecting the creatures. The army consisted of every single fighter and creature he had left, but it should have been enough. The Acromantulas alone would ensure terror and discord at the castle.

In the distance, through the trees, Voldemort could see the castle proper. He knew from his time at the castle, and later when he last visited years later, that the castle’s defensive wards actually extended beyond the reach of the castle’s bridges to the very edge of its lands. However, now he could clearly see the shimmer of the ward lines in a tight bubble around the keep of the castle itself, leaving the bridges and outer battlements open to attack.

He did sense multiple, overlapping anti-Apparition hexes around the castle, but he was neither surprised nor bothered. In fact, it was a sound measure. The castle normally employed an Anti-Apparition ward, but in this case by having waves of jinxes like overlapping shields in a phalanx, it freed up the magical power requirements and made it nearly impossible to break the coverage, since with one broken jinx there would be a hundred more. They would not last more than a day or so, but it was long enough.

The jinxes would not keep out his ground forces, thought.

“Let the creatures attack first,” Voldemort said with calm confidence. With the wards so tight, he could afford to take the outer battlements first and move closer to bring them down, saving his own power for the fight against Potter.

He watched from the forest line as the trolls, giants and Acromantulas charged toward the castle with hellish roars and cries, while his wizards hung back to watch the chaos. It was only then that they saw defenders for the first time along the tops of the battlements and along the bottom of the walls rising up out of trenches like animals.

Voldemort despised Muggles, but he remembered the Second Muggle War, having fought with Grindelwald as a barely legal youth. He instantly recognized the unusually long barrels of the weapons that bristled both at the top and bottom of the battlements, but did not understand how they could be there. Muggle weaponry did not work within…

…the wards. Wards which had been drawn back to the keep itself, leaving the battlements ward-free.

Atop the wall, Harry smiled in satisfaction and turned to Thomas Derkins. “Tell you men to fire when ready.”
“Roger that,” Derkins said, grinning as well in anticipation. He echoed the order.

The first shot was from one of the ten M82A1 sniper rifles along the battlements, with a single shot punching through the skull of a troll. The creature continued on for three steps before it fell dead to the ground. The trolls around it were too stupid to understand they were walking toward their deaths.

The acromantulas charged ahead of both trolls and giants, moving faster than either breed of lumbering monster. These creatures encountered two separate lines of defense: the .50 caliber machine gun placements at the base of the walls, and the M134 miniguns lining the top of the battlements.

The M134s did not even sound like guns—they sounded like Muggle chainsaws as they mowed down the attacking swarms of Acromantulas. Those spiders that survived the double-sweep of machine gun fire were so few and far between they stood no chance from the wizards also manning the ditches.

Those same miniguns turned their sights onto the giants. Voldemort watched as the first giant raised his club, only to stutter his steps as a mini-gun tore into his chest with devastating, almost unbelievable power.

“My Lord,” a faceless Death Eater breathed. “What kind of magic is that?”

“Magic that should not exist,” Voldemort snarled angrily. He stood helplessly as every single dark creature that answered him succumbed to the impossible weapons—weapons that even outside the immediate wards should not have been able to function. The Dark Lord knew just enough of Muggle weapons from his research during his first war to know that such devices needed electricity to work, and there was no way electricity could work at Hogwarts.

And he was right.

Harry Potter smiled and checked the powering runes to make sure they were functioning properly for the miniguns. The Runemasters he hired had taken his challenge, and the offer of a ten thousand galleon reward, and did in a matter of weeks what five hundred years of wizards said could never be done: they managed a way to convert magic into direct current.

A surge of warning in the Force brought him out of his thoughts in time to see a lone acromantula breast the walls of the battlements. Harry did not hesitate and lashed out with Force-lightning. The creature squealed before being blasted back from the walls.

He took the opportunity to step wholly onto the battlements to view the field below. The last giant’s chest vaporized under the combined power of four mini-guns and fell, leaving the grounds before the castle littered with dead, car-sized spiders, trolls and giants.

“Snipers report targets in the trees,” Derkins said.

“Fire at will,” Harry said.

The air once more exploded under the .50 Caliber founds fired not just from the sniper rifles, but also from the machine gun emplacements. The miniguns did not fire—Harry wanted them saved for closer operations.

In the Force, he felt Voldemort’s rage, but also the terror of his men as their heads and chests started to vaporize. Even from the castle he could see the glimmer of magical shields, just as he could see those shields collapse under the onslaught. As his advisors suggested, magic alone could not stop a
heavy caliber round.

“What I wouldn’t give for an AT-AT or a Juggernaught,” he muttered.

All this, Harry knew, was just to remove the chaff from the battlefield. They all heard a roar of rage as a sudden ball of fire flashed out from the trees and rushed toward the emplacements, growing into a heard of flaming dragons as they approached.

“Fiendfyre!” Harry shouted. “All ground units evacuate!”

Wizards scrambled out of their trenches and ran for the battlements as the magical flame approached. The heat of it was almost unbearable even from the top of the forty-foot battlements that surrounded the court yard.

Harry watched with a hard expression as five of Derkins men failed to escape in time. The Fiendfyre consumed them so quickly it vaporized them even as it attacked the weapon placements. Magazine cartridges exploded while weapons themselves melted under the magical heat. The ball of Fiendfyre continued its hunt along the walls before dissipating.

Another ball of Fiendfyre approached, this time heading for the top of the wall. “Stand ready,” Harry called.

Around him, five hundred witches and wizards from across the continent raised their wands. As the fire expanded into the winged form of a dragon, swooping down to attack, Harry shouted the order: “Now!”

Five hundred wands cast spells of water and ice, pelting the fiery construct with its elemental opposite. The older, more skilled wizards he brought in from the continent conjured ice giants—magical golems of ice that were the only known magical construct that could, even for a time, contest fiendfyre. While Harry had the power, he did not yet have the knowledge or skill to cast such magic. He could have killed the wizards who did easily, but to waste such knowledge was stupid.

He was not like Voldemort, Darth Sidious or Darth Vader—he was better than them. While in his heart of hearts he knew he was still a Dark Lord, Harry had something Voldemort nor the Sith ever had; he had Hermione and Luna. For them, if not for himself, he would play things smart.

The Fiendfyre fizzled away, defeated by the combined power of the first line of defenders. Harry took pride in their work, up until Voldemort blasted the wall out from under his feet.

He felt the surge of danger in the Force just as the massive ball of red magical energy burst from the forest edge. He had just enough time to jump clear as the ball struck the wall and blasted it apart with the destructive power of a turbolaser. He heard and felt many of his people die in the Force, along with easily fifty of the defenders nearest where he was.

The magic necessary to produce such destruction was astonishing, and terrifying at the same time.

“All defenders fall back to the keep,” Harry ordered. “Fall back to secondary positions!”

It did not surprise Harry that somehow Thomas Derkins had survived. He took command and quickly evacuated the walls, but not before a second astonishing burst of magic brought down another section of the battlements, taking with it another thirty defenders.

Harry pulled his father’s cloak from his pocket and leapt down from the shattered battlements, content that Hermione, Luna, and Derkins as his Military second in command would handle what happened next in the keep. For his part, he had to remain outside the castle walls.
He hid under the cloak, but then also shielded his presence from the Force entirely, disappearing as only the Sith could. He squatted down on the far edge of the plain twenty yards from the shattered walls of the battlements and watched as Voldemort finally emerged from the line of trees.

His army followed behind him, if an army it could still be called.

The machine gun and sniper fire devastated the Dark Lord’s forces, reducing it from hundreds to perhaps eighty fighters all told. Snape, Harry saw, was lingering back. His job was to kill the snake, and if he succeeded, Harry planned to let the man live in comfort on the continent. With that last Horcrux gone, the Dark Lord would be mortal once more, even if he remained ridiculously powerful.

Voldemort stopped before the castle, eyes narrowed. “They have fled from us,” he said loudly, speaking to his tattered followers. “Those that survive this day shall have the power of kings in the days that follow. Your loyalty and skill will be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams. Go now—there cannot by many left. Go kill those who oppose us, but spare those who surrender. We will need sheep to herd and cull in the days to come.”

His men surged forward through the broken outer defense of the castle, while Voldemort himself raised his wand and attacked the Castle Wards.

Even as far away as he was, Harry could not help but wince at the sheer power Voldemort unleashed. For this, he did not even use his wands, since such power would likely have shattered it. Instead, he raised both hands, reached out with his god-like magic and literally wrenched the wards of the school down like so many pieces of cloth. It was a terrifying display, even to a Sith. Not even Sidious could have done something so awe-inspiring.

With the wards down, Voldemort continued past the shattered battlements until he stood in the middle of the courtyard.

He did not notice the new flagstones that covered the center of the courtyard, nor would he have, since they were now coated in plaster dust and shattered bricks. What he did notice was the occasional flash of spell fire within the school itself, accompanied by cries of pain.

Harry let himself emerge from the Force, gathered his cloak and pushed it into the pockets of his battle robe, and walked calmly to the shattered wall. He did not know how much Voldemort could sense through his magic, but assumed he could sense enemies around him as well as Harry could. Indeed, Harry just reached the line of the broken wall when Voldemort calmly turned and stared at him. “Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived,” the Dark Lord said with a reptilian smile. “Come to die.”

“Hopefully not,” Harry said. He smiled as a silver doe danced past the startled the Dark Lord to Harry.

“It is done,” the doe said in Snape’s voice. “By the Longbottom boy, Merlin help us.”

The patronus disappated. “What was that?” Voldemort growled.

“That was the message letting me know your last Horcrux was destroyed,” Harry said with a smirk.

Voldemort stared at him for the longest time in silence until he slowly began to laugh. Harry admitted to himself it was not the reaction he was expecting, or wanted.

When at last the Dark Lord calmed from his laughing, he said, “Do you think I need Horcruxes any longer, boy? I am God! I have drunk the nectar of the Pharaohs! I am immortal! This body cannot
“Bella died easily enough without her head,” Harry said. “I think you will too.”

At the mention of Bellatrix, Voldemort snarled. “You will pay for her death, and the deaths of my followers.”

“What followers?” Harry said calmly. “Your main informant was wrong, my foolish friend. We did not have a few hundred wizards here. I’ve collected fighters from throughout Europe under a unified command of the International Confederation of Wizards. Do you hear any more fighting from the castle? Your followers are dead. My orders were to provide no mercy. Even as we speak, an additional force of four hundred ICW Enforces have retaken the Ministry of Magic. You are the last remnant of your short reign, Tom Riddle, and you won’t be leaving this place alive.”

Voldemort took a menacing step forward. “That name no longer has any meaning for me.”

Harry smiled grimly, remembering another man who tried to flee from his past. “No, I suppose not. Goodbye then, Voldemort.”

Voldemort raised both hands, summoning magic to level mountains, when Harry shouted, “Now!”

He just managed to launch himself into the air over a wave of magic that vaporized a twenty-foot long pile of rubble just as a tight cone of runic magic rose up from the courtyard of the castle in a cylindrical wall. Voldemort’s eyes widened in rage as he flared his full power against the wards. Such was the strength of the attack that the strongest runic wards known to magic flared dangerously.

“Derkins, Moody, get those guns moving!” Harry screamed.

Voldemort continued to strain the wards as Derkins directed squads of wizards to float in three massive weapon placements, and the large ward stones that would provide the energy for them to run.

“Tom, just in case you don’t recognize these,” Harry said as he approached, “you are looking at three towable M167 Vulcan Air Defense Systems. I understand they’re being phased out of active service, starting a few years ago. That just makes them cheaper for me, I suppose. These weapons fire an explosive 20 millimeter bullet, over 6,000 of them a minute, in fact, at just over a thousand meters per second. I was hoping we could experiment, you see. Let’s see what the nectar of the pharaohs can do against the ingenuity of modern Muggle military ordinance.”

The Dark Lord’s eyes widened. He began to rise into the air, only for the wards to flash and bring him down. He raged and attacked the wards with his magic, causing the huge ward stone below him to take on a permanent glow as it absorbed his power.

Harry stood silently as the wizards under Derkin’s command—all the man’s mercenaries trained in Muggle warfare—established the three weapons systems. It took precious minutes for them to get the power connected, minutes Voldemort spent battering at the strained ward stone.

It was admirable, in a way.

“We’re ready, lad,” Moody said at Derkin’s nod.

“Then by all means, let’s see what happens,” Harry said.
Voldemort stood still, ready to act the moment they dropped the ward stone.

“Oh, Tom, did I mention this was a permeable ward? It will let through anything at all, except magic.”

The Dark Lord’s eyes bulged to maximum reptilian proportions before the three massive Gatling-style cannons opened fire. Voldemort raised his hands and summoned a magical shield easily as powerful as the wards that contained him. Harry watched with interest as the wards intercepted and vaporized the thousands of rounds striking him.

“Merlin’s balls, that man is powerful,” Moody roared over the cacophony of the weapons. Beside him Derkins nodded in silent agreement. Spent shell casings began to pile up around all three guns, while in the center of the courtyard Voldemort bowed his head with his hands held up, somehow maintaining his shield.

Harry began to sweat, genuinely frightened that they would run out of bullets before he ran out of magic.

The Dark Lord looked up at Harry, and for the first time since the fight began, Harry could see strain on the wizard’s face. “They’ll destroy you in the end as well!” Voldemort screamed, his voice somehow making it to Harry’s ears over the din of the weapons fire.

“I’m sure they’ll try,” Harry agreed, using the Force to ensure his enemy heard him. “But by then, you’ll be a long-forgotten memory. Goodbye, Tom Riddle.”

With a grunt, Voldemort’s shield collapsed, and not even a second later almost twenty thousand 20 mm bullets reduced his body to a fine mist. Harry felt his passing as a thunderclap of dark energy in the Force.

“The King is dead,” Harry whispered with a satisfied smile. “Long live the king.”
Screams ripped apart the solemn silence of the night. They continued unending for newly ten long, horrifying minutes before at last they came to an end. Without the screams, the only sound was the harsh, unrelenting whistle of the wind.

Harry Potter sat up and looked at this skin. Lines of pale flesh marked his naked limbs where they had been flayed to the bone just minutes before. The rock below him was clean, where just moments ago it was drowned in blood. He stood slowly, glorying in the power he felt within him.

He stood in the center of a stone basin, and ringing the basin were the bodies of one hundred men and women, each condemned to death within their respective nation. Each had agreed to give their life in return for a substantial payment made to their next of kin. After all, they were going to die anyway, why not ensure something was left to their loved ones?

The *Imperius* charm insured their compliance, along with the compliance of his assistant for the day. He looked at the glassy-eyed Pansy Parkinson in satisfaction. She was one of the first of Voldemort’s Ministry to surrender, and had been the most cooperative. He considered killing her briefly—there was no reason to let her live, in truth.

But then he thought of his wives—of how Luna looked at him when he left that morning, somehow knowing what he was going to be doing. Instead, he placed a thumb to her forehead and rubbed it gently across her brow, erasing her recent memories with a simple touch.

When he lifted his *Imperius* curse, she blinked and shivered as she looked into his brilliant, cold green eyes. Instantly tears rose to her own eyes as she realized how close to death she stood. “Please,” she whispered. “Please don’t kill me.”

“I have no reason to,” Harry said, speaking a simple and yet profound truth. “You’ve served well enough.” He hand-conjured an egg-shaped stone and turned it into a portkey. “Take this and return to England. Let your mistress know I will return shortly. Continue to meet their needs satisfactorily, and you will be allowed to finish your probation alive.”

Pansy squeezed her eyes shut. “Thank you, my lord,” she managed to say clearly enough. She took the stone and disappeared with a pop. When she was gone, Harry reached out his senses, astounded at how the Force not only responded to him, but seemed to actually be a part of him. He rose easily into air, borne aloft by power that was too strong to be called either magic or the Force, but was the source of both.

He waived his hand, and with a surge of power dissolved the bodies of the Muggles who gave their lives so that he could live forever.

And now, it was time to go back and help Hermione with the Philosopher’s Stone she and Luna were working on. After all, if a 14th Century wizard could do it, then the brightest witches of the 20th Century most assuredly could as well.
Harry, Hermione and Luna stood together, smiling for the cameras, as behind them the first fusion reactor in Europe went online. The plant itself was shaped like a standing domino for the reactor coils, which ran horizontally up and down the interior of the structure. Run on carbon and hydrogen, and producing water as a byproduct, the energy plant produced 3,000 megawatts of energy every hour.

The reactor, wholly owned by Phoenix Energy, a subsidiary of Phoenix Industries, represented the culmination of five years of tense negotiations and demonstrations, and was just the first of fifty such plants planned.

Firebird Solutions, another wholly owned subsidiary of Phoenix Industries, was currently working with the European Union to decommission and clean up the many nuclear power plants that dotted Europe. Harry was sure he’d find something to do with all those fuel rods.

He said a few words at the press conference, thanked the appropriate ministers and politicians, and walked with his wives back to their car—a solar/electric hybrid built by Boyoda, as of the previous year a wholly owned subsidiary of Phoenix Industries.

Once in the car, they tapped on the glass and the security wards separated them from the real world.

“Thank Merlin that’s over,” Hermione muttered. “I swear the Spanish minister was staring at my ass the whole time.”

“I know I was,” Luna said brightly. “That’s a very fetching skirt.”

“Well, yes, thank you,” Hermione said. She removed her Fire-phone, an integrated palm-sized computer and phone connected to the new wireless networks Firebird Communications had established throughout most of the European Union countries. It provided faster download speeds than anything else available, ever. Somehow, their competitors had still not been able to break any of their new technological innovations, although Harry knew Apple Computers in America was close to doing something similar following their own technology.

“We have the anti-trust suit in Italy tomorrow,” she said. “Harry, that one might be a problem. Our defense team says the Ministers are trying to push through a law that would essentially make us illegal.”

Harry nodded—he trusted Hermione’s word more than anyone else in the world save Luna’s. If she said there was a problem, then there was a problem, simple as that. “See if we can schedule a meeting with all involved parties,” he said.

“Imperius?” Luna asked. There was no judgment in the question, simply a query.

“If necessary,” Harry said. “I think in this case, though, bribery might be more effective. The Italian minister has demonstrated a level of corruption I think we can use. If bribery doesn’t work, we’ll revert to blackmail. And then if that doesn’t work, we’ll get more exotic.”

He looked at Luna. “Any word on the unification proposal at the ICW?”

“The Chinese are fighting,” she said. “They want a seat at any permanent advisory council.”

“How many magicals are in China?”
“More than Europe, America and Australia combined,” Luna said.

“What about Russia?”

“Far fewer,” Luna said. “Stalin and his successors were not kind to wizards and witches, while the Chinese Communist Party was much more tolerant, surprisingly.”

Harry touched the Force lightly, following its currents to the Chinese. “I can work with them,” he finally said. “They have a xenophobic, self-interested perspective that makes them predictable if you just know how to see things through their eyes. Offer them a permanent seat on the counsel in return for helping me pressure Russia.”

Luna beamed. “I was hoping you’d say that. I’m sure they’ll agree.”

“And then when that’s done?” Hermione asked.

“Then, we’ll have a single world-government for all the magical beings,” Harry said with smile. “A government with laws and rules of engagement, and a single magical military to stop anyone from getting too anxious. Though, of course, you shouldn’t call it military. It’s the Enforcer Division.”

“And I’m sure they’ll be enforcing the law soon, like in Argentina,” Luna said. “They and the Koreans have refused to acknowledge the ICW completely.”

“That’s fine,” Harry said. “When they try to act without regard to ICW rules, we can move in and teach them their mistake, but until then we need to bide our time. Many witches and wizards are still adjusting to the shift to Muggle currencies; we need to give everyone a few years to catch up.”

“And then?” Luna asked.

“And then, when the magical world is completely unified, we can take a close look at our Muggle Counter parts.”

“And by then,” Hermione said, “well, Phoenix Industries will own the entire world infrastructure.”

“It hasn’t been easy,” Luna said.

In fact, it hadn’t been. Their greatest challenge was OPEC. The oil producing countries of the world, within the first two years of sales of Harry’s solar-augmented vehicles, saw a drop in revenues in the billions of Euros. They responded by at first lowering the price of crude oil to just dollars on the barrel, but by that time Hermione and Luna had whipped up the ecological lobbyists throughout the world to preach the benefits of cheap, renewable power. Solar/gas hybrids were replaced with solar/electric hybrids that did not use gas at all.

His company then began producing solar energy plants in the southwest United States that produced as much energy as the most advanced coal power plants. Similar solar farms appeared in Spain, Italy and Australia.

They built one in Egypt at that government’s invitation, only to have the plant attacked by Islamic Militants who just happened to have received funding and intelligence from member nations of OPEC.

That attack was the invitation to act Harry had been waiting for. On a platform over the shattered solar farm, he held up the pictures of the workers beheaded during the attack and publicly vowed justice. The International Community watched in shock as for the next three months Harry’s privately funded army swept through and obliterated militant camps in every OPEC nation,
disregarding their cries of violated sovereignty.

Harry responded to those cries with undeniable proof of their complicity in the terrorist attacks not just on his plant, but across the world. His own plants in the UN kept any possible sanctions against his company or him personally from gaining ground, while his contacts in the western nations were thrilled that he was able to do what they all wanted to, but could not because of their previous dependence on oil. Government leaders publicly decried his action while privately congratulating him.

When at last the worst of the fighting was done, Harry performed the killing stroke by developing an algae-based artificial oil that could be mass-produced on levels equal to OPECs best production years, at a fraction of the cost, with no longer-term environmental cost. He won the Nobel Prize that year, and was named the Greatest Man Alive by Greenpeace, Time, and Teen Witch Magazine. Luna, of course, was only excited by the last.

“So when are you going to take us to space?” Luna asked, moving to the edge of her seat.

Harry smiled at her. “We should have the Earth in the shape we want within ten years. And then… then, my loves, the stars alone know how far we’ll go.”

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