The Boy With Kaleidoscope Eyes
by BlueMaple

Summary

Harry Potter dies a second time of, of all things, quite surprising and unanticipated old age. Once again arrived at King’s Cross, he is offered his rightful seat on the Onward Train, but, in that one split second between Life and After, he discovers that though one can take the horcrux out of the Boy-Who-Lived, the crotchety, intensely private family man and world-renowned Auror who grew to take his place is not quite immune to fear-of-death by association. Not quite time travel, it's yet a trope... But... Not.

An epic tale of love, hope, renewal, second chances, revisited priorities, and thoroughly buggered plans and plotlines... None of which are nearly as accidental or incidental as one might imagine. Part One recommended for context.

Notes

I cannot and do not in any way, shape or form lay claim to JK Rowling's world or characters. I don't want to repeat this disclaimer at the beginning of every chapter, so it may be assumed it is lurking under its invisibility cloak at the top of each. Say hello! It's friendly, and,
incidentally, loves your comments. :)

'Winter Kaleidoscope' (below) credited to Dr-Wolf0014 at deviantart.com.
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(Take Two)

Harry has been back for just over a year and a half when the payoff finally occurs. He's known it's been coming for weeks now; Mrs. Figg’s bin-out-back, hidden door key and floo have been invaluable ways to keep track of the Wizarding news, never mind the results of his subtle and discreet temporal machinations. It hasn't been easy, mind - Figg is more than a bit of an inconvenient homebody - but with all those Kneazles to breed and feed, she's had to go out for supplies sometimes, and as for the ethics of it all... It's been, as the saying goes, for the Greater Good. After a long, long lifetime of living for others, Harry is more than willing to adopt the cliché on his own behalf, and Notice-Me-Not charms are, in his opinion, the most underestimated and greatest invention since treacle tart.

He sits on the curb off the corner of the tiny petrol station and convenience market at the corner of Wisteria Walk, scuffing old butts and dusty gravel into weary little piles with the toe of one trainer as he nervously shreds a scrap of napkin. The bus – Muggle, not Knight - wheezes to a halt, and a single passenger disembarks. It is a man, gaunt and scraggly, but clean for all that, and carrying a simple leather satchel. He has the face of a beaten and debased angel, and hungry, wild eyes. When he spots Harry opposite, he halts in his tracks and stares. Harry stares back, the can of Coke beside him forgotten. In that breathless, dry moment his fractured universe slams back together, spinning behind the smeared lens of his glasses, and he lets out a small, pained sound, almost a whimper.

The man crosses the street in three great loping strides, slamming on the brakes for the last and approaching him gingerly. He stands before him, looking down at him, and his fingers, pale and thin, whiten to near translucent as he clenches them against his emotions. Harry stumbles to his feet, his thin child’s hands clutching at his own thighs.

“Hello, Harry,” Sirius Black whispers. “My God. Oh my...” He brings his free hand up to cover his bitten, scarred lips: the grey dry stubble, those hungry, wild eyes. Eleven-year-old Harry reaches up and touches the hand wonderingly.

“Padfoot,” he whispers. The hand drops. So does the satchel, and then Sirius is lifting him in his arms, and Harry is wrapping his legs around his waist and burying his face in the thin, rough neck as he frantically inhales the scents of stale cigarettes and hospital linens... They stand there for a long time as the broken pieces of their mutual worlds spin and reform like the broken shards in a kaleidoscope, creating something both old and new and brilliant and beautiful, and finally, finally, right.
Eighteen Months and Eleven Days Earlier

Harry Potter died at the ripe old age of a hundred thirty-six, his wife Ginevra heading the bright army of their spawned generations at his deteriorating and celebrated side. He woke, as he had once before, in the train station at King’s Cross. The Old Guard was there, waiting with banners and the loaded trolley cart: **The Next Great Adventure**, the pamphlet someone shoved in his hand said, and oh God, he wanted them to just go away, because he’d had enough adventure for any hundred lifetimes, and if the reward was just more of the same...

He stood there stubbornly till they drifted away, confused and hurt and bewildered all. *Mist and shade, shall this too fade?* he thought, surprised... He hadn’t actually thought it would work; he was just pitching a bit of a last hurrah of a tantrum on principle - he’d been Voldemort’s horcrux, after all, and something of the man’s antipathy towards his own end had been bound to show at the last moment - but then the train had faded to white, and the white to pale, and bloody buggering hell, he panicked momentarily. *I don’t want to be a ghost, that wasn’t the plan, I don’t want*...

*Maybe I should have thought this through.*

Then he faded too, and when he solidified again, it was to the stuff of nightmares, or at least of near-excessively annoying and never- quite-forgotten bad dreams. *Bloody buggering hell*, he said out loud as he found himself on his back under a ragged sheet in a small boot cupboard that, in the worst, most humid days of summer, could pass for the Gateway to Mordor. Less than two inches from his nose, a smaller, but no less intimidating version of Shelob greeted him cordially. Harry batted her away, and sat up, sweating and grimy in the dark. *Do not tell me. Do not*...

A quick peek down his tattered drawers confirmed it, and he flopped back: half-moaning, half-laughing, and pressing the heels of his hands to his eyes.

*I’ve died and gone to hell*, he thought despairingly, but after only a bit more wallowing he sat up again, blinking in realization as the kaleidoscope spun behind his eyes. Seconds later he was scrambling out of the cupboard into the moonlit kitchen, and was staring at the calendar on the wall, each day neatly and compulsively checked off in blue ink.

*Nineteen eighty nine*, he whispered aloud. *December twentieth, nineteen eighty nine*, and he glanced out the window at the snow-swollen full moon, and sat down hard, right there in the middle of the pristine scrubbed floor of the late and unlamented 4 Privet Drive. *Solstice night, what dark and mirthful magic is this, bloody buggering bolloky hell.*

A timeless while later, Harry Potter pushed himself to his feet, nicked a frosted Christmas tree from the cookie jar on the counter beside the microwave – say what you would about Aunt Petunia, but her pistachio shortbread was to literally die for - and retreated back to his cupboard. Moments later it opened again and he padded out, went to the fridge, hauled out every fixing he could find, and made himself a sandwich that would have had Ron weeping in admiration and/or lust. That wandless Notice-Me-Not, courtesy of Auror 101, worked just as well in the pursuit of ham, beef, chicken and cheese as it had in the pursuit of Dark Wizards.

Harry considered his options as he sat at the table in his drawers, skinny bare legs swinging freely as he demolished the sandwich and guzzled a full two pints of full-cream milk straight from the bottle. His options and his priorities.
December 20th, he said aloud. His voice was as thin and small and boyish as befitted a nine year old. 

\textit{Five days till Christmas.}

He polished off the last of the sandwich, glugged the last of the milk, rinsed his dishes neatly and wiped the counter out of habit (that old saying on how if you wanted to know how a witch would turn out you should look at her mother had, at his end, proved dismayingly accurate; he’d loved Gin, but bloody buggering \textit{bollocks}, she’d turned into a harridan over crumbs and smears in her old age), and ran a hand through his hair as he stretched mightily and contentedly... He was about to head back to his cupboard when he heard a noise from the other room. Curious, he slipped down the hall and peered in. Dudley was there, poking and prodding at piles of presents, a glinting razor blade in hand as he carefully sliced bits of paper and squinted to see what lay underneath. Harry rolled his eyes as he leaned against the door in the moonlight and watched. The hiss of disappointment was almost as predictable as the gigantic cloud of gas that escaped as the pudgy boy bent over too far.

Nostalgia was one thing, Harry reflected as he beat a hasty retreat, gagging. Some memories, more than others, were better left dead and buried. Dead, buried and \textit{rotted}, and the walls rattled again, and he shut himself in the musty dark gratefully. Shelob winked at him from all eight of the shimmering full moons of her eyes.

\textit{Full moon}, he thought. \textit{Right. Priorities. Let’s see how this does you for a Yuletide present, Moony old man.}

Harry scrabbled in the far corner of the cupboard, retrieved a crumpled piece of paper and a broken crayon, and began to scribble in concentration. He wasn’t the best potioneer ever to come out of Hogwarts by a long shot, nor even one of the most mediocre, but Luna’s boy, Lorcan, had been bitten when he was twenty, and after the first transformation had emerged, not broken, but furious and indignant.

“Bugger this shit,” Lorrie had said roundly as he’d mauled his way through twice-wolf-high stacks of research on the subject from every available resource. “I’m not going through \textit{that} every month for the next hundred years,” and when the stacks had proved useless, he’d hauled out his cauldron and the remains of his seventh year potions kit, and, with the kind of single-minded focus that had, on the part of Tom Riddle (though coupled with a great deal more sanity) made Harry’s first childhood less than ideal, had proceeded to hammer out a liquid cure for lycanthropy in six months flat.

It even tasted good – a bit like spiced plum cake, with a wicked whiskied kick. As a really added bonus it was made of entirely, perfectly normal Muggle ingredients (the secret, apparently, was in the Mr. Smiley enviro-cleaning fluid) and had a brewing time of precisely fifteen minutes and six seconds. All happy coincidences for a nine year old wizard-in-temporary-exile, and the finished product not only solved the proverbial furry little problem, but mixed well with Christmas pudding and soothed the stomach besides. Aunt Petunia was as predictable as she was nasty, and tomorrow, December 21\textsuperscript{st}, Harry would be put to work mixing the icing for the fruit cakes she made for St. Andrew’s Tinsel Fair on the 23\textsuperscript{rd}. It wouldn’t be hard at all to sneak a tailored tin into the mail – he was in charge of walking the finished results over to the church too, after all - and after that...

He tucked the remembered recipe under his pillow and fell promptly and soundly asleep.
“So what is it like?” the blond boy asked greedily. Madam Malkin rolled her eyes and jabbed him with a pin (quite intentionally, Harry was almost sure) but the boy ignored her, aside from an absent swat. Harry held out an arm patiently upon request of the avidly eavesdropping assistant as he kept an eye on Sirius through the window. His godfather was standing in line outside the bookshop chatting with Remus Lupin, and occasionally leaning over to lick chocolate ice cream slobberingly, cheerfully and obviously off the ex-were’s lips. Gross, yes, no matter your age and perspective, but it was also kind of sweet... Harry hadn’t been remotely surprised when Sirius had told him on the bus ride to London that he was living with a male friend, but he’d been absolutely shocked when they’d met with Remus at the Leaky Cauldron and witnessed their warm, intimate greeting. Tonks and Teddy considered, ‘living with a male friend’ hadn’t really processed as ‘living with a male friend’ till the tongues had confirmed it, but then again...

He’d spent the last sixteen months, Sirius had told him awkwardly on the bus ride, living and recovering in a small private Wizarding hospital after an unjust criminal conviction and nine years' hard time, and he’d re-met Remus, an old school friend, there, while he’d been undergoing some monthly tests. Harry, naturally, had inquired on the kind of tests, and after a long pause, Sirius had told him the truth flat out: that his friend had been a werewolf, and Christmas before last had been gifted with a miracle – a spontaneous cure for his condition.

“Huh,” Harry had said. Petunia’s fruitcake had been described in many ways over the years, but never miraculous. That year’s batch had been particularly bad, and in the interests of Remus actually eating random and horrifying baked goods that came through the anonymous post, he’d resorted to a mild compulsion charm. “You mean he just stopped changing one month?”

“Yes,” Sirius said. “Some months were a lot harder than others, and leading up to that one moon, he just thought he was going to have an easy time of it, for a nice change – but he waited and waited, and he just never transformed. He waited the next month at St. Mungo’s - that’s Britain’s biggest Wizarding hospital- and he didn’t change again. The third month, he got official government confirmation that he’s cured. He still goes into the smaller clinic now every month so that they can take some blood and have a cuppa while they run the results, but nothing’s changed. He’s a hundred percent human now.”

Harry had wrinkled his nose.

“Well, he would be, wouldn’t he?” he’d said reasonably, and at Sirius’ odd look... “He was always human, he just had...” He’d paused. Sirius’ lips had twitched.

“A furry little problem?” he’d suggested, and when Harry had grinned and nodded, he’d put an arm around him tightly and squeezed till the ancient leather of his jacket squeaked. Harry had pulled away, as befitted a shy eleven-year-old, but when he had, he’d held up the pack of cigarettes he’d pinched out of his godfather’s pocket.
“Really?’ he said. “Cigarettes? These things are gross. They showed us films at school of people who smoked, and their lungs were all black and sticky and rotting, and when they breathed they all sounded like…” He sucked in a rattling breath in a passable imitation of a pre-adolescent Dementor. Sirius promptly turned green, opened the dirty window of the bus, and tossed the pack under the wheels.

“Don’t do that again, pup,” he’d ordered. “Brr. Now I’ve got the willies.”

“Better than than cancer,” Harry had said heartlessly. Wizards, he knew, rarely got cancer – their version of it was magic, rather than cellular growth gone feral - but when they did, it caused, past the point, constant pain equivalent to the Cruciatius. It was one of the few conditions in their world where euthanasia was permitted, even on medical grounds. In all of his hundred thirty odd years, Harry had only known one person with the condition – but that one person had been Charlie Weasley, and he had, upon agonized request from his beloved brother-in-law, done the dubious honours himself so that his blood family wouldn’t have to. It had been, without question, the hardest thing he’d ever had to do in his life, and that included dealing with the collective emotional impact of Tom Bloody Buggering Riddle and all of his bollocky groupies.

“Anyway,” Sirius had continued. “Remus and I met up again at the hospital the month that I came in, and since we were roommates at school and knew we could get along, decided that once I got out we might as well share a flat. It’ll work better too now,” he’d added awkwardly, “since I’ve put in a petition for your custody. The Ministry probably wouldn’t grant it if it was just me; I’m certified fit now, but I still have a lot of whaddayacall’ems, flashbacks, and you have your relatives besides, but with Remus in house, and cured... He’s a respectable member of society now, he teaches at Hogwarts and everything, and we were both great mates with your parents besides. Everybody knows that. Between the two of us, we should have no... well, not a lot... of trouble pushing the petition through.”

“Your flat-mate teaches at Hogwarts?’ Harry’s eyes had widened. He hadn’t been expecting that. For the first time since he’d returned – been reborn, self-reincarnated, whatever... he felt uncertain. All of the changes that he’d wrought so far in his world... Well. He’d wrought. Maybe, he thought, he should allow himself to be sorted into Slytherin this time. There had to be someone there who’d be happy to mentor him in thinking on the repercussions of his actions.

Someone besides Snape, of course.

He changed his mental subject there rapidly.

“What does he teach?’ he wanted to know. “Remus, I mean.”

“History of Magic. Every other year, anyway. The professor who usually teaches the course is a ghost with no concept of time anymore, so the headmaster is just going to tell him every other year that seven years have passed and he’s due a sabbatical. On his off years, he’ll be teaching Defense against the Dark Arts. There’s a bit of a curse on the position,” he’d added casually. “Nobody can hold the position for more than a year without crapping out or kicking it – but that’s years in a row, we reckon, and if he breaks the pattern with time off between, he should be fine.”

“Should be?’

“It’s a risk,” Sirius admitted. “But he’s willing to take it. Well, after he made arrangements in his contract so that he’s paid double the years he teaches History, and nothing at all the years he’s teaching DADA. And there’ll be no actual contract those years either; he’ll be volunteering, so he won’t officially be the instructor. “
“And you’re sure that’ll work?”

“Yeah.” Sirius’ canines had flashed. “Pretty sure. The wizard who threw the curse liked to cover his bases, as the Americans say, but the word ‘volunteer’ wasn’t in his vocabulary. He was more of a coerce-and-enslave kind of bloke.”

“Huh,” Harry had said again, and then, with a deliberate excited wriggle in his seat that made his godfather’s thin lips twitch fondly and wonderingly... “Can you tell me the rules of Quidditch? I read about it, and it sounds absolutely brilliant. Did you ever play? Do you think I’ll ever get to play?” He sat up straight. “Are brooms really expensive? You said my parents left me some money, do you think there’d be enough for a broom?”

“Quidditch,” Sirius corrected. The twitch had turned to a full, almost clown-like smile, radiant on his face, and the wild in his eyes was tamed by bright, shining tears. “Yes, yes, depends on the broom, absolutely, and ...” Harry had squeaked as the man had hauled him into his lap and hugged him so hard he thought he’d break. Just as hastily, he was set back, but he snuggled up a bit this time, and Sirius wiped his face and put a long, bony arm around him comfortably.

“Quidditch,” he began. “Is only the greatest game in the known universe. It’s played with four balls, six hoops, two teams of seven valiant souls on a single mission – unless they’re Slytherins; they all sell their souls to Salazar as ickle firsties in exchange for certified blood status, and operate on sheer sleaze afterwards...”

“POTTER! I asked you a question!”

“Uh. Oh. Sorry. What is what like?’ Harry asked, jerking his attention back to the present reluctantly.

“Living with those Muggles,” the boy said, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “Nobody knew where you were, not until Black put in his petition for you, and now it’s all over the papers. What are they like?”

“Oh. Oh. Um. They’re not so bad.” Harry held up the other arm. He could hold a grudge there, he supposed, but on the whole, he’d decided that out of sight, out of mind was probably the most psychologically healthy way to go, and it wasn't like he ever planned to go back to Privet Drive. He wasn’t quite sure how he was going to manage that yet - Sirius had that petition in for official guardianship, as well as permission to house him for the last month before school started, but despite his intensive therapy with the Mind Healers at St. Mungo’s, his godfather still seemed bit fragile when it came to asserting himself - and Dumbledore, bless his heart, could be persistent when he got his mind fixed on something. For the moment, though, Harry decided that it didn’t hurt to be optimistic. “My aunt makes really good cookies. My cousin and I don’t get on, but that’s more essential personality conflict than anything else.”

“No? What kind of ways?” Draco Malfoy asked, pale eyes brightening as he tried rather obviously for casual and failed miserably in sight of something so potentially crucial that he could Tell His Father. Madam Malkin sighed loudly and impatiently through her nose, and glared out the window in the direction of Malfoy’s scarpered parents. Harry was suddenly and viscerally reminded of a sign he once saw in a Muggle toy shop: UNATTENDED CHILDREN SHALL BE PRIMED WITH ESPRESSO AND GIVEN FREE PUPPIES. Somehow, he thought, coffee and puppies weren’t quite what the irritated seamstress had in mind.

“He’s blond,” Harry obliged. “Not too bright... Thinks a lot of himself. More than enough of himself for both of us.”
A feminine giggle, quickly suppressed, sounded from the assistant behind him. Malfoy sniffed.

“Sounds like a bit of a dud,” he said disdainfully.

“A lot of a Dud,” Harry contradicted. Malfoy nodded in what he thought of as understanding, and as Madam Malkin nodded to him, hopped down. “Well, I must go now. Mother’s waiting. Nice to meet you Potter; shall we look for each other on the train?”

“Why not.” Harry watched the door swing shut. Madam Malkin cleared her throat.

“That’s you done, dear. Pick-up in an hour or so? It’ll give you time for a nice ice cream; tell Florean I said that you didn’t force me to stab you, and he’ll give you an extra scoop.”

“Thanks, Madam,” he said. As he was about to leave, he cocked his head curiously. “If you don’t mind my asking... What House were you in?”

“Slytherin.” She patted his cheek. “Don’t believe everything you hear, Mr. Potter – or judge a House by those who insist on being showcased. You’d look lovely in green.”

“Pup!” Sirius poked his head in before he could respond. “Moony said he’s happy to get the books for us, and it looks like there’s a lull at Ollivander’s. Let’s grab your wand, and then...”

“BROOM!” Harry chanted. “BROOM, BROOM, BROOM, BROO...” It was not remotely put on. He hadn’t been on a broom in almost eight years, not since he was cursed by that wretched Milk-Chocolate Lord Wencit Wannabe and lost his ability to keep his balance in flight at speeds above five miles an hour.

“Ahem,” his godfather said at the disapproving look of a passing hag. “Yes. Well. Remember, you’ll have to leave it with me. First years...”

“Aren’t allowed brooms. I know, I know.” They ducked across the street and down to Ollivander’s.
With Tangerine Trees

Ollivander’s Wand Shop

“No,” he said firmly as Ollivander finished his spiel, and held out his hand. Ollivander looked at it, and him, askance.

“I beg your pardon?” he huffed.

“I don’t care if it likes me,” Harry said. “I don’t want it. No offense,” he said to the object he was holding. “I’m sure you’re brilliant. I just don’t think we’re meant to be.”

“Young man, I don’t think you understand how this process works. You do not just say no to the wand that chooses you! They have...” The old man drew himself up indignantly. “Feelings!”

The holly and phoenix feather wand, as if in sad agreement, coughed up a last forlorn and faded red spark. Harry rolled his eyes internally. He’d loved that wand, but there was no doubt that it (like he, he was more than a little embarrassed to admit) could be a bit of a drama queen.

“I don’t think you understand how I work,” he said. “I don’t mind the thought of being great, or of doing great things; I’m just not going to do them with the brother wand of the wand that cursed me and killed my parents.” He held out the wand a moment longer and when Ollivander refused to take it, placed it firmly on the counter. Sirius pinched his nose, half in frustration and half in amusement.

“I know this is a bit rich coming from me – no, pup, don’t ask; I’ll tell you the details when you’re a bit older – but one really can’t blame one’s relatives for everything.”

“No,” Harry returned. “One can’t. That doesn’t mean one has to put oneself in situations where one is constantly reminded, either.”

It was sound reasoning, there was no doubt about that, but there was considerably more to it than that. Over the years – and Dumbledore had never denied it, though he’d never confirmed it either, through his portrait or in person – the reluctant Boy-Who-Lived had come to suspect that his wand hadn’t so much chosen him as been nudged in his direction. Certainly the old headmaster would have had a lot easier time putting tracking charms and whatnot on a wand with a core from his familiar, and Harry knew very well that if the wand hadn’t truly liked him it wouldn’t have attached itself to him under any circumstance, but still. There was no point in encouraging that kind of obsessive-compulsive behaviour.

The light from the wand dimmed a bit. It almost seemed to heave a resigned sigh. Harry glared at it, mentally daring it to twinkle. It skittered a little instead, spinning once as if to turn its back on him and sulk.

“Can’t argue with that, I suppose,” his godfather said. “Fine. What else have you got?”

Ollivander looked more than a bit affronted at the lack of theoretically adult support, but returned to the back. Again, he was gone some time, but when he returned, he put two boxes in front of Harry. Harry eased the lid off the first, and peeked in. He recognized the contents immediately. He had to stifle a grin, remembering Gryffindor House’s universal reaction to the delicately coloured and carved instrument in the hand of its proud new owner.

“It’s. Um. Very pink, isn’t it?” he ventured. “And frilly?”
“The word you're looking for is 'latticed'. As for the pink... It's Japanese cherry,” Ollivander said austerely. “Harvested at the Spring Solstice, with a core of newborn unicorn hair. An exceedingly rare and powerful combination for a wizard or witch with exceedingly rare and powerful potential. “

Harry picked it up and waved it obligingly. It twisted in his hand, and a warm bubbly spray of water shot out and splashed over his face with a sound not unlike a raspberry. He sputtered. The wand hummed, as if laughing. He put it back gingerly, remembering how Neville Longbottom, under all that shy and stammer, had had a rather ridiculously basic sense of humour... He lifted the lid of the second box.

“Wow,” he said. “That’s really cool! You can see the core right through the wood!”


“Huh. What else has it got going on?”

“I don’t know,” the old man said, more than a bit shortly. “It’s unprecedented. It’s got a bit of a mercurial and whimsical temperament; that’ s all I can tell you, though if you suit, the source of the core considered, I’d suggest you learn to control your temper. And don’t tell me you haven’t got one; every witch or wizard ever paired with a Horntail has been touchier than a Knockturn courtesan.”

“Oi!” Sirius snapped. “Rich again, coming from me, but again... Eleven!”

“Mm. Occlumency wouldn’t hurt either. I have a suspicion that the transparency of the resin will translate.”

“Occlu... What?” Harry inquired obligingly.

“Mind shielding,” Sirius translated. He actually looked a bit worried now. Harry shrugged and picked up the wand, giving it a wave. For a moment, it did nothing, and then, deep inside the semi-transparent shell, the core seemed to burst into flame: brilliant blue and red and gold flame that tumbled along the length of the wand and warmed it to near-burning in his hand... At the same time, he felt an inquiring mental prod, and he slapped back automatically and sharply... The flame subsided somewhat, and the wand cooled a bit... In the back of his mind, he heard a deep, serpentine hiss of surprised laughter. His scar tingled.

“Not much going on there,” Ollivander said, just as Harry said... “I’ll take it. I’ll take them both.”

“The amber and the holly?” the old man said hopefully.

“No. The amber and the cherry. I read somewhere that you should always have a back up wand,” he added at Sirius’ surprised look, and as Moony entered... “Remus! Come check out my new wands!”

“You found two that suit?” his former/new professor said, pleased. “Oh, that’s handy, isn’t it? It’s always good to have an extra.” He came over, arms laden with bags of books, peered – and immediately jumped back in surprise as the holly wand, sitting on the counter, shot up, literally, and battered him excitedly about the head. Ollivander blinked. Remus set down the bags and grabbed the wand, waving it. A rain of golden stars poured out, circling him and enfolding him till he glowed.

“Balls,” Sirius said in awe. “That’s... What is that?”

“Seven galleons. Eight for the cherry, and twenty five for the amber.”

“Twenty... What?”
“It’s one of a kind.”

“They’re all one of a kind! Twenty five _galleons_? That’s just criminal, and hello, Azkaban? Nine years? I know whereof I speak!”

“I don’t mind, Padfoot.” Harry dug out his money bag. “It’s worth it.”

“Put that thing away, would you?’ his new guardian-to-be said, exasperated, and pulled out his own money bag. “Fine, fine. We’ll take all three. Knock it off, Moony, there’s natural radiance and then there’s just showing off.’

“You should know, Remus,” Harry said belatedly as Lupin snapped out of his starry haze. “That’s the brother wand of the wand of the bloke that cursed me.”

“You don’t say,” the ex-were said, examining it with fresh interest. “How very apropos, considering I plan to use it to help bring down the bloke that cursed _me._”

“Shoulda used that kind of argument straight up,” Sirius said to the shopkeeper. “It really liked Harry,” he explained to his bemused partner. “But he didn’t reciprocate.”

“Oh sure, it _liked_ me,” Harry teased. “But it _lurrrrves_ Remus.”

Remus tweaked his ear. Harry yelped and laughed, ducking away.
As it turned out, Sirius and Remus lived, not in a flat, nor at 12 Grimmauld Place, but in a quintessentially cosy little cottage at the bottom of a small, deep valley in central Wales. There was a creek running through that culminated in a dammed-up swimming pond; it was half-surrounded by a lovely rich wood, and far off in the high distance were the ageless grey mountains. Beyond those, Remus told him as he and Sirius sat on the porch steps that first cool evening, Harry snuggled between them as they all worked their ways through huge bowls of savory lamb stew and even larger stacks of warm oatcakes oozing with butter (Harry wouldn’t have minded a tankard of the spiced ale the men were drinking, but given his current age, had to settle for thick, rich apple cloudy), was the sea... They would go, Sirius promised him, before the summer was over, and he put his bowl aside and his long arm around both of them.

“I know it’s a bit selfish of me, pup,” he said. “But I’d kind of like to keep this month for the three of us. We’ll tell you whatever you like about the Wizarding world, and go on the odd day trip – mostly to out-of-the-way places; between the three of us we’d attract more attention than you can even begin to imagine - but I’m only going to have another few weeks with you and Moony here before I have to ship you both off to Hogwarts.”

Harry just leaned against him.

“I don’t want to go anywhere else,” he said dreamily. “Ever. This is heaven, right here.”

The two men looked at each other.

“Were you unhappy with your aunt and uncle, cub?” Remus asked gently. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but Sirius and I were a bit concerned when you suggested in your answer to his initial letter that you two meet away from your house, and well... We couldn’t help but notice that you’re a bit thin and ragged besides. Oh, and the oculist we took you to says that your glasses prescription was likely a good five or six years out of date. I’d thought your family was fairly well off.”

“They are, and they aren’t exactly bad to me,” Harry said awkwardly. “But my mum and her sister... They didn’t get along well. She let me know that early on. They mostly just ignored me, ‘specially in the last couple of years.” He caught Sirius’ thunderous expression. “Leave it, please? I’m here now, and I don’t want to think about them anymore.”

That was certainly true. He’d known he couldn’t hope to hide the specifics of his life with the Dursleys from his new guardians, but still, and in light of the softened details, Harry hoped desperately that they would abide by his wishes. Over a century’s worth of practicing as an Auror and dealing with bureaucracy and the press had made him past expert at managing the system, but his skills weren’t likely to be of much use now that he was eleven again, not in any situation where he had to be his own front-man anyway.

“I just want shot of them,” he said, aloud. “For good. No more trouble, alright?”

Both men sighed.

“If that’s what you want, cub.” Remus put his own arm around him. His cure had made an amazing
difference in his appearance; he still retained that aura of the gentle, diffident professor, but he now
stood taller and straighter, he was heavier of course – he looked as if he’d gained a good two stone of
solid muscle and flesh over the last time Harry had seen him - his hair was shinier and thicker, and
even the grey there seemed faded. Most striking though, were his eyes, gone from light green with
flecks of amber to a deep, rich chocolate flecked with gold, and the way he moved – lightly on his
feet, as if he was ever about to break into a joyous loping run just for the sake of the fact that he
could do so without pain. He was, Harry had thought when they’d re-met, absolutely beautiful, and
had immediately started running down the list of students currently enrolled at Hogwarts who were
likely to start paying attention in Snape’s class just for the ability to spike the good professor Lupin’s
evening tea with love potions. “For now, anyway. If our petition doesn’t go through, though, we will
be checking in. There are such things as appeals, and for you... We’ll take it up with God Himself if
that’s what’s required.”

“It will go through,” Harry said firmly, and to change the subject... “Sirius? Er. I don’t mean to bring
up a bad subject, but how did they finally reckon you were innocent?”

“They caught the bugger who actually did it,” Sirius said dryly. “He was an Animagus like me, only
a rat, and the lazy sod slept through the time he’d have had to transform back into human form and
reset in order to keep his mind. He popped back into form right at Christmas dinner, in front of the
whole family, and that was that.”

“Slept through... Huh?”

“Becoming an Animagus is a tricky business,” Remus explained. “And it’s not too good to spend too
much time in the animal form, like Sirius says. The longer you stay in though, the harder it is for your
mind to remember the importance of changing back, so most wizards and witches set themselves a
kind of internal alarm, via magic, that reminds them, and changes them back on their own after a
grace period if they can’t manage it. Pettigrew spent so much time – almost nine years – in rat form
that that would have been essential, but in his instance...”

“He slept through the alarm,” Harry finished.

“Yeah.” Sirius barked with bitter laughter. “Can’t tell you the number of times we had to drag the
lazy sod out of bed at school; it irritated the crap out of us, but in the end...”

Harry patted his hand comfortingly. Notice-Me-Nots, he thought for the thousandth time since
returning, were amazing things. It hadn’t been hard at all to slip out after posting Remus’ fruitcake on
the 23rd of December, 1989, and through Mrs. Figg’s floo to the inn closest the Burrow, charms
firmly intact and a crushed Muggle sleeping aid worked into a particularly luscious bit of cheese
nicked from the trays at the Tinsel Fair. His own Animagus form had been a great asset there, and it
had been the work of all of ten minutes, once arrived at the Weasley residence, to locate the rat, spike
its dinner tray, and disappear again. He’d been hugely gratified that Boxing Day to read in the
Evening Prophet (abandoned again in Figg’s bin-out-back) that Peter Pettigrew had been found,
detained, questioned and arrested... The New Year’s edition had trumpeted the transfer of Sirius
Black from Azkaban to St. Mungo’s, after a very brief stop at the DMLE for official vindication.

Nineteen months, Harry thought, had been a long time to wait to hear from him again, but
considering how things might have been different the first time around had his godfather been able to
get appropriate treatment for his trauma, he didn’t begrudge it.

“It’s done,” Harry said firmly. “It’s done, and Remus is cured, and we’re all here, and safe...” He
looked up belatedly. “Are we safe?”

“Course we are.” Sirius barked out another laugh. “This place is not only off the Muggle grid, but
under Fidelius as well, and this time, we’re our own bloody Secret Keepers. We’re not making that mistake again.”

“Excellent.” He scraped up the last of his lamb stew and sighed contentedly.

He still had Tom to deal with of course. This time though... This time, he not only knew what had to be done, but how to do it, properly and in good time. He’d do it as the nasty job it was that needed doing, but in the meanwhile...

He wouldn’t just be the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry vowed to himself. This time, he planned on being the Boy-Who-Lives. And never mind that happily-ever-after rot either. This time... This time he was going to be happy-right-now-and-all-along.

And he planned to make damned sure that everyone else he loved was too.

“It’s getting cool,” Remus said. “And it’s been a long day. Why don’t we go inside and light a fire, and crack a few of those books we bought today?”

“Oh come on, Moony,” Sirius complained. “His first night with us, and you’re going to make him do homework?”

“I didn’t just buy him schoolbooks,” Remus said mildly. “There might be a copy of ‘Quidditch Through The Ages’ in there too, and, of course, a proper manual on the care and upkeep of his broom.” He stood and stretched luxuriously. Harry’s jaw dropped as, in the dim, green light of evening, under the first stars, his limbs shifted smoothly.

“What...”

“Werewolves can’t become Animagi,” Sirius grinned at him as his godson goggled in shocked delight. “But he made us teach him the theoreticals after your father and I managed it. It took him, what... Four months after he was pronounced cured?”

Harry thought rapidly. The great, graceful Irish Wolfhound before him shifted back and began to collect the dishes.

“We call him McWolf. Just thought you should know,” he smiled down. “One day, Harry, we’ll teach you how to do this.”

Harry made a decision. Life, he decided, was too short, no matter how long you lived, and he didn’t want to have to hide. Not here.

“You have to be taught?” he asked, carefully and childishly puzzled.

“Of course,” Sirius said, amused. “People aren’t just born with the ability to transform into animals, pup. It’s a lot of work, and... WHOA! Merlin’s saggy shit-streaked shorts!”

”SIRIUS!” Remus snapped, even as he dug out his wand, flustered, to banish the remains of the shattered dishes he’d dropped. Harry concentrated and popped back into boy-shape.

“I’ve been able to do that as long as I can remember,” he lied. “It really freaked out my aunt the first time it happened. You’re saying it’s not...” He let his lip quiver a bit, artfully. “Normal? Am I a... Freak?”

Remus sat down heavily.
“No,” he said. “You’re just - like Ollivander said of your wand - unprecedented. But then again, I’m not one to talk.”

“Do it again, pup,” Sirius said, now recovered and quite beside himself with excitement. “Do it again!” He held out his hand. Harry obliged, hovering not on, but just over his palm. The two men gazed in wonder.

“A hummingbird,” the ex-were breathed. “Oh, Harry. That’s just... You are... wonderful!”

“What do they stand for, Rem?” his partner asked. “Do you know? I mean, what do you know about them?”

“They’re quick, of course, stupidly so, surprisingly vicious when pressed... Never known to walk when they can fly; I don’t think they can walk, that’s what the hover is about... Territorial, protective, and are thought of as messengers...” He frowned slightly, racking his memory. “There’s something else. Something to do with time. I don’t quite remember; I’ll have to look it up.”

Harry buzzed backwards and popped back into boy-shape again. Sirius shook his head.

“I think we’d best keep this one under our hats, pup,” he said. “I don’t know about Remus, but I’ve had enough of the poking and prodding from medical officials to last me a lifetime, and if we registered you, the Ministry would put forth a legal motion to bring you in.”

“Ohay.” Harry said, doing his best to look uncertain. “But I can change here, right? With you, because this place is protected?”

“Of course you can,” Sirius said bracingly. “Let’s go in now, okay? I think we all could use a cuppa right about now.”

“Any other secrets you have to share with us, cub?’ Remus asked as he collected mugs. “While you’re at it?”

Harry pretended to think, waiting for the exact right moment, and then...

“I can talk to snakes,” he said. “Does that count?”

“WHAT?”

“Damn. I liked those mugs too.” The ex-were waved his wand. “Alright, young man. Inside with you. Padfoot, go put the tea on, and transfigure a few of the cups to spill-proof plastic while you’re at it, would you...”

Chapter End Notes

Apple cloudy, for those who are wondering, is fresh-pressed dark apple juice: non-alcoholic and what we in Canada (if not in Great Britain: thanks, diddleymaz) call cider. Not to be confused with the actual British cider, which, as I know now, is strictly adult-issue!
The Hogwarts Express

September 1st, 1991

The train was brilliant, as always. Harry lounged in the last compartment, socked feet propped on the casement of the window, and wiggled his finger deep into the hole on the top of one of the even two dozen raspberry cream-filled chocolate cauldron cakes that Remus had baked him for the train ride. The nicest part about being a kid again, he reflected as he slouched down in his seat so deeply that he might as well have been sitting on his neck rather than his bum, was having the liberty to act like a kid again. People *expected* him to act like a kid. They *wanted* him to act like a kid. He intended to take full advantage of the fact for as long as he could get away with it, never mind Dumbledore’s insistence that he have a happy, ignorant childhood.

That being said, if that barmy old coot actually thought that he was going to go prancing down with Ron and Hermione through those stupid traps to confront Turbano-Tom again, he had another think coming. His Mind Healer (mandatory issue for all Auror candidates, Dark Lord Vanquishers or not) had been absolutely appalled when she’d realized that most of the chronic PTSD he’d suffered had had its roots, not just in the chronic emotional and physical neglect that he’d suffered as a child, but in the fact that he’d killed a man with his bare hands when he was eleven, and nobody had ever bothered asking him how he felt about it. Harry had a distinct impression that that would have changed under Remus, at least, but it wasn’t a theory he intended to test.

No, *this* barmy old coot had a Plan. It involved a bit of calculated risk, certainly, (case in point, rejecting his old wand with that handy shared core in favour of a new wand and an accumulated twelve decades of magical advancements and practical experience) but there were certain things that Harry Potter just wasn’t willing to go through again for the cause. He fancied he was certainly mentally sturdier than he had been as an original child, but, Quirrell aside, that event with the Philosopher’s Stone had set a very bad precedent between him and Dumbledore; that is, that the latter could manipulate events and, more to the point, him, like a puppet on those proverbial prophetic strings.

As the Muggle saying went... Bugger *that* for a bunch of bananas. Never again, Harry avowed as he dug for more raspberry cream. He’d been Dumbledore’s man last time, and it had all worked out for the given quantity of best, or at least better, but by God and Godric, he outranked the headmaster now in age and experience; he was the foremost expert on the Dark Arts in the whole damned world, even if nobody here (now?) knew it, and he wasn’t giving up in-house access to these cauldron cakes in exchange for cold tinned soup, stale bread and unintentionally moldy hunks of cheese for anyone.

He polished off the last of the cake, reached for another, and silently toasted (caked?) their maker. To Remus Lupin, a man of many talents, if Sirius was to believed (and Harry was perfectly willing to believe it, beyond the man’s inability to remember at stunned moments that he was a wizard, with the ability to repair things like his favourite dishes when they broke), though he really didn’t want to think on it after a month of living with two ‘flat-mates’-slash-insomniacs. Notice-Me-Not charms now ranked slightly under Silence charms in the reborn wizard’s estimation of Best Invention Ever.

Harry wiggled his toes in his socks again. It was so weird, he thought, to have reliably and naturally
warm feet again. To have circulation-to-the-extremities that actually worked again. And joints that worked again, and a digestion-and-related that worked again... He wasn’t nearly as scrawny as he’d been his first first year; if he’d been hungry as a human at the Dursleys since returning, he’d just popped into hummingbird form when no one was looking and hunted down a few ants and a bit of nectar, but he was yet a growing boy, and that hummingbird metabolism translated.

The compartment door slid open.

“Anyone sitting there?” a tiny, tiny, achingly cute and adorably grubby and self-conscious version of Ron Weasley asked. “Everywhere else is full.”

“Knock yourself out,” Harry said, once he’d recovered from the shock and had crammed every unexpected and overwhelmingly painful shard of associated memories behind his shields. His heart was fucking breaking, he thought wildly; it had reformed at the sight of Sirius, but was fucking breaking at the sight of the bright, unformed seed of the annoying, exasperating, intemperate, brilliant old geezer who’d (despite his flaws and never quite-vanquished tendency toward virulent and unwarranted jealousy), absolutely defined friendship for him for all fucking eternity.

“Er. Sorry?”

He’d grabbed a third cauldron cake and practically buried his nose in it out of sheer emotional self-defense.

“Muggle expression,” he mumbled. “It means go ahead.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Ron sat gingerly on the edge of the seat opposite. “I’m Ron. Ron Weasley. I’ll have to tell my dad that one. He likes Muggle thi... What are you doing?’

“Eating a cauldron cake.” Harry wiggled his tongue deep inside the cauldron cake, emerging with a chocolate mustache and raspberry cream up to his eyebrows. “My uncle made them for me. I’m Harry. Want one?” He held out the plastic container. Ron eyed it, but in the end, couldn’t resist. The icing was at least an inch thick.

“Thanks,” he said gratefully, and for the next few minutes, the two boys unabashedly played with their food. By the time the cart had passed and Hermione and Neville had made their entrance, Ron had more than that bit of dirt on his nose, and they were both so high on sugar that they were nearly bouncing off the walls of the carriage. Hermione, predictably, sniffed disapprovingly, but there were still plenty left to share, and the touch of mocha in the icing, in the end, proved irresistible. Neville just ate his without fuss or fanfare, staring forlornly out the window. After awhile, Harry deliberately dropped his cherry wand out of his sleeve and let it roll to the other boy’s feet. The chubby blonde boy bent automatically to pick it up.

“Whoa!” Ron breathed as the compartment suddenly filled with the heady scent of the wild forest and a veritable rainfall of tiny, tumbling flowers. “What the... Blimey, mate! You’ve got some serious oomph there, and with another bloke’s wand, yet?”
“I don’t... I’ve never...” Neville stammered and shoved the wand back at Harry. “Here, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...”

“No, no, it’s okay,” Harry reassured him. “It’s my back-up wand. I just got it because my uncle wanted me to have an extra. Ron’s right though, it really really likes you. Didn’t you two meet at Ollivander’s?”

“I didn’t go to Ollivander’s. My gran says... She gave me my dad’s wand. For memory’s sake.”


“Loads of people lost family in the war,” he murmured. “My uncle says it’s rude to ask.”

Ron flushed and shrank back.

“You should have done,” Hermione was saying disapprovingly to Neville. “The wand chooses the wizard, you know. You should buy it from Harry, if he’ll let you.”

“Sure,” Harry offered. “Five galleons. I paid eight for it, but it’s second-hand now.”

“Oh, I can’t, I can’t, Gran would... Dad was a famous Auror, she wants me to be like him, and to turn away his wand...”

“You’re not turning it away, you’re just getting an extra. Whoever heard of an Auror with just one wand? I bet your father would say that too. She says anything, tell her what happened, and that you bought it fair and square from me, and if she still argues, tell her take it up with my godfather. Sirius Black. He’ll set her straight.”

Neville dithered, but in the end, dug into his trunk and pulled out a small bag. Four golden galleons and a double handful of silvery sickles later, and he was sitting back and stroking his new possession in awe... Ron, recovered from his embarrassment, had to stuff a handful of Bertie Botts’ in his mouth to stifle the sniggers.

“Kinda pink, innit, mate?” he said in a low, conspiratorial whisper. “And the engraving’s a bit. I dunno. Frilly.”

“It’s cherry,” Neville said. “It symbolizes death and rebirth. Awakenings. And the unicorn hair... Unicorns heal, you know.” The note of pained wistfulness in his quiet voice was shatteringly poignant, and Harry caught his breath... Neville looked up at him and caught his expression. Harry swallowed hard, and suddenly, there was a twinge behind his eyes. He twitched convulsively, and the amber wand slipped out of his right sleeve and smoothly into his palm. It immediately caught everyone’s attention. Hermione was beside him in an instant, breathless.

“Is that... What is that?” she squeaked in awe. “I didn’t see that one in the shop, look; it’s on fire inside!”

“It’s amber,” Harry said as if from a distance. The tingle behind his scar – not exactly painful, more of the way his foot felt when it was waking up after he’d sat on it too long and set it to sleep – was suddenly intense, and the hissing was back again... It wasn’t exactly Parseltongue, he thought as he listened intently, but it was definitely, definitely related. With a little bit of effort... “Petrified tree resin. The core is the heartstring of a Hungarian Horntail. It was...” He paused. He didn’t know how he knew, but... “It was old when it died. The oldest dragon in the British Isles. Maybe all of Europe.”

“Wicked,” Ron breathed, and actually wiped his hand on his joggers before he reached out to touch it. “I gotta tell Charlie,” and then, suddenly... “Old and young.”
"Huh?"

"Your wand. It’s really old, innit? And Nev’s is all about beginnings. Birth. Spring. That’s pretty cool. It’s like you go together."

And the truly stunning thing there was that there was no jealousy there. Not one iota, just soft, naive curiosity and wonder. Harry slid the wand in his sleeve again. It hummed against his forearm. Watching him closely, Neville did the same thing, awkwardly.

"No, don’t put it away yet! Cast a spell with it, Neville,” Hermione urged him. “See how it feels!”

"I don’t know, I..."

The compartment door slammed open. Incipient-Malfoy was standing there, Crabbe and Goyle at his back and baby sneer firmly intact, but before he could say a word, a badly startled Neville’s wand was in his hand.

"VINEA INCARCEROUS!"

"What the bloody hell?" Malfoy crashed to the floor as whip thin green and pink-tinged vines sprang out of the wand, enveloping and wrapping him so tightly he squawked. “What the HELL, Longbottom?!!"

"Oop," Neville said, flustered. “Um. Sorry? You scared me.”

"Draco?" Crabbe ventured. “I think you got... Why do you got grapes all over you?"

"Grapes?"

Harry howled. Ron fell to the floor sobbing with mirth. Hermione came over and plucked a velvety purple orb and popped it in her mouth.

"Mm,” she said. “Much better than all that chocolate. And as for the grapes, it only makes sense. Vines, you know. Only they’re bound to be all over...” Her voice, and the lofty tones inherent, faded out at Incipient-Malfoy’s furious glare, and she blushed and grabbed another grape before retreating to her seat and flapping furiously through the book she’d been carrying when she arrived.

"GET ME OUT OF HERE! NOW, YOU GREAT PLONKER!"

"I'm really sorry Malfoy.” Neville sounded genuinely apologetic. “I don’t know the countercurse.”

"How did you cast it in the first place?” Hermione asked, looking up from her book. “It says here that 'Incarcerous' is a charm, not a hex or curse, but it’s a sixth year spell! You told us that you were practically a squib!” It sounded both betrayed and accusing.

“I don’t know!” Neville wailed. “I’ve never done it before! I’ve seen it done; our gardener on our country estate uses it to catch things – bears, mostly – when they wander onto the property, but the vines come out of the ground, not his wand, and I don’t even think he reached sixth year!”

"If the vines come out of the ground, it’s only fourth year or so,” Hermione said knowledgeably. “Because you wouldn’t be conjuring, would you, just encouraging what was already there.” Her eyes narrowed. “Maybe it's the wand itself? I mean, if you’ve never done much magic, and you finally get a wand that’s really attuned to you, it might just offer you the little extra on the first go.” She sat up straight. “Do me,” she ordered commandingly.
“What?”

“What what? It’s grapes, it’s not going to hurt me! I want to see if you can do it again!”

Ron looked at her as if she were barmy. Neville obviously dared not disobey; he pointed the cherry wand at her, and, trembling, repeated the incantation. Absolutely nothing happened.

“Guess it was just a one-off after all,” she said, looking both disappointed and relieved, and plunged her nose back into the book. “Or maybe it was a combination of the wand and accidental magic; we’re still really young, after all, and you did say you were scared.”

“Bloody hell,” Harry gasped as he finally picked himself up. “I don’t care where that came from; that was brilliant. Okay, Malfoy, hold still. I’ll cut you loose.” He pulled out his own wand and flicked the tip in a yet another near-automatic, thoughtless movement he’d learned at Auror Camp. The edge of the wand immediately thinned and sharpened to a gleaming razor-edge.

“Coooo!” Goyle whistled, impressed. “How’d you get it to do that?”

_Bugger. Again._

_I have to stop doing that._

“I asked nicely?” Harry said after a moment, trying to sound puzzled and naive.

“You asked... You talk to your wand?”

He couldn’t help himself. He didn’t try. Just at that moment, the kid sounded _exactly_ like his snot-nosed, skeptical great-great-great-great grand-nephew, Percy Ignatius Weasley the fourth.

“Sure,” he said, poker-faced. “My godfather says that a boy’s wand is his best friend. He said I should talk to it, and play with it, and polish it every nigh...”

“HARRY!” Hermione’s face was aflame. “STOP!”

Ron sprawled back, gasping and weak. Neville tried to look prim and failed spectacularly. Crabbe and Goyle just looked excited at the possibilities. Malfoy banged his head against the floor. A cluster of grapes fell from his hair and splatted messily.
Clouds of stars hung heavily over the lake and the forest. Harry clutched the plastic container with the last remaining cauldron cake to his thin chest as the straggling line of children emerged from the passage beyond the underwater harbour, and paused to catch his breath.

“Alright there, Harry?” Hagrid’s disembodied voice said from behind him.

“Yeah,” Harry said. He wiped the sweat from his face with the corner of his robe. His tension on the journey up from King’s Cross had grown exponentially with every mile. He’d done a quick tour of the length of train while under a disillusionment charm cast on himself while in the loo, and had found himself astonished and uneasy at how few faces he recognized immediately, even from his own year. A hundred twenty-seven years, he thought. A hundred twenty-one since I was seventeen, and that’s all the thanks I can offer them for dying on my word?

He was ashamed.

At first he tried to reason with himself. A hundred twenty-one years was a long, long time. The world, both Muggle and Magical, had changed immeasurably since his Hogwarts days – hell, magic had changed immeasurably; spell design had become a hugely popular career choice after that scare in ’43 when Wencit Wannabe had nearly blown the lid of the Statute of Secrecy for good and the Segregationists and/or willfully stupid/blind/dumb had finally processed the impact of what Muggles could do, as opposed to what they couldn’t do. The courses he had ahead of him were, not to put too fine a point on it, an exercise in nostalgia; the basics would always remain the same, but that’s what they were now. The basics.

Even potions had changed, once the Global and United League of Potioneers (aptly abbreviated G.U.L.P) had gotten their heads unstuck from their cauldron bottoms and started educating themselves on things such as the practice of chemistry and the contents of the Periodic Table of Elements. Potions and Transfiguration, Runes and Arithmancy, never mind Healing classes all had elements of the curriculums drawn straight from Muggle chemistry, biology and physics, and microscopes were in vogue in the dungeons as telescopes were in the astronomy tower. ‘Muggleborn’ wasn’t even really a done word anymore in Wizarding society now that the Purebloods had effectively bred themselves out of viable existence; the preferred usage was ‘Firstborn’ or ‘First Generation’, or in the case of individuals who could draw their lineage from the socially and genealogically disenfranchised (i.e. Squibs, a.k.a Latents), ‘Reboots’.

They were inside the entry way suddenly, in a huddled mass, and the ghosts were there (Malfoy was pointedly ignoring him, having gone back to his carriage immediately after he’d been cut loose to spend the remainder of the ride trying to get the purple and lavender tones out of his platinum hair), and then..

Harry had always liked Professor McGonagall, but, looking at her now as she'd been when he'd first met her... He’d never appreciated at any point in life how elegant she was. How, frankly, if you were a hundred thirty-eight looking back over your shoulder and not eleven-and-gormless (or, let’s face it, seventeen-and-gormless, or twenty-and-gormless... Gin had had quite the job there), hot she was.

I am not going to develop a crush on Minerva McGonagall. I am not going to develop a crush on Minerva McGonagall. I am not... He did the mental math quickly, more to distract himself than anything else.
“Neville!” Hermione hissed, craning her neck as they were ushered into the hall. “Neville, where are you going?”

"Trevor’s scarpered again,” Neville whispered frantically back in a near wail. “I’ll never find him if I don’t get him now! Hold my place, Harry; I’ll be right...”

Then the Sorting Hat began to sing, and Harry became so busy steadfastly ignoring the residents of the High Table (the one in particular; it’d been two years, and he’d gotten more effective practice in Occlumency trying not to think about Severus Snape than his former teacher could possibly, or would possibly, give him credit for) that he tuned himself out of events altogether. All too soon though, he was being ushered forward, and then... There he was. Bum on the stool, Sorting Hat on the head, and nothing between him and Albus Dumbledore’s obsessive-compulsive, lemon-scented machinations but the power of a mind that couldn’t decide whether it was sitting in the skull of a precocious pre-pubescent with grandOedipal issues, or a garden-variety dirty old man.

Harry Potter was suddenly terrified.

He had a Plan, yes... And for better or worse, it all stopped, or rather started...

Now.

“If it isn’t Sirius Black’s new pup,” the Sorting Hat said, resigned. “Bred from James Potter and Lily Evans, no less. I don’t suppose you’re actually inclined to let me advise you?”

“Um. Sorry?” Harry said, Occlumency shields powered at maximum. “You mean I have a choice?”

There was a small pause.

“Let’s say you get to cast a vote in the event of a tie and leave it at that,” the Sorting Hat said. “In the meantime, and since you’re going to make me do this the hard way as we both pretend to ignore that great big oliphaunt sitting in front of that door to your inner sanctum... Do you have any inherent preferences on the subject that I should know about?”

“Not really,” Harry said, and it was true. At a hundred thirty-six - thirty-eight now, he supposed – he wasn’t particularly worried about which pile of school children he roomed with. “Good, bad... It’ll all come down to me in the end anyway, won’t it?” For a split second, a tinge of the old, never-quite-forgotten adolescent bitterness broke through, overwhelming his control near entirely. He forced it back ruthlessly, and tried for the chipper. “It’s like the Muggle saying: blossom where you’re planted!”

“Mm.” The Hat hummed in a pleased sort of way. “That’s more like it. Very Hufflepuff of you Mr. Potter. Or... Is it Slytherin?”

It was obviously a test. Harry had to bite back his response. Again, he failed. He thought he’d been prepared for the moment, never mind the impact of the memories come to life in bulk again... For the first time, he felt real sympathy for Snape and his bottomless wells of self-protective snide.

“Slytherpuff? he suggested.
“Don’t get smart with me, or...”

“Aaaand... It’s... Ravenclaw! The crowd roars!”

The Hat changed tack.

“Young Malfoy’s very excited about the prospect of you in green and silver,” it said. “And Vinnie and Greg are hoping you’ll show them that trick you did with your wand. I wouldn’t recommend it to Vinnie at least; no details, but he’s feeling rather repressed. It could go either way.”

“You’re testing my Gryffindor sensibilities there, aren’t you? My noble, chivalric nature? And... You call them Vinnie and Greg?”

"Don’t change the subject. And if you’re going to be like that, which house would you rather not be in, and get to it. I’ve still got four of you to go – no, five, with Longbottom. Where’d he get to? Only he missed his call, didn’t he?”

“He’s off looking for his toad again. Get used to it; I think it’s going to be a theme. I’d rather avoid Ravenclaw if at all possible,” Harry obliged. “They sound harmless enough, but my sources tell me that they can be really cutthroat and intense, and. Um. Kind of mean to people who don’t make their grade. Hufflepuff’s nice, and right next to the kitchens, but I’ll only go if you promise not to sort Zacharias Smith there.” Zacharias Smith was one of the few exceptions to Harry’s ‘pile of school children’ rule; he’d started as an unpleasant boy who’d grown to a thoroughly repulsive, amoral adult. He’d never quite gained the status of ‘nemesis’, but ‘giant chronic bleeding ulcerated hemorrhoid’ was fairly and accurately descriptive.

“I can’t do that, I’m afraid,” the Hat said. “I haven’t met him yet. If he’s anything like his parents though... There are times I have to sort someone into a House because it’s least of all possible bad fits.”

“Uh huh. Well, he’s a git, and I don’t feel like sharing a room with him for seven years. Gryffindor...” He paused. How to phrase this...

“Yes?”

“It’s just that everybody expects me to go there,” he said plaintively. “Because my parents went there, you know? And they do sound like they were really nice, but with everybody going on about how wonderful and heroic they were, and “Oh Harry, you look just like your father but with your mother’s eyes’, I’m not sure that they really want me. I want to go somewhere where I belong, not them.”

“I might be able to help you there,” the Hat said dryly. “But you’ve going to have to let me in first.”

“No. No, I don’t think so. You live in Professor Dumbledore’s office.”

“Do I look like I have little golden wings, Mr. Potter? I am not a Snitch, nor am I a spy. I. Sort. That is all, and I promise you, I have never, nor will I ever, offer explanations on any student’s tendencies to anyone without their express permission. Now. What do we think of Slytherin?”

“If Professor Snape is the one with the hair and the nose and and the look like he’s got a sore tooth that he’d like to bite me with,” Harry said. “He’s been glaring at me since I came in. It’s quite creepy, really. I don’t suppose you could tell me whether he’s likely to lighten up any if I go to his House?”

“Not as long as Remus Lupin is teaching here, or as long as you’re living with Sirius Black,” the Hat said sadly. “Never mind that your hair is exactly the texture of your father’s. I’m sure your sources
have told you the history *there.*”

Harry heaved a sigh. The seconds continued to tick by. Outside the confines of the Hat, more than one teacher looked a little nervous.

“Alright then,” he said. “I’m just not willing to risk Smith, so... I guess that leaves only the one option.”

“You know,” the Hat said gently. “Just because people expect something of you doesn’t mean you have to go along with what they have in mind. A bit of advice that I’ve given more students than I can recall – most of them, actually. And as much as I sense that you really just want to be happy, Hufflepuff won’t do that for you. They’re...” It paused. “*Persistent* when they get their minds fixed on the idea that one of their own needs protecting. They’ll protect you even from yourself.”

“Fine. You know what to do then.”

“I suppose I do. Alright. BETTER BE...”

“Hold up, hold up,” Harry said oh-so-casually-and-belatedly. “Before I go, there’s something you should know.”

“And what would that be?”

“Professor Quirrell is possessed by the spirit of Voldemort.”

The pause that followed *that* revelation stretched out so long that it allowed a new set record for the longest Hat Stall in Hogwarts’ history.

“Godric bless me,” the Hat said finally. It sounded most displeased. “So he is. I suppose you’d like me to take care of that? And to refrain from asking any uncomfortable questions on how you knew?”

“Yes please. And thanks,” Harry said gratefully. “It’s not that I wouldn’t try to take care of things myself, but I *am* only eleven.”

“Very prudent of you. And you were fifteen months old the last time.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with it the last time. That was all my mother’s doing, and I don’t have a spare lying around to offer up her life for me this time, do I?”

“No,” the Hat agreed sadly. “No. You don’t. Alright. We’ve kept everyone on tenterhooks long enough. BETTER BE... GRYFFINDOR!”

“Thank you,” Harry said politely as he removed the Hat and placed it carefully on the stool.

YOU’RE VERY WELCOME, MR. POTTER, AND MAY I SAY THAT YOUR MOTHER WOULD BE VERY PROUD OF THE YOUNG MAN SHE SACRIFICED HERSELF TO SAVE? I HAVEN’T HAD SUCH A LOVELY CHAT FOR DECADES.

Harry blushed.

ALSO, the Hat continued, YOU HAVE RASPBERRY CHOCOLATE CREAM IN YOUR HAIR. TRY FOR YOUR MOUTH NEXT TIME; I DON’T SHARE PROFESSOR LUPIN’S PARTICULAR OBSESSION. AH, THERE’S TREVOR! THAT MEANS YOU’RE BACK, MR. LONGBOTTOM, AND UP. NO, I DON’T KNOW YOUR TOAD. HE MADE QUITE A FEW FRIENDS ON THE TRAIN THOUGH, AND A LASTING IMPRESSION ON NOT A
Harry made his way to Gryffindor Table amid the raucous hoots and cheers, glancing back over his shoulder with a grin as Neville clambered up carefully. Neville hadn’t missed his place last time, he knew, but he was getting used to the myriad of small changes surrounding larger, more stable events. As long as nothing too, too drastic happened, he wasn’t going to worry; he’d just enjoy the moments.

The Sorting Hat settled comfortably, murmuring to itself. It opened its brim... Then just as abruptly closed it again.

The seconds drew out to half minutes, the half minutes to minutes... Everyone stirred restlessly. Neville didn’t move. Trevor hopped up in his lap and nestled into his arms.

“Two hat stalls,” Harry heard one of the Weasley twins murmur in excitement. “What do you think...”

“Is there a problem,” Professor Dumbledore’s pleasant voice rang out at last.

HMM? NO, NO; HE’S A GRYFFINDOR RIGHT ENOUGH, BUT... YES OF COURSE, MR. LONGBOTTOM. ANY TIME. JUST TELL PROFESSOR DUMBLEDORE WE HAVE A STANDING APPOINTMENT. OFF YOU GO NOW.

Neville slid out of the hat and down from the stool. Harry craned his neck as he approached, settling quietly between Harry and Hermione and staring at the table. His face was wet with tears.

“Blimey,” Ron said in an undertone, once he, too, was seated. “You okay, Nev? What was that about?”

“Nothing.” Neville wiped his nose on his sleeve. “Well, yes. It was something. I asked it if it knew my parents. They were injured in the war. Tortured into insanity. I don’t know anything about them, really. I never will. So I asked the Hat what they were like. Because... Because it’s been in their heads. And it would know, wouldn’t it? I got...” His voice wobbled a bit. “I got the idea... When it said that bit about Har... Potter’s mother.”

Before he could say anything more though, the table veritably exploded in food. Suitably distracted, they all (or most of them) turned away.

“That was awfully brave of you,” Harry said as Ron’s elbow narrowly missed his ear in its attached arm’s quest for the platter of chicken drumsticks.

Neville said nothing, just stuffed a roasted potato in his mouth.

“It’s Harry,” he said to the boy next to him. “Not Potter. Just... Harry.”

Neville offered him a tiny smile before turning back to his food. Harry turned to start in on his, when the cherry wand, poking out the sleeve of the other boy’s robes, made an appearance. Neville took it out and tucked it carefully in his pocket. Harry wrinkled his nose at it, trying to remember something that had caught his attention on the train, then disappeared just as quickly in light of the grape incident.

“Cherry wood,” he said. “You sure you’ve never been to Ollivander's?”

“No,” Neville said through a mouthful. “Why?”

“Nothing,” Harry said, but much later, when, up in Gryffindor Tower, he and Neville were taking
their turn in the loo and brushing their teeth, he pushed the door shut, cast a very obvious (and very obviously not first year) silence spell, and turned to the small, chubby boy before him.

“You did get it then,” Neville said. “I wondered if you would.”

“Cherry and unicorn hair,” Harry quoted. “The cherry’s obvious, innit, but the unicorn hair... I never mentioned that. And your wand’s not transparent.”

Neville lowered his toothbrush. His tiny smile grew.

“Can’t get anything past you,” he said, “Mr. Head of the Auror Department for over your century,” and as a fist pounded on the door...

“Oop.” He stumbled over and hauled on it breathlessly. The transformation was astonishing. “Sorry. Room of Requirement,” he mouthed at Harry behind Seamus’ back. “Once they’re asleep. Invisibility cloak?’

Harry did, in fact, have his invisibility cloak; Padfoot and Moony had retrieved it from its caretaker and returned it to him ceremoniously the night before. He nodded, his mind near-exploding. He crawled into his four-poster, heart pumping wildly, and stared up at the canopy.

Across from him, Neville Longbottom did the same.
It took till near one in the morning till Seamus had finally drifted off. Harry propped himself up on his elbow and looked over at the bed opposite. Neville was propped on his pillows, arms tucked behind his head, and turned to look at him at his soft whisper. Harry jerked his head, slipping out of bed and retrieving his invisibility cloak and wand from his cracked-open trunk. By the time he had shoved his feet in his slippers and cast Disillusioners and Notice-Me-Nots on them as accessories to the cloak, Neville was ready, pale round face determined.

“Change,” he ordered Harry, again in a whisper as they stepped outside the passage. “I’ll meet you there.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t be stupid. You can fly along the crest of the ceilings and nobody will see you, with or without the charms. I’ve got to walk the whole way and I don’t want to be tripping over you.”

“Alright,” Harry obliged, and shifting, darted out from under the cloak and buzzed up to the ceiling. The charms still held, Animagus or not, and once up on the seventh floor, and having confirmed that there was not a soul, living or dead, in sight, he shifted back to boy-form and slipped behind the tapestry to wait. His stomach grumbled loudly. He retrieved the Muggle protein bar he’d slipped in his dressing gown pocket and unwrapped it, scarfing it down and trying to chew quietly. He used considerable energy in any case when transformed into Dash (his hummingbird’s name) but burned easily three times as much, twice as fast, when holding spells onto himself simultaneously.

Neville appeared, or rather didn’t, in a surprisingly short time. Harry watched as the door in the opposite wall appeared as if out of nowhere, and darted through and in as it opened and closed. Once inside, he collapsed in a cosy chair. Neville removed his cloak, tossed it over the second, and went to throw another log on the fire. Harry grinned as he retrieved a bottle and two glasses from the mantelpiece.

“Firewhiskey? I know the room likes you, but how are you getting past Gamp’s Law?”

“I brought it in and left it here when I graduated,” Neville said shortly. “In seventh – well, eighth, year. This is the Head Boy’s office. It’s just like I remember. No worries, it’s got an anti-inebriation spell on it. Flavour only.”

He handed Harry a shot and clambered into the second squashy chair, tucking his feet under him. Harry sniffed and sipped, letting his head fall back in pleasure.

“Bugger me,” he said profoundly.

“You’re going to have to watch your mouth now that we’re young again, you know. And... Bend over, and I will,” his compatriot returned. “You’ll have to settle for the Sword though, since I’m bloody eleven.” He nodded to the Sword of Gryffindor, hanging over the fire.

“It’s not my fault!” Harry protested. “I only died! Everybody dies! I didn’t bring me back here, or you!”

“Do you have any idea what did?”

“No,” he admitted. “Not really. I came back on Solstice Night though. December 1989. I figure now there must have been some sort of ritual involved; maybe some sort of last minute prank from that
“No clue,” Neville said. “All I know was that I was finished. I died the spring after you did, five years to the day after Hannah...” His face spasmed. “And I was ready. Ready, willing, I’d said my goodbyes to my kids and grandkids, and I went to-forest, and...” His face spasmed again.

“We don’t have to stay here,” Harry said. “You can’t have changed since you got back.”

“You sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

The room shifted. They were now on the edge of a huge forest, not an English one, but one of pine and fir and stunted maple. Harry shivered; it was brutally cold, with a crisp caking of ghostly snow everywhere. As if in response, a fur cloak and boots appeared as if out of nowhere. He jammed them on hastily.

“Hang onto my neck,” Neville directed. “And don’t get ideas, Potter. We still have a lot to talk about, and I’m not at all happy with you, for the record. Death obviously hasn’t been good for your common sense, or your Auror instincts.”

Harry obeyed, yelping as Neville flung out of his arms, stretched, and exploded in a giant floof. His accompanying roar split the night and seemed to rattle the very mountains.

“Bugger me,” Harry said breathlessly again. “How come you’re not a cub? You’re bigger than I ever remember you!”

The gigantic, matte-black North Alaskan grizzly bear – twelve feet on its hind legs, and over 140 stone, or 2000 pounds of solid muscle, claw, teeth and feral killer instinct – just loped toward the forest.

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One Hour Later

“Much better.” Neville resettled into his Head Boy chair. “And to answer your question, the Animagus transformation seems to be tied to the age of your magical core, not to the age of your body. Our cores are the same ages as we are, mentally, or we wouldn’t be able to cast any of the spells we still do. Didn’t you wonder about that?”

“Been a bit busy,” Harry excused himself, but then, feeling the bit of an idiot, confessed... “Er. No?”

“What have you wondered about?”

He lifted a shoulder.

“Voldemort,” he said. “And how to get rid of him with least possible fuss. Other than that... Surviving the Dursleys, and working out how to be happy.”

“And have you been?”

“What, happy?”

“Mm.”
“The last month’s been nice,” he said cautiously. “With Remus and Sirius. Before... I woke up back at the Dursleys’, like I said. They weren’t so mean to me this time, though. I mostly just cast...”

“Notice-Me-Nots.” Neville nodded. “And popped out as Dash when needed to fill up on flowers, right?”

“Yeah. You?”

“I woke up at the Spring Solstice again,” he said. “You’d already cured Remus, and managed to free Sirius. It honestly didn’t occur to me at first that you might have returned as well; I thought I was in one of those whaddayacall’eems that the Muggles and Unspeakables go on about, well, that the Muggles go on about, and the Unspeakables don’t, except when they do. Parallel universes.” His round little shoulders hunched. “I thought... I thought at first... Mum and Dad... Maybe things weren’t as bad there as they’d been, or... Or... But when I went with Gran to see them like we always did, the weekend after... They were just the same.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said inadequately.

“I’m sorry too,” he said bitterly. “Sorry they didn’t die. That the Lestranges and Crouch didn’t kill them straight up. Now, I get to wait another fifty seven years after finally, finally seeing them at peace, every damned week, knowing that nothing can be done, nothing will be done, that...” He choked on it. “Gran. The first time. She always said ‘Don’t give up, Neville. There’s always hope.’ And I hung onto that. Always. It kept me going. Well, I know better than her now. I know there’s none. I know. And that’s what I have to live through all bloody damned over again.” He laughed a bit hysterically. “Bellatrix Lestrange couldn’t have hit me with a worse curse if she’d tried, Harry. Not if she’d tried.”

They were silent. Harry pulled his knees closer to himself, trying to digest the horror of what he’d just heard. He couldn’t even begin to manage it.

“I’m sorry,” he said. Then... “Maybe we can find a way back, maybe...”

“There is no way back,” Neville said flatly. “There’s no back to go to, not for us. We lived out our natural lifespans. Everything we had to do is done. Everything’s complete. Nothing cut off, nothing unfinished... Our season’s over. I don’t know what happened, or why, but whatever did, and whatever the reason... We’re here. Eleven again: no wives, no kids, no grandkids, no... Nothing.”

“Nothing but what we make,” Harry corrected. “If we can get rid of Voldemort sooner this time...”

“There isn’t a this time’.” Neville knocked back his drink. “It’s not about time. It is... What it is. Just because things started off the same way here, doesn’t mean... And you’ve already ruined everything anyway!”

“What?” Harry said blankly. “How’d I do that?”

“Hello? Pettigrew? Sirius? You do remember fourth year, don’t you, when Voldy returned? I don’t suppose you remember who helped him do that? Who was waiting for you when you and Diggory were transported to that graveyard?”

It took a moment for that to process – then to process the likelihood that it had already processed, and had from the beginning, and that he’d been in such complete self-centered denial that he’d refused to allow himself to see what freeing Sirius early would do.

The shame that he’d felt on the train returned tenfold.
“If Pettigrew doesn’t rescue him,” Neville continued. “Who will? Someone else? No one at all? We’re in completely uncharted waters here, Harry. If we’re careful, maybe, maybe... We can predict what will happen up to the end of second year, before the first Sirius saw Scabbers in that newspaper article. After that, though...”

Harry thought rapidly. He set his own shot glass down with a decisive thud.

“We can do this,” he said. “We can. Seven horcruxes- six now, including me, and we know now that I won’t actually kick it when I get AKed, I’ll come back if I want to, without the extra scaly bits. We know where they are. We know how to find them, and how to get rid of them before the decisive break in the events line occurs. We just need a plan.”

“Oh well,” Neville said ironically. “Plans we can come up with. Plot twists... Those are right out of our control, aren’t they? Never mind the fact that I’m still mad at you! Whatever ritual or curse you got caught up in, it had to be aimed at you! Everybody liked me!”

“Aw, come on Nev,” Harry coaxed. “Don’t be like that. And look on the bright side!”

“The bright side?”

“Yeah. Just think of the school reports you’ll be able to send home to your Gran!”

“Oh,” Nev said, and then, dubiously... “Hermione won’t be top of our year anymore. She’s really, really not going to like that.”

“She’s a great girl,” Harry said bracingly. “She is. She could do with a bit of squashing though, let’s be honest, at this point anyway.”

“What about Ron?”

He paused at that. It broke his heart to say it, but...

“We can still be friends,” he said slowly. “But he’s not my Ron. And if we don’t go through the things we did together... He never will be. I don’t like it, but if people will live instead...” He trailed off. Neville reached over and patted his shoulder.

“He probably wouldn’t be anyway,” he said. “If we’re honest. He was always an awful git about poofers, and you’re living with Sirius and Remus now. You know he’s dazzled by you, but as soon as we take a History lesson, or he sees Sirius visiting with you two, you know what will happen.”

Sadly, Harry did. He sighed.

“I don’t know what his problem is,” he said. “Honestly, it’s stupid. Nobody in his family has that kind of prejudice.”

Neville laughed outright.

“You’re not just an old man,” he said, amused. “You’re a stupid old man. Never figured it out, did you? Hannah said you must’ve; it was dead obvious after you and Ginny got married and ‘specially when she said she was having James, but...”

“What are you going on about?”

“Ron is a poofer, Harry,” he said, and at the dropped jaw... “Well. Bi, anyway, at least, though I have my doubts. You weren’t a girl, you wouldn’t have heard, but all those Hens’ Nights with Ginny
and Lav and Suze and Hannah and Hermione... Hermione wasn’t ever actually uncomplimentary, but that’s because it would have reflected badly on her. Believe you me, though, it wasn’t hard for Hannah to read through the lines. It’s why she broke up with Ernie and Justin, after all.” He sighed in reminiscence. "When I think of the tourney she put me through to prove I was straight..."

“Good God,” Harry mumbled. “Ron. Bent.” He brightened and sat up. “Think we could lead him to the path of self-acceptance? There’s got to be some nice boy in Hogwarts that we could set him up with!”

“Not in our year,” Neville said. “Well, Seamus, but Seamus is... Seamus. Not exactly long-term material, no matter who he shags. I think we should settle on saving the world before we pair off our friends. If only so we know who’ll be left.”

“Merlin’s balls, Longbottom!” Harry was aghast. “Morbid, much?”

“Practical, more like. Be a bit much, wouldn’t it, to get through all this without a single casualty?”

“It’s not going to happen,” Harry agreed sadly. “But then again...” He brightened once more. “Another positive! Molly Weasley totally cock-blocked you last time, mate, when it came to Bellatrix! She’s still alive now; you’ll get another go!”

Neville looked massively guilty.... He stared.

“Neville,” he said. “What did you do?”

“Not much,” he mumbled. The words that followed were mumbled again, but yet distinct.

“You... WHAT?”

He sighed.

“I gave Gran a Somnolia potion when I got back,” he confessed. “And Apparated to the coast, and Notice-Me-Notted myself onto the barge to Azkaban, and well. Snuck into see her, and into her cell. We had a nice little talk, and I. Um. May have transformed into Beorn and chewed her wand-hand off.”

“What?”

“I didn’t kill her!” he protested. “But I was upset! I’d just seen my parents for the first time, and...” He wilted. “I’m sorry.”

“No you’re not. You chewed her wand-arm off?”

“Hand. And her secondary.”

“She only had two! And nobody noticed? Why wasn’t it in the papers?”

“I’m sure they did notice, but nobody cares there. They don’t, unless someone actually dies.”

“Uh huh. Did you on chew anyone else while you were there?”

“No. It took me a month to get the taste out of my mouth as it was.”

“Oh. Well...” Harry tried to think of anything bad that might come out of literally disarming Bellatrix Lestrange, and failed utterly. “Anything else?”
“I might have saved Pandora Lovegood’s life,” he confessed.

“Huh? Who?”

“Pandora Lovegood. Luna’s mum. I sent Luna a letter telling her I was one of the Spirits of Beyond, and that the day her mum would have died was an inauspicious day for experimenting with new charms. She wrote me back, and asked me who I was, and I said nobody important, just a minor member of the fey court who had a habit of listening in on my betters when I wasn’t supposed to, but that I’d heard this omen, and seen the possible results in the Booke of Omenes, and that she might want to convince her parents to go camping that weekend or something. And she did, and now Mrs. Lovegood is Professor Lovegood, well, semi-Professor Lovegood, and is working with Professor Flitwick with OWL and NEWT Charms students who want to go into Research and Development. Weren’t you paying attention at dinner?’

“You wrote...” Harry flopped back and roared. Neville grinned sheepishly.

“You might have a saving people thing,” he said. “But as it turns out I do too. You’re just lucky that the company that owns and produces Mr. Smiley Enviro-Cleaning Fluid hasn’t changed the recipe there in over a hundred forty years.”

“Even if they had, it wouldn’t have mattered,” Harry said. “My grandfather, Fleamont Potter, invented it. He was a big Muggle supporter, particularly when it came to their money, and branched out from Sleakeazy’s and Pepper-Up and Skelegro into their wider markets early on. He left the formulas for everything his front-men changed over time in our main vault, every time they did change. I did check before I spiked Remus’s fruitcake and sent it through the post.”

“You spiked...”

“Mm,” Harry confirmed. “Added a bit of a compulsion charm to counter the ‘don’t take candy from anonymous post-owls’ effect, and there it was.”

“Huh,” Neville said. “D’you think that would work with Fenrir Greyback?”

The two boys sat before the fire and stared at each other. Neville leaned over and refilled their shot glasses.

“Alright,” he said. “I forgive you.”

“For what?”

Neville waved a plump hand. “Whatever I was mad at you for,” he said. Then, fervently... “Blimey, I’m glad it’s you. I wasn’t sure, you know? Not... I mean, I was pretty sure, all the major changes made that I saw in the Prophet had to do with things that would have made your life personally better, but still. I wasn’t really sure, not till the loo. It would have been horrid if it wasn’t you.”

"Neville, old man," Harry said solemnly. "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship..."
"This," Professor Remus Lupin said to Professor Pandora Lovegood as they settled in at the breakfast table the next morning, "has to mark the first time that a DADA professor got taken out before he ever taught a single class. Did Albus try to hit you up for the job too?"

"First thing," the statuesque blonde woman confirmed. "And I barely scraped an A on my NEWT there. I told him that I’m far too young to die. And... Too?"

"He tried, but I have an iron-clad contract." The ex-were dished himself up some porridge. "There’s no way I’m going on official book there, and he knows it. How is Luna coping with your absence? Good morning, Severus!"

Severus Snape just grunted and seated himself, reaching for the tea. It was a shame, Harry reflected as he looked over from his seat at Gryffindor Table and up from his huge plate of layered bacon, egg, sausage, tomato and fried potatoes, that the infamous Potions professor’s students had never processed that the man was simply not a morning person... A little understanding and sympathy there might have made everyone’s life considerably more tolerable. He slurped his black-as-sin-coffee-disguised-handily-as-pumpkin-juice as emphatic punctuation to the thought. Beside him, Neville hummed to himself as he diced a green apple, sprinkled it over his raw oats, and stirred in a huge dollop of vanilla yogurt with cinnamon.

"I don’t remember there ever being fruit on the table here before," Katie Bell said as she seated herself. "What’s with that?"

"I left a note out for the house-elves." Neville sipped his own coffee-disguised-as-orange-juice. "On my bedside table, and asked them to put out some healthy stuff. I’m trying to get in shape."

"Stairs’ll do that for you," Fred Weasley boomed as he slapped him so hard on the back that he nearly fell into his bowl. "Good moooorning, ickle firsties! Welcome to Hogwarts again, and did you hear the news? The thought of teaching the lot of you has driven off a professor already, and you’re not even attended your first class yet! Good job!"

"Huh?” Harry said around a mouthful of wadded buttered toast and marmalade. "Wha'?"

"Quirrell’s out." George poured himself pumpkin juice. "Our sources confirmed the story less than fifteen minutes ago: a whole pack of Unspeakables and Aurors grabbed him while he was sleeping, and hauled him off to exorcise him. Story is he picked up a really foul case of parasites while he was in Albania. Stay tuned for more details; if they’re out there, we’ll find ‘em!"

"Parasites," Ron repeated.

"He was possessed, Ron," Percy said briskly. "Unfortunate, but these things are an occupational hazard in his field. He should have stuck to Muggle Studies; the worst thing that they get infected with is untoward and easily monitored fits of imagination. Pass the crumpets, Granger. Ah, thank you." His hand paused mid-transaction as he saw Harry’s plate. "Good heavens, Potter. What are you eating?"

"Breakfast," Harry said, after he’d swallowed. An unnaturally hearty appetite, he reasoned, was no excuse for bad table manners, and for a moment, regretted his decision not to befriend Ron, at least not immediately... It was a lesson that, as a father and grandfather, he might have proved far more
effective at enforcing than the first time around. “What’ve we got first thing, Nev?”

“Transfiguration,” Neville said, consulting his timetable. “And Charms after.”

“Excellent,” Percy said. “It’ll be matchsticks to needles then, won’t it, and feathers.”

“If you say so,” Harry said politely, and exchanged covert grins with his new partner-in-crime. Even as he did so, his pocket buzzed. “Oop Hang on. Godfather incoming.” He dug in his robe pocket. “Sirius!”

“Pup!” Sirius Black cried. “You’re awake!”

“Course I’m awake,” Harry said. “I’ve got classes. Why are you awake?”

“Early mail call from Dumbledore. Bloody phoenix nearly pecked my eyes out. Details later. You’re awake because you’ve got classes? Words I never thought to hear from a Potter. You definitely take after your mother. Mm.” The face in the mirror tried to peer around the corner. “Is that bacon I see?”


“The red ends of the matchsticks set things on fire when you duel with them,” Sirius obliged. “Watch your fingers. Also, if you do feathers, remember it’s Wing-GAR-dium Lev-i-OH sa, not Wing-GAR-dium Lev-i-oh-SAH. I can still hear your mother lecturing me on that one after all these years.”

“I think I’ve got the feathers down anyway,” Harry said dryly. “Thanks, Padfoot. Go de-gnome the garden or write Moony a love-letter or something. He’s getting chatted up by Professor Lovegood, and he looks like he likes it.”

“Moony?” one of the twins said, goggle-eyed. “Padfoot? What?”

“He and Pan are good friends,” Sirius conceded. “Even had a date or two back in the day, I think, but in the end, it just couldn’t work out. Obviously. Anyway, her daughter starts at Hogwarts next year: she’s a cutie. Bit of a wild imagination, but a real doll. We’ll have to have them all over some time. Maybe on the weekend; you know you’re coming home on Saturday nights now, don’t you, and staying till Sunday tea?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Absolutely. Um. Sirius?”

“Yeah?”

“Could I bring a friend sometimes?” He caught Ron’s hopeful look and, ignoring the pang in his gut, quashed it gently, but firmly. “Only there’s another boy here, he’s got no brothers and sisters either, and he lives with his Gran, and we really got on on the train. He matched my cherry wand when I dropped it and he picked it up, so I sold it to him. Anyway, he’s really nice, and...”

“Whoa, whoa!” Sirius cut him off. “You gave him one of your wands?”

“No. I sold it to him. He said his Gran wouldn’t like it; she wanted him to use his father’s wand; he was a great war hero, along with his mum, but I told him that everyone needs a backup, and as Aurors, his dad and mum would have agreed. So he gave me five galleons to make it official, from his own pocket money that he earned doing gardens, and we talked about that too, because he knows a whole lot, and I always did the garden at the Dursleys, so...”

“Breathe,” Sirius ordered. “Does this friend of yours have a name?”
“Neville,” he obliged. “Neville Longbottom.”

There was a pause.

“Ah.” It sounded a bit uncertain. “Well... Sure, Harry. Your friends are always welcome. Let me talk to Moony, okay, and we’ll get in touch with Madam Longbottom in the next couple of days.”

“Okay.” Harry bagged another fried egg and stuffed it into a roll with bacon. “I gotta go, Sirius. People here are waving at me like they’re going to explode if I don’t. I’ll talk to you later, okay? I love you.”

“I love you too, pup,” Sirius said. As soon as he’d signed off, Remus appeared beside him, resplendent in his new black teacher’s robes, neat grey suit and scarlet waistcoat. More than one student swooned.

“Give it here, Harry.” He held out his hand.

“What?” But...

“You can have it back after classes, as long as you return it to me at breakfast every morning. You’ll get into enough trouble, I reckon, without His Nibs’ help.”

“I just like to talk to him,” Harry said, reluctantly handing over the mirror.

“I know you do.” He tweaked his ear. “I do too. Lunch in my office, alright? One o’ clock.”

“Okay. Um. Moo... Professor Lupin?” he called. Remus turned. “This is Neville. Neville Longbottom.”

‘You don’t say.” Remus examined the boy before him. “I hear you’re the one responsible for the fruit?”

“Y-yes,” Neville stammered. “Is that... Was that wrong?”

“Heavens no,” the ex-were said amiably. “I enjoy that sort of thing a lot more myself now, now that I’ve officially lost my taste for blood and guts and gore.”

“Moony!”

Remus winked at him. “Just joking,” he said, and his face sobered. “Here’s a lesson for all of you; you never do get a taste for that sort of thing, no matter how long you’ve been a werewolf. No matter what anybody tells you. That’s part of the curse.”

“Only it’s not like that for everyone who’s bitten, is it?” Hermione ventured. “What about people like that Fenrir Greyback?”

“Fenrir Greyback wasn’t a person to start off with,” Remus returned. “Not where it counts, Miss...”

“Granger. Hermione Granger.”

“Granger. In Muggle terms, he was a medically confirmed psychopath long before he was ever bitten; one who liked to dabble in things best left alone, never mind his rancid little hobbies as concerns Muggles again, and he deliberately allowed himself to be attacked so he could further his own agendas.”

“Things best left...” Hermione’s eyes widened. “You mean the Dark Arts?”
“They change you,” Remus corroborated soberly again, looking around the table. “Lesson number two. The Dark Arts change you. I won’t be teaching you till next year... But remember that, every year, no matter who does. The face in the mirror may never change, but where it really counts... Your own mothers wouldn’t recognize you. They wouldn’t want to.”

He wandered off, tucking the mirror in his pocket. Fred and George immediately pounced.

“Padfoot?” They demanded in chorus. “Moony? Where did you hear those names and why are they attached to people you know?”

“We need to get going, Harry.” Neville swallowed the last of his juice and tucked a napkinful of roasted chestnuts in his pocket. “We’re going to be late.”

“Right, right.” He grabbed his own bag. Ron still looked more than a little mopey as he watched them go.

“Don’t I feel like a right shite,” Harry mumbled as they headed toward the stairs.


“Sorting Hat. It’s not like my meeting with him at the end of this year was a crucial turning point. It was strictly situational confirmation and information-gathering, and now I won’t have to kill an innocent man with my bare hands. That was dead traumatizing, you know? I’ve never got over it.”

Neville sighed. “I get that,” he said. “It just... complicates things.”

“Ten to one he’ll be back,” Harry predicted. “He’ll get away from the Aurors; this lot except for Moody couldn’t find their arses with the Marauder’s Map, and then he’ll come looking for the Stone again. One way or another, he’ll be there waiting for us at the end of the year. It’s just a question of who he’ll be inhabiting.”

“We’ll keep an ear out for missing Aurors then,” Nev said. “Or Unspeakables.”

They entered the Transfiguration classroom in good time, and settled themselves at a desk halfway back. The rest of the class trickled in slowly, Ron seating himself glumly beside Seamus. The two reborn wizards cast covert grins at each other, and turned their attention to the front as McGonagall began with her traditional dire warnings on her subject. Several pages of complicated notes later, she passed out the matchsticks. Harry examined his carefully.

“You ever seen one of these before?” he asked Neville brightly. Neville gave him a sour, amused look. “Never mind. Okay. Needles. Sharp, silver, pointy...” He waved his wand with a flourish. Neville peered over his shoulder at the results.

“That looks easy enough,” he conceded, and mimicked his movements and incantation. They sat patiently waiting for McGonagall to come around as everyone sweated and frowned and waved around them.

“Now, now, Potter,” she said, approaching. “Don’t just sit there and stare at it. Longbottom, you must at least try; I read that letter from your grandmother, but really, I think...” She stopped in her tracks and stared down at the desk. Two perfectly matched, glistening silver needles twinkled up at her. “How...”

“We just did the movement and said the word,” Harry said innocently. “Like you said to, Professor.”

She glared at him suspiciously, as if he might have dared to swap the matchsticks when she wasn’t
looking, and waving her own wand, switched them back.

“Again,” she ordered. “You first, Longbottom.”

Neville obliged. Harry followed. She stared again, adjusting her glasses on the tip of her nose.

“Well,” she said. And then, flustered... “Well. Excellent work, boys. Five points each to Gryffindor.” She offered them a puzzled smile. Behind them, they could hear Hermione hissing in anger through her teeth.

“How did you do that?” she demanded of them. “You cheated; I know you did, you can’t possibly have got it on the first go!”

“Miss Granger!” Professor McGonagall snapped. “That is enough! I stood there and watched them perform the perfect transfigurations myself, are you saying that they got one past me?”

“No, Professor, I’m... I’m sorry, I...”

“Eyes on your own work. Mr. Thomas! What do you think you’re playing at? Mr. Finnegan, stop that at once!”

“Professor McGonagall?” Harry said meekly as Neville poked idly at his needle with his wand, turning it back and forth so rapidly it twisted around itself in confusion and ended up with its point through its own eye. “What should Nev and me do now?”

“Nev and I,” Hermione corrected loftily.

“Two points, Miss Granger,” Professor McGonagall snapped again, and as Hermione beamed... “From Gryffindor. Concentrate, please!” She returned to Harry’s desk and held out her hand. “May I see your wand, Mr. Potter?”

He handed it over dutifully. She examined it carefully from every angle.

“Amber,” she murmured. “Interesting. Most unusual. Does the core always flare when you’re trying a spell?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I haven’t actually tried that many yet, Professor.”

“Keep me posted.” She handed it back. “Certain wand woods do lend themselves well to transfiguration – your father’s was mahogany; a well-known example – but I simply don’t have enough experience with amber to be able to tell you whether yours is one of them. Did Mr. Ollivander say anything in particular on the subject?”

“No,” Harry said. “He just said that Hungarian Horntails have really bad tempers, and that the witches and wizards chosen by them tend to be like that too.”

“I see.” She looked down her nose at him, crossing her arms. “We’re not going to have a problem with that little issue of yours in my classroom, are we, Mr. Potter?”

“No, Professor,” he squeaked. He was, just at that moment, devoutly glad she could not tell what he was thinking... Neville bit his lips so hard in stifled amusement that they nearly bled. She turned her attention to him and held out her hand. He put his wand in it immediately.

“Lovely,” she said approvingly. “Your grandmother changed her mind on your match after all?”
“N-not exactly,” Neville said. “I bought it from Harry. It um. Was his back-up, and it liked him alright, but it. Er.”

“Went a little mental when it met Nev,” Harry supplied. “In a good way. I think it would have snapped itself in two if I’d insisted it leave him, Professor, really. I didn’t want to be responsible for that. “

“Of course you didn’t,” she said. “Very well. Since you’ve mastered this particular assignment so easily... Try this one.” She waved her own wand. The matchstick turned into a fountain pen. “Examine the pen closely, and try not just to change the shape once you’ve got that down, but the details as well.”

Behind them, Hermione gasped in outrage. “That’s second year work, that is!” she protested loudly. “That’s not fair! Professor, I think there’s something wrong with my matchstick!”

“Damn,” Neville murmured. “I’d forgotten how plain annoying she was before she almost got mashed by that troll. Maybe we should just let that one pass, so she’ll get the lesson?”

“Don’t tempt me,” Harry mumbled back, and picked up the pen. “Alright. Let’s see what we’ve got here.” Even as he raised his wand again, a huge clamour rose out in the hall, and a very familiar, very furious voice.

“You signed it?" Remus Lupin roared. “You actually signed it? Without talking to me first?”

“I wasn’t awake yet!” another familiar voice protested. “And the phoenix was being mean! It kept poking at me, and flapping at me, and crooning at me, and I just wanted to go back to sleep!”

“So you signed it? A bloody contract, for the bloody DADA position, just like that, without talking or consulting with me or even reading the damned thing, after everything you put me through before you’d quote-unquote allow me to work here myself? You stupid, stupid, brainless...” There was a decided sputter. “Mutt!”

Harry’s jaw dropped. Neville lowered his own wand gently.

“Oh dear,” he murmured. “This could definitely complicate things.”

“I know, Moony, but look on the bright side,” Sirius pleaded desperately from the hallway. “I’ll be here all the time! At Hogwarts! With you and Harry, and I’ll be really, really careful, I swear, and the curse has already got its victim for the year besides, it sounds like, and maybe it’ll decide that the nine years in Azkaban was punishment enough insofar as I’m concerned, and treat it... As...” His voice trailed off. “Retroactive payment?” That last was very, very tiny and hopeful. “Um. Would it help any if I told you that I’ve decided – independently, I promise, and I swear I’m not just saying it to get out of trouble - to accept your proposal?”

The room was dead quiet. Every student looked wide-eyed in Harry’s direction.

“Proposal?” Ron Weasley said loudly. “But they’re both men!”

“Well spotted, Mr. Weasley,” Professor McGonagall said, rather acidly. “What gave you the clue, the great roaring flame emanating from your matchstick?”

“Wha...” Ron looked down and squawked in panic. Neville buried his face in his robe sleeves and shook with laughter, pretending to sneeze violently. Harry poked him hard.
“Shut up,” he muttered. “It’s only the first class, man, and we’ve still got the poofy dancing feathers to go...”
Of Yellow and Green

Professor Lupin’s Office

12:45 pm

“Alright.” Remus shuffled papers neatly, examining one last paragraph one last time. “Alright. It’s not as bad as it could be, I suppose. I have no idea what he was thinking on offering you, of all people, the Headship of Gryffindor House – “

“It’s a joint position,” Sirius offered hopefully. “Or could be, the way he’s defined it there. ‘Single or established couple’, see, and we’re very established. Very, very established. And that hearth rug in front of the common-room fire is very comfy; McWolf will love it.”

“Second person is fine, Sirius.” He sighed and sat back in his chair. “I hate him, I really do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I know he’s a bit, whaddidyoucallit, unprecedented with the Animagus thing, but…”

“Him being an Animagus is the least of it really. To be honest, I’m not sure what it means. I do know, though, that your average eleven-year-old simply isn’t as proficient as he is. At anything. He cooks, he cleans, he budgets, he gets our jokes…” He waved off the predictable wide smirk. “Alright, we’re not terribly discreet at times, but a boy his age simply shouldn’t have the life context to get the subtlety of mine, at least. The potential implications there…”

The smirk disappeared as if Vanished. Sirius Black’s face darkened, and he lowered his coffee cup.

“You’re not saying…”

“No,” Remus said immediately. “I’m not. There would be other signs there, other indications, and he’s got none of them.” He hesitated a long moment. “That being said… I asked Snape to double check for us there in Potions class tomorrow.”

“YOU WHAT?”
“You heard me. I’m worried, Sirius! You’ve met Petunia and Vernon, even if it was years ago, and from the look and sound of it, especially as pertains to what Harry hasn’t said to us, they haven’t changed a bit. I want to know what’s been going on there, and frankly, after sharing my suspicions with him… So does Severus. He’s a great git, but you know how he feels about child abuse.”

“What, that it builds character?”

“Knock it off.” The ex-were’s voice was sharp again. “I know you two have your issues, but this isn’t about you. You know damned well, as well as I do, that if Harry’d been sorted into Slytherin he’d’ve been down in the hospital wing before he’d had a chance to take the Hat off his head.” He raised his hand, cutting him off. “Yes, he looks healthy enough now, but he’s still too damned small, and he’s gained the half-stone that makes him look on the paltry side rather than outright starved in the last four weeks since we met him. Severus might not comment on those things, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t take note of them when he sees them. Say what you will about his personality or loyalties, but he takes his job as Head of Slytherin seriously, even if he’s a crap teacher, and he has never, and would never, just sit back if one of his snakes were in that kind of trouble.”

Sirius slouched.

“Did he say anything to you?” he asked. “Before you asked him to check?”

“Yes. He seems to have set aside the fact that he’s Jamie’s son in light of the fact that we’re now the ones raising him. One more thing to hate us for, I suspect, and to criticize us for, and he can’t exactly do that effectively while hating on the child, can he?”

“So what does he have in mind?”

“A bit of Legilimency. Nothing profound or illegal,” he hastened at Sirius’ Look. “Certainly nothing more than a Mind Healer would do if suspicious on an unforthcoming minor in his or her care. We have responsibilities, Sirius, and frankly, I’d rather Snape proxy for us there than Dumbledore.”

“What? Why?”

“Dumbledore’s the one discouraging our suit for custody, for one thing,” Remus said dryly. “He wants him to go back to the Dursleys. For whatever reason, he’s stuck on the idea, and that being said…” He took the quill and co-signed the contract. “There. Now you’re a lot less likely to bollocks things up.”

“You don’t actually think he wants me to bollocks it up, do you?”

“The more letter of complaints he gets from parents,” Remus said. “The more of a body of evidence he has to present to your unsuitability as guardian at the hearing in November. Even if he isn’t consciously intending the results, he would use them if they presented themselves.” He frowned slightly. “Then there’s the issue of the Granger girl and the Weasley boy.”

“Huh?”

“You saw them on the train when they chatted with us through the mirrors. They were having a blast. Frankly, it reminded me of us when we first met; it was as if they’d known each other their whole lives. This morning at breakfast though… He wasn’t being mean, Harry, that is… But he was deliberately shutting them out, and when he left the table, it was as if he was making the point of leaving with Longbottom alone.”

“He’s a kid,” Sirius said, unconvinced. “Kids blow hot and cold. And they’re thoughtless little buggers at the best of times, yeah?”
“Yes and no, but there’s more to it than that. I know it.” He sighed in frustration. “His body language… It wasn’t thoughtless, it was deliberate. And, I hate to say it… Deliberately hurtful. He was trying to push them away, Siri. I didn’t just see it, I smelled it. I may not be a wolf anymore, but I can still detect an effective shunning-of-pack when it’s happening.”

Sirius tugged at his hair.

“You’re saying…” He hesitated. “You think he’s. I dunno. Isolating himself? Deliberately, as a response to habitual emotional neglect and abuse? And only letting in Longbottom because they have the lack of family in common, and the enforced social isolation and whatnot?” He caught the peculiar look. “What? My Mind Healers are good for something, and I’m all over the results of lack of family and enforced isolation. I may be mildly crazy yet, Rem, but I’m not stupid.”

“We can’t discount it,” Remus said. “The deliberate self-isolation, not your stupid.” He picked up the contract and put it down again. “Maybe this is for the best, no matter what Dumbledore had, or has, in mind. That Animagus form of his alone worries me; it’s just too small and sneaky. Can you even begin to imagine the trouble Jamie would have gotten into if he’d been anything other than the biggest bloody land animal in Great Britain?”

“Oh well.” Sirius laughed softly. “He’s got his tells. I don’t know if you noticed his plate this morning, but it was stacked eight inches high, and he went through all of it.”

“Mm?”

“Spending time as a hummingbird burns through his resources,” the boy’s godfather explained. “And he has to refuel. He went on a little jaunt last night – quite an extensive one, if he was eating that much after a feast the night before – and with no access to a garden or a ready supply of nectar, his breakfast gave him away.”

“You noticed that?”

“Of course I noticed that. I was effectively starved for nine years, Moony. I notice everything about food now.”

“Oh, Padfoot.” Lupin’s eyes softened, and he got up and came around the desk, putting his arms around the man and pressing his lips to his hair… Sirius tilted his head back for a kiss.

“We’re both free men now,” he said, and then, hopefully…. “Does this mean you forgive me for signing after all?”

“As I said, it’s not as bad as it could be,” Remus conceded. “Head of Gryffindor House, and an agreement to consult with students on the Other Subject as needed, in as formal or informal an environment as the situation demands…”

“So I don’t get to watch you sever Dumbles’ sequins after all?’

“Not unless you die on the job. If that happens, I’ll hire Severus to summon you back from the grave just so you can watch, I promise.”

“Yay!”

They kissed again. A soft knock sounded at the door, and a head of spiky, tousled black hair and a pair of bright green bespectacled eyes peered around.

“Is it safe?” Harry asked brightly. “Only you were kind of loud in the hall outside Transfiguration
this morning, and then there’s been Ron ever since.”

“Mm?” Remus inquired as lips popped.

“He doesn’t clap for fairies.”

“Huh?” Sirius looked confused. “What are you going on about?”


“If you’re referencing a Muggle book, you’ve got me at an inherent disadvantage there, pup, and if you’re not… The library at Azkaban really isn’t all that.”

“I’ll owl-order a copy,” his godson promised. “You’ll love it.”

“I’m sure I will. Ron?”

“He likes boys,” Harry translated. “And doesn’t like the idea, and is going to project on you. He already is.”

“Oh,” Remus said in dismay. “Oh dear. The poor thing. Are you sure, cub?”

“Pretty sure, yeah. Nev is, anyway. And I think Professor McGonagall might think so too. She made a really funny joke about his great flaming matchstick this morning.” He entered the office and perched himself on a stool, helping himself to a ham and cheese sandwich from the plate on the desk. “Brilliant,” he said around a mouthful. “M’ starving.”

“Mm.” Remus returned to his seat and took a sandwich half for himself. “Now that we’re on the subject… Where, exactly, did you decide to dash off to after hours last night, young man?”

Harry stopped chewing abruptly. Sirius barked a laugh at his trapped expression.

“We weren’t born yesterday, pup,” he said kindly. “We know you’ve been used to kiting around on your effective own for years now; Vernon and Petunia aren’t exactly stellar human beings, and I can’t imagine they’d be doting parents, but you’ve got us to deal with now – in-house yet, and now that we’re Gryffindor’s Co-Heads, really in-House – and you’re just going to have to resign yourself to be raised properly. Now’s as good a time as any to let you know that we’ll be putting anti-underage-Animagus charms on every one of the doors and windows and fireplaces of the Tower.”

“We are?” Remus said. “When did we decide this?”

“Right after we decided to install the weekday anti-lethifold charms,” Sirius said blithely. “The Invisibility Cloak is made of lethifold skin, Jamie told me once, and…”

“You gave me that cloak!” Harry protested. “And now you’re not going to let me use it?”

“Sure we will. On the weekends.” He caught the look and sighed. “Come on, pup. Try to see this from our point of view, okay? We have contracts to fulfill, and responsibilities, and the final hearing isn’t till November. I promise we’ll lighten up on the overbearing parent thing after we have full custody of you, but till then, a little cooperation and understanding would be most appreciated?”

Harry grumbled, but in the end, settled with his sandwiches, legs swinging, and blathered on enthusiastically about his morning… Remus couldn’t help but smile softly as he watched the two people he loved most laugh and talk animatedly, in between huge bites and laughing fits.

This could work, he thought. This could… Really, really work.
“So you’re actually going to be living in Gryffindor Tower?” Harry was asking. “Together?”

“Well, we’re engaged now,” Sirius said, self-consciously and cautiously. “You probably heard that in the hallway too. So… Yes. “

“I heard,” Harry said, and promptly made wet smoochy kissing sounds that knocked him off his stool with the force of his own mocked gagging and giggles. “We aaaalll heard. They could probably hear you slobbering and snogging up in the Astronomy Tower.”

“Charming, Harry,” Remus said, amused. “Speaking of which, don’t you have Charms soon?”


He bolted off at full speed down the hall. The two men could almost swear they heard his heels humming and buzzing.

“That went better than I expected,” Sirius said hopefully.

“You are aware that anti-lethifold charms are about as effective as nursery rhymes, right?” Remus asked. “Never mind that even if they did work, they'd only work on live ones? It’ll only take him one test of the wards to figure that one out, and there’s nothing preventing him from transforming outside the portrait hole.”

“Maybe he won’t test them?” Sirius suggested. “Lily wouldn’t have. She was all over the law-abiding at that age.”

Remus just rolled his eyes at him, and poured himself more tea from the pot.
The letter came at breakfast, clutched in the talons of a stately, somewhat dusty-looking barn owl. Neville Longbottom detached it carefully, exchanging it for a rasher of bacon from the communal platter, and patted the bleary-looking creature on the head before it flew off, hooting hollowly around its full beak.

“W’choo got there, mate?” Ron asked, his own mouth full.

“Letter from my Gran.” Neville examined it from all angles before sliding a neat finger under the flap. “I wrote her yesterday and told her where I was Sorted, and about my new wand. She probably just wants to…” His voice trailed off as he scanned the words before him, his face going an odd, mottled milky colour.

“Alright there, Nev?” Harry asked as he smeared jam on his toast, but he was distracted by the plethora of feather everywhere, and wasn’t really paying attention. He still adored owls of every sort, though he hadn’t got Hedwig this time around, nor any pet of any sort for that matter... He’d gone to the store on Sirius’ and Remus’ offer, but somewhat later in the afternoon than Hagrid had gone when they’d first visited Diagon Alley, and the snowy owl had already been sold. In the end, Harry hadn’t been able to bring himself to buy something that could never begin to be a replacement. He never had; in all the years since he’d left Hogwarts till the day he’d died, he’d never owned another bird. He couldn’t begin to imagine that he ever would.

“Yeah,” Neville said, and he obviously wasn’t, but he said nothing else, just stuffed the letter in his bag. “She got Sirius’ note about visiting. Also, she’d like to meet you, at your convenience.”

“Me?” It was a bit blank, but it got his full attention. “Why?”

“She likes the idea that we’re becoming friends.” His voice was more than a bit flat. “And wants to know if I think that you could handle meeting my parents. You don’t have to, but she’s always looking for something that might trigger their memory, and you look just like your dad, with your mum’s eyes.”

Harry lowered his toast.

“Oh,” he said, and then, in the silence... “Yeah, of course I will.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to,” he said, and it was true. “She's my godmother, isn't she? Your mum, I mean, and mine was yours. Sirius told me so. We’re family.” Neville looked down at the table for a moment, then up again.

“Thank you, Potter,” he said, with an odd formality... For just a second, he looked like neither himself, nor his mother or father, but as Harry remembered him in the long ago: moving in swift fury in the single split moment, shining sword in his hands on a dark battlefield ... Rather like Augusta Longbottom herself, in fact: unbowed and unbeaten in his furious unswerving hope and determination for an impossible future and impossible freedom. “Longbottom will not forget.”

The particular ironic emphasis on the last few words nearly slew Harry on the spot. He slipped a hand under the table and took the chilly plump one in his own, squeezing it hard. Neville clutched it,
just for a moment, and let him go gently, retrieving his knife and returning to his fruit and omelet.

“You sure that’s all it is?” Ron said, obviously yet concerned. “Only you looked really sick for a moment there. I know you’re trying to get fit, but you should have a bit of bacon or sausage, really. All that veg alone can’t be good for you.”

“There’s nothing wrong or inherently unhealthy with being a vegetarian,” Hermione said haughtily. “I don’t know what kind of research wizards and witches do on the subject, but Muggle research shows…”

“I’m fine,” Neville cut her off. “And I’m not a vegetarian. I’m just not hungry is all.” He pushed his plate away abruptly, and grabbing his bag, made his way hurriedly out. Hermione hissed in aggravation between her teeth.

“Nice going, Ronald,” she said scathingly. “Now he’s never going to tell us what’s bothering him! How are we supposed to help him if he…”

Harry, despite his best efforts, couldn’t resist the mental fantasy of turning the bushy-haired little busybody over his knee and smacking her behind.

“What is your problem, Granger?” he demanded loudly, as he slammed to his own feet. “Does everything have to be your business? Sometimes people just want to be left alone, don’t you get that? Sometimes they don’t want to be helped!”

He grabbed his bag and hurried out himself… Across the hall, Sirius and Remus watched him go, exchanging worried looks.

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Two Hours Later

The Dungeons

Gryffindor Tower, Harry reflected, and as things promised to fall out under the renewed reign of the Marauders, would be a much more interesting place to live than it had been under McGonagall. The students had been surprised at last evening’s announcement of the change in regime, but seemed accepting enough, and as for McGonagall herself, she’d made it abundantly clear that she was thrilled to bits with her lessened workload. She’d shed a few tartan-scented tears over her lambs-in-lions’ colours, of course, but on the whole, she’d been emanating a definite aura of ‘you will reap what you sowed; have at it, boys, and good luck to you’ in Sirius and Remus’ direction. Harry, as the established patriarch of generations’ worth of Marauder/Weasley hybrids, was finding that amusing in the retroactive extreme. Encouraging each new decade’s worth of promising mischief-makers had truly been one of the joys of his old age, particularly since he’d never actually taught at Hogwarts himself.

Neville, of course, having been Herbology Professor, Head of Gryffindor, Deputy Head, and Headmaster at varying points, doubtless held a different perspective, but right now, he had obviously not thinking on that, and, having set aside whatever traumatizing message his Gran had included in his morning letter, was struggling, instead, in the throes of a genuinely eleven-year old case of Pre-Potions Paralysis. The characteristic symptomatic whimpering was particularly severe.

“Oh come on, Longbottom!” Harry dragged his reluctant friend towards the Potions classroom. “You’re a hundred thirty-eight years old, the man’s been dead for how many scores of years, you
shared office space and morning coffee with his portrait for over five decades – hell, you were the one who fought the Board of Governors to have that cup of morning coffee painted into his main portrait - and you’re still intimidated by him?"

“Little bit, yeah?” Nev confessed. “Well, it’s more the thought of him, really. The way he was. Is. I mean I know he was a hero and all, but that doesn’t secretly make him nice in the here and now, does it? And for the record, I didn’t fight for the coffee to be nice. I fought for the coffee so he’d quit whinging on the subject every time he’d see me drinking mine.”

“He. Is. A. Hero,” Harry said firmly. “Right here, right now. Just think of him as our very own Batman.”

Nev snorted, but followed him into the potions classroom. “Not helping,” he said as he cast a surreptitious muffling spell and set up his cauldron. “Got anything else to work with?”


Neville blinked, then sniggered.

“Godric yes,” he said. “Poor kid. Drake’s second grandson, couldn’t brew potions for shit, and ended up with a cauliflower growing out of his head for a full half of his third year when he mixed up the recipes for… What were they again?”

“No clue. Just picture the cauliflower on this Severus’s head, maybe with a crown of our Malfoy’s grapes from the train, and you should be just fine. Also, really? You’re worrying about Potions? You’re G.U.L.P certified and everything!”

“G.U.L.P hasn’t been founded yet,” Neville pointed out, and looking down, poked at his potions kit in distaste. “Never mind their improved practices and substance regulations. No wonder I always blew myself up every week, these ingredients are primitive to the point of the barbaric.” He picked up a wad of tiny silvery tubers, nicked the root of one with his thumb till the juice ran, and sniffed, his round face wrinkling in distaste. “This iceweed wasn’t grown in Scotland! It wasn’t even grown in England!”

“Listen to you. How can you be afraid of him when you sound just like him? And how the heck can you tell that? No, never mind, don’t tell me. It’s got to do with the fertilizer, doesn’t it?”

“It’s always got to do with the fertilizer. They’re plants, Harry.” He waved absently to Malfoy as he settled across from him. The young Slytherin half-sneered automatically, but as his hair was still tinted ever-so-slightly lavender at the tips, refrained from further comment. Harry poked him.

“You’re supposed to hate him,” he muttered. “For now, anyway.”

“I never hated him,” Neville muttered back. “I was scared of him. There’s a difference. And Daphne’s third daughter married my Frankie! We practically have grandchildren together, if you’re going by his-wife’s-relative’s-are-his-relatives tradition, and things warmed up between us besides, after Astoria died and Hannah started feeding him every night at the Leaky because he couldn’t stand to go home to the empty house. You know that! Am I supposed to just forget the fact that he was my best friend for all those years? I’m sorry, Harry, it may be easy for you, but for me… It’s not, if only because time and circumstance and whatever this is isn’t giving me the option!”

That stung more than a bit, and Harry opened his mouth to offer him a heated response, but before he could, a cauldron thudded behind him, and he looked back over his shoulder, to the averted eyes of an extremely unhappy Ron. He sighed and turned back.
“I dunno,” he muttered. “I can’t tell you what to do. It’s just… He’s not that person yet. Remember that.”

“I couldn’t forget if I tried.” Neville stuffed the iceweed back in his kit. “But then, I reckon I can’t forget what he’s got to go through either, can I? You weren’t the only one who had a shite home life, and yeah, we get to kill Voldemort again, but Drake’s got to be nice to him. Again. And he doesn’t even know it yet!”

Harry grimaced at that.

“Yeah,” he said reluctantly. “Though if things go according to plan, he won’t have to this time, will he?”

“No clue. Things keep changing, don’t they?”

Harry sighed again, and glancing across the aisle, bit his lip. The grapes had been Neville’s, no doubt, but the lavender tints…

He let his wand slide half into his hand, and tilted his wrist in Malfoy’s direction, making a tiny surreptitious circle with the tip, counterclockwise. As if on cue…

“Draco!” Vinnie Crabbe exclaimed suddenly. “Your hair’s not purple anymore!”

Malfoy’s face lit up, and he grabbed for the hand mirror that Pansy Parkinson was preening over. Moments later, his shoulders had straightened, and the sneer was back full-force. Behind his cauldron, Neville grinned, obviously trying to hide his amusement at his once-friend’s pompous, relieved pleasure.

“Sorry,” Harry muttered to him. “He wasn’t my best friend.”

“We’re not eleven anymore,” Neville muttered back. “But they are. Try and remember that? And I may not be Headmaster anymore, not in name, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t remember. Every kid who ever passes through these halls is, by magical vow, my responsibility. I haven’t taken that vow yet, technically or temporally, so it may or may not be binding – but it wasn’t ever the magic that bound me, when it comes right down to it.”

Severus Snape, Harry reflected, had nothing on Neville Longbottom when it came to the scary. Not when it came right down to it, and he suddenly understood just why Nev’s Animagus form was half again as big as it had ever been, now.

When is an Animagus not just an Animagus? There’s never been a Headmaster or Headmistress besides McGonagall who could change before, and that wasn’t really… He took the vow while he was still learning. How would that affect the change – and the form - itself?

Another thought occurred to him, startling and chilled.

Is that why he’s here, at least? Whatever happened… It called me back…But he is Hogwarts, in a way. Did Hogwarts call him back, intentionally, when it heard whatever it was calling me? To protect itself?

How big is he going to get, before this is all over? And why do I get the feeling that I’m not the major player in the game anymore?

“Ah. Yes. Harry Potter.” The voice was as deep and silky and slippery and redolent with loathing as it had ever been. “Our new... Celebrity.”
Harry tucked his feet under his stool, folded his hands before him neatly, and did his very, very best to remind himself just why, exactly, he’d named his son after the man before him. As the class progressed, he answered questions simply and politely, and weighed and crushed and stewed while Neville worked beside him. They didn’t exchange a word, and Snape swept past them, looming over them just for the intimidation factor, but there was nothing to be said. Harry scooped up the porcupine quills as Nev removed the cauldron deftly from the flames, waiting for the precise count of seven before sprinkling them evenly over the top. Harry picked up his wand, stirring twice clockwise and three times counter-clockwise. Snape watched, frustrated, as he removed it, taking the cloth Neville handed him to clean his wand…They sat down together as the potion continued to simmer, watching as it turned a beautiful, or at least precise, shade of bile green.

Neither said a word as their former nemesis came by one last time, staring at the contents before charming a bit into a vial and holding it up to a candle flame at the end of his own wand.

“Who taught you to brew, Longbottom?” he said abruptly.

“No one, sir,” Neville said timidly, but clearly, and as Snape sneered at him... “I really like plants and gardening though, and Gran is very fussy on how her tea is made.”

“Mm,” Snape looked at Harry. His amber wand was lying on the table. He set his own down, and reached over and picked it up. The fire within roared; he immediately dropped it. It skittered like a live thing across to where Snape’s lay, and slammed up next to it.

“What the...” Ron swore violently and leapt back as the entire table was lit in arcing fire. Just as soon as the fire had started, it stopped. The two wands lay quietly on the desk, side by side. Harry picked his up cautiously. The hum at the back of his mind was vibrant. Happy.

“It’s glad to see her again,” he said distantly. “It’s missed her.”

“I beg your pardon?” Snape snapped. In that split second, though, Harry knew he understood. They stood there for a long moment, staring at each other... Then Snape seized his wand and turned away abruptly.

“What was that about?” Ron hissed as they packed up their books.

“Later, Ron,” he murmured. “This isn’t the time.”

Later, when ‘later’ came, the three sat on Harry’s bed, the wand lying between them.

“His wand’s got the same core as me,” he said without preamble. “Well, sort of. I think his dragon knew my dragon. More than that, I think they were mates. Married mates,” he clarified. “Not friend mates.”

“WHAT? Urghhhh!”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t know what it means. Can you write to your brother, maybe, and ask him about the relationships between Horntails, Ron?”

“Yeah, of course,” Ron said uncertainly. “Though I’m not sure what you want me to say, yeah? Maybe we could just ask Hagrid.”

“I don’t think Snape would want this getting around. And Hagrid… Well. Moony says he’s very nice, but not very good at keeping things to himself.”

“So it’s a secret?” The look on the red-head’s face was almost painful in its hopefulness. Harry’s
heart twinged, and collapsed in resignation.

_Bugger._

“Yeah,” he said with a small smile. “It is. Just… Just between the three of us, okay?”

Beside him, Neville offered him a faint, sympathetic and understanding smile. Harry heaved an internal sigh, and gave over completely, sprawling on his front and picking up the wand. Ron settled comfortably cross-legged and prodded at it with his own wand.

“I’ll write to Charlie tonight,” he said, and then, completely unexpectedly… “You ought to be nicer to Granger.”

“Sorry?” Harry said blankly.

“I know she’s a nightmare, but you _were_ nice to her on the train. She thought you wanted to be friends, but then you both showed her up in class – all of the classes, really - and I’m not saying you’re doing it on purpose, but if you are, it’s a really mean thing to do. “He shifted a bit uncomfortably as they stared at him. “I know you two haven’t got mums or sisters, but girls are different from blokes. More sensitive. Weird, if you ask me, but…” He took a quick breath, as if steeling himself, and then collapsed in on himself, shoulders slumping as he picked at his sock and refusing to look them in the eye.

“It’s just,” he muttered. “If it was _my_ sister… I’d be mad if blokes were nice to her, and then were mean. And she’s coming here next year, my sister, I mean, and she already hopes…” He flushed purple and shut down completely.

Harry put his wand down.

“Granger’s alright,” he said carefully. “But she _did_ accuse us of cheating, Ron, first thing. And all we did was say the word, and wave our wands the way McGonagall and Flitwick said to, and follow the steps the way they were written in Potions. We didn’t brag or anything, did we?”

“You looked bloody pleased with yourselves!”

“Well we were,” Neville said unexpectedly. “Are. And we have a right to be! We’ve got everything right on the first go, and I can’t speak for Harry, but that’s kind of a new thing for me, yeah? You’d look pleased with yourself if you _got_ it all on the first go, wouldn’t you?”

“I s’pose, but…” Again, he wilted. “I dunno. I dunno what I’m trying to say. And she was being kind of nosy this morning, I know that, but… She just wanted to help, see?” He fumbled. “Girls… Girls like to help.”

“We’ll be nicer to her,” Harry said firmly, though wondering wildly at the same time, where, exactly this New Improved and Sensitive Ron had come from. "If you tell her to stop telling everyone we’re cheating. We’re just doing our best, and so what if it’s good? She’s not the only witch or wizard who’s allowed to do well.”

“I can try,” Ron said, again unenthusiastically. “I just don’t know that she’ll listen. Girls don’t, usually, not the ones I’ve known anyway.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “My aunt’s like that.”

“Gran too,” Neville agreed. “Though she sure has a lot to say.”
“Did she yell at you for the cherry wand?” Harry asked at that, looking over. “In your letter this morning? You said she didn’t, but Granger was right on that much anyway, something more was bothering you. You don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to, but if she is bothered about it, I can write and try to explain myself.”

“No. Actually, she didn’t talk much about it at all. She had something else to tell me.”

“Uh?” Ron sat up. “About your parents?”

“Not… Well, sort of. About the Death Eater who tortured them.”

“The… The bastard’s still alive?”

“No,” Neville said after a pause. “No. She’s not. Her name was Bellatrix Lestrange, and she was in Azkaban, and she died. The Ministry of Magic sent Gran a letter last night. They said that… That she went insane, and chewed her own hands off, and somehow – probably incidental magic – managed to heal them over, but then she got an infection. A really bad, painful one, and well. She died.”

It was very flat. Harry’s mouth dropped slightly. Ron looked simultaneously thrilled and horrified, as only an eleven-year-old boy could.

“Urggh,” he said in hushed tones. “She chewed her own hands off? Blimey, that’s not just crazy, that’s… That’s dedicated crazy, that is!”

“Yeah,” Harry said faintly, from somewhere far away, from a great distance.

*Bellatrix Lestrange is dead.*

*The woman who killed Sirius is dead.*

*Bellatrix Lestrange is…*

He put his head between his knees and breathed deeply: in through his nose, out through his mouth. Again from far away, he could hear Ron calling his name, alarmed, and could hear Neville scrambling off the bed, running for the door, calling...

“Pup?” And then Sirius was there, suddenly, (or at least it looked like Sirius; this version was shockingly neat and groomed in his trim grey trousers and white dress shirt and black and gold waistcoat) and his thin hard arms were wrapped around him, soothing him, and Remus was there too, petting his hair and his face and pulling him into his lap as Sirius wrapped himself around them both. Harry buried his face in his chest and tried to breathe. “Pup, what is it? Harry? It’s okay, Padfoot’s here, and Moony’s here… Tell us what’s wrong, pup. What is it?”

“The Death Eater that hurt Nev’s mum and dad is dead,” Ron said through white lips. “She died yesterday, in Azkaban. I think… I think it might have reminded him of his mum and dad; is that it, Harry?”

Remus swore and pulled him closer. Sirius, surprisingly, said nothing – but after a moment, got up and went to Neville himself, pulling him in tightly, and then pulling him over to the tangle on the bed.

“Couldn’t have happened to a crazier bitch,” he said strongly and firmly. “Was it painful, Nev, do you know?”
“They said she bit her own hands off,” Neville said faintly. “And then she got an infection, after healing herself part of the way spontaneously. They said it took months. In the end, even the Dementors were avoiding her because of the smell.”


“Moony, really,” Sirius said. He petted Neville’s hair. Neville, surprisingly, snuggled in. “Well, Nev?”

“Her funeral’s Tuesday next. Gran suggested we go after everything is over, so that I, at least, can piss on her grave. She said she’d do it, but she doesn’t have the proper equipment.”

“I think we can arrange that. As your Heads of House and all. Though that being said… Why wait till after? Harry, old chap, how would you feel about lending young Neville here your invisibility cloak?”

“Only if I can come too,” Harry said, wiping his nose on his sleeve. “Can I, Sirius?”

“I think I must insist,” Sirius said grandly. “Alice is your godmother, after all, Harry, as Lily was yours, Neville. What about you, Ronald? Can we convince you to make a donation to the cause?”

”Blimey, yeah,” Ron said with a bounce of enthusiasm, and stilled just as quickly. “I mean, if it’s okay with Neville. I wouldn’t want to intrude on a family moment.”

“No, no.” Neville too, wiped his nose. “The more the better. And you’re a blood traitor too; it’s perfect. All we need now is a Muggleborn – Harry’s our halfblood after all - and we’ll have a one hundred percent guarantee that she’ll never rise again, if only out of the shame.”

“We could invite Granger,” Ron offered. “No, she hasn’t got the proper equipment, but she’s got the that Muggle thing – the spray mister, she called it - from her Potions kit. That might work.” He considered his own words. “That’d be brilliant, actually. I mean… It is a Muggle thing. A Death Eater would prolly hate it all on its own, never mind what was inside.” He brightened. “Maybe we could even sneak it into the grave! As a goodbye present!”

Harry, despite his emotion, or perhaps because of it, began to giggle. It was infectious. Soon all three boys were in an aching, laughing heap… Remus smiled and slid to his feet, shaking his head indulgently.

“Alright,” he said. “Sirius, why don’t you summon a house-elf, and get these lads set up with some hot chocolate. I’m just going to drop a quick line to Augusta and let her know that young Neville here received her missive, and that we’ll be aiding and abetting her suggested arrangements.”

“Tell her I’d be delighted to take everyone out for dinner after,” Sirius said grandly again. “As Head of House Black and in honour of my dear departed cousin’s passing.” He heaved himself up with a grunt, and looked down, startled, at the loud crack sounding from under his hip. “What the… Shit!” He held up the two pieces of the wand he’d inadvertently sat on in dismay. Ron’s face fell in abject horror.

“He’ll replace it,” Harry said hastily. “He has to, he broke it! Don’t worry, Ron, he’ll replace it, won’t he?”

“Of course he will,” Remus said firmly. “First thing tomorrow. We’ll floo to Diagon Alley from my office, Ron, and get you a new one.”

Ron looked torn.
“I dunno,” he said. “Mum and Dad might not like it; I should at least owl them.”

“I’ll do that,” his Head of House said. “Neville, is there anything you’d like me to pass onto your grandmother?”

“No,” he said, and then, sitting up… “Yeah. Could you tell her I got my needle and my feather on the first try? And that Professor Snape asked me who taught me how to brew, and he wasn’t looking like he wanted to bite me at all?”

Both men’s eyebrows flew up. “Both your needle and your feather?” Remus repeated, distinctly impressed.

“He and Harry are the best in the year,” Ron volunteered. “So far, anyway. Their potion looked exactly like someone had just puked in their cauldron. Granger nearly cried; hers just looked like melted bogies.”

“And yours?”

“Oh well. I don’t know what I did to mine. It smelled just like Christmas, and when Snape made me and Seamus taste it, it came across as really thick and chewy mince pie mix. Total bollocks. It was so bad he didn’t even Vanish it, just told us to leave it; he was going to make one of his other students clean it out and scrub the cauldron in detention and would return it next week.”

“Mmhmm. And you have no idea what made it go that way?”

“It was the porcupine quills, I think. I think Seamus might have picked up pine needles instead. They’re right next to each other on the shelves in the classroom, and it looked like someone bled on the label.”

“Hot chocolate,” Remus directed Sirius as he sniggered. “I’ll be right back.”

He morphed into McWolf, and bounced down the stairs. Feminine squeals and cries of delight sounded from below, alongside a deep, mellow whuffle. Sirius grinned after him fondly.

“All right there now, Harry?” he asked, turning back. “And you, Neville?”

“Yeah.” Neville sat on the bed again. “I just… I can’t believe she’s really dead.” He looked a bit forlorn suddenly. “I feel like I should be happier. Like I should feel something. Anything. But I don’t.”

Sirius sat beside him and pushed his neat dark braid back.

“If only it were that simple, kiddo,” he said, and then, exquisitely gently. “It will come. Probably when you visit your mum and dad next, and see that they haven’t changed.” He hesitated, then tilted the round chin up, looking the boy straight in the eye. “You do know that they’re not going to get better, don’t you? Ever? I know that your Gran has probably told you not to give up… But you’re old enough, I think, to know that some things can’t be fixed. It does no one any good to pretend otherwise.”

Neville’s lower lip trembled. Sirius sighed.

“I knew your parents,” he said quietly. “They were great people. More importantly… They were good people. They wouldn’t want you to live with false hope, Neville. They’d just want you to live.”

Neville’s eyes spilled over. Ron and Harry looked a bit uncomfortable, but didn’t move. Sirius
stroked the boy’s hair as he wept, not as the child he seemed, but as a man, with a man’s rough, full sobs.

“There you go,” he said finally, and dug for a handkerchief. “Blow.”

Neville blew, and scrubbed at his face.

“M sorry,” he said, muffled, as he blew a second time, and then, suddenly small and in a child’s lost tones again… “Am I a bad person for saying that I’m glad it hurt?”

“Merlin’s saggy tits, no,” Sirius said feelingly. “I’m glad it hurt. Bellatrix Lestrange was evil, plain evil, and if she were still alive, I’d give her the Order of Merlin First Class for killing herself.” He tilted his own sleeve, and his wand slid out; he tapped the night table.

“Hot chocolate,” he ordered. “Two big pots, three mugs, and a plate of mixed biscuits.” He tucked his wand away and boosted Neville to his feet. “Come on. Let’s go clean you up.”

“He’s nice,” Ron said, helping himself to a biscuit as the door closed behind them and the taps started. It was definitely a bit awkward. Then… “D’you think he was talking on himself? When he said some things can’t be fixed?”

“Maybe,” Harry said. He poured himself some cocoa and sat on the bed again, suddenly exhausted. “I dunno. Maybe not. He’s a bit mad sometimes, but I’d be too, if I’d spent nine years in a place where people chew their own hands off to pass the time. He’s got Remus though, and he helps. A lot. Almost all the way, really, most of the time, and when it doesn’t… He’s just there for him. When you’ve been alone for that long, and mad with it… I think that’s everything.”

The message was not subtle, but then, neither was his audience. Ron sighed and sat beside him.

“I’ll talk to Granger,” he said. “Prollly won’t do any good. Girls are weird like I said. You’d never catch a bloke chewing his own hands off; he’d have nothing left to polish his wand with.” He looked sideways. “Did I hear him right? Professor Black, I mean? You really have an invisibility cloak?”

“Yeah.” Harry reached under his pillow and pulled it out. “It was my dad’s, and his dad’s before him, and his dad’s before him.”

“Wicked,” Ron breathed, fingering the silky, shimmering material. “And they let you bring it here? Professor Black and Professor Lupin, I mean?”

“They said I can only use it on the weekends,” Harry said. “But yeah.” He eyed the other boy sideways. “Don’t tell Granger, okay? You know how she is about rules; she’d probably report it to the Wizengamot. I don’t want to risk that till after November, when Sirius and Remus get custody of me.”

“Course.” He swung the cloak over his head, and for awhile, and once Neville had returned, red-eyed and composed, they simply amused themselves, creeping into the main floor’s loo at one point and making strange hooting sounds that sounded, Harry suspected, much more like owls than ghosts. Sirius found the entire episode terribly funny… Remus just lolled as McWolf on the hearth rug as he graciously permitted the younger, more homesick children to rub his ears and pat his belly, and shifted back periodically to explain the details of Animagus training to several equally excited seventh years.

Much later, tucked warmly into bed, Harry stared at the roof of his canopy. Opposite, Neville snored softly, exhausted, and Ron, Seamus’ borrowed wand glowing softly behind his curtains, scribbled and murmured to himself as he scratched out a letter to Charlie… For the first time since Neville had
told them of his Gran’s letter, Harry’s thoughts returned to his odd wand. He rolled on his side and pulled it out from under his extra pillow, tracing the shadows of the flames within gently with a single finger.

_Not… Quite… Parseltongue. Yet you can understand me, obviously._

The deep, serpentine hiss of laughter sounded again at the back of his mind. Instead of trying to formulate words, Harry closed his eyes, and did his best to project the emotions he felt when formulating a question. With it, he sent an image – not of himself as he was now, but as he had been: taller, stooped, with still-thick white hair, green eyes and cheeks heavily lined with age, no glasses (they’d finally come up with a spell to fix his vision) and in his favorite cherry red jumper and soft black trousers. He felt, in return, a pause, and serpentine eyebrow, if there was such a thing, lift in amused response. The soft prodding at his shields grew stronger, then withdrew, not under protest, but of its own decisive volition.

_/Not yet./_

It wasn’t Parseltongue, but the meaning, for the first time, was precise and clear. Harry sat up abruptly. The amber was no longer yellow, but a deep radiant blue, hot and literally sweating in his hand. He dropped it, scrambling back and shaking his fingers… And yelped as they cooled suddenly, and the amber, and its color, faded along with it. Inside, the individual flames were tumbling steadily, faster and faster until they were nothing but a bar of rolling light looping back on itself. He found it oddly hypnotic, and edged closer again, picking it up gingerly.

_/Harry?/_

The voice was clear and shockingly loud in his mind, husky and quintessentially feminine. He nearly dropped the wand in shock.

_/Ginny?/ he tried tentatively, hardly believing his own ears. /Gin? is that you?/

_/Harry, love. It’s alright. It’s alright. You can…/_

The voice stopped abruptly. He waited, and waited, with bated breath, for the next words. They didn’t come. He nearly screamed in frustration.

“I can… What?” he whispered aloud. “I can… What? Gin, _please_!”

There was no answer. Through Ron’s curtains, he heard the whispered delumination spell, and heard the creak of the bed, and a final grunt.

“Night, mate,” Ron said sleepily. “Sleep well.”

Harry didn’t answer. He couldn’t. He just rolled over and wept into the soft darkness of his pillow.
Co-Heads’ Quarters

Gryffindor Tower

Two Nights Later

“So?” Remus put his book down as Sirius entered their bedroom, tossing his teacher’s robe and book bag over the rather hairy armchair by the fire. “First official day of classes… How did it go, Professor Black?”

“It was nerve wracking,” Professor Black confessed. “Yet oddly familiar. All those gaping empty-eyed mouth-breathers in black cloaks drifting about the corridors and wanting to kiss me? I felt right at home, except I was throwing essays and research reports at them instead of Patronus charms.” He kicked off his shoes and threw himself on the huge bed, wrapping his arms around his lover and burying his face in his neck. “Mm. You smell good.”

“You don’t,” Remus said fondly. He ran his fingers through the black, damp tangle of hair. “You smell like wet dog. Should I ask?”

“I stopped by Hagrid’s right before I came here to ask him if he could entice a few grindylows out of the Lake for a day or two on behalf of my third years, and got caught in the rain on the way back.”

“Ahh.” He hauled him up a bit. Sirius shook out his hair and sat up cross-legged, pulling off his socks. “And how were the first years?”

“Alright.” He wiggled out of his trousers and slipped under the blankets. “Why are we in bed again? It’s not even dinner time yet.”

“Technically, I’m on the bed. You’re in it. It’s my free evening, at least till seven, and I enjoy lolling.” He slid down beside him. “I think it’s McWolf’s influence. I never got a chance to do much of that sort of thing as a teenager, unless you count the days after the full moon when I was in the hospital wing.”

“I don’t.” Sirius rolled over and rested his head on his shoulder. “Cuddle me, Moony. I’m cold.”

“And worried about Harry? He’s not ignoring Ron and Hermione again, is he?”

“No, no. Well, not Ron, anyway, and honestly, Hermione’s a sweet girl, but she is a bit much on occasion. He’s trying though, so we have no grounds to complain.” He flopped on his back. “That aside, though… You’re right. I thought it was just you being you, but he’s not normal. And after that little trip to Surrey that I made this afternoon on my spare period…”

“You went to the Dursleys?” Remus sat up. “Did anyone see you?”

“No. No one was home.” He rubbed his eyes. “It’s not good, Rem.”

“Details,” his lover ordered grimly.

“No pictures of him,” Sirius said unhappily. “Anywhere. A ton of his cousin – ‘ton’ being the
operative word; they more than obviously stuff him with all the food that Harry never gets – and I did a deep scan for residual magics throughout besides. Nothing that can’t be explained away by accidental magic, but these were all habitual accidental magics. The place reeked of Notice-Me-Nots, Moony. There was even a drawer in the fridge that held traces, and when you combine those two things with the fact that they had him sleeping in a bloody boot cupboard…”

“What?”

"You heard me. And they weren’t the only two things. There was a toddler mattress in there, a baby pillow, and one sheet. Not even a blanket: a sheet, one sheet that he had a choice to sleep on or under. and before you ask, it was definitely his. I could smell him all over it, and in none of the other bedrooms. Oh, and I checked the attic and the closets; there were no clothes remotely near his size, no toys, no photos of Jamie or Lils... The only thing I found related to them was an old, filled bankbook with monthly deposits to a bank a couple of blocks over dating back to the week Harry was left there. I’d bet my entire line of vaults that they were made out from Gringotts, and were transferred directly from the Potter accounts – and that if we checked, there’d still be outgoing.”

Remus Lupin swore. Loudly.

“I don’t want to ask,” Sirius said after a moment. “But I have to. Have you talked to Snape?”

“Briefly. He said there are no signs of sexual abuse, at least. Insofar as our jokes are concerned, he’s just inordinately precocious…”

The sigh of relief was profound.

“On the other hand, he’s got the strongest Occlumency shields he’s ever seen in an untrained witch or wizard in his life.”

“Occ… Huh?”

“You heard me. His Notice-Me-Nots aren’t just physical; they’re mental.”

“But Ollivander said he needed to learn that! Shielding, I mean! That the wand indicated…”

“He got it backwards,” Remus said bleakly. “I asked Severus about that. An amber wand isn’t an indication of a mind that needs to learn to shield itself, Sirius; it’s an indication of a mind naturally inclined toward it, out of self-protection.” He reached across to the night table and retrieved a sheet of parchment, magically inscribed and copied from, if the script were any indication, some extremely old book. “He gave me this. Have a look.” Sirius shook himself out from the blankets and took it.

“The potential power levels of wands made of amber reflect the fact that they are not formed from wood, but from the liquid heart of wood, and are therefore and effectively an unsheathed double core. As such, they are very dangerous, and by their nature, demand a partner with great courage and a compensatory need to protect others. Wands made of amber are exquisitely rare, and tend to align themselves with witches and wizards who have undergone serious trauma. Amber is believed to balance emotions, eliminate fears, relieve headaches, clear the mind, and dissolve negative energy. Amber is almost exclusively paired with unicorn hair, in the interests of promoting healing not through, but in, the chosen witch or wizard. “

He read the next line to himself, and when he continued, his voice was not quite steady.

"Amber automatically rejects phoenix feather cores. They are antithetical substances, for the witch or wizard who draws the attention of an amber wand is by definition unready, upon the moment of partnering, to embrace the new life that the phoenix embodies."
He turned the paper over.

“It is not recommended that amber be paired with dragon heartstring. It can be done, but they type of witch or wizard that it would attract would be so inherently conflicted that they could be considered nothing less than a danger to those around him. Any wandmaker who attempts to craft an artifact of this combination should be well-warned; they are taking not only their own lives into their hands, but risking the lives of all those around them…’ What the fuck, Moony? Why would Ollivander even craft such a thing, much less sell it to an eleven year old, much less one cursed by bloody Voldemort?"

“And that’s the question, isn’t it,” Remus said. “Severus was so disturbed by the particulars and the implications that he flooed to Diagon Alley on his own free period. Ollivander doesn’t remember having Harry’s wand in stock, Siri, much less making it. He swears, and a quite thorough Legilimency scan confirmed it, that Harry bought the first wand he matched; the holly and phoenix feather wand that he rejected, and chose me.”

“But… We were there! We remember!” He clutched his head. “We do, don’t we? Oh God, please tell me we do, because I do, and if I really, really don’t…”

“Shhh, shhh.” Remus took him in his arms, soothing him and kissing his eyes and cheeks. “We do. We were there. Here, see? Look.” He shook his sleeve. “Wand. Holly, phoenix feather. Mine, mine, mine. All mine, just like you. Oh, Padfoot, don’t cry. It’s not the end of the world, I promise. It just means he needs a bit of help, alright? A bit of help, and we’ll get it for him, and soon, he’ll be up and perking and annoying us for all the wrong and hilarious reasons, just like Jamie did. Mind you,” he added after a moment. “We might not want to encourage him too much. He seems to have Lil’s brains too, and the combination there…”

He trailed off. Sirius burrowed in.

“Can’t blame that one on us,” he said. “They didn’t exactly ask our opinion before they knocked themselves up, did they?”

Remus huffed with laughter. “No,” he said. “No, they didn’t.”

“What are we going to do though, really?” He removed his head from his lover’s chest and sat up, shaking his still damp hair. “Ollivander might not remember making the wand, or selling it, or really problematically and probably, where he got it in the first place, but people have seen it now. Dumbledore’s seen it, Rem, and you can bet that he knows exactly what it means. What’s it going to do to our case if he presents Harry in court as inherently mentally unstable? I’m inherently mentally unstable enough, on the record, and even with you to balance me… You know there are people out there who are just waiting for your condition to reassert itself as suddenly as it went away!”

“I’m aware,” Remus said. “And I think… Honestly… That the best thing that we can do is to present ourselves as aware of the problems, potential and actual, and exercise our pro-active options. Now, before they can get it on record that we haven’t. They can’t say that they’re going to take him away from us so that they can offer him the very same opportunities for help that we’d already be giving him, could they?”

“They can,” he said miserably. “And they will. It’s Dumbledore, for God’s sake! How can we fight Dumbledore?”

"We’re Marauders, Sirius Black. We can do anything.”

“I don’t know that being a Marauder is actually an advantage in this situation, you know?"
“Bite your tongue, you plonker. You really did go soft in the head in Azkaban, didn’t you?”

“Depends on the head you’re talking on,” Sirius said with a mischievous and largely automatic leer, but it was half-hearted at best, and collapsed back into misery within seconds. “He’s not going to like it. I mean… he’s really not going to like it.”

“He doesn’t have to like it,” Remus said frankly. “In fact, it’s probably better for us that he doesn’t.”

“How d’you reckon that?”

“Rule number one,” he intoned. “If your sprog doesn’t tell you that he hates you at least once a week, you’re not raising him right. We’ll throw a few vegetables at him, ground him once or twice for not doing his homework, and soon he’ll be whinging so loudly about us and our unreasonably good parenting that the court will not only assign us custody, but hail us as heroes for taking him on.”

“You really think that’ll work?” Sirius asked doubtfully. “I told my parents that I hated them a lot more often than once a week, and it did absolutely nothing for our relationship.”

“Yes, but they threw curses at you instead of parsnips and carrots, and we both know the kind of extra-curriculars that they wanted to assign you as homework, don’t we?”

“There’s that,” Sirius conceded, and wiggling out of his shirt, burrowed in again. “And just for reference, wet dog is like garlic. It doesn’t count if you both smell like it. Or eat it.”

“No?” his lover, said, amused. “Is that a fact.”

“It is,” he confirmed, and with a rather canine growl, pounced and dragged him under the blankets.
“Therapy!” Harry threw himself on the chair furiously. “Can you believe it? They want me to go to bloody therapy!”

“Mm.” Neville sat, one foot tucked half under him and one draped over the side of his chair as he licked a thumb and flipped a page of the thick glossy copy of ‘Herbology Today’. Beside him on the table was a stack of Potions books, and beside those was a neat pile of scribbled parchment. “Better, but still more fifteen than eleven. At eleven, you would have been shy and worried and quiet, but secretly grateful that anyone actually cared enough to get you checked out.”

“Bugger.” He slumped, then sat up. “On the other hand, they are suffering from that not-unwarranted assumption that I’m bizarrely precocious. I’ll tone it down a bit over the next day or two, and hopefully that’ll be enough. Though... For the record, and as an adult again... I’m still not thrilled. Occlumency shields aside, I’m dead! Doesn’t dying, at least, excuse a bloke from people poking around in your head?”

Neville looked up at that. His expression was not a little wry.

“You’d think,” he said. “Wouldn’t you? But then… For you, at least, the two have always tended to go together.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Neville rolled his eyes.

“Avada Kedavra?” he suggested. “Other people’s bits literally stuck in your head… Possession by evil Dark Lords, years of vision-induced headaches, all only solved again by more people killing you… Is any of this sounding familiar? At all?”

“It’s not really the same thing.”

“Not really, no, but it is part and parcel.” He put the book aside, and tucked his feet up properly, linking his arms around his knees. “They’re not wrong, you know. You could use someone to talk to, even now. You had a great life after you graduated, but all of us who grew up with you could always tell that you never quite got over your childhood. Maybe you should look at this as an opportunity to process a bit, even if you can’t exactly revisit what happened in precise and specific terms?”

“What does that mean?”

Neville hesitated, then firmed his mouth.

“It means I’m worried about you,” he said. “You said when we first talked that your main goal was to be happy this go around, but you’re not acting it. You’ve been self-sabotaging yourself left right and center, avoiding friends and relationships and emotional commitments again because that’s what you know. And that’d be one thing, wouldn’t it, if it were just your life at stake, but it’s not, is it? It’s the whole world’s again... Literally.”
“I know that. You think I don’t know that?”

“I know you do, but, and not to sound selfish... But it’s on me too, isn’t it, this time? This is my school, and always will be, and you need to get your shit together, mate, because I got rid of Bellatrix Lestrange; I chewed her up and spit her out in cold blood and left her healed just enough to suffer through the kind of torture she put my parents through, and yes, okay, there were those personal motives, but still. You owe me for that. You owe me, and I need you to come through, Harry, because...” He struggled. “I get the do-over thing, I really do. But if you’re eleven again, so am I. And you got a free pass on killing Quirrell this time... But even if it was Bellatrix Lestrange...”

He stopped abruptly. Harry stared at him, mouth ajar. Neville sat back and poured himself a finger of firewhiskey, gulping it with closed eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said inadequately.

“I wish I was,” Neville said bluntly. “And trust me... That’s worse.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes.


“Lots, but that’s the easy part. The hard part’s going to be orchestrating a meeting with the Dark Wanker once all that’s taken care of – preferably here at the school again; I know secrets about this place that Tom couldn’t possibly know simply because he was never inducted as its Avatar...”

"Its...What?"

“Avatar. Hogwarts is alive. Sort of. Not quite sentient, but not quite... Not. I took a magically binding oath, and it seems that I retain Head Emeritus status at least, because it still hears me when I talk to it, and responds to my orders. Or takes them into account, at least, since unlike Dumbledore, I don’t presume to assume that I’m really doing anything other than making hopefully helpful suggestions.” He caught the bewildered look. “You don’t actually think that the Hat and I spent fourteen minutes and thirty seven seconds talking about my parents, do you? We did, to the point, but we’d gone through all of that years back, and mostly, it just wanted explanations on what we’re up to now.”

“I don’t...” Harry shook his head. “Are you saying that Hogwarts now has two Headmasters? You and Dumbledore? How does that work?”

“We’re playing it by ear. And without his knowledge, obviously. Right now, Hogwarts says that I outrank him on the singular subject at least, simply because I know what’s coming and how to defeat the enemy – or will, anyway, if you don’t quit messing with the known fixed points on the timeline.”


“Pandora’s not a fixed point. If we sort this out soon enough, she won’t affect anything at all. Bellatrix was a risk, yes, but I did think about it, and thought back, and really, the only thing she did of note after Tom rescued her from Azkaban and before the final battle was torture a bunch of people who would have been tortured by other people if she weren’t around, and shoot the curse that knocked Sirius through the Veil. You’d already rendered the point moot just by returning – any vision that Tom sent you on him being captured in the DoM would be useless now – so really, I didn’t see any harm in resolving the issue straight up.”

“Fine.” Harry reached for a parchment and pen. “Diadem, diary, locket, cup, ring, and of course,
“Diadem’s already taken care of,” Neville said, and at his odd look... “What? It was a bloody great chunk of desecrated soul, paid for with literal murder! Was I just supposed to leave it lying around to stink up my school?”

“I don’t think there’s a way to answer that question correctly that without hurting my own feelings. How did you manage it?”

“Ah well. That was the easy part, like I said. Basilisk venom, please,” he said to no one in particular. “One horcrux’s worth, in an impermeable container.” A small vial promptly appeared on the table beside him. Harry stared.

“Um. How?” he said again.

“As Headmaster,” Neville said. “I have the right and privilege of access, through the Room of Requirement, to every other room within the ward-walls of the school. Those walls didn’t include the Chamber of Secrets the first time around, but once the school was rebuilt… They did. And now that we’re back in the original timeline, so is the basilisk. I’m not sure exactly what kind of deal the Room ’s worked out with it, but there it is. Or rather, here it is.” He held up the vial in the firelight. “I’m not sure whether to be repulsed or impressed by its efficiency. The stuff’s still warm.”

“But the school hasn’t been rebuilt yet! Or broken yet! How does that work? How can it work?”

“It doesn’t work outside the Room,” Neville explained. “But once you’re in it, it gives you what you require, doesn’t it, from ideas drawn from your, and all of the former collective inhabitants' memories, imagination, and experiences. I occasionally require certain things to defend the school that only existed in our time, but it can still give them to me because I’m from that time, and they, and the particular moments in time, exist as factual memories, and therefore fact, in my head.”

“So … Anything that you think of here… Becomes real?” Harry held his own head.

“No. Anything that the Room identifies as real through me… Can become actual, if Hogwarts deems it necessary for its defense. It doesn’t care so much about me personally, but when you take a magically binding oath, your core changes. You change. When you accept the Headmaster's Oath for what it truly is, and it accepts you, the magics of the school itself become a part of you, and you of them. And again, that kind of symbiotic relationship isn’t really affected by time.”

“Is this common knowledge? I’ve never heard anything about this before! Not in any book, not from anyone, anywhere!”

“You wouldn’t have. It’s knowledge passed down by the Sorting Hat on a need-to-know basis, from Godric and the Founders themselves.”

“What if you get a bad Headmaster? Or Headmistress?”

Nev shrugged. “The school accommodates. And not everyone who’s held the position has been Oathsworn, or had access to all of the privileges inherent. They might think they have been, and do, but trust me, if you’ve been accepted as such… You know it.” He put the vial down. “If you don’t, on the other hand… Well. How can you know, really, what you’re missing if you’ve never really experienced it?”

And weren’t the implications of that unnerving, Harry thought uneasily, as a sudden memory returned.
Oh, I would never dream of assuming I know all Hogwarts’ secrets, Igor. Only this morning, for instance, I took a wrong turn on the way to the bathroom and found myself in a beautifully proportioned room I had never seen before, containing a really rather magnificent collection of chamber pots. When I went back to investigate more closely, I discovered that the room had vanished… But I must keep an eye out for it. Possibly it is only accessible at five thirty in the morning. Or it may only appear at the quarter moon - or when the seeker has an exceptionally full bladder.

“What do you think I should do about Dumbledore?” he asked abruptly. “I mean… What would you do?”

“Avoid him,” Neville said frankly. “As much as possible. You know he’s not going to let you, but you’ve got to try, at least, Harry. You’re much more than Auror enough to know that this entire thing with Remus and Sirius’ jobs is a set up – what better way to show that they’re inept parents by handing them a towerful of crazed students as their first nannying job - and if they get turned down for you in November, he’s Head of the Wizengamot. He can sink an appeal faster than you can say “Why did Sirius Black never get a trial, again? Oh yes, it’s because he’s engaged to an ex-werewolf. A male ex-werewolf.”

Harry grimaced.

“We live in the bloody Dark Ages, you know that? Though he’d be a great fat hypocrite trying to pull that one after his affair with Gellert Grindelwald.”

“That’s not common knowledge, though,” Neville pointed out. “And the personal ethics of outing him aside – which I should hope that they’re not…”

“Of course they’re not,” Harry snapped. “I may be a certified codger with age-equivalent and abandonment issues, but I’m not a complete pillock, Longbottom.“

“I’m glad to hear it. At this point, he’s not the enemy, just a massive pain in the arse. We don’t want to ruin him; we just want him to stay out of our fur and feathers while we take care of business. Speaking of which…”

“Right. Right.” He sat up. “I’ve been thinking about that. I reckon we can go after the cup next.”

“Plan?”

“Bellatrix Lestrange is dead. It’s been publicly acknowledged that she and her husband and brother in law were predominately responsible for your parents’ condition. Now that you’re in school, on top of your parents being in St. Mungo’s… How are your family finances again?”

Neville sat back slowly, unfolding his legs and tapping his fingers on his magazine, beside the little vial of basilisk venom.

“You think that Longbottom should demand restitution from her estate,” he said. “Formally?”

“You wouldn’t get all of it,” he said. “Then again… You might. It’s not like they charge anyone rent to stay in Azkaban, and Rabastan and Rodolphus have life sentences and no living heirs.”

“Barty Junior was there,” the other wizard said, half to himself. “Any petition we put forth would have to include him.”

“That’s your choice. It’d be an unpopular one, though, considering his father is elderly and in officially good standing with the Ministry. Honestly, I think you’d get even more of a chance of
getting access to the Lestrange vaults if you made a point of leaving him off. It’d make you look…”
He made a vague gesture. “Understanding of circumstance.”

“Alright.” Neville pulled himself from his brooding reverie with obvious effort, and tucked his legs up again. “How do we do this? I can’t just suggest it to Gran; not like…” He made a vague gesture of his own at his own small, stripe-pajamaed body. “I have a hard enough time taking myself seriously like this, much less convincing anyone else to.”

“Sirius can do it for you. He’s Head of House Black, and Bellatrix was a Black. And even if the petition doesn’t work, he can at the very least demand a retroactive dissolution of marriage and demand her dowry back, to be placed in trust for you and your parents. Once that’s done, it’s but a short bout of whinging to get him to take us to Gringotts to play pirates in the piles of ill-gotten gold. He should be done Peter Pan by then; he’ll probably want to join us.” He cocked his head. “As for taking yourself seriously… Why don’t you just ask the room to make you look like you used to, at least here? And turn the place into something more familiar?”

“Why don’t you?”

“It’s not about me. This isn’t my place, is it? If what you said is true, the Room of Requirement is the Headmaster’s real office, and you’ve had that affinity for it ever since seventh year, when everyone was hiding out here.”

Neville’s round face quirked in a smile, but he closed his eyes… Moments later, he and the room were shifting and changing, the room into something warm and glowing and earthy, with squashy chairs, hanging plants of wild and beautiful variety, and the smell of coffee, rather than tea, throughout. A considerable, if not huge, desk was tucked in the corner, and instead of the gadgets that had lined Dumbledore’s shelves, there were thousands upon thousands of constantly shifting photos: all of students, waving and playing and laughing, some reading, some napping in the library… Harry couldn’t help but smile as his eyes turned to the singular object among them - an old-style wizarding camera, battered and carefully tended, with a Muggle-style ID strip on the bottom, he knew, that had neatly preserved letters printed on it spelling ‘Colin Creevey’.

“I don’t think you ever missed one,” Harry said. “Of all the students you looked after, from the day they arrived to the day they left. Though I don’t know why you had to get them all as first years. That means there’s not a Quidditch photo in the lot.”

“I’m a herbologist. I like seeds,” Neville said, and his voice was much deeper, and Harry looked again. He was tall now – well over six feet - built, with a solid, muscular body. There were a thick streaks of silver in his darkened hair – he’d outgrown the childish blond by fifth year – but the soft, endearing face was the same, despite its chiseled adult angles and his grandmother’s uncompromising eyebrows… Neville Longbottom, despite his unprepossessing start to life, had grown into rather a heart-breaker by anyone’s standards, and in his dark brown and gold Headmaster’s robes, open fronted over sturdy, practical corduroy trousers and the rich, nubbled burnt orange jumper that should have looked hideous on anyone, but suited him right down to the ground, he was an impressive and oddly reassuring sight. He even smelled the way he had in his years as Deputy and Head: again of coffee rather than tea, of wet dark young earth and spiced ale, and with just a hint of the fresh lavender that Hannah always used to wash the sheets at the Leaky.

“You’re what… Seventy like this?” he asked.

“Seventy three,” Neville said. “The day I was inducted.” He stretched out his legs and examined his hands, raised before his face. “I can still hear Gran bitching at me to get the dirt out from under my nails, at least, before I disgraced our whole House and my parents’ memory.”
“I still can’t believe she made it to the day. Or maybe I can. She always was that determined to see you reach your full potential.”

“More like she was determined not to die before Dad did. She did process at some point - I don’t know when – that he was never going to recover, though she never gave up ostensible hope, and certainly didn’t intend to leave him to the mercies of the turnover at St. Mungo’s. I never understood that, really, till Frankie was born.” Frankie Alistair Augustine Longbottom was Neville and Hannah’s only son, born long years after the rest of the children of his father’s generation had ridden the boats to, and back, over Black Lake. He was the joy of their lives; a plain, simple man with a wicked, wild knack for both pastry and the breeding of carnivorous orchids, and an even wilder one for Muggle investing. He’d been the first human in the history of the Gringotts banking system to be offered a position besides curse-bait (a more apt description, Bill Weasley had once said, for his actual job than curse breaking). The goblins even had a saying about him: ‘shove knuts up the Longbottom and he’ll shit out gold galleons.’

“Yeah,” Harry said, and sighed, and tucked his own skinny, eleven-year-old legs up. “Can Dumbledore sense he’s been sacked, d’you reckon? On the one issue anyway?”

“Dunno. I do know that he hasn’t moved Fluffy yet though even though Quirrell is gone, and I had to have a word with the staircases to make sure they understand that they’re not to shovel certain – well, any - students to the third floor corridor at random. I don’t suppose you could throw up a few of your pet wards around the area to ensure that no one but a certified teacher can find their way there via the standard routes?”

“Sure. I’ll need to borrow your extra wand though. I need two for the finer weaves.”

Frank Longbottom Sr’s wand spun between them; he caught it easily. It sneezed at him rudely. He laughed at it as he got to his feet.

“Like father, like son,” he said. “Come on, then. Let me show you a few tricks I’ve picked up since you last worked for the Auror Corps.” He headed for the door, looking over his shoulder. Neville had conjured a footstool, and was sitting back, still as a grown man, examining his fingernails again.

“Thanks, Harry,” he said. “It’s good of you, you know? I know how much Dash takes out of you when you’re working through him.”

“Just ask the house-elves to make me a treacle tart for breakfast tomorrow. A whole one. They can disguise it as a quiche or something; I don’t care, but I’ll need the sugar to get through double Potions after.”

“Yeah,” Nev sighed. “Do you have any idea how hard is to diet when all Beorn wants is to empty the table at every meal in preparation for winter? I don’t even want to think about having to get out of bed every morning for classes when he decides it’s time to hibernate.”

Harry laughed and ducked out, a wand in each hand and whistling in anticipation between his teeth even he transformed… When the door had sealed itself, Neville got to his feet and went to the south wall, moving several dozen photos aside till a singular large (empty) portrait was revealed. He knocked three times on the frame and stood back. The paint seemed to swirl into a vortex, evolving into a tunnel. Moments later…

“Headmaster,” the deep, silky voice said as its owner stepped gracefully through, its black cloak swirling about it in an undeniably bat-like fashion.

“Headmaster,” Neville Longbottom returned, inclining his head slightly. The two men stared at each
other measuringly before Neville shook himself lightly. “Coffee?”

The newcomer nodded in assent, accepting the mug as it appeared. “That sweater is as hideous as ever,” he observed. “I’d thought it a trick of the painted eye, but apparently… It is not.”

“You’re as charming as you ever were, Severus,” he said. “Whatever happened to “I want in on it, Longbottom; let me in on it, I’ll do whatever it takes, I’m so damned tired of being dead, this coffee tastes like bollocks; I’ll even be nice to you in Potions?”

“You are eleven years old again, you puling brat, at least when you’re outside this room. And Potions only comprises one portion of your week. Be warned.”

Neville just laughed.

“Have a seat,” he said. “She’s on her way.”

“And Potter is safely stashed?”

“He’s installing some extra wards for me on the third floor to keep underage wanderers at bay. I can’t believe that great git didn’t even do that much.”

“Now now.” Severus Snape seated himself in Harry’s vacated chair, sipping elegantly. “Show some respect. Or at least appropriately applied subterfuge. Did I teach you nothing over the years? You were an apt enough pupil once you stopped wetting yourself at the mere mention of my name.”

“You really are a git, aren’t you? I cannot believe that I actually agreed to offer up my blood to bring you, of all people, back to help. We had options, you know? People were lining up on both sides of the Veil to help us pull this off, once we recovered the Resurrection Stone and put out for volunteers, anyway.”

“I was the greatest spy of any generation,” Snape said dryly. “You need, and needed me, particularly since, at a hundred thirty-eight now or not, Potter is as astoundingly dull, emotionally stunted, and self-absorbed as he ever was. He seems actually to be taking the chance to be eleven again seriously, on both the conscious and subconscious level.”

“We knew that would probably happen. It’s the way his kind of chronically traumatized mind works.”

“He’s hardly the only individual to suffer from the aftereffects of an overly melodramatic childhood.”

“No,” Neville conceded. “But he’s the one who came up with this plan in the first place, and agreed to go in effectively blind on the specific crucial details so that we might actually have a hope of pulling it off. And don’t you go dropping any snide little hints on the hopes of messing with his head, Snape. I know you better than you think I do – your portrait painter was extremely comprehensive – and Harry’s not the only one who could yet use a good Mind Healer.”

“He’s already thrown the plan, such as it was, completely off the rails! First Black, then Lupin...”

“First Lupin, then Black,” the second figure emerging from the tunnel corrected. “Honestly Sev, you’ve gotten so imprecise in your old age. Never mind the Death Eaters. I told you this would happen if you didn’t get away from the dungeons and your potions fumes now and again.”

Snape stood immediately, turning as the glamour on the nondescript, rather plain woman shifted. She grinned at him, stretching and shaking out her glory of dark red hair before bounding forth to offer him a tight hug, as well as a resounding smack on the head.
“That,” she informed him, ‘was from James. On principle, in advance of… This.”

Neville actually blushed at the long, deep passionate embrace that followed. It went on, and on, and on, and at last, he had to revert pointedly to his eleven-year-old self, complete with striped pajamas, and step into their line of sight. They parted reluctantly.

“Nice feet!” Lily Potter, nee Evans, grinned as she bounded forward to hug him exuberantly before dropping to her knees before him and taking his face in her hands. “Oh, Neville. You’re so gorgeous!”

“They keep me warm,” Neville said of his (apparent) bear slippers. “Hello, Mrs. Potter. It’s so nice to meet you in person at last.”

She hugged him again, hard.

“Aunt Lily,” she ordered. ”And never mind him. I like the orange sweater. It looks perfect on you.”

“Do try to remember, Lily, that he is more than twice our ages when we died… Combined?”

“ Weird,” Lily pronounced as she got to her feet. “Where’s Harry?”

“He’s working.” Neville looked up at Snape. “What’s this? You never told me you two dated! I thought you just pined for her!”

“Oh we didn’t,” Lily reassured him. “Date, that is. We gave up our first kisses to each other though, when we were twelve, but that was it. I have to say, Sev; you’ve improved considerably since. Who have you been practicing on?” She winked at him.

“Slag. You taste like Potter,” he informed her dourly. “Never mind the fact that you’ve been back two years now. There are potions for that, you know. And toothpaste, and mouthwash, and oh yes, bleach for me.”

She snorted. Loudly. It was a decidedly inelegant sound.

“Alrighty then,” she said and threw herself in a chair, appearing obligingly beneath her. Her knees, Neville noticed, were as knobby as Harry’s had ever been, and she had an ink spot on her left thumb, exactly where Harry’s quill habitually pressed on his right. “What’s the plan?”

"Get rid of the horcruxes,” Neville obliged. “One down, five to go, by the way… Off He-Who-Should-Just-Give-Over-The-Name-if-He’s-So –Embarrassed-By-His-Own-Youthful-Pretensions-That-He-Can’t-Even-Stand-To-Hear-Anyone-Say-It-Anymore, and once this world is set to rights, get on with what we really came to do.”

“And what of Dumbledore?” Snape asked.

“You leave him to me,” Lily said grimly. “I cannot believe he wants to send Harry back to Petunia!”

“Are you going to invite me along when you have your word with her?” Snape inquired. “I have no love for your son; he’s a thoroughly obnoxious prat no matter his age…”

“Hey! He has my eyes!”

“I haven’t forgotten. If he hadn’t, I might have been able to forget you, and actually get on with my life.”

“You didn’t do too badly.” She patted his knee. “I mean, okay, it was pretty horrid, but you did good
things with it, and once we’re done here, I intend to reward you for your martyrdom in extremely unapproved, thoroughly Muggle style.”

"Aren’t you married?" Neville asked politely.

“I was,” Lily said. “But then we died. ‘Till death do us part’ and all; all debts paid, and James is good enough company, but he’s not here, is he? Great prat; he actually accused me of cheating on the coin toss, never mind that if he’d been the one to come back, he wouldn’t have been able to keep the secret from Remy or Siri for a second.”

Snape shuddered. “As I was saying,” he said. “Be sure to invite me along when you’ve prepared to haunt Petunia for her sins. I have been in that portrait far too long, and Longbottom here only let me out on the promise that I’d be civil to every resident within the wards of, quote-unquote, his school.”

“Poor thing. You must be dying to punish someone properly.” The wink was even more outrageous. Snape actually blushed.

“Will you two stop already?” Neville said, irritated. “It’s bad enough that I have to sit across from the hall from my eleven-year-old wife in an eleven-year-old body three times a day, never mind sharing classes with her and pretending to hate my best friend…”

“You have to pretend to hate Harry?” Lily asked, puzzled. “Why? That wasn’t part of the plan.”

“He’s not talking about your precious son,” Snape sneered. “He’s talking about Draco Malfoy.”

“Luca and Cissy’s boy? Really?”

“Luca and Cissy?”

“They mellowed a bit after they passed,” she said. “So did I, I expect, and as for James, he’s probably eating popcorn and making rude comments right now. Anyway. Horcruxes?”

“The diadem’s done,” Neville obliged. “And we think we’ve come up with a viable plan for the cup. That just leaves the diary and the ring and the locket. And Harry, of course.”

“And Voldemort,” she reminded him. “And the great big holes torn in our prettily established plot, never mind that bloody buggering weird wand. What’s the story with that, Sev? Not to sound like… Well… You… But loose ends make hairy potions, and none of us want to be coughing up furballs at inopportune moments.”

“Was she always like this?” Neville said, bemused, to Snape. “Only I always got the impression that she was supposed to be this great self-sacrificing saint and paragon of womanhood and all. Combined with Helen of Troy, maybe, or the Dark Witch Morgana – there’s no way that ritual she pulled off involved anything other than blood magic, no matter how Dumbledore goes on about hearts-and-flower power, after all.”

“She was a girl,” Snape said, surprisingly fondly as he looked at the irrepressible smirk on the freckled, pointed face before him. There were more freckles on the one cheek than the other, Neville noticed, so thickly sprinkled in one portion just on the left cheekbone that they made almost the shadow of a strawberry, and those ears… Yes, they were definitely candidates for Muggle pinning surgery. And it wasn’t just her knees that were knobby; those elbows looked rather potentially painful as well. “My girl, even if she did have the horrifically appalling judgement to attach herself permanently to that oversexed, overcompensating moose.”

“And that,” Neville said. “Really, really will be enough of that. Wand, Severus?”
“Fifteen inches,” he said promptly, with a smirk of his own. “Black pine, rigid, with the core – and spirit – of a Hungarian Horntail.”

“A Hungarian Horntail that happened to be married to Harry’s Horntail,” his successor pointed out, and at his professor’s glare, and Lily’s chortle (it sounded rather more like a donkey’s bray) threw a third smirk into the mix. “What? I’m older than both of you put together, remember?”

Snape rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know anything about the wand,” he said, sobering. “It wasn’t part of the plan, and frankly, the research that I’ve done on the implications of the particular combination are rather disturbing. The ritual we performed to bring us here relies on absolute balance, as you know: hence the fact that each of us returned on one of the seasonal Solstices, and I was certain we balanced the elements properly to choose an appropriate and perfect-to-the-point copy alter dimension of our timeline to work with, but the fact remains that that kind of wand doesn’t exist in our version of this world. Amber isn’t a substance that works there as an ingredient for core or shell; the molecular composition isn’t compatible with the necessary magics. Here though… It’s just different enough to make the almost unheard-of, yet still possible, difference.”

“Well. Whatever it is, or does, or means, we’ll work around it,” Lily waved a hand. “First things first, we get on with… Everything else. I want to see my baby again, and I can’t do that till we get rid of Tom and restore his proper memories and understanding of the situation, so chop-chop, boys. Let’s get ’er done.”

“Who knew,” Snape said dryly to Neville. “They have American television programs in the afterlife. Please, Lily. Cannot you try to remember that, on this side of the Veil at least, you are yet British?”

“I’m American,” Neville offered to her. “At least Beorn is. My Animagus,” he said at his godmother’s bemused look. “He’s a Kodiak bear.” He held up his feet in demonstration. “From Alaska. My great-great-great grandfather emigrated to England when he was sixteen.”

“How nice,” she said. “I’m very proud of you. I don’t suppose you ever told him your Animagus form, Sev?”

“Lily…”

“Oh come on! It’s adorable! I don’t know why you’re so ashamed to tell people!”

“And now you’re just being annoying for the sake of it. How did I forget that unbecoming little habit of yours? It’s one you share with your spawn, by the way, and if you don’t stop, I will take it out on him.”

“Yeah well, if you would just stop glaring at him, and maybe even snarking at him, he might find it in himself to return the favour, mightn’t he?”

“I have to get up in the morning,” Neville said, rising to his feet. “Why don’t you two catch up. I know we’ve all been back for two years now, but unless you’ve been breaking the rules to meet up before we were supposed to, I imagine you have a lot to say to each other. Things that I, in case it really, really isn’t obvious, do not want to hear.”

“Sleep well, darling,” Lily said immediately, and rose to her feet to give him a hug. He hugged her back, smirking at Snape over her shoulder as, as an eleven-year-old, he pressed his cheek to the obvious and snuggled in. Snape glared. She petted his hair.

“I really do like the feet,” she said. “You should show them to your mum sometime. She loved
stuffed bears. She used to pile her dorm bed so high with her collection that there was barely room for her to sit, much less sleep.”

He blinked up at her at that. “She did?”

“She did,” she confirmed. “And... No joke, I swear on my magic... She named her favorite one Neville.”

He hugged her hard, once, again, and almost ran out of the room. She sighed and sat on the chair again. Snape came to sit beside her, or rather, to pick her up and resettle her on his lap. She leaned against him, head on his shoulder.

“I’ve missed you, Snivellus,” she said. “You great greasy git. Letters just haven’t been enough.”

“I’ve missed you too, Lily,” he said. “And you’re right, they weren’t. Haven’t been. But for the sake of what we’re trying to do...”

“You really care for him, huh?” she said, looking to the door.

“He is a good man,” he said soberly. “A kind one. As good and kind as I never was. He made the world, and the school – our school; it was mine too, for however short a time, and under whatever pretenses – a better place, and he only ever wanted one thing in return. And by Salazar and Godric, Lily, we will give it to him.” He sighed. “As long as Harry doesn’t screw it all up with his rediscovered reserves of adolescent angst, anyway.”

“Yet another thing I’m going to blame Petunia for,” she agreed. “God. I love the boy, I do, but he was just like her the year he was fifteen. Whinge whinge, whine whine, woe is me, the world hates me, nobody understands me, why meeeeee...”

“When are you going back to see her?” he asked, linking his arms around her waist securely.

“Hallowe’en, of course,” she said. “I don’t suppose you have plans? Only the last thing James said to me was to tell you that you officially have his permission to ‘go all Death Eater on her bony arse’ on his behalf, and to be sure to enjoy it enough for both of you.”

“Did he now.”

“I did tell you he’d mellowed.” She smiled a bit wistfully. “He even told me not to waste any second chances with you, can you believe it? Begrudgingly, but he did.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“We were teenagers, Sev. We were all teenagers, and walking ghosts besides, and we all knew it, and clung to whatever we had then just for something to hold onto. Now... We’re not. Well, ghosts, yes, of a sort, but... Grown up ghosts, anyway. And this weird thing happen when you grow up, you grow into that cliché that you really do just want the people you love to be happy.”

“I suppose,” he said. “One day at a time. As for Hallowe’en, we seem to have been pre-emptively rendered troll-free, so I should have no problems getting the night off.”

“Hurray!” She kissed his hooked nose smackingly. “So. Tell me. Just who have you been practicing on again?”
And He's Gone...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Third Floor Corridor

12:30 A.M

The third floor corridor was dim and dusty, and the cold seeped unpleasantly through the stones into Harry’s bare feet as he skinned into a nearly blacked corner to transform. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a silvery wisp and stood statue-still till it had turned another corner, then peered out cautiously as he assessed his options.

The wards he was about to cast were excellent – fantastic, even – but they had two disadvantages; they couldn’t be cast while under the invisibility cloak, or under any other sort of similar spell for that matter, nor could they be cast with wandless magic. That meant he had to revert to his human form to do the work. For a moment he was tempted to make the threat moot in a distinctly more permanent fashion – old age and experience, never mind the plethora of small and helpless descendants that he’d cradled in his arms over the decades, had made him decidedly less sympathetic to Hagrid’s notions than he’d been when he’d first met the man - but in the end, he just hitched up his pajama pants, cast a quick warming charm on both hands and feet and crept toward his first target: the grotty, orange-lit lantern just to the right of the first door on the opposite wall. Feeling rather an idiot, he let his fingers brush the stones there, and sent a silent message.

_Potter here. I reckon Nev’s told you about me. Keep everyone away, would you; this is going to take a bit, and I’d rather not have to explain myself to… Well. Anyone, really._

There was of course, no answer, and it could have been his hyper-extended imagination, but still. He felt a bit reassured as he flexed his fingers and settled his feet. The amber wand in his right hand hummed, so low it was almost a growl… Frank Longbottom Sr’s wand hiccuped at him again, rather snarkily. He examined it, startled, before remembering suddenly that this was a _Longbottom_ wand: an heirloom wand of _House_ Longbottom, and it probably appreciated the proper courtesies.

“Harry Potter,” he whispered. “James and Lily’s son. It’s a long story, but I’m an Auror too, and your son Neville’s mate, and he lent you to me so that I can install some special wards from the future that will make Dumbledore’s pants twist. You in?”

The hiccup translated immediately to a sound that sounded remarkably like “Wheeeeee!” Harry snickered.

“All right then,” he said. He raised his hands, settled his thin shoulders, and, eyes fixed on the lantern before him, set to work.

Remus and Sirius' Quarters

7.30 AM
Hogwarts, Harry thought painfully as he lay face down on his guardians’ bed and gritted his teeth against Remus’ careful ministrations, might not be sentient, exactly, but she certainly had a mind of her own. The third corridor wards had taken just under an hour to set, and at the end of it, reassured that he’d not been spotted, quite content with the done job and very ready to head back to his bed, he’d headed, metaphorically whistling, off to Gryffindor Tower, only to find himself firmly rerouted. He’d tried to retrace his steps, only to be rerouted back again, and after the third attempt, a baker, up and about his business of setting the day’s bread in the pre-dawn hours, had peered at him from over the frame of his portrait, and said…

“I don’t think the castle thinks you’re finished the job yet, dearie.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Well, you did such a lovely job on the third floor just now – I felt the adjustments all the way from my head to my toes, so I did; all us portraits did – that I think it’s being suggested that you…” He waved a floury hand. “Mix in a bit more yeast in spots that aren’t quite as self-rising as they could be?”

“Self-rising?”

“Muggle reference,” the baker had said patronizingly. “Don’t fret your inbred little brain over it; just stick to what you know. That’s all we can ask of you.”

“You’re a Muggleborn?” Harry asked with interest. “Really? I’m a half-blood myself.”

“Half-blood’s better’n half-baked, and of course I am. Word of advice, when you get onto mixing your starter, find yourself some fresh yeast. Your children’s magics will be the all the sounder and heartier for it, and that’s God’s honest truth.”

“I will keep it in mind,” Harry said. “So. Um. Where am I, and what does Hogwarts want me to do, exactly?”

“Lor’ bless me, I don’t know, I’m sure! You’re the fancy Wards Master, you figure it out.” He peered again. “Bit young for it, aren’t you?”

“I’m short for my age,” the Wards Master in question said dryly, and just for the lark, did a quick scan of the room he’d landed in. His jaw dropped.

“What the… I’m standing right over the magical nexus point of the entire castle!”

“What the… I’m standing right over the magical nexus point of the entire castle!”

“Of course you are. Where else would you be? Easier to fix everything at the source than to carry you around and patch plasters everywhere, isn’t it?”

“Fix… Everything?”

“Dumbledore’s alright,” the baker said kindly. “But he’s not much for the finer bits and bobs when it comes right down to it; he thinks that no one would dare attack the place with his arse on the throne, and Dippet was the result of fourteen straight generations of cousin-on-cousin action. The place hasn’t had its dough turned since Phineas Nigellus was in charge, and he was no great shakes either, if only because he wouldn’t hire anyone with a genetically original thought in their heads.”

“Huh. Um. Alright then.” He scanned again. “You know there’s not anything actually wrong with the wards, right?”

“I’m a baker. Of course I don’t. Go on, then,” he said encourageingly. “Just play with the recipes
here and there, and see what comes up. I daresay that’s all Hoggy wants you to do, really. She’s a lady; she appreciates a new outfit as much as any other, I’m sure.”

Harry sighed and hunkered down, conjuring a ball of what looked like bluebell flame but most definitely wasn’t, and launched it at the nexus point. Seconds later, neat little lines began to vomit forth, and a revolving miniature map of the castle began to form, the main ward lines neatly labelled in somewhat gothic printing. The secondaries and tertiaries followed; he prowled around, examining them and poking here and there. At one point, a heavily cross-hatched section squeaked and pulled away from his finger, trembling. He frowned and looked closer.

“What’s going on here,” he said, and then… “Well, bugger me. That’s not on.”

“What is?” the baker asked, looking up from where he was piping hot cross buns. “Or rather, isn’t?”

“Somebody’s rewoven the wards here to…” He stuck his tongue out of the corner of his mouth, held a wand up in each hand, and began to untangle the leylines, rearranging the pattern in which six of the strands lay over each other. When he was finished, he looked closer again.

“That should do it,” he said. “Oop, bit of blood there, let’s just…” He pointed with the amber wand. Nothing seemed to happen, but then, every pipe on the left side of the castle seemed to whine and rumble at once.

“Oi!” the baker said alarmed. “No messing with the plumbing! They don’t teach Vanishing spells till fourth year now!”

“No worries,” Harry reassured him. “It’s just the castle’s instinctive reactive instinct to what I just did. Kind of like sympathetic yawning, but … Not.”

“And what did you just do?”

“Unraveled a curse that someone set by crossing a few relevant warding lines in the shape of a hex,” he said. “He didn’t actually change the wards at all, just changed the way they reacted to the magical signature of anyone signing a magical contract on a specific position, and sealed the results with his blood. Anyone signing on without his magical signature would be forcibly ejected by the wards after a predetermined period of time… In this case, ten months.”

“How very strange,” the baker commented, and then, struck… “You don’t mean…”

“Mm. Now, that being said… Why wouldn’t anyone have picked up on that before? It’s not exactly an advanced technique, or a difficult solution.” He poked again. The entire net of castle-shaped lines shimmered. The amber wand snarled. Frank Longbottom’s wand hissed disapprovingly. Harry sat back on his heels. There were some things, he reflected, that Notice-Me-Nots were just not intended to do, much less on that scale. Tom had been determined. And pissed. Out of the corner of his eye, he couldn’t help but notice that the painted bakery was beginning to attract more than a few interested ‘customers’.

“Harry Potter!” a familiar voice said indignantly. “What are you doing this side of the portrait hole this time of night? You’re supposed to be in bed! Ooh, wait till I tell…”

“You’re not going to tell anybody anything, Violet,” the baker snapped. “None of you are. He’s on Hogwarts’ business, he is, by order of the Headmaster – the Oathsworn one, not the other one, and so help me…”

Violet, the boon companion of the Fat Lady, subsided, grumbling.
“Thanks,” Harry said. “I appreciate that.”

“Not a problem, Wards Master. Anything we can help with?” he asked. “Such as we are?”

“I’m not actually a Wards Master,” he said. “I mean, I could be, but I never actually got around to taking the exams. Somehow, something always seemed to come up at the last minute that required me to. You know. Cast actual wards somewhere important instead. Some of my Aurors were a bit disappointed by my emphasis on the protective arts rather than my kill-maim-destroy approach, but let’s face it, when a Dark Wizard can’t get in to kill you, you don’t die. Case in point…” He stood, flicking away the wide-scale Notice-Me-Not as so much fairy dust, lifted his arms, a wand in each hand, and began to conduct rapidly, in a smooth, continuous series of movements that continued one on from the other like flowing water.

“Oh, la,” one of the young Regency maidens from the fifth floor said, impressed. “Don’t he look like he’s dancing! Ten thousand a year and I’d marry him, yes I would!” She cocked her head. “When he grows a bit anyway. And dies, and has his picture done. Are you betrothed, milord?”

“Technically no,” Harry said, eyes fixed on his work and hands flying. “I don’t think so. Not in the legal sense, considering that we haven’t even met yet, but when it comes right down to it, and for my own good health should she ever hear of this conversation at any point… Yes. Afraid so. Very much so.”

“That doesn’t sound promising,” the Regency maiden said disapprovingly. “An amiable wife is a gift beyond measure, milord. From the tone of that last, your prospect sounds a bit of a harridan.”

“She can be, but she’s my harridan, and I’m her Harry, and it’s going to take more than a missed train, or a caught one, for that matter, to change that.”

The amber wand hummed approvingly, even as it sweated. The Regency maiden swooned, landing on top of the hot cross buns, recovering immediately and crying out in indignation at her ruined muslin.

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**Back in the Present**

“Ow,” he gritted as Remus helped him roll on his back, and prodded his shoulders gently. “Ow, ow, ow, ow OW!” That last degenerated into a pained roar. Remus poked at him a bit more for good measure, and sat back on the edge of the bed to regard him closely.

“You know, Harry,” he said. “Far be it from me to sound the suspicious and disapproving step-guardian, but I can’t help but notice that the strain in these particular muscles correspond exactly to where a bird might have pain had he… Hmm. Overextended himself on an ill-advised and incidentally forbidden weeknight flight?”

“Yeah, pup,” Sirius said, sitting opposite. “You didn’t go outside, did you? I mean… What Remus said: bad godson, and if I had a newspaper I’d smack your nose, but only, Scotland’s wicked gusty at this time of year, and Dash isn’t exactly built to battle the elements.”

“I didn’t go outside,” Harry said, perfectly truthfully.

“Outside the castle or outside the portrait hole?”

“You never said that I couldn’t transform during the week,” he pointed out. “Just that I couldn’t use
the invisibility cloak. And I didn’t. And I didn’t transform inside the Tower, don’t worry. Nobody saw me."

Remus sighed. “Here’s a hint for you, cub,” he said. “You know when it goes all dark outside? That’s when you’re supposed to sleep.” He picked up his wand and tapped it against his palm. A thick, cinnamon-scented orange salve eased out; he put the wand aside and began to smooth it over Harry’s back. Slowly, the movements translated into a gentle, deep massage. Harry nearly melted into the mattress.

“Bloody buggering bollocks,” he moaned. “That feels fucking fantastic; don’t stop, Gin.”

The hands stilled.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Potter?”

“I meant, that feels really nice, Rem, please don’t stop?”

This time it was Sirius’ turn to sigh.

“Look, Harry,” he said, obviously trying to sound rational and/or paternal. “I know you’re upset about seeing a Mind Healer; Merlin knows I wasn’t too thrilled when they told me that I couldn’t get custody of a gnat, much less you, without the full treatment there, but... Take it from me, okay? They’re really not that bad. I mean, they leave you with your soul and everything!”

“I don’t mind seeing a Mind Healer,” Harry said, neo-petulantly. “I just don’t like being informed of the fact, rather than consulted on it. I mean, it is my mind, yeah? Even if Voldemort is stuck to it?”

The hands stilled again.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well, technically he’s stuck to my scar,” Harry said. “A bit of him, anyway. His soul. It broke when he tried to murder me; apparently it’s not good for structural integrity on that metaphysical level.” He rolled over and looked up at their puzzled, horrified faces. “Wait, didn’t you know? Professor Dumbledore does; he has for ages. Ever since the night it happened, or didn’t he tell you?”

“What?” Sirius roared. “He... WHAT? THAT...”

“Hold up, hold up,” Remus said. “Harry, that is an extremely serious accusation, never mind an extremely strange ...” He floundered. “Supposition. How... What...”

“I was talking to Moaning Myrtle,” he said innocently, and again perfectly truthfully. Confounding a ghost wasn’t nearly as simple as Confounding a human, but it was definitely possible. “In the bathroom last night. She said she was passing through the turn by the Headmaster’s loo and heard him talking to himself about it, when. He was. You know. He reckons that the only way to get it out of me is to kill me, and she reckons that that’s why he wants custody. She said she’s really worried, he doesn’t care much about the students, she thinks, after all, he’s never even come to her to ask her how she died when she was murdered fifty years ago, and that was by the thing that came out of the Chamber of Secrets. He just helped blame Hagrid for it, and anyone and everyone should have known right off it wasn’t him, because the monster he was hiding was a baby acromantula, and all the students hurt before Myrtle were petrified. Acromantulas don’t petrify things; it says so in Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them. They just sting them and wrap them up and eat them. Or rather, suck out their blood and vital flu-ids.” He finished off that statement with a rather disgusting schlurping sound. Remus and Sirius stared at him, white-faced.
“You have a bit of Voldemort’s soul stuck in your scar,” Sirius repeated carefully. “And Dumbledore knows, and Moaning Myrtle heard him say that the only way to get rid of it – and therefore Voldemort, entirely – is to kill you?”

“Yeah, I know, right?” Harry said plaintively. “I know we can’t tell the Ministry this, or use it in the custody case, they’d go nutters and probably offer me up themselves, but there’s got to be something we can do. I mean, it’s not like it talks to me in his voice or anything, but honestly, I used to like my scar, and now I just feel kind of icky. And of course I don’t want to die,” he added hastily. “That goes without saying.”

“Do you think Miss Myrtle would talk to us?” Remus asked. “Privately?”

“Oh yes. I told her that you’d probably be in to see her today at some point. She’s very excited; she said she doesn’t mind being a ghost anymore, really, but it still really bothers her that no one thought her important enough even after she was not-dead to ask her her opinion on what happened the night she died. Only she was right there, right?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” his godfather said. “But why aren’t you screaming in horror? I mean, I supposed icked is an appropriate response, but still. I don’t think I’d be nearly as rational. In fact I can guarantee I wouldn’t be.”

“Well, it’s not like I feel any different than I did yesterday,” Harry said reasonably. “I mean, I’m still me. I thought about it; I’ve got a whole soul, right? There’s no way he can fit into it, to change it. All he can do is sit there and. Well. Sit there. At least this way we know where he is.”

“I vote we take him out of school now,” Sirius said to his lover. “Now. Out of this school, and out of the country, to another country, where that … Person… Has no say.”

“He’s the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards,” Remus pointed out. “There is no country where he has no say. And even if we did manage it, that still doesn’t solve the real problem, which is how to get great bloody You-Know-Who unstuck from our child’s head!”

“Without killing me,” Harry added. “As I said, and to reiterate… I’d really prefer that.”

“You are not going to die. I won’t allow it. Though, that being said… Take heart on this much at least; there are definitely no Mind Healers in your near future, pup. We definitely don’t need these kind of complications on record.”

Remus flopped back, most inelegantly, and stared up at the canopy.

“I am going to kill Dumbledore,” he announced. “After this is all over. Painfully. I know how, and alright, I’m not a werewolf anymore, but that just means I’ll be able to remember what I did to him once I’m done doing it.”

“I still have all those old homework assignments my mother gave me,” Sirius offered. “I totally failed the practicals, but that was only because I refused to try them, not because I couldn’t do them.” He sat down beside Harry, stretching out his legs, and pulled him into his arms. “Don’t you worry, pup. We’re going to get all this sorted out. No, Remus and I are going to sort this out for you.” He kissed his forehead gently, directly on the scar. “I just want you to do one thing for us, okay?”

“What?”

“Talk to us when you’re scared? You don’t have to pretend to be brave with us; we’re both well familiar with pants-wetting fear – I daresay we’re all feeling a bit of it right now, despite our smooth and soothing parental demeanors and your suave ‘nothing doth ruffle me but my hair’ Potter genes,
and we’re certainly never going to look down on you for your acquaintance there.”

“I won’t. I mean... I will.” He leaned against him (gingerly) and watched as Remus got up, going to the trunk at the foot of the bed and retrieving the invisibility cloak. “What’s this?”

“We can’t just leave,” the ex-were said. “But I’ll be damned if we’ll leave you unprotected. Carry it with you everywhere, Harry, and if you’re backed into a corner and we’re not about… Use it as appropriate. If you can’t, transform. Transform and get to my office, and get the hell out.” He dug for another item: a tiny packet of oddly coloured floo powder. “This stuff’s untraceable – every grain is bound to our particular Fidelius wards at Cŵn-y-Cwm. Don’t lose it; it was bloody hard to enchant, and involves processes that parts of me really would prefer not to go through again.”

“At... What?”

“Cŵn-y-Cwm.” He pronounced it carefully. “Valley of the Dogs. Give it a go; the English translation won't work.”

Harry repeated obediently, several times till they were sure he had it right.

“Good.” Remus sat down beside him anxiously, and petted his hair. Even as he did so, a house-elf popped in, wringing her own hands anxiously.

“I is sorry, Professor Loopy,” she said. “I is sorry, Professor Paddy… But Professor Dumbly is calling a staff meeting. About…” She darted a look at Harry. “The third floor!”

That last was a terrified whisper. Remus sat up straight.

“Do not tell me,” he said. “Do not tell me!”

“Nobody is hurt,” the elf hastened to reassure him. “But.. “ She lowered its voice again dramatically. “Nobody is getting in! And nobody is getting out!”

“Ooh, I got that one! Charlie and the Chocolate Factory!” Harry enthused. “I loved that book! I actually had to sneak it out of Dudley’s room; it’s probably the only one he ever read all the way through because of the descriptions of the … candy…” He trailed off. The elf looked at him blankly. Remus grinned at him fleetingly.

“Why would he think anyone – or thing – getting out is a bad thing?’ Sirius asked, perplexed. “Considering what’s in there, and all?’

“I is just delivering the message, Professor Paddy,” the house-elf said, tone switching from dramatic to prim so fast it was dizzying. “That is what he said.”

“Drama queen.” Sirius heaved himself up with a grunt. “Alright, Harry, You can have a lie-in till lunch, but after this… Your stupidity is on your head. To the point,” he added hastily. “I mean, we’ll always be there to rescue you. Just not to bail you out. Unless you’ve been unjustly imprisoned in Azkaban, or justly imprisoned, for that matter, because let’s face it, it’s just no place for a growing boy.”

“Indeed,” Remus agreed. “Though just on principle, and since it’s my class you’ll be missing… I’ll be expecting an extra foot on the essay I assign this weekend. Of original thought, mind you: no stacking up on quotes to fill the extra.”He stroked the boy’s hair as he shifted gingerly. “I’ll bring you up an early lunch on my break. Requests?’

“Yes. Lots of everything, with treacle tart, and marmalade pud, and chocolate cake, and…”
“I get the idea. Bring him some breakfast now, will you, Titchy,” he said to the house-elf. “The full English, plus fruit, buttered oatcakes, and extra bangers.”

“And your special juice, Master Harry?” the elf asked.

“Special juice?” Sirius asked as he tugged on his robes and shouldered his satchel of teaching materials.

“It’s a Muggle brand,” Harry lied hastily.

“Called double espresso breve,” the elf pronounced carefully, and beamed. “Charmed orange and pulp free; two sugars, light cream! Is that being right, Master Harry?”

“Um,” Harry said at Remus’ raised eyebrow – it was of course, far too much to expect that a man so intimately acquainted with the taste, texture and efficacy of every brand of chocolate over the British Isles would have no similar affinity for coffee– “Four this morning, please?”

The elf bobbed and disappeared.

“I’m sure Voldemort hates it,” he offered the eyebrow. “I mean, it’s hardly really British, is it? And what kind of Pureblood would choose it over tea?”

“I’m going to my meeting now,” his second guardian informed him. “And for the record, you will be talking to someone, young man. You may think yourself a big, bold, brave Gryffindor now, but there are yet limits. I have limits, and for the record, and once I have confirmed things with Myrtle, you will begin to suffer the realities there.”

The door closed behind the two men with a not-quite bang. Harry slumped and winced. Even as he did so, a rat-tat-tat sounded at the window... He heaved himself up painfully and went over, opening the case to greet a huge, fierce and rather scarred and windblown owl. It held out its leg imperiously. Harry untied the letter (rather scorched around the edges) and pushed over the little bowl of owl treats on the side-table.

**HARRY POTTER c/o RON WEASLEY AS NECESSARY**

**HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY**

**SCOTLAND**

The handwriting was wrenchingly familiar. He had to sit down to catch his breath. When he had…

Dear Harry, Charlie’s familiar, never-quite-forgotten scrawl read.

It’s good to meet you! Ron wrote me and said that your History of Magic professor has assigned you each a term project, and that yours is on the evolution of wand-making, and you chose it because your own wand is kind of weird. Those are his words, by the way, not mine. He said that you have an amber with the core of a Horntail. Mine is Giant Lupuna with Peruvian Vipertooth. It’s weird too, but that’s another story. Anyway, Ron said that your professor said that the best place to start when trying to understand wands is to look up your own, and asked me to tell you everything I know about your core, so… Here goes.

Hungarian Horntails are nasty. Stay away from them, as long as they’re alive. Really, I mean that. I have scars that I’ll never get over. That being said, they’re very nice underneath – as long as you’re another dragon. Other dragons like having a Horntail around because they are such
effective guardians of their territory, and Horntails like having other dragons in their territory because they bring them food in exchange for not killing them. It’s like a tithing system, and it works out well for the Horntails at least, because if they don’t get enough food, they can always eat their neighbours. They don’t, often, it’s bad politics, but the other dragons know it’s a possibility, and Horntails are by nature big drama queens, so it keeps everybody (including the dragon wranglers!) on their toes.

Horntails are probably the longest lived species out there – it’s really, really hard to kill them till their scales weaken enough from age to be vulnerable to magic. So they have been known live over eight hundred years. The oldest harvested body on record was nine hundred thirty one years old – there are magics that can date them - but not all harvested bodies do go on record, and that one died over fifty years ago. If Ollivander has made your wand since, and your Horntail was really the oldest one in Europe, yours had to be pushing a thousand. I’ll ask around and try to find out if anyone knows anything, but that might not work out. Certain heartstrings are best given under certain conditions, with the consent of the dragon while it’s still alive, and those species often make bargains with wandmakers, that they have to dispose of their other remains according to dragon traditions. That doesn’t mean slicing them up and selling them for boot-soles, for the record.

Horntails are monogamous. They only have one mate, ever. They can (don’t tell Mum I told you this) have sex with other dragons, before or after their chosen mate dies, but it’s never with another Horntail, and there are never eggs from it. Their blood doesn’t match anything but one of their own, I guess. When they do pick a mate and the females lay eggs, there are a lot of them at once – as many as two dozen. That being said, each female only lays two or three times in her life, and only a few ever hatch. They are, honestly, the scariest buggers alive while they’re waiting to see how many make it, and it’s suicide to try and steal them from the nest. Really suicide, and a really unpleasant way to go besides, so not many try it.

Harry lowered the letter, suddenly seeing the events of his former fourth year in a whole new light. He had to take a whole series of deep, controlled breaths before continuing.

There’s a legend I heard once – that the Horntail’s soul is actually a physical thing, and is contained in its heartstring. If that’s true, it would be interesting to put in your essay, because legend also says that any creature that only mates once in its life does it, not like humans do, who have a choice, but because when they do find their mate, their souls are magically bound. So, any wand that has a heartstring from a Horntail – and they aren’t common at all; they’re best given freely like I said, and Horntails aren’t much for conversation or negotiation – would have, if that Horntail had mated, the influence and power of two heartstrings/souls fueling it, not one. One would be dominant, of course, but the other is still definitely there, and that’s what makes some Horntail wands so volatile, really: not that they’re bad-tempered, but that you’re dealing, again, with two of them. If what is Ron said is true, and your dragon’s mate is in someone else’s wand inside the castle– yes, he told me about that, and don’t worry, he didn’t say who –w ell. Good luck to you, and I hope you like the person as a friend at least, because your wands are going to want to get back together for regular snogging sessions. I don’t know how that will work, but at the very least, I expect that you’ll grow to want to be friends with the person with your wand’s match, if only because your two wands will want to make it happen. They’ll try to arrange it, and facilitate it, and since they’re intelligent – yes, I said INTELLIGENT: Horntails are smarter than most people I know; they just dumb it up for their own protection– and aware (souls don’t die,
after all, even Dementors can’t kill them, they just trap them inside themselves to power their breeding abilities, and that’s what makes the Ministry tolerating them so horrible: Perce says the first thing he’s going to do when he becomes Minister is cut THAT off, and good for him, I say; he’s a ponce, but he understands the important things when he tries) you’ve got no hope, really. Good luck, and if you feel like keeping me updated, I promise I’ll keep whatever you tell me to myself. I don’t want to share, I just want to know.

Yrs. v. sincerely,

Charles S. Weasley

P.S. If you do write back, just call me Charlie.

P.P.S. Oh yeah. I almost forgot. If your wand does have a match, and the match is as strong as you think it might be, and it probably is if you can sense it the way Ron thinks, you might not want to talk about it. The Unspeakables would confiscate both in a second. You see, dragon heartstrings are harvested after their dragon’s body is dead, but there have been legends about a few wands made with heartstrings that the dragons have donated while they’re still alive. If that’s the case here, your dragon and its mate would probably have decided to be live donors together, at the chance of finding each other again and cheating death, and live heartstrings… I can’t tell you how powerful they are. The only story I’ve ever heard of a more powerful heartstring is a variation on that old tale of the Elder Wand, where the heartstring (most translations say tail hair, but that’s not as exciting) was donated by a live thestral – the King of the Thestrals, in fact. I’m not sure how that would have worked, considering that thestrals are by very definition at least half-dead, but there you are. That’s why it’s a tale, I guess. If your wand core was from a living mated donor, to be honest, the amber shell only makes sense. I’m not sure that anything but amber could contain such a string for more than a couple of years at a go. Two souls for one, remember, and it would need the mental shielding that amber provides around it to protect its owner from being overly influenced.

P.P.P.S. The owl’s name is Smaug. He belongs to the Reserves, but he doesn’t really like his job. He does like bangers though, so if you have any on hand, it’ll ease the insult.

Harry looked around. Sure enough, Smaug had progressed from the owl treats straight to the extra plate of sausage.

“Hang on then,” he said, and making his painful way back to the bed, fetched up parchment, quill and ink from Remus’ night table, and began to scrawl.

Dear Charlie,

Thank you for your letter. It was very nice of you to write back so soon. I’m sure all the information you gave me will help me with my essay.

He paused, chewing the quill indecisively.

I will be happy to tell you what happens, but it is going to be interesting because though I don’t really mind the person we are talking about, they are older, in Slytherin and don’t like me. I will tell you more when I get some of those charmed envelopes that don’t let anybody but the writer and the person the letter is meant for read what’s inside.
I would like to hear the story of your wand. It doesn’t sound like anything I saw at Ollivander’s at all. Did he make it?

Smaug is okay. He is eating my breakfast sausage right now. I will use another owl the next time – Sirius and Remus told me they’d get me one if I wanted one - and you can keep it till you write back. I don’t have anybody else to write to, so it won’t matter, and if I do, I’ll just use a school owl.

Sincerely, Harry J. Potter (Harry)

P.S. If you don’t want people to know who you’re writing to, you can address your next letter to Dash. It was my nickname at my old school, because I’m really fast. You might want to, because I found out that sometimes people try to make my mail go to them, so they can see what other people are writing to me about. It’s weird. Do you have a nickname?

HJP

He rolled the letter up tightly, attached it to the begrudgingly offered leg, and patted the owl on the head.

“Charlie Weasley,” he directed. “No stops, and if anyone tries to intercept, peck their eyes out.”

The owl hooted in response around its mouthful of sausage, and launched itself out the window. Harry watched it go, and retrieved the letter, rereading it... He chewed his lip indecisively, then rolled it up, tying it off with a thread of parchment tassel.

“Titchy?” he called.

There was a moment’s pause, then a crack of displaced air.

“Master Harry,” the house-elf said. “Is you finished?”

“Not quite,” Harry said. “I was wondering, though, whether you’d deliver this to Professor Snape for me?”

“Professor Snape is being in the meeting with the other Professors right now,” the elf said. “He is not liking being interrupted.”

“Well, keep it safe till he’s out of the meeting,” Harry said patiently. “And give it to him then. Tell him it’s from Potter.”

“Is that being all?”

“Yeah. He’ll understand when he reads it. Don’t wait for a reply unless he tells you to.”

“Yes, Master Harry.” Titchy popped out with another crack. Harry eased himself down. Eleven-year-old arms, he reflected, were not meant for six straight hours of adult-level double-casting – and he was pretty damned sure that Hogwarts wasn’t done with him yet. He’d got the definite impression that now that she’d got a taste of his skills, she wouldn’t want just the one dress, but an entire new wardrobe.

On the other hand, he couldn’t wait till Dumbledore realized what he’d done to the gargoyle outside his office.
He pulled his tray over carefully, and began to eat.

Chapter End Notes

No, Harry didn't consult with Nev before dropping the news of Voldemort's soul-shard on Sirius and Remus. Yes, there will be repercussions...

Next up: Augusta and Dumbledore!
Bellatrix Lestrange's Farewell Party

London

September 20, 1991

The funeral was small and apologetic, and the mourners seemed to consist largely of people whose main regret was that the guest of honour was so late at arriving to the scene. Practiced impassivity, rather than sorrow, was the order of the day, and even Narcissa Malfoy, the deceased’s favoured sister, looked more relieved than otherwise.

The casket – crassly, perhaps, but Pureblood traditions were nothing if not self-interested - was open, for no member of any of the families comprising the Sacred Twenty Eight was ever crossed off the relevant family tree without the confirming signatures of the guests-in-the-book as legal witnesses to the fact that the deceased was, indeed, present and accounted for. That way, Sirius had informed Harry, any inconveniently taxable sins that might come back to haunt the living heirs were thoroughly interred with the body. Andromeda Tonks was there, unaccompanied by her husband and daughter, and her regal form, strong features and sleek hair gave more than one bystander entering the hired parlour a start. The resemblance between her and Bellatrix was remarkable: the major difference being that Bellatrix had had pitch-black hair rather than the nut brown hidden under Andromeda’s long, dark veil. Too, she had been physically tiny in life... Harry blinked as he saw the second of the three Black sisters rise to her feet. Long years had dulled the memory, but still. He couldn't fathom how he could have possibly forgotten that Andromeda Tonks skimmed the far side of six feet.

“That’s just creepy,” Ron muttered as the three boys skulked under the cloak in the back corner of the parlour. “I don’t see why she doesn’t use glamours or something. Who’d want to look like that cow?” Neville said nothing, just craned his neck discreetly as Augusta, impassive and as imposing as anyone there, approached the corpse on the dais and pulled out her wand. Narcissa started, alarmed, and even the morticians and ministry officials looked a little worried, but Harry immediately recognized the incantations she was chanting (it was nothing so subtle as murmuring) as those used to confirm the genetic identification of (most commonly) fallen family members compromised beyond recognition. Again, the boys watched as Andromeda stepped forward, pulling out a single strand of her hair, and offered it to the Matriarch Longbottom... Augusta took the hair, and performed a few more movements. A bright, small flash sparked, and the old woman stepped back, nodding.

“Confirmed,” she announced, to no one in particular, though her eyes flicked, nevertheless, to the boys’ corner. Not once had she looked into the casket itself.

Sirius came forward then, to take her arm and lead her out of the parlour. The three boys shuffled after him, and into the side chamber. Three heads - one black, one blond, and one fiery red – popped into view, hovering bizarrely before the rest of them followed. Augusta released Sirius' arm gently and came over to take Neville’s face in both her hands, kissing his forehead regally.
“Longbottom is satisfied,” she announced. “For the moment. One down, three to go.”

“Don’t we get to pi… I mean, wee on her?” Ron said plaintively. “Mum says she was reported in the party that killed my uncles too, and even if it was never actually confirmed, I was looking forward to that bit!”

“You’re an idiot, Ron,” a feminine voice said scathingly, and from under a second, considerably smaller, invisibility cloak, a bushy brown head popped out. “The invitation was for symbolic weeing, honestly!”

“I assure you, it was not,” Augusta said, and provided Sirius, each of the boys, and Hermione herself, with a sizable vial. “The loo’s right there, Neville. Each of you follow, and once the casket is interred for good, the contents of your vials will automatically Vanish themselves to the interior. That bitch will be soaking in it for all eternity.”

“How very revolting.” Sirius kissed her cheek. Under the wrinkles and stern, she dimpled at him as the girl she once was. “Rem sent a bit too. Alright, he’s an ex-werewolf, but the principle still stands.”

“How very sweet of him.” She watched as the children trooped obediently, one after the other, into the facilities. “It’s good to have you back, Sirius. I never did believe that tripe they spouted on your betraying the Potters, you know. Your lot made my Frank’s life as a prefect …” She paused. “Challenging… but he always said, as did poor Alice, that there were no more faithful friends than James, you, and your husband.”

“Not Peter?”

“Him, they never liked.” Her nose twitched in faint disgust. “A panderer, Alice called him, and in the end… What can you expect from a pig but a grunt? No, I told Minister Bagnold that they’d made a mistake there, but what do I know? I’m old, and she just patted me on the head and reminded me that you’d confessed yourself.” Her iron gaze turned to him full on. “In the future young man, do remember to phrase your legal statements more precisely? The staff of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has never been known for its capability to discern between melodrama and metaphor, and remarks such as ‘It was all my fault, I killed them,’ even when offered in the grieving and unbelieving moment, do not tend to help your cause.”

“I will keep it in mind,” he said, and bowed as Harry emerged, rinsed and dried vial in hand. Augusta Longbottom tucked in neatly in her purse. The rest followed, and when all was settled, she took Neville’s arm.

“I find myself a bit peckish,” she announced. “Shall we?”

“We shall,” Sirius said. “Remus will meet us there.”

“Excellent. I presume he’s making the Other Arrangements?”

“He owled this morning;” Sirius confirmed. “The take-away from the curry shop off the Alley will be ready by the time we’re finished, and will be delivered to St. Mungo’s by the time we get there.”

“Well done,” she said. “Frank does like his masala, and your mother would never forgive us, Neville, if we came without papadums.”

“Diagon Alley has a curry shop?” Hermione asked. “Really?”

“No,” Sirius said. “But the Muggle curry shop right across from the Leaky, on the Muggle side, has
a wizard for an assistant manager. Pay’s shite, but the goblins at Gringotts have him on a nice little side-contract for his regular delivery services. Alright, grab a hold of the portkey, everyone.” He extracted a sleek fedora from somewhere inside his robes. “On the count of…” His pocket chimed. He held up a finger, and dug out a familiar mirror. “Hey Moonblossom, what’s up?”

“My blood pressure,” Remus said grimly. “Dumbledore’s invited himself along for lunch.”

“Excuse me?”

“He says he wants to pay his respects to Madam Longbottom.”

“To… Paying one’s respects is one thing, but one does not simply… Has the man no couth?” Madam Longbottom said indignantly. Even Ron looked taken aback. “To intrude without invitation on such an ostensibly delicate occasion… Who does he think he is?”

“Madam Longbottom.” Remus sketched a half bow. “I do apologize. I tried to dissuade him, but he is not be dissuaded.”

“It’s alright, Gran,” Neville said unexpectedly. “It’s not about us, really. He’s just trying to get dirt on Harry, or rather on his guardians for the custody case. It’s pretty obvious, isn’t it, but it’s to his shame, not ours, and nobody of any proper breeding could ever think otherwise. We’ll just rise above it.”

His Gran’s eyes rested on him, surprised, and with surprised approval. Harry couldn’t help but be amused and a little unsettled. ‘Breeding’ he knew, at least in Neville’s world-view, had nothing whatsoever to do with blood, but still. He’d even got the latter-yeared Draco’s self-deprecating, pompous little smirk of an accent down.

“Well said, Neville,” she said, and then, musing… “He’ll offer to pay for the meals for everyone, of course, as a polite nod to the inconvenience… Under normal circumstances, Sirius, you would refuse of course, but this time… Hmm… How to manage it…”

“Hermione’s a Muggleborn,” Ron said helpfully. “It’s to be expected she wouldn’t know our traditions. Maybe you could use her?”

“I may be a Muggleborn, but that doesn’t mean I’m inherently uncivilized, Ronald,” Hermione snapped. She tilted her nose up and sniffed. “My manners are as good as anyone’s, I’ll have you know, and my parents would rather have their wisdom teeth removed without anesthesia before they’d presume on someone else’s social engagements like that!”

“I have no idea who Anna Thesa is,” Ron said. “But I wasn’t trying to insult you, Hermione. Blimey, I was just saying; there are countries that have different traditions from us, Perce says, not worse, just different, and I just thought…” He fumbled “I dunno. I don’t know anything about Muggles, but they’re obviously different, right?”

“Yes,” she conceded after a moment, and the nose lowered a bit. “We can be. But not that different. Not on the important things.”

“Be that as it may,” Augusta Longbottom said firmly. “Your idea has definite merit, Mr. Weasley. You are a child, Ms. Granger, and I think your bright lovely smile and an “Isn’t that ever-so-nice, Headmaster; don’t you think so, Professor Black” would be considered a faux-pas that could easily be attributed to your age rather than your heritage.” She patted the girl’s arm. “I know it goes against your every instinct and obviously proper training, dear, but you really would be doing me a favour. I’d slap him silly for the presumption myself, but he knows I know better, and let’s be honest, I’m
not really in any position to plead undue grief as my excuse.”

“I’m just leaving now,” Remus said from the mirror, resigned. “Oop, here he comes.”

“I hope he splinches himself,” Hermione muttered. “Honestly. I’m embarrassed for him!”

“Don’t bother,” Sirius advised. “Let’s just concentrate on enjoying our lunch and running up the bill. As the most promising students in your year, I would certainly say you deserve the fun…”

The exquisitely appointed French café that they attended was, surprisingly (or perhaps not, the occasion considered) in Paris. Sirius landed neatly, catching the tumbling children like a row of queasy dominos, and set them upright just in time to catch an incoming Remus’s eye in a sympathetic furious grimace as the History of Magic professor gallantly straightened Augusta.

“Bienvenue, Madam,” he said in his soft Welsh accent, and bowed deeply. “It’s an honour. “

“Indeed,” she returned, and straightening her vulture hat, looked him over with a sharp and blushingly appreciative eye. “Hmm. Still as fit as the Fates seem to have allowed you, Lupin?”

“He’s still cured, if that’s what you mean,” Neville said. “Honestly, Gran! How is that polite?”

“He’s your teacher, Neville,” she returned. “Considering how lax the old goat seems to be on even the most fundamental rules of prudent society these days, I thought it prudent to check.” Again, she offered her grandson a scouring look. “I must say, child... Hogwarts is doing wonders for you. Never mind your promising academic start, you’re learning to assert yourself nicely, though you do need to learn the art of reproving indirectly, obviously. We’ll work on that.”

Nev blinked at her. She took his arm again, rather than Sirius’.

"Onward we go, then,” she said. “Shall you order for us, Professor Lupin? The children, I am presuming, don’t speak French, and I can’t be bothered, since the bother seems so readily to be waiting for us inside.” She nodded through the faceted bay window at Dumbledore’s garish, bobbing hat.

“But of course,” he said, and winked at the kids. “Real silver,” he said in an undertone. “I’m so excited! I feel like I’m courting reckless death by etiquette.”


“Silver, Ronald,” she said. “Werewolves? This is Paris, they’ll have all the properly posh flatware.”

“I know, Hermione,” he said. “I got it. I just…” He looked awkwardly down at himself. He hadn’t felt bad about the shabby state of his robes at the funeral, the particulars and the invisibility cloak considered, but there was no denying he looked a bit out of place. Augusta just whipped out her wand again. A deepening colour charm to compensate for the faded fabric, a bit of pseudo-embroidery that covered the worst of the mended rents, and a swift polishing charm on both shoes and hair settled him, if not elegantly, than at least decently. After a quick look around, she whitened Harry’s shirt, tamed Hermione’s hair into an elegant twist (adding tiny lion earrings that roared adorably in her ears) and unwrinkled Neville from top to toe, starching his collar in the process.

“Much better,” she pronounced, and straightening her vulture hat once again, reasserted her grasp on her grandson’s arm, and led the way into the shimmering, scented interior of the restaurant.
Harry ate his salad quietly, elbows carefully off the table and avoiding Dumbledore’s eye assiduously as on one side of him, Neville discreetly tutored Ron on how best to crack and eat mussels and on the other side, Hermione happily munched her warm artichoke hearts. Sirius and Remus chatted politely with the Headmaster, pausing occasionally to offer each other a forkful of escargot as Augusta worked her stately way through her brandied lobster bisque. Dumbledore himself, as twinkling and expansive and apparently oblivious of tensions as ever, enjoyed the bread basket alongside his cock-a-leekie soup.

“These are disturbing, Longbottom,” Ron said under his breath to Neville. “Tasty, but disturbing.” Dumbledore caught the aside and chuckled understandingly.

“A new experience for you, Mr. Weasley?” he inquired.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “I’m normally not encouraged to slurp at the dinner table.”

Harry snerfed into his lettuce. More guffawed, really, but he couldn’t help himself. It was such a Ron thing to say, he thought, no matter his age.

“Ah, young Harry!” Dumbledore beamed. “A laugh! I was beginning to wonder if you could smile at all.”

“Why would you wonder that, Headmaster?” Remus inquired, looking pointedly at the appropriated bread basket. Dumbledore ignored his look.

“Oh, only that your charge seems to have gotten off at a bit of a rough start at Hogwarts,” he said. “Socially speaking, if not academically. I’ve worried.”

“It’s been less than three weeks,” Hermione pointed out. “And he’s got them now, doesn’t he? Friends, that is?” She glared rather fiercely. Harry was surprised; the law-abiding Hermione he remembered wouldn’t hear a word against the Headmaster, much less have confronted him in public. Then again, she’d always been rather fond of her newspaper subscriptions, and as September moved forward toward October and the uneasy promise of November, she was becoming less and less enthralled with a man who, as those papers reported, was for whatever reason absolutely determined that Harry’s Muggles, who by all reports (including that of Harry himself) didn’t want the chance, should receive the opportunity to practice their limited capacity for remorse on a perfectly well-off child.

Hermione Granger, Harry thought, may have been annoying as a girl… But he’d forgotten too, the absolutely unlimited size of her heart, and that fierce drive for justice that she’d had, full grown, right from the start. Never mind her capacity to forgive him at least, on that daily, or rather minute-by-minute basis, once she determined that he needed, as her friend-whether-he-liked-it-or-not, her forgiveness more than she needed higher grades.

Once that had processed… He’d crumbled. He couldn’t help himself.

The day before, September 19th, her first birthday away from home – had cemented his decision. She’d been abnormally quiet all day, to the point of the worrying, when he’d sat down in front of her in Potions and jotted the date. The memory of the occasion had come back in a rush, and the quiet sniffle behind him had done him in.
“Granger,” he’d said half an hour later. “You’re bollocksing it up.”

“What?” She’d looked up in alarm, standing on her toes to peek into what was supposed to be her simmering cauldron. “Oh no! It’s totally vaporized! Oh no!”

“Bad luck,” he’d said with sympathy, and as she’d glared, had reached over and reached in, and extracted (courtesy of a happy little charm that never failed to win love from the grandchildren) a single chocolate raspberry cream cauldron cake with an unlit candle on top… He’d lit it with a quick spark… She looked from the cake, to him, and back, mouth ajar.

“What…?”

“Happy birthday,” he’d said.

“How…”

“Magic,” he’d said. Snape had swooped over, of course, and scathed as only he could, but Hermione’s cheeks were flushed pink, and she had icing on her nose, and she didn’t care one whit for the zero she earned for her empty pot.

“Does this mean we’re friends again?” she’d said timidly as they’d left the classroom. “Only, I’m a big pest, I know, and I didn’t mean to be so rude, really. I just…” She’d pinked again. “I’m kind of used to being the best,” she confided in a whisper. “Mum warned me that I might not be, here, but…”

“Indeed he does.” The indulgent twinkle from the Headmaster was blinding. “And you, Miss Granger? How are you adapting to all the changes in your new life?”

“I have friends too, if that’s what you’re asking,” Hermione returned defiantly. “Thank you for your concern.”

“I’ve never had any friends before,” Harry said bluntly. “Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon never encouraged it; they were afraid that people would realize I’m a freak. And Dudley, my cousin, would beat anybody up who ever liked me.” He looked straight at Hermione. “I reckon I just didn’t see what was in front of me till it stayed, right? Only, I’m not used to other kids being stubborn enough to stick around when I try to chase them off for what I’ve always thought of as their own safety.”

Hermione stopped, her forkful of artichoke at her lips.

“Oh Harry,” she trembled, and buried her face in her ice water to prevent the tears. Ron patted her back.

“Told you he’d come around,” he said bracingly. “Only Bill told me, right, while he wrote right before school started. Said you’d likely be a bit touchy with knowing your name was all over the papers for the bad things that happened to you; who’d want that, he said, and you’d be a bit easier once you were settled in your new place, with proper guardians who understand magic. I reckon I hadn’t thought of it like that, but Mum said he was right, and that I – we all – should just give you your space, and well…” He looked a bit sheepish. “I reckon I’m a bit of a prat sometimes, and I want to be as famous as anybody, but it’s like the Sorting Hat said, right? Your mum was the hero, not you. You’re just an ordinary bloke, right? Like the rest of us?”

There was a plea in there somewhere… Not far from the surface, either.

“I really, really am,” Harry reassured him. “Bit weird, isn’t it, to have all these people talking at me
like I’m some great wizard when all I did was sit there and cry and wee myself while a curse bounced off me because of a spell someone else did? Remus explained it to me though; he said it probably makes people feel better when there’s somebody physically left there to remind them that any evil can be defeated, and they’re more likely to want to make that live reminder their hero than one who passed on for the cause.”

Dumbledore cleared his throat.

“How do you mean, my boy?” he asked. ”When you say ‘because of a spell someone else did’? You can’t possibly remember what happened that night, can you?"

“I remember some things,” Harry said, and it was true… His Auror-assigned Mind Healer had been a brilliant Legilmens, and painful as it had been, when he’d requested she work with him to elicit as many memories of his parents as she could, had come through for him. Some of the ensuing revelations had been startling, to say the least. Others had provided his heart with a kind of soothing balm that only hysterical laughter could provide. “Mum was singing something, or chanting, I suppose, and Dad was calling up, telling her to take me and run, and then she was yelling, and Voldemort was laughing, this really high laugh, and telling her to move, and she called him a mincing moldy toerag and told him to sod off and die.” He caught Augusta’s stare. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but she really did say that. Loudly. Then everything went green.” He forked up a radish.

"And then I was looking up at stars, and it was really, really cold. I reckon that’s when you left me sitting on the doorstep at my aunt’s house, Professor. I’ve always wanted to ask; why didn’t you just knock on the door instead of leaving me there with a half-page letter telling her her sister had just been murdered?"

Dumbledore’s mouth opened and closed a bit. Harry ate more salad, the picture of bright, green-eyed inquisitiveness. Neville kicked him gently under the table. Harry’s eyes flicked over briefly. Careful, Neville’s own eyes warned. That’s more than enough new information for him to work with. Let him hang himself now.

“It was a bit of a hurried night, my boy,” the Headmaster said delicately. “There really wasn’t time to sit and discuss the sad specifics.”

“You had time to write the letter,” Harry pointed out. “And cast the blood wards. Those must’ve taken an hour at least. A cuppa and a ‘there there’ wouldn’t have taken that much longer, and might have put them in a mood to do more for me than stuff me in a boot cupboard for the next ten years.”

“Harry…”

“He’s not exaggerating,” Sirius said to the flabbergasted Augusta. “I popped by and took pictures. Want to see?’ He reached for a thick wallet and pulled out a series of wizarding photographs. “Look here. There’s his toddler mattress, and the sheet – they were very generous, they gave him one big enough to wrap himself in – and if you look closely, you can see that family of spiders waving from the corner there. Prolific little buggers, but I suppose they were good company, eh, pup?’

But Augusta was just staring at Harry, her lips quivering with…

“Your mother,” she said in a restrained voice. “Called He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named a mincing moldy toerag? To his face? And told him to…”

“I was only fifteen months old,” he said apologetically. “But it’s always stuck in my head (he offered Dumbledore a rather pointed look at that last) because my aunt and uncle always told me that my parents died in a drunk car crash, you see? That they were drunk. The two accounts just didn’t seem to add together.”
“Died in a…” Remus’ mouth dropped, outraged. “They did not!”

“When it comes down to it, that’s really the least of their sins, Moony. Remember, we have the list? Anyway, it definitely sounds like Lily,” Sirius said. “The accounts never talk about it now, but she had a mouth on her, our girl, that would make a werewolf blush.”

“And did,” Remus recovered himself. “Frequently.” He popped in the last escargot. “Lovely. How are you doing with those mussels, boys?”

“All done.” Neville squeezed and tilted the last shell expertly as he scraped the meat out with his tiny fork, dipped it in the tinier bowl of sauce and schlurped it up. “Yum. Brilliant.”

“Slimy, yet satisfying.” Ron agreed.

Hermione giggled again, and hummed quietly. Harry grinned back.

“Hakuna Matata,” he hummed back. “What a wonderful phrase…”

“Hakuna Matata,” she sang quietly. “It’s no passing phase…”

“It means no worries,” he joined in. “Till the end of our days… It’s our problem free… philosophy… Hakuna Matata!”

“Admirable,” Sirius said. “If sadly unrealistic. And…. What?”

“It’s a Muggle thing,” Hermione said patronizingly. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Don’t you worry your inbred little brain about it. Though as someone once said to me, half-blood’s better’n half baked.”

Hermione cracked up. Ron and Neville looked mildly affronted. Augusta sighed.

“It’s from a recent American film,” she told her grandson. “Quite popular. The protagonist was, aptly, a young lion cub with rather peculiar taste in friends – peculiar friends with rather peculiar taste in food. Mr. Weasley there just inadvertently quoted one of the more popular lines referencing the fact.”

“Gran…”

“It’s not an insult, Neville,” she said patiently. “Peculiar people are by far the most interesting, and you may have your legacy and heritage and reputation to maintain, but that doesn’t mean you’re not entitled to your gentlemanly quirks.”

“We’re quirks,” Ron said to Harry and Hermione. “How about that? And not just quirks, but gentlemanly quirks. D’you think they have a register at the Ministry for that?”

“Speaking of the Ministry,” Remus said, cutting them off. “Did you get the Board of Governors’ approval for the temporary potions teacher replacement, Headmaster?’

“I did,” Dumbledore said, as the children looked up. “She’ll be here first thing tomorrow.”

“Temporary…” Hermione looked up on high alert. “What happened to Professor Snape?”

“He had to leave quite urgently yesterday evening,” Professor Dumbledore said. “He received a letter that put him in quite the state of agitation, and asked for permission to go see the sender as soon as his classes ended for the day. I agreed of course, but no worries, as your song says. He’ll be back,
hopefully, before the beginning of next week, and in the meantime, we will be graced with the presence of one Professor Eulalia Shelley. Charming woman, I’ve heard.”

“Eulalia?” Neville repeated, and then, diverted… “Gran? How do you know about American films?”

Augusta hesitated.

“Your father had a passion for them when he was a boy,” she said finally. “One, coincidentally, that he found he shared with your mother. At the time, I thought it foolish, but after they were hospitalized, I talked to Arthur Weasley – your father, Mr. Weasley – and he was kind enough to get the necessary permits for a magically adapted Muggle television and video player.” She pronounced the words carefully. “They’re kept primarily in the children’s ward, but now and again, their nurses will take them down, as part of their therapy, and allow them to watch their favourites, and to introduce them to new ones. Your mother in particular is fond of anything with animals.”

This was all said with a certain reluctance.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” Neville asked, a bit lost.

“Your other relatives don’t approve,” she said honestly. “And didn’t, of the idea of introducing you to anything Muggle at all. They were all so worried, you see, that you were a Squib, and didn’t want…” She took a breath. “I suppose I didn’t want to give you any encouragement that the Muggle world has its good points, for fear you’d give up on what little magic you may have had, and decide to embrace the culture entirely when you were old enough. I couldn’t bear the thought of you…”

She stopped. Neville looked down at his plate.

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She stopped. Neville looked down at his plate.

"We don’t have to worry about that now, anyway,” he said to his mussel shells.

“No,” she said, shaking herself briskly. “No, we don’t. Ah, here’s the next course.”

“I have piles of movies at home, Madam Longbottom,” Hermione ventured. "I do mean piles, right from the beginning of the cinematic age to the brand new ones. Mum and Dad get them for their patients to watch while they’re doing their teeth. I’d be happy to owl them and ask them to box some up for you, if you can get Mr. Weasley to enchant them, that is?”

“Thank you, Miss Granger,” Augusta said gravely. “I would be most indebted to you, as would the other patients at the hospital, I’m sure. They’ve become quite the popular pastime.”

Hermione blushed and bobbed her head eagerly. Dumbledore smiled indulgently as the small plates were cleared and the larger unloaded.

“Do you have a favorite class, Harry?” he asked. “I’ve gotten nothing but good reports from all your teachers thus far, though of course, it’s early in the year yet.”

“I like them all,” Harry said, watching as a huge plate of boneless seared lamb medallions, buttered peas and baby onions and sautéed rosy whole baby potatoes was set in front of him. The empty bread basket was replaced by two more, one discreetly out of reach of the Headmaster. He stuffed his mouth as soon as it was politely possible, avoiding more questions as he worried.

_He left right after he got the letter? Charlie’s letter? And he was agitated? What was in there that was so agitating that he’d have to go to Romania just like that?_

He went back over the contents in his mind as thoroughly as he could remember, but there was nothing. Certainly, he thought, Snape probably had known most of the facts and stories relayed there
himself; he was too good a Potions Master not to investigate the properties of the wand he used to create his masterpieces. Still, there had to be something.

“I got a letter from Charlie,” he said in a casual undertone to Ron as the adults talked. “Yesterday. Did he send you one?”

“Yeah,” Ron said, brightening. “I did. He sent me pictures too; I’ll show them to you when we get back to the dorm.”

“He said his wand was a bit strange too,” Harry said, remembering suddenly. “You had his old one, didn’t you, before Sirius sat on it?”

“Yeah,” Ron nodded. “Ash and unicorn hair, it was. His new one… He got it last year in Peru, when he was there helping chasing down a rogue dragon as a favour for a friend. It led them right into some old ruins, and there was a booby trap; Charlie fell into it and got out again, but when they got him out, it was from under a rock slide, and he was only saved because there was a little cave behind it. They poked around once it was safe, and he found a skeleton…” He shuddered. “With the wand still in its hand. They thought it’d be no good, it was all beat up and battered, but when Charlie pulled it out, it went mental for him. Weird looking thing, and it’s not so much beat up as gnarly and twisted, but it works a treat, and dragons respond to it like nothing else. He had it checked for curses and everything,” he added. “Of course he did. The curse-breaker they had with them gave it the full scan before he’d let anybody touch it, and it was fine.”

“Of course,” Harry said automatically, remembering the wand as if it were yesterday. Charlie had only ever owned the one in his memory, and it had definitely been ugly, yes, but they’d always seemed very fond of each other. He’d never thought to ask the story of it though, assuming that he’d got it from Ollivander’s like everyone else did theirs. At the last, when Charlie had been dying, and asked him to release him with the pain… Harry had used that wand, not his own. It hadn’t felt particularly easy in his hand, but it had done the job, though it hadn’t survived to serve another master. He’d broken it in two, ceremoniously, at the funeral, and laid the pieces to rest at the man’s feet before going out and getting thoroughly stinking drunk. Charlie had been, after the final battle, the closest thing to a father he was ever to have again – or at least, to the bigger-than-life, heroic elder brother that he’d always yearned for. He’d invited Harry to Romania a few months after everything was calmed down, on retreat from an adoring and sycophantic Britain, and proceeded to treat him, of all things, as if he were a normal, boring human being… After he’d gone back, they’d exchanged letters every week for years, on everything and nothing, as brothers did… After he’d died, Harry had wanted nothing so much as a third son to name for him, but it just hadn’t worked out. He and Ginny had both grieved that, but considering the curses they’d both taken during the war, the healers told them, they were lucky to have the three they did. In the end, Teddy Lupin and Victoire Weasley had brought forth his namesake: Charles Septimus Weasley-Lupin, and no one had ever questioned the oddity of a godson asking his godfather to be godfather to his own son.

“He’s great,” Ron was continuing, between mouthfuls of braised beef. “I dunno whether he’ll be able to come home for Christmas, but you’ll meet him sometime, anyway. I don’t…” He nearly dropped his fork as Fawkes suddenly snapped in… All around them, customers shrieked and jabbered in shock. Dumbledore just smiled benevolently and reached up to catch the letter that the phoenix dropped from its beak.

“Pardon me,” he said. “I do have to take this.” He unrolled the scrap and scanned it, the twinkle dimming and frowning. “Oh dear. Oh dear. This is unfortunate.” He patted Fawkes; he flashed out again. “Mr. Weasley, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but… The message is from Professor Snape, and he’s asked me to inform you, on behalf of your parents, that he’s returned to Britain, and St. Mungo’s, in the company of your brother Charles. Your mother and father are gathering up the
rest of the children and are requesting that we meet them at the hospital.”

“What?” Ron’s freckles milked to white. “What? Charlie? What is it, was it a dragon? Is he…”

“I do not know, Mr. Weasley.” He slung his cloak on. ‘Come. I will return you to your dormitories when it’s possible.”

“Hold on, Dumbledore,” Augusta commanded, and rising to her feet as she dabbed at her lips, beckoned to the rest. “We’ll go with you. We have a portkey to St. Mungo’s right here; we were going to visit my son and daughter-in-law after the meal, so we’ll just take advantage.”

“Thank you, Madam.” He bowed, and dropped a handful of galleons on the table. Seconds later, they were outside on the cobbled side street, and then they were gone.

Chapter End Notes

The Lion King, source of the lyrics from ‘Hakuna Matata’, was released in 1994. I messed with the dates a bit. :}
To A Bridge By A Fountain

St. Mungo's

“Mum?” Ron’s face behind his freckles was still milk-white as he raced down the corridor towards his family. Harry’s heart almost stopped as he saw the look on Molly’s face. She too, was white, but she was grimly calm and composed. Arthur looked grey and haunted as he held Ginny on his lap, her fine caroty hair spilling over and around him as she wept in his shoulder. Fred and George had not a spark of mirth on face or in eyes, and Percy looked like he’d just been hit over the head. Hard. “Mum, Dad... What’s going on?” He stopped in his tracks as he processed the finer expressions. “Oh no, is he...”

“He’s alive,” Molly said, and her voice was strong and firm. “Still alive, and it’s early yet, so there are things they can do. Come sit, Ronnie, and we’ll tell you. Oh, hello, dears.” She nodded distractedly to the others. “I hope you’ll excuse us, we have to...” She shot to her feet as a door a few feet away opened and Professor Snape emerged. His expression, Harry was relieved to note, was as sour and unchanged as ever. Nothing in any world or time could be that bad, he thought, relieved, as long as that expression remained a constant.

He froze.

*It’s early yet, so there are things they can do.*

*Merlin’s arse.* Harry thought frantically. *Oh God, please no. No. Not yet, not yet; it’s too soon, what...*

“He’s stable for now,” Professor Snape said without preamble. “I must go back to the castle soon, though, to begin the necessary potions.” He caught sight of the second group, eyes flickering over them, and ignored Dumbledore’s inquiries as his eyes rested on Harry. “Potter.”

“What...” Harry swallowed hard. “Professor Dumbledore said... He said you got a letter... And you went right away, what...”

“Mr. Weasley would like to tell you himself, I think.” His black, fathomless eyes turned back to the breathless family. ‘Credit where credit is due. Potter here sent me a copy of the letter that your son sent to him, on what instinct and for what reason only he knows – but the fact remains. I would not have known the danger Charles was in had he not. I will be in contact.”

He walked swiftly away. The Weasleys turned as one to stare.


“Dad!” Ron was almost on the verge of tears. “*Dad!*”

“Come sit, Ronnie.” His mother pulled him over. “It’s bad, very bad...” Her lip quivered; but she recovered. Harry could almost hear the echo of the self-administered mental slap. “But there’s hope yet.”

“Was it a dragon?”
“No,” Bill said as he came down the hall. He looked exhausted. “Well, no, and yes. It was his wand. The one he found in Peru, remember? They checked it, and it was fine, but they didn’t check the skeleton, and even then, it probably wouldn’t have shown much. It was too old.”

“His wand?”

“Giant Lupuna is a wonderful wood,” Arthur said carefully. “With many wonderful properties... But it also, after it’s harvested, tends to the porous. Not unusual, though modern wandmakers tend to magically seal such woods, and it’s fine if it has the proper core – unicorn or phoenix feather – but with a dragon heartstring, the crafter has to be careful, Ron, to make use of an appropriate dragon. The crafter... Wasn’t careful. He or she chose a Peruvian Vipertooth, and while they’re not as overtly vicious as other types, they don’t have to be. They’re poisonous, you see, and the poison... “

“The crafter was a necromancer,” Bill said bluntly. “He enchanted the wand so that it would poison its victims, and he thought he was safe because it was his wand, but he wasn’t. And the wood was wrong. He chose the wrong wood, and they didn’t have the charms developed back then that seal the woods, and the poison leaked through, and because he’d bonded with it, and the bond affected his magical core, his core was poisoned. And it killed him.”

Ron sat down, hard. Hermione sat beside him, clutching the edges of the garish plastic seat with white-knuckled thin hands.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a small voice. “But I’m... I’m Ron’s friend, Hermione Granger, and I’m Muggleborn. I don’t... I don’t understand. Your core can be poisoned?”

“It’s cancer, Hermione,” Neville said bleakly, from beside his grandmother. “They’re saying he’s got cancer. Cancer of his magic.”

Hermione’s face paled to translucent.

“But...” She faltered. “But... I read about that; that means...”

“It’s not really cancer yet,” Percy said. He sounded very far away. “It’s early. They said it was early yet, Mum, right, and there are still things they can do?”

“Yes,” Molly said. “Perce is right, there are. It’ll be difficult and painful and exhausting – the Healers have to...” She closed her eyes. “Shut down his core for a bit, so that he can’t access it while they’re treating it...”

“Shut it down?” Ron said, horrified. “So he can’t access it? You mean... Make him a Squib?”

“Temporarily,” Augusta said, and came to sit. “It will be unpleasant for him certainly, Mr. Weasley, but absolutely necessary. Your brother will not survive many years as Squib or Magical if they do not, and trust me...” Her lips pursed tightly and whitely. “He will not enjoy his life in the meantime, past the point.”

“But... For how long? What will he do, where will he stay? He can’t still work on the Reserves without magic! He can’t do anything without magic!”

“He’ll be here at St. Mungo’s for a month at least,” Arthur said. “Sleeping for most of it. He looks well enough right now, you wouldn’t think there was a change... Severus had quite the job convincing him that he was actually in danger because he had no symptoms, and of course, because he simply didn’t want to believe it...”

“Ah yes,” Dumbledore murmured. “Fear, the most dangerous foe of all.”
“Oh, shut up, you old goat,” Augusta snapped at him. “This is not the time for your babbling, and for the record; here’s a practical lesson on how to be actually helpful. Sirius, go to Gringott’s now, and have them make a transfer of ten thousand galleons to the Weasley account from the Longbottom accounts, immediately. Here is my key, and my seal.”

Sirius said nothing, just took both and kissed her cheek again.

“You’re a brick, Madam A,” he said to her. “I’m on it.”

He disappeared through the doors. Molly put her hands to her face. The Longbottom Matriarch leaned over and put her hand on the smaller woman’s knee.

“Your son will have everything he needs,” she said. “From whatever source is required. If it is humanly possibly, he will recover.”

“Madam Longbottom,” Arthur said. “Don’t think we don’t appreciate it... But with Neville in school now, and your own son and daughter...”

“Don’t you worry on that,” Augusta said grimly. “Longbottom is not exactly struggling, and we have filed for restitution against the Lestrange estate – the full estate, since Lestrange obviously has no need for it anymore – in any instance. If things go as I expect they will, there won’t be enough room in our vaults to hold what’s owed it this time next week. You are to let me know immediately, Mr. Weasley,” – she ignored Molly altogether – “if you require more, for anything, up to and including the necessary refitting of your home for an invalid, and a living allowance for your family should you be forced to take a leave of absence from your job to care for Charles.”

“I will,” he promised. Molly tried to look at him reproachfully, but could only burst into tears.

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “I’m sorry, I just... That wand! His wand! It’s just... The thought that it was eating at him...”

“Has it been destroyed?” Remus asked.

“Yes,” Bill said shortly, and for the first time, Harry noticed the heavy bandage on his hand. “Properly. Professor Snape and I did it together.”

“Are you alright?” Harry ventured, speaking for the first time, and pointing at his hand as the eldest Weasley son focused on him, surprised.

“Of course... Oh.” He lifted his hand. “This? This wasn’t from that; the owl bit me when it came to deliver the message to get my arse here.”

“Oh,” Harry said, relieved. “Good.” He lapsed back into silence again.

“How long will he be off work?” Ron persisted. “And recovering?”

“The healers said at least a year,” Molly said. “They can reactivate his core, they hope, after Christmas, but there are parts there that will have to be regrown, so his magic will be a bit unstable. Bouts of accidental magic, he’ll have to learn certain things over again, in terms of spell work... “

“You mean he’ll have to go back to school?”

“No. He’ll have the information yet, but he’ll just have to practice a lot to get his techniques down again.” She looked uncertain. “I think?”
“We’ll sort everything out as the need arises,” Arthur said firmly. “Right now... Professor Snape has gone back to Hogwarts to brew the Draught of Living Death. It’s necessary, for that next month – that’s why he’ll be sleeping – and Charlie said that he doesn’t trust anybody else to make it for him.”

“Too right,” Fred, or perhaps it was George, nodded fiercely. “Too right. He may be a great greasy git, but he’s the best, and Charlie deserves the best.” His eyes swiveled to Harry. “Harry... Since no one here’s said it yet, we owe you. We owe you ... Big time.”

“I just sent the letter to Professor Snape,” Harry said. “He did all the work.”

“We owe him too,” George, or was it Fred, said. “That doesn’t take away from what you did, even if you didn’t know you were doing it.”

“Story of your life, mate,” Ron muttered in an aside. Harry hid a rueful grin, but nodded, trying desperately to ignore the piercing brown eyes now turned to him from the last, decidedly disconcerting, source.

"Oh," Ron said with a start. “This is Ginny. My little sister. I told you about her; she’s coming to Hogwarts next year?”

Both children, the adults were interested to note, turned immediately crimson.

“Yeah,” Harry muttered. “You said. I remember.”

*And oh God, I wish I didn’t. Not now, anyway. Get a grip, Potter. This is not the ti...*

He nearly fell over as Ginny hopped lightly from Arthur’s knee, tore over with that same blazing, hard look he remembered so well, and hugged him hard, kissing his cheek... Then suddenly she was ten again, and not just crimson, but afire with embarrassment, and she squeaked.

“I didn’t... I’m sorry, it’s just... It’s Charlie,” and she burst into tears again, and he couldn’t help himself. He managed to give Remus an uncomfortable look, and squirmed a bit first, but in the end, he gave her a quick, extremely awkward hug – and yelped furiously as the wand in his sleeve set his shirt on fire, pure crimson and gold fire that arced up around both of them and wrapped them up in a brilliant cloak of glory. Dimly, from far away, he heard shrieks and yelps, and cries of alarm, and he hurled himself backward and literally bounced off the wall... The fire faded, his scar tingled furiously, and he looked up, dazed, as Remus crouched before him, patting him down desperately.

“What...”

“What the bloody buggering hell was that, Harry Potter?” ten-year-old Ginny demanded inelegantly as her brothers huddled around and checked her over.

“Um,” Ron said. “It’s nothing, his wand does that sometimes, it did it with Professor Snape, only the fire was a different colour and their dragon cores are married besides, it’s...” He clapped his hand over his mouth. “Bugger,” he said from behind his palm. “I’m sorry, Harry, I know I wasn’t supposed to say that to anyone!”

“Married,” Molly Weasley repeated, looking down at her youngest son. “Your wand carries the heartstring of a mated dragon, Harry?”

“Er,” Harry said. “It hasn’t been confirmed. I don’t think... I mean... I wrote to Charlie, that was what the letter was about... He said. Um. That he doesn’t think it should be. Confirmed that is. In case the wrong people might get too interested.”
“EWWWW!” Fred (or perhaps it was George, and it didn’t really matter because the other twin was ewwwwwing right along with him; even Percy looked a little nauseated) - “Your wand is married to Snape’s wand? How does that work?’

“It doesn’t,” Arthur said. “Not if it Harry doesn’t want it confirmed, boys, understand? We owe him that.” He looked around at his crew sternly. “Now. Dry faces everyone, and we are going to go see Charlie again, and not one of you is to show fear. He’s got more than enough going on for all of us, I promise, so you will, above all, remember that we are Gryffindors!”

“I’m not,” Ginny pointed out. Her brothers scoffed and rolled their eyes as one. Even Remus chuckled.

“I, for one, have no hesitation in saying this... I greatly look forward to seeing you in my House next year, Miss Weasley,” he said.

“What do you think it means, mate,” Ron said, “that your wand lit up when Ginny hugged you? She doesn’t even have a wand, so that can’t be it!”

“Honestly, Ronald?” Hermione muttered. Then, tossing her still restrained hair... “Boys!”

“Indeed,” Augusta Longbottom agreed. “Miss Granger, Mr. Potter... Why don’t you come with me. I’m sure Neville’s mother and father would love to meet you, though I’m sure Neville’s explained to you that they’re not exactly chatty, demonstrative people?"

“He did,” Harry reassured her. “Um. Remus? What are you going to do?”

“I’ll just step down to the cafeteria and have a cup of tea. Meet me there when you’re done your visit?”

“That’s very thoughtful of you to think on not intruding,” Augusta said, deliberately not casting a gimlet, disapproving eye on Dumbledore. “I’m sure Frank and Alice would love to see you again, Lupin. They always spoke well of you.”

Remus smiled at her.

“I’d love that, Madam,” he said sincerely. “I’ve often thought of them over the years – if you were to imagine, as a matter of fact, that a week has passed where I’ve not remembered them, you’d be much mistaken.”

“So why did you never contact me for permission to go on the visitor lists?” Her eyes narrowed.

“I was a werewolf, ma’am. Werewolves are disallowed from certain sections of St. Mungo’s. I’ve been certified human again, yes, but resolving the finer points of law that ruled against me would yet require a representative in the Wizengamot to facilitate matters, and my letters requesting that a court-ordered barrister forward my petitions there have yet gone unanswered. This month...” He flushed a bit, though with dignity. “This month has really been the first time that I’ve managed to earn enough money to pay for a private solicitor. Sirius offered, of course, but there are some things that a man desires to provide for himself.”

“I see.” She looked him up and down. "I will represent you in the Wizengamot, then, should you want someone to facilitate things for you yet before you marry and automatically retain the services due Black. As long...” She held up a long, knobbly finger. “As long as you promise to visit Frank and Alice once a month.”

“No promise necessary, Madam.” He sketched that half-bow again. “It would be my privilege in any
case. Frank was – is – my friend, and Alice is Harry’s godmother. As Sirius and I intend to adopt him formally when we are granted custody... That makes her – and her husband, and the rest of her family, for that matter – our family.” The smile widened a little, and sharpened - definitely sharpened – as he glanced at the oddly silent Headmaster. “Our pack, if you would.”

Augusta actually laughed.

“Can’t take the wolf out of the boy, eh, Lupin?” she said approvingly. “Come along then. The curry will have been delivered upstairs by now, and if you’re as sensible as you seem with a towerful of growing teens to look after, you’ll have ordered more than the extra.”

They turned to go towards the lifts, but a caroty sleek head peeked out of Charlie’s room first.

“Harry,” Ginny Weasley called. “You’ll stop in on your way down, won’t you? Only Charlie’d like a word with you before they turn him into an Inferi.” She yelped as a maternal hand pulled her in by her ear. “Ow, what Mum? I was just making a joke; it is the Draught of Living Death!”

“I will,” Harry promised. The serpentine laugh hissed behind his scar again. He wondered if he crossed his eyes whether it would be the same thing as glaring at it.

*Shut up, you*, he thought firmly. *Could you have been any less discreet?*

The serpentine hiss gave way to a rich feminine laugh. A very human, very familiar laugh.

*/Where’s the fun in that?* Gin’s – not Ginny, but Gin’s - voice teased him.

*/Gin? Gin, what.../*

*/Later, love. Just remember.../*

The voice was cut off immediately. Harry could have screamed in frustration.

“Lift’s here, Harry,” Neville called. “Hurry up, then!”

He stuffed the wand further back up his sleeve, and hurried.
Charles Septimus Weasley had never been a tall man – five foot seven at his full height, an inch shorter than Harry himself – and he’d been a late bloomer at that. Born prematurely, he’d never, as his parents put it, ‘quite caught up with himself’, and at nineteen, muscular and stocky as his training had made him, he still had two inches to go. Harry hovered at the door, watching the young dragon wrangler’s family fuss over him as he lay on the neat, starched hospital bed in the private room arranged for him during his testing. The room had not been an act of generosity on the hospital’s part, Harry knew. The tests would have been excruciatingly painful, and far older wizards than Charlie had been known to break down and scream piteously, frightening even the most hardened of Healers, never mind their fellow patients.

Through the gap between Percy and Bill, Harry could see Charlie himself: tanned, round-cheeked, smiling, with riotously curly gold-streaked ginger hair and no apparent care in the world. Even from that distance, though, Harry’s all-too-experienced eye spotted the exhausted tremor of his square brown hands, and the bonelessly fatigued way he slumped into his pillows... He knew, from long, never long-enough-ago experience, that the young man – boy, really – was about five minutes away from bursting into tears.

Such an exhibition would have absolutely mortified the Charlie Weasley he’d known and loved. He cleared his throat. Arthur glanced over.

“Harry!” he hailed. “Back already? How was your visit?”

“I’m back, yeah. Neville’s still up there, and Madam Longbottom and Remus went to get a cup of tea. And it was okay,” Harry said diffidently. “Nev brought his mum a teddy bear. She almost smiled.”

“That’s wonderful!” Molly was genuinely pleased. “And Frank?”

“He ate all the spicy curry when we weren’t looking. The nurse wasn’t too happy; she told us off and said that if she had any say that we’d be the ones to come back and take care of him when he sicked up tomorrow. Madam Longbottom told her off good though; she said she was sure that Mr. Longbottom would be absolutely delighted to have the opportunity to care for her were she in the same position the measly one day a month that she wasn’t being force-fed watery mashed and stewed sprouts, and that shut her down.”

“This is Harry Potter, Charlie,” Ron said eagerly, before his parents could respond. “Come on, Harry, come on over! Join the party!”

“I’m pretty knackered, actually, Ronnie,” Charlie said apologetically. “Can Harry and I have a few minutes alone, and then, maybe...” He trailed off. Those five minutes had cut themselves to two in Harry’s estimation. Fortunately, Molly wasn’t entirely oblivious.

“Of course, dear.” She kissed his sunburned cheek and ran a plump hand caressingly over his untidy mop. “Goodness me, Arthur, you’re going to have to tie me back while he’s resting this month or I won’t be able to resist attacking him with the scissors while he can’t argue. Alright, everyone out. Yes, you too, Ron.”
Charlie watched as his family trailed out. When they were gone, and the door was shut, he reached for his wand automatically to raise the bed, and grunted in irritation as he found it gone.

“Bloody thing tried to kill me and my instinct’s still to cuddle with it,” he said. “What else could I have been but a dragon wrangler, eh?”

Harry just stood awkwardly by the door, biting hard on his cheek to keep back the tears. Charlie boosted himself up and patted the sheet.

“I don’t bite,” he said. “Too tired anyway. The magical inhibitors they gave me are dead awful that way.”

He forced himself over, and to climb up. Charlie watched him with a small smile.

“You’re a titch of a thing, aren’t you,’ he observed. “Fred and George said, but you’re no taller than an Ironbelly egg.”

“I’m working on it,” he said. “Um. This is the part where I should say I’m sorry I landed you here, right?”

“Let’s just blame Snape and have done with,” he advised. Harry was startled into a laugh.

“You don’t look so bad,” he said and then, awkwardly. “Um. Hi. I’m Harry.”

“Charlie.” Charlie shook his hand. His square freckled hand dwarfed the smaller one. “So. I wanted to say thank you, before they knock me out.”

There was no world, no universe that existed where Harry could possibly have said ‘it was nothing.’

“I’m glad I could help,” he said quietly. “Even if I didn’t mean to.”

Charlie’s brown eyes searched his.

“Look,” he said finally. “I’m not very good with words. The thing is though... I...” He gulped a deep breath, and there was a sudden glimmer of tears on the stubby, ginger-and-gold lashes. “I reckon... “

He gulped again, struggling again in a way that Harry knew he that he hadn’t yet permitted himself, for the sake of his family. He took all of three seconds to weigh his options and scooted up to take his hand.

“You’re going to be okay,” he said firmly. “You have to be.”

“I do, do I,” the young man before him said, and wiped at his round brown cheeks. “Says who?”

“Says me. Harry Potter. The-Boy-Who-Lived. If I can survive Voldemort, you can survive this. It’s not so hard,” he said awkwardly again, at Charlie’s bemused look. “You just... keep going, you know?”

“I’ll remember that,” he said, and then, rolling over to open his desk drawer... “Here. Got something for you.” He reached into a scattered pile of belongings, and pulled out a moneybag. “I reckon I owe you more than I’ll ever be able to pay, but in the meantime... “ He shook out a double handful of galleons. “I want you take this and buy the biggest damned owl that Eeylops has to offer.”

“Why?”

“So we can write letters,” he said. “After I wake up, and am back at home suffering Mum’s weeping
and wailing.” He grimaced. “Worse part there, I won’t be able to use silencing charms on her, or cheering charms on myself.”

“Oh,” Harry said, and then, tentatively, and with an eager, hopeful leap of his stomach... Maybe it can be different this time, maybe... Maybe it’s another thing that can be good instead of... “So it’ll belong to both of us?”

“Yeah.” He wiped his eyes again. “Be a good mate, yeah, and don’t tell anyone I was blubbing? Otherwise they’d all want to get in on it, and I’ll drown in my damned sleep.”

“I won’t,” Harry said, not letting go of his hand.

“Good.” He hitched himself up a bit more. “So they call you Dash, eh? Something tells me there’s more to the story than your quick feet.”

“There is,” Harry said. “A lot more. Get better, and I’ll tell you all.”

The second Weasley son chuckled softly. “To answer your question,” he said. “My friends at the Reserves call me Beauty. Because of all my beauty marks.” He flicked at his freckles.

“I’m happy to visit you, but there’ll be no snogging, will there?”

“Uh?”

“Sleeping Beauty? Muggle fairy tale? Handsome prince wakes up the fair maiden after her hundred year enchanted sleep, with true love’s kiss?”

“Sounds a bit off to me,” the fair maiden said dubiously. “And boring, honestly. You got anything with raging chimaeras or manticores or basilisks be going on with?”

“I could owl away for some books,” he offered. “Once I’ve got our owl, anyway.”

“You do that.” Charlie cocked his head, eyes suddenly sparkling with amusement despite his heavy fatigue. “So I hear you set my baby sister on fire? Should I be worried, what we both know about your wand now considered?”

“Er. I don’t know. Should I be?”

“I won’t tell her,” he said. “Or anyone else, not if you promise not to tell her till she’s at least sixteen, anyway. Though you can bet, at least, that Perce’ll be looking it up.”

His expression must have given him away. Charlie actually chuckled.

“Your secret’s safe with me.” He mimed zipping his lips. He sat up a bit more. “Mum’ll be dithering... But before you go... Can I see it?”

“What, my wand?”

“Yeah.”

“As long as you don’t try to do magic with it.” He shook it out. “None of your weird jokes now,” he said to it severely. “He’s sick, and doesn’t need any of your... Whatever it is.”

The wand hummed. He handed it over... Not a flame twitched. Charlie examined it carefully, holding it up to the light.
“It’s beautiful,” he said, and then, wistfully - “Can I have a go with it, when I’ve got my core back? I’d love to see how the other dragons on the Reserves react to it.”

“I’d have to come to Romania for that,” Harry pointed out. “Can’t exactly send it in the post now, can I?”


“It’s alright,” he said again, and took it back. “And... Yeah, that’d be brilliant. Next summer, okay? Right before school starts.”

“You got it.” His eyes drifted further shut. “Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Hurt her and I’ll have to kill you.” His lips flicked. Harry wiped his own eyes.

“I won’t,” he said. “I’m going to go now, okay? Only I’ll have to go back to the school soon, and I want to ask Remus to take me to Eeylops first.”

“Get a big scary one,” Charlie murmured. “I like the big scary ones.” He snored. Harry slid off the bed and tucked the blanket around him gently, bending to kiss his forehead.

“I will,” he said. “And I’ll try not to be offended, then, when you piss yourself laughing at the other me.”

He went to the door. The family stood anxiously.

“He’s sleeping,” he informed them. “The magical inhibitors kicked in.”

“Already?” Molly looked most disappointed. “But...” She cut herself off. “It’s for the best,” she said briskly. “The more he sleeps, the less he’ll be tempted, or will try, even on that instinctive level, to use his magic, and the healers said, didn’t they, that that’s what triggers the active...” She faltered. Arthur put his hand on her shoulder.

“Cancer, Mollywobbles,” he said to her. His voice was pitched low, and the words were obviously meant only for her, but everyone could yet hear him. Even after almost a century and a half, Harry felt furious envy for these children who had grown up with parents who’d loved each other that much. He’d done his best to demonstrate the same for his children, and felt modestly confident that he’d succeeded - Gin made it easy - but it had never come as easily as it might have, had he grown up feeling it himself. “We’ll do Charlie no good if we can’t even say the word. Our boy has cancer, and he ...” He too faltered, but steeled himself. “Everything has to be for him now, don’t you see?” He looked around at his children, from Bill down to Ginny. “I want you all to hear and understand this, alright? We love you all. Your mother and I. You are our... Everything. But right now, and till we’ll sure he’ll be alright again... Charlie is going be more than everything, to both of us. You’re going to have to rely on each other for a lot of things, and I hope... I know that you can do that, alright, and when it’s hard, and it will be hard, I won’t insult any of you by minimizing it...”

“Don’t you worry, Dad,” Fred said immediately. “We understand.”

“We do,” George nodded. Percy nodded once, very firmly, and reached out to take Ginny’s hand.

“I’ll talk to the goblins,” he said. “They’ll put me on leave till Christmas at least, or at least home
duty if I ask them to. If I explain the situation.”

Harry doubted that, sincerely – ‘asking’ would be more along the lines of ‘I’ll sign all my commissions over to you for the next year in exchange for a favor’, but if his parents suspected differently, they said nothing.

“Really?” Hermione couldn’t help but ask. “Only I hadn’t thought that they were that obliging, from what I read.”

*Oh, Hermione.* No one seemed offended though; in fact more than a few of them looked relieved at the diverted topic.

“Some things aren’t written down,” Bill explained. “Short version: goblins are all over tribal connections, and they appreciate the fact that I, as one of their employees, have familial connections at the Romanian Dragon Reserves. If they lose my willingness to cooperate – they can’t force that; it’s not part of the contract – they could make my life difficult, yes, but they’d still be out those connections, wouldn’t they? It behooves them therefore…” His lips twitched ironically. “ Wouldn’t it, at least this once… to invest in my interests.”

“Oh,” she said, and opened her mouth to ask another question. Augusta, though, seated with Neville, caught her eye and shook her head reprovingly, once. She flushed and closed with a snap. Arthur offered her a tired, indulgent smile.


“Already?” Ginny wilted, disappointed.

“I’m afraid so, Miss Weasley,” Remus said apologetically. “Professor Black and I do have our duties to attend to, and we’re your brothers’ ride.”

“Oh,” Harry said hastily, and dug in his pocket. “Here, Ginny. Charlie asked me to give this to you.” He handed her perhaps half the gold Charlie had pressed on him. He could always, he thought, supplement the rest with his own. “He said to get your lot a new owl with it. So you all can write to each other. He said the one you’ve got is a bit old, and probably won’t hold up the next few months.”

“Wicked!” Ron enthused.

“Wicked!” Ginny said simultaneously. “Can we get a snowy owl, Mum, like Luna’s?”

“We can try, dear,” her mother said, absently as her eyes strayed back to Charlie’s closed door. “But snowies aren’t common at all. We’d be lucky to ever see another up for sale in the Alley, and that’s the truth.”

“Snowies?” Harry couldn’t help but ask.

“They’re all white,” Ginny explained. “Like snow. They look like big soft ghosts. My friend Luna’s mum bought her one when she got her contract for Hogwarts, just so they could write.”

Neville glanced over. Harry couldn’t help but smile a little wistfully. There was a pang there, yes, but he found he rather liked the idea of Hedwig and Luna together – particularly for the singular cause.

“What did they name her?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“Marshmallow,” Ginny said, and, puzzled… “How’d you know it was a girl?”
“Er,” he said, and then... “I dunno. Fifty-fifty chance?” Then...”Marshmallow?”

“After the marshmallow plant? It helps make things stick together. Rub-on medicines and things, and now Luna and her mum.”

“Right,” he said again, feeling rather the idiot. Again. “I was thinking of the Muggle candy.”

“Muggles have candy?” Ron said, surprised. “Really?”

“Do Muggles have... Honestly, Ronald!” Hermione said, fully exasperated.

“What? I don’t know, I’m not a Muggle, am I?”

“I’ll owl away for some for you to try,” Harry said hastily. “Hermione can’t, she said that her parents are dentists.”

“Yeah, I know. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I despair,” Hermione said dramatically to Harry. ‘I really, really do. How can so few people live so absolutely surrounded by so many, and remain so absolutely and entirely uneducated on their habits?”

“Buck up,” he consoled her. “We still have time. It’s not even October of our first year. First step, we entice them in with Saturday morning cartoons and sugar-coated cereal straight from the box. After that... They’ll be putty in our hands.”

“What’s putty?” Arthur asked.

“Ooh!” Her eyes brightened. “What a brilliant idea! We could get badges! What was that you said at lunch? Half-blood’s better than...

“Half-baked?”

She giggled madly.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Neville said delicately. “But slogans like that aren’t exactly the way to win friends and influence people.’

“Funny as shite though,” Sirius said with a grin. “Do you remember the shirt Jamie got you in sixth year, Rem?’

“Come to me for your creature comforts,” Remus reminisced. “I couldn’t wear it out of the dorm room, of course, but it was the thought that counted.”

“No badges,” Harry said firmly. “They never lead anywhere good.”

Hermione’s face fell, disappointed. He poked her.

“Nev is right. We’re outnumbered here,” he reminded her. “It’s like chess. You have to plan ahead. With subtlety.”

“What are cartoons?” Fred asked with interest. “And what do they have to do with Saturday mornings?”

“We’ll go through the Muggle Studies department,” Hermione planned. “Maybe Professor Burbage can help us get the permits for a modified television, like the one that Madam Longbottom brought
in..."
Later that Evening

Harry sat at the corner table in the common room, chin on his folded arms, and stared up at the gigantic, pitch-black owl hunkered before him. It offered him a pinched, suspicious glare, its tufted ears twitching at him, and ruffled its messy abundance of feathers. Huge, round and squat, it was, all in all, a rather unpleasant looking creature... Ron hovered beside him, his own eyes wide, and shuffled a bit back as the thing shifted. Its talons left visible marks on the table-top.

“Bit big, innit?’ he ventured. “I mean.. It’s nice and all: very ...” He gulped again as the owl swiveled its head to stare at him directly. "Nice... But... Big. Yeah. Big. Why isn’t it up in the Owlerly again?’

“The other owls don’t like him,” Harry said matter-of-factly, not breaking the owl’s gaze. The owner at Eeylops had made rather a point of the fact that the particular bird was a hard sell, and that he’d have to earn its respect if he didn’t want it to deliver his post half-mangled on contemptuous principle. “They attacked him on sight.”

“I can’t imagine why.” Then... “Er. Why?”

“Because he’s black.” Hermione plumped down beside them and offered the bird a strip of dried sardine. It tore it from her hand and savaged it, snapping its beak at Ron again with a mad glint in its gold eyes. “Did you have to pay more for him, Harry, because he’s so rare, or did they give you a discount because he’s a biological sport?”

“A what?' Dean Thomas asked blankly, from where he was playing Exploding Snap with Seamus.

“He’s different,” Neville said helpfully, from the armchair where he was scratching out his Charms essay. “You’ve seen albino rats, right, you know those funny ones that are sometimes born without any color at all: pure white with pink eyes? Only it’s not just rats; other animals produce them too, and sometimes the opposite, where they’re all black. That’s called melanism. It’s really rare, like, one in a hundred thousand, and with owls, you’ll see it even less because most of those would be killed at birth by their mothers, or by other predators later, when they sniff out that they’re not on.”

“How do you know all that?’

“There was a hedgehog that lived in one of our greenhouses that was born that way. I looked it up.”

He licked his quill. Hermione gagged. He held it up reassuringly.

“Peppermint,” he said. “The other end’s for writing with.”

“Urgh. What if you got the ends mixed?’

“You only ever do that once,” he said. “Trust me.”

“So he’s got to stay here?” Ron persisted. “In the dorms?’

“No, no dorm. Not past tonight, anyway. Hagrid said he’d fix him up with a roost in his hut, and it’ll be better anyway, because he’s a Blakison’s fish owl. That means he eats fish,” Harry added helpfully. “He reckons he’ll just raid the lake whenever he’s hungry, and says that as long as I keep the sardine-flavored owl nuggets on hand for treats instead of the mice-flavored ones, he’ll be just fine. Oh, and Professor Flitwick’s going to cast an anti-attack charm on him. That way, the other, wild birds’ll leave him alone when he's out and about.”
“What’re you going to name him?” Oliver Wood wanted to know, too from the prudent distance.

“No idea,” Harry said. “I think I’m a bit afraid to suggest anything. He looks like he’d bite my head off if I picked the wrong one.”

“Phineas,” Sirius offered as he passed by on his rounds. “It means Black. Actually, Phineas Nigellus means Black Black, and Phineas Nigellus Black means Black Black Black. Far be it from me to recommend my relatives, but with that expression and his saturnine good looks, it does suit.”

“But he was a Slytherin!” Ron said, aghast.

“You’re telling me that that owl isn’t a Slytherin? I don’t know what got into you, pup. It’s a positive snake with feathers!” He stopped to examine him. “A really fat snake. How the hell is he supposed to fly like that?”

“He’s not fat. It’s all muscle, and just the shape of his breed. I like him,” Harry said defensively. And he did, or rather appreciated him, though not for any reasons he cared to share. Hedwig, of course, had been pure white, delicately elegant in build, and had always held herself as a paragon of ladylike, if demanding, behavior... Phineas (the name did seem to suit) was easily twice as big as she’d ever been. Rumpled and hulking, he simply reeked of vulgarity, and his hoot was more of a snarky hiss in disguise. He had to weigh close to ten pounds bone dry, and had a measured wingspan of seven feet. “He’s got charisma.”

“Attitude, you mean.” Remus approached, arms crossed. Phineas sneered at him. His lip curled in return, revealing a single sharp canine. It went frighteningly well with his dark grey evening flannels, slippers and crisp pale shirt. “Another Black in Gryffindor. Well, Mr. Black, I’ll warn you now. This is my tower, and if you step one talon out of line...”

The bird just stared at him contemptuously. The canine receded. Remus smiled gently at him.

“You’ll learn,” he said. “I’ve trained one of you up to my standards; I daresay I can do it again.”

“I think he’s adorable!” Lavender Brown squealed. “He matches your hair, Harry!”

Hermione sniffed at her so hard her nose nearly inverted in on itself.

“One good thing about him anyway,” Ron said. “He’s even bigger than Malfoy’s owl.”

“Oh yes, Ron. That’s why I bought him. Because he’s bigger than Malfoy’s owl.”

“Oh, come on. You’re telling me you didn’t think on it? Haven’t thought on it? Even for a minute? Even for a second?”

“No,” Harry said, and then admitted... “I did think on the fact that he kind of looks like Snape though. He’s got feathers, not bat wings, and he’s not quite so tall and billowy... but still. D’you think I should send him a message at breakfast tomorrow, just so they can meet?”

There was a moment’s silence, and the common room erupted into roars of laughter.

“Phineas is good,” Harry decided, and sat up and back slowly. The bird waddled forward a bit – if he hadn’t been so naturally intimidating, it would have been cute – and pecked at him. His wand slid down his sleeve and into his palm and he pointed it.

“WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!” he barked. Phineas shot up as if set off by a rocket, flailing and barking madly as he was pinned to the ceiling. Harry lowered him gently back to the table.
“No,” he said firmly. The bird lunged at him again.

“WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!”

“Harry!” Remus reproached him sharply as Fred and George flailed with weeping mirth. Percy just looked approving. “Stop that! You’ll hurt him!”

“I’m just holding him up there,” Harry protested. “Not hexing him or bashing him against the roof or anything. And the bloke at Eeylops said I had to be tough with him!” Phineas glowered, but stayed still. He offered him a sardine nugget as reconciliation and reward. The black owl promptly hacked, and regurgitated a ball of mashed, loose jerky all over him.

“Oh, that’s nice,” Harry said to him as Sirius' own bark of laughter echoed over the veritable riot in the common room. “One more like that, Black, and I’ll return to sender the hard way.”

“Serves you right,” Remus said heartlessly. “There are ways and ways, and that was not on, no matter what the owner at Eeylops said. He’s a dumb animal, Harry, and...”

Phineas promptly hacked up all over him at the insult, but didn’t bother waiting around for the response. He seemed more than content to have made his point and waddled over to the window, hopping up with surprising grace and launching himself toward the lake.

“I’ll order you a training book,” was all Remus said as he Vanished the vomit. “A proper one. That spell is not meant to be used that way.”

“Cut him a break, Moony,” Sirius muttered, pulling him aside. “You know he wasn’t raised properly.”

“He is now,” Remus said flatly, if equally quietly. “Bad beginnings make bad habits, Sirius.”

“But...” He looked torn. “James wouldn’t have...”

“James isn’t here anymore,” Remus cut him off. “We are. As for that...Fifth year ring any bells there, Padfoot? I stood by once, I’m not going to stand by again. We’ve got a whole towerful of impressionable young minds here, and I’m not just a prefect anymore; I’m a teacher, and a Head of House. So are you, for that matter. More than that, we’re temporary guardians who intend not just to be permanent guardians, but parents, and I won’t have a bully for a son. I won’t.”

Sirius sighed, but nodded. The cold, fervid envy that Harry had felt at the sight of the Weasleys all together again faded abruptly. To be honest, he doubted that Phineas would have responded to anything less than such a tactic - positive reinforcement was one thing, but he had the definite impression that like the original Phineas, his new acquisition would have scorned such things as soft and weak - but that wasn’t exactly something that could be rationally explained on the basis of purely pre-adolescent experience. He had just started to get to his feet to apologize to Remus when a huge black cannonball hurtled back through the window and dropped a half-eviscerated flounder on his discarded homework, landing amid the mess and regarding him with beady, challenging eyes.

“Um,” Harry said. “Thank you? I think?”

“Why are you thanking him?” Ron said in disgust. “Urgh, that’s just...”

“It’s like another owl bringing him a mouse, Ron,” Percy said condescendingly. “It’s a sign of respect.” Unwittingly, he repeated Harry’s thought: “Positive reinforcement is all very well, but some just don’t respond well to anything but firm initial discipline. Though I did notice,” he continued pompously to Remus, “to be fair, Professor Lupin, that Phineas’ head never even brushed the ceiling.
Well done on your magical control there, Harry, particularly with a protesting target.”

“Thanks, Perce,” Harry said fondly. “Do me a favor, okay, and don’t ever change?”

Percy cast him an uncertain, peculiar look at that, but said nothing, just nodded slightly and turned back to his homework.

“Um.” Harry said to Remus. “Could you...” Hr gestured to his homework. “Vanish that?”

“No,” Remus said, and looked to Sirius pointedly. Sirius sighed, but only a little, before shaking himself.

“You’ll have to do it all over again, pup,” he said bracingly. “We don’t hang people – or owls – upside down. Even as training techniques, and I’d say not even my parents did that, but I’d be lying, and come to think of it...” He looked hopefully at Remus. “Maybe that’s a good place to start? If my parents would imagine doing it... He shouldn’t?’

“Definitely a place to start.” Remus patted his head. “See, Black,” he said to the owl. “Perfectly trained. You, too, will come to learn your proper place in the pack.”

Phineas waddled over and vomited all over the floor again, not-quite-missing the toes of his soft woolen slippers.

The next couple of weeks, in retrospect, were a bit of a blur. A pleasant one: seeing Charlie, and with the hope of his long-term recovery and a potential real, uninterrupted friendship in mind, Harry found it easy to once again remind himself of his proper priorities – horcruxes and happiness. Hufflepuff’s cup, as it turned out, was a total cinch to recover once the ruling on the Lestrange estate came through, and with it came a most unexpected surprise, at least for the Weasleys... Harry emerged, yawning yet, from the shower one morning to the sight of Ron in his favorite Chudley Cannons boxers, sitting on the edge of his bed and staring dumbly at a piece of parchment. Huddled around him were Fred, George and Percy, rumpled and dazed all.

“I don’t believe this,” Ron said. “Is it a joke, d’you reckon?’

‘No,” Percy said. “I don’t...” He stopped, at a loss for words.

“What’s going on?’ Harry asked curiously. Ron looked up.

“Nev’s gran,” he said. “She added a whadayacallit...”

“Codicil,” George supplied.

“To her wotzit against the Lestranges, offering up the name of a few families that they were known to have. You know. Been ‘specially affected by the fact that they were such prats. Uncle Fabian and Uncle Gideon were the last males of the name of the Prewett line, and when they helped kill them, they ended one of the Sacred Twenty Eight. On paper, anyway: with all of us, one of us can always have a kid that we give the name to, but that hasn’t happened yet, so...”

“They gave her half the estate,” Fred said, dazed. “Madam Longbottom, but split up the rest among the other named parties. And it says here that our family, the Weasleys, or rather Mum, as their closest relative... is being given double shares because of the family line thing again.”
“Yeah,” George said, taking the parchment from Ron and staring at it as if the lettering (and numbers) might disappear. “It’s pretty obvious, innit, why Madam Longbottom did it: for Charlie, so Dad doesn’t have to ask her for help again – but ... three million galleons per brother? Plus a twentieth share of the non-liquid assets, including real estate and retained household staff?”

“Retained household staff? You mean, like house-elves? And... Three...” Harry blinked. “Bugger me. That’s a bit of a lot, yeah?”

The four Weasleys lined up before him didn’t seem to be able to respond to that. They did, however, respond to the instructions to report to Professor Lovegood’s office that next Saturday, and were promptly flooed home en masse for what promised to be the shopping spree of a lifetime... Harry and Neville waved goodbye, Sirius grinning behind them as he did so. When the fireplace was clear...

“Alright, then,” he said briskly to his two charges. “Remember what our letter said; the curses and wards have all been removed on the vaults, but there’s still enough gold there to drown in if you step wrong, so watch your wallowing. One token each as a personal memento, that was the agreement, and no shriveled severed heads.”

“They’ll have those?” Neville asked obligingly. “Really?”

“I’ve no doubt,” Remus said, appearing behind them. Harry gawped. He was dressed, of all things in a Muggle suit - a hand-tailored, Armani Muggle suit, or he missed his guess, and was carrying a Burberry trenchcoat over his arm. Remus ruffled his hair.

“I have an appointment in London,” he said. “With Madam Longbottom, once we’re done.”

“Doing what? Meeting up with the Prime Minister at Downing Street?”

“As a matter of fact,” his co-guardian said, “Yes. Briefly, anyway, and then we two are having dinner together to discuss our strategy in the Wizengamot.” He kissed his fiancé. “Thank you for the outfit, Padfoot. You have exquisite taste, as always.”

“Welcome. Can’t have my werewolf, however ex, running around London in mangy fur, can I? And I can’t believe she asked you to be her escort and not me,” Sirius sulked. “It’s not fair. What’s wrong with me?”

“You’re inappropriately fifteen at those unpredictable moments,” Remus said kindly. “I’m not.”

He took a pinch of floo powder and stepped neatly through. When they emerged, they were in the front lobby of Gringott’s. Harry glanced at Neville. He nodded slightly. The cup, in the end, was only part of their plans for the day.

“Padfoot?” he ventured. “Um. If it’s not too much trouble... I’ve seen my trust vault, yeah, but never the main family vault of the Potters. Can we... I mean, I don’t want anything from it, I just...” He puppy-dogged his eyes as much as he could manage it without popping them. Padfoot, predictably, melted.

“Of course, pup,” he said. “Only we’ll take care of business first, alright, and then we can spend some proper time poking around.”

“Yes!” he cheered. Soon, they were rattling at full-speed to the lowest levels of the bank. Once arrived...

“This is nice,” Neville said, wading hip-deep through the piles back to the small crowd, Hufflepuff’s cup clutched firmly in his sweaty hand. “I think I’ll take this.”
“That’s not much of anything.” Sirius examined it. “And the badger looks a bit mad, if you ask me. You sure you wouldn’t rather have a nice sword or suit of armour or something?”

“What would I do with a sword?”

“Not much,” Harry agreed from where he was sitting on top of a trunk, browsing through a rather interesting, if seriously outdated, book on Dark Curses. Remus peered over his shoulder, tore it out of his hands and threw it across the room.

“No,” he said, and just low enough so that only they could hear. “Not now, not ever, Harry. I will not have you developing a fascination with ... that... kind of thing, no matter – no, especially - your circumstances considered.”

“I was just looking at it!” Harry protested.

“That’s how it starts,” the ex-were said grimly. “Once you look... It’s like potato crisps. You can never stop at one.”

Harry stared at him.

“Potato crisps?” he repeated. “You’re actually comparing the Dark Arts to potato crisps?”

“Just pick something else, alright?”

“Alright.” He slid to his feet, and made his way to a box of discarded wands that he'd spotted earlier. He hunkered down and began to rummage. Most were useless, to him anyway, and two were so inherently dark and repulsive that he discreetly snapped them on the spot, but much to his surprise, one actually warmed for him – a long, pale stick, smoothly polished and exquisitely done about in Celtic knotwork. He cast a quick, all-purpose scanning spell (the core, he saw, was made of hippogryph feather) glancing over his shoulder... It came up sparklingly clear. He gave an experimental wave. It responded immediately and promptly, though not spectacularly. He got a definite impression, not of shyness, but of dignified reserve and a strong distaste for unnecessarily showy displays of power. His inner Gryffindor, alive and well these days, struggled a bit there, but in the end, the experienced and practical grizzled old Auror won out. The amber wand, after all, drew rather a lot of attention, and there would undoubtedly be times he’d need a magical assistant with a proper sense of decorum.

“What have you got there, pup?” Sirius asked, slogging over.

“A wand. I still need a secondary, and it feels really nice. Not like my amber, but... Normal nice.”

“Don’t tell anyone I said so, but we could all use a bit of that now and again,” Sirius agreed, and taking it, examined it closely. “Huh. Definitely not willow or birch... Butternut, maybe? Not uncommon abroad, but... Alright. We’ll get it properly checked for unexpecteds, and if all goes well, it’s yours.” He tucked it in his pocket. “We’re done here? Good. Let’s go.” His face was pale, and he was sweating... Remus took his hand firmly.

“You heard him,” he said to the goblins. “Potter vaults next. That’ll cheer you up, love. “

And it did. The family vault was nothing less than a wonderland of portraits, silks, piles of books, trunks, coin and ...

“What’s this?” Harry rummaged casually through a pile of old letters on a table right near the entrance near the vault. “It’s got your name on it, Remus!”
“Sorry?” Remus said, startled.

“It was sitting right on top.” He handed it over.

“That’s Fleamont’s handwriting!” Sirius said, and as Remus unsealed the envelope and unfolded it... “Oh my God! It’s dated like, a month before he died! Why was it never delivered, do you think?”

“No idea. Maybe he thought we’d be down here with Jamie after the funeral, and we’d find it then.” He scanned, chocolate eyes widening.

“What does it say, what does it say?”

“Hold on, hold...” He flipped it over. “This can’t be right! These are all Muggle ingredients! And... Mr. Smiley’s Enviro-Cleaning fluid?”

“Remus...”

He flipped the paper over.

“Dear Remus,” he read. “Been fidgeting around a bit for a few years now, and just came up with this. I know it looks unlikely, but I really think it might work. If it does, it’s yours, to do with what you want. Enclosed is the patent, filed under your name at our family solicitors’. Use it well. You’re a good boy, and were always a good friend to Jamie, even when he was being a prat. I can say that, because I was a prat at his age too. You’re not though. You’re just a sweet kid who got a really, really bad break. Hopefully this will help you along, in all ways. Fondest regards – Fleamont Potter.

He turned the page one more.

“A recipe for Fur-B-Gone,” he read. “For those inflicted with follicular issues beyond the miracles of Sleekeazy.”

“Where’d you get the handwriting samples again’ Neville murmured to Harry as they stood back.

“Snuck out as Dash and into the Ministry,” he murmured back. “He filed a lot of patents, and there are a lot of forms involved. They’re all on record, if you know where to look.”

“And his style of writing?”

“I have been in this vault before, yeah? He’s got a whole trunkful of journals and letters behind that tapestry over there. I practically memorized them all before James was born, so that I could tell him everything I didn’t know about our Potter ancestors.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to give it a go,” Sirius was saying reasonably. “I mean, except for the Mr. Smiley’s, it looks more like a recipe for a hot toddy than anything else. And Mr. Smiley’s is enviro-cleaning fluid, guaranteed not to so much as make your sprog puke, even if he drinks the whole bottle.”

“I’m not a werewolf anymore, Sirius!”

“You’re telling me that you don’t have a pen friend that could use a night out and a free drink or two? Brew a flask, order hot chocolate, top it up for him – or her – and then call him or her after the next full moon to see how they’re feeling.”

“That’s completely unethical, Sirius! What if something went wrong? I just can’t experiment on my friends without their knowledge and consent!”

“So experiment on your enemies! I know you’ve got a few of those, and...” He stopped, or rather
skidded to a verbal halt. The two men stared at each other.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Remus said breathlessly.

“If you’re thinking ‘Fenrir Greyback,’ then. Yes. Yes you are.” Harry and Neville exchanged fat, satisfied private smirks as Sirius grabbed the paper. Fruitcake, they’d thought in the end, was all very well, but this way, Remus got the satisfaction of personally taking down his nemesis, and the residuals from any patents pending (they’d not exactly been hard to rig) would give him a quite tidy private income besides. “Godric’s bleeding... Moony... If this works... And it has to work; everything Fleamont made always, always worked...”

“How do we get it to him, though? And in him? I can’t exactly invite him up and invite him out for a drink, can I?” He tried to take the letter back. “Does it even say how much he’d need to ingest?”

“Hold up, here, let me... Here it is. “One half-pint per, as good as a cure. Can be drunk anytime, anywhere, and should have an immediate calming effect.”

“We’ll think on it,” Remus said, and glancing at his Muggle watch, started. “Oop. I have to go; Madam Longbottom will be waiting for me upstairs.”

“Like taking candy from a baby,” Harry murmured to Neville as they followed the men out. “How’re you doing there?”

“I need a shower. This thing stinks,” Neville murmured back.”On levels I can’t even begin to describe. The diadem wasn’t this bad, what...”

“It’s got more of him in it. A lot more. The horcruxes weren’t split into seven equal parts, remember; each split bit was half of each progressively smaller bit. “

“*You* get to do the diary then. That’s got the full half, and I don’t think Beorn could take it. He’s feeling pretty rabid right now as is.”

“Here. Give it to me.” Harry took the artifact and stuffed it under his cloak. “They don’t affect me as badly, for obvious reasons. Also, it’s probably got something to do with your link to the school now too, specially after I boosted the wards.”

“Yeah. Thanks for that, by the way.” He looked as pale as Sirius had earlier. ‘Owen was very impressed.”

“Owen?”

“Owen Hufflepuff. Helga Hufflepuff’s husband. The baker down in the main wards room?”

“Huff... Helga *Hufflepuff* married a *Muggleborn*?”

“Hurry, boys,” Remus called, and as they tucked themselves into the cart... “Padfoot and I were thinking; we both have next weekend off – Professor McGonagall’s agreed to take the Tower for us once a month – and if you like, we could go home, Harry?”

“That’d be fantastic,” Harry said enthusiastically. “Can Neville and Ron and Hermione come?”

“Secret’s not worth much if you tell the whole school, is it?”

“He’s just kidding,” Sirius said firmly. “Of course you can, pup. You can all pitch in and help us plan the wedding.”
“Wed... Uh?”

“Wedding? You do remember we’re planning on getting married?”

“Yeah, of course, but... You never said when.”

“That’s where the planning comes in,” Remus said. “We don’t want to wait too long; the Fat Friar is getting a little stressed about our continued and unorthodox living arrangements.”

That night, as the two reborn wizards sat in the Room of Requirement and watched the remains of Hufflepuff’s Cup smoke and twist on the Headmaster’s desk, Neville stretched his legs out and reached for his cup of tea as his bare feet turned to bear feet.

“I showed them to Mum,” he said, sipping. “That first time we went to see her, when you went down to see Charlie, and Gran and Remus were having their tea in the hospital lounge. He’d told Harry by now about his mother’s stuffed collection, though he hadn’t, of course, told him his source of the information.

“Did you? What did she... I mean, did she react at all?”

“We sat on the bed and she petted them,” he said. “Dad...” He smiled. “He kept touching the side of his head. Knocking at it really. I didn’t get it at first... But then I realized, he wanted to see me do ears.”

Harry was astonished. “Is that kind of response level new?” he asked.

“No. Not how you mean. They can respond in small ways to things they find entertaining; it’s just never personal. Well, the bubble gum wrappers, yes.” He sprouted ears, absently, shrinking and growing them as he pondered. Harry’s lips twitched. Neville was always the grown man he’d been here in the Room now, and the extra accessories, when coupled with the Headmaster’s robes and the impressive appearance...

Dumbledore, he thought, would be delighted by the look. He wasn’t that delighted these days, mind you; he was still trying to determine why his gargoyle absolutely refused to respond to any candy-related passwords any more, offering only a dour ‘bad for your teeth, bad for your teeth’ whenever pressed. It was a small irritant, but it was still an irritant.

“Anyway.” Nev stretched mightily. “Two down... Got a preference on what we do next?”

“No really,” Harry said. “Though... I really don’t know how we’re going to get at the diary. We don’t even know where Malfoy keeps it; of all of them, that was the one that was just handed to us, and for some weird reason, I don’t feel like waiting for him to hand it off to Gin again.”

Neville tugged at his bottom lip. The ears shrunk and regrew in tandem with his rhythm there.

“No.... No, that’s definitely not an option. I could take a few guesses,” he said. “I know Malfoy Manor pretty well now, and it won’t have changed much, even retroactively; they always rebuilt along the original blueprints. Oh, and Drake made a point of giving me the tour when Frankie and Stella were engaged, to show good intent. Getting in there... It’s not so much the wards, as that there are always, always people around. Paranoid people. Professionally paranoid people, and that’s not even counting the portraits.”

“Easy ones first then,” Harry suggested. “The locket’s right there at 12 Grimmauld Place, and the ring in Little Hangleton. Hell, we could skulk out right now, if we liked, Apparate over and pick both up within the hour.”
“What about the curse on the ring?’

He waved that off, then stopped.

“There’s that,” he conceded. “I know how to neutralize it now – I did some research way back when – but it’s not exactly easy. We’re going to need a few specialty items.”

“Such as…’

Harry reached in his pocket and pulled out a list.

“I don’t suppose we could just ask the Room for them,” he said hopefully.

“Yeah. No.” He folded the list. “Alright then. Locket next.” He started to stand, then snapped his fingers. “The Malfoys' Christmas Ball.”

“Uh?’

“They always have a ball at Christmas, and we’ll both be invited this year, because of Sirius. He’s House Black now, and Narcissa is a Black. She knows you’re going to be adopted, but Black still needs an Heir, and until he was restored, Draco was it. She’ll want to curry favour there again, in the interests of him getting… Something, at least. One of the family seats on the Wizengamot, if that’s all, but that can be a really big deal under the properly cultivated circumstances.”

“Do you think she’ll make up with Andromeda?’ Harry asked curiously. “Now that Bellatrix is gone?’

“Not in public. Never that. But in private… Stranger things have happened. Andromeda and Bellatrix were like oil and water, but her relationship with Narcissa wasn’t so bad, Gran says. Even now, we know she values Drake’s health and safety and happiness above anything else.”

“Okay.” Harry nodded. “So, diary at Christmas, locket next… That leaves the ring.” He sighed at the memory of the list. “Bloody phoenix tears. Must be nice to have those on tap, yeah, but we’re rather lacking on the loyalty-to-Dumbledore part these days, so that’s not likely to happen.”

“We’ll figure something out.” Neville closed his eyes. “Harry?’

“Yeah?’

“Can I ask your opinion on something, and please don’t go nutters, because I’m actually quite serious?’

“Sure?’

“What would you think about telling Gran about all this?’

“What? Sorry?’

“I’ve been thinking about what Sirius said, the night after Bellatrix died. That Mum and Dad wouldn’t have wanted me to live with false hope; they just would have wanted me to live. He was right you know, but more than that… I think Dad would have wanted that for his mum too. And she can’t… She can’t let go. He’s her child. I get that. But if we were to tell her everything…” He trailed off.

“That’d be cruel, don’t you think? Taking away all her hope like that?’
“What’s crueler?’ he asked. “Taking it away, or leaving her with it when we both know it’ll never be fulfilled? Right now, he’s her more-than-everything. Like Charlie has to be for the Weasleys, except she’s not even going to let herself die till Dad does, Harry, and that’s almost sixty years from now. And if we told her about us, and the war that we’re preventing, and how she could help finish that job, for Mum and Dad, with us - the job that for her and Mum and Dad, will never ever be over...”

Harry rubbed his neck.

“Do you think she’d believe us,” he said at last.

“Yeah. I do. More than that, she could help us. Honestly, I think we’re going to need help at some point, and she’s the most sensible, practical, best person I know. Scary,” he added. “But looking back... In a good way.” He hunched his shoulders. “I was really scared for her when I saw the way she reacted to Charlie. Longbottom’s not poor, but we’re not as well off as she made out, either. Ten thousand galleons is a huge chunk for us, and it’s not like she expected the Weasleys to pay it back, and she was promising to support them besides, even before the ruling on the Lestrange estate came in! And okay, maybe that was pretty much guaranteed, but still. She would have offered anyway, you know? She needs something else to fixate on, Harry, besides people with really expensive sons with incurable conditions!”

They sat in silence for a bit.

“Alright,” Harry said at last. “Alright. I won’t say I don’t have reservations... But you’re right. This is your life as much as mine, so it’s up to you. We could use help, and nobody’s ever going to suspect her of anything. “ He grinned suddenly. “And she’ll be proud of you as anything, for sure, when she realizes you’ve made Headmaster at eleven.”

“She’ll be prouder that I killed Bellatrix.”

“You’re going to tell her that?’

“Yeah.” He hunched his shoulders again. “I need to. I need to talk to someone who will understand, and she’s my Gran, no matter how old I am.”

Harry nodded. “I reckon you do, at that,” he said. “Do you want me to be there when you tell her who we are?”

“No. But she’ll want to talk to you after.”

“Right.” He reached for paper. “Now. About that locket...”
Thursday, October 7th

12 Grimmauld Place

“AND CLEAN THE PLACE UP!”

“Yes, little Master,” Kreacher called back, waving from the front stoop of 12 Grimmauld Place as Harry and Neville practically tumbled over each other in their haste to leave. “Kreacher will! The House of Black will be restored to its former glory –“

“Not its former glory,” Harry said firmly, picking himself up. “You saw the paint chips and the furniture pamphlets; everything we want done over-with is circled. Your crew will be here in the morning; we’re trusting you to keep them in line, but again – only by the means we discussed, alright?”

“Yes, little Master. Kreacher swears. But Master Regulus’ chamber stays as it is, little Master swore too!”

“Yes, yes. And the elf heads and the big bookcase, again?”

“The heads is to be put into secret storage as heirlooms of the future elves of Black, and the bookcase goes in front of Mistress’ portrait,” the house-elf recited. "Turned in, with the books Little Master will send against the wall so she has something good to read.”

“Excellent.” Harry offered a wave back as they headed off. Kreacher offered a twisted, rather horrific grimace that would have translated, on anyone else, as a radiant beam, and shuffled back inside, the burnt and sizzled remains of Slytherin’s locket clutched blissfully to his emaciated grey chest. Neville shuddered convulsively, brushing himself off as best he could.

“Oh my God,” he said. “And may I just say... Oh my God? There is not enough soap in the world! Even Azkaban was cleaner than that!”

“Scary, but true,” Harry agreed. “Still. He was so happy! Did you see his face when he was pouring the venom inside the locket? I thought he was going to cry with joy. Or wet himself, one or the two. Possibly both. Still with joy, though.”

“That was well done,” Neville said, diverted. “Letting him do the honours, I mean. Poor little thing; he looked like he’d fulfilled his life’s purpose.”
“Yeah.” Heavily glamoured again (though not as any variation on their older selves; the Potter and Longbottom genes simply ran too true for random outings) they walked to the closest all-night pub. “What about that crew? D’you think your Gran will notice that all your house-elves but one are missing in the morning?’

“No. Dolly will still be there, and she’s the only one she really interacts with. Aside from, I’ll be home explaining things, and their absence will be part of the explanation, so...” He lifted a shoulder. “You worried?”

“Yes, of course.” They entered the pub, picked out a back corner table, ordered their drinks and pasties quickly, and settled back. Nev slurped his beer before continuing. “The major issue is going to be that if I’m here, where’s her Neville, and her Harry, for that matter. She’s likely to beat me over the head –literally – till I answer that one to her satisfaction, so any suggestions would be welcome.”

Harry looked troubled. That, honestly, had been a question he’d often wondered on, and simply couldn’t answer.

“I reckon the easiest thing is to tell her the truth,” he said. “That you just don’t know, and have no way of finding out.”

“That won’t wash,” Neville said bluntly. “I was nine when we returned, Harry, or rather her Neville was, and practically a squib in her eyes besides. She’ll still think on him, once she processes and accepts this new reality of me, as that Neville: hopeless, helpless, defenseless, and now lost. How is that easy?”

Harry slurped his beer unhappily.

“It’s not,” he said. “I know that. Maybe if you told her that you two merged? That her Nev’s still part of you, in you?’

“Oh because that doesn’t sound like possession or Dark Magic at all!”

“It’s not like you’ve been doing dark things since you got back!”

“Aside from transforming into a giant killer bear and chewing up defenseless, if not innocent, women?’

“Woman. Singular. Very, very singular, which was why you chewed her up, and personally, after everything she did, I’m no longer willing to concede her essential humanity, much less classify her by gender.”

Neville just rubbed the back of his neck. Harry tilted his. It crackled impressively.

“Look,” he said in his most practical tones. “Old Auror technique, and probably a Headmaster’s one too: when dealing with bewildered families and parents wondering where their little angels went wrong... If she’s going to ask the unanswerable questions, she’s likely to offer speculative explanations herself, past the point. Just sit back, listen, mmmmm a bit in a thoughtful manner, and in the end... Pick the theory she seems most comfortable with and go from there. I’m really, really sorry, mate, but that’s the best I’ve got – aside from suggesting that since her Nev-and-Harry disappeared together, they’re likely together now, wherever they are, and at that age, you may reassure her, though her Nev might have been hopeless and helpless, I was most certainly not. I had survival down to an art form, and my magic started manifesting when I was six months old besides. That was why I did have survival down to an art form.”
Neville brightened a bit. “That might help,” he said. “Actually, I’m sure it would. And I’ll be sure to point out too, that my dad and your dad worked together sometimes, and made a damned good team from what she’s told me herself.”

The pasties arrived, piping and savory and piled about with thick golden chips with gravy. They ate rapidly: Harry because he was absolutely starving as per usual, and Neville because October had arrived with a cold snap, and Beorn, as a result, was wide awake, on the edible prowl, and having absolutely none of his base-form’s diet business.

“How t’hell did you ever survive at the Dursleys’ with Dash’s metabolism again?” Nev asked around a huge mouthful. “Even with the Notice-Me-Nots and the nectar and ants, they had to have noticed all the missing food, specially in the winter when the gardens were dead and there weren’t a lot of bugs.”

Harry lowered his pasty.

“I’m not proud of myself there,” he confessed. “But it really was a matter of survival. There’s a big supermarket about a mile away from Privet Drive, and I used to apparate in from my cupboard after hours, load up on groceries, and Apparate back. I fixed a drawer in the fridge and another cupboard above the oven with more Notice-Me-Nots, and just stored everything I got there. I didn’t have any money to pay for it, of course, so I beefed up the security instead, discreetly. They used to have a pile of break-ins and cash robberies when I was a kid, and I made sure they didn’t, for those two years anyway. The money I saved them, even if they didn’t know I saved it for them, more than made up for whatever I took.”


“Oh, course it does.” He poured more vinegar over his chips. “You should go hunting. It might take the edge off.”

“I’d planned to this weekend, in that forest you described back your house, but then you invited Ron and Hermione, so that’s out.”

“Actually, it’s not. Bill got offered last minute tickets to the Puddlemere United /Cannons match from a friend called out on business and is taking him and Ginny, and Hermione has decided to take advantage of all of our absences to hole up in the library and finish the research for her term History of Magic project before all the good books are gone.”

“History of Magic project. Now there’s a phrase I never thought I’d hear in any timeline.”

“Yeah. How’s yours coming?”

“Please. We’re a hundred thirty-eight. We made - are - history.”

“The future, actually.”

“And that’s why I chose as my topic likely developments in herbological magics and potions, based on the major players in the fields today and their established and predictable patterns of research and development as drawn in from past Masters. Double duty; I get to hand it in as my term potions projects as well.”

“You do remember that you’re supposed to be eleven, right? Not a Master of the either subject?”

“I’m dumbing it down. Obviously. Oh, and the brilliance of the subject matter will be nicely qualified by the hair-tearing fact that there won’t be a correctly spelled word or a properly placed
comma in the entire product. That’s the part that’s going to take me the longest; I’m trying to think on how many different ways I can spell ‘verminous chrysanthemum’.” He mopped up the last of his gravy with his last chip. “You finished there?”

“Way ahead of you.” Harry burped lightly, and reached for his money pouch. “God, I love being able to digest grease properly again. Thanks for the tip on the ‘Room of Accio Random Couch-Change’ by the way. Remus is great, but he insists on that age-appropriate allowance, unless it’s for books.”

“No problem.” The Once-and-Future Headmaster of Hogwarts drained the last of his beer and heaved himself up. “Alright. Let’s go. It’s early yet; we might actually get a few hours’ decent sleep for a change.”

“Have you decided how you’re going to approach the subject with her?” Harry asked as they left the pub. “In the first place?”

“Yeah, but I’ll wait to tell you till it’s all over, alright? Right now, I just want to go back to the tower and bed, and if I let myself think about it too much, I won’t sleep.”

“Sure, mate.” He patted his back. They ducked into an alley, there was a loud crack as of a car backfiring, and they were gone.

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**Friday, October 8th**

**Transfiguration**

“Ooh, nice wand!” Hermione reached out eagerly. Harry snapped his hand back and rapped her knuckles sharply. “Ow!”

“Bad witch. Don’t grab,” he said reprovingly. “Let’s try that one again. Would you like to examine my wand, Miss Granger? Why yes, Mr. Potter, I’d be ever so delighted to make its acquaintance, may I beg you for an introduct... OW!” He yelped as Professor McGonagall rapped him sharply on the head. “What was that for?”

“We have had this discussion before, have we not? Three points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter,” she said severely. “For completely inappropriate crudity. Oh, don’t give me that.” She sniffed at his look of disbelieving affront. “I wasn’t born yesterday, and I taught your mother besides.”

“My mother? Not my father?”

She just sniffed again, and swept off down the aisle. Neville elbowed him.

“Do try to remember,” he muttered.”Your proper age? And... Again... Everyone else’s?”

“I was! Do! I didn’t mean it that way; she’s just got a great dirty, filthy mind!”

“Don’t drool, Potter. It’s unhygienic, to say the least.”

“Can I see, can I see?” Hermione implored, though this time from a respectful distance. “And where’s your amber?”

“Sure,” he said, jerking his attention back and offering her the wand that he'd chosen from the
Lestrange vault. Sirius had returned it to him that morning, and he’d fancied that it had been quite, if sedately, glad to see him again. The feeling had been most mutual; his amber wand, as he grew more comfortable with it (or perhaps, it with him), had, as Ollivander had promised, been acting more and more whimsically. Potions in particular was becoming more and more of a challenge, to the point last session where Snape had actually sent him a message demanding that he get another wand for active use in his class, and noting that he intended to do the same so that they could toss their two Horntails in a drawer and let them canoodle at each other for at least the three scheduled hours a week. He hadn’t phrased it quite like that, of course, but that had definitely been the gist. “Er. I’m giving it a holiday. This one’s aspen and hippogryph feather.”

“Did you get it at Ollivander’s?” she asked, giving it a wave. It ignored her. She frowned. “Why isn’t it doing anything?”

“Dunno. Maybe it’s a wand that only likes boys? OWWWWW!” He roared as McGonagall pounced on him at approximately the speed of sound. “What? It’s possible! Aspen’s got a valid history that way; I looked it up!”

“Your mother, Mr. Potter. Do not make me tarnish what little memory we of Wizarding Britain have of her by invoking best-forgotten and sorry episodes of her pre-heroic past!”

“She saved the world,” Neville pointed out. “I think Wizarding Britain would forgive her a bit of habitual vulgarity.”

“Don’t be cheeky, Mr. Longbottom. I’ve having lunch with your grandmother this coming week; I’d hate to disappoint her with a bad report of your manners after you’ve got off to such a promising start. Which reminds me.” She reached into her pocket and removed a small, thick book. “While I’m admittedly impressed by your above-average vocabulary and appropriate and applicable patterns of usage, I am equally dismayed by your spelling. This is called a dictionary. Use it. I very nearly had to hire a translator to decipher your last essay.”

“I have one already,” he said meekly. “But you have to know how to spell a word, Professor, before you can look it up.”

“Professor Flitwick charmed this one just for you. He was...” She adjusted her glasses. “Delighted to do it for you. No, thrilled. Open it to the letter with which your word begins – one can hope you can at least manage that much – and speak clearly. The pages will turn on their own, and the appropriate entry will be highlighted.”


“Your mother was a hamster, Potter,” Neville muttered at him under his breath as he grabbed back. “And your father smelled of elderberries. For the record.”

“Your folks are Monty Python fans?” he muttered back. “Really?” Behind them, Hermione brightened.

“Your gran got the package then? Of the movies my parents boxed up?”

“She did, thank you ever so, Granger. The nurse says my dad’s been making clopping noises now every time he wanders down the ward, and my mother refuses to take a bath.”

“Will you lot shut up?” Ron snapped from his seat in front of them. “I am trying to get this stupid,
“stupid spell to work!” He glared over the shoulder of his crisp new black robes (complete with crumb repulsion and auto-ironing charms) and from under his professionally styled shock of red hair. “You saw the letter from Mum; I only get the new Nimbus this summer if I get all Es and Os, even in Potions, and she meant it!”

“It is not a stupid spell, Mr. Weasley.” Professor McGonagall stopped beside him. “Don’t clutch your wand so; it will only get nervous if it senses your abject desperation, and will fail to respond entirely. There, that’s it. Now, extend your little finger along the left side there, flick your wrist, and... Excellent! Ten points to Gryffindor!”

“Woot!” Ron cheered. “One more twig in the basket!”

Neville stuffed his fist in his mouth and nearly slid under the desk. Harry’s shoulders shook.

“She’s doing it on purpose,” he muttered as he desperately tried to quell his laughter. “I know she is. She has to be!”

And at that, the bell rang... Neville sobered immediately, emerged from under the desk, stuffed his books hastily away, and, visibly bracing himself, slung his bag over his shoulder.

“Good luck, man,” Harry murmured as he packed his own things. “Be strong, now.”

“Thanks, Harry.”

“Say hi to your Gran for me, mate,” Ron said, looking up. “And tell her Charlie’s doing good. Still sleeping, but the Healers’ last reports said the latest graft on his core looks like it’s starting to take.”

“That’s fantastic,” Neville said. “I’ll definitely pass it on.”

“You’re leaving now, Neville?” Hermione asked. “But we’re not done classes for the day yet!”

“I’ve been having some headaches,” he lied awkwardly. “Gran made me an appointment in Hogsmeade to have my eyes checked, and we’re going to lunch after. I probably won’t be back till tonight, right before I floo out with Harry and Professor Black and Professor Lupin for the weekend.”

“Ah,” she said. “Well, we’ll take notes for you. Have fun!” She hurried off. The boys followed quietly, Ron mumbling and flicking his wand again as he went.
As You Drift Past the Flowers

Chapter Summary

Okay, this chapter was so long that I ended up splitting it into two parts. Don't worry; the next section will be up in a day or two!

Longbottom Manor

Augusta Domitia Claudia, Dame Lady Longbottom (‘Dame’ and ‘Lady’ were Muggle titles, and if they didn’t exactly grant the witch in question extra points or credibility in the Wizarding world, they didn’t, given the source, do her any harm either), nee Augusta Domitia Claudia Fawley, had been accused of many things in her lifetime, but never of being an inherently unobservant woman. She had realized for quite some time now that something was profoundly troubling her grandson Neville - troubling him far beyond any level that her fairly extensive, if by nature rather structured, imagination could comprehend. Given that, she also recognized that Neville, if not remotely like his mother and father in any recognizable manner, was exactly like her in the one way at least; he heartily disliked being pushed into talking on a subject that he did not want to talk on. He was, in fact, more likely to bite the extended and worried hand (politely of course; she’d managed to instill that much in him) if it was extended before he was damned good and ready to accept it.

Augusta had, therefore, extended nothing: only proceeded to half-worry herself to death in discreet and proper, socially approved style. She was not so naive to think that any child who had witnessed his parents’ torturous descent into insanity could be unaffected in either the short or long term, and she couldn’t help but wonder (though she never said anything; that kind of borrowed trouble tended to come with rather high interest rates), if the effects of her grandson’s horrific experience were finally coming to a kind of twisted bloom that would eventually strangle him entirely. The fact that he’d only been sixteen months old that night had only disturbed her more as time passed; the entire extended Longbottom family’s (except Algie’s, the great pillock) chronic worry for their heir’s magic, in fact, had not been so much worry that he was a natural Squib, but rather that he’d been so definitively traumatized by what he’d been forced to oversee that he was rejecting himself as a magical being entirely.

Literally forced to oversee, for small Neville been strapped in a high chair when Crouch and the Lestranges arrived, and the thought that he’d been so easily positioned to ‘supervise’ the proceedings, Crouch Jr. had testified, his little wet tongue flicking wildly and his wide eyes glued on his victims’ mother with feral glee, had...

Amused them.

This is how it’s done, ickle baby, Bellatrix had cackled. Watch and learn, bitty Nevvy. Make the U nice and long, and remember, you have to MEAN it. Come on, Mummy. Come on, Daddy. It’s time for Nevvy’s lessons! Let’s... help...him... LEARN!

Augusta Longbottom sat in her high-backed chair in her formal parlour, watching and waiting as the boy stood at the window, back to her, and gazed sightlessly out at his beloved, gently fading gardens. Sixteen months old, she thought... And nineteen months since she’d taken him that
completely ordinary spring afternoon for one of their completely unremarkable twice-monthly visits to Frank and Alice. For some reason, Neville had woken that morning as if it hadn’t been like every other morning since the first – no, he’d woken with completely perplexing and unwarranted and alarmingly obvious hope. Hope that this time something would be different. That something might have, would have, could have changed, that...

Augusta closed her eyes briefly, there in her high-backed chair in her impervious parlor that smelled ever of gentle, fading gardens and untouchable memories.

Nothing would. Nothing could.

But for that one moment, one hour, she’d watched as Neville had fairly vibrated with the belief that it had. And even though he’d come home empty-eyed, devastated and dark in a manner that, much to her undying shame, he obviously hadn’t even expected her to notice, it had been enough to make her, too remember what she had believed at the beginning of Longbottom’s long nightmare, before the plot had yet and so firmly established itself. And it had been enough (along with that shame; her eyes had been opened in more ways than the one that day) for something... to force her extend her own hands and seize again that which her grandson, at nine years old, had just so gently, and in such discreet and proper, socially approved style, set down forever.

Someone had to have it, she’d mused. It was just plain unfair that poor Frank and Alice should have to face the long decades ahead without even one person in the world to look out for them on anything but the purely physical level. So she’d hoped, deliberately at first, and after awhile, the deliberate had become a habit. And sometimes, in Augusta Longbottom’s dreams, if for just a fleeting moment, it became something close to real.

She listened to him sigh lightly, and watched as he squared his small, plump shoulders, removed his hands from his robe pockets, and turned to face her. His round, sweet face was not quite as round, she thought, as it had been when she put him on the train for Hogwarts, and his eyebrows were definitely darker. She waited patiently as he came forward and sat opposite in what had been his grandfather’s chair, on the very edge so that his feet would lie flat on the floor. Augusta rather hoped he would hit a growth spurt soon, if only for his own dignity’s sake.

The sigh turned into an explosive gust of breath.

“Where to start,” he said, almost to himself. He hadn’t realized he’d spoken out loud. He squared his shoulders again.

“Gran,” he said firmly. “I want to show you something, alright? As pre-emptive proof of what I’m about to tell you. Only you have to promise not to scream, alright?”

“I do not scream, Neville,” she said with that formidable dignity of her own. It took every ounce of self-control she had not to laugh. Good God, she thought. Where did that come from? “You know this.”

“I do,” he conceded. “But I’d still like your promise.”

Her lips did twitch at that, if only barely. He just looked so grave, the poor dear. So deadly, deadly serious, like an old, old man in a child’s body.

“Would you like me to make an Unbreakable Vow?” she asked politely.

He tugged at his lower lip. She frowned, momentarily distracted. That was a new habit, she thought, displeased, and she wondered where he’d picked it up. It wasn’t exactly unattractive; he had good
enough teeth even without corrective spells, but still. She frowned again, as she blinked, and blinked again.

Had his ears just...

Surely it was a trick of the light. It had to be.

“No,” he was saying judiciously. “No, I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“You don’t think...” She stared at him, taken aback. In the end though, though she didn’t respond verbally, he’d read her assent well.

So she didn’t scream when he reached down to remove his shoes and socks, and didn’t scream when he retrieved his wand from his sleeve and waved it about, clearing the room in an instant in a manner that sent every stick of furniture but the chair she sat on scuttling back against the walls (though she did gasp rather loudly; she’d known he was doing rather alarmingly well at school, but there was alarming and there was alarming).

She didn’t even scream (though her bitten tongue was swollen for a week after; she could have healed herself of course, but she kept the wound as a reminder never, never, never to assume that just because she, Dame Lady Augusta Domitia Claudia had given up (mostly) on hope, that the world could not yet yield her any surprises) when...

Without a word, without a wand... Her eleven-year-old grandson transformed into a gigantic bear.

That being done, and that being said, she felt perfectly justified in fainting. There had been nothing in the bargain: nothing at all, after all, forbidding that.

Neville (or the thing purporting to be Neville) poured her tea, eminently mindful of the wand-tip nestled next to his collar, and sat back properly at her indication. Augusta sipped, the still-pointed wand never wavering. After the second sip, she lowered her cup, though she didn’t put it down.

“Very well,” she said. “You brewed it as properly as I taught you. I am, in light of that fact, and as an hour has passed in my company without your resorting to any liquid that might include Polyjuice Potion, willing to accept your identity, at least for the moment. Don’t get too comfortable though. You are...” She sipped a third time, deeply. “On notice. Now. Where did you get all this power, young man? If I find out that you have been dabbling with things best left to no one at all, you will regret it.”

“I’ve not gone Dark, Gran,” Neville said patiently. He looked amused. She hated it when he looked amused. His lips curled just like her late husband’s, and goodness. That was new too. His eyebrow was quirking just like...

She quelled the comparison immediately, pushing the constant image of her son’s face from her mind as firmly as she could manage it.

“Excellent,” she said. “I’m glad to hear it. Go on.”

“I’ve traveled here from a parallel world, on a mission to finish off Voldemort for once and all,” he said obligingly. “As well as to accomplish some further unrelated business. Well, not unrelated. Very related, actually, in all ways, but let’s start with the first. I’m sure you’ll have enough questions there to be going on with.”
There was not enough tea in the world, she thought, as she lowered her cup.

“A parallel world,” she repeated disbelievingly. “You don’t say.”

“I do,” he said. “I’m dead there, actually. At a hundred thirty-six,” he added hastily. “I lived out my full lifespan and then some. I had to; the invoked ritual involved four people, or rather souls; two murdered and two who’d died naturally, for balance, you know...”

“You murdered people to complete a ritual? Neville Frank Longbottom!”

“No, Gran.” He actually rolled his eyes. “I did not. Voldemort did. I – we – just capitalized on the fact of their misfortune. With their souls’ full consent, I might add, and now they’re back with me, and quite determined to avenge the acts, though again, he’s not really the main reason we’re all here. We just need to get rid of him because he’s a big pillock, and is in the way of ruining. Erhm.” He considered his words. “Everything.”

“I see.” She sat back. For some wild reason, quite beyond her ken, she actually found herself considering the possibility that he was telling the truth. It would certainly explain quite a lot, she thought. Small things, mostly, but then, when it came down to it, the small things were generally the ones that required the most of that. Then again, maybe she’d just been reading one too many of Frank’s old muggle science fiction and fantasy novels. Time passed slowly of the evenings at Longbottom Manor, and sleep was hard to come by... That was her excuse, she thought, and she was sticking to it. “Surely though, you’ve been here – in this world, that is - long enough to realize that your friend Potter took care of that already?’

“Don’t make like you’re humouring me, Gran. It’s really annoying, and bad manners besides. I know I don’t look it, but I’m actually your elder, like I said.”

“Cheeky,” she said, but it was automatic. Glamours were a possibility, she thought, but... No. The oculist would have spotted those right away.

Alien cloning it was, then.

“He’s gone,” Neville elaborated. “But he’s not dead. Not dead dead, I know you’ve had to have heard through your contacts in the ministry that his spirit, or what was left of it, was possessing Professor Quirrell?’

She sighed.

“Yes,” she conceded. “I have.”

“Brilliant. Well, Harry and I are on that. And the other two as well, though Harry doesn’t know about them. Or rather, he does, but doesn’t remember he does. He doesn’t know about much, actually; that was part of the ritual too. He had to come back blind because he’s the most vulnerable of all of us and could ruin the whole thing if Voldemort cottons on to the fact that they’re mentally linked before we finish him off, so at the moment, he just thinks we two died and somehow ended up going back in time together. It would be really bad, see, if he – Voldemort, that is – got any inkling of the fact that a ritual like the one I just described – one that can allow you to cross worlds – was possible. It was easier just to erase that information than risk it getting picked up on in a really unlucky moment.”

Augusta drained her tea, and set her wand aside.

“Her Majesty,” she informed her grandson, ‘Would absolutely love you. You have the kind of creative, paranoid imagination that she adores in her prospective informants.”
“You’re actually admitting you’re a spy?” he said, surprised. “You never would in my world; you insisted, right to the end, that you only ever got together with her once a month to drink tea and despair of your relatives.”

“Nev... Oh, never mind. Of course I’m not a spy. And I never despaired of you, really. I might have thrown up my hands now and again, but it is not the same thing.”

“You got over that when I was made Deputy Head of Hogwarts,” he noted. “For the record. And you were downright proud – for you – when I made full Headmaster.”

“I was, was I,” she said dryly. “I’ll give you this, you lie fantastically well.”

“And I’d take fantastic offense at that, only from you, I know it’s a fantastic compliment. Though I was telling the truth there, for the record. My teacher said I had a natural talent for it,” he said modestly. “Lying, that is. I’m pants at Occlumency, so he taught me the other instead. Mind you, I prefer to think on it as acting. Lying just sounds so... Crass.”

“Mmhmm. Alright then, Headmaster. What was your wife’s occupation? May I presume you have one?’

“Of course I do. Or rather, did.” His eyes shadowed. “She died about seven years ago now. She was the landlady at the Leaky Cauldron.”

“Name?” she demanded.

“Oh no,” he said. “Little Nev’s still blooming right where I planted him, waiting for me to finish the job so he can come back and live his life here again, and I’m not seeding you with the kind of information that could... OW, Gran! Not in my eye!”

“You will,” she said, on her feet now, and standing over him with her wand pressing quite painfully. “Have considerably more to worry on than your eye if you don’t return me my grandson this instant, you bounder. I’ve put up with this nonsense quite enough, I think, if only for the fact that you do make a proper cup of tea, but now...”

Neville yelped in alarm as she placed an indelicate heel carefully. “If you don’t want me to step down... It’s time to speak up. Where is my Neville, and exactly how long of the thirty seconds you have to return him to me should I expect it to take before my sadly rheumatic knee gives out?’

“Gran,” he said, strangled. “Please. Think of your great-grandchildren!”

“Oh, I am,” she said grimly. “Perhaps you’d best think on yours?”

“Bugger,” he said. “For God’s...” He closed his eyes. “He’s with Harry.”

“And where is Harry?’

“At Hogwar... OW! Gran, please! Hannah will kill me; she...”

“Hannah... Hannah Abbott?’ she inquired sweetly.

“Yes, yes, she...” He paused, and swore again. “Bugger!”

“Indeed. And...Thank you.” She removed the heel and sat down again, setting her wand aside and refreshing her tea. Neville struggled to his feet, sweating, and collapsed in his chair.

“That,” he informed her, “was not on.”
“Effective though,” she noted. “Alright. Let’s suppose... And it’s only a supposition that I’m willing to entertain till I come up with a reasonable explanation on why you’re suddenly channeling your long-lost American relatives, of all people, in my personal parlour... That I accept your explanation. Parallel worlds and a ritual that involves four souls: two murdered and two naturally deceased... It only follows, therefore, if balance was so crucial an element, that the outgoing power emitted by two natural, aged and dying souls should be counterbalanced by the incoming power of two natural, living, children’s souls. Those would be my Neville’s, and young Potter’s, obviously. May I ask who is in charge of them now, in your world?”

He gazed at her, astonished. She waved him off.

“Er,” he said. “That’d be... Er. My son Frankie, and his wife Stella. Wow. That was really impressive, Gran!”

“Mm. Wouldn’t they be rather aged by now?”

“Not terribly, no. Hannah and I had him when we were close to sixty. He was our first and only. For a long time we thought we couldn’t have any at all, but he surprised us.”

“Sixty?” she repeated, alarmed. “And with the bloodlines crossed through the Abbotts... Neville... Was he a...”

She couldn’t finish the sentence. He smiled at her reassuringly.

“He’s magical,” he assured her. “Not very, but enough to manage elementary wandwork.”

“He didn’t – doesn’t - have enough magic to go to Hogwarts?” Her face fell.

“No, no. He does – did; he even got a letter, but in the end, he decided – and it was his decision; he’s always known his own mind – that he just didn’t want to put himself through the kind of pain and struggle that that would have entailed when he wouldn’t have likely achieved a single OWL in anything that involved more than pure theory. So he went to Eton instead, and Cambridge after, and really, Gran, he was fine. Is fine. He’s had a wonderful life, a great career, has loads of friends in both worlds, and his children –he’s got four of them; three boys and a girl – are amazing. Stella Greengrass, their mother, is Daphne Greengrass’s daughter, and Daphne married, believe it or not, a Muggle, so they’ve got loads of magical talent between them. And being a Squib or a near-Squib doesn’t have nearly the stigma that is does now anyway. In fact, in certain circles – goblin circles specifically – it’s considered an advantage, if you have the mind and instincts to overcome the challenges, anyway.”

“He works for the goblins?”

“We’ve got lots of time to talk on that sort of thing later, now that you know the essentials. Can we get on with the topics at hand, please?”

“These are the essentials,” she said tartly. ‘Good Lord, child. You’re a hundred thirty-six – thirty-eight, now - and you haven’t learned that yet? How long does it take?”

He sighed.

“I’ve missed you so much,” he said wistfully. “Horribly. You have no idea, Gran.”

Augusta found herself smiling at him softly... And mentally, quickly, before she could stop herself, and in that most unladylike manner, shrugged. Perhaps that old Muggle saying that Her Majesty was so fond of really was true. Perhaps one did have to make the decision to believe before one would be
able to see.

Then again, Her Majesty had also told her - many, many times - that she needed to get out more. Parallel worlds were a bit far, mind you, but she supposed that accepting visitors was a good beginning.

“I suppose you must have... You may kiss me, then,” she said regally, and as she put her wand down and Neville slid off the chair and came to nestle in her arms, she pressed her lips to his smooth blond head and closed her eyes, recalling yet another royal cliché.

_in for a penny_

“Something’s bothering you,” she said directly. “Beyond the obvious. It has been, for a long time now. Something beyond...” She waved a hand, not letting him go. “All of this. What is it, child?”

“I’m not sure I’m ready to tell you,” he said honestly, from the starched, bony haven of her arms. “I thought I was. It was the whole reason I decided to tell you. But it really might change your opinion of me, Gran. No, it might change your opinion of Little Nev, when he gets back, because. Well. Whatever potential I have... He has too. He is me, when I was that age. This age. Exactly me. He had to be, or we wouldn’t have been able to swap out. There are other worlds beyond this one and mine, you know, and some of them did fit the rather precise physical and temporal criteria of the ritual. Souls though... They’re a lot harder to match.”

She helped him sit on her knee, or rather, to lean against it in imitation.

“I have not,” she said. “Been an exact paragon of motherhood, Neville, and if your father were ever to return to us... He would tell you, I’m sure, that I never have been. Never mind the fact that one does not become a member of the Order of the Vulture in Her Muggle Majesty’s Very, Very Secret Service without learning how to press, fold, charm, and properly store one’s personal skeletons in the proverbial closet.”

“The Order of the Vulture?”

She twisted his ear lightly.

“There are gentlemanly quirks,” she said wryly, "or rather, ladylike quirks, and then there is simple bad taste. Then, too, there are Royals with rather more of a sense of perverse humour than is good for them.”

“It’s not that,” he said. “Well, that too... Only... After you died, Gran... My Patronus changed.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It was a toad,” he explained. “Trevor, remember... But after you died, I got Valerian.” He retrieved her wand, concentrated, and waved. The huge silvery bird lurched and glowered at them, flapping once around the room and fading out. She kissed him again.

“Tell me,” she said. “I promise I will attempt to curb my disapproval.”

The small boy before her ran a hand over his hair and closed his own eyes. She waited.

“You saw,” he blurted. “I’m an Animagus. A bear. After I got back... In the spring of ’90... We went to see mum and dad. You won’t remember, I’m sure...”

“I remember,” she said.
“The weekend after,” he said. “I brewed a Somnolia potion. I put it in your tea. And I went to Azkaban.”

Augusta Longbottom processed that... Then pulled back slightly and looked down at her agonized grandson.

“You brewed a Somnolia potion?” she repeated.

“Um. Yes. And went to Azkaban, and...”

“But that potion requires a Mastery, child! You’re not even allowed to attempt it without one; it may take only thirty minutes, but it has over a hundred different ingredients!”

“Yeah, it’s a bit tricky, but the house-elves were very helpful that way, and... You did hear me say I went to Azkaban, right?’

“Yes, yes. Gracious me. A Potions Master!” She shook her head. “Whatever happened to Herbology?”

“Oh, I have a Mastery in that too. And a PHD in Botanical Science from Oxford, and a Master’s – not a Mastery, but Master’s – in Chemistry.”

She stared down at him.

“They all kind of go together,” he assured her. “You’d be surprised, really. It wasn’t nearly as much work as it sounds.”

“And you became Headmaster besides?”

“At seventy-three, yeah. I was Deputy for ten years before that though, and Herbology Professor for twenty three years before that.”

She retrieved her mug, and sipped – no, slurped – in a most undignified manner.

“Very well,” she said when she was properly bolstered. “You may tell me about Azkaban now. I’ll need to hear every detail, I think, to counter the rapid swelling of my head coming on from having spawned such a spectacularly over-achieving grandchild.” She held up a finger. “Wait. First... Tell me. Or rather... Don’t. You killed He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named too, didn’t you?”

“No. He killed himself in the end, sort of, with a bit of assistance from Harry anyway.”

“Did you get Bellatrix, at least?”

He hesitated. When he spoke, close as she was, she had to lean forward to hear him.

“Not in my world,” he whispered. “Not in my world, Gran.”

He clung to her, desperately and completely and utterly eleven just for that moment, and in that moment... Augusta Longbottom understood everything. Believed everything... And saw everything. Everything, and she felt her grandson’s hot tears soaking through the velvet bodice of her long green gown, and patted his cheek gently.

“My boy,” she said. He sniffled, and looked up, his round little face smeared with tears. She wiped them away.

“You’re not mad,” he asked in that timid manner she knew so well. Frank, she thought, had been a
timid child, for all of about a week anyway, till Algie had laughed it out of him. Neville, she
reflected, was made of tougher stuff. “Or disgusted? I mean... I know who she was, but... I killed her,
Gran! I ...” He struggled valiantly. “I murdered her. I chewed her up, and... And spit her back in her
own face, and... And I laughed. And I meant it!”

“Sometimes,” Augusta Domitia Claudia Dame Lady Longbottom said grimly, “you have to mean it,
Neville.”

“But...”

“No buts.” She took his face in both hands again and kissed his sweaty forehead regally again, and
said again, as she had in the side room at the funeral parlor... “Longbottom is satisfied.”

He hauled a handkerchief out of his trouser pocket, and scrubbed at his face. She motioned him back
to his grandfather’s chair, and resettled her skirts.

“Dolly,” she called. There was a pop, and a frantic, frazzled house-elf popped in.

“Yes, Madam,” she said. “Dolly is here. Dolly is going crazy, Dolly thinks, but Dolly is here. What
can Dolly do for Madam? Only Dolly is begging Madam, don’t make Dolly go to Grimmauld Place
with the other elves to help with the cleaning there, because Dolly popped over to give help with an
especially big and dirty carpet, and...” She shuddered violently and convulsively, and wailed...
“There were things under it!”

"Grimmauld Place?"

“You don’t have to go back, Dolly,” Neville said hastily. “And the second shift should be arriving
soon in any case; some of the elves at Hogwarts volunteered when Harry told them that the
renovations were going to be his wedding present to Professors Black and Lupin. May we get more
tea, please? And maybe some beef sandwiches?”

“Tea, yes. Beef, no. Dolly is deciding that this is a vegetarian household now. No more live things,
not after watching Kreacher eat those...” She couldn’t even finish the sentence, only shuddered
again, and quite nearly gagged at the memory. Augusta sighed as she popped out again.

“I will take you out for dinner, I think,” she said. “When we are done here, and before I return you to
school. Now, why don’t you tell me more about this ritual and what it’s meant to accomplish, and oh
yes, most immediately, it sounds like, how we intend to rid ourselves of That Thing?”

Neville tugged at his lip again... She watched closely this time. Sure enough...

“You might want to watch your ears,” she said. “They seem to sprout when you do that.”

“Uh? Oh.” He dropped his hand. “Sorry. Habit. It amused literally eight decades worth of blubbing,
homesick first years. Alright. Alright. I think the best way to do this is to call in the other two. They
can help me explain some of the technical specifics from the other side of things, if you have
questions, and you might want to see ... One of them... Again in any case.”

“Oh?”

“No screaming,” he warned. “And no fainting either. You scared the living shite out of me there; I
thought I’d killed you on the spot!”

“Watch your mouth!” she snapped. He only laughed.
“Keep that one on tap,” he advised, and, reaching into his pocket again, extracted a tiny miniature portrait, leaned it carefully against the coffee table opposite, and tapped it three times with his wand.
Chapter Notes

Augusta: Part Two.

One hour later

The session had been informative, if necessarily brief – Snape had classes to get back to, and Lily her job at an apothecary in Kent – and now it was Augusta’s turn to stand by the window. Neville sat on the chair, himself again, or at least as he had been at seventy. The old woman had been relatively composed throughout the re-introductions and the story, if rather irritated that they wouldn’t tell her the final point of the ritual... Snape had been absolute on that point; he said that there was too much that could go wrong yet, but some questions, Neville knew, she had been saving for after they left, and now that they were gone, her mind was once again on her errant grandson. Her bony knuckles gripped the casement tightly, and her shoulders were tight to the point of the brittle under the dark green velvet.

“What would persuade him to go?’ she asked. “What did you tell him that would persuade him to leave everything he’d known for up to five years? That was over half his life at that point!”

“The truth, Gran,” Neville said patiently. “He isn’t a stupid boy, you know. If someone had come to me and said “Nev, the people who nearly destroyed your world once are going to return in five years to have another go; d’you want in on the plan that will take them down before they get started,” I would have wanted to help too – particularly given my very own personal twice-monthly reminders of the potential consequences.”

It was a bit more blunt than was tactful, perhaps, but it was hard to deny the logic there. Still. Augusta found that she really didn’t want to know the answer to her next question. It had to be asked, though – for his sake. For both of their sakes. It was long overdue.

“How did you convince him it was really you,” she said harshly. Painfully. Behind her, his eyes fluttered closed in similar pain.

“Gran,” he said. “Don’t ask me that. Please. Of all things… Don’t ask me that.”

“Tell me.”

He pushed himself up instead, and came to stand behind her. Wrapped his arms around her firmly. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to lean back against him, just the once. His body was strong and sturdy and quite ridiculously reassuring. Like Frank’s, she thought, but a good head taller and fifty pounds heavier than Frank’s had ever been. She could feel him breathing, feel his heart beating against her through that ridiculous orange jumper (she wouldn’t admit it, but she actually rather liked the colour on him), and imagined that she could actually hear him sorting through his thoughts. She imagined his mouth opening and closing as he sorted through possible answers, and finally, as she had, so many times before (if not for the same reasons) saved him the trouble.

“He remembers what happened that night,” she said. “Doesn’t he? You remember. The Obliviators offered… The best of them… But they couldn’t guarantee…” She pinched her nose. “You were
only sixteen months old. It’s harder, so much harder, when the subject is a baby. The neural paths are still forming.”

His heart seemed to slow against her back, just for a moment.

“Not the visuals, no,” he said quietly. “I had my eyes closed for most of it. But … Yes. He - we – remember. Harry had some memories too. His mother screaming, Voldemort laughing, the green light… That was all though, till he went to a Mind Healer when he was grown. She helped him recover the rest. The bits he told us about in the restaurant.”

“Did you?” she asked bluntly.

“Go to a Mind Healer? No. I wasn’t missing any bits that I ever wanted to remember.”

“Why did you –he – my Neville - never tell me?” For the first time, she sounded openly tearful.

Neville actually sat down at that, and so agitated was she that she barely noticed, much less objected, when this time, he pulled her into his lap.

“Oh Gran.” He let out his breath in a sigh: warm and tea-scented against her cheek. “I knew, even then… That you prayed, and do pray, every night, that, at the very blessed least, Mum and Dad live in a quiet void. If I had told you that the other lived in me instead…”

“Did she tell you that? The other me, I mean?”

“No.” His lips pressed to her hair. “She didn’t have to. For years… I prayed right along with her. With both of you, I imagine.”

She twisted and turned on him at that, as a cat pouncing on a mouse. As he’d known she would. Her eyes blazed.

“Prayed,” she prodded. “Past tense… Do you know, then, now, where they do live? Or how? Or in what state?”

“I brought the Sorting Hat in,” he said. “At one point. It can’t lie. It doesn’t see the point. They experience sensations and emotions. Pleasure, distress… The essentials. They recognize faces, if they see them often enough. Experience emotions, as pertains to certain faces. Certain colors and textures soothe them, and certain tastes, though we already knew that. I’ve been… It’s why I suggested the take-away curry way back when, on my birthday, and regularly thereafter; I knew it from my own experience that it would go over well. They can respond to new things, but only when they’re given something new to respond to. Now that you know, we might want to work a bit more with that; St. Mungo’s is great, but there are a lot of things that I learned from Muggle medicine and advances there that we wizards just don’t know.”

“We’ll look into them. Does Frank recognize me?”

“He knows you,” he said carefully. “Not who you are… But he senses the maternal there, I guess. He likes seeing you. So does Mum.” He paused. “They do remember me.”

“Of course they do.” She looked him up and down, collecting herself. “You grew more than I thought you would. And you have my father’s eyebrows.”

“They’re your eyebrows too,” he pointed out. She ignored that.

“And what about young Potter? Did you have to work to convince him to leave?”
Neville snorted with sour laughter. “You’re joking, right? He didn’t even ask if he’d be able to come back, Gran.”

She grimaced and returned to her chair.

“I do not understand,” she said. “I really do, requirements of the ritual notwithstanding, how Lily Potter could sit back for two years, knowing where he was and how he was living, and not…” She gestured meaninglessly.

“She wasn’t exactly thrilled at the necessity, I imagine, and she likely wouldn’t have been able to stop herself if he’d had a nine-year-old mind as well, but he was a hundred thirty-six when he got here, Gran. It’s been a long, long time since he’d even consciously thought on his relatives, and I gather that they were like echoes around him when he did return. Since he made sure that they didn’t notice him and all. Living mannequins, or memories, existing in his background, that he just had to dodge and avoid. And he told me that he managed to get out a fair bit besides.”

“Two years alone with echoes?” she said troubled. “That’s not healthy, child, for anyone, no matter their age. We, of all people, know this. You’ll bring him by to see me?”

“Yes, of course, but…” He eyed her curiously. “You’re worried about him now? As he is, now?”

“Of course I am! He was finished. He had a right, from what I’ve heard today, to expect a bit more than what he came back to. A kind of heaven, that after all he did in his lifetime, he wasn’t yet expected to create for himself. I have never pretended to imagine or believe that this is an inherently just world, but if even the afterlife, as he perceives it, is not be depended on… He should learn that some things yet can be.”

“He has Sirius now. And Remus.”

“He does. They were not, however, given to him as a gift, were they?”

He looked down at his shoes.

“Do you wish that Little Nev had told you,” he said. “Before? Of what he remembered? Do you think it might have changed anything?”

“If wishes were dishes, then beggars would feast. It will change things now,” she said. “When he gets back.” She shook her head. “The brave child. The brave, foolish… brave child. Five years…” Her eyes were suddenly wet.

“We did tell him that it probably wouldn’t take that long. And he wouldn’t go until we told him how long you would live. And he said to tell you,” Neville ventured. “If I told you everything, before he returned… That he’d miss you. And that he loves you. Oh, and to be nice to me.”

“He did, did he.”

He grinned at her. She couldn’t help but laugh.

“Oh, you,” she said. “Come here.”

He came. She stood again and let him wrap her up, properly this time, face to face. She found, again, that she rather enjoyed the sensation of someone to lean against, and into.

“Hannah Abbott,” she mused, and then, tilting her head back (he really had grown beyond her expectations – Longbottom boasted sturdy men, well-looking men, but it was not famed for its tall
men) severely... “Did she love you like you deserved?”

“Shouldn’t you be asking me if I loved her like she deserved?”

“You are a gentleman. And a Longbottom, and no Longbottom, no matter how odd, would ever marry a woman he didn’t regard as a Queen.”

Her grandson (she could quibble there, she supposed, but it had been a long day – a long ten years – and she really wasn’t inclined) kissed her cheek again.

“She did,” he confirmed. “Every day of her life. I was so happy with her, Gran. She was the only woman I ever met who had both the heart and the nerve to match you and Mum. You got along absolutely brilliantly.”

“Mm. No need to ask if she could cook, eh?” She prodded his stomach a bit under the orange sweater.

“She couldn’t, actually. Not worth a damn. She was the landlady, not part of the kitchen staff.”

“Ah well,” his grandmother said, resigned.

“Frankie can though,” he said. “He might not be able to transfigure whiskers to fur on a cat, but the things he can do with cream and chocolate are obscene. Never mind his steak and kidney pie. His pastry there is so light and fluffy you’d think he enchanted each layer with Wingardium Leviosa.”

“And his wife? Stella?”

He laughed. “It’s why she married him, she always says. That and the fact that he’s the richest man in Wizarding Britain.”

She pulled back, astonished. “What?”

“He lives in two worlds, Gran. He’s literally the Wizard of Wall Street.”

“So she’s a gold-digger?” She looked most displeased.

“No. Dirt-digger, like me. One of my prize students, in fact, and we got along tremendously. She’s an herbo-preservationist.”

“A … What?”

“She works in Brazil,” he elaborated. “Working to regrow parts of the rainforest. Little Nev’s in heaven there, I imagine, and by the time he comes home, if all goes well, will be well on his way to a Mastery - not just an apprenticeship, but a Mastery - in the field. Who knows, he may end up inventing the field here.”

“He’s eleven!”

“He’s me,” he said simply. “I’m not a genius, but when it comes to plants, I don’t need to be. They sing to me, Gran, on a level I can’t even begin to explain, and being in the rainforests… It’s like going to the symphony, see?”

“No,” she said. “But I’m willing to take your word for it.” She nodded once, decisively, and reached for the shawl. “What will young Potter be studying?”

“No idea,” he said. “We’ll find out when he gets back. One thing’s for sure though, it won’t be
snakes.’

“Mm?’

“He’s not a Parselmouth there. When my Harry came through, he absorbed this world’s equivalent horcrux. There – Little Harry really is free.’

“Thank God for that much,” she muttered, and as he draped the warm garment around her shoulders, shook herself. “Very well. Change back. Now.”

He did, obligingly, returning to his child-self.

“DOLLY!”

There was a pop.

“Madam called Dolly?”

“I did. Master Neville and I will be dining out tonight. “ She looked the little elf over. She looked a bit more composed than she had earlier, but her floppy ears were still twitching with occasional residual agitation. “Are you feeling better now?’

“Dolly is, Madam. Thank you, Madam. Dolly is sorry for out–bursting earlier, but that nasty, nasty house is just…” She shuddered.

“Nasty?’ Neville offered helpfully. His grandmother pinched him. He yelped.

“OW! What was that for?’

“You know perfectly well what,” she said, and as Dolly popped out… “I will go change, and then you may Apparate us. To Vichy’s, I think.”

‘Can I go as an adult, at least?’ he asked meekly. “Only I’m really tired of pumpkin juice.”

“I suppose so,” she conceded. “Let’s see the evening wear, then.”

He glamoured up; she looked him over with that sharp, critical eye.

“You’ll need a name for when you’re out and about like this,” she observed. “Neil Cartwright will do.”

"Sorry?’

“Cartwright is the name of one of the offshoots of the main branch of our American relatives. Neil is a variation of Neville. You’re a Potions Master: my favorite cousin visiting from abroad. Can you charm yourself the appropriate accent?”

“Of course. Why am I only visiting you after all these years, though?’

“I may not be scheduled to die for another sixty years, Neville, but the world doesn’t know that. It would behoove me, would it not, to make the arrangements for your and your parents’ guardianship should something happen to me before your majority, particularly now that our vaults have been so thoroughly refreshed, or would you rather I leave everything - and you, and your parents again - to Algie?’”

He shuddered.
The week surrounding October’s full moon, Harry thought in bemused retrospect, was one of the first times in his life that he could actually relate to the rest of the world in terms of dodging, rather than initiating, incidental chaos. It was most alarming, if in some ways hugely entertaining, and, of course, loud; the days were simply full of adults screaming at one another in what he couldn’t help but think of as (his aspen wand, safely stowed in his sleeve, snifffed in agreement), blatantly Gryffindorish displays of emotion.

It had started off harmlessly enough on the afternoon of the 29th of October. It was a Wednesday, and Remus and Sirius had taken the four now-inseparable first years to visit the newly revived Charlie Weasley after classes. Neville had excused himself at the great doors, swinging right to the lifts and the Janus Thickey Ward, while the other three barreled into Charlie's room bearing the traditional and always-welcome therapeutic cocktail: greetings, gossip, and gifts.

“I cannot believe,” Hermione said severely as she perched on the end of the patient’s expanded bed and sorted through the stacks of Muggle paperbacks that Harry had owled in the previous week for his entertainment, "that you have an owl at the Reserves named Smaug, and that nobody there knows where the name comes from!"

“Lighten up, Hermione,” Ron said around a mouthful of gummy worms. He was sprawled beside her and alongside Charlie, sorting through a gigantic bag of imported Muggle candy. “They knew it was from a book at least, didn’t they?’

“Yes, but not… Oh, never mind. Here, Charlie, have a look at this one.”

“Gimme a mo’,” Charlie said absently, turning a page as he nibbled on a Flake bar. He was thinner after his month of enforced rest, of course, and his hair was shorter – in the end, Molly hadn’t been able to resist the temptation - but his colour was good, and his natural energy was very slowly returning. “Have to say, this one’s really good. A little demented, but really good.’

“What… Oh.” Harry craned his neck. “Stephen King,” he explained to Hermione. “Where’d you get that one? It wasn’t in the lot I sent you.”

“Friend of mine in the Auror Academy brought it by. Or rather, she got her dad to; he’s Muggleborn and has access to what she calls the ‘good stuff’. Great bloke: he’s been by a couple of times while I was sleeping, the healers said, and left a whole pile to go with yours, never mind the edibles.” He licked chocolate off the side of his hand, then gagged as he read an over-descriptive paragraph. “Urgghh! What kind of a person comes up with this kind of thing, and are we sure he wasn’t a Dark Wizard during the war?’


so many last night they made my entire mouth *and* all my teeth turn black. Mum came by and she thought I was rotting from the inside out. Screamed half the bloody hospital down; it was great.”

The male chorus laughed riotously.


“What’s wrong with…” Charlie peered over, and wrinkled his snub, freckled nose. “Oh. *That* one. No, don’t bin it; I set it aside for Mum. It’s her kind of thing, even if it isn’t mine. I only got about three words in before I tossed it over for one of the ones you sent, Harry— the one with the Muggleborn Animagus whose family couldn’t deal?”

“Mm?”


“Baby steps,” he mouthed. He pushed his own stack of books and sundries aside, brushed off a few crumbs and sat up with a bounce, returning his attention to their host. “So. You said that the Draught’s out of your system now, with no side effects, and that the first treatments seem to be helping… Did they say when you get to go home?”

“Couple weeks, hopefully. Though there’s been a bit of a change in plans there.”

“Uh?” Ron swallowed stickily. “There has been?”

“Yeah. My healers went to check out the Burrow, and there’s just too much magic there. The whole place is held together *by* magic, and it oozes, right, and they still want me exposed to as little as possible, or at least to build up to it once I’m off the suppressants, so I’m renting a flat here in London Muggleside for a couple of months, with Bill. Mum’ll still be by regularly, of course, and there’ll be a house-elf full time – one trained to spot medical problems, but…”

“Hey Charlie,” a familiar deep voice hailed. “Mind if I come in?”

“Mr. Cartwright!” Charlie sat up all the way. Harry turned, startled at first, then outright shocked. Before them stood six foot three inches of Neville, clad in neat brown slacks, gold turtleneck and the distinctively styled dark robes and badge of a Potions Master. Neville had filled him in, of course, on the details of his new public identity, and too, that he’d managed to visit the hospital itself once or twice with his Gran in order to arrange visitation, case-specific consulting privileges and whatever-else-needed-to-be-managed, but still. It hadn't really processed. And he certainly hadn't told him that he intended to show himself that day - or that he'd apparently acquainted himself with Charlie.

He felt, irrationally, a rather ridiculous pang of jealousy.

“This is Neil Cartwright,” Charlie introduced the children, hastily gathering up candy wrappers. “He’s not on my case, exactly; not as a healer anyway. Only he’s visiting the Longbottoms –”

“A augusta is my third cousin,” Neville/Neil supplied. “We’ve been pen friends for decades –”

“So he can see if there’s anything he’s been working on that might help Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom. Madam Longbottom asked if he’d have a look at my records too, as a favour to see if
there’s something that he thinks might help me along. Budge that pile there, Hermione, and give him the chair.”

Hermione budge, brown eyes wide as she scrambled up beside the boys, a messy armful of books still clutched to her chest. Harry watched, bemused, as Nev seated himself comfortably. Ron gawped a bit, his own eyes fixed on…

“Don’t take this the wrong way, mate,” he said, obviously attempting for the delicate. “But they do have a floor here for that, right?”

“For what, exactly?”

"Ronald!”

“Erhm. The ears?” he said, delicately again. “And the…”

“Feet?” Neville, a.k.a Neil Cartwright, supplied in amusement. He stretched his legs out and wiggled the huge, furry obvious. Hermione clapped her hand over her mouth, squeaking adorably and dropping half her books. “Thank you for your concern, but I’m fine, really. I’m still rather new to my Animagus form – I learned it while I was on sabbatical last summer – and as it’s rather hard to transform at whim, seeing as it’s so big, I make do.”

“You’re an Animagus?” Hermione perked.

“I am,” he confirmed in his charmed (and charming) drawling American accent. “Kodiak bear. Twelve feet, hundred forty stone, and not really fit for polite company. My patients like the accessories though.”

“You just learned last year? But you’re so old!”

Charlie nearly coughed up a lung at that. Neville roared. It did sound rather bear-like. Ron took full advantage of the situation, rolling his eyes and sniffing dramatically.

“Honestly, Hermione!” he mimicked. “Can I not take you anywhere?”

She blushed furiously, even as she stammered an apology. Neville/Neil waved her off, still chuckling.

“Seventy three,” he said. “Last July. And twelve feet and a hundred forty stone were bound to take me awhile.”

“What kind of research do you do?” she asked eagerly. “You’re a Potions Master, only I can tell from your robes, but I’ve never seen your kind of crest before.”

“I’m a Potions Master, yes, but I also have a Mastery in Herbology. I specialize in the medicinal properties and possibilities of exotic plants.” He smiled at her. “You won’t have heard about most of them. I breed them myself.”

“And you’re from America?”

“Yes. I’ve spent most of my career working in Brazil, though. Haven’t published much up to this point, it’s mostly been all research and waiting out bred specimens to evolve and flower so that I can play with them, but I’ve finally come up with some definitive results.”

“And you think they can help Charlie?” Ron demanded. Charlie looked almost painfully hopeful.
Harry frowned. Neville’s forays into medical research, he knew, though groundbreaking in their own way, had never been intended to target cancer. His experiments had centered around purely neurological disorders, and most of the hybrids he’d just mentioned had taken literally decades to breed. Sure enough...

“Cancer’s not really my specialty,” Nev-as-Neil said directly and honestly. “Most of my work just isn’t applicable to his case.” He held up a hand at the crestfallen looks. “Which isn’t to say it will never be.” He turned physically to the young man in the bed. “As for that, Charlie, I’d like your permission to consult on your case for research purposes. Your condition is so rarely caught early, and though the treatments they’re giving you are working so far, they’re not in any way what anyone would call definitive.”

Ron wrinkled his nose. “What does that mean?”

“It means they’re experimenting on me,” Charlie explained. “They have ideas, and the ideas seem to be working so far, but most wizards and witches who get cancer of their magic find out when the pain starts. That’s the beginning of the real end, where there’s nothing to be done, so to a certain extent, they’re making it up as they go along. Mr. Cartwright…”


“Yeah, Neil… Sorry, Mum’s always been really squiffy about that sort of thing… Is saying that he wants to know if he can watch what they’re doing to me officially, so that maybe he can help people like me, who got caught out early, later on.”

It was more of a question… Nev nodded. Just as Hermione was about to probe further though, a trio of healers burst in, followed, of all things, by an extremely determined Augusta Longbottom wheeling a fully dressed and warmly wrapped Frank in a chair. A wide-eyed orderly wheeled Alice in another, and a second toted their meager luggage.

That was when the screaming started.

“You couldn’t have warned me?” Harry demanded later, when they were back in the dorm. Neville just shrugged.

“I didn’t think about it,” he said candidly. “Or have time to, for that matter. Checking them out today without giving notice was Gran’s idea; she didn’t want to give anyone at St. Mungo’s time to argue with her once the arrangements had been made. I did know she’s been doing some research since I first talked to her, though I should have remembered, once she makes up her mind about something, how fast she works and that there’s no going back. And there’s no doubt in my mind that they’ll be much better off in their own home anyway with those full-time private caregivers.”

“So she’s taken them back to Longbottom Manor?”

“No. To a really advanced Muggle treatment center first, for some tests and scans – Andromeda recommended the place, through her husband Ted – and she’s looking now for a little house for them after. Nothing fancy, just a place that she can decorate with their things, and where they can have real food all the time, and be taken out now and again to parks and things. There’ll be a live-in for each of them, and a few specially trained house-elves too; she’s looking at contracts for those now, from an agency that works with the same hospice that Sirius went to after he left St. Mungo’s.”

Ron, coming in on that last, had thrown himself on his bed and kicked off his shoes.

“It’s not a big deal, Harry,” he said briskly. “Not that your parents aren’t a big deal, Nev, but it was
pretty obvious, wasn’t it, that the main reason those blokes were so upset was because St. Mungo’s is losing two such regular sources of income. For the record, though, I think your Gran did the right thing. Crying shame it is, the way they treat the people up in the long term ward: like they’re already dead, right? Honestly, I wanted to smack that bint of a nurse when you told me about the first time you visited with the curry. That was just nasty, and it’s not like she’s a Muggle and would have to clean the bedpan by hand. They’re better off shot of the place, never mind that from what that Cartwright said he saw after he reviewed their records as their new co-guardian - that Healers haven’t actually been treating them with anything new, or as anything but sprouts-on-legs for years now. That’s not right, mate. Maybe there isn’t any hope for them, like Sirius said, but they’re still people.”

Harry gazed at him, bemused... Ron, for the most part, was yet Ron, but he didn’t think he’d ever get used to this inexplicable and quite bizarre sensitivity to other people’s feelings and needs.

“You’ve thought about that?” he ventured.

“Hard not to think about it, yeah?” A scowl flickered over his long, freckled face. “Only they’re heroes, aren’t they? No offense, Harry, but in a way, more heroes than your folks were. Yours only died for you. Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom... They lived, and survived, for Nev here. And looking at them now, and the way they look at him... Somewhere, somehow, they’re still doing it.”

He turned his back, shucking his robes and clothes off and reaching for his pajamas. Neville and Harry exchanged glances. Ron squawked, startled, as Neville got up abruptly and came across and hugged him. Hard.

“What...’

“Thanks,” he said, and hurtled out, leaving Harry with their perplexed friend.

“What did I say?” Ron asked him.


It was meant as a joke, but much to his immense surprise, Ron flushed a little.

“Yeah,” he said. “Actually. Not before... But now, yeah. Maybe. What?” He scowled belligerently at the blank look. “Charlie’s doing okay now – so far, anyway – but you heard him, didn’t you; they’re basically experimenting on him because nobody’s ever bothered doing proper research on the subject! That’s not healing, that’s bollocks! And now Mum and Dad say we’ve got money for any kind of school we want, and if I want that Nimbus I have to get all Os and Es anyway, don’t I? Maybe I’ll even work with that Cartwright fellow one day. He’s a bit of alright, it looks like, even with those stupid ears.’

He’d hauled on his pajamas (a tidy, crisp navy blue, accompanied by a matching hooded dressing gown and slippers) and stomped out to the loo, muttering. Harry had run a hand through his hair, bemused again... Barely had he recovered and stood to rummage for his toothbrush and soap when the dorm room banged open and Seamus burst in. Behind him sounded a very familiar roar. Two of them.

“Black and Lupin are on the warpath, mate,” he’d said breathlessly. “And it’s the row of the century. What did you do?’

“Huh? What?” Harry said inelegantly. He scrambled out after Seamus and down the stairs. Half of
Gryffindor was gathered as their two heads stood toe-to-toe, almost literally in each other’s faces.

“YOU ARE NOT GOING WITHOUT ME!” Sirius roared. “NO! I FORBID IT!”

“DO YOU WANT THIS TO WORK OR NOT?” Remus roared back. “IF YOU COME WITH ME, HE’LL KNOW SOMETHING’S UP, YOU STUPID MUTT!”

“I AM NOT A MUTT! I AM A GRIM, THE GRIMMIES OF THE GRIMS THAT EVER GRIMMED, AND I AM MAKING AN ASSOCIATED PREDICTION NOW; IF YOU GO ALONE, YOU WILL DIE, NOT BECAUSE OF THAT GREAT FLAMING CARNIVOROUS ARSEHOLE, BUT BECAUSE I WILL KILL YOU!”

“Um,” Harry said as they both paused for breath. “Pa... Professor? Is everything okay?”

“No,” Sirius snapped. “It is not okay. It is not remotely okay. DO YOU HEAR THAT?” he bellowed to Remus as he spun on his heel and stomped off towards their quarters. “IT IS NOT OKAY! AND FOR THE RECORD, I HOPE McWOLF LIKES THAT HEARTH RUG YOU’RE STANDING ON, BECAUSE YOU ARE NOT SLEEPING WITH ME TONIGHT!”

The door slammed. Remus sighed and pressed his fingers to his nose, muttering to himself as if warding off a headache.

“Don’t s’pose you want to talk about it?” Fred-slash-George ventured brightly. “Only it’s not good, I’ve heard, to keep it all bottled in. Oh, and you haven’t thrown anything yet, so there’s that to be done yet. Can’t really call it a proper lovers’ spat, can you, until you’ve thrown something, even if you are banished to the couch. Hearth rug. Whatever.”

“Put a sock in it, Weasley,” Remus said, and slammed out after Sirius... A moment later, the door opened.

“Couples fight,” he informed the room at large and Harry in particular. “It doesn’t mean we’re breaking up or anything. I might break him yet, but only a little. And I’ll put him back together again. Probably. After he admits he was wrong.”

The door slammed a third time. Everyone present exchanged furtive glances. No one seemed quite to know what to do or say.


“Oh sure,” Harry said, from where he was frowning in concentration at his feet, and flipped a dismissive hand. “I know that, and they’ve got nothing on my Uncle Vernon when someone tries to get between him and his steak-and-kidney anyway. Um. I don’t suppose any of you managed to catch where Moo... I mean, Professor Lupin, wants to go? Only I just heard the bit at the end there.”

“No idea,” Kenneth Towler said. “What about the great flaming carnivorous arsehole? Does that sound familiar to anyone?”

“My bets are on Dumbledore,” Percy said unexpectedly, and as everyone looked at him, astonished... “I’m not calling him that, but it’s only reasonable that they would think it, isn’t it? The custody date’s coming up soon, and things are bound to be getting a little tense there.” He pushed his spectacles up his nose. “I do hope you’re not worried about that yourself, Harry. Your guardians have a solid case: a more than a solid case, and inappropriately public displays of pseudo-marital tension aside -”
“Ooh, la,” Fred mocked. “Listen to you!”

“Yeah,” George agreed comfortingly. “Or don’t. Even if he does have a point this time. And that wasn’t anything in any case, like Gred said. Mum and Dad wouldn’t even call an argument like that warming up.”

“I’m not worried,” Harry lied. The twins actually came to sit beside him.

“Yes you are,” the left-side twin said. “Who wouldn’t be? Don’t worry, ickle Harry. It’ll all turn right...”

“Soon enough,” the other twin finished, and then in tandem, together... “You’ll see.”

He eyed them.

“Do you know something I don’t?’ he inquired politely.

“Many things.” Fred patted his head. “But..”

“That would be telling,” George finished, and lowered his voice. “We will tell you this much, though...”

“Get a good seat at breakfast tomorrow,” Fred grinned. “Where you can see the Head Table.”

They patted him again, once each, and sauntered off... Percy sighed. The door to the Heads’ quarters opened again. The students gawped at the sight of Sirius, almost in tears, clutching at Remus and kissing him passionately.

“Be careful,” he begged. “Please, Moonflower? I had to live nine years without you, and I can’t... I can’t... Go through that again.”

“You won’t.” Remus, now clad all in swashbuckling black with an ebony and bone flask at his belt, cupped the other man’s face in both of his hands and kissed him back, firmly and solidly. More than one student gagged rudely; the rest swooned more-or-less automatically... His co-guardian looked, Harry thought, not a little carnivorous himself, never mind the knee-length dragon-leather trench coat... The Armani and Burberry had only been the warm-up there. Sirius, much to everyone’s entertainment, had adopted dressing his fiancé as his secondary hobby, only after undressing him. “I promise, love. Keep the hearth rug warm for me.” He came over and hugged Harry hard, and murmured in his ear... “Wish me luck, cub. And keep him busy for me. Prank all of Slytherin House if you must, but... Keep him busy. I’ll try to be back by midnight.”

It took a moment for that to process, along with the flask, again, at his belt.

“You’re going after Greyback now?’ he squeaked.

“Two days till full moon. I’m not letting him have another run at anyone if I can help it, and my contacts said he’s planning something really special to commemorate the tenth anniversary of You-Know-Who’s downfall. I can’t allow that, don’t you see, but I can’t take Sirius with me either. If anything does happen... He’s got to be here for you.”

He kissed his forehead one more time, and swung out of the portrait hole. Harry watched him go, chewing his lip worriedly. He understood the rationale for leaving Sirius behind perfectly, and even agreed with it – but the thought of sending in one of his men without back-up went against every instinct he’d ever cultivated. After a moment, he tugged Neville into a corner and whispered rapidly. Neville listened carefully as he murmured, and nodded.
“Cloak?”

“Upstairs in my trunk. Broom’s shrunk underneath. And... Be careful?”

Neville just grunted, and slipped up the stairs. Less than two minutes later, a bare silvery flutter – more of air than cloth – brushed by him, and an invisible hand touched his. Harry let out a small, relieved breath. He went over to the biggest window and opened it, amid shrieks of protest.

“Sorry,” he said apologetically as Neville slipped past him and through. “I thought I heard Phineas.” He slammed the window shut. “So,” he said brightly and loudly. “Hallow’een next week. Who’s in for decorating the Slytherin common room with all the leftover pumpkin guts?”

“It’s been done,” Sirius said. He looked rather pale, but smiled a bit as he came over to hug his godson. “My third year. Sorry about that, kiddo. Pre-wedding jitters. The planner’s really getting on my nerves, and Rem said he’d take care of it all, but I’m a jealous, insecure puppy when it comes down to it, and he’s done nothing so far but stare at his arse.”

“Remus has been staring at the wedding planner’s arse?”

“No, the wedding planner’s been staring at...” He sighed. “Never mind. It’s stupid. I’m stupid. He’ll be fine.”

“I’m sure he will be,” Harry reassured him. “And just think, you can play Dread Pirate Roberts with him when he gets back!”

“Huh?”

“It’s alright.” He tugged him over to the big sofa. “Never mind. House meeting: if pumpkin guts are out, what can we do instead...’

Chapter End Notes

Next... Fenrir... Dun-dun-DUN!
 Appears on the Shore

Edinburgh, Scotland

The rain poured down in black, icy sheets, warping and bending the constant ripples of half-burnt neon light that flooded the heart of the uni district. Once upon a time, and if Remus Lupin had been a different kind of man, he would have considered this fetid urban mire - a dirty tangle of lackluster storefronts, overpriced coffee shops and dingy, compensating pubs, all surrounded by blocks of student flats and tenements - prime hunting ground; it simply teemed with hordes of angry, sullen half-educated post-adolescents in their physical prime. Perfect prospective converts, he knew, once bitten and rendered, to serve the causes of the downtrodden and suppressed... It hadn’t surprised Remus at all to learn that Greyback favoured the area. The feral Alpha preferred pre-pubescent children, yes, but converted children had that one small disadvantage; most were so small and undeveloped that they didn’t have the physical fortitude to survive the initial bite, much less their first full moon.

Greyback, of course, was always willing to take that chance. If he didn’t win offspring, he usually won a great deal of money from those peculiar variants of wizards and a few select, monied and generally paedophilic Muggles who got off on traditional gentlemanly sports such as dog-fights, cock-fights, and bear-baiting. Given the opportunity to watch, and place bets on, infants, toddlers, and grade-schoolers torturing and brutalizing themselves...

Remus had never deluded himself on the number of bets that had been placed on him surviving his first transformation, and later, the one just after he’d hit puberty. Aside from the first, that one was always, always the worst, and from the certain point of view, entertaining... Once he’d gotten through childhood... Well. Lyall Lupin had never been particularly socially adept on any level, and those who’d lost money when his son had somehow managed to beat the odds his first six years were looking greatly forward to recouping once the first rush of hormones kicked in.

Little known fact: Albus Dumbledore really wasn’t as altruistic as all that. Aberforth Dumbledore, on the other hand... He was a good man. A good man with an inexplicable soft spot for vulnerable, wounded kids... Remus didn’t know how the barkeep had come to keep his brother’s balls in his pocket, but in the end, it hadn’t mattered. All that mattered was that the younger Dumbledore took less than kindly to some of the rumours that passed through his pub, and even less on unsavory individuals (cough: bookies) who attempted to employ his premises as their headquarters. He generally just kicked them out, but on the single occasion, rumours and individuals had come a bit too close together for his moral comfort, and he’d done a bit of prying. Said prying had been construed as potential interest, and the bookie-of-the-day had tried to entice him in with a deal that included box seats for an upcoming and very particular occasion: date to be determined (you can bet on that too, if you like!) and a complimentary portkey to the site of the party thrown in for good measure.

Remus had received his invitation to Hogwarts the very next day, hand-delivered by the Headmaster himself. Lyall and Hope Lupin had cried in hysterical relief and gratitude, but Remus was a werewolf, and Albus Dumbledore hadn’t smelled particularly benevolent that day. Rather, he smelled, not of actual blood, but of the fear of blood, and more specifically, of the fear of his own blood. He didn’t smell like he was afraid of Remus himself though, not even a little bit.

Remus was not a stupid boy, or an oblivious one, and he’d always been a bit of a prodigy with maths
besides. Too, his parents had spent the last year drumming the doctrine of Stranger Danger into his head till he’d thought he’d choke on it, and the variables there, when coupled with their crippling relief, had balanced immediately. He’d realized immediately that he wasn’t just being stowed away for his education, but his own physical safety, and he knew his maxims on certainty besides: death, sin, taxes, no prisoner had ever escaped from Azkaban, and no student had ever been kidnapped from the grounds of Hogwarts. Some had met their unfortunate demises there, of course, but it wasn’t quite the same thing in the eyes of those who liked to watch their prey literally eat themselves (and at puberty, try to rape themselves) up close and in person.

He’d wondered, over the next few years, who had the power to frighten Albus Dumbledore like that. Who had the power over him, period. It wasn’t till he’d graduated and gone to the Hog’s Head for a celebratory drink that Aberforth had pulled him aside and let him know who he had to thank.

“You’re a fine lad,” he’d said. “A good lad. I know you and Black there are...” He’d waved a hand with surprising delicacy. “But here’s the thing, alright? If you ever find yourself with a kid of your own... You’ll want to keep an eye out. Old debts are never paid, y’know: the sins of the fathers, as the saying goes, and the longer they have to wait, the more money goes in the pot. Some of them what placed their bets in the first place... They have stronger backers now, if y’get my drift. The strongest, and you’re making you and yours targets in your own right, now that you’ve gone and made promises to certain people that you more’n likely won’t be able, or even allowed, to keep.”

Remus’s nostrils had flared at that, and his eyes had narrowed. Aberforth just nodded.

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The evening festivities in Gryffindor Tower were in full swing, supplemented by much food and drink from the kitchens. Harry sat on the arm of one of the sofas, nibbling at a ginger biscuit and frowning at Alicia Spinnet’s profile. Something was wrong there, he thought. Something was off.

His Auror senses, already on high alert, were practically screaming at him, and it had, of all things, to do with...

“Alicia?” he said tentatively. She tilted her head back inquiringly. “Did you change your shampoo or something?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.” No, that wasn’t it. Neither was it the way she brushed her hair back behind her ears, tucking it securely in with the help of her pink Alice band. No, he remembered that much well enough. Funny, he thought, how it was, in the end, the little things that stuck with you after all the years... He nibbled his biscuit again, and let his eyes sweep over the room. Forced his mind away from the problem at hand, and allowed it to drift... It was by far the best way, he’d discovered over the decades: let the mind drift, and in its disconnected state, it inevitably stumbled over the answer.

He really did like the changes in Ron, he thought idly. They were a bit weird, but family tragedy had a way of rearranging one’s priorities, he supposed, and the Sorting Hat had done everyone – not just himself, but everyone – a huge favour when it had publicly announced that Lily Potter, far from being a hapless victim of not-quite-circumstance, had actually worked to save the world through her son’s nappy-clad arse. The vast majority of people who, last time, had bugged their eyes every time they saw him now brushed him off... Even Draco ignored him, though, that being said, it probably helped that he hadn’t been selected for the Quidditch team this first year. McGonagall had wanted him on the squad, of course, once she’d seen him out joy-riding with Sirius, and Wood’s whimpering, once he’d seen him in action, had been just pathetic, but Remus had put his foot down. Harry was too young, he’d said. Too small, and those two things aside... It wouldn’t be fair to everyone else. Exceptions to the rule were all very well, but they were precedents too, and if one first-year was allowed, eventually another would be, and sooner, probably, rather than later, someone would get hurt. Sirius, surprisingly, had agreed with him – not without a bit of pouting-on-principle, but when it came down to it...

“He’s eleven,” he’d said firmly, overriding a near-frantic Minerva. “Just turned eleven, and he doesn’t weigh five stone soaking wet. One good bludger to the shoulder at a hundred feet would make one hell of a mess on the pitch, and yes, he’s fast, but his eyes still aren’t great, and it would only take one misjudged angle, yeah? It can wait. “

Harry had protested, of course, but not overly loudly. His dorm-mates had been far too sympathetic, and the novelty of having mates to bitch with on the subject of overprotective, irrational parents had quite frankly warmed his heart in a way that that few things in his life ever had. Mind you, a responsible Sirius was even weirder than a sensitive Ron – nineteen months of therapy aside, he just hadn’t thought he had it in him. He just had never struck Harry as wired that way, even before...

His drifting mind stubbed its toe. He rubbed it absently, his wand shifting in his sleeve. His aspen wand, his amber was on a date with Snape’s, and speaking of the devil... That was strange too. He was strange. Not patient, exactly, not even close, but...

He frowned, and slid to his feet. Ron was hunched at a corner table, perusing, of all things, his Potions book. Harry picked it up and flipped through it.
“Hey!” his friend protested. “I was reading that!”

“What’s this?” Harry asked. “This isn’t our text.”

“It’s a supplement. It explains the difference between slicing and dicing and mincing and things.”

“Huh. Where’d you get it?”

“Snape gave it to me. He said he’d been watching me, and that most of my problems in potions come because I’m not careful enough with how I prepare the ingredients. Load of bollocks if you ask me, but I’m doing what the thing says anything now, and he actually gave me an A-plus last class; you saw. Bit more, and I’ll be up to an E, and then....” He grabbed the book back. Harry watched him for a moment longer, then returned to his sofa, helping himself to another biscuit. Across from him, Sirius was now seated on the floor before the fire, building a huge monument of Exploding Snap cards with the help of second years and third years as he drilled them on the finer points of jinxes and hexes. Harry popped in the last bite of his biscuit and was just getting to his feet when it hit him.

“How come you’re wearing a pink headband?” he said, puzzled. “I thought you hated pink.”

Alicia looked at him weirdly again.

“What are you talking about, Potter?” she said. “It’s not my favorite colour, but it’s not repulsive or anything.”

“But...”

He stopped. She waved him off. He bit his lip.

I’m not wrong. I know I’m not. The Alicia I knew would never have worn anything like that, ever. I remember, because when she went to the Yule Ball with George in fourth year, she sent the designer dress robes her mum owled her back and said she’d rather die than wear anything in that colour. Her mum sent her that Howler back saying that she could just wear her Quidditch robes, then and she did; she just charmed them to look like...

He sat down slowly.

Ron is sensitive.

Snape is helpful.

Sirius has a responsible streak.

Alicia likes pink.

He crossed his arms, staring down at his feet and frowning as he nibbled his thumbnail. One by one, the pieces started to fit together, neatly and precisely.

It’s not proof, he argued with himself. It’s not. Family tragedy changes people. Maybe... Maybe we’re just not so annoying this time. Sirius has nineteen months of therapy, and Remus too. And maybe she just decided she hated pink later, maybe...

He removed his nail from his mouth.

“Padfoot?” he called. Sirius looked up with a smile.

“Yeah, pup?”
“Do you have any pictures of you and Moony in school? When you first got together?”

Sirius blinked at him.

“I don’t,” he said. “Moony does. Why do you ask?”

“Can I see one?”

His godfather offered him a peculiar look, but shrugged, getting to his feet. A few moments later he returned from his quarters, holding out a small, framed photograph. Harry took it and examined it closely. Sirius the Younger, bright-eyed and rosy-cheeked and half-buried in powdered snow, scrambled up and waved excitedly at him, calling to someone silently. Behind the huge snow fort they’d built, a tawny head peered out inquiringly, then plowed through the frigid heaps to stand beside him, throwing an arm around the boyish shoulders and kissing Sirius’ cheek almost shyly before waving to Harry in turn. Harry squinted hard, his alarmed heart in his mouth. No, there was definitely no mistake.

*Pink hairbands are one thing, but...*

“Hey Padfoot,” he said again. “Did Moony always have brown eyes? Only I saw a photo once of him with Mum, and I could have sworn they were green. Not like mine, but lighter, with...” He trailed off. “I thought... Did they change, maybe, after his cure?”

“*Green*? No. Must have been a bad developing charm.” Sirius said dismissively as he headed back to the snap castle. “No, we used to joke that that’s why he ate all that chocolate, not to further his waifish boyish figure, but to maintain the colour of his eyes. Don’t lose that now; it’s one of the only ones we’ve got.”

“I won’t.” Harry stared at the photograph again.

*Buggery bleeding bollocks.*

*That can’t be accounted for by going back in time. It just... can’t. Nev’s first instincts were right after all; we didn’t go back. We slipped sideways, into a bloody parallel universe.*

He had to stop himself from screaming as he remembered something Kingsley Shacklebolt had taught him, on a guest appearance at his first week in Auror camp.

“*Old Muggle saying,*” he’d said. “*God’s in the details. Well, I’m telling you now, boys and girls, where God is, there’s His opposite. Everything, no matter how small, no matter how apparently inconsequential... is important. Mad-Eye’s motto – oh yes, I’m sure you all remember... was ‘Constance Vigilance.' Mine... Well. That’s mine again: ‘Where God is, there’s His opposite.’ A good Auror – a live Auror, one who makes it to retirement - never, never allows him or herself to assume that anything is inconsequential. Anything... Can change everything.*”

Even as he finished the thought, a familiar tiny chime rang. He fumbled in his pocket, casting an automatic Muffliato and a Notice-Me-Not as he slunk further back into the shadows in the corner by the window. One of the first things he’d done after Neville had tipped him off to the Room of Accio-Random-Couch-Change was to send away for a second set of enchanted mirrors, for the two of them... He’d had a gut feeling at the time that they might come in handy.

“Nev,” he whispered. “Nev, we’ve got a problem, we...”

“What’s going on?’ He squinted. “Where are you?’

“In the loo at a pub called the Skewered Rooster, in Edinburgh. Harry, we need backup. Remus’ contact missed a rather crucial detail; it isn’t just Greyback here tonight. It’s his entire current fucking *pack*, meeting up for a fucking planning meeting for fucking Hallowe’en. Sixty wolves: they booked the whole place, and Remus is out there right in the middle of it. They smelled him as soon as he came through the fucking door.”

Harry’s mind blanked in absolute horror.

“We need backup,” Neville said again. “Find Snape, and tell him.”

“*Snape?*”

“*Do it!*” Neville snapped. “He *knows*, Harry! No, don’t ask questions, we’ll explain later, but... Tell him, and tell him to find a way to get Sirius here, and then glamour the shit out of yourself and get here yourself. You and both your wands. We *need* you!” He rattled off the Apparition coordinates and disappeared abruptly.

There were no words. Harry didn’t waste time trying to find them. Seconds later, he was outside the portrait hole and careening down to the dungeons.
Waiting To Take You Away

Chapter Notes

For reference and reminder; McWolf is what Remus named his Animagus form, the Irish wolfhound. It means 'son of wolf', and is a nod to a) the form, b) his name (Remus son of Lyall is in some traditions Wolf, son of (That is, Mc) Wolf) and the fact that it's the inheritor of his werewolf legacy. No, Remus doesn't have a split personality, the three parts of him just think a little differently is all - like facets on a prism - depending on which side of him/whose nose he's using to analyze any given situation. :)

It was a little known fact, but one that Remus Lupin could confirm personally; dogs actually had better senses of smell than wolves. As Moony his sense of smell had been easily a thousand times more acute than a human’s; that acuity, when he gave McWolf the nod, was multiplied by a factor of ten.

And he didn't even have to change to make use of the talent anymore. Remus watched, face impassive, one leg neatly crossed over the other and hands folded on his knee as the confiscated bone and ebony flask made the rounds and the scent of the active pack dropped another infinitesimal notch. Of the sixty werewolves spiraling in and around him, nosing at him, spitting at him, licking at him... Seventeen had drunk. Eighteen, he thought, as the walls rattled and yet another wrist tipped. The enticement charm on the flask had only been practical; Fenrir Greyback was a lush, alright, but only for blood. And flesh, of course, but Remus wasn’t sure the word applied to solid food.

He was not bound to the bar stool he was sitting on. It was not a gesture of trust, but rather one of disdain. He was a dog now, and no dangerous one either. In the eyes of the pack, he’d been neutered, and as such was not even worthy of collar and leash. The neutered, after all, did not wander.

Remus highly doubted that a lack of fur and teeth in his hosts would save him, even should every last one of them fail to transform on the moon-lit dot. Greyback didn’t just recruit for brawn and stamina. Like any traditional father he wanted children just like him, and he could sniff out a psychopath, potential or otherwise, a mile away.

Nineteen.

Winnie ‘Judas’ Spero, his contact, had actually thought she was rescuing him. Bringing him home. Not to kill him (necessarily) but for the opportunity to rejoin the fold. Hallowe’en, and he, as it turned out, was the party.

The bets on him surviving his second first transformation, he was sure, were astronomical. As were the bets on him dying. No one in the current room, though, really cared about the money; their actual motives were rather more biological... There’d never been an ex-werewolf before, after all, and for a community bound and chained to the maxim of the transformative, they were rather set in their ways. Still, they were human enough, that is to say self-interested enough, to employ the prudent maxim to
their advantage: curiosity might kill the cat, but it provides the uneasy were with information. No one, not even Remus himself, could say how his spontaneous recovery had occurred, and if it could happen to him, it could happen to any of them.

They wanted proof that it wasn’t the end of the line.

Remus watched as a new were – a young woman with pale eyes and stringy brown hair – approached. The deep bite on her thigh had been loosely and carelessly wrapped against, ironically, infection, but now the wrapping was gone and the wound bared: her personal Dark Mark displayed for all to see. She was an Intentional: a willing recruit who’d known what she was getting into before she’d been bitten, theoretically at least. Intentionals were rare, and there was generally a bit of a ceremony around the planned turning. Greyback’s beta, Paul Wurtenburg, would be leading her through her first true transformation in two days.

She took the flask and drank deeply. Remus watched impassively, suppressing even the smallest hint of inner glee lest someone get an inadvertent whiff. He’d covered his contingencies, oh yes he had. Not only was the flask bottomless, it had a satiety charm on it to complement the enticement charm. Each imbiber would be compelled to drink a full half-pint, but only that one half-pint, before passing it on. His nostrils flared as she wiped her mouth, and he turned his head slightly. No, the wound was still there, and still potentially deadly, but Mr. Smiley’s Enviro-Cleaning Fluid was already doing its job. It was subtle, but McWolf could literally smell the curse on her dissolving, leaving ordinary infected and potentially gangrenous flesh in its wake. The smell of the wolf was still on her, for the time being anyway, but there was no bite to it. It was simply, and for lack of a better term, body odor.

No doubt about it. Fleamont Potter was a fucking genius.

She passed the flask, and came over, bending to flash her scant, pasty breasts. She’d removed her shirt, and wrapped his confiscated burgundy silk scarf around her torso like a bandeau. She smiled at him with extremely bad teeth before licking his cheek in mock greeting – werewolves had some truly disgusting customs – and spiraling away. McWolf gagged and spat in a corner of his mind; Mr. Smiley was never meant to be used as a mouthwash, and the smell of her breath was repulsive. Wurtenburg, Remus thought, had probably used those rancid teeth of hers as one of his main persuasives. Converting her wouldn’t reverse the decay, but it turned enamel to steel, and sensitive nerves to indifferent knots. Her smile would never be pretty, not without glamours, but she’d never get a cavity or need another root canal or extraction again. It was amazing, really, the number of people who were won over by that particular side-effect.

Winnie came over and kissed him deeply and sloppily. She hadn’t drunk yet, not of the potion at least; she stank of whiskey otherwise, and her normal timidity was much reduced. His nostrils flared again, in revulsion and distaste this time at the musky undertones. She was coming into heat. Once converted, and at the full moon, at least, the wolf didn’t care on the gender of his mate, and she’d had a thing for him for years, seeking his company on occasion even after his cure. He’d known it, of course, though he’d always politely ignored the fact... She hadn’t seemed to mind; indeed, his gender preferences aside, had seemed to expect and accept his gentle, tacit rejection. He’d thought, ironically, that it had been the reason he could trust her. That, plus the fact that she hated Greyback, plus thirty silver sickles would get him a trip beyond the proverbial Veil. He should have known better, he thought. Everybody hated Greyback. He stowed that away for hopefully future reference: the enemy of my enemy isn’t necessarily my friend. The bets on how he’d handle the sexual aspects of his second transformation were surely running as high as those on his survival, and Winnie looked more than ready to take out her promised bounty in trade.

Small mercies, he supposed. Lyall Lupin might be socially inept, but Hope Lupin was a practical
The woman. She’d dragged him at fifteen (and despite his rolled eyes and protests of irrelevance) to a Muggle sperm storage facility. He’d offered up his genetic legacy, such as it was, for the cause, and then she’d promptly ordered him to Madame Pomfrey, and his appointment for a magical vasectomy. The Marauders, of course, had laughed themselves sick at that one, even as they agreed on the practicality. Remus was as bent as they came, but Moony was rather more flexible, and undeniably charismatic in the days before the full moon. Sirius might have been his mate, but Sirius had never had any hang-ups on fidelity either, not when it came to women anyway.

Go for it, he’d said, amused, when at sixteen, he’d first caught Moony literally sniffing around the aptly named Marcia Ready (Ravenclaw) in Charms class one day. She wants you, you know she does, and she has to have shagged half the school besides in the name of whatever research project she’s got on the go. She smells like a different guy every night, and there’s not a broomcloset in all of Hogwarts without her scent in it.

But you’re my mate!

And I have practice for the Quidditch final all fucking weekend. My arse is going to be way too sore to ride the Moonlight Madness Express, so just do her already. I’ll be waiting up when you get home, studying drills probably, but what can you do. Prongs is a maniac, you know that?

And she’s a person, you know that? Even if she is a total slag, that doesn’t mean I have the right to take advantage.

So let her take advantage of you. It all comes down to the same thing in the end, when you’re with a bird.

And you’d know this... How, exactly?

My female relatives are all genetically leathery perverts. Every last one of them. They’re also obsessed with continuing the line, and the nominal patriarchal. Nuff said?

It hadn’t been, but Remus (if not Moony) had shuddered obligingly anyway. Moony had simply smirked and allowed Marcia Ready to borrow his quill.

So to speak.

Across the room, Greyback, resplendent in the dragon-hide trench coat, waggled his tongue at him lewdly. Remus wondered what Greyback’s reaction would be when he didn’t turn. If anyone had placed any bets on that. The tests done on his blood after he’d reverted to human had been comprehensive, and whatever miracle had been granted him had been thorough. He wasn’t just cured, he was inoculated against future infection. The entire pack could use him as a literal communal chew toy and every last shred of him would still be as human at the turn of the moon as it had been to start.

He wondered if that would count as failing to survive his transformation, if no transformation occurred in the first place.

Twenty even, Moony noted from where he was lolling again on his hearth rug, and sniggered. Come one, come all. Or not. It’s Spay and Neuter Night at the Skewered Rooster!

Remus’ lips actually twitched at that. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as Paul Wurtenburg accepted the flask and drank deeply. His heart gave a small vicious cheer in spite of itself. Wurtenburg was simply a tidier, considerably more hygienic version of Greyback; his long hair was a sleek, shining well-groomed chestnut, and though the rest of his burly body was covered from top
to toe (including his hands, in fine gloves – he’d always done well in the betting pools) his square, admittedly handsome face was free of scars. His wolf, even while in the throes, was as naturally vain as any hippogryph. It also didn’t like competition, aesthetic or otherwise. Wurtenburg liked to bite the parts his victims couldn’t hide, particularly the soft, fleshy, and ultimately non-fatal part of the cheek and neck. He was delicate about it – he could be, because he mostly did deal with Intentionals, and had a ready supply to Wolfsbane when necessary – but the wounds remained.

*Not to rain fecal matter on the festivities, Lupin old man, but one must ask. How bottomless is that flask, anyway? We weren’t exactly planning for the full three score and ten when we were hitting up the house-elves for the necessary.*

Remus’ mouth straightened, but his eyelid twitched. Moony raised his head.

*Is that a pang of apprehension I smell there? Best be careful, old man. Don’t want them to think our nerve is breaking. He paused. We did use the extra-large sized cauldron, did we not?*

**It’s two days till Hallowe’en,** he thought back. **That’s a lot of pumpkin pasty filling and spiced apple cider set to simmer.**

*Oh dear. And Fenrir’s clear on the other side of the room. He lowered his head to his paws. This could get interesting. Suddenly I’m rather glad I don’t have a body anymore. Do you think it’ll be just like going to sleep, for me at least?*

Remus shifted slightly on his bar stool. Sixty heads immediately swiveled his way. Sixty wands immediately slipped into sixty palms.

Oh yes, he thought. There was a lot of money riding on this one. He sat back again, recrossing his legs leisurely, and folding his hands on the now-dominant right knee. Under the tight cuff of his left sleeve, his holly and phoenix wand lurked – Greyback had searched him of course, but had stopped when he’d found the single wand in his coat pocket, and his supposed sole back-up in his dominant sleeve. Cypress and unicorn hair: his first, and the original that the wolves were familiar with... They’d sneered at him as it had snapped, and tossed it onto the fire on the pub’s hearth. It had been followed immediately by his second: rowan and phoenix feather, custom-modified with a tuft of his own former tail hair. Ollivander had asked for the sample specially after eight solid hours of searching through his shop for a suitable replacement for the cypress wand, after he’d been cured. The rowan wand had warmed to him, but diffidently, and the old man had sighed.

“You’re just not ready to let go of the past yet,” he’d said. “You don’t trust your rebirth. Understandable. We’ll just add the little touch of the familiar, but I’m warning you now, it won’t be your last wand. Sooner or later, you’ll be back.”

He watched as number twenty one drank. The pack-scent dropped another tiny notch, Moony’s nose twitched.

*Someone’s going to notice soon, he observed lazily. Pack’s a third down now, and the smell of greasy cod and spilled beer only carries you so far.*

Even as he spoke, Fenrir Greyback made his way to the center of the pub. The chairs and tables had all been pulled back, and as he swaggered over, the rest of the pack removed themselves to perch on the available encircling furniture, cramming into booths, and pressing their backs against the magically tinted windows.

*Nobody is getting in, Titchy the house-elf gibbered in the back of Remus’ memory. And nobody is getting out!*
A stool slid over neatly. Greyback hooked a foot around it and seated himself in front of his captive. Moony eyed him with distinct distaste.

Someone should tell him, he noted. That he’s allowed to wash. Past the point it doesn’t make him look frightening, it just makes the rest of us look bad. And not, no matter what he thinks, in any good way.

“Lupin,” Fenrir Greyback purred, in his rasping voice, and reached in the inside pocket of the coat Sirius had bought. Pulled out a small triangular mirror, and held it up. Dropped it on the floor in front of him, deliberately. It shattered into a thousand pieces.

“Little known fact,” he rasped. “I’m not stupid. I recognize a two-way mirror when I see one.” His yellow, pointed teeth flashed. “Did you put a spell on it that will bring in your friends if it breaks?”

He hadn’t, of course. Fleamont Potter may have been a fucking genius whose fiscal legacy would provide for his heirs for generations to come, but his eleven-year-old grandson still needed a guardian.

Twenty three. Twenty four.

“You’re allowed to wash,” Remus informed him pleasantly as he flexed his wrist and turned his hand. The holly wand slipped down into his palm, invisible to anything but his thigh. “Past the point it doesn’t make you look frightening; it just makes the pack look bad. And not, no matter what you think, in any good way.”

The room was suddenly as still as the grave. The bartender actually fell over in shock, crumpling behind the counter. He scrambled up seconds later. Moony’s head swiveled sharply along with everyone else’s.

That, he said. Is not a wolf. He hasn’t even been bitten. Wasn’t this supposed to be a private party?

Och laddie, McWolf said. He’s been bitten alright. Just not by a wolf. That’s a...

The first were lunged. The bartender actually pointed at him – not with a wand, but with a finger. A finger that suddenly wasn’t a finger, but a single gigantic claw, seven inches long and thicker than a cigar.

Excellent control, Moony said admiringly, as the were landed on the claw, now squarely impaled to the last knuckle and right between the eyes. The bartender tipped his wrist; the body slid off with a squelch.

“Fuck me with a bloody buggering duck,” Remus said aloud. “Cartwright? Augusta, you positive angel. I should have known you’d be keeping an eye out.”

“She didn’t send me, actually,” Neville-as-Neil Cartwright said as his features shifted. “And be warned. She’s not going to be pleased with you when I tell her you went in without backup. She’s lost one son already, or hadn’t you got that she sees you as another now? She wouldn’t have taken you to meet the Queen if she didn’t see you as the family you claimed to be.’ He placed a hand on the bar and, launching himself off the body of the unfortunate original bartender now lying unconscious behind the counter, vaulted over neatly.

“I shall take my punishment like the man that I am, then,” Remus Lupin said, and as he rose to his feet, the holly wand slipped out of his sleeve and fully into his hand.
This is a VERY long chapter, with lots of info. :) If you have questions (which I'm sure you will) post them, and I will respond after your comment.

The Dungeons at Hogwarts

Forty Five Minutes Previously

He’s got Padfoot at the place where it’s hidden.

He’s got Padfoot at the place where it’s hidden.

He’s got Padfoot at...

The door to the Potion Master’s private quarters was discreet, but unmistakable. Harry swooped through the narrow, empty hall, grimly ignoring the ghosts of his past as they rattled, panicked, inside his head, and landed with a jarring thud before it. He hissed at the carved snake knotted around the ancient door handle; it bared its teeth at him, but retreated... Moments later, the door opened. The incumbent, unsurprisingly, looked less than pleased to see him.

“Potter? What on earth...”

“Remus has gone after Greyback,” Harry informed him without preamble. He’s got Padfoot at the place where it’s hidden. He’s got Padfoot at the place where it’s hidden... “It was a trap. Neville followed him as Cartwright, and said that you know about us, and to let you know that he needs help. The Skewered Rooster in Edinburgh, sixty wolves, and he was expected. You’re to call in Sirius, and we’re all to get our arses there, yesterday.”

There was another pause. The black, fathomless eyes narrowed. Then...

“How patently predictable,” Severus Snape said in disgust, and flung, or rather slammed, the door wide. It smashed against the wall beside him in emphasis; Harry nearly jumped out of his skin. “And inconvenient. Does it never occur to anyone – and that includes the world at large, for the record, never mind your specific wretched guardians - to consult with my schedule before scheduling their inevitable and interfering crises? No, of course not. That would be considerate.”

“The world at...” It occurred to Harry, as he processed that, that Snape’s clothes were rather nicer than what he usually wore: dark green robes with ivory rather than silver trim, shining leather dress shoes, and a decidedly non-regulation tie. Even his hair wasn’t quite as lank as usual. “Er,” he said belatedly. His inner ghosts babbled in confusion. He’s got... What? He’s got... What? What the... What? “Sorry. Did you have a da... I mean, plans, then?” What??

That settles it. Definitely a parallel universe.
“Did I... You’re an Auror; you’ll have no problem offering up five feet on my desk on Monday on the irritating futility of obvious and/or rhetorical questions.” He stood aside, gesturing him into the room. The door closed behind him, rather more quietly. Snape eyed him narrowly. “How much do you remember, Potter? Or should that be... How much are you remembering?”

“I used deduction, not memories, and not nearly enough. You will be explaining once we’re done here.” Harry pulled his scattered thoughts and emotions together by sheer force of will. “Also, no. To the essay, that is. I’m the messenger, not the irritant. You can assign homework to Lupin once we get back; this is all his fault for going off without back-up, and he wouldn’t even have Neville there now if I hadn’t been worried enough to send him out after.”

“You are always my irritant. You inherited the position from your father. There was probably even a prophecy about all of us at some point. And... I will not. Not till the time is right, and before you argue, your knowing anything was – is - not part of the plan. Your plan,” he cut him off. “Enough. Give me your wand.”

“Huh? You’ve got it right there in your drawer, remember?”

“A hundred thirty-eight years old and as articulate as ever, I see. Not your amber wand, your aspen wand.” He strode over, retrieving both Horntail wands from the drawer, and tossed them over. Harry caught them mid-flight. “The two will work best together when wielded by the same wizard, and you are the Dueling Master here, are you not?” It took more than a moment to process the staggering weight of the compliment there, but in the end (as had been the intent, perhaps) it snapped him back to the present like nothing else could have. He took a deep, steadying breath. Snape ignored him.

“That being said... I too will need a weapon.” He caught the aspen wand, and snapped his wrist experimentally. It hissed, then cut itself off and hummed consideringly before exuding a sleek silver and gold tendril that wrapped itself around his wrist all the way up to his shoulder before seeming to sink literally beneath the skin.

“It will do,” he conceded. “For the one night. A very practical wand: it recognizes the need for prudence in an emergency. How did you ever convince it to partner you?’

“I’m here, aren’t I? And I only look eleven, as you just said yourself. And Is it just me, or are the wands here a lot more intelligent than the ones at home? And weirder? I’ve never seen one do that before.’

“Glamour up,” Snape ordered, ignoring that, and moved swiftly to the potions cabinet and handed him a small vial of light orange liquid. “Here. This will lock you in your chosen form for four hours, so that you don’t have to think on holding the spells.”

“Huh. Neat. Wait, they hold if I have to resort to Dash? I mean... If I transform into my Animagus form during the four hours, will I return to the glamoured form, rather than my original?’

“Yes.”

“Impressive.” He whistled softly. “When did you come up with the recipe for that?’

“While I was dead,” the Potions Master said tersely. He swung his robes off and pulled out fresh clothes from his wardrobe: dark close fitting trousers, under-shirt and a dark not-sweater... Harry averted his eyes politely and began to work on his glamours. Soon the eleven-year-old was gone. In his place was a young man of perhaps twenty five, with soft, light brown hair, matching eyes, and pleasant, if unmemorable features. A single faded scar ran from his left eyebrow straight down to his chin. He concentrated again. When the glow faded, he wore, not Muggle joggers and t-shirt, but dark brown dueling trousers, vest, gloves, a long-sleeved ivory shirt and, and dueling trainers. Those last
were not actually glamoured, but were rather Harry's typical footwear, glamoured themselves for all other occasions.

“One would think you’d had enough of scars,” Snape sneered as he knelt before the floo. “Can’t you do without the reminder for one evening?”

“It’s a curse scar, Snape. An active, very vain curse scar that, much like its originator, doesn’t like being magically repressed. If I don’t take its presence into account when I change, it makes itself known in other ways. And your socks don’t match,” he added. “Navy blue and black are not the same color.”

Snape just rolled his eyes. “Gryffindor common room. Black!”

“Hey Snape,” Sirius said, surprised into civility as he leaned over from the hearth-rug and his card castle. “What’s up?”

“Message incoming. It was a trap. Armour up and meet me by the front gates.”

Sirius’ mouth opened, then closed. He said not another word, just disappeared abruptly. Harry looked over from where he was stuffing various items into his pockets. “Scent masking potion?” he asked briskly.

“Second shelf. Blue corked bottle. Drink half of one, and try to get the other half to Longbottom at some point, before things calm down enough for your so-called guardians to recognize both of you, no matter what you look like. Speaking of which... How, pray tell, am I to address you like this?”

“This identity’s registered as Lawrence Cartwright. Neil’s grandson, from Juneau, Alaska. Madam Longbottom made the arrangements through a friend of hers.”

“Of course she did. Excellent. One thing, at least, that I can reassure myself has been done properly. One moment.” A second puff of floo powder exploded in a bright cloud.

“Sev?” a puzzled, vaguely familiar feminine voice said. “Why are you in battle clothes? I thought we were going to dinner!”

“Unfortunately, my plans have changed, my darling,” Snape said. Harry’s eyes widened in mirth at the endearment. The Potions Master didn’t even look over, just flipped him two fingers. “Or rather... Been changed. I’m afraid I’m going to have to cancel, or at least postpone.”

“Bugger. Do I get an explanation, at least? It’s not got more to do with Dumbledore, does it, because I promise, we have him right where we want him, and I was really looking forward to having breakfast with you at the High Table tomorrow besides. Wally even promised to make those special cinnamon sweet rolls to celebrate!”

“No, no. We’re right on schedule there, and you shall still have your sweet rolls, I promise. It’s just...” He sighed. “My colleagues – you know the ones I’m referencing, I’m sure - have gotten themselves into trouble. Again.”

There was a pause.

“Ah,” the feminine voice said, both delicately, and... not. “Do you need help?”

“I would never presume, but... Edinburgh. The Skewered Rooster. Sixty wolves, and we’ve got one man on the inside. One, and his specialty is flowers, and we’ve got to bring Black along besides. You be the judge.”
“You need help,” she concurred. “Where shall I meet you?”

“Kitchen entrance. Take all precautions.”

“On my way.”

The floo flashed. “Who was that?” Harry asked, craning his neck.

“Let’s go,” was all Snape said as he rose. “No, not that way, you idiot. This way.”

“Dumbledore can trace the floo patterns through the grate.”

“Dumbledore has enough of his own issues to worry over, or will by tomorrow morning. And floo grates,” Snape said grimly, "have chimneys. Straight up, as the saying goes, second turn the right, and straight on to morning. And if you ever tell anyone about this, Potter, you will be on that Onwards Train if I have to bind you and throw you into celestial storage myself. The form may be deadly in and of itself, but like yours, is rather singular in this part of the world. I prefer not to have the word out if at all avoidable – in any circle.”

“Wha...” Harry’s eyes widened appreciatively as the Potions Master shrank. The long, sleek and extremely distinctive form of the giant Asian hornet darted up the still-sparking floo. Seconds later, Dash buzzed behind him.

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**Edinburgh**

“I am going,” Sirius muttered as they skulked up the alley behind the pub, water-repellent and warming charms as firmly intact as Remus’ had been, “to kill him. I told him this was a bad idea; I told him...”

“And I am telling you,” Snape snapped, “to shut your mouth, Black! We are, lest you have forgotten, heading into a den of werewolves! Correct me if I’m wrong, but is not exceptional hearing one of the perks of the condition?’

“Oh, take a pill, Snivellus. Or a potion. Whatever. And you can stop wetting yourself, by the way. They’re not wolves right now; they’ve got another two days yet. Right now, they’re all just psychotic schizophrenics with raging cases of PMS. Not unlike your former compatriots, mm?”

“However accurate the descriptive may be, I have only met the finer version up close and in person once, and I was, as you’ll recall, I’m sure, a bit too distracted to take notes. You will have to enlighten me on the differentiated symptoms.”

“I spent nine years in Azkaban, man, for a crime I didn’t commit! Can’t we just call things square there, and let the past be? They can’t hear as well as they usually can,” he explained. “Their hearing, as is their heightened sense of smell, will be starting to peak, but as it’s still developing, they’ll think it unreliable. The rain won’t help there either.”

“You’re saying that they won’t necessarily believe what they hear or smell?”

“Yeah, and their uncertainly will only make them pissier. Oh, and when you’re dueling, keep in mind that the majority of them will be overbalancing on their toes.”
“Their... Sorry?” their third companion said. Harry hadn’t, once they’d arrived in the alley, been altogether surprised to find that Snape’s mystery date was, in fact, the substitute who’d replaced him while he was tending to Charlie - Professor Eulalia Shelley: a plain woman with nondescript features and a wicked knack, as Fred and George had reported after a rather exciting foray to her temporary lab, for dubious, if not quite illegal, potions. Small and petite, she was wrapped in a rather nice lemon-yellow cloak. Harry hoped that she wasn’t too attached to it; it had low odds on surviving the night intact... Her boots on the other hand, were extremely sturdy, if unnaturally pointy from all angles. He’d winced in advance as he’d taken note of them, in sympathy for their prospective victims.

“Toes,” Sirius repeated. “Wolves walk on their toes. The instinct kicks in the week before the full moon; more than one poor anonymous sod’s been caught out by the Werewolf Registry by the tendency.” He waved as Harry-as-Lawrence-Cartwright slipped back.

“Wards are up,” he reported. “Muggle repelling, and enclosing. Anyone getting out the doors will be bounced right back in again. Oh, and I caught Gramps in the loo. He’s ready when we are.”

“How’s Remus?” Sirius asked anxiously. “Is he alright?”

“As rain. He’s sitting on his bloody throne as we speak, watching them play pass-the-flask.”

“Any way we can tell who’s drunk or who hasn’t?” Eulalia Shelley asked. “Or if it’s actually working?”

“Not right now, no. That being the case, we have to assume that it hasn’t. Isn’t.” He passed out packets of the mixed silver and dittany, along with more tiny vials of scent depressant. “Drink these now, and if anyone bites you, get the powder on, quick. You won’t have anything to worry about in terms of actual infection, but it’ll seal the wounds till we can get you help, and remember, they’ll be dead anyway once the Aurors bring them in, so don’t be shy on taking them down. That being said, leave everyone who doesn’t bite you alive. We’ll need governmentally confirmed test subjects for the potion.”

“How did you know he was here?” Sirius asked. “I mean... He didn’t tell anyone where he was going tonight, not even me.”

“Gramps was coming up to drop something up for Neville, and caught him at the gates. He had a bad feeling and followed him, and called me in.”

“From Alaska?”

“Owed favors. They make the world go ‘round.” He flipped his wands in demonstration. They, too, were glamoured: formed now of anonymous dark wood with the matching gold and bronze bands around the base that denoted his rank as International-Class Dueling Master. He wouldn’t have bothered, but the official identity that Augusta Longbottom’s contact (or rather, Contact, and wasn’t it nice not to have to fake his own paperwork for a change) had arranged for him had marked down his rank as one of his credentials. “Everyone ready?”

“You sure the dog-door’s big enough for me?” Sirius said dubiously. “And how are all of you getting in?”

“Magic, Black,” Snape said. “Eulalia?”

Eulalia Shelley nodded. Harry reached out and tapped her on the head; she shrank rapidly. as Draco Malfoy had once in the long ago, not to a ferret, but to a small red fox. Seconds later, Snape was
beside her, in matching black. Two, or rather three, Notice-Me-Nots later...

“Go,” Harry ordered. “The transformation will last exactly three minutes. Get to the loo; Gramps will organize things from there. Black... Leave Lupin to me and Snape. I’ve got the oomph, he’s got the healing potions, and you’ll just be in the way. Your only job is to find and take down Greyback – alive – while Professor Shelley finds that flask, and work with her get the potion down his throat, understand? Oh, and try not to get killed in the meantime.”

“Nothing difficult then,” he said sardonically, but the dank mad light of Azkaban was in his eyes again, and his lip was curled... Harry watched till his tail had disappeared through the dog door, and dropped into a low crouch as he edged around the building. The hearth was on the north side. He murmured another warding spell, tapping his own heart. /be careful, my Harry/, Gin whispered in his mind. He didn’t spare breath to be surprised, just transformed again and launched himself upward, over, and down into the fire.

The Skewered Rooster

He transformed half down the chimney, and barreled out of the fire, the Horntail wands literally blazing in his hands. Two werewolves went sprawling. His first target was the hanging chandelier; it flattened under the power of his spell into a huge prismatic disc. A split second later; a single gold beam pierced it dead center, the light arcing off and rebounding around the room in a dozen different directions... Each beam caught a figure. Seven of them dropped, stunned.

Harry fired again. This time, the beams downed three. He spun on his right heel, tucking his left leg in and crouching as a huge snarling were flung himself at him. The momentum carried him squarely over his head and into Neville. The were fell and did not rise again.

Heads turned. Harry launched himself up to his feet again, crossing his arms and snapping them apart in a swift, blurred movement. A dark bubble rose around him, he caught his balance and literally bowled his way across the room, blasting apart the cluster of wolves bent over the figure on the floor... He tumbled out, landing on his feet again, but the bubble remained, locked and shimmering around the bloodied, limp form of Remus Lupin. The wolves scratched and tore ineffectively at it, then turned on him; he simply raised his arms in response and brought them down as axes. The six wands closest to him shattered. He didn’t bother to grin, just swiveled, spiraled low and snapped his leg out. Without the full weight of his adult body behind the strike, he simply dislocated the knee closest to him, rather than breaking it. It did the job though, and he took advantage to tumble through an impossibly small gap, snapping out another word... The two wands narrowed and sharpened as his amber wand had on the train. His hands flashed, blood sprayed from four severed Achilles tendons... Four fell, howling, and hauled themselves instinctively to the sidelines to lick their wounds.

Harry launched himself again into the gap they left, landing with pinpoint precision back to back with Snape. The Potions Master hadn’t bothered with the theatrics; he’d simply planted himself squarely in the middle of the pub, and was laying waste, economically and efficiently. Bodies fell all around him, and the aspen wand gleamed, white as bone against his hand and curling slightly as a smile. It was more than a bit unnerving. Harry made a mental note to look up the runes carved on the
handle, even as he took advantage of his smaller size to weave in and around, blocking attacks with one wand as he picked off opponents coming in from unexpected and awkward angles with the other. He thought, at one point, that he saw Snape shoot him a surprised and legitimately impressed look, but ignored it. Occlumency shields had more than one use; in the end, he’d studied as hard as he could to build his up, not to protect himself, but so that he might literally split his mind into two effective personalities while he was fighting - one to attack, and one to defend. He had, unsurprisingly, and once he’d realized the possibilities there, proved very, very good at it.

Out of the corner of his eye, and without missing a beat with either wand, he saw Sirius, as Padfoot, slipping and scrambling over bodies, nose to the ground in the chaos... The Notice-Me-Not that he’d cast upon himself before coming into the crowd was good, and the scentless potion he’d drunk was better, but neither prevented anyone from noticing him when his teeth were sunk to the root in a woman’s thin, pimply buttock... She screamed, but the teeth had done their job. She dropped the flask she was holding. Sirius caught it mid-arc and transformed. His bloody grin was wide and feral, almost a rictus. Just at that moment, Harry wouldn’t have placed a single knut on any guarantee of his sanity.

“Bloody hell, Black,” Neville said, exasperated, then... “Fuck it. We’re wizards. We can fix the place up.” He stretched his arms as if to embrace the trio coming at him, and...

“Well,” Eulalia Shelley said as she emerged from behind an overturned table. “That’s one way to take care of the problem.” The remaining conscious weres just huddled where they’d been herded, in the corner next to the kitchen hall, as the twelve foot Kodiak sat in front of them, snarling. Across the room, Snape bent over Lupin.

“He’s alive,” he reported, and began pulling potions out of various pockets.

“Drink?” Sirius offered a shivering girl on the fringe. She took the flask and gulped, staring glassy-eyed at the snarling vision before her. She’d barely swallowed before the man next to her grabbed.

Harry lowered his wand.

“That was rather anti-climactic,” he said reprovingly to Neville. “Really, Gramps. You called me in all the way from Juneau with the promise of a bit of fun, only to cock-block me? Again? How’m I supposed to get practice for my Grandmastery if you keep monopolizing my opportunities? I’m telling Auntie Augusta on you!”

“Wand, please,” Eulalia said briskly to the were at the corner. She whimpered, and dropped hers in the lemon-yellow cloak, now transfigured into a bag. Harry scanned faces rapidly.

“Where’s Greyback?”

“He’s under the table there,” Eulalia pointed. “I caught him with a Petrificus Totalus when he tried to make a break for it and the door bounced him back.”

“You don’t say.” He accio’d the flask mid-hand-off. “Hold that thought.” He scooped up a chunk of chair leg and transfigured it into a small plastic funnel as he made his way over... He pried the furious Alpha’s jaw open, and placed it carefully.

“May I do the honours?”

He looked over his shoulder, smiling.

“Lupin,” he said. “Of course.”

He handed off the flask. Lupin squatted painfully beside him. His shirt was half gone, there was a
deep bite and multiple claw marks all over him, but they were shrinking even as Harry watched. He watched as Greyback’s eyes processed that, and bared his canines gently as the furious yellow eyes grew wide with realization.

“Got it in one,” the ex were said, and settling the funnel, tilted his wrist, and poured. “Sorry, didn’t catch your name?”


“Lovely form,” Remus complimented him as he removed the funnel, and renewed the Petrificus Totalus. “From the little I saw, anyway. Who’s next?”

“Hang on.” He pointed at the ceiling again. More gold beams shot out. More bodies fell. “There you are. The ones on their backs still need dosing.”

“Excellent.” He stepped amongst the bodies. “Hello, Eulalia. It’s lovely to see you again. What brings you by?”

“Sev invited me to the party,” she said, tilting a random neck back. He placed and poured. “He always did have peculiar ideas on dates.”

“Oh are you two seeing each other then?” He sounded genuinely pleased. “That’s so nice! Congratulations, Severus!”

“Do tell me when you’re quite finished, Moonbeam,” Sirius said politely, leaning against what was left of the bar. “And are ready to pay your full attention to my tantrum?”

“What are we going to do with them now?” Eulalia asked. “We can’t just let them go.”

“I called the Aurors,” Sirius said. “They should be here any minute.” Even as he spoke...

“What’s this then?” a very familiar voice said. Harry jerked. “Aside from a pretty mess?”

“Mad-Eye!” Remus hailed. “Kingsley! Fancy meeting you here!”

“Don’t get smart.” Mad-eye Moody blinked through his revolving eye as his eye came to rest on Neville. “What the...”


“Is that Fenrir Greyback?” Kingsley said incredulously.

“It is,” Remus confirmed. “Along with his entire pack..”

“This one’s dead, sir,” Dawlish reported as he leaned over beside the hearth. “And this one’s passed out. She seems to be. Er. Missing a buttock.”

“A...”

“Wand in the back pocket,” Sirius contributed. “It ignited. Never a good idea; better wizards than she, yada yada, or didn’t Sir there warn you of that your first day at Auror Academy?”

“He did, yes, but... This one doesn’t really look like it’s been burned off. More... torn.”

“Burned, torn, chewed... “ He waved a hand. “You done yet, Moonlight-of-my-life? Only we do
have a conversation to finish.”


“Erhm. Lawrence Cartwright,” Harry said. “I was just called in to fight. By my grandfather, like I said.” He pointed to Neville again, now sitting on his vast haunches and cleaning his enormous claws with his even more enormous teeth. “I’ve no idea what’s going on, really. Though you might want to take these ladies and gentleman into custody. Secure custody,” he emphasized. “The full moon is only two days away, after all.”

“They’re all werewolves?”

“This one’s dead too, sir,” Dawlish reported. “Wand through the eye.” He pulled it out gingerly, and cast a quick spell. “Holly and phoenix feather. Shall I collect it for evidence?”

“Holly... Oh. That’s mine. He bit me,” Remus explained, as Dawlish handed it back with a most peculiar look. “Purely self-defense, I assure you.”

“He... What?” he pulled back, horrified. Remus waved him off.

“It won’t take,” he reassured him. “Never mind that it’s not quite the full moon yet, my cure wasn’t just a cure, it acted as a vaccine. I couldn’t be reinfected if I wanted to be.”

“You sure about that?”

“Of course. Check my medical records. The tests were quite comprehensive.” His eyes fell on Greyback. “Never mind a matter of public record. You could have all saved yourselves quite a lot of effort, never mind money, if you’d bothered to pop by the Ministry and look them up.”

“Where,” Mad-Eye said sardonically. “Do you suggest we put sixty werewolves?”

“Anywhere you like.” Remus refastened the flask to his belt and stretched luxuriously. “They’re harmless now. Well, less harmful.”

“And how do you figure that?”

“You don’t have to take my word for it.” He rolled Fenrir over and peeled him out of the coat. “Stow them all someplace for three days and you’ll see for yourself. My job here is done.” He reached in his pocket and retrieved his wallet, murmuring a charm. An extra pocket popped open; he retrieved a folded sheet of paper and passed it over. Mad-Eye Moody squinted at it. His mouth dropped.

“Well,” he said. Then... “You’re sure it works?”

“I am.” He tapped his nose, morphing to McWolf and back again.

“And it’ll keep working?”

“You did read the name on the bottom of the page, did you not?”

“I did. Do you mind if I keep this?”

“Not at all. I have another copy at home. Several of them.”

“I hate to do this,” Harry said. “But I do have to go. My portkey’s set for ten minutes from now.”

“Mm. I presume I can get in touch with you through your grandfather here?”
“Of course.” He edged toward the bar, and the invisibility cloak behind it... The eye swiveled on him sharply.

“Nice glamours,” Moody observed “More’n nice, if I can see the fact but not the details behind. Some new American trick, is it? Come on now. Let’em down. We’re all friends here.”

“I’d rather not,” Harry said apologetically. “I’ve got some nasty scars. Really nasty scars. This is what I look like without them, actually.”

“Can’t be any worse than me.” His eye turned again. “Alright. Go on. I’ll be in touch. Wait.” He cut him off as he turned. “You said you were called in to fight? You have dueling training then?”

“Um. Yes.”

“He has International Masteries in Dueling, DADA and in Warding,” Snape contributed in his deepest, most silky tones. Harry shot him a nasty look. “Well, he would have one in Warding if he ever got around to taking the exams. How long have you been putting it off now, Cartwright?”

Harry shot him another nasty look... Mad-Eye just grunted. “I’ll definitely be in touch then,” he said. “Alright, go on.” He turned and barked orders to the squad of Aurors now coming through the front door. The ex-wolves made no move to fight, just stood dazed.

“How come they’re not protesting?” he asked Neville as they slipped out the back door.

“The one after-effect of the potion, remember, if you drink it straight? Lorcan was down with a migraine for a week after he perfected it. That’s why he tried mixing it with things like fruitcake in the first place; something about the candied sugar mitigates that effect.”

“I didn’t know, actually.” He eyeballed the other man. “Lots of that going around, it looks like.”

“Not here,” he said. “Not anything, till I talk to the others.”

“Others?” He stopped in his tracks. “Others? With an ’s’? As in more than one?

There was a pause, then...

/Shit,/ Gin’s voice said distinctly. /Neville, you great arse, you.../

/Hey!/ A second and equally distinct protest sounded. /He is not an arse! He’s a bear! A great ... Big... Furry... Cuddly../

/Stop it, Hannah. Stop right there, before I../

What?” Neville asked, catching a glimpse of his expression. “What is it?’

“Why,” Harry said dangerously. “Is your wife talking to me, or rather to my wife through my wand? And why is her best friend, one Miss Susan Bones, talking to both of them?”

/Bollocks, a fourth voice said, panicked. He’s got both wands yet, and with the two of them together... Didn’t he give the second back to Snape?/

/Obviously not, Harry said mentally. /Lav-Lav. What the buggery bloody fuck is going on here?/

/Everyone shut up,/ a fourth, bossy and painfully familiar voice ordered. /All of you. Right now.
You heard nothing, Harry, understand? Absolutely nothing. Gin Potter, if you weren’t already dead, I would kill you right now!/

/What have I got to do with anything?/ Gin’s voice protested. Across the unfathomable stretch of time and space, never mind the realms of the living and the dead, Harry’s eyes rolled back so far in his head that they very nearly did the entire tour of his body before settling back into position.

/You’ve been sneaking off to talk to him, that’s what you’ve got to do with it! Don’t give me that look; you’re his bloody wife, and the bloody Horntails wouldn’t have enabled the rest of us till you’d persuaded them to break the rules, would they? That was not part of the plan, Gin! We were not part of the plan, or had you forgotten that?/

/I haven’t told him anything! I just wanted him to know that he’s not alone, and that it’s his decision in the end, after it’s all over anyway, and that I really really don’t mind, and that I always knew, and I just want him to be.../

Whatever mental connection was there snapped suddenly. The silence in his head was deafening.

“Harry?” Neville said tentatively. “You okay, mate? Only you look a little gobsmacked.”

“We are going back to the castle now,” Harry informed him. “And we are going to sit down, and we are going to have a long, long, long talk, Longbottom. And you are going to tell me everything, understand? Absolutely... Everything.”

“Even the bits that risk the future of this entire world?”

“Especially those bits,” he said firmly. “If you don’t, I’ll just keep picking at them, and you, and everyone else, i.e. Snape, until I figure them out on my own. And I’ll probably bollocks it all up, never mind the fact that I’m Head of The Aurors, because Gin’s involved, and Su, and Lav, and Hermione, never mind Hannah, and anything those five come up with together, especially now that they have all of eternity to consult without interruption, is bound to defy reasonable and logical interpretation, never mind the fact that they are all, as women and therefore by very definition, bloody buggering INSANE!”

Neville stared at him, there in the rain that billowed around them like displaced wet sheets on some great stretched line of wet laundry.

"Shit,” he said finally. “Hannah’s in on this? And the rest of her girls’ club? That wasn’t part of the plan. We’re all doomed.”

“My middle name, remember? In that case, it definitely won’t hurt to tell me everything, will it?”

Harry seized his arm firmly and they Apparated back to the castle with a ‘crack.’ Even as they disappeared, two more figures stepped out of the shadows. The taller one offered up a deep sigh.

"Brave new world,” it said moodily. “Sunshine, rainbows, hearts and flowers, and a chance to truly stick it to Dumbledore, with minimal interference from You-Know-Who. Your One True Love, if for a limited time only, and at the end of it all... Hope for a future that was never possible in any world. Remind me again why I thought this was a good idea?"

“It was a good idea,” his companion said bracingly. “It’s still a good idea. Now, how about we go to Little Hangleton and pick up that ring as a kind of peace offering before we head back? It might put the two of them in a better mood over having to rewrite the entire metaphorical essay from scratch. They’ve been stuck on that curse for weeks now.”
“They’ve lost their touch,” Snape said sourly. “Potter, at least, should know I keep phoenix tears in my private cupboard; he only treats it like his personal apothecary.”

“How long does it take to brew?”

“Not long. An hour or two.”

“Fine. You go back to the lab, and I’ll go pick the thing up.”

“Aren’t you worried about getting cursed?”

“What, by the Resurrection Stone? I’ve spent the last thirteen-plus decades talking to everyone on the other side, Sev. Anyone who had anything to say to me has already said it, a hundred times over. Trust me, I’ll be fine.”

“There’s that,” he conceded, and leaned down to kiss her chastely on the cheek. She rolled her eyes at him.

“That’s the best you can do?” she teased him. He tweaked her nose.

“We may have limited time,” he said. “But that only means I have limited time to do it right, this time. Never mind the fact that Moody’s damned eye can literally see through walls.”

“Do you think he saw through my glamours? she said anxiously. “I mean, beyond the fact that they were there?”

“Funny you should mention that,” a voice said behind them. They spun on their heels... A glassy blue eye whirled at them madly in the dark. “Mrs. Potter.”

“Bugger,” she said. “Just... Bugger.”

“Mm. What’s waiting in Little Hangleton?” Mad-Eye Moody enquired as he stepped out of the shadow of the pub. “Cursed job, is it? No, Snape, I don’t think you’ll be headed back quite yet. Places to go, see, people to talk to... That would be me, for the record – and stories to tell. Again to me. Accio wands!” That last was barked out sharply and quickly. Snape watched as the aspen wand slid out of his sleeve promptly, Lily’s following. Neither tried to stop them.

“I let you do that,” she informed the Auror. “For the record.” She craned her neck. “You didn’t tell anyone else, did you?”

“Course not.” He gestured. ‘Let’s go.”

“Shall I tell you what I had planned for dinner?” Snape asked his disgruntled date. “So that we might enjoy it in the one manner, at least, if not the other, on the way?”

“We’re going to pick up a piece of Voldemort’s shredded soul, Sev. How can you possibly think about food at a time like this?”

“Oh, this is good,” Moody said with relish. He peered at her. “Soul bits, Death-Eaters, and .... Are you an Inferi now? How many levels of glamours are you hiding there, anyway?”

“I am not an Inferi,” she snapped, and batted his wand out of her face. “And we’re only picking up the soul bit so we can destroy it, you great pillock. Do you really think I’d have bothered offing him the first time, ten years ago, just so I could put him back together again?”

“Anything’s possible,” he said. “Why just tonight, I’ve arrested sixty ex-werewolves, only three of
whom are dead, and got myself my very own copy of the purported cure for lycanthropy in my pocket!” He patted his raincoat. “It’s not even Christmas yet.” He pointed his wand at them again. Snape bent to peer closer at it, then straightened dangerously.

“Where,” he said. “Did you get that thing?”

“Mm?” He looked, and stuffed it back in his pocket. “Oops. Wrong one. Picked it up with a pile of others we confiscated. There we go.” He pulled another out.

“Pfft,” Snape said to Lily. “And so it goes. Not with a bang, but with a whimper. Is there any point to pretending we have an established plotline to work with anymore?’

“We’re not out yet,” she said bracingly. “What do you mean?’

“Yew,” he said, nodding to Moody’s pocket. “Pheonix feather. Thirteen and a half inches, unless I’m much mistaken. “

Her face whitened as she looked at him, parchment-pale in the neon flood-lights.

“But,” she said. “But... That’s...”

“The Dark Lord’s wand,” he said grimly. “Yes. When were you planning on telling us that his spirit had escaped the Unspeakables at the Ministry, Moody?’

There was a pause.

“I picked it up off the floor,” he said defensively. “It had rolled under the bar!”

“it disappeared the night he was defeated,” Snape said, sounding even more detached. “At Godric’s Hollow. Pettigrew confirmed under questioning that he’d stolen it from the ruins. The Ministry reclaimed it, when he told them where he’d stowed it.”

“And they didn’t snap it?” Lily said horrified. “After all that he’s done with it? And not to sound self-absorbed, but after he killed me with it, and Jamie, and cursed my baby with it? They should have made it an international event!”

“Never mind that. If it’s out... Its owner is out. How long?’ he repeated.

Moody sneered, then shrugged.

“Just about a week ago,” he said. “Fudge doesn’t want people panicking.”

“Right,” Snape said, and seized both their arms. “Little Hangleton it is. Then back to Hogwarts for a planning session.”

“That’s not all,” he cut him off. “Pettigrew’s escaped Azkaban. The day before You-Know-Who broke out.”

“Excuse me?” a polite voice said from behind that. “I couldn’t help but catch that last. Would you mind repeating it?’

“Yes,” Snape said. Then, wearily... “Lupin. Which part?’

“The part where Voldemort escaped the Ministry,” Sirius said, stepping out of the door behind his lover. “And Moody picked the wand off the floor, from the bar, and this lovely, if obviously quite insane young lady expressed her very, very personal indignation at the fact that it wasn’t snapped
after it had been used to off her and curse my godson and kill a man who was, we’re quite certain, not married to her? Oh, and the part where Pete somehow managed to get out of Azkaban the day before He-Who- Shall-Not-Be-Named did a runner around the Unspeakables. I’m personally quite interested in hearing all the details there.” He examined the stunned woman before him closely. “I knew you had to be crazy if you were willing to date Snivellus here. I can recommend a few good Mind-Healers, if you don’t think you’re too far gone? You too, Snivellus,” he added. “I know you always had a thing for her, but finding a woman who thinks she is her, to feed into your perverse fantasies? Even I don’t have it in me to feel anything but sorry for you there.”

Lily Potter looked at Snape. He looked down at her. Moody scratched his ear, then dug in his pocket and handed the two of them back their wands.

“Right,” he said. “On second thought... I’m going to go back in and help with the clean-up. I’ll be by tomorrow morning though, as previously arranged, and once that’s taken care of, we’re all going to find a nice quiet corner and sort this all out, understand?”

“I concur,” Remus Lupin said. His eyes, Snape noticed a bit uneasily, were still narrowed considerably as he looked Lily over. Even in the shadows, he could see his nostrils flaring. “I absolutely concur.”

“Tomorrow!” Moody barked as he retreated into the pub. “After breakfast! Right after breakfast!”

“We’ll save you a sweet roll.” Lily waved at him. “Little Hangleton, Sev?”

“You go ahead,” he said. “I’ll go back and brew the necessary. Shall we, gentlemen?”

“Sure,” Sirius said, and held out his hand. “Here. What are we going to do with this one?”

“You stole Voldemort’s wand?” Remus said incredulously. “Off of Mad-Eye Moody?”

Sirius shrugged. “He was there. It was there. Greyback really wasn’t much of a challenge in the end.”

“He wasn’t a challenge at all, you great plonker,” Lily said. “Because I took care of him for you.”

“The door did that,” he pointed out. Remus just rubbed the bridge of his nose, falling slightly back to walk beside Snape, behind them. He suddenly looked nothing but absolutely exhausted.

“Thank you, Severus,” he said quietly. “For coming. The venue considered, and... All things considered. It must have been... unnerving.”

They walked in silence through the diminishing rain.

“It was,” Snape said finally. “And it was not. It was a long time ago, Lupin, and you... You were never the one at fault.”

Remus looked sideways at him in wonder.


“You’ll understand,” Snape said remotely. “Tomorrow. For tonight... Go home. Back to your tower, to your lover, to your son. No matter how long you have with any of those things... Take it from me. It will never be long enough.”

They reached the Apparition point. Lily stood on her toes to kiss his cheek lightly.
“I’ll be back in an hour,” she promised. “Put the tea on. Don’t mix it up with the potion.”

“I won’t.” He watched as she Apparated out. Sirius immediately turned on him. He raised a forestalling palm.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Go back to your hearth-rug, mutt. We have, lest you’ve forgotten, a regime to bring down in the morning – and you have a tantrum to throw, do you not? Never mind a towerful of young idiots to tuck in, as I have a dungeonful of dunderheads?’

“Come on, Siri,” Remus said, taking his lover’s hand. “Time enough to sort everything out later. Let’s go home and make sure Harry’s alright. He has to be worried sick with both of us gone, and I promised him I’d try to be back by midnight. You know he’ll be waiting up.”

“Oh, and Remus,” Sirius said uncertainly. “If you say so.” He clutched at the other man’s fingers. “You know I’m not really mad at you, right? I was just...”

Snape watched as he ducked his head, and as Remus tilted his chin up with one finger and kissed him sweetly.

“I love you, Sirius Black,” he said. “And for the record... You were right, and I was wrong. I did need you, after all. I should have known, really. I’ve always needed you.”

Snape rolled his eyes as he braced himself for Apparition, but only a little.. He cracked out, and in. The small woman crouched beside him suddenly nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Christ on a cracker, Severus!” she hissed. “You scared the bloody shit out of me! What are you doing here; you’re supposed to be at home brewing... Mnmph!”

“Shh,” he said, and stopped her mouth with another kiss. “It’ll take me less than an hour. I know you may think you don’t need me, but ... I need to be here. With you. I wasn’t, after all, the last time you took him on.”

Her eyes softened.

“Come on then,” was all she said. “Let’s put the bugger to bed.”

They slipped off into the darkness, and down the hill.
With Your Head in the Clouds

Just Past Sunrise

Harry sat on the window seat of his dormitory room, watching as the tidal waves of soft color ebbed and flowed over the horizon beyond Black Lake. There was a real bite in the air, even indoors, but he wasn’t cold at all, bundled as he was in his flannel pajamas, fuzzy socks, slippers, and the soft cherry-red zipped jumper that Percy had helped him order from the school’s Wizarding contact at Marks and Spencer in London. Not quite the same as the sweater that Susan Bones had knitted for him for his hundred thirtieth, but close enough for comfort, and definitely for remembrance.

He pulled his knees up and tilted his head against the stone, breathing against the frosted glass. Of all of the women in Gin’s circle of friends, Susie had never married; she’d had lovers galore, but she’d always smilingly refused their offers of commitment. He’d never wondered why till now, shrugging it off whenever Gin speculated... Some people didn’t marry, he’d always said; they just weren’t inclined that way, and would follow it up, always again, by stating rather matter-of-factly that if he hadn’t met Gin herself, he didn’t imagine he’d ever have found anyone else. She’d always given him a bit of a sad look at that, but in the end, had left it alone.

Harry wished suddenly that she was here now, so that they could finish all the trains of thought he’d never realized they’d dropped.

He turned the ring hosting the Resurrection Stone (now free of curse since its bath in the potion that Snape had brewed when he and Eulalia Shelley had returned, and no longer a horcrux since Neville had promptly followed it with a finishing rinse of basilisk venom up in the Room of Requirement) between his fingers. He hadn’t had the chance to talk to Neville the night before, nor had he been party to the horcrux’s death; Remus and Sirius had completely monopolized him from the moment they’d returned, insisting that they all have cocoa and biscuits together before reluctantly allowing him to return to his bed. Neville had, for some reason, insisted he hold onto the ring once he’d returned with the remains, tossing it over before he clambered into his four poster, pulling the covers and pillows over himself and falling into a sleep so deep it might as well have been a coma... The first snowflakes of the year had been falling when they’d emerged from the tunnel under the Shrieking Shack, and his hibernatory instincts had kicked in on cue.

Harry himself had lain awake till the wee hours, on his back and turning the ravaged ring in his fingers. Unlike his wand, though, it seemed to have no hidden agenda, and shimmered at him placidly. He’d fallen asleep, finally, the thing clutched in his fist, and when he’d woken again, it was still there. He’d removed to the window seat to examine it in the pale light. It continued to sleep, the shades it held dark and anonymous and quiescent.

He wondered, what exactly, he was supposed to do with it now.

A creak sounded at the door. He looked over. Lavender’s cat poked its nose through, and disappeared... He let his wand slide out of his sleeve (he’d returned Snape’s to him through Neville) and examined it. Before he could attempt to focus and prod mentally though, there was a huge yawn from Ron’s bed. He looked over. The boy was scratching at his ribs, and swinging his legs out as he fished with his toes for his abandoned slippers.

“Gotta wee,” he mumbled, three-quarters asleep, and stumbled past him to the loo. When he emerged, he stopped in front of him, rubbing his eyes.

“You okay?” he asked blearily.
“Sure,” Harry said. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“Uh huh.” Instead of returning to his bed, he hauled his blanket over and clambered up, tucking it around them as they sat facing each other. “Here, it’s cold.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, but Ron’s head was resting against the window, and he was snoring softly. Harry smiled a little and slipped out, taking a moment to retrieve his own pillow and to tuck it carefully between the red head and the window. He tuck the blanket around Ron more closely, resisting the urge to kiss his cheek. A sudden pang hit him so hard he nearly doubled over. His Ron had died many years ago- he’d been just eighty-seven, a respectable, but still unreasonably youthful age for a wizard, from long-term complications from the curses he’d received during the war. They hadn’t been particularly painful or unpleasant complications, but his body wore out faster as a result.... He’d died clear-eyed and clear-minded though, and, a Weasley to the core, had left them all laughing through their tears... For the first time, it occurred to him that, if this wasn’t in fact, a temporal do-over, he was truly facing a stranger. His heart fractured a little - yet again - with the renewed sense of loss, and he had to take deep breaths and swallow back the sudden thick tears.

He returned to his trunk to retrieve his clothes and changed rapidly and quietly... Minutes later, he was making his way down to the common room. It was, unsurprisingly, empty. He curled up on one of the squashy chairs. Lavender’s cat appeared again, jumping on him. It was a tiny, delicate gray thing, with mismatched eyes that shone with all the light of the hidden jewels in Ali-Baba’s caves. He petted it gently. It sniffed at him a bit, and offered him a dubious look.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “I know. I smell like chicken. Get over it.”

A soft laugh sounded opposite. He looked over. Remus had emerged from his quarters, and was standing before him in dressing gown and slippers, hair rumpled and smiling at him softly.

“Good morning, cub,” he said. “You’re up early.”

“Yeah,” he said. Then, more to see what he’d say than anything else... “What happened last night, exactly? I know you said everything went well, but I was really worried when Sirius left so fast. He didn’t even tell me he was going, and after... You didn’t seem to want to do anything but feed me biscuits.”

“Ah.” His guardian came to sit beside him. “It was a bit of an emergency situation. My contact wasn’t quite as forgoing as she might have been had she actually been looking out for my best interests.”

“Sorry?”

“She set me up,” Remus translated. “Though it backfired rather spectacularly. I’m warning you now, cub, come three days from now, I’m going to be both the most celebrated and reviled man in Europe.”

“Sorry?”

“He didn’t just take out Greyback.” Sirius shuffled in in his pajamas and robes. His hair was neatly braided, but his red eyes and morning shadow (and his morning breath, Harry assumed; his teeth were sound, but having a dog as an Animagus form had its downside) would have been enough to frighten a boggart into retirement. “He took out every member of his pack. The celebration will come when he releases the official cure for lycanthropy, and the revilement will come when all his exes realize what he’s done to them. Here.” He handed Remus a steaming cup of coffee, and slurped up a scalding mouthful of his own. Harry could almost hear the Grim retreat and the man step forward.
“Steamy and black, just like you like it.”

Harry let his jaw drop appropriately, ignoring the rather obvious innuendo. “What?”

“Mm.” His godfather slumped in a chair, yawning as he sucked back more coffee. “Potion worked like a charm. Or like a really good potion. And he didn’t do it all by himself. I helped. Oh, and Snape was there, with his girlfriend, and Neville’s cousin Cartwright, and his grandson from Juneau. God, that kid can duel. Never seen anything like it in my life.”

“I’m confused,” Harry said plaintively. Then, for good measure - “Professor Snape has a girlfriend? Euuuuuuw!”

“Lovely, Harry,” Remus said. “Yes. He does. We’re a bit bemused as well. He’ll be giving us the full story later. After breakfast.”

“Is there something that’s going to happen at breakfast?” Harry asked. “Only Fred and George seemed really excited about it. They told me to get a good seat and everything.”

“There is,” Remus said. “But for certain reasons – legal reasons – we can’t tell you. It could compromise the validity of ... things. I do suggest you follow Fred and George’s suggestion though.”

“Has it got to do with me?”

“Indirectly,” Sirius said. “Though really, you’re just the catalyst. It should have come down years ago, really. Once it’s taken care of, we can get on...” He nodded to the scar on Harry's forehead. “We haven’t forgotten, you know.”

“Have you found anything?”

“We will,” Remus said firmly. “Don’t you worry. That being said... We do have some good news.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Sirius smiled down at him. “We set a date.”

His face lit up. “When?”

“Christmas Eve,” he said. “We figure since everyone is going to be at a party anyway, it might as well be ours.”

“Where?” he asked eagerly. Remus’ smile turned a bit rueful.

“Madam Longbottom has offered her Manor for the festivities,” he said. “Considering she’s bought Sirius’ house, we feel we owe her the pleasure.”

“What?”

“My family house.” Sirius grimaced. “I don’t even want to think about what it looks like after all these years; we only had the one house-elf left to take care of the place after my mother died and I went to prison, and I can’t imagine he’s kept the place up in my honor. We never got on.”

That was one way of putting it, Harry thought, and immediately started going over again all his carefully planned explanations on how he had discovered that Black had an ancestral home in the first place, and why Kreacher would have felt compelled to obey his orders to do the place over like House Beautiful when he wasn’t even supposed to be able to get past the wards in the first place. Thinking like an adult this early in the morning just gave him a headache though, so...
“What does she want with your house?”

“Oh, it’s not her. It’s for Frank and Alice. She wanted something in London proper.”

“Oh. Right. Isn’t she kind of put off by the people who used to live there?” he said doubtfully.

“You’d think, but she says there’s a certain poetic justice to it all. Also, she absolutely hated my mother. They went to school together, and the rivalry was epic. She quite likes the idea of taking over her territory and filling it with Frank’s collection of Muggle science fiction and Alice’s collection of teddy bears.”

Harry snorted. Sirius stretched his legs across the distance between them and toed him lightly.

“Sorry for taking off on you like that last night,” he said. “I tried to spot you in the crowd to let you know, but you’d disappeared, and I didn’t have time to wait.”

“It’s alright. Neville said you wouldn’t have if it hadn’t been an emergency, never mind Snape’s head in the fire. We figured it must have been really important if he was actually willing to cooperate.”

“Mm.” It was a bit sour. “He’s a git, but there’s no denying he’s handy to have at your back in a fight. We won’t go into the before and after, but...”

“I didn’t know Nev’s cousin had a grandson of his own,” Harry said, neatly diverting him. It was, he thought again, simply too early, and he loved Sirius, he did, but the former Marauder still tended toward the bit vicious when he was feeling cornered and/or embarrassed. It would probably take a few days, Harry figured, before his guardian garnered the fortitude to thank his nemesis for so irritatingly and effectively organizing the cavalry that had saved his lover’s arse, and none of them had had nearly enough sleep to be going on with. “Is he an Animagus too?”

“No idea. He fights with two wands though.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Very. It takes a truly disciplined mind, and the ability to use one hand as well as the other. No point in trying if one’s weaker, your opponents will cotton on and use it against you. And before you ask... Spells that grant ambidexterity do exist, but they’re not practical; if you see a witch or wizard coming at you with twin wands, it’d be the first Finite you’d cast, wouldn’t it, to take away the advantage. Cartwright’s grandson – his name is Lawrence, I think – is a natural though. I saw at least six people throw the counter on him last night and he just kept right on going.”

“Do you know of anyone else who ever managed it?” He tucked his feet up.


“My little brother Regulus could,” he said. “He had the mind for it too. Rumour was that he got Occlumency training from Voldy himself, to further his abilities there. Dunno if it’s true, but he sure as hell could duel. From the time he started at Hogwarts, nobody, not even Jamie, would pick a fight with him, not after the first inevitably bad experience. Even the oldest of the Slytherins let him be.”

“Did he take advantage?”

“No,” Sirius admitted. “He was a bit weird that way, Had his own code of honour and everything; he would never take on anyone who didn’t have a chance of beating him unless it was a matter of
war or to save a life. He didn’t even like the idea of taking out Muggles, really, not because he didn’t think they were inferior, but because in his mind, they were. It wasn’t sporting.”

“But he did? Take them out, I mean?”

The elder Black shrugged. “On orders, if he was ordered, till he went and got himself killed, yeah. Gotta admit, I always wondered about that. No one ever seemed to know quite how it happened.”

It sounded a bit studied. Remus caught Harry’s eye and gave him a minimal shake of the head. Harry subsided. Still, he was curious – *his* Sirius had spoken of his brother with considerably more scorn and disdain.

“I’m sorry,” was all he said.

“For what?”

“He sounds ... I mean... It doesn’t sound like he was completely horrid.”

“Don’t try to make it into something he wasn’t. He knew what he was doing,” he said. “Believed in it, even. He may have gotten cold feet over the gory specifics of his chosen career in the end – rumor has it that that’s what killed him – but his code of honour, like I said, wouldn’t have allowed him to sign on in with someone in the first place that he didn’t back a hundred percent. “

“But...”

“He was a great duelist,” Sirius said shortly. “But he wasn’t a moral man. He was an insufferable, arrogant git with absolutely no humility, who believed that his vision of the world was the only one worth living, dying or killing for. If you weren’t on his list, he didn’t pity you, or help you... he ignored you, till you were useful or not, and then ignored you again. There are a lot of people like that, pup, and any number of them will throw themes of law and civility and honor and the greater good at you in attempt to seduce you into, at the very least, tolerating their actions on what they’ll assure you is really your behalf... But after tolerance comes rationalization, and from there, it’s a quick downward slide to Hell, no matter what side of the given war you’re fighting for.”

Harry turned the stone in his fingers, in the safety of his jumper pocket, under his robes. He had the distinct feeling that they weren’t talking about Regulus anymore.

“Yeah,” he said. “I can see that.”

“Good.” His godfather toed him again. “Don’t forget it.” Remus watched them both quietly. From the upper levels of the tower, groans and moans and shuffling feet were beginning to sound, along with the rush of water through various pipes. Harry got to his feet.

“I’m still sorry,” he said.

“So am I, pup.” Sirius, too, got to his feet and hugged him. “So am I. Don’t go off right after breakfast, okay? Rem and I will come and find you.”

“What about classes?”

“Just wait for us,” Remus said. “Go on down, Harry. The first sitting should be hitting the tables right about now, and I can hear your stomach growling from all the way over here.”

He nodded, and ducked out the portrait hole. Half down the fifth staircase he diverted, taking the second corridor to the case that led directly to the library. Madam Pince prodded her spectacles as he...
entered, and fixed him with her gimlet eye.

“Potter,” she said. “What are you doing here this early?”

“I’d like to borrow a copy of *Hogwarts: A History*, please,” he said. “And maybe a general history of the Wizarding world? One with a timeline, and the names of the people involved in major events, with bits about them?”

She muttered at him, but disappeared into the stacks. He pushed his hair back – and nearly jumped out of his skin as a familiar misty giggle sounded behind him. He turned, surprised.

“Myrtle?” he said to the vision, or rather apparition, before him. “What are you doing out of your bathroom?”

“Hello, Harry,” the ghost said coyly. “Do you like my hair?”

“Your... Yeah. Yeah, I guess. Um. What did you do with it?”

It was obviously the wrong question. No matter how old he got, it was always going to be the wrong question.

“I brushed it out,” she said petulantly. “Stupid boys,” but then she giggled again. “And put on makeup, see?” She batted her translucent eyelids at him.

He didn’t, but impossible questions were, fortunately, always balanced by the singular answer. “Very pretty,” he obliged. “What’s the occasion?”

“You’ll see,” she singsonged. “You’ll see!” She floated through a wall. He peered after her, bemused. Madam Pince returned, thrusting three heavy books at him.

“Don’t crush the pages,” she said. “Or your Heads of House will hear about it. And we know how Professor Lupin, at least, feels about books?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, and clutching the books to his chest, beat a hasty retreat to the Great Hall.

It would be a lot easier to spot the comparative differences in his dimensional histories, Harry reflected as he turned pages with one hand and shoveled in oatmeal laden with butter, brown sugar, raisins, and cream with the other, if he’d learned the finer points of his own world’s history properly the first time around. Hermione watched, buttering a slice of toast and slicing it into precise soldiers as he flipped pages.

“It would be a lot easier to help you,” she noted as she dipped the first soldier into her egg, “If you told me what you were looking for.”

“Things,” he said vaguely, and tapped the rim of his bowl once. It refilled neatly; he continued scooping.

“Nice to see that you’re getting on so well with the house-elves. What kind of things?”

“Historical things.”

“Big historical things, or little historical things?”
“Either-or, really.” He put the spoon down and reached for his fork, spearing a sausage and biting off a third. “And thank you, but I’m pretty sure you can’t help me.”

“You’d be surprised.” She passed the grilled ham, blinking at Neville as he interrupted the transfer and shoveled a good half onto his plate. “Um?”

“Hungry,” Neville mumbled. Harry had suspected he wouldn’t be in a particularly good mood after his final glance out the windows before leaving the tower; the season’s first snow was now lying three inches thick across the Quidditch pitch, and the proof sat before them; the Heir of Longbottom resembled nothing but a woolly ball perched on the end of the bench. He was stuffed into at least three jumpers under his winter robes, as well as his scarf, a woolly cap, and his wizard’s hat. “Mm. Food. Pass the... NO! MINE!” Ron yelped as he jabbed him with his fork as he reached for the last biscuit.

“What the hell, Longbottom? You’ve been a total bear since you woke up this morning!”

“Bloody castle is too bloody cold. I don’t like being cold. Biscuits are hot. Pass the cocoa, Hermione?”

She passed obligingly. He poured, and gulped, and poured again, only pausing for breath in order to reach for the bacon.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Neville,” Hermione said with surprising tact, “but if you’re trying to get fit, binge-eating on pork products and liquid sugar isn’t really the way to go.”

Neville growled at her. Loudly. She stopped her mouth abruptly with more soldiers, shrinking back with wide, round eyes.

“It’s okay,” Harry reassured his alarmed mates. “His Gran told me gets like this once the cold weather really kicks in. It’s a Longbottom thing, supposedly; Mr. Cartwright said he’s the same way.”

“Is it going to stop before spring?” Ron asked, fascinated as he watched their friend inhale what seemed to be the equivalent of a small pig. “Because even Ginny can’t eat that much bacon at a setting, and she’s like, the Queen there.”

“Yeah?” Harry looked up. “But she’s so tiny!” And pork makes her sick. Or at least it makes – made – Gin sick.

“It’s deceptive. She’s gotta fuel that temper somehow.”

“Oh.” Feeling on slightly more solid ground there, he ventured... “What else does she like?”

Perhaps it was the early hour, but Ron actually seemed to consider that a reasonable question.

“Quidditch. Animals. Mum and Dad bought her a crup when we went on our shopping trip; she’s always wanted one, along with a kneazle, but there’s a waiting list at the breeder’s for those, and she probably won’t get one till she comes to Hogwarts. And the crup’s dead useful in any case, it chased out all the garden gnomes on its first day, and they haven’t been back since.”

“A kneazle?” Hermione repeated, delighted. “Will they let her bring one here?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t they?”

Harry flipped another page. Neville slurped more cocoa. Finally, he slowed a bit, though he still
shivered.

“You going to be okay?” Harry murmured, casting a quick *Muffliato*.

“Still on edge after last night,” he murmured back. “I may be civilized, but Beorn likes to eat what he kills.”

“Urgh.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Want me to ward you against the cold later? One little runic tattoo somewhere discreet, and you’ll be set for the winter.”

“God, yes. “ He shivered violently. “This is horrible. Never mind fattening. I know where it’s coming from, but I just can’t stop. Pretty soon the urge to sleep all day is going to kick in, and I really don’t know what I’m going to do then.”

“Maybe it’ll ease off once you’re warm again? And as for the food... Maybe if you went hunting again? There’s always the Forbidden Forest.”

“And spend the next week picking Acromantula legs out of my teeth? No thank you.”


“Yeah, and why not just go straight for Hagrid’s heart while I’m at it?’

“It’s not like Voldemort is ever going to get that far,” he pointed out. ‘Devil’s snare and whack-a-troll aside, there’s no way he’s getting past my hall wards. I specifically locked out his magical signature, and only I can lift the ban.”

“Mm. We’re going to have to talk about that, I...” He paused as Fred and George slid avidly into their seats.

“Incoming,” the left-hand twin whispered gleefully. “Buckle up, ickle Harrikins; the ride’s about to begin!”

“Uh?” He looked up – and blinked. Everyone looked over as the march of feet sounded in the hall, and a veritable battalion of Aurors, headed up by Mad-Eye Moody, the entire Board of Governors and a triumphantly smirking Moaning Myrtle entered the room, the officially garbed Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at her side.

“What the...” Dumbledore lowered his mug, startled. “Amelia?’ he rose to his feet. “What’s going on?’

“What’s going on,” Moaning Myrtle smirked at him rather vindictively, before Amelia Bones could answer. “Headmaster, is that I was murdered fifty years ago, in this very castle, and you, as Deputy Headmaster, failed in your designated duty to solicit and provide the courts with information on that murder – to properly investigate it, even, though you were ordered to by Headmaster Dippet – and allowed the real murderer, or rather the murdering thing’s inciter, to continue to roam these halls, all while allowing the Board of Governors and the Aurors at the time to labor under the mistaken impression that another student, a student that you knew was innocent, to be expelled for a crime he didn’t commit, for his wand to be snapped, for his life to be cut off before it had really started, and...”
“Miss Warren,” Amelia Bones said wearily. “Please. We have discussed the matter of due procedure here, never mind your annoying commitment to italics, before, have we not? Repeatedly?”

“I’m not irrelevant just because I’m dead! I have rights!”

“You don’t, actually,” she said. "Your family, however, does, and if you will allow me to speak, as they’ve asked me to, on their behalf, we can get on with things properly.” She turned to Dumbledore and cleared her throat, extracting a roll of parchment from her robes and unscrolling it as the Aurors took up official position. “Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, I regret to inform you that you are under arrest. You are instructed to lay down your wand and accompany me to the Ministry of Magic, where you will face charges of criminal obstruction of justice as pertains to the murder of a student under your charge, one Myrtle Warren, and, as pertains to the subsequent expulsion and arrest of one Rubeus Hagrid: slander, libel, perjury, and the promotion of false and incriminating evidence resulting in a false and unjust conviction and imprisonment.” She paused. Murmurs rose. Dumbledore lowered his fork. At the end of the Head Table, Hagrid sat, huge hands twisted in his lap and staring down at his plate... Huge tears rolled down his cheeks into his beard. “You will also face civil and criminal charges pertaining to your ongoing and established pattern of failure to report the physical and emotional abuse of students to their Heads of House and the appropriate legal authorities. I will not list said students here, for the sake of their privacy, but the fact remains, and a closed court session will divulge all.”

Again, the murmurs swept through the hall. Cries of horror and indignation rose as students surged to their feet in what they obviously saw as unjust treatment of their beloved Headmaster... Slowly though, they settled back as they realized that not a single teacher was uttering a word of protest. Then, to everyone’s shock, Neville Longbottom stood.

“It’s true,” he said, his voice wavering. “The Sorting Hat told me. Not names, or details, but since Professor Dumbledore wasn’t doing anything... It asked me to ask the Heads of Houses to come talk to it. It has,” he said defiantly as everyone present stared at him, mouths uniformly ajar. “A responsibility. To the school.”

“It asked you?” Zacharias Smith said loudly. “Why would it talk to you?”

“We have a standing appointment, remember?” He jutted his chin out, amid the jumpers and scarves. Much to everyone’s shock again, Severus Snape glided down from the Head Table, and came to put his hand on Neville’s shoulder.

“Well done, Longbottom,” he said smoothly. “One hundred points to Gryffindor. Professor Dumbledore, you will find, once in court, my name on that list of accusers. That would be accusers with an ‘s’ your blatant disregard for my own unfortunate home environment during my own years here under your de facto, legally binding and sworn magical guardianship was hardly a singular occurrence, and one that, as Madam Bones has stated, follows an established pattern of neglect on your part.” He looked around the room with those dark, fathomless eyes. “To those others on that list... And you know who you are... You have not been forgotten. You are important. You matter. And, most importantly of all... You are no longer alone. You have...” He squared his shoulders. Never in his life, even when facing down Voldemort, had Harry found a single individual quite and so sheerly intimidating. “Me.”

Not a breath sounded. In the silence, Sirius Black stood. Remus didn’t rise, but he linked his arm firmly around the whip-thin waist in obvious physical, as well as emotional support.

“And me,” he said loudly. “Me too. You knew,” he said to Dumbledore. His face twisted. “You knew what I went home to every holiday. What...” He grimaced, but only slightly, and caught Snape’s eye. “You knew what Sni... Snape went through, everyone did, but we were stupid kids,
and you weren’t, and maybe the courts would never have done anything for either of us because of my family name and his lack... But you still had the responsibility to say something. And now you want to send my godson back to his so-called family, when you know again? No. No. Not as long as there’s breath in my body, old man. I don’t know what you’re hoping for there, or why... And I may... I may not be the most fit parent in the world... But at least I know it, enough to accommodate for it. To get help, for me, for him, to make sure that there’s someone else there, along with me, who can...”

He stopped, shaking so hard it was visible from any angle in the Hall.

“You didn’t even allow me a trial,” he said plaintively. “Nine years, and you’re the Head of... The Supreme... It was your responsibility, and I had responsibilities too, and Remus was sick, he was... You knew that Jamie and Lils wanted us to take him on together; the Ministry would have let us take him together if I’d been cleared, even if he was a werewolf, and you just .... You let them lock me up, and left Remus all alone; he lost everything that night, everybody he’d ever loved or who loved him, and you left him alone with it, with nothing and nobody, and now you want to send Harry back to those horrible, horrible...”

His voice cracked and broke. Remus did stand then, and wrapped him up. His words were murmured, but it was impossible to mistake ‘so proud,’ ‘so brave, and ‘love you.’ Under the table, Hermione’s hand grasped Harry’s tightly. On the other, Ron squeezed it awkwardly.

“Did you know,” he murmured. They shook their heads mutely. He looked to Fred and George.

“How...”

“Vinnie Crabbe,” George said in a low voice. “Gred and me caught him in the loo, puking. He’d gone home for the weekend last month, and came back with a broken rib, and the potion he’d got from his mum – she said he couldn’t go to the infirmary or he’d get his dad in trouble - to fix it made him sick. We told him to go to Dumbledore, to tell him what was going on, and he said he already had. He’d said he’d take care of it, but he didn’t, did he? He’d have had to talk to Snape first, as his Head of House, so that Snape could talk to his parents, and Vinnie said that Snape never came to him, so he figured no one cared. We told him that wasn’t right, couldn’t be right, that Snape’s a git, but he helped Charlie, and Charlie’s a Gryffindor. And a Weasley. And not even a student anymore. It just didn’t make sense. So we remembered what Nev said, about having a standing appointment with the Hat, for his parents, and asked him to tell it that was happening. And it told him that it saw that Vinnie was being abused, along with a couple of other kids when it sorted them, and it told him that he can’t tell details about any kids, but it can tell about what’s happening to them, if they’re being hurt, and it told Dumbledore because it has to, and he just hadn’t done anything. They weren’t on his priority list. You’re not even on his priority list, and you’re Harry bloody Potter. It’s like...”

“It’s like he likes seeing kids abused,” Fred said fiercely.

Harry doubted that sincerely, but still... He shifted uneasily. It wasn’t something that he could say of the Dumbledore in his world, but he didn’t know the one here. And now that he was looking back...

**Young Malfoy’s very excited about the prospect of you in green and silver,** the Sorting Hat had said. **And Vinnie and Greg are hoping you’ll show them that trick you did with your wand. I wouldn’t recommend it to Vinnie at least; no details, but he’s feeling rather repressed. It could go either way.**

*Would it have dropped me a hint like that if it could have just told Dumbledore and expected him to solve the problem?*
“Are you going to come with us peacefully, Albus?’ Amelia Bones was asking.

“Certainly,” Dumbledore said, rising to his feet. “This is all a misunderstanding, I assure you, but I’m sure we can sort it all out in no time. Minerva, I trust you will hold the fort, or the castle as the case may be, in the meantime?’

“I certainly, certainly will,” she said grimly. Her eyes were like flint as she stared him down.

“How do we know we can trust her?’ one of the older Slytherins said loudly. “How do we know she didn’t know? Or any of the others?’

“Your Heads of Houses and professors have all been subject to private interviews under the supervision of a special committee designated by the Wizengamot, Miss Harper,” Amelia Bones said crisply. “A committee headed by Madam Augusta Longbottom. Her reputation is impeccable, I assure you, and her methods thorough. She insisted on administering the Veritaserum herself, and only after she’d tested it on her own person.”

“What about Madam Pomfrey?’ Percy asked. “Was she interviewed?’

There was a pause.

“Madam Pomfrey is bound to report all concerns to the Headmaster or Headmistress,” the Director of the DMLE said. “We will be investigating why her reports have been disregarded over the course of the next few weeks. In the meantime…” She turned to Harry. “Mr. Potter?’

“Um,” he said. “Yes, ma’am?’

“We at the DMLE and Wizarding Child Welfare initiated, upon the specific request of Her Majesty the Queen to the Minister of Magic, a joint investigation of Muggle and Magicals into your former home life. It has been determined that it is an entirely unsuitable environment for your raising, and a formal judgment has been rendered. All registered objections to your relocation have been overturned, and you are remanded hereby and in perpetuity into the guardianship of Sirius Orion Black and Remus John Lupin.”

Harry stared, stunned, as the entire hall roared in approval. Even a few of the Slytherins raised their glasses, though he suspected that had more to do with the formal rejection of Muggles than appreciation of his good fortune.

“Her Majesty the...What?’

But Bones was already going, along with her entire contingent. As their footsteps faded...

“You are Mum’s godson,” Neville pointed out. “And since Gran’s her proxy now, for all matters legal and otherwise... “ He laughed outright as a stunned, but now fully recovered Sirius literally leapt over the Head Table, transformed to Padfoot mid-launch, and tore across the hall, knocking Harry off the bench and licking his face rhapsodically. McWolf wasn’t but a beat behind, and Harry sprawled in the middle of the floor as they pounced and wrestled and tossed him about in sheer joy.

“Did you know?’ he demanded, as he struggled to a sitting position. “Did you know about this? Not just that Dumbledore would be arrested today, but about the investigation and the ruling?’

“We knew it was in the works,” Remus said, transforming back. His hair was everywhere, his clothes were rumpled, and the grin stretched from ear to ear. Sirius too switched back, and hauled them both up into a huge hug. The roar sounded again. Not a few of the Hufflepuffs were sniffing into their cereal.” Madam Longbottom said she’d do what she could for us, but these things can take
time, and we weren’t sure it would all come down before the scheduled court date. So... No.”

“First order of business,” Minerva McGonagall announced. “Classes are cancelled for the day. Congratulations, Professors Black and Lupin. Mr. Potter. We’re all very pleased for you.”

“I’m going to kill you, Longbottom,” Harry said as Sirius spun him about again. “I can’t believe you knew, and didn’t say anything!”

“Surprise?” Neville offered. Harry threw an apple at him. He promptly caught it and bit into it.

“FOOD FIGHT!” Fred bellowed enthusiastically. “FOOOOOOOD FIIIIIIII...”

“I do not think so, Mr. Weasley,” Snape said with asperity, and pointed his wand. Fred burbled around a pair of gigantic lips and accompanying waving whiskers. The Gryffindors gawped, shocked. Sirius brushed his tangle of hair back and came over to tilt the boy’s face and examine him critically.

“Not bad,” he pronounced. “Lionfish?”

“But of course,” Snape said. “What else?”

“Indeed.” He tapped Fred’s nose with his wand. He gasped and burbled again before laughing uproariously.

“That’s wicked,” he enthused. “You have to teach us that one!”

“I think not,” his Potions professor said, and again looking down at the twins, nodded stiffly... “Fifty points apiece, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Weasley, for your truly indomitable efforts in the pursuit of justice on behalf of a member of my House.”

The twins actually blushed, as only two thirteen-year-olds could.

“It was the least we could do,” Fred mumbled. “After what you did for Charlie. You saved his life, you know?”

“That had nothing to do with my students,” Snape returned. “The debt, if you wish to perceive it as such, and I don’t, was between Snape and Weasley, not Slytherin and Weasley.”

George mumbled something else.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Weasley?”

“I said,” he said loudly. “That it didn’t have anything do with debt. It had to do with decency.”

“Indeed,” Snape returned. “Even we Slytherins may strive for that, now and again, may we not?”

He strode off, billowing. Sirius sighed.

“I hate him,” he said unenthusiastically to Remus. “And if he keeps on like that, I won’t just have to apologize to him, I’ll have to be sincere about it. All without throwing up.”

Remus laughed.

“You’ll get there,” he said. “I have absolute faith in you.” He ruffled Harry’s hair. “Alright, cub. Back to the tower with you. Or the library, or wherever it is that you plan to do your homework. Neville, for God’s sake, go back to bed. You look like you’re about to fall asleep in your bacon.”
“Where are you going?” Harry asked.

“I believe someone has a few questions for us.” He nodded to the doors, where Snape, now standing with his arm about a slight woman in a lemon-yellow cloak, was talking to Mad-Eye Moody. “We may have a few for him in turn.”

“Is that Professor Shelley?” Fred peered. “It is! Why does he have his arm around her?”

“Three guesses,” McGonagall said from behind him. “Upstairs with you now, Mr. Weasley. I have a great deal of work to accomplish today, and keeping track of you and your brother is not on the list.” She reached into her pocket and extracted a small book. “As requested. Don’t even think of it as anything but theoretical research right now, gentlemen. I’ll know if you do; it has a charm placed on it that will let me know if you attempt to put the contents into practice before I personally deem you ready.”

“What is it?” Harry asked as they made their way up the stairs.

“We’re going to open a joke shop when we graduate,” George explained. “We were talking about it, and McGonagall was wandering around in her cat form, and overheard us. Scared the wee right out of us when she transformed, but blimey, didn’t she surprise us after – said she thought it was a fantastic idea, but that it would involve a lot of transfiguration-based spell crafting, and that that can be really dangerous if you don’t know what you’re doing. Not just for the joke-makers, but for the recipients, and that she can help us there.”

“What?” Ron said blankly. “She wants to train you up to prank people for a living?”

“More like she knows we’re going to do it anyway, and doesn’t want to see us kill anyone with it,” George said fairly. “But since we’ve got no interest in that either, it works out well.”

“Mm.” Harry frowned. His Auror instincts were niggling again. “Fred?”

“Yeah?”

“Madam Bones said that they were arresting Dumbledore for Hagrid’s false imprisonment. He didn’t actually go to Azkaban, did he? Only, I heard that he was accused, but that he’d got off on Dumbledore’s recommendation.”

“No, he...”

“Azkaban?” Percy said from behind them. “No, no. Of course not, Harry.” Just as Harry breathed a sigh of relief – “He was only thirteen. They don’t send thirteen year olds to Azkaban. They kept him in the holding cells at the DMLE.”

“What?”

“For four years,” Fred confirmed. “Till he came of age. No Dementors, but there might as well have been; they had the mental healers – and not the nice kind, either – at him full time while he was there because they thought that he was naturally dangerous himself, and inclined to mental instability because he was half-giant and had been messing with Class XXXXX creatures at so young an age. Oh, and his dad had just died too, yeah, so he had no other family to help him. After he got out, Professor Dumbledore’s brother suggested he come here to serve as groundskeeper - no one wanted to risk taking him on, Dumbledore was worried, but somehow his brother convinced him to take the chance in the end.”

Harry digested that in horror. He’d had no idea: none, and lacking the opportunity provided him by
the Dursleys' rejection of his school letters to form a friendship with the gentle half-giant this time, had had no way to rationalize or follow up on an acquaintance that might have led to the earlier revelation.

“How do you know all this?” he asked, as they turned onto the final staircase. “It was an awfully long time ago.”

“Charlie told us. He and Hagrid were great mates while he was here. He even offered to get him a job on the Reserves if he liked, once he got in himself- he’d be great there. He’s always said no, he owed too much to the school that gave him a second chance, but now that he’s finally being forced to see the truth... now.... Who knows. It’s got to be a huge blow to him, and it'll be brought up all over the papers again. He might not want to stay around now that the truth’s out, and Charlie might not be able to work at the Reserves anymore, but his word’s still good there.”

“I hope he does go,” Hermione said. “I mean, I’m fond of him and all, but... Only it’ll all be a constant reminder of everything, won’t it? And he’s always looked sad enough besides. Maybe he can even get a new wand, and some more lessons if he goes.”

“Sad?” Harry said involuntarily, even as Percy said “Oh, certainly. He’ll get a nice settlement if Dumbledore’s convicted. He’ll be able to afford tutors easily.”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Sad. I’ve never seen him smile once, have you, Ron?”

“No,” Ron said. “I haven’t. Hermione’s right, Harry. He’s better shot of this place. “

They entered the tower through the portrait hole. Neville immediately stumbled toward the stairs.

“We’ll talk later,” he said to Harry. “I’m sorry, mate, but I’m exhausted.”

“Go on,” Harry said, too troubled now to wonder, or argue. He sat down in an armchair and pulled out the second book that Madam Pince had given him: *Important Events in 20th Century Wizarding Europe and the Wizards and Witches Who Defined Them.*

He flipped to the first page and began to read. Down in the dungeons, far below his perch, Mad-Eye Moody surveyed the four people seated before him, his skewed, whirling eye spinning and shining like the broken shards in a kaleidoscope.

“Well now,” he said. “Who’s up first?”

“Not yet,” Snape said. “We’re missing someone.”

“We are, are we.”

“We are.” A soft knock sounded from his pocket. He reached in, extracted a tiny portrait, and set it against the wall. Moody watched, single eye narrowed as he enlarged it, and tapped the frame three times. The paint swirled, forming a vortex, that formed in turn, a tunnel. The grizzled Auror grunted, startled, as a tall, sturdy figure stepped through.

“Who...”

“Neil Cartwright,” the man before him said, and dropped his glamours, raising them again even as he held out his hand and sprouted demonstrative ears. “Or rather... Neville Longbottom, sir. Headmaster of Hogwarts, at least in my own world. The oath does seem to carry over here though, or at least the castle and I have an understanding based on the particulars of my past. Chronologically speaking, that’d be your future,” he clarified. “If you gloss over the bits on crossed dimensions, anyway.”
Alistair ‘Mad-Eye’ Moody examined him thoroughly. Remus and Sirius’ jaws dropped in painful tandem.

“How’d you pull it off? Your version of the Unspeakables? And... Why? Voldemort again?’

“No,” Neville said, seating himself. Sirius gawped at his ears like a six-year-old. “We’ll get rid of him, of course; he’s a damned pest in any universe, but he’s not the point. In the end, he’s nothing. Nobody important, no matter his own opinions to the contrary, and in our world... We haven’t forgotten him, but we’re well on our way.”

“How old are you?”

“A hundred thirty-eight.”

Sirius made a small, agonized sound. Remus held him tightly. His nostrils were flared wide, and his canines were unconsciously bared as glanced back and forth from Neville to Snape to Lily, and listened and processed.

“Why are you here?” Moody asked again.

Neville Longbottom closed his eyes.

“To rescue my counterpart's parents,” he said in a distant voice. “From that lost land they live in, sir.” His eyes opened. They were very clear and calm and certain. “To live the life that was stolen from them. My own parents are long since passed... But here... Here, they’re still alive. Still alive, and by God and all the versions of heaven and earth that ever were, and if all of the souls of the living and the dead who ever loved them and respected them and grieved for them and worked together for literal decades toward this end have anything to say about it... There will be one world at least, where all of the hope that was ever offered them will not prove false. “
Alastor Moody’s favoured weapons had always been his instincts. He had no need of a pocket
sneakoscope to tell him when someone was taking the piss in his vicinity, nor did he require a foe-
glass of any dimension to tell him when an enemy was lurking in the shadows. Throw in the power
of the magical eye, and the fact that he’d been a member of Slytherin House during one of the
longest and nastiest decades in its long and nasty history – a decade during which all of the other
Houses had actually had hope that its members were mellowing, so busily and quietly had they been
preoccupied with ‘tutoring’ each other in preparation for the war to come...

Popular rumour held that Albus Dumbledore was the only wizard that Tom Marvolo Riddle had ever
feared. That might have been true back in the day, but during the years of the First Wizarding War,
and especially after the Dark ‘n’ Nutty Flavour of the Week had met his unfortunate neo-demise,
Riddle’s followers had learned the hard way that Alastor Moody was going to be the real one to
watch should the particularly-driven horses come ‘round the mountain again.

For Moody knew them. He knew them all intimately: by name, by habit, by weakness and strengths:
the bedwetters, the bullies, the posers, and true psychopaths, and by extension and eventual and
mandated social exposure, all of their extended friends and relations. He’d grown up with them,
bedded down with them in their very den every night for seven long years, and never once, not for a
single moment in any one of those seven years, had he ever given any of them a single reason to
doubt their belief that one day, he’d be ranked among the greatest of them all. He’d let them think
that, encouraged it, trained with all of them, trained them himself as the Dark General they’d always
expected he’d become...

And in the end, or rather at the beginning, back when Tom Marvolo Riddle had still had that full
nose of his own to work with, Alastor Moody had made it his practice and vocation to walk with his
trusting, twisted compatriots into the tall grass: to turn about, to smile and wave them on...

And to cut them down in soft, scarlet swathes of blood under the pitiless gold sun, hissing as the
snake he was even as the lion within him (and the Sorting Hat maintained it had been justthatclose),
closed in to feast.

Severus Snape had not been the first witch or wizard to act as a spy for the Light. He had only been
the subtlest. As a Scot rather than an Englishman though - and oh, that last did give Snape the
emotional advantage - Moody had chafed. He’d known his duty: had literally been raised for it from
before the time he’d entered Hogwarts as the stereotypically sullen, rebellious son of two of the most
dangerous and famous Aurors in the history of the Corps (Slytherins did love their repressed
stereotypes; it was always going to be their greatest weakness) and he’d done that job well. More
than well: perfectly.

Well, Moody temporized silently, almost perfectly. The art of subterfuge had never truly sat well
with him, and in the end, he supposed, he’d somehow managed to betray himself. From the point
that fateful day where he’d turned in the tall grass to find that his cover had been blown for good
(and mowed down a good half-field’s worth of seedless, withering chaff before the literal phoenix
had swooped in to carry him, if not his second leg, away to safety), he’d made a point of disparaging active personal subtlety as thoroughly as he scorned the idea that a fifteen-month-old shit-squirter could take down the most powerful Dark wizard in human history.

Lily Evans Potter, on the other hand...

*There* had been a witch worth backing for the race. Moody hadn’t known her well, not personally, but they’d recognized each other as kindred spirits of a sort nevertheless. He’d done his own, private, version of research on every prospective member coming through the original headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, and upon poking about the castle for dirt on any-and-all, had discovered that there was only one reason the Sorting Hat had put the girl in question in Gryffindor instead of Slytherin. It wasn’t because she was Muggleborn, either. At eleven, Lily Evans had hated being cold more than anything else in life, and had informed the Sorting Hat in no uncertain terms that she wanted the House furthest from the lowest, and by obvious extension, dampest and chilliest, point in the castle.

Moody had actually laughed at that when she’d confirmed the story over tea-cake at her first official meeting with the Order, when he’d asked her straight out what a bad girl like her was doing in a nice place like this....She’d just winked, kissed his cheek, and whispered in his ear that if he ever told anyone about the books that she knew that he knew that she’d been smuggling out of the restricted section at Hogwarts and running through the Muggle photocopier back at her home library in Cokeworth (the books were all secured against even the most advanced of copying charms, but were helpless – of course – in the face of Muggle technology) he’d soon be missing the second of original three legs.

The books, of course, had been on blood magic. Of course they had been. Lily Evans Potter wasn’t exactly Dark, though. No, not even shadowed. She was just...

Curious.

She liked to know things, she’d told him, around a mouthful of tea-cake. Just in case.

And Alastor Moody had, after due consideration, decided to leave things there. His instincts again, and if had been anyone else it would have been crossed wands at dawn, but his instincts had told him to let things alone. And so he had, and it had paid off in the one way if not the other, and he held forth absolutely no sorrow for the fact as he’d stood by her grave at her funeral and watched the cold earth fold over and around her. She’d died on her feet as the warrior she was, literally spitting in the face of her murderer, and Moody could only pray that when it was his turn, he’d go with half the sheer balls of the girl that had been, in the end, not Voldemort’s mere equal, but his better.

He’d been sorry for the cold earth, though, and after the others had all left, had returned, sunk his wand deep into the loose soil, and aimed a permanent heating charm down through the cracks of the plain wooden coffin. For however long an eternity she lay there, Moody thought, Lily Evans Potter’s bones would rest warmly.

It was all he could give her, in thanks or otherwise. He could almost feel the soft brush of her kiss on his cheek for it, and taste the ghostly, last bite of tea-cake slipped between his lips.

No, Alastor ‘Mad-Eye’ Moody had no illusions that he’d survive a second war. He had no particular fear of death – he never had; it was part of what made him such an effective and formidable enemy of the Dark - but that didn’t mean he didn’t enjoy life. He was, as a matter of fact, rather fond of it, and it was, therefore, in his best interests, he reasoned, to ensure that that a second war never occurred. In the meantime, and while he worked to prevent it by personally running down and incarcerating every one of his morally erstwhile housemates, those skills he’d used to survive the first
war translated.

Wickedness, Dark Wankers and wars aside... He could, and despite his half-missing nose, smell a bullshitter a mile away.

Sadly, there was no trace of it now. The man before him, Neil Cartwright a.k.a Neville Longbottom, was absolutely, heart-wrenchingly, completely sincere.

If Moody had had any tear ducts left, or tears for that matter, on the particular subject, he would have wept for him. As it was, he just shook his head pityingly. Sincere, he thought, yes... But putting the matter of the stranger’s purported identity aside, there was no hope. None. They had tried. Of course they had tried. They’d tried... Everything. There was nothing left to try. And he knew, for he’d looked. Personally. Frank and Alice Longbottom had been Aurors. Family. He wasn’t entirely sure that the man before him was sane himself; his cock-and-bull story of another world didn’t ring as a lie, exactly, but that didn’t mean he didn’t just believe it was true. Moody didn’t know what the truth was, or might be, or could be, but he knew that much. That much, and he held onto the fact tightly as his eye and his mind whirled madly together, though it cut through the hands of his memory like razored glass.

“It’s not possible, son,” he said gently, or as gently as he could manage it. Just for the moment, he decided to humour his delusions. One thing at a time, he thought, and firmly ignored the perplexing apparent proof sitting beneath the layers of glamours on the woman opposite. One thing at a time. “In any world. They’re gone.”

“And we’re going to bring them back,” Eulalia Shelley said firmly. She stood, the illusions surrounding her falling away as a soft robe in the night. The soft sound from Sirius turned into a terrified wail. Remus wrapped him up and rocked him, never taking his eyes off of her. She knelt before them, and touched Sirius’ shaking, flinching arm.

“It’s me, Sirius,” she said. “Lily. My brave, brave Siri. What have they done to you?’

“You’re dead,” he whispered, and shut his eyes tightly. In his chair, Moody did the same, literally bringing his hand up to cover the magical one as the sudden taste of tea-cake filled his mouth. Forcibly, he brought it down. His head hurt, suddenly and badly. For it was Lily, he knew it now... In truth, he had known it last night, instantly, and had run back to the bar, not to clean up after the sixty ex-werewolves, but to give himself time to try and figure out a reasonable explanation for the world-suddenly-gone-completely-batshit-insane. Till now though, till this very moment, he hadn’t let his mind accept the fact as fact.

And that meant, he thought detachedly, that she either hadn’t died at all... Or that Cartwright-slash-Longbottom’s story was true.

Goddamn, he thought, his head hurt.

“I saw, I saw your body, I saw... I was there, I... Oh God, Remus, oh God, oh...”

“I’m real, Siri,” she reassured him again. “And I’m Lily... But I’m not your Lily. I came... I’m from another place. Another world, like Neville said. I came with him and Severus, to finish what my...” She paused. “My twin, I guess you could call her - started that night. That night that everything ended.”

Sirius’ eyes snapped open, and cleared and sharpened, and he turned immediately to Snape.
“With you?” he demanded. “Wait... If you came... Where’s the other you?”

It was, Moody thought, from the depths of his own bemusement, a very fair question. A very fair and excellent question. And it figured too, he thought a bit sourly amused, that that would be the detail that brought Black out of his frightened hysteria.

“We are identical souls,” Snape said. “And as two identical souls cannot exist in the same world at once, he is holding the door so that when we have done what we came to do, we may return to our heaven and our earth. The door opens only from the one side, you see, and if there is not a soul there bound to hold it till we are done, those who have crossed over to our side so that their counterparts may accomplish what might be done here will never be able to return to their home.”

Mad-Eye sat back in his chair. The pain behind his eyes was receding a bit, through sheer force of will.

*When in doubt... Fake them out.*

“And did you force him into this new career as a doorstop?’ he said coolly. Severus shook his head.

“No. We used blood magic, but there was nothing Dark about it. Every participant had to be a volunteer. We approached this world at a crucial point in time,” he said. “A point that I’d been at myself. A point where I had to decide whether I wanted to live or die. In my world... I made one choice. In this world... My counterpart was about to make the other. We interrupted him, and offered him another option. He agreed to throw in his lot with us.”

“Why?”

“Decency?” His mouth twisted a little, wryly. “Even we Slytherins may strive for it now and again.”

“Nice try.”

Neville smiled a little.

“We showed him our world,” he said simply. “A world where Voldemort had been defeated. A world that lived. A world that his counterpart, in a very real way, saved, because he was brave enough to do what needed to be done, when it needed to be done, no matter the personal cost. He decided he wanted to help his own world achieve that.”

“No motivations there as concerned your plans for your parents?’

“He said that he didn’t think it could be done,” he said. “Like you. But then he said that if we were really planning to move literal heaven and earth to try, he might as well be in a position to point and laugh at our Gryffindorish stupidity, and halfway between here and there was as good a place as any.”

Remus’ canines receded at that, and he actually sniggered. Sirius looked at him, betrayed.

“Oh come on, Siri,” his lover said. “That was funny. Can’t you hear him saying that?”

“You believe them?’

“Yes,” he said. “Use your nose, Padfoot. That’s Neville alright, and Lily. And Neville’s supposed to be eleven, and Lily’s dead. I saw her body too, and smelled it, and no offense love, but rotting aside, Avada Kedavra does leave that rather unpleasant nasal after-taste.”
“None taken,” she returned. Black sat up abruptly.

“Is Jamie here too?” he demanded. “Did you bring him with you, did he...” He sniffed the air, whipping his head around. Lily caught his hand again.

“No sweetie,” she said gently. “He’s not here. He sends his love though. All of his love, always.”

“So he’s alive in your world?”

She closed her eyes.

“No,” she said. “He’s not. He died, just as he did here. As I did.”

There was a deep silence.

“I don’t understand,” Black said, and the bewildered six-year-old was back... She returned to her chair, pulling it up beside him, and took his hand firmly.

“We needed eight souls,” she said. “Identical souls, or rather, matching: four from each side. From our side... Two living, two dead. Two that would naturally pass – the ritual took hold of them at the moment before their last breath had faded... And two that had been murdered. To balance it, from this side... We needed two living children’s souls, to cross over – don’t worry; they’ll be back... and two deceased souls again, that had forced themselves to pass in an untimely manner.”

“Suicides?” he said. “Who...”

She held his hand tightly.

“The first volunteer,” she said. “Was Severus. Your Severus. He did kill himself, you see, we just... timed things right so he could jam the door.”

“And the second?”

She looked him in the eyes.

“It was Regulus, Siri,” she said quietly. “Your Regulus.”

“What?”

Moody’s lips twisted in sour amusement. It figured, he thought. Didn’t it just figure. He’d bet everything he owned that the Sorting Hat had just as hard a time making the final decision on Reggie-boy as it had on him. Cunning and sly, witty and dangerous... And ambitious, oh yes. There’d been ambition enough and to spare there - all channeled toward his compulsive, all-overwhelming and literally killing drive to become a good old-fashioned hero.

Mind you, he’d never been all that fussed on which side would hold him up as a hero. Not at first, anyway. Not as long as he made it in the end. Moody supposed that that was what had tipped him towards the banner of the green and silver after all, at his beginning. He said nothing, though, just watched as Lily held Sirius Black’s hand, telling him how Regulus Black, the finest duelist of any generation trained by Voldemort himself, had managed, just the once, to slip past the monster’s mental shields in order to garner the truth of his horcruxes... How he’d gone with Kreacher to the hidden cave to replace the deadly locket, after Kreacher had been forced by Voldemort to help seal the magics there, and how Regulus, that second time, had taken it upon himself to drink the deadly potion himself... How he’d not been dragged, but thrown himself to the Inferi in the lake, to allow the house-elf time to escape. Black stared at her, wide eyed, as she talked steadily. When she was
“Reg did that?” he said in a small voice. “Reg? My brother Reg?”

“Yes,” Lily said. “Your Reg. He was a prat, but he was always an honorable prat. A fair-minded one. In his mind... Voldemort wasn’t playing fair.”

“Or with a full set of potion ingredients,” Snape said dryly. “And a leaky rusted-out cauldron to boot. Splitting one’s soul isn’t exactly good for one’s sanity.” He caught Lupin’s eye as he frowned.

“Yes?”

“Two children’s souls,” he said. “Neville, and...”

The ex-were pressed his fingers to his nose.

“I am,” he said precisely. “Going to kill the little bugger. “It has to be taught?” he mimicked. Black slumped in his chair.

“He seemed so happy this morning,” he said forlornly. “You’re saying it’s all an act?’

“No. Not at all! He really is eleven in this world,” Lily said anxiously. “In body, at least. He needs someone to look out for him, till all this is done with, Remy. It’s not like I can just announce my return from the dead, can I? And once your - this world’s Harry – comes back, he’ll need you too. It’s not like I can stay.”

“What’s going to happen?’ he asked. She chewed her lip.

“There are several possibilities,” she said finally. “But when it comes right down to it, and as creepy as it sounds... You have to remember something, Sev and I... The Sev you see before you, and I... We really are still dead. The ritual we performed provided us with bodies based on the templates of the deceased souls that lived here, but we’re on borrowed time, really. And that time is going to run out.”

They sat in silence for awhile.

“What’s it like for him?’ Black said finally. “Doorstop Snape? Wherever he is?’

“No idea,” she said. “Nobody’s ever done what we did before, so there’s no one to report back on the particulars.”

“So he went in completely blind?’

“Yes.”

“Damn.” There was distinct, if begrudging respect there. “Positively Gryffindor, that. Who knew old Snivvy had it in him?”

I did. Moody said nothing though, just grunted.

“The finer details can wait, I s’pose,” he said. “And you may have your priorities, but I have mine, and a job to do besides. What I want to know is this; how many times did You-Know-Who split his soul, and where do we find the bits?”

“We’ve found most of them already,” Neville said. “Four out of the six, and we know where the last two are.”
Do tell.

"Malfloy Manor," Lily supplied. "Probably in the secret chamber under his drawing room floor. It’s a beat up black diary, with T.M Riddle on it in gold, and it writes back when you write in it. A burst of contained fiendfyre or a shot of basilisk venom will take care of it nicely."

"Sounds easy enough," Moody said. "I can schedule a raid, no problem. And the last?"

"Let me guess," Lupin said. "It’s the bit stuck to Harry’s curse scar."

"Excuse me?"

"How’d he get rid of it the last time?" the ex-were asked. "I presume he did?"

Snape rubbed his chin.

"That’s the tricky part," he said. "He had to die."

"He came back again," Lily said hastily at the unbelieving look. "One soul expelled, or soul fragment as the case may be, per death, and his own soul had seniority, so it stayed behind. It wasn’t permanent."

"So what’s stopping him from taking it out now?" Moody asked. "Seems pretty straightforward."

"It’s not," Neville said. "Voldemort has to off him himself."

"Ah. That does complicate things. Correct me if I’m wrong, but won’t he need a body to do that?"

"What are we supposed to do with him now?" Sirius asked, ignoring that. "He doesn’t need us!"

"He does," Neville said. "You don’t know him; you don’t..." He clenched his hands. "I grew up with him. People... People he loved died around him, from the time he was a baby. From the time he entered our world, he was defined, heralded and celebrated as a murderer. Not reviled, but celebrated. In our first year, he accidentally killed a man, Quirrell, and no one ever even thought it might bother him, because it was an accident, and the man was possessed besides. A year never passed where people weren’t cursed or injured or killed, and he was either completely ignored for his part in things, or offered complete blame when he had no responsibility. Fifth year... Fifth year..."

He shot an apologetic look at the two men. "You died, Sirius, because Voldemort got into his head and convinced him that he was holding you captive, and drew him into a trap. You came to rescue him, and Bellatrix killed you. He never ever got over that, and the year after, his sixth year, Dumbledore finally decided to tell him that he had to kill Voldy all over again, because he hadn’t done the job right the first time. And yes, finally he managed it, but we lost so many people, including you, Remus, and... And in the end... He’s always felt responsible. They called him the Boy who Lived but they left off the second bit. The Boy who Lived to Kill. In the end, he made the worst possible choice; he made a career out his designated abilities. He became an Auror, and not just any Auror – the greatest one our world had ever had. At least they called him an Auror. In the end, he was an effective, legally condoned and publicly celebrated assassin. He never even tried to do anything else. Never thought of it. He was an absolute bloody genius with wards, both spell-cast and runic, but he never got his Mastery there, because he saw it as the soft option. Keeping evil out, instead of destroying it? It was the wrong way to protect people. The irresponsible way."

"That’s kind of disgusting," Black said in wonder. Moody agreed. Whole-heartedly. Then again... He was bound to. He could relate. "I mean, he’s not disgusting, but... What kind of world do you people come from that could do that to a kid?"
“Not so different a world from this one had we not stepped in,” Lily said. “By the time your Harry comes back, it will all be over. Everything that warped our Harry the way it did... Will be negated. He’ll have gone straight from almost complete ignorance of his past to a place where he’s raised without expectations, with love, and with a friend at his side to share the adventure with. He’ll still be a bit of a celebrity, depending on how we manage the final confrontation with Tom, but without an actual second war... that too will fade into history where it belongs.” Her lips twisted. “To be fair, it wasn’t so much the world, for the first little bit there... It was our version of Dumbledore.”

“Of course it was.” Black rolled his eyes.

“It’s not an ‘of course’,” Snape said dryly. “The souls recruited for the ritual matched, but that didn’t mean every soul on both worlds do. Our version of Dumbledore was a great deal more... Mm. Pro-active in asserting his benevolence when the end results would suit his long-term plans.”

Moody actually snorted at that.

“Alright,” he said “Alright. Let’s sum this up. Riddle’s back, obviously, and escaped. Pettigrew’s escaped, and got the wand out. Someone picked the wand up, and left it at the Skewered Rooster. I picked it up. Black lifted it...”

Sirius grinned, reaching into his pocket and put it on the table.

“You, you, and you...” He pointed to Neville, Lily and Snape. “Are from another world. As is the boy-currently-masquerading-as-Harry Potter. You’ve come through on a psychiatric rescue mission for the Longbottoms, and to knock the Dark Lord off his feet before he gets back on him again, and have been working your way through all of his soul-bits. Two left, one in Malfoy Manor, and one on Potter. Riddle has to kill Potter so that his soul can be sent on. Then and only then will he be vulnerable to death. And to do all this, he requires a body. Am I missing anything?’


Moody’s headache increased exponentially. He shoved it back grimly, trying to focus.

“You’re a lot of bloody idiots,” he informed them. “You know that?”

“Uh?”

“You introduced yourself to me,” he said. “In the pub. By name. In front of sixty very disgruntled werewolves, who once the migraine wears off and their predicament sets in, are going to be looking for something to chew on. Neil Cartwright, wasn’t it: cousin of Augusta Longbottom. The very aging Augusta Longbottom: the one with the very vulnerable son and daughter-in-law, and that lovely little grandson? Never mind the fact that you Black, and you Lupin, are now going to be enemies number one and two on so many levels it’s not even funny, and oh yes. You just adopted a son too. Name of Potter. Cute kid. Those green eyes of his would look lovely dug out and bottled on someone’s mantle.”

They blinked.

“What...” Black said, and then, violently... “Shit. Shit, shit, shit.”

“If Voldemort’s wand was there,” Moody continued. “There’s a good chance Voldemort himself was there. Possessing someone, or maybe just sitting back for the show. Who knows? Fenrir Greyback isn’t exactly the type he’d choose to possess, if he had his druthers – he doesn’t wash enough – but Paul Wurtenburg...”
There was a pause.

“Wurtenburg’s dead,” Lupin said detachedly. “I put my wand through his eye when he bit me.”

“Did you. Pretty little holly and phoenix feather job, wasn’t it again?”

“Yes,” he said. “Brother wand of the wand that cursed Harry.” He laughed a little hysterically. “And I did tell him when he refused it and it accepted me instead that I planned to use it to take down the bastard who cursed me. Looks like I was aiming too low after all.”

Moody’s eyebrows flew up. “Brother wand,” he repeated. “You mean... They share the same core?”

“From the same phoenix, yes.”

“And he rejected it? After it accepted him?”

“Yes.”

There was a pause. Moody rubbed his head again.

“Can I see it,” he said. Lupin tipped his sleeve. Just before he could hand it over though; the dungeon door slammed open.

“MANUS PETRIFICUS!”

Every man (and woman) looked over, startled. Moody’s right hand, just descending on the yew and phoenix feather wand on the desk, froze mid-movement. His second arm slammed to his side, locked.

“Harry?” Lupin said, startled. “What...”

“You people,” Harry Potter said between clenched teeth. “Are idiots. Absolute bloody buggering bollocking idiots. How much have you told him?”

“Told... Who?”


“Harry, what,” Neville started.

“He was a spy, Nev. He was sorted into Slytherin here, not Gryffindor. He was the Order’s bloody pet assassin; he worked on the inside for years, till he fucking slipped up! It’s right there, all in the buggering history books!”

“You need to calm down, son,” Moody said, his eye whirling. He was sweating profusely, and his voice seemed considerably higher than it had even a moment ago... Even as he spoke, his right hand twitched. A jet of blue-black light slammed out of Harry’s right-hand wand, blasting the yew wand out of reach and against the back wall. It tumbled to Sirius’ feet; he bent and picked it up automatically. “I’m on your side here.”


“Wha...”
“SNAP THE FUCKING WAND!”

Sirius took it in both hands and snapped it. Or rather, he tried. It didn’t so much as bend. He tried again.

“It has some sort of unbreakable charm on it,” he said. “I can’t...”

“Either that,” Harry said. “Or it’s a bloody buggering horcrux!”

“Harry,” Neville said. “I would have sensed that.”

Harry said nothing, just aimed his wands again. A spiral of blood-coloured smoke shot out, smelling of sweetly acrid, rotting flesh. Moody screamed and doubled over, hands still rigid as he banged his head against the desk over and over like a puppet on jerked strings. Everyone present stood, horrified, as he literally splintered the front of his skull, crumpling to the floor. A thick black spectre rose from the ruin of blood and bone. A second spiral spun out from the second wand in a soft gold glow, sealing the unconscious man’s wounds and easing his body to the floor.

“He slipped up,” Harry said grimly. “They caught him out. He escaped... But Riddle knew about him. He had to have known. And before he let him escape, he prepped him for future possession, and modified his memory, so he wouldn’t remember. Hello, Tom. So nice to see you again. Don’t you have somewhere else you need to be?”

He aimed again. There was a high, unearthly shriek, and the spectre blasted apart, dissipating like smoke. When the sound faded, not a particle remained. Harry tucked his wands away. Neville was already on his knees beside Moody, examining the seals. The Auror’s face, behind his splintered temple, was as grey as the smoke.

“Why didn’t it show up,” he said. “His face, during the possession, Like he did on Quirrell?

“Oh, I don’t know,” Harry snapped. “Probably because this is a different bloody buggering world, and possession works differently here? At least when you have time to hijack and prepare a potential vessel-in-case-of-emergencies before sacrificing a third of your men to the cause so that you can sent the unwitting stooge back to the enemy lines?”

“Pup?” Sirius said timidly. “Um. Where did you send him?”

“Which part of him?” He rose to his feet.

“Uh?”

“His left leg equivalent is in Outer Mongolia. Pretty sure his right eyebrow is in Tasmania. Could be Tanzania. Probably bits there lurking about in Greenland. He’ll pull himself together eventually – maybe in a month or two; ether does that – but it’ll allow us to time to do a bit more research on things we might have missed, anyway. You know. Important things?” He glared at Snape.

“Why,” the Potions Master said testily. “Did you not merely contain him, Master Potter?”

“Because,” Master Potter snapped. “That sort of thing requires certain preparations, Professor Snape, and I had no bloody buggering time.” He prodded at the wand in Sirius’ hand with a finger. “What have you been doing the last two years anyway? Sitting on your arse eating bonbons and writing love letters to Professor Shelley here?” He cut off his words abruptly as he turned his head, eyes widening as he saw the woman before him. He opened his mouth, and closed it again.

The room went very quiet.
“Well,” he said at last. “I think that this would an excellent time for that talk, Headmaster, don’t you?”

“Say hello to your mother, Potter,” Professor Snape snapped at him. “She’s come a long, long way for the dubious privilege of seeing you in person again – and make no mistake, it has all been for that reason, at least on her part.”

“Don’t push him, Severus,” Lupin said sharply. “You have no right.” There was a definite and unsubtle emphasis on the first word there.

“Yeah,” Sirius agreed. “Or at least let his heart catch up with his eyes. Not that you’d know what that was like, you great tosser, since you don’t have a heart, but...”

Neville got to his feet, removing his hand from where he’d placed it on the stone wall.

“Pomfrey’s on her way,” he said. “Hogwarts has alerted her that we have a man down. She’ll have alerted St. Mungo’s through the sister-wards in the hospital wing, they’ll be here shortly to collect him. Is he clear now, Harry?”

Harry snapped his eyes away from his mother, hunkered down again, and passed his wands over the unconscious Moody in an intricate, tiny series of movements.

“You might want to put your glamours back up,” he said to his silent mother, without looking at her. “Only people might get confused with it. He’s fine. Clear, anyway.” He straightened. “I have to go. I promised Hermione I’d only be gone a bit, when I ran out. We have a Charms test tomorrow, yeah, and I was helping her study.”

“Harry,” Remus said gently. “I know you’re...” He paused. “Not eleven... But Siri and I... We’re still your parents now. It may be a legal formality, all things considered... But we’re still pack, at the very least. Family, you know?”

“Yeah,” he said, without looking at him. His wand flicked again. The blood on the desk Vanished, along with the bits of random bone. “I know. I gotta go, Moony. Hermione’s waiti...” He oofed slightly as Sirius stepped forward suddenly and fell to his knees before him, hugging him tight. “What...”

“I don’t care,” he said passionately. “I don’t care how old you are, or where you came from. You’re still my pup. My pup. Aren’t you?”

It sounded not a little desperate. Harry put his arms around him. To the watchers, the reversed juxtaposition of youth and age was dizzying: the small, undersized boy, in posture and tender, wistful, resigned expression, holding the shivering, weeping full-grown man as a child in his arms as he pressed his lips to the black hair.

“Yeah,” he said quietly after a moment. “Yeah, Padfoot. I am. I always will be. No matter the time, no matter the world.” He released him gently, and reached around him, summoning the wand on the desk wordlessly. “I’ll get rid of this,” he said to Neville. “After you get everything sorted... We talk.”

He turned to the door, and turned back. “Just so we know... How much did you tell him? You know, of all the things that you didn’t tell me?”

“Erhm,” Neville said. “Pretty much... Everything?”

“Lovely,” Auror Potter said. “Isn’t that just lovely. I’m just so proud of your ability to be discreet with it all, and with the world at stake, and Mr. Constant Vigilance right there in front of you too? Only, and for the record there? I don’t mean that.”
He disappeared down the corridor.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Professor Sirius Black’s Classroom**

**Friday, October 31st, 1991**

The entire castle, on the fine, crisp Hallowe’en morning of 1991, was thick and heavy with the odors of spices and baking pumpkin. The ghosts floated down the corridors on veritable fragrant currents of cinnamon and nutmeg, and portable kegs of hot apple cloudy dotted the corridors in the dungeons for the delectation of the chronically chilled students. Harry Potter sat at his desk in his DADA class, stirring a fresh pot of black ink absently with his quill as he stared at the single handwritten question at the top of the quiz that his brand-new father had just set before him.

**Describe the origins and classification of the spell that you cast in the dungeons yesterday, and justify your use of its employment.**

At the front of the classroom, Professor Black seated himself in his chair behind his own desk, pulling over a stack of parchment scrolls, quill, and a pot of red ink of his own to keep him occupied while he kept an eye on his students. The first-year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws sat like rows of hunch-backed, black-robed gnomes, ticking, crossing out and jotting busily. Harry snuck a sideways look across the aisle. Ron was bent over, nose to nose with his paper, frowning intently as he read through the series of multiple choice and short essay questions that made up his, and everyone else’s but Harry’s, test.

It hadn’t looked good, Harry was aware. No, it hadn’t looked good at all. No one had questioned his use of such an apparent dark and deadly spell at the time, and the Healers from St. Mungo’s hadn’t bothered taking the time to ask on the details before packing up the unconscious and gravely injured Moody and carting him away, but the inquiry _would_ come, Harry knew. An inquiry that would halt in its tracks as soon as Kingsley Shacklebolt cast the spells that would confirm the residual traces of possession on his still-living-if-very-much-unconscious superior, and then got the witnesses to the event to confirm just who had been doing the possessing, but...

In the meantime, those witnesses were bound to have questions for Harry himself. More questions, he amended silently, and heaved a heavy sigh, and stirred his ink again as he remembered the conversation he’d had with Neville the night before.

“How did you _know_?” Neville had persisted as they’d settled for their long-delayed meeting in the Room of Requirement. “How?”

“I. Am. An. _Auror_,” Harry had said patiently, and dropped the copy of _Important Events in 20th Century Wizarding Europe and the Wizards and Witches Who Defined Them_ that he’d borrowed from the library on the small table between their armchairs. “The Auror, you plonker. Phrases such as ‘his cover was blown’ and ‘he escaped from enemy lines against insurmountable odds with only the loss of his leg’ set off my warning signals on every level there is.”
“Okay, fine, but how could you know he was possessed? Come to think on it, how did you know Riddle had escaped from the Ministry in the first place? I didn’t know, not till Moody brought it up this morning, and the bit about the wand being at the pub, and Sirius nicking it!”

“I eavesdropped on Sirius and Remus last night, after they thought I was in bed, and after they were. Came in through their window as Dash – they always leave it open a crack, and I redid the wards there ages back so that I could sneak in when necessary – and settled on their canopy to see if I’d missed anything interesting after we left. Didn’t stay long, they got way too distracted and blubbery way too soon by the fact that they both could have been killed, but before that happened, I caught the relevant bits about Tom and Pettigrew, and Moody having picked up the wand from under the bar, and Sirius having nicked it. Once I’d read this...” He gestured to the marked book – “I put the pieces together. And really, in the end, the fact that Moody was still alive is really the best proof you could have there of it all.”

“To you, maybe. Explain,” Neville had ordered.

“If Moody had really offed a third of Tom’s Death-Eaters,” Harry had said patiently again, ‘And betrayed every single one of his compatriots the way he did, without Tom’s foreknowledge of his treachery there... He wouldn’t be alive to be Head Auror today. There. Is. No. Way. Tom would have come out of hiding as soon as it happened, and executed him himself, as quickly and messily as possible, as an example. That’s how he thinks. Thought. I know. The fact that he didn’t kill him... Means that he had to have known that he was a spy in advance, and wanted him alive for reasons of his own. And that he told everyone around him that he wanted him left alive, no matter what seemed to happen to Tom himself, and that they could maim Moody all they liked in the meantime but that was it, that was all. And all that leads to my next inevitable and rather obvious conclusion; Tom had set Moody up himself before the big day for something really, really special. Something contingent again, given the fact that the entire remaining army of Death Eaters never struck back after his downfall ten years ago, not definitively – on Tom himself being nominally dead.”

He watched as Neville struggled through that, sorting it all out, or not, to his satisfaction.

“That doesn’t lead to the obvious conclusion that he was possessed!”

“Yeah it does,” Harry had said bluntly. “Tom’s spirit was captured by Aurors and Unspeakables after Quirrell, right? And taken to the Ministry? Who was in charge of that raid? Moody. Who would have personally assigned himself to keep an eye out? Moody. Who would rather have died than let Tom escape on his watch? Moody. Who was still alive after Tom escaped? Moody again. He wouldn’t be, unless he was intended to be all along!”

“These things don’t add up,” Neville had said in frustration. “Not to that!”

“They do if you’re me,” Harry had said again, and sighed at the look on his friend’s face. “Look, Nev. You’re a herbologist. A researcher. A scientist. You’re used to thinking in a linear fashion, okay? From beginnings to logical ends. I’m not. I’m trained not to, not till after a case is solved, and the lab report needs writing. I was trained to go with my gut. To discern and establish the obvious solutions and answers from the middle of things, to trust that, in the split second, I can trust my instincts. And no, I didn’t have all of the facts lined up that led me to the one conclusion... but I didn’t need to. As soon as I read that bit about Moody’s personal history in the history book Madam Pince gave me, I knew. I just... Did. And as he was downstairs, with Snape and Remus and Sirius and Professor Shelley-“

“Your mum, you mean –“

Harry had ignored that.
"And you’d gone off, and when I shot upstairs, you weren’t there, so I knew where you were too, after all, didn’t I?”

“I don’t like it... That spell... Using that spell, when you didn’t have all the facts... He could have died, Harry. He could still die!”

“He’s not going to die. He cracked open the front of his skull, but there was no brain damage. It’s just fixing the bone.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

“Because aside from the fact that we’re talking on Moody - Moody, who’s got way too much to do yet, and a second prospective war to fight that he’s always known was coming, never mind that Tom’s made it really personal now by shacking up in his head - the second spell I cast – the gold one, that sealed his skull up - ensured it?”

“Oh, you’re a healer now?”

“No, but the two spells go together. They were designed to go together. The point of the exercise, after all, is to get rid of the possessor, not to kill the possessed.”

“By bashing his head open on the closest hard surface?”

“That’s not how it works, and you know it.”

“Knowing it and seeing it are two different things. And it still bloody looked like it to me,” Neville muttered. “Never mind everyone else. And you can’t have it both ways, Harry. You can’t say it isn’t the same Moody, and then claim to understand his counterpart’s motives here. You can’t do that with anyone. Not even Riddle himself!”

“Sometimes I can’t,” Harry agreed. “But sometimes I can. You can’t... Most people can’t... But I can. I died of bloody old age, mate, in my bed, after a hundred twenty years in the bloody field. When it comes right down to it... I cut my teeth on Tom Riddle. He was nothing but my entrance exam to Dark Wanker U., and yes, it was a tough exam, but I’ve never forgotten a single one of the questions I had to answer there, and they all came down to the one thing – do you trust your gut, Harry Potter, or do you not?”

Neville had sat back in his chair and examined him.

“So what are your instincts telling you now,” he said.

“That you need to give me back my memories,” Harry said. “So I at least know as much as Riddle does. Is there anything he doesn’t know now?”

“He doesn’t know the practical specifics of the ritual that brought us here. He knows about the involved souls, and their identities though. Oh, and that Snape isn’t his Snape, but ours, so there goes his usefulness as a spy.” He pondered. “Pretty sure we didn’t mention the fact that you’re an Animagus. I’d have to run my memory of the conversation through the sifter to confirm that, but that’s easy enough. Dumbledore’s Pensieve is still up in his office.”

“Fantastic. Bloody fantastic.” Harry had rubbed his temple. “The wand’s not a horcrux, by the way. It’s been prepped as one, but it’s empty. I reckon he intended to stow the bit that is stuck to me in it, ten years ago.”

“Can you unprep it? And break it?”
“Yeah, of course. But is that what we want?”

“Why wouldn’t we?”

“It’s good bait, yeah? If we have it, he’ll come back for it. Speaking of which, we’re going to have to decide what to do with the Philosopher’s Stone, now that Dumbledore’s gone.”

“Return it to the Flamels?” Neville suggested.

“I’ll leave that up to you. It’s your school now again, till it isn’t, so it’s your decision. Just let me know if you need me to help you with anything.”

“Mm. Well, we need to get the diary from Malfoy Manor, as soon as possible, obviously. Finding Pettigrew is up there, and checking out all the ex-werewolves for residual possession, just in case. We can work something out with Gran there; she’ll facilitate your, or rather Lawrence’s, involvement in the case so you can assess them via your own particular methods.” He’d eyed his friend deliberately. Harry knew that look. He braced himself.

“And?”

“You need to sort out your stuff with your mum,” the Headmaster said. “I know it was a huge shock, and the memories I’ll give back to you will ease things a little, but you can’t just lock that away, Harry. She’s number one on Riddle’s hit-list now, even above you, because he’ll be aware through Moody and his own memories of the night that he went down that she was the one responsible, not you. Throw Snape in the mix, and all of the ex-weres who are going to be coming after us – and Gran and my own mum and dad – as revenge against Sirius, Remus, Neil and Lawrence again…”

“Most, if not all, of the ex-werewolves will be imprisoned for their crimes,” Harry pointed out immediately. “They won’t be able to get at us.”

“They were all dosed before Moody got there,” Neville had retorted in return. “With a few notable exceptions such as Fenrir and Wurtenburg – and Wurtenburg’s dead – there’s not an awful lot of proof to prove that they were werewolves before this full moon, if they don’t turn again. Or even, if they were werewolves… That they ever bit or killed anybody. The law can’t indict them for what they are, or were, only for what it can prove they did.”

Harry had paused at that.

“Shit,” he’d said vehemently.

“That’s what I said,” Neville had agreed. Sadly. “I have to tell you, mate; I think this calls for a drastic change in approach to our ongoing plans and positions here at Hogwarts…”

Back in the present, in the DADA classroom, Harry lifted his quill from the bottle, tapped it against the inner rim, and sitting straight, began to inscribe neatly.

The spell in question has no official name. It was invented in 2037 by Head Auror Harry James Potter, in tandem with Mind Healer Tamsin Applebee, and, due to the potentially deathly outcome of its casting, had yet to be registered for public or civilian use as of the date of Mr. Potter’s death on December 20, 2116.

Sirius shifted in his chair. Harry glanced over, and saw his eyes flicking over a sheet of parchment lying on the huge desk before him. He had no doubt that every word he was writing was appearing on that sheet of parchment now, even as he wrote it. He dipped his quill a second time.
It was not designed to injure a possessed individual, and, indeed, no direct harm is done to the target upon the occasion of its casting. The spell was crafted using the principles and practical formulae employed by Legilimancers, and forces awareness on the individual that he or she is possessed while bolstering that individual’s natural determination to rid him or herself in the unnatural parasitic infection by whatever means he or she deems most effective. In the specifically mentioned case, the individual in question reacted as per current and traditional understanding that a parasitic spirit is most likely to vacate the occupied premises when it realizes that it is functioning within a non-viable (i.e. dying) mortal host, and he made the conscious choice to inflict injuries upon himself that would encourage the spirit to believe that it, itself, was in danger.

He dipped his quill a third time, and twined his feet around the legs of his stool, pausing to sip from the tall portable thermal mug (Muggle-issue) at his elbow. Hermione, he reflected, was a genius. She was the one who’d arranged, upon consultation with Professor Burbage, to offer up those kegs of hot apple cloudy as a Hallowe’en treat – along with the stacked mugs alongside. No magically enchanted vessel would trigger the taps, forcing those who wished to partake to imbibe from the provided receptacles. Said receptacles themselves were firmly charmed against any kind of spell that would change their nature or appearance. The sight of Draco Malfoy surreptitiously wrapping the mug, emblazoned garishly with MUGGLES ARE MAGICAL! in his green and silver scarf, was one that Harry planned to remember for the rest of his days.

The spell is intended as an extreme measure, and is thus recommended for use on, and only by, registered Aurors, and only in cases of direct and dire emergency. In cases of the possession of children and civilians

He paused, searching for the appropriate phrase.

less extreme (i.e. more traditional) measures are yet recommended. Aurors (or the trans-national equivalents), when taught the spell, are asked to sign a release that recognizes that a colleague, when forced to cast the spell on them, is not attempting to injure them, but to help them understand and recognize that they have become a direct party to a threat to innocents. They are not obliged to authorize use of the spell on their own persons, but are made to understand that in a case where the parasitic spirit is actively endangering, or likely to actively endanger innocents through its control of the unwitting or witting host, the host forfeits the decision in the name of the people he or she has sworn to protect.

It is strongly recommended that, in a case of an infected individual such as A.M – that is, one who is inherently likely to choose immediate and self-inflicted death over such an unnatural symbiotic state, that the caster be prepared to heal the reactionary injuries as quickly and effectively as possible.

The spell cannot be classified as Dark, as it works on, through, and toward the principles of purification and Mind Healing. The characteristic blood-red spiral and acrid odor of the wand’s released, cast energy is an aesthetic and reactive response to the presence of invasive, non-inherent Darkness in the targeted mortal individual.

Sirius’ eyes were fixed intently on the page before him. Harry’s eyes flicked up to meet his. They locked gazes for a moment, before each returned, near simultaneously, to their linked parchments.

While it could be argued, in this particular case, that, as A.M. had no knowledge of the spell and had not granted permission for its casting against him, the caster is directly responsible for the
injuries sustained on both the moral and legal bases, it too could be argued that the caster, knowing the identity of the parasitic infector, and unaware as he was of the quantity and content of the sensitive and classified material imparted to both host and parasite before his arrival, had the legal and moral obligation to proceed as he did.

It is worth noting that if the caster had been mistaken and the individual in question had not been possessed, the spell would have had no effect on either caster or recipient beyond a great bloody bugging headache mutual severe migraine.

Harry scraped the last bit of ink off of his quill and set it down neatly. All around him, his fellow students scribbled industriously. Sirius caught his eye again and nodded. His face was pale and tired, and he looked scragglier than ever despite his tightly restrained black hair, shaven face, impeccable suit and neatly cut black teacher’s robes. Harry said nothing, just picked up, and fiddled with the quill once more. Beside him, Neville wrote carefully. He glanced sideways, as unobtrusively as possible. At the top of his page, clearly positioned so that Harry could read it, was another pair of handwritten sentences.

Bit of a waste of your time, this. Write me an essay on something of the subject I don’t know.

Harry’s lips twitched as, below, in stunningly elegant, decidedly not-eleven-year-old handwriting (and without a single misspelled word or blotch), Neville’s opening title appeared.

The Unexpectedly Constructive Use of the Traditionally-Acknowledged-as-Absolutely-Pointless Wittering Chitter-Blossom in the Concocting of a Misting Spray that Freshens the Air, Soothes Agitation, and Kills Dementors

An Instructive Essay Based on the Research of

Master (Dr.) (Prof) Neil Cartwright: M.POT, M.HERB, M.Sc, PHD

As Summarized and Presented by

Neville Frank Longbottom

“You going to spend the rest of your school career plagiarizing yourself, mate?” Harry muttered.

“S’not plagiarising if I give myself due credit, now, is it?” Neville muttered back. “And Dementors are a right pain in the arse in any world. I can’t think of a single good reason to keep any one of them around any longer than absolutely necessary.”

“Mr. Longbottom,” Sirius said. “Mr. Potter. Shut it. Both of you. Your classmates are attempting to think.”

“Mr. Black,” Harry corrected.

“Uh?”

“Mr. Black. I reckon I’ll alternate months as that and Mr. Lupin, now that you and Professor Lupin have adopted me, starting with Mr. Black since your birthday is in November and November starts tomorrow. I know it’s the thirty first, but December has thirty one days and November only has
thirty, so it evens out, and this is your class besides.”

Sirius lowered his quill and surveyed him again.

“Something wrong with your original name?” he inquired.

“No,” Harry said. “I’m keeping it as a permanent middle. No hyphens,” he added. “Um,” he added belatedly, as an eleven-year-old would have. “If that’s alright with you, anyway?”

Sirius gave him a tiny, but genuine smile of acknowledgement.

“That’ll be fine,” he said. “Mr. Black. Now shut it. You’re taking a test, not tea at Madam Puddifoot’s.”

Harry pulled his parchment over again, and dunked his quill again... He watched out of the corner of his eye as Sirius’ lips twitched up at the corners, as the quick, clumsy but definitive sketch of a large black dog chasing circles around a tiny hummingbird appeared on the charmed sheet before him. He traced a wand over the sketch and Harry watched in turn as the dog on his page pounced, catching the hummingbird between its huge paws and schlurping it over with a blanket-sized lolling tongue.

Nice, Padfoot, he wrote in tiny letters. I did wash this morning, you know? Save the tongue-bath for Moony; he’s more likely to appreciate it.

Sirius blinked, blinked at him – and guffawed. Loudly. Students jumped.

“Sorry,” he said hastily. “Just thinking about ... Something. Something funny. Yeah. Go on. As you were.”

This is going to take a bit of adjusting, he wrote back. I’m not saying it’s impossible, but... Can we meet up later on the seventh floor, and you could show me what you look like grown? It might be easier if I have the comparative visual baseline to work with.

You know about the Room of Requirement?

Course.

Yeah, Harry wrote. Is Moony really upset?

He’s a bit distracted, pup. Full moon. Sixty of his exes lined up in a row, waiting as proof of the cure for bloody lycanthropy. Big day for him, you know?

Right. Sorry.

Are you really upset?

Less than I was before I read your response here, but yeah. The Healers say that M. will be fine in a couple of weeks, but still, and him aside... What did you expect? You’ve been taking the piss from day one, and we hadn’t even inducted you as an official Marauder yet! We were waiting till the adoption went through; there’s a secret handshake to be going on with and everything!

I’m sorry. Only I had no active memory of actually planning to come here, and I’d originally thought I’d gone back in time after I died, see? I was just living day by day as eleven-year-old me again, trying to fix things as I went along from the way they’d gone the first time. I didn’t start figuring everything out myself till the last two days, and after Neville told me the whole story last
night.

Do you remember everything now?

Yeah. He removed the block on my memories. Not the details of the cross-dimensional ritual itself; Riddle and I are still linked after all, and he might know about the ritual but he doesn’t need to know more than he does on how it works - but everything else... Yeah. I reckon I do. No point in hiding it from me now, now that R. knows everything.

It’s all very weird, I must say.

The sketched dog rolled his eyes expressively.

Tell me about it. Later. In the Room. And no, I’m not upset. You haven’t said... But I did realize last night that the very first thing you must have done when you got back was to start the chain of events that got me out of that hellhole, pup. You did, didn’t you?

Yeah. Same day I sent Moony a fruitcake laced with the lycanthropic cure in the post, and cast a permanent incontinence curse on Uncle Vernon. Front-end only; I did have to live with him, after all.

You did?!

Yeah. He has to special-order his size in adult nappies and everything.

No, I mean, you were the one who sent that horrid fruitcake? Moony says it was the filthiest thing he’d ever tasted, but he couldn’t stop eating it. The icing, anyway. Like in, ‘the power of Christ compels you’ kind of way, from that Muggle film ‘The Exorcist’?

The icing was the important part. I’m not responsible for the actual cake; Aunt Petunia made that. And yeah. When did you ever watch that?

Frank Bloody Longbottom. He was obsessed with Muggle cinema. Science fiction and fantasy, mostly, but your mum sold it to him as an object lesson in how the Muggles view the Dark Arts. We all watched it the year we were sixteen, the whole of Gryffindor House, on Hallowe’en again, actually. You talk about your nappies? We were conjuring them and passing them around like chocolates.

What did you do to Petunia and that great gormless cousin of yours?

Nothing to Aunt Petunia. She has to sleep with the nappies, after all. Punishment enough right there. Dudders... I hit him a bad case of chronic acid reflux. He can’t eat anything past the point, and it has to be healthy. He’s a lot fitter this time around, or rather here, and that solved a lot of problems between us right there. He never actually liked being fat, and it put him in a perpetual bad mood.

He was the size of a baby whale in those pictures I saw of him!

Still a lot smaller than he was originally. And he’ll hit a growth spurt soon, and that should even out the rest of him.

You ever planning on removing either curse?
Hadn’t planned on it, no. You reckon I should?

No, but you should probably tell your mum. I heard her and Snape talking on how they plan on stopping by their place tonight for a personal word, and whatever she does to them... Mixed recipes can sometimes have odd effects, yeah?

There was another pause. A small, extremely detailed, quill-and-ink meadow began to spring up around the sketched dog and hummingbird. The dog rolled happily in the drawn grass; the hummingbird alighted on a neatly rendered wittering chitter-blossom and dipped its beak.

You do remember her now, right? Sirius’ quill wrote tentatively I mean, as part of the plan?

Yeah. I just

The hummingbird fell off the chitter-blossom and began to snore happily.

I forgot. It was a bit of a shock, is all. I wasn’t expecting it. I wasn’t really expecting any of this. I mean, I put a few of the pieces together, but it’s not the same thing as remembering.

He doodled a bit more, hesitating. There was one more thing he did remember now, he thought. Was remembering. He’d set it aside at the given moment; it hadn’t really processed, but now...

Now...

Padfoot?

Yeah?

My wife – Ginny Weasley; I married her in my world – she’s dead. I went first, there. I found out the night we got Greyback.

He didn’t elaborate further. He didn’t have to, he knew. He just stared down at the parchment, not daring to look up. His eyes burned savagely, and he blinked furiously, dropping his quill and stuffing his hands in his lap, under his robes as he tightened every muscle in his body so that no one would see him suddenly trembling.

Up at the front of the classroom, Sirius lowered his quill... Harry was aware, on the certain level, of the grey eyes resting on him, clouding in real sorrow and sympathetic pain... The dog on the parchment went over to the hummingbird and lay down beside it, cradling it protectively in the circle of its paws as it nosed it gently. The wittering chitter-blossom closed its petals. Sirius picked up his quill again.

I’m so sorry, pup. What can I do?

Harry removed a single hand from his lap and picked up the quill.

Hold off Mum for a bit? I know we have the feast tonight, and that she’ll probably be there as Snape’s date, but after that...

Done. It was instant. Then... Um. How?

I don’t know. he wrote. You knew her better than I ever did. And it’s only been ten years for you. It’s been a hundred thirty-six for me, on that face-to-face level. How does one deal with mums in person?
You’re asking me? Again, the parchment dog rolled his eyes, its tongue lolling laughingly. Clearly, you’ve never met my mother, in any world. The chime on the desk rang. Sirius straightened, and tucked his quill away, tapping his parchment with his wand. All of the words cleared abruptly, leaving only the sketch of the dog and the hummingbird and the meadow. Harry rolled it up carefully and tucked it into his bag with his books.

“Parchments to the front,” Professor Black said briskly. “And off you go. Take the left hand corridor up to your next class; there are spiced donuts at the second keg down. Password to unseal the boxes, and yes, it has to be rendered individually; no nicking treats for your friends allowed: “Half-Bloods are Heavenly...”

Chapter End Notes

Apple cloudy, for those who are wondering, is fresh-pressed dark apple juice: non-alcoholic and what we in Canada (if not in Great Britain: thanks, diddleymaz) call cider. Not to be confused with the actual British cider, which, as I know now, is strictly adult-issue!
On a Train in a Station

Classes finished early that day, a good three hours before dinner. Harry managed to avoid meeting up with Neville, Ron and Hermione after Charms by the simple means of raising his hand ten minutes before the class was over and excusing himself to go to the loo. Once there, instead of returning to the classroom, he transformed into Dash and headed straight up to the seventh floor and the Room of Requirement. A simple Notice-Me-Not on his bag ensured that no one noticed he’d slipped out with it over his shoulder, and it was with huge, near desperate relief that he collapsed in the chair awaiting him, far away from the noise and distractions of the day as he pulled the metaphorical blanket over his head and simply...

Breathed.

The sheer volume of memories that Neville had returned to him was overwhelming. He’d managed to fend them off for most of the day, but the conversation with Sirius had done him in, and now he felt, literally, as if his head were going to burst with them. He tossed his glasses aside and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, feeling them prickle and burn and dampen, the tears sliding out with the memories: minutes, days, whole years’ worth of personal history that he’d deliberately set aside in the name of the one determined goal. With them came faces: James’, Al’s, Lily’s...

Harry James Potter squeezed his eyes shut.

I can’t do this again, he thought. I can’t I can’t I

The Room shimmered behind his lids. He opened his eyes. Before him stood a large pedestal, and on it...

He groped for his wands desperately, lurching out of the chair and up the steps. The pensieve glimmered softly: inky black, opaque, and comforting. Harry clenched his eyes shut again, placed the tip of each wand at either temple, and yanked. Great twisting strands and spirals of misty silver emerged; thick as clouds, bright and glimmering as a distant universe’s worth of stars flowing from his eyes... He dunked the wands into the pensieve again and again and again. Finally, minutes or hours later, he collapsed, breathing hard, to the floor. His wands tumbled out of his lax fingers.

His head felt light and empty. He almost fancied, in his near-drugged, heavily fatigued state, that he could hear it echo. When he’d gathered up a bit of energy again, he rolled on his back and looked up at the ceiling.

“Ow,” he said, to no one in particular. “That hurt,” and then, experimentally... “Titchy?”

Titchy appeared with a pop.

“Master Harry?” she said with surprise, looking about. “Titchy was not knowing that house-elves can be called in the Come-and-Go Room!”

“No.” He dug into his bag and retrieved his money pouch, “Master Harry would be liking Titchy to
be popping over to Honeydukes, and to be bringing him – me - back a nice big box of the blueberry chocolate truffles. Oh, and a nice big bottle of Ogden's finest to go with it.”

“Master Harry is thinking he is being very funny,” Titchy said, unamused, and took the bag. “Ha ha. Titchy is laughing, see? Lie still, Master Harry. Titchy will be back in four shakes of a crup’s tails.”

She popped out. Harry lay back again.

“This was not,” he said aloud to the ceiling. “How things were supposed to go. Not even a little tiny, tiny little titch of a bit. Here’s a question for you: how are you supposed to get someone to A-K you when he knows he’s going to die if he does it?”

The ceiling did not respond. Harry rolled over painfully, and pushed himself to his feet.

“I’m too old for this shit,” he said, retrieving his wands. “I really, really am. Too old, and too young. If I have to do this all over again, why did I agree to do it in a bloody eleven-year-old body? You can’t do anything in an eleven-year-old body. Never mind the lack of muscle or stamina; it’s like Nev said - nobody takes you seriously. Oop. No. Riddle will take me seriously, at least, because now he knows I’m as much as a barmy old coot as Dumbledore ever was, only that’s alright for him, really, isn’t it, now that I’m five-and-a-half stone again behind whatever kind of glamours I use, and really, really squashable.”

There was a crack. Titchy popped back in, carrying a large gilt box containing no less than thirty truffles, and his considerably lighter money bag.

“Do not be eating them all at once, Master Harry,” she warned. “You will be making yourself sick. Professors Loopy and Paddy will not be liking that, especially if you be spoiling your dinner for the feast tonight.”

She cracked out. Harry plonked down on the chair and opened the box, unwrapping a chocolate.

“Here’s to you, Gin,” he said, and bit into his wife’s favorite treat. “And us, and to all of the memories.” He toasted the pensieve as he chewed. “Don’t suppose you have any bright ideas that might help here, now that it’s all officially gone tits-up?”

There was no answer. He tilted his head back.

“Thirty,” he mused aloud. “Thirty was a good year. Remember thirty, Gin-my-Tonic? Lily turned two, and you finally got your arse back. I never cared, but you did, and since you did, I reaped the benefits.” He chuckled. “Never been fitter in our lives than we were that year, either of us, and none of it came from chasing after Dark Wankers or kids either. I could be thirty again, I think. Yeah, that’d be a bit of alright.”

He turned sideways. The chair stretched obligingly into a sofa as he stretched out his scrawny child’s legs, and a soft wool blanket draped itself over him. A thick, squishy pillow tucked itself under his rumpled black head. He propped the box on his chest and unwrapped a second.

“Needs alcohol,” he opined. “And your mum’s steak and kidney pie.” He nibbled. “You know, of everything anyone ever told me about my mum, they never said if she could cook? I should ask Sirius. He’d know. I’m not going to ask her, anyway.” He licked chocolate off of his thumb. “Bint. Two years back while I lived it up with the Dursleys again, and her off mooning over Snape? And don’t tell me that I told her myself that she was to leave me alone once we got here; that’s totally beside the point. I’d never have left our kids to fend for themselves with those nutters, no matter how old they were, or what they told me to do; not for one bloody second. I might not have been able to
tell them I was there, but there are ways around that, you know? And you wouldn’t have listened to me either. You would have come to Number Bloody Four Buggering Privet Bollocking Drive the very first night you got back, and Imperio’ed the bloody buggering bollocks off of the lot of them. “Thou shalt be nice to my Harry, or else.” He waved an imaginary wand, then slumped back, eyes burning again suddenly. The chocolate turned to ashes in his mouth, as the tears slipped out again. “You were a good mum, Ginevra Molly Weasley. No, you were a fantastic mum. A fantastic mum, and the best damned wife a man could ever want. Why’d you have to go and die on me, uh? I know I left you first, but that’s beside the point too. You’re gone... And I’m still here. Here, with nothing but more of the same ahead of me; nothing but a rewash of the Bloody Boy Who Lived, only without his best girl to keep him company. It’s just... It’s not fair.”

He scrubbed at his eyes with his thin fist again. The chocolates slipped to the floor. He turned on his side and faced the Pensieve full of memories, and the crackling fire beyond.

“It’s not fair,” he said again desolately. “I was supposed to be a walk-in here. Walk in, off Tom, walk out, stage right. It wasn’t supposed to be about me, and they had to go bollocks it up, the bloody idiots. I’m so tired of it being about me, Gin. Hell, I’m tired of being me. Of being eleven. I’m going to be eleven, I reckon, if only in my head, for the rest of my bloody life. Again. Eleven, with my father’s face and my mother’s eyes, and nothing for it but to live out what I was born to do for the fact, no matter where I go, or when.”

From the corner of his eye, he caught another shimmer. He turned his head. A half-empty bottle had appeared on the floor beside the sofa. He leaned over and picked it up. He examined it, boosting himself into a sitting position.

“Ogden’s Old Firewhiskey,” he read out loud. “Isn’t that lovely. Wait, what about Gamp’s Law? Or... No. Let me guess. My Auror senses are tingling... Somewhere, somewhen, some seventh years had a party, and left this behind?”

He didn’t really care, in the end. In the end, he uncorked the bottle, and swigged heavily. It burned like dragon fire, all the way down. He gulped again, reflexively, and a third time. His eyes swam. He fell back, the bottle splashing over his covered knees.

“Eleven,” he said in sorrowful disgust. “Forever,” and he put the bottle carefully back and slid down, pulling the blanket over his shoulders. “This is not on,” he informed the Room, and closed his eyes. The burning was fading, into a deep, slurried full-body tingle. He was warm suddenly, from head to toe, and his head felt light and fluffy. A nap, he thought. A nap would be absolutely brilliant.

“Wake me in a bit, mate,” he said to the Room, and shoved his head under the pillow. “Quietly. And if you could present me with a solution to all this shite that I never asked for when I’m up again, I definitely, definitely, wouldn’t say no.”

The Room shimmered again, and suddenly the furthest corners of its current parameters were filled and thrumming with soft gold light. Harry didn’t see it. He was fast asleep.
With Plasticene Porters

Saturday, November 1st, 1991

Just Past Dawn

The browning hedges of Privet Drive were as impeccable as they’d ever been, and the lawns, even in late autumn, were as closely clipped as could be expected of such a prim and socially conscious neighbourhood. A young woman in a belted London Fog trench-coat, a long black wool skirt and polished matching ankle boots sat on the stoop of Number Four, chilled fingers wrapped around her travel mug of tea... Her hair was completely hidden by the hood, as well as an elegant dark green eternity scarf embroidered in silver.

The young woman inhaled deeply and sipped, watching the dim stars as they faded in the grey sky before returning her attention to the previous object of her perusal. Perhaps half a block down, a man was seated on a bus bench, dark head ostensibly bent over a newspaper. Even from the distance, the woman fancied she could smell the scent of his favourite Colombian brew emanating from his own thermal mug, set on the bench again beside his right hip.

As she watched, the man folded the newspaper neatly and tucked it away, glancing about. No one was in sight. Before the young woman’s eyes, he vanished. Moments later, she felt a soft brushing against her cheek, and reached up to adjust the throat of the scarf. The giant Asian hornet buzzed neatly into the folds, hidden from sight.

Lily Evans Potter sipped the last of her tea, and, pushing up the sleeve of her coat, glanced at her watch. Ten more minutes, perhaps, she estimated, and removed her left hand to her pocket... The wand there warmed against her fingers reassuringly.

As it turned out, her watch was off. Not surprising, she thought, as the lock behind her turned, and the doorknob clicked. Anything other than a solar-powered battery there tended to go a bit wonky after more than a month’s or so exposure to her constant magical proximity. She stood as the door opened, back to the house’s occupant, and, flicking her hood back, slid her left hand in her pocket again, and turned. The startled woman behind her, clad in a quilted pink wrapper and paler nightgown, clutched at the milk bottles in her hand, literally staggering back as her eyes bulged and her mouth opened in a silent, ugly scream. Lily twitched her wand slightly. The tumbling milk bottles stopped just as they were about to hit the concrete stoop again, and lined themselves up neatly and gently.

“Hello, Tuney,” she said pleasantly. “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

Petunia Evans Dursley crumpled to the immaculate floor. Lily stepped over her and turned back. Safely now within the confines of the house, the hornet buzzed out of her collar, and transformed back to a man in an elegant, extremely expensive-looking black suit. His night-black hair was long: slightly oily even in its freshly washed state, and was held back with an onyx and pearl clip at the nape. His nose was more than a trifle large, his teeth a bit crooked, and the look of disdain on his narrow face as he looked down did his looks no favours, but with his kind of grace and elegance, he would have drawn second glances anywhere.
“Bugger,” Lily said succinctly. “Now I have to touch her.” She toed at the woman with her boot. “Tuney. Come on, Tuney, wake up. You can’t be lying there on the floor all day; I have things to do.”

“Charming, Lily,” Severus Snape said, and pointed his wand at the crumpled figure. It jerked and sat up suddenly, gasping, grey and wide-eyed as the woman’s head, done up in pink rollers and twisting wildly on her long thin neck, turned frantically from one to the other. Her eyes rolled back in her head again and she started to fall back.

“Oh no you don’t.” Lily pointed her own wand. “And for the record, you fall forwards when you swoon. *Rennervate!*” She stuffed her wand in her pocket, and reached out a hand to her sister. Petunia recoiled from it as if it were a snake. Lily rolled her eyes and grabbed her, hauling her, stumbling to her feet. She promptly flattened herself against the wall, whimpering and breathing heavily.

“Tea?” Lily inquired of Severus, lifting the lid of her mug and examining the drained interior. “I’m sure there’s lots in the kitchen. And bacon, probably too. You don’t get to Vernon’s size without your daily side of bacon. I could do with a sandwich or six. Only coming back from the dead, you know, it’s hard work. Builds up a good appetite.” She lifted her head and wrinkled her freckled nose. “Tuney? You haven’t gone and had another baby, have you?”

“Muh?” Petunia whimpered.

“I was only asking,” Lily continued, as she made her way to the kitchen and unbelted her trenchcoat. Snape took it from her gallantly and hung it over the back of the chair. “Because it does smell an awful lot like wee in here. Wee, and nappies. You should really do something about that.”

“Allow me, my darling.” Snape waved his wand. The air abruptly freshened, leaving the crisp, sharp scent of pine. He pointed the wand at the refrigerator; it swung open and a pack of bacon, a carton of eggs, a stick of butter and a loaf of bread sprang out, setting themselves industriously to work along with the appropriate pans and utensils. The kettle chirped, hastened to fill itself and settled itself on the stove. The stove ignored it, so the kettle proceeded to boil itself, humming happily. Lily stretched, removing her scarf and setting it carefully with her coat.

“Excellent,” she pronounced as her fiery red hair tumbled down around her shoulders. “Thanks, Sev. You’re an angel.” She kissed his cheek smackingly. Petunia mottled unattractively.

“Stop that!” she snapped. “You are a married woman!”

Lily turned her head to look at her, both amused and disgusted.

“Well?” she said. “Really? Ten years of thinking of me in my grave, and those are your first words to me? ‘Stop that; you’re a married woman’?”

Petunia sputtered. Lily sat down.

“For the record,” she said. “I’m not. A married woman, that is. Jamie’s still gone.”

The sputter stopped abruptly. Petunia actually made her way to a chair, pulling it as far away as the kitchen would allow.

“You’re... not dead.” It was almost a question. “Not... But the letter said...”

“You really shouldn’t accept everything you read at face-value, Tuney. For the record, and in the future, anything signed ‘Albus Dumbledore’ is almost guaranteed to be a great load of self-serving
bollocks. If he comes knocking ‘round again, tell him to shove off.”

Petunia’s eyes narrowed.

“I thought you loved him,” she accused. “And that he could do no wrong in your eyes!”

“Yes, well,” Lily said, reaching up without so much as a glance to catch a plate of buttered toast and bacon flying her way from the counter. “I reckon that was before he nicked my baby from the ruins of the house where my supposedly murdered body lay alongside my actually murdered husband’s, and brought him here to be raised by you, wasn’t it?” She bit into the toast, chewed and swallowed. Snape passed her a napkin as a more decorous plateful came his way. He Summoned a knife and fork, and began to eat... Petunia’s eyes narrowed to thin slits. Lily raised her eyebrows at her and Summoned a spoon and the marmalade.

“You’ve been alive all this time,” Petunia said accusingly. “And you left him here? What kind of mother are you?”

“What kind of... You’re not actually pointing that wand at me, Petunia Evans, are you? Not after my son had to be removed from your home for abuse and neglect?”

The mouth thinned along with the eyes.

“Nothing to say?” Lily mocked gently.

“Where have you been?” her sister asked abruptly.

“In hiding,” she said, promptly. It hadn’t been hard to come up with a story that she knew her sister would accept, not with her inherent and overdeveloped taste for the conspiratorial melodramatic. “In a coma of sorts, first, and then in hiding. You watch enough bad American telly; you’ve heard of witness protection, I’m sure?”

“He said... The old man said... That the wards around the house were powered by your sacrifice! Your death!”

“I’m sure he did. Fact is, Tuney, Harry could cast better wards right now than the ones Dumbledore raised that day. And he’s what now... How old... how old... No, you wouldn’t know, would you, since you never celebrated his birthday... From your point of view, he could be anywhere from eleven to... a hundred thirty-eight?”

“He was left on the doorstep,” Petunia snapped. "With a letter. What kind of people...”

“Person,” Lily corrected. “Singular. Despite his occasional use of the royal ‘we’, Dumbles still only qualifies as one man. Wizards in general, and witches too, don’t tend to do that sort of thing, or didn’t you get that when Wizarding Child Services showed up to reprimand you for stowing my kid in a filthy boot closet for ten years? Pass the butter, Sev.”

Snape passed, obligingly. Petunia turned, registering his presence for the first time.

“What’s he doing here?”

“He insisted on coming in so he could watch. He’s not really any more fond of Harry than you are; he does so look like poor Jamie, and Jamie and he were never really on good terms, were you Sev, but he’s always hated you more. On the psychological level... I suppose there’s a bit of confrontation-by-proxy as well. His own childhood wasn’t exactly ideal, as you know very well, and whether he likes Harry or not, there’s that matter of the boot cupboard again, and the lack of food,
and proper clothes, and things like regular doctors’ appointments that would have ensured that he
didn’t go about half blind most of his life? Though I suppose that last worked well for you; he
couldn’t see well enough to duck the frying pans that you were always hitting him with.”

There was a long silence.

“I admit,” Petunia said with some difficulty. “That I could have handled things better.”

Lily lowered her toast.

“So why didn’t you?” she said bluntly. “You didn’t have to keep him, and I’m sure Vernon was
talking up the orphanage besides. Or was it all self-interest after all, since you obviously didn’t give a
toss for the fact that he was your nephew- that the wards there protected your family, not just mine?”

“Pet,” a familiar voice called from up the stairs. “Is someone else down there? At this hour?”

“It’s alright, Vernon,” Petunia called, not removing her eyes from her sister. She hesitated, then rose
to her feet. “I should go up and tell him that you’re... He’s not...”

She disappeared hurriedly. Snape helped himself to another fried egg from the pan.

“Shall I take him on,” he inquired. “While you deal with her?”

A great inarticulate roar sounded from the floor above, before Lily could respond.

“What do you effing mean, she’s been alive all this time? You’re telling me that it was a trick? A great effing lie, from start to finish? All these years, all these years... that I lost my health, my job, our reputation for nothing?”

“Vernon, please,” Petunia’s voice pleaded. “She says she was in a coma, and then in witness
protection, and...”

“She’s an effing liar, Petunia! They’re all effing liars, you...”

There was a gargantuan shaking from above, again, and ...

“Vernon, no! Wait! Your pants!”

“Eff my ruddy...” The shaking stopped though, at least for a moment. Lily shook with laughter
over her toast, even as Snape smirked. The very house seemed to tremble on its foundations as
Vernon Dursley made his way down the stairs. His eyes bulged, his thick lips were wet and
trembling, and his face was mottled, as his wife’s had been, grey and patchwork crimson as he
 lumbered into the kitchen. He stopped in his tracks, only blinking once and uncertainly, before his
rage and offended sensibilities took over again.

“You’re effing alive?” he snarled.


He snarled inarticulately and lunged at her – and found himself flung back against the wall as Snape
simultaneously waved his wand and polished off his egg.
'If you touch her,” he informed Vernon in his deepest, silkiest tones, “you will not only be pissing yourself at every turn, Mr. Dursley, but defecating yourself as well. And that, I promise you, will be the least of your troubles.”

“I’m so sorry you lost your job,” Lily said sympathetically to him. “And your reputation, and... Did they let you keep Dudley in the end, Petunia? I know you had to have given him, at least, proper food since from the pictures I see there...” She gestured to a large portrait in the entryway – “He wouldn’t fit in the boot cupboard, and you would have had to empty the frying pan somehow, anyway, before you hit Harry with it. Oh, and of course, letting Harry himself eat whatever he cooked in it would have countered your efforts at starving him, but you never know. Only I’m just asking because I don’t see him about here now, do I?”

“He’s at school,” Petunia said defiantly. “Smeltings. And Vernon may have stepped down from his position at Grunnings, but he has another one now, just as good, working remotely from home, and...”

She trailed off, staring at her sister despite herself.

“You’re alive,” she whispered, and her hand went to her mouth. “You’re... You’re really... really... alive?”

“And eating the good Christian bacon to prove it,” Lily agreed, popping the last rasher in. She wiped her lips on the napkin Snape conjured for her, and stood. “Come on then. You know you want to.”

She held out her arms. Petunia hesitated, took a step forward, another, and another, bursting into noisy tears as she fell into her sister’s arms. Lily rubbed her back gently as she wept. Vernon, splayed against the wall like a fat, sweating butterfly on the pin of Snape’s negligently pointed wand, boggled and fumed.

“PET!” he roared. “PETUNIA!”

“You’re alive,” Petunia wept. “Oh Lily. I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“I know,” Lily said, rubbing her back again. “I know, Tuney. I knew you would be.” She dug into her pocket. “Here you go. Blow.”

“I was so scared,” her sister sniffled. “So scared. You died, he said you died, and that... that they would be after him, those... murderous f-f-freaks, and after us, and... that we had to keep him here, and that it would keep us safe, but what if they’d seen his ..., his... Detected it somehow, and ... We just wanted things to be normal, Lily. For our Dudders, for us, for...”

“Shh.” She helped her sit, and Summoned a cup of tea. Petunia glared at it, but in the end, took it up and drank it in her shaking hands. Lily sat opposite her, tapping her fingers as she calmed.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. Her sister examined her.

“I know,” she said. “I believe you. Try to remember that feeling, Tuney. It’s called remorse, and is quite an accomplishment, really. Far more terrible people than you – freaks, even – might have been redeemed, no matter what horrors they inflicted, if they’d ever managed it. Saved their souls, even.”

She rose to her feet. Snape rose to his, fetching up her coat and scarf, and helping her into it.

“What?” Petunia said, and then... “You’re going? Already? When... When will you be back? How can I get in touch with you?”
“I am,” Lily said. “And I won’t, and you can’t.” She adjusted her scarf. “Come on, Sev. Let’s go.”

“What? What? But... But...”

Lily Evans Potter’s green eyes turned to her. They held not one ounce, not one iota, of understanding, sympathy or compassion.

“You abused,” she said deliberately. “My son. You starved him, you beat him, you isolated him, physically and emotionally, and I have no doubt... No doubt... that if he had thought he could have gotten away with it, on both the Muggle and Magical level...” Her eyes flicked to Vernon. “That this thing you married would have done him in before he’d been here with you a month. And you... You would have protected him for it. For the sake of your own son, you would have told yourself, Tuney, but in the end... It still would have been my son lying dead in his grave for the fact.”

She turned her back.

“LILY!” Petunia wailed. “NO! Don’t go, don’t...” She burst into tears again. “I’m sorry!”

“I’m sorry too,” Lily said, as she headed for the door. “For a lot of things. But not for this. Not now, not ever.”

She let herself out. Petunia sobbed, once, unbelievingly, and crumpled to the floor. Snape stood looking down at her for a long moment, before pointing his wand at her. She cringed back, even amid her tears. He murmured a few words; she shrieked and covered her face... Vernon roared and struggled, positively puce in his indignation and fear and fury.

“LEAVE HER ALONE, YOU EFFING...”

Snape tucked his wand away and turned to the door, snapping his fingers indifferently. Vernon crashed to the floor, scuttling over as a frothing, fat and nappied cockroach on his hands and knees to his wife, and shaking her by the shoulder. She didn’t respond, just wept.

“WHAT DID YOU DO TO HER? PETUNIA! PET! WHAT. DID. YOU. DO?”

“Nothing,” Snape said. “Nothing fatal, anyway. I have merely ensured that she will always remember this moment. Every hour, every hour on the hour, every day, Mr. Dursley, for the rest of her life.” Even as he spoke, a frantic voice called.

“SEV! SEV! COME QUICK!”

He bolted out the door. Not one, but two figures were standing there, talking urgently in the otherwise still sleeping-and-deserted street.

“Lily? Lupin? What...”

“We found him,” Lupin said without preamble. “Not ten minutes ago. We figured he was in the Room; it wouldn’t open for any of us, but we found a way in, finally, when Sirius thought to question the house-elves. Titchy said that he’d summoned her in while he was in there last night, before he missed the feast and didn’t show up at the Tower for curfew, and her magic remembered the way.”

“You can summon a house-elf from within the Room of Requirement?” Snape asked, momentarily distracted.

“No,” Lupin said. “But it turns out that the Room can deposit one there on your behalf if it decides
it’s what you Require.”

“Is he alright?” Lily demanded urgently. “Remus, is Harry alright!”

“We don’t know. We’re checking him out now; Siri’s with him; he said to meet him...” His pocket buzzed. He scrambled for the mirror: Harry’s mirror, linked to Neville’s. “Neville? What’s the word?”

“’Fuck’ will do nicely,” Neville said grimly. “As will ‘bloody’, ‘buggering’ and ‘bollocks’ in any combination. I’ve lifted the wards temporarily; apparate straight up to the Headmaster’s office, all three of you. You have exactly... Thirty seconds... Starting... Now.”

There was an immediate triple crack, and they were gone.
Harry came back to consciousness slowly, drifting through a foggy gold haze. His head felt like it had just gone fifteen rounds with a bludger’s bat, his body felt like it weighed a good three times its normal mass, and his mouth tasted like something had crawled in for one last good sulk before its inevitable death. Whatever it was might have brought chocolate with it in a last-ditch attempt at self-comfort before it expired, he thought, but in the end, it wasn’t helping. At all.

Also, it was far too bright. He opened his eyes, just a bit, and promptly closed them again, not so much against the light, but at the quick and thoroughly unwelcome sight of the sea of faces hovering over him.

Some Auror I am. I forgot to lock the damned door.

Two adoptive fathers – and Heads of Houses - a Mum, a Snape, and a Nev. Woot. Who needs an AK when you’ve got all that to be going on with?

“Harry?” Sirius’s voice said anxiously. “Is that you in there?”

In... Where? Huh?

“Nrgh,” he managed. “W’er. Ow. B’g’r!”

“What did he say?”

“Nrgh,” Neville’s voice translated. “Water. Ow. Bugger. You’re a pain in my arse, Potter, you know that? We’ve had half the bloody castle searching for you all night! We even had to break Fred and George’s heart and confiscate the Marauders’ Map!”

Harry batted him off. A cool glass of water appeared before him, complete with magicked straw. He sucked thirstily, gasping with pain as Sirius and Remus helped him sit. “Ow. Bugger!”

“Excellent. You’ve got all your syllables back. Now the potion.”

Harry tried to bat him off again, but his arms were heavy, and his reflexes were off. In the end, it was far easier to drink than to argue. He swallowed obediently, if not terribly obligingly, sputtering and gagging on the taste. Whatever had died in his mouth resurrected itself immediately and apparated out post-haste, impotent in the face of its obvious superior. The rest of him began to yawn and wake up slowly, one cell at a time. Eventually, the hangover as a whole sneered at him and ambled off in the direction of the resurrected Thing, albeit slowly and rather insultingly... Harry sighed in relief as it disappeared.
“That,” he said clearly, “was disgusting, Longbottom.” His voice sounded abnormally deep and husky to his own ears. He cleared his throat. It didn’t seem to help. “Is there some secret vow you potions masters take that states you have to make everything taste so bloody awful?”


“Don’t wa... Whoa!” He blinked down at himself as he started to rise, and grabbed at the pale cotton cloth wrapped about his hips. “Where’d my clothes go?”

“They’re on the desk there. Accio mirror!”

“We’re in the Room of Requirement, Nev. You don’t have to Summon one.” He blinked, processing as he looked around. Sirius and Remus looked pale and worried. Snape looked rather bemused.

Harry turned away, mentally and physically. He’d forgive her eventually, he thought, inasmuch as there was anything there to forgive, but he wasn’t quite there yet. He could hear his Auror-Issued Mind Healer Tamsin Applebee’s warm, deceptively mild voice in the back of his mind even now.

Forgive her for... What exactly? For leaving you alone with the Dursleys again when you asked her to, for the good of others... Or for leaving you alone the first time when you were a baby, no matter that it saved your own life -the one life you’ve never really learned to value - when you didn’t ask her to?

Tamsin was an excellent Mind Healer. A good friend. And she had one up on Voldemort; she’d never taken it personally when he’d told her to sod off and die.

“Why the redo of Dumbledore’s office?” he asked, to distract himself. “Something wrong with my choice of decor?”

“We’re not in the Room anymore. This is the real thing; we brought you here to run some tests. Watch your sheet there, mate! None of us need to see that!”

“Uh?” Harry grabbed at his sheet. “Whoa! What the hell?” He peeked under. “What the hell?”

“Start at the top,” his friend advised. “And work your way down.”

Harry took the mirror, and peered in cautiously. Soft light brown hair, matching eyes, pleasant, ordinary features, a long, pale and faded scar starting at the edge of his left eyebrow and skimming the corner of his mouth, ending mid-chin...

“Why have you got me glamoured up as Lawrence Cartwright?’ he asked, puzzled.

“We don’t. Power down. Now.”

He powered down. Or tried to. And tried, and tried again. Nothing happened.

“What the...”

Sirius and Neville looked at each other.

“Pup,” Sirius said. His voice was shaking a little. He handed him his aspen wand. “Do me a favour. Um. Glamour yourself the way you used to look?”

“The way I used... But...” He took the wand and began the preliminary movements. It hissed at him. He dropped it, shocked. Snape raised an eyebrow.

Harry took it as if it might bite. It flamed obligingly. He began to work the spells carefully. They handed him the mirror. Soft light brown hair, matching eyes...

“Try blond,” Neville suggested. Thirty seconds later, his hair was a neat blond ponytail, and his eyes were blue as the sky. He stared at himself in the mirror, and dropped the glamour.

Soft light brown hair, matching eyes...

Harry Potter rose carefully to his bare feet, clutching at his sheet. Sirius too, stood. At his full height, he stood just shy of six feet. At his current height, Harry was perhaps five eight or nine. His body... He looked down. His body was decidedly not eleven. His body was, in fact, exactly what he’d dreamed it would be at eleven. Lithe, defined – ripped, even - subtly muscular, particularly about the arms and shoulders... In short, it was the body of a fully grown international-level duelist in his absolute prime.

(Icouldbethirtyagain;that'dbeabitofalright)

He peeked under the sheet again as he struggled to process. Remus put an arm around him to steady him.


“Shh, cub.” Remus’ arm tightened. “I’m here. We’re not sure, quite yet, but whatever it is, it’ll be alright, I promise.”

“Do you remember,” Neville said urgently. “And please think hard, Harry, because this is really, really important... The last things you said in the Room?”

He struggled to remember.

“I said,” he said finally. “That is wasn’t fair. That I was tired of it all being about me. That it wasn’t on. That I was tired of being me. That it wasn’t the way it was supposed to be.”

“Do you remember, at any point saying that you wouldn’t help carry out the plan to defeat Voldemort and to protect Hogwarts, if you remained as you were?”

“What? I don’t know, I don’t... I was upset, I said... I think I said, that I didn’t think I could. Can. But I wasn’t talking about the plan! I don’t think, anyway, just... my life! Being me again, not...” He trailed off. “And we’re not there now? But... How? It’s impossible! The Room shouldn’t be able to change people! Not permanently!”

“It can,” Neville said. “I think, anyway... Because it learned through me. I did my first real transformation as an Animagus in the Room, the day I became Headmaster. Within the hour of the vow. Beorn... he wanted to come out. You know how it is. He actually wanted to do it while I was taking the vow, but I held him off, and as soon as I was finished, as soon as I could... I took off. The only place I could think of was the big enough – I didn’t know how big I was going to be, only that it was going to be bloody ridiculous – was the Room of Requirement. It witnessed the event. It absorbed the particulars. And what it witnesses... And absorbs, it can do.”

“But that was your Room, not ours!” Sirius protested.
Neville hesitated, obviously weighing what he was about to say next.

“I have a theory,” he said. “And it is just a theory... That they’re all one. The nexus point. Only all the dimensions, they would need a nexus point of infinite possibility to turn on, right? I think... No I believe... That that’s what the Room is. What happens in one version can happen in any of them... If it needs to. You just have to key in on what to ask. How to ask. To want it badly enough, to want it absolutely. And as Hogwarts – every version of Hogwarts, no matter the dimension - will do anything and everything to protect itself, and if its protector says it can’t, for some reason or another... And means it, absolutely... The Room decides.”

“You’re saying,” Harry said. “That this isn’t just a glamour. That ...”

He stopped.

“The wand... My aspen wand... Doesn’t want me anymore,” he said. “What...”

“It’s got a hippogryph feather for a core, remember? You didn’t ask if you could use it,” Sirius said. “Or suggest. You just tried to cast a spell with it. To command it. Hippogryphs like being introduced properly.”

“But I’m still me,” he said bewildered. “Aren’t I? I mean... Under this? I have my mind, my memories... It still knows me!”

“It knows your magical core. And if you’ve changed,” Remus said carefully. “Physically... Permanently... Entirely, on the cellular basis... That means your core has too. Not a lot, just a bit. Your Horntail wand would still recognize you, but Horntails are quite a bit brighter than hippogryphs.”

“That doesn’t make sense! Polyjuice changes you too, completely, and you don’t see people’s wands rejecting them when they take it!”

“Polyjuice doesn’t change your core,” Neville said. “It just... morphs it a bit. Sort of pushes it around like a finger’s imprint in wet sand. The hour it takes to the sand to reshape and refill the hole is the hour you have a changed appearance.”

“But...”

“There is one way to find out,” Snape said. He looked surprisingly unantagonistic. Intrigued, even. “Transform to your Animagus form.”

“Uh?”

“If your physicality – or more to the point, your receptiveness to your physicality - has permanently and irrevocably changed – it is possible- likely, even - that your physical Animagus form has changed too. At the very least, your markings will have changed.”

Harry sank back, adjusting his sheet automatically. His hands were tanned a light nut brown, and his forearms were defined and muscular and sprinkled in light brown, almost blond hair.

“I don’t...”

“If the Room has changed him,” Lily said firmly, speaking for the first time. “It can change him again. He can go back and say he wants this undone.”

“It doesn’t work like that, Mrs. Potter,” Neville said. “For the Room to do something like this... To
do something like this, the Room would have truly truly had to be convinced that, not only did Harry want this to happen, but that it was the only way to preserve Hogwarts. To prevent what happened in our world, or something even worse now, now that Riddle is in the know. Harry would have had to be absolutely willing, but in the end, from the Room’s perspective... It’s not about him. It’s about preserving the environment that hosts the Room itself, here and in every other dimension that does host it. Not just its body, as it was in our world, the damage was cosmetic there, mostly, but the magical node situated under Hogwarts itself. If that was damaged...”

He didn’t finish.

“Riddle doesn’t know I’m an Animagus,” Harry protested. “You said that yourself, Neville! It’s the one thing you didn’t tell him!”

“He might,” Sirius said. “At the Skewered Rooster... You came down the chimney, and you were... like this... when you came out of the chimney, but you wouldn’t have fit, otherwise. He’ll have put the pieces together by now, as a possibility on a list of possible explanations anyway. Actually, if you’re a hundred forty...”

“Thirty nine...”

“He’d probably put it at the top of the list. Pretty much every witch and wizard gives at least a thought to attempting the Animagus transformation by the time they’re grown, and as an Auror, it would have been an almost mandatory weapon in your arsenal.”

He rubbed his nose.

“I’d like some clothes,” he said abruptly.

“Cub,” Remus said gently. “I know this is a shock... It’s a shock to all of us, but...”

“I would like,” Harry said deliberately. “Some clothes. And some privacy. If my Animagus form has changed, none of you gets to know what it is before I do. After that... I will decide which of you gets to know. That way, no one else can bugger it all UP!”

Surprisingly, Snape took off his outer robe and laid it over the chair.

“You may transfigure it as needed,” he said. “Along with the sheet. Your former clothes are there...” He nodded to a small, torn bundle on Dumbledore’s desk – “If you require more fabric.” Sirius sneered at him automatically. Remus kissed Harry’s cheek, rising, and took his fiance’s arm firmly.

“Out,” he said. “All of you. Now.”

They filed out. Again, Snape was the last to leave.

“What,” Harry said tiredly. Snape shook his head, and bent to pick up the discarded aspen wand.

“Madam,” he said courteously to it. “I understand that you are startled by the situation. We all are. That being said, we have worked well together the once, I think... I would like to propose an at least temporary exchange of loyalties.”

“A... What?”

The aspen wand seemed to rear in his hand. He flattened his palm. Harry raised an eyebrow as it stood itself on its end and actually bowed to the man before it... Snape bowed in return, then shook his sleeve. His Horntail wand shook out. It flared eagerly.
“Wretched thing,” he said affectionately. “No need to ask you what you think. I do reserve the right though, to call on you again as an old friend would another, if ever needed?”

The female Horntail wand – fifteen inches, and black as night - shot out a scarlet flame that spun like a whip, lashing out . . . and touched Severus Snape’s cheek like a kiss. Harry jumped as it recoiled and shot out again, curling around his wrist. At the back of his mind, the serpentine hiss of laughter sounded, and a soft, surprisingly feminine chortle. He slammed his Occlumency shields up hastily. Snape smirked, and reversed the wand, handing it to him, hilt first.

“Black amber,” he said. “Most mistake it for black pine, simply because it is so rare. I suggest you cultivate its admirers’ delusions; all else aside, the shell alone is extremely valuable, and would attract thieves looking to make a hasty five hundred galleons.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Thanks? Wait, this is a five hundred galleon wand?”

“Yes. And before you are so gauche as to ask me where I placed my hand on that kind of coin... I did not. It was left to me for my use by my counterpart, when he agreed to participate in the ritual.” Snape said. “Since I had, obviously, no wand to bring with me.”

“Huh. Did he say where he got it?”

“No. He did, however, warn me to be careful with it; even if the core were to remain undamaged, the particular casing would absolutely impossible to replace. No, no, don’t thank me. They work most effectively together, yes, but I imagine they will, too, cause distinctly more trouble together. As the saying goes, Potter... Better you than me, and, at the very least, I will no longer have to put up with her infernal whinging on the subject of spending more time with her blasted husband.”

He swept out. Harry stared after him. After a moment, he got to his feet.

“First things first,” he said. “Okay. We can do this.” He pointed the wand at the mirror. It expanded to a full length version, on a leaning support. He took a deep breath, stepped in front of it, dropping the sheet. The wand in his hand whistled, vulgarly. The wand on the desk sniggered.

“Oh, shut it, both of you,” he said. “I don’t recall asking your opinion.” He closed his eyes.

Alright. Alright. I can do this.

But before I do...

He concentrated again. Again, the specific glamours that would have allowed him to appear as eleven again, with black hair and green eyes, simply... slipped right off him as if greased. He stared into the mirror.

“That,” he said aloud. “Is fantastic. Problematic, but... fantastic.”

An odd, twisted, sense of exhilaration began to grow in the pit of his belly. He strode over to the fabric, and began to transfigure quickly. One pair of dark brown leather breeches, knee-high dueling boots, white sleeved shirt a la Lucius Malfoy (say would you would about the man’s morals, but he’d always had excellent taste in clothes) and, after due consideration, a rather nicely done copper-and-bronze robe that he vowed to make a true reality via a visit to Gladrags sooner rather than later...

He transfigured a quill into a hairbrush and tidied himself up a bit, casting a breath-freshening charm. His vision, he was pleased to note, was as perfect as he could have hoped for. By the time he was finished, he felt positively giddy. He strode to the door, delighting in the absolute and full weight of a properly trained, adult body, and opened it. Frantically hissing parentals-potions-professors-and
Neville turned as one.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said. His idiotic grin stretched from ear to ear. “Can I borrow you for a second, Padfoot? And you too, Moony?”

“Of course, cub,” Remus said. Sirius nodded. The door closed firmly again.

“Remus,” Harry said without preamble. “I’d like you to perform an Unbreakable Vow on me and Sirius. If Sirius is willing, and it’s only because it’s Riddle we’re talking on, okay? I wouldn’t insult you with it if it weren’t.”

“Course, pup,” Sirius said instantly. “About what?”

Harry had to blink back tears at that.

“I’m going to transform,” he said. “Or try to. I want one witness. One. To... to confirm things for me. And to facilitate things in the future, if necessary. And I want it to be you.”

Remus eyes softened. Sirius stared at him, looking from one to the other uncertainly.

“Me?” he said. “Why me?”

“Because I trust you.” Harry took his hand. “And I’m your pup, right? No matter... Anything?”

The huge, doggy grin was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. They knelt across from each other. Less than a minute later, it was done. Remus kissed them both and slipped out. The door closed. Harry triple checked it, and picking up the second wand, cast a single spell... Sirius craned his neck, fascinated, as around them, an opaque shell of a square bubble unfolded, side by side, enclosing them in a transparent, blue tinted box.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“It’s a warding box. Bigger on the inside than on the outside – it stretches as far as you need it to when you walk towards the parameters - and you can’t get in without a key. Anyone trying to listen in only hears VWORP VWORP VWORP.”

Sirius gave him a most peculiar look. Harry laughed.

“I’ll tell you later,” he promised. “It’s a Muggle reference, but I swear, you’ll love it. And all the more apt now for that it comes across time and space. Does you when you need temporary and absolute privacy. You can see out, but nobody can see in. All they see if they try is an old-fashioned police box.”

“Who thought it up?” he asked, interested.

“Hermione,” he said with a grin. Sirius laughed.

“Go on, then,” he said eagerly. “Let’s see, let’s see!”

Harry hesitated.

“Before I start,” he said. “You’re not upset about the changes?”

“A little,” he said honestly. “But for myself, not you. I’m not sure how this is supposed to help save the world, exactly, but I’m in for anything that does that. Only I missed a lot of that world, didn’t I, locked up in Azkaban, and a lot of the plans I had for my life too. Quite a lot of which,” he added
after a considered moment. “That were contingent on my godson being legal. So... That’s alright, anyway.”

Harry snorted. He waved him off.

“That’s alright, anyway.”

“Thing is, pup, it does solve a few other rather pressing problems as well. I reckon you being an Auror you picked up on them too; there’s no way we could have justified keeping you at Hogwarts in the open now, not as a student or as you were, not with all of Remy’s exes-and-extendeds on the prowl. That’d just be bad parenting, and once it hits the papers, the other parents would be demanding you and Neville be sent away anyway, for their own kids’ safety. I don’t know how much you know about the werewolf gambling rings, but Remy basically shut down half an extremely lucrative source of income for a whole lot of very nasty sorts, and they’re all going to be wanting to take it out on his favourite people’s hides.”

Harry grimaced.

“We’ll talk about that later,” he said. “First...”

Sirius nodded and stepped back a bit. Harry closed his eyes and concentrated.
The Room of Requirement

Saturday, November 1st

7: 30 PM

The Room of Requirement was exactly as they’d left it, though without the pensieve. Sirius bounded in happily, plopped himself down on the sofa, and, retrieving the left-behind box of chocolates, peeled the wrappers off of three, stuffed them all into his mouth at once, and chewed obnoxiously at Snape. The Potions Master eyed him with distinct distaste, seating himself as the room provided him with a version of his own favourite armchair.

“Your message, mutt,” he said. “Is quite, quite clear. As unbelievable as the fact may be, you now know something I don’t. I am happy for you, truly, though if it not too difficult, would you please chew with your mouth closed? You may be an absolute drooling imbecile, but there is no need to advertise the fact.”

“And you are a patently pretentious git,” Sirius returned. “No ‘mays’ or ‘be’s’ about it. What can you do. Nothing, that’s what, since you were obviously born that way.”

The Potions Master rolled his eyes. “So,” he said, turning to examine Harry again. “And without going into details, naturally... May we assume from your dubious new relative’s expression here that my theory was correct? Your Animagus form has changed along with the rest of you?”

Harry, seated on another conveniently appearing-and-facing sofa, said nothing. Sirius’s smirk widened.

“Sirius,” Remus warned as he settled beside their brand new son. “Watch it. You took an Unbreakable Vow, and there are no loopholes there, no matter how you tiptoe around the subject.” He propped his feet up on the coffee table provided him. “That goes for you too, Severus. Fair warning, here and now... If I catch you trying to work your way around this one at my fiance’s expense, I will personally knock you over the head, drag you up to the third floor, and have Fluffy render you down for your own potions stores. No, thank you, Neville.” He waved off the other man’s offer of a shot of the whiskey. “I’m on hall duty in half an hour.”

“So noted.” Snape sat back, accepting the shot in his stead and pouring it into the Muggle thermal mug that he’d extracted from under his robes. It smelled, not of apple cloudy, but of coffee: rich, seductive and smooth. “I must say, Lupin, that I’m a bit surprised at how casually you are processing the fact that your son is now a grown man with absolutely no need of you whatsoever.”

“I am,” Remus said pleasantly, retrieving a truffle from the box Sirius passed him, “far more concerned, as any good father would be, Severus, on the effects of the change on Harry himself than I am on my own opinions of the matter. Never mind the fact that he is far less vulnerable now than
he was before, and oh yes, there’s that little matter of averting our world’s apocalypse? All in all, I think we would all be best served by my tabling my personal angst till after that particular matter is resolved."

“Never mind,” Sirius added. “That we get to keep him around like this. We couldn’t have, you know, after Greyback’s pack didn’t change last night, not if he really was a kid. It’d just be too dangerous for everybody concerned.”

“What did Aberforth say when you went down to the Hog’s Head on your break, Padfoot?” Harry asked, speaking for the first time since they’d entered the room. “Any leaks yet?” He himself had spent his day, not in classes, but in London. Sirius, while the two had yet been ensconced in Dumbledore’s office, had immediately offered him three things: the key to the Blacks’ family vault, the accompanying seal, and a scribbled note to the Goblins instructing them to set up a vault in the name of one Lawrence Cartwright, with a rather large transfer in-the-name-of. Harry’s eyes had widened as he’d processed the number. Sirius had just waved him off.

“Don’t worry,” he’d said. “Still plenty left there to dress Remus. Hell, after the word comes through tomorrow and the international community starts pouring fiscal accolades on him for his contributions to history and society in general, he’ll be able to afford to dress me.”

“I do have money, you know? Madam Longbottom set both me and Nev up with subsidiary vaults for when we’re out and about like this. With galleons in them, even. Lots of galleons. Lots and lots of galleons. Though not as many galleons as all this. Are you absolutely sure you can afford this, Sirius? Only you will have Little Harry to feed and house when he comes back.”

“Course. Little Harry has his own fortune waiting to frivol. This one’s for you. Go,” his father had said, kissing his cheek. “Shop your brains out. Anything you want. Oh, and be sure to buy yourself a pair of proper dueling boots. Real ones, not transfigured ones. I may not be able to claim you as my son like this, pup, but that doesn’t change the fact, does it? Little Harry, once he’s back, will just mean I have two.”

Harry had said nothing, just hugged him, hard. Oddly, and never mind the fact that he was now a full-grown man in body as well in mind, for the first time since he’d returned he’d felt like Sirius was the one doing the paternal hugging. Sirius had just wrapped him up, burying his face in the light brown hair.

“Remus is totally going to cry when I point this, at least, out to him,” he said, as they’d both pulled away, a bit damp around the eyes.

“What’s ‘this’?”

“You have his hair,” Sirius said. He’d wiped Harry’s face with his palm, and smoothed said hair down. “And for some weird reason, my father’s ears. What’s with that?”

“Ask your Mind Healer?” Harry had suggested. “It wasn’t deliberate, but I’m sure that it doesn’t mean I didn’t do it intentionally.” Then, examining himself in the mirror again... “Can I get a note to get one pierced?”

Sirius had barked with laughter.

“Come on,” he’d said. “I have to get to class.”

"It's Saturday," he'd been reminded.

"Work, then. Rounds. Marking. Whatever. Saturdays only really count if you're a student. Though..."
Nice going there, son. Care to come up with a reason why you’ll be skiving from now till you’re excused from Hogwarts? Only, you know. The other teachers will ask. Even Snape, the great git, and in public too, if only to see me squirm.”

“Tell them I’m off being fitted for my very own Mind Healer,” Harry had suggested. “Now that the adoption’s final, I have all those obvious Delicately-and-Carefully-Quashed-till-I-Was-In-A-Position-to-Feel–Secure Issues to work through, don’t I? Madam Longbottom, I’m sure, would be delighted to escort me. “

“Excellent,” Sirius praised. “We’ll plan that induction of you as a Marauder as soon as we come up with a name for your new form.”

“We can’t do that, Padfoot,” Harry reminded him. “The Vow might take it the wrong way.”

“Bugger.” He looked crestfallen. “And it’s such a wicked form too!”

“After we off Tom,” Harry had said, patting his back. “Then I’ll release you from it, and you can throw me a coming-out party. So to speak.”

“Nothing official, no,” Sirius said, back in the present, in the Room of Requirement again. “But the word’s definitely out now that something huge-and-related just went down in Edinburgh. No one’s hit on the real story, of course, only that it was huge enough to involve the magical Americans, and possibly the Muggle Queen herself. Oh, and everyone knows now that Moody is at St. Mungo’s again, from an attack that occurred at Hogwarts while he was here as part of the crew that arrested Dumbledore. You can just imagine how that’s going over; rumours are breaking faster than wind at the Hufflepuff table on curry nights.”

“Siri. Really.” Remus nibbled at his truffle. “You’re a professor now.”

Sirius waved him off.

“Only, everyone was expecting to hear of some big tragedy this morning, weren’t they?” he continued. “What with Hallowe’en coinciding with the full moon, and Tom’s tenth Deathday and all. And there was nothing, and from the certain unpleasant perspective of unpleasanter people, Aberforth says, with those absolutely pleasant amounts of money at probable stake... No happy explanations for any of it. There’s a race on now, he’s heard, with a quite nice little chunk of change up to the first employee at the Ministry to break and leak the confirmable details.”

“So... Front page Prophet: tomorrow morning.”

“First thing,” he confirmed. “If not tonight. Brace yourself, Moonblossom. You are about to become the hero of the century.” He put a hand to his ear. “Ooh, listen! Can you hear that? Order of Merlin: First, Second and Third Class coming your way!” He leered. “Promise me you’ll wear them at some point for me, and nothing else?”

“I’ll consider it,” Remus returned pleasantly as everyone present rolled their eyes in tandem. “If you promise me that I will never have to resort to muzzling you in Severus’ presence to keep you from accidentally killing yourself.”

“Done. Anyway. As I was saying... Finding a way to keep Lawrence Cartwright, at least, at the school would really, really, really not be a bad thing. You and I will still officially be here, after all, Moony, and bounty hunters faced with getting past the Hogwarts defenses and an International-level Dueling Master would be a bit more reluctant to interrupt our classes, yeah?” He cocked his head at Harry in a rather doggy fashion. “Do I recall, pup, you mentioning something in the pub about
working towards a Grandmastery? How far do you reckon you have to go there, and how long do you think it’d take you now that you’re back in your physical prime?”

“Madam Longbottom and Nev’s parents are safe for now,” Harry said, ignoring that. “Grimmauld Place is under Fidelius, and now that it’s been cleaned out, has everything they need till I can get back there to ward Longbottom Manor and link the two through the secured Floo. We can add another link there too, to our house in Wales, so they have the spot to visit.”

“You can link sites under Fidelius through the Floo?”

“Yes. We came up with a way to do it about... Thirty years ago? Only people would get bored, and frankly psychologically unstable, staying in the same places all the time for years on end, and the department of Magical Transportation asked Spellcrafting and Modification if they could come up with something to improve the limitations.”

“Did you invent that one too?” Sirius asked, vastly impressed.

“No. I helped a bit here and there, but only enough to rate the footnote. I know how it’s done though; once it was properly developed, it was all a case of wards again, and I got called in to work on a specific case or two over the years, as the handy friend of friends.”

“That’ll be nice,” Remus said approvingly. “Alright. So that just leaves Neville.”

“Not a problem,” Neville said. “If we decide that this is how we want to proceed, I’ll just have a word with the Room here, and it’ll change me too. It won’t be nearly as tricky as it would have been for Harry, since I wouldn’t want to change my core, just age to my preferred point. I prefer not to have my Animagus form messed with anyway,” he added. “Mum and Dad like it the way it is.”

“You’re sure it’ll do that for you?” Sirius asked dubiously. “I mean... You did say that it won't do it for just anybody who asks.”

“Only if it’s necessary to prevent the magical apocalypse, yeah? And whether I am strictly and personally necessary or not... As the Headmaster here, Hogwarts will see it as my job to fix and facilitate.”

“And how do you feel about it?”

“I’d like a chance to warn Gran first, but eleven was never my favorite age. And the classes are kind of boring. I could get a lot more research done if I didn’t have to spend so many hours a day modifying my own good spelling.”

“How do you think your Gran will react?” Harry asked. “Really?”

“Honestly? She’ll probably be a bit relieved. Safety issues aside... She genuinely likes me as Neil. She’s not had anyone to really talk to you know, about Mum and Dad on that adult level, and it’s good for her to have someone to lean on. Someone competent, who not only knows what’s going on there, but who is personally invested. It won’t stop her nagging, of course,” he added. “Or lecturing, but she does that to everybody, no matter their age or relation.”

Harry smiled a little at that. They all did.

“And after?” Snape probed. “Once the announcement has been made that the ‘children’ are being relocated for their own safety? Where will you go?”

Sirius shifted before Neville could answer that.
“I’ve been thinking about that too,” he said abruptly. “And I have an idea.”


“I think,” Sirius said, and took a deep breath. “I think... We can manage to keep both of you here at Hogwarts... But it would require letting one more person in on things. Which really, if you think about it,” he added hastily as all present looked at him, askance. “Is not such a big deal. I mean, Riddle knows now, right? And to be honest, from talking to her... I think she already suspects something weird is going on. Not this level of weird, but... And she could help, really. We’d have to have her make an Unbreakable Vow... In fact, it’d be good if we all took one, together, to ensure that no one does accidentally let anything else slip, especially on the nature of this Room, can you imagine what Tommy could get up to if he processed that...”

Neville sat back, examining him.

“You’re talking McGonagall,” he said.

“She is de facto Headmistress now,” Sirius said. “And with a bit of juggling of positions...” He trailed off, the aching timidity and self-doubt that never lurked far under his debonair, devil-may-care exterior breaking through yet again. One day soon, Harry thought as he watched his godfather struggle: one day very, very soon, he was going to go back to Brazil, gather up every specimen of Wittering Chitter-Blossom that he could find, hire an entire army’s worth of potioneers to mix up an industrial sized batch of Dementor B-Gone...

And then make his way personally to Azkaban and lay bloody buggery bollocking fucking waste.

“Harry?” Remus said. “What do you think?” Harry jumped as he realized that everyone – even Snape - was waiting for him to speak. No, to decide.

No. Just... No.

I’m not that man any more. I’ll do what I have to do... But...

He looked down at himself. The dueling boots were the most expensive money could buy. The old Harry Potter, he’d thought, as he’d stared at them on the shelf, had once had a pair just like them... But they’d been given to him. As effective tribute. He’d worn them, of course, because they were actually as good quality as the maker claimed, and Gin had thought they’d looked dead sexy on him besides, but he’d always felt a bit of a walking advert in them. Which, of course, he had been.

No one here though, knew Lawrence Cartwright.

They would, he thought. Eventually. And in the meantime...

These boots... These boots were his. He’d earned them, and not for killing Lord Bloody Wankering Voldemort either. He’d earned them, and the right to wear them, because he was just that good.

“I think,” Harry said deliberately. “That as Headmaster... Hogwarts’ recognized Headmaster... Oathsworn and all... That someone else besides me should be making the final decision. I’m just the muscle now, mates. You want someone to run this dog and pony show, formally... Longbottom’s your man.”

Neville smiled at him lopsidedly. One by one, the others nodded. As if in acknowledgement, the Room shimmered. The heady scent of the forest filled the air as it had on the train, when he’d first picked up the cherry wand, and a veritable rainfall of tiny blossoms fell all around, glowing and fading. When they were gone, the room they had been in was gone... They sat in various chairs in
Neville’s office. All of the thousands upon thousands of children in the thousands of thousands of photos on the walls and shelves cheered and waved. He popped his ears at them.

“I accept your nomination,” he said. Again, as if in acknowledgement, the Room shimmered. A gold glow suffused the glamoured man before them. It was so bright that they all had to squeeze their eyes shut. When they opened them again, Neville Longbottom was standing before them as Neil Cartwright, fully grown, fully fleshed and flexing his fingers.

“Now that’s more like,” he said. His voice was deep and pleased: a fully rounded, nuanced baritone that no imitative charm could quite hope to emulate. He stretched luxuriously, spine crackling audibly all the way from the base of his neck to the base of his spine.

“But you’re still old!” Sirius protested. Neville laughed. It was free and easy, and eminently adult, and wrapped the listener up in a reassuring coffee-and-spiced-ale-and-barely-lavender-scented hug... Harry grinned just at the sound.

“Everyone’s got a favourite age,” the Headmaster said. “This was mine. Halfway to... Everything, really, with the best still ahead.”

“Huh.” Sirius shook his head. “This is what you grew up to be? Only the glamours were one thing, but honestly, mate, you’re a little scary like this, you know? In a good way,” he hastened. “A really really good way.” Remus offered him an amused look.

“Can you still glamour as your smaller self?” Harry asked. Neville concentrated – and shrank immediately, or seemed to.

“That’s handy, anyway,” Remus said. “Though, that being said... Do Little Harry.”

Neville did, obligingly. Snape rose to his feet and prowled about him.

“You’ll need to tweak it a little,” he pronounced. “Potter’s hair is a somewhat more obstreperous above the left ear, for one thing, but on the whole... Potter, glamour yourself as young Longbottom.”

Harry slid his wand out of his sleeve and obliged. A mirror appeared; the rest gathered around to make suggestions.

“This is just weird,” he said as he tweaked. “Little me, big me, little me again, Lawrence Cartwright...” He paused. “That’s a dead stupid name, Lawrence. I need another one.”

“You’ve already on public record,” Sirius pointed out.

“Then give me a nickname. You’re good at that.”

He pondered.

“Ren,” he decided. “From Lawrence.”

“That works. There. That should do it.”

“It’s accurate enough, but it’s not going to work for that long,” Neville observed critically as they examined each other. “We’re a lot more than our faces. We might get a day or two out of it before someone notices that we’ve swapped expressive quirks and individual body language, but only that, before Hermione at least, starts getting her suspicious on.”

“At least we don’t have to worry about Fred and George spotting us on the Map now,” Harry said
pragmatically, and then... “Why doesn’t...” He darted a glance at his mother, then away. “Eulalia Shelley appear as Lily Potter there? They would have noticed that.”

“I ensured that it wouldn’t,” Snape said shortly. The original Marauders – Remus and Sirius looked at him blankly.

“How’d you do that?” Sirius asked.

“Your ego, Black, really is just that remarkable, isn’t it? You are hardly the only wizards in the multiverse with the skills to master such magics. “

“Skill had nothing do with it,” Remus said to his fiancé. “Jamie probably told Lils about the loophole. When you legally change your name, and register it with the appropriate department at the Ministry of Magic,” he explained to the others, “they apply a magical seal that ensures that all documents filed under your original name update automatically. It was originally intended, and still is, to accommodate women who change their names when they get married and don’t want visit every department at the Ministry to make sure that it’s all taken care of.”

“So you cheated.” Sirius smirked at him. Snape sneered back.

“Not every problem requires the most complicated solution, mutt,” he said.

“Says the man who came back from the dead and crossed a dimensional portal, arranged for his consciousness to take up residence in a magically constructed zombie-body, and instructed his counterpart to kill himself so he could swoop in to play the Gryffindor he never managed to be his first time around.”

“He managed it quite well, actually.” Harry said as he morphed back to Ren. “Lay off, Padfoot. He may look like the man you hated, but he really, really isn’t. In the end... After all was said and done... He could have had his choice of any of the Houses. All of them. And every one of them would have been proud to claim him.”

“Yeah, yeah. So. Who wants to tell McGonagall?”

“I will,” Lily said. They all turned to look at her. She’d been there all along, of course, but had been utterly and absolutely silent, more than obviously avoiding looking at the child she’d birthed in his new incarnation. Sirius looked a bit pained.

“Is that really a good idea, Lils?” he said. “I mean... Time has softened her a bit on the subject, and she can look now on your good bits with reasonable objectivity... But that’s only because you were dead. Maybe we should just... You know. Ease her into the idea before we present her with you.”

“Uh?” Harry said, puzzled. Lily looked equally so.

“What?” she said. “What are you going on about?”

Remus and Sirius looked at each other.

“Definitely not our Lils,” Sirius muttered. “No way she could forget seven years of that kind of enmity.”

“I don’t know what your relationship with Minerva was like in your world, Lily,” Remus said delicately. “But here... your counterpart and Minerva... Well. They butted heads a bit. She certainly didn’t wish you - her - dead, or anything like,” he hastened. “But...”
“What? What?”

“You liked to know things,” the ex-were said. “And she liked to stop you from knowing them. At first it was just her job... But you were a bit... Erhm. Persistent with it. Ungracefully so.”

“She wouldn’t give you a pass to the Restricted Section from the library in first year,’ Sirius translated. “And believed that you strung Jamie along on a hook all those years for the sole purpose of access to his Invisibility Cloak. She was always a bit soft in the head when it came to Jamie, nothing inappropriate or anything, but he was that brilliant at Transfiguration, and honestly, you weren’t very subtle, Lils, when he used to take the piss at Snape here for mooning over you. Screaming that he couldn’t criticize the Hat for putting Snape in Slytherin when the Hat had wanted to put you in Slytherin, and that was only the beginning of it. No Head of House likes to hear that her House is actually her students’ second option, especially in front of all the others at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, never mind in her own class, every day for how many years?”

“What?” Harry sat up, looking his mother fully in the face for the first time. “It did? The Hat, I mean; it wanted to put you in Slytherin?”

“No,” she said, still not looking at him. “It didn’t. It wanted to put their Lily in Slytherin. In my world, I had the choice, like you said Sev here might have had. It said I could have gone anywhere.”

“Why did you pick Gryffindor then?” he asked. She shrugged minimally.

“I was looking right at the table when I was Sorted,” she said. “And a really nice girl that I’d met on the train had already been Sorted there.” She offered Neville a small smile. “I didn’t know anybody but Sev, and I thought it would be nice to have a built-in girlfriend, even if she was a couple of years older than me.” She considered. “Maybe she’ll be a bit softer toward me, once she processes that I’m not actually the Lily she knew?”

Remus and Sirius looked rather dubious.

“We could bring in Gran to explain things to her,” Neville offered. “They’re great friends, and she’d know, McGonagall that is, that she can’t be fooled. She’d believe her.”

“I will accompany her for the interview,” Snape said. “If that suits you, Headmaster?”

Neville nodded.

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll go and contact Gran now, before heading back to the Tower. Harry, you can’t go back to classes like this, obviously, when it’s time for classes, and you have the excuse of the Mind Healers down to get out of those anyway, till it’s time for us to leave, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be productive. Do you remember Malfoy Manor well enough to get in?”

“I remember our Malfoy Manor well enough,” Harry said dryly.

“This one is the same,” Snape reassured him. “I have had to maintain at least peripheral contact with Lucius and Narcissa since arriving here, and the homes, at least, are absolutely identical.”

“Are you going to be able to get in now?” Lily asked, obviously and yet maternally compulsive whatever their mutual qualms. “Now that your Animagus form has changed?”

“Of course,” he said, and that was all. Remus heaved a sigh. He wasn’t the only one; Snape heaved right along with him. Both had identical troubled, exasperated looks of worry on their faces, aimed at their respective former Potters.
“I have to go,” Lily said abruptly, and got to her feet. Seconds later, the door closed behind her. An awkward silence fell.

“You should know, Potter,” Snape said. “That she went to visit your relatives this morning.”

“Did she? While I was missing, and half the castle was looking for me?”

“You are an adult, Potter,” the man said acerbically. “Half the castle might assume that you are not, but she is quite, quite aware herself, I promise you, that you are capable of caring for yourself. Painfully aware; she only died, after all, to ensure that you would have the opportunity to grow into the necessary skill sets.”

Harry said nothing, just rose to his feet.

“Madam Longbottom’s offered me a room at Longbottom Manor,” he said to Sirius and Remus. “To stay in, till we get the details sorted. I met her for lunch today after all, to get our stories straight about the Mind Healers and all, and she pointed out that it covers the excuse that I’m not sleeping in the dorms too, if I’m staying with her while we shop around there.”

“Very well. And you’re sure you’ll be alright going into Malfoy Manor by yourself, cub?” Remus asked. “I’m not one to be talking on the importance of back-up, I know, but then again... I am.”

“He’ll be fine,” Sirius reassured him, patting his hand. “I promise, Moonfire.” He hauled his fiancé to his feet. “Come on, then. The mob awaits. Nice boots,” he said to Harry. “Did they cost much?”

“As a matter of fact,” Harry said, looking down. “They did.”

“Brilliant.” He pecked him wetly on the cheek. “Off you go, then, and don’t be a stranger. You may be all grown up now, but that doesn’t mean your old dads don’t worry, you know? Race you to the Tower, Moony!”

“Wha... PADFOOT, YOU BIG CHEAT!” That last broke into an indignant doggy whuffle as he transformed quick as lightning into McWolf, and charged after Padfoot’s saucily wagging tail, already out the door and half down the hall. Neville chuckled, and stretched again.

“Damn,” he said. “Gravity. Gravity, and gravitas, and bloody hell, but it’s good to be properly tall again.”

Harry grinned at him. “Yeah,” he said. “I hear you there, mate. Alright, then.” He dug in the inside of his robes and hauled out a perfectly flat, pocket-handkerchief-sized satchel, bringing it up to full and considerable size... He pulled out the invisibility cloak and an extra set of wands, fitting them neatly into the built-in holsters on the boots before stripping off the robes themselves and folding them into the satchel. Underneath, he wore an extremely tight and supple two-piece bodysuit of sorts: mottled thin leather, high-collared enough to cover his throat, and that came all the way to his wrists and ankles.

“Merlin’s balls, man,” Neville said, blinking. “Is that chimaera hide?”

“It is,” Harry said. “Your Gran insisted on buying it for me. Well, bribing me with it, really.”

“To do what?”

“She suggested that I have a go for my International Grandmastery,” he said. “At the Global Invitationals in Dublin in January. I told her it wouldn’t be fair, since I have a hundred twenty years of new spells to work with, and she said that that would only make it interesting for a change. Also,
she has a bet on with her Majesty that, as a nominal American, I won’t be able to beat out the British representatives, and pointed out that if I get it, the money she’ll win there will pay for the suit anyway, so she won’t actually be out of pocket.”

“You think you can get ready in two months? Don’t take this the wrong way, mate, but how long has it been since you’ve fought on that level?”

“You’d be surprised how an hour or two a day as a hummingbird keeps you in shape there,” Harry said. “And I’ve been back and active along those lines for two years now. I’ll be fine.” He tucked the satchel into a neat, near-invisible pocket. “Alright then. I’m off.”

“Potter!” Snape snapped. “Do you not have any curiosity at all on what your mother said, or did, to the Dursleys?”

“Nope,” Harry said. “Because I already know.”

“You do, do you.”

“I do. Sirius mentioned that she planned to stop by, so I did too, first thing after the meeting this morning.”

“And why would you do that?”

“In case I had to clean up your mess again,” he said coolly. “After that fiasco with Moody that’s buggered things up from here to Hell and back. Only Tom knows that Mum’s alive now, yeah, but he’s not going to advertise the fact, out of sheer embarrassment, if nothing else... But do you really think that after all the publicity and mess that’s going to hit after the public report of my adoption, that there won’t be reporters lurking in the hydrangeas on Privet Drive looking for one last scoop from the unrepentant, horrid Muggles who made their hero’s life a living hell? Be a bit complicated, wouldn’t it, if in her chronic and loudly repentant state, Auntie dearest accidentally let it slip to the public in general that Lily Evans Potter never actually died? And that you, of all people, knew?” He rolled his neck. It cracked loudly in the sudden, appalled silence. Snape actually looked a bit sick.

“No worries,” Harry reassured him. “I obliviated them both, quite thoroughly. They have absolutely no memory of either of you ever showing up on their doorstep.”

“Rendering your mother’s gesture of revenge on your behalf effectively impotent,” Snape said. “Petty, even for you, Potter.”

“I don’t need her to take revenge on my behalf,” he said. “I don’t want her to take revenge on my behalf, Snape, especially along those lines. And even if I did... She, and you, got it all wrong. You wanted her to be sorry. You wanted her to regret what she did to me. You expected her to regret it, because you’ve spent your own lives regretting the wrongs you caused others, see? And you project. But I lived with Petunia Evans Dursley for how many years, as the target of her wrongdoing, and I can tell you this. The only thing she really regretted about me... The regret that you forced on her... was her regret that she got caught out, and called on it. Twice.”

Snape said nothing. Harry sighed.

“I don’t know about death,” he said. “But that reciprocated, active love that you bypassed time and eternity for doesn’t seem to be doing much for your former sense of subtlety, Professor. I know you just want to make her happy... To prove to her that you can be the man that you think she always wanted... But you’ve already proven that. Just... give over the angst there, and try to recognize that, for you at least, and insofar as she’s concerned... You don’t have to earn heaven? This is it. Not
supposed to be it, but is.”

“Has it occurred to you,” Snape said acidly, “in your pontificating... That once we resolve the reasons we came here... That it will end again? There is only so much time we have to work with, Potter, your mother and I, and many, many things on our mutual to-do list.”

“Then why in hell waste that time on people like the Dursleys?” Harry asked, genuinely bemused. “You meant nothing to them, Snape. Nothing. Why make them the gift of somethingness in return? It’s just not worth it.”

“Did you do anything to them, Harry?” Neville asked softly. “Before you left?”

“No. Well, yes. I removed the incontinence spell on Vernon.”

“What? Why?”

There was a silence.

“Because it was mean,” Harry said at last. “It wasn’t on. It was something he would have done to me, if he could have. And once I realized that... I just couldn’t be buggered. Because when it comes right down to it... I have that chance now, don’t I. The chance not to be me. Or maybe... The chance to be more than me, for a little while, anyway. And if I really do want a blank slate... There are some things, like that, that just feel better off erased.”

He left the room quietly, throwing the cloak over himself as he went. After a moment, Snape swept out without a backwards glance. Neville frowned after him.

He has been bloody careless, he thought. That’s not like him at all. Love aside... Caution has always bloody defined him.

He tugged his lip and popped his ears as he thought carefully on the specifics of the relevant conversations, frowning even more deeply.

That really is an awful lot of unnecessary information on the ritual that you just handed over to Moody there, Severus, he thought. And it was you who handed it over, wasn’t it? You two didn’t trust each other one bit back home, as I recall. Why would you suddenly decide it was safe to reveal all to him just because he’s an Auror – especially when you’d seen him pointing Voldemort’s wand at you not twelve hours earlier?

He tapped his fingers on the edge of the desk.

I need to talk to you, Gran, he thought. Because some things just aren’t written in the history books, are they. Maybe... Maybe it’s not a phoenix we need here... But a vulture, after all...

Chapter End Notes

Hey all!

There are four more chapters of this particular book. The sequel that follows is entitled "The Strange Familiar", and will pick up where this one leaves off. Please don’t expect that everything will be resolved by Chapter 35, though - we’re not even close! :)
Note: Harry's new Animagus form will remain a mystery for awhile yet. Feel free to make wild and inaccurate guesses! If anyone actually DOES figure it out before the big reveal (and please send me your guesses in a private e-mail, rather than as an online comment), the first to succeed will win a lovely prize of a single-chaptered side-episode of their choice from BWKE.

Fair warning, Book One has been fairly mellow. Lots of romance, no nitty-gritty. Book two will have lemons. And lemonade. Spiked lemonade. Relevant chapters will present warnings at the top. If you choose to continue reading, welp. You will have forfeited your right to bitch at me in the comments.

xoxo Blue Maple
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was famous for many things, not the least of which was its food, and on the morning of Sunday, November 2nd, 1991, the house-elves reached heights there that they had never managed in all of the school’s thousand-year history. The sight that greeted the castle’s residents as they stumbled, bleary-eyed and yawning, to the Great Hall for their breakfasts, stopped each and every one of them, from the tiniest first year to the most jaded of the seventh years, in their gobsmacked tracks.

“What the buggery fuck is all this?” Marcus Flint of Slytherin House demanded, bemused, as he surveyed the stacks of delectable buttered welsh cakes, the racks of crisped toast, the delicate trays of eggs of all variety, the perfectly sizzling trays of even more perfectly cooked steak, bacon, ham and bangers, the tureens of milky oats and the bowls of ripe, glistening fruit of every possible variety... Flaky buttermilk biscuits abounded; bowls of browned hash potatoes promised to melt on the palate, and grilled tomatoes and mushrooms, baked beans and black pudding beckoned enticingly. Jams, jellies and spreads of every variety were crowding the edges of the tables, along with vast pitchers of milk and juice and steaming pots of finest coffee and tea... Terence Higgs, likewise of Slytherin House, said nothing, just stuffed in an entire buttered-and-salted hard-boiled egg in one go as he turned the page of the Morning Prophet and pointed a finger at another newspaper on the bench beside him. Flint picked it up even as he slung a beefy leg over, grabbing a fork and stabbing at dishes at random. Said fork fell among a stacked pile of tiny rolled crepes stuffed with raspberries, bananas, blanched almonds and best warmed Honeyduke’s chocolate, all drizzled with yet more chocolate and powdered sugar.

“What the...” Flint’s eyes widened as he read the double headline on the front page. On any other occasion, the impeccable quality of the crepes would have been to blame for the stunned look now gracing his features... Not so today.

REMUS JOHN LUPIN, WORLD’S FIRST EX-WEREWOLF, MAKES MAGICAL AND MEDICAL WORLD HISTORY WITH A DEMONSTRATED AND CONCLUSIVE CURE FOR LYCANTHROPY

HEROIC HOGWARTS PROFESSOR TAKES DOWN GREAT BRITAIN’S LARGEST FERAL WEREWOLF PACK WITH THE HELP OF THE LATE GREAT FLEAMONT POTTER’S LAST AND LONG-LOST LEGACY, ‘FUR-B-GONE’

“Sweet fookin’ Jaysus and all the saints of Heaven,” Seamus Finnegan was saying in reverent awe from Gryffindor Table as he turned pages. “Is this for fookin’ real?” No one responded... The Great Hall was absolutely packed, but there was none of the standard ongoing laughter or chatter, only the sounds of rapturous chewing and raptly turned pages.

“He’s released it?” Penelope Clearwater said suddenly and loudly from Ravenclaw Table. “The recipe? Just like that?” She scanned, eyes whirring in her head as half a dozen students in blue and bronze leaned in, reading over her shoulder. “This can’t be right! This can’t be real! A first year could make this!”
“It’s not as easy as all that,” a seventh year pointed out. “I mean, sure it looks simple, but there’s the formula for Mr. Smiley’s Enviro-Cleaning Fluid in and of itself to be going on with, isn’t there? If you have a ready bottle on the go or can get access to one from the shops, that’s all well and good, but I reckon if you were to break it down and brew it from scratch, it would be a lot more complicated.”

“But why would he release it?” Jacia King said from Slytherin. It was practically a betrayed wail. “It makes absolutely no sense! It says here that Potter invented the cure, but Professor Lupin still holds the patent! Releasing the formula and the brewing instructions to the public domain, just like that... He’ll totally lose all the royalties and residuals he might have made from it!”

“He released it because that is what Fleamont Potter would have wanted,” a silky smooth voice said from behind her. She jumped. Severus Snape stood there, paper in hand. “You are absolutely correct, Miss King. Professor Lupin has indeed foregone a rather unique and unmatched opportunity for personal gain... But one, in the end, that he recognizes that he has no real right to. He did not invent the formula, after all, as you said - Master Potioneer Potter left him the recipe, and rights to the patent, in a letter that was only recently discovered in his family vault - but that being said, I am fairly sure that the man only passed on the rights because he was close to death when he made his breakthrough, and ascertained that that patent must, perforce, be held in trust by another. Master Potter doubtless realized that as a victim of the curse himself, Professor Lupin would be the best man to ensure that no one – no one – will ever be held hostage to his particular kind of misfortune again because of a simple lack of money or opportunity. A very Gryffindorish gesture, but in this instance, the only properly moral one to be made.”

“And it works?” A third year from the Hufflepuff table said. She sounded almost on the verge of tears. “It really, really works?”

“It works,” Snape assured her. “It works perfectly, Miss Carpenter. I have just come from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, where Amelia Bones herself personally confirmed to me that she witnessed all fifty seven of the dosed and incarcerated werewolves, including Fenrir Greyback himself, fail to turn at this month’s risen full moon. Reports are back from the initial blood work done by a contingent from St. Mungo’s yesterday, and the results are absolutely conclusive. Every single one of the cursed individuals is now one hundred percent and quite irrevocably human again.” He raised his hand. “And they are not only cured... But inoculated against further infection. “

Dead silence met his pronouncement.

“In... What?” Gregory Goyle said uncertainly.

“It’s a Muggle word, Greg,” Tracey Davis, a first year Slytherin half-blood said softly. “It means they can’t be infected again. Ever. Even if they were bitten by a hundred other werewolves, on a hundred full moons in a row... They wouldn’t turn.”

“Ten points to Slytherin, Miss Davis,” Severus Snape said. “And another twenty five for having the courage to pass on the benefits of your knowledge to a fellow student, no matter what some might think of as the questionable origin of that knowledge.” He actually smiled a little at her. She blinked up at him, and smiled back uncertainly before returning to her food.

It was strange, Harry thought, as he sat at the end of Gryffindor Table disguised as young Neville and ate his own breakfast... Despite his own foreknowledge of how the world could be expected to react – again – to the announcement of a cure, he’d somehow and yet expected far more noise. More celebrating. More shouts, more skepticism.... Just more. Instead, as there had been all those long years in the future, in another world where the name of the hero on the paper had been, not Fleamont Potter or Remus Lupin, but Lorcan Lovegood-Scamander... There was none of that. The Great Hall
was almost eerily quiet as the students ate, read the paper again and again, murmured to each other, ate more, and read again.

“I don’t understand,” Hermione said, bewildered, as she looked around. “A cure for lycanthropy... That’s huge! Why isn’t everybody happier?”

Beside her, Ron poked at his potatoes. Beside him, George lowered his paper and regarded the girl with unaccustomed seriousness.

“I reckon you don’t understand, Hermione,” he said. “That you can’t, really. Because you’re a Muggleborn. There’s nothing wrong with that,” he hastened to explain at her thunderously disapproving look. “It’s just lack of proper context again. Lycanthropy... There hasn’t been a time in wizarding history – human history, really – where it hasn’t been seen as, and cultivated as, one of every child’s greatest, darkest fears. In the Muggle world, see, it’s just a story. A scary story. If you’re a witch or a wizard though...”

“It’s end story, see?” Fred said. “And it’s real. Bitten, cursed, turned, dead. To become the monster everyone fears. The monster who makes other monsters. A monster with no mind, only the instinct to maim and kill. No reasoning, no escaping, no hope...” He struggled. “A cure... A real cure... It’s too much to process straight up. It’s too much to believe, straight up. No matter what or who says it. It’s just... too big, yeah?”

“But Professor Snape said it was real!” Hermione protested. “And he’s one of the best Potions Masters ever! Everybody knows he wouldn’t make a statement like that if he wasn’t sure, don’t they? Doesn’t that make it real?”

“You don’t understand,” George said flatly. “You can’t. I’m sorry, Hermione. Come on, Fred.” He rose to his feet. “I feel like a walk by the lake, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Fred said. “I reckon I do.”

Harry watched them go, side by side, two utterly sober-faced, mirthless thirteen-year-olds walking so closely that their robes folded around the joined knot of the hands that clutched at each other, hiding them from view of anyone who wasn’t directly looking. After a moment, Hermione bundled up her paper and retrieved her bag, taking a peach and a napkinful of stuffed crepes to nibble at on her way back to the Tower. Just as she was heading out, she turned back.

“Harry,” she said determinedly.

“I’m really glad you’re going to be seeing a Mind Healer,” she said. “Only I was really worried, you see, when you disappeared like that on Hallowe’en night. I knew why you did. I told everybody you probably just wanted to be alone. Well.” She glanced sideways. “I did, after Ron told me. He said he’d have wanted to be alone, after all that. After the arrest, and the adoption, and ... and getting away from those nasty horrid Dursleys, officially and all. Because he’d have wanted a good blub, and boys don’t blub in front of anybody. You know you can talk to me though, right? If you want? Because I know I’m a great bossy know–it-all with my nose in everybody’s business... But with you, right now, I promise – I swear – it’s only because I care about you.”

It was achingly sincere. Harry-as-Neville blinked. Hard.

“Promise me something, Hermione?” Neville said, from behind Harry’s face.

“Anything,” she said immediately.
“That we’ll always be friends,” he said. “All of our lives, no matter what?”

She stared at him, and blushed crimson, and ran off hurriedly. Ron rolled his eyes at him tolerantly as he refilled his plate at random yet again.

“Nice one, mate,” he said, and looked around. “Where is Professor Lupin anyway?”

“At the Ministry, probably,” Harry-as-Neville said. “Getting fitted for his Order of Merlin, First Class. And his International Cross of Service, and whatever else they can find to throw at him.”

“His... WHAT?” Ron squeaked.

“International Cross of Service,” Percy said, appearing and seating himself beside him. “An honour bestowed by the International Confederation of Wizards on appropriately deserving individuals who have performed deeds that have benefitted, or have the potential to benefit the entire global Muggle and Magical communities.” He perused the plates before him, and helped himself to a slice of toast, a single poached egg, two rashers of bacon, and, after due consideration, a single, obviously celebratory sausage. “I was actually under the impression that it was a myth, till I passed Professor Babbling in the hall by the library and heard her mentioning the possibility to Professor Grubblyplank. Then I stopped by the library and looked it up.” He ate a bite of toast, considered his options, and reached for the marmite. Ron gagged rudely. “It’s only been given out three times since it was established, way back when the International Confederation of Wizards was established and the first Supreme Mugwump gave it to himself for coming up with the idea of said Confederation in the first place.”

“Does it come with any money?” Dean asked, interested, leaning over to listen.

“As a matter of fact, it does. Quite a lot, I believe. Ten million galleons or something to that effect?”

Harry could have corrected him – it was actually ten million galleons from each participating and voting country in the Federation; thirty seven in total (an act of continued generosity that was only ratified by each new generation of politicians because of the fact that it was unlikely ever to be granted in their lifetimes) – but he kept that bit to himself.

“Er,” Dean said. “Well. That’s a bit of alright, isn’t it? It’ll make up for him giving away any profits he might have made on holding the patent, anyway.”

“How do you suppose they’ll split it?” Katie Bell wondered. “I mean, Professor Lupin will get some of it, there’s no doubt, but it was Harry’s grandfather who actually invented the formula. The whole formula, considering he came up with Mr. Smiley’s too, so there won’t be any cross-claims there from other sources. They’ll probably want to give at least half to his heirs, posthumously.”

They all looked at Harry, or rather Neville-as-Harry, expectantly.

“How should I know?” he said. “I don’t know how any of this works any more than the rest of you. Less, I was raised with Muggles, remember?” He was saved by further questions by the approach of Professor McGonagall. She looked a bit... Odd. Odd, and not a bit wild about the eyes, in a quiet, dignified sort of way. Harry had the distinct impression that that look had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with any public news.

“Mr. Potter,” she said. “Mr. Longbottom. I would appreciate it if you would join me in the Head’s office. Your grandmother is awaiting us, Mr. Longbottom, and would like a word with you both.”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry said, from behind Neville’s face. “You done there, mate?”
“No,” Neville –as-Harry said sadly. “But I’m scared of your Gran now, so... Yes, I think so.”

They rose to their feet, and gathered up their things, following her out. As they passed through the doors, they were halted briefly by a most poignant sight... Emily Carpenter, the third year Hufflepuff who’d broken into near-tears while asking Snape if he was sure if the cure was real, was seated on the second step, her face in her hands. Remus himself was sitting beside her as she wept... He wore his best robes, but his hair was tousled as if he’d just come in from outdoors, and there was still a hint of snow on the shoulders. He was holding her close, almost rocking her as she cried quite inconsolably in his arms. Sirius, as Padfoot, was snuggled at her feet, nosing at her knees gently. Harry tried desperately to remember the particular girl and her history, but...

“Miss Carpenter.” McGonagall’s voice was stunningly warm and stunningly smiling as she came over, crouching before the girl and wiping her face with the edge of her tartan shawl. “There now. All’s well now, isn’t it? Have you heard from your mother yet?”

“Y-yes.” She hiccuped, and held up a letter, clutched in her fist. “J-just now. The owl just left. She s-said she saw the p—paper this morning, two hours ago, right wh-when it came out, and Da went right out to the sh-shop and b-bought everything they needed, and b-brewed it up right in the k-kitchen. R-right there, in our k-kitchen, in fif-fifteen minutes and six seconds, and... And she drank it all on the spot. A-and they went to St, Mungo’s right after, to get her blood ch-checked, because the article said that you can tell right away, that it’s instant, a-and... they didn’t even make her wait, not one second, before th-they checked her. And she wrote me back, right there from the office when the results came in; the healer lent her her own p-personal owl, and...” She held out her hand. “Look!”

Minerva McGonagall took the paper and opened it.

“Certified cured,” she said in her thick brogue. “Contingent on monthly tests for one year. Ah, Miss Carpenter. This is a great day, isn’t it?” She handed the paper back, and stroked the curly head. “Professor Black, why don’t you take Miss Carpenter here to your office, and Floo her home for the day? I’m quite sure that her family would like to be together just now.”

“Will you come too, Professor Lupin?” Emily begged. “Please? Mam will want to say thank you in person so badly; I know she will!”

“I’m afraid I can’t, Miss Carpenter,” Remus said gently. “Not today, anyway. Only I have rather a lot booked into my schedule quite suddenly, you see, and I just popped back for a few moments to pick up a thing or two from my quarters. You’ll tell your mam, though, to send me a note, and we’ll all work out a time to have tea together once everything is settled a bit?”

She wiped her nose on her sleeve.

‘M’sorry,” she said. “It’s just... I don’t suppose you know if...”

“If...” he prompted.

“It was Greyback’s beta,” she said in a rush. “Who got her, three years ago now. Paul Wurtenburg. He’ll go to Azkaban for it, right? Even if he is cured? I mean... He was there, right? In Edinburgh?”

“He was,” Remus said gravely. “And he was cured... But that being said, Miss Carpenter... I doubt very much that he’ll spend an hour in Azkaban for anything he did.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock and horror. He leaned in and kissed her forehead.

“Only he’s dead, you see?” he said. “Very, very, very dead. In fact,” he said in most confidential tones. “I may have done him myself, when he tried to bite me again. Stuck my wand right through
his eye, I did.” He gestured, and made a most revolting schlurping sound. “Think your mam might like a pensieved memory of it, to go with her letter there?”

Professor Lupin,” Professor McGonagall said in exasperation. “Really!”

“Yes, Miss Carpenter?”

“I know you’re probably going to get a ton of offers for this now,” she said with absolute sincerity. “But just so you know, I’m going on record first. If you and Professor Black ever want a baby... Once I’m past seventeen, of course... Owl me.”

“MISS CARPENTER!”

Sirius howled, rolling over and over and pawing at the air in mirth. Remus just laughed.

“We will keep it in mind,” he said, and offered her one last squeeze. “Off you go now. For God’s sake, Padfoot, get a grip. You look ridiculous, and you’re wearing your St. Roux robes under all that fur besides. You’ll be all over dirt and snow from everyone’s shoes when you transform back if you keep on with it.”

“Hufflepuffs,” Minerva McGonagall muttered as she hustled the sniggering boys down the hall and up the stairs. “Honestly, the things that come out of their mouths! Nepeta Cataria,” she said to the gargoyle as they approached. “And don’t try telling me again that it’s bad for my teeth. It’s a plant, not a candy.”

“Tomato, tomahto... It’s all relative, pussycat,” the gargoyle said dourly. She smacked its head sharply. It grumbled, but slid aside. Once inside the rising staircase...

“Drop the glamours,” she ordered. “Just the thought of the layers of illusions you’re working with now is giving me a headache.”

Neville and Harry glanced at each other, and obeyed. She blinked at them, and shook her head as if to clear it. It did indeed, look rather painful.

“Erhm,” Harry ventured. “Are you alright, Professor? Headache aside? Only, it’s a lot to absorb in one go, I know.”

“That depends,” she said. “Did you get the diary from Malfoy Manor?”

“No, ma’am,” he said. “I just scouted around a bit to make sure things really were as I remembered them. It’s a bit of a one-shot-only mission, and I prefer not to make avoidable mistakes based on assumptions.”

“And?”

“And... What?”

“Are they as you remember them?”

“For the most part,” he said. “I had to set up a couple of runic patterns of my own devising that will loosen the weaves emanating from the major nexus point positioned under the drawing room. They’ll take a couple of days to degrade, but once done, I’ll be able to slip in without worrying.”

“Back-up?”
“No need,” he said. “It’s not anything I haven’t dealt with a thousand times before, and things have evolved considerably along those lines in the last hundred twenty five years or so besides.”

She sighed at that.

“A hundred twenty five years,” she murmured, and, shaking herself, waved them in. They followed. The office was empty.

“I thought you said Gran was waiting?” Neville asked.

“She is,” she said. “At my family home near Caithness. We spent the night there discussing the situation after our meeting with you and Professor Snape yesterday evening.” She beckoned them to the fireplace, retrieving the floo powder. Just as she was about to step through, Harry shifted.

“I don’t suppose,” he ventured. “That he. Um. Brought anyone with him?”

Minerva McGonagall turned to look him over.

“Briefly,” she said. “Very briefly.”

Harry winced.

“You didn’t hex her, did you?” he said, with trepidation.

“No,” she said. “I am a grown woman, Mr. Potter, and more to the point... A lady. I do not hex individuals at random, however annoying they may be, simply because I can.”

“Did she hex you?”

There was a pause.

“Mr. Potter,” she said again. “Far be it from me to speak ill of the dead... Or the temporarily resurrected for that matter... And I do not wish for a single moment to downplay the significance of her contributions to history or her efforts to save you that night... “

He sighed. “She did hex you,” he said. “Bugger.”

“She is a great woman,” Minerva McGonagall said primly. “And a great witch. Some might even define her as having a great heart, and there is certainly and obviously no lack of courage there. There is one thing more, though, Mr. Potter – and at a hundred thirty-eight, no matter your appearance, you are old enough to recognize the truth of the matter, and to come to terms with it... One would be hard-pressed indeed to find any world, in any dimension, where any one of her acquaintances could accurately define your mother as a lady. “

“She didn’t hurt you, did she?”

“Of course not. She would have had to hit me first, and I may be fifty-six, but my Animagus form is a cat.”

“You do realize, don’t you, that she isn’t.. I mean, she isn’t the Lily you knew?”

Minerva McGonagall’s lip lifted: very, very slightly.

“I understand that she’s been back for two years,” she said. “And never bothered to check in on you in what she knew to be an actively abusive situation.”
“I did tell her to stay away.”

“I may tell the sun to come out when the rain and my arthritis have been particularly persistent, Mr. Potter, but that does not mean that it must perforce obey me. And yes, she did tell me that she went back to the Dursleys’ yesterday morning, and of the punishment she inflicted. I am afraid that it did not overly impress me.”

“No?”

“Tell me something,” Minerva McGonagall said. “What would you think of someone who defines appropriate punishment for an offense committed against someone other than themselves—somebody they purportedly love beyond measure—as the criminal’s perpetual musing on the fact that they must henceforth live without the individual dispensing the sentence?”

It took a moment for Harry to sort that out. Neville said nothing.

“A life worth living,” McGonagall said. “No matter the universe – is not defined by the presence or absence of one Lily Evans Potter, Potter, no matter what she or her husband or lover of the moment might think to the contrary. She has done great things, yes – but the mere accomplishment of great things does not make a great, or irreplaceable, person.” Her eyes flicked over him – the light brown hair, the light brown eyes, the scarred cheek on the pleasant and unremarkable face. “I think you have come to understand this, over the course of your life, better than you ever wanted to. I think... When it comes down to it... It is why you informed the Room of Requirement that you could not complete the tasks you came to accomplish as the man you were in your former home – the man that everyone expected, by very definition, to be the greatest of them all. It says a good deal about you that you never – that you were never inclined - to succumb to that kind of projected and expected narcissism, did you know that? A very good deal indeed. More, I daresay, than could ever be said for either of your parents.”

She tossed a handful of floo powder in the fire.

“Auldshire Manse, Caithness,” she said clearly, and stepped through. Neville and Harry looked at each other. Neville squeezed his shoulder.

“She may or may not have a point, mate,” he said. “But fifty has a way of forgetting what twenty was like, I reckon, where you’re still at that age where everything does revolve around you. And now... Your mum... She loves you. But she’s still twenty, you know? Wherever she was... After... No matter how many years passed on this side, while we grew old, and up... I don’t think they really stuck to her. That they could. From her point of view... She is where she left off. That’s got to be hard.”

“I don’t want to be mad at her,” Harry said miserably. “I really don’t. But it’s been almost a hundred thirty years, Nev, and yeah, I lived because of her... But if I’m honest... as much as I wanted her back when I was a kid... After a point... It just didn’t matter anymore. I regretted the fact that she died, but I didn’t miss her, because I didn’t ever know her.” He hunched his shoulders. “I thought that was what she would have wanted, you know? For me to get on with things. To be happy.”

“Yeah,” Neville Longbottom said sadly. “I reckon I do know, at that. My mum would have wanted the same thing, they always told me... And yet here we are.”

“It is not,” Harry said firmly. “The same thing. It is not the same thing at all.”

“No?”
“No.” He took a handful of floo powder. “You know – you’ve always known – that even if this does work, by some miracle... That this isn’t for you. It’s for them, for the Alice and Frank who live here, and for Little Neville. For your Gran, here. So she’ll get her son and daughter-in-law back. So that one world, at least... will be as right as we could never make it at home, no matter how happy our ever-after did turn out there, before we wave it all off and bounce back to meet our train.”

He flexed his wrist to throw the powder – and looked down, startled, as Neville caught his wrist.

“Uh? What is it?”

“Harry,” Neville said. “Harry...”

“What?”

“It’s not going to be like that,” he said. “It can’t be, now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Harry, you’ve changed. Your magical core has changed. We bound ourselves to the ritual through our magical cores; the parameters of the ritual were defined by them. And the door opened, and we came here, and our counterparts went there... and even though it’s jammed now, so that the defined souls can bounce back, either way, to where they began, or ended or whatever...”

Harry Potter’s light brown eyes grew huge and wide.

“No,” he whispered. “You’re saying...”

“The Room gave you what you asked for,” Neville said. “Exactly what you asked for. An identity... A true identity, a life – a potential lifetime – defined by everything but that which you were. I’ll be going back. Everybody who crossed over in either direction who still fits those original parameters, the pre-set parameters, will be going back. But you...”

The man who had been Harry Potter staggered. Literally staggered.

“I won’t fit,” he whispered. “I won’t... Fit?”

“No,” Neville said. “I’m so sorry, mate. I thought you understood when your Animagus form changed. Because it wouldn’t have changed, if you were the same person. “

“I’m not going back,” he repeated. “I can’t go back. No matter what happens... I’m... Here? For good?”

Neville took his elbow firmly, lips tightening.

“Come on,” he said, and scooped out a huge handful of floo powder. “We’re going to see Gran now. I reckon if anyone can help you process the implications here, she can. Auldshire Manse, Caithness!” he called as he hauled them both onto the grate.

The light flashed brightly, and they disappeared.
“There now, child.” Dame Lady Augusta Longbottom set a large mug of strong tea laced with multiple dollops of honey and thick cream on the little table beside Harry's elbow. “You have had a shock, and no mistake. Do take your time with it; no one here is in any kind of position to hasten you along, I assure you.”

“No ma’am. Yes ma’am. I mean...”

He fumbled. Augusta waved him off, patting his cheek before re-seating herself in her selected chair... Confused, but unutterably grateful for her obvious understanding, Harry settled for a small smile in response, and for several large gulps of his tea. His eyes fairly crossed with the sweetness of it. It all made perfect sense now, he thought... If his dimension’s version of Augusta Longbottom had raised Neville to drink tea with this sheer quantity of honey in it, there was absolutely no way that his Animagus form could have been anything but a bear.

“Have a biscuit, Potter,” McGonagall offered, coming in from the kitchen with a laden plate. Harry helped himself to a ginger newt and nibbled at the edges automatically as he finally managed a proper and focused look-about. It was all distinctly and surprisingly different from what he’d remembered. He’d only been in Minerva McGonagall’s family home two or three times in his life before she died, on very particular events such as her hundredth birthday, and the decor, though comfortable enough, had been a definite reflection of the two centuries’ of strict and dour Presbyterian ministers that had employed it as their residences through the local Muggle parish. Said parish had sold it to the McGonagall children when their Muggle father’s successor put in a bid to upgrade to another location, Harry’s McGonagall had told him, but as neither she nor her brothers had ever actually lived there full time, preferring to save the location as a meeting point where they and their families could all gather without imposing on any one of them in particular, they had never put much effort into redecorating.

This version of Auldshire Manse was as tall, imposing, and immaculately tidy as the other had been, but it was obviously, not just a house, but a home. Cosy and snug as its mistress’ unmatched gift for Transfiguration and overzealous eye for plaid-and-derivatives could make it, shelves of books and crackling fireplaces abounded, a majestic set of bagpipes hung from the sitting room wall, and the fragrance of live, dried and hanging herbs (Harry had spotted, on the sills one or two specimens of nepeta cataria growing rambunctiously in pots) mixed rather delightfully with the smell of burning apple-wood throughout. The most immediate and astonishing difference, though, was the sight that had met the two men's eyes as they had stumbled out of the kitchen floo. The stunningly beautiful oak table, half-transfigured and shaped beautifully from the enormous stump of a tree, had declared in bold and no uncertain terms and by its very presence, that A Very Unapologetic Witch lived here.

There were also several cats: purely Muggle cats in various stages of growth, sleeping on various perches and in randomly scattered baskets around the great room of the residence. Harry, upon reflection, as a particularly huge and brilliantly spotted specimen sized him up from atop the back of McGonagall’s preferred high-backed armchair, decided that it was best not to comment there.
“Do you live here when you’re off-hours?” he ventured instead.

“I do.” She offered Augusta the biscuit plate. “Now that I don’t have responsibility for the residents of Gryffindor Tower. I had a cottage in Hogsmeade that I lived in with my husband Elphinstone before he died, but I sold it shortly after he passed and brought everything back here.”

Again, Harry was surprised. He hadn’t even known that his McGonagall had been married till after the birth of his first son. He supposed that she wouldn’t have considered it appropriate to confide such matters to him when he was a student, but somehow, he knew, there was more to it. He’d noticed, in the last two months, several distinctions to be made between the two Transfigurations Mistresses, the primary one of which was (as demonstrated regularly through her ongoing, quite extraordinarily subtle and obviously self-amusing tendency toward double-entendre) this version’s distinctly more active sense of humour.

Subtle if you weren’t a hundred thirty-eight and hadn’t spent six years rooming with Seamus Finnegan and Neville Longbottom, anyway, followed by over a hundred twenty as part of the Weasley family.

“Ah. It’s very nice,” he said in his best diplomatic tones. Neville grinned at him sideways in sympathetic understanding from the tea trolley as he prepared himself a mug as ungracious as that which Augusta had handed Harry. The huge, squashy sofa didn’t exactly creak as he settled back beside him in his fully grown-and-weighted six foot three inches and sixteen stone of comfortably orange-jumpered-and-corduroy-trousered glory, but it definitely squeaked in surprise. Harry could almost feel himself relaxing as the particular scent that had always been The Headmaster’s patted him on the head, and as said Headmaster stretched out his long legs contentedly, draped one extremely solid arm along the back of the sofa, and popped his ears and his feet. Augusta coughed slightly into her own tea. A small, wiry kitten, perhaps three months old, promptly vaulted off the bookshelf and came to sniff and nuzzle a bit before settling in to groom the left of said ears enthusiastically. It was either an adorably alarming or alarmingly adorable sight, depending on one’s interpretation of McGonagall’s expression.

“Drink up,” was all Neville said to him. “Ta, Minerva.” He too, took an offered ginger newt, and dunked it in his mug.

“Minerva?” Harry said, and waited to the sky to fall.

“I’m a grown man, mate. No more eleven than she is. And she’s not my professor anymore, anymore than she is yours. After we met up last night and I explained everything to her and Gran – and showed her a few memories to prove myself, or rather us – she took the Unbreakable Vow and sealed the deal with the personal invitation to call her by her Christian name.”

“To which in turn,” McGonagall said as she settled herself, her eyes yet fixed in fascination on the kitten, and the ear it was grooming. “He invited me to call him by the name that we established will cause the least confusion in the future. Once you have had time to process those implications Augusta just mentioned, Mr. Potter, we two may discuss the same particulars.”

“I’m not ready for that yet,” Harry said immediately. “All things considered. Potter’s fine.” He slugged back more tea. “Though Neil’s alright, if that’s what you want, mate. It’s just Neville without the ‘v’ and the ‘le’ at the end anyway. And the American accent, of course.” He paused. “That come from the Room too?”

“You listened to yourself on a playback charm lately?” Neville said, amused. Harry said nothing, just went back to nibbling at his biscuit.
“These are really nice,” he said to McGonagall, as he had of her house.

“Thank you,” she said, and thrust the plate at him again, anxiously, as she had then. He shook his head, the sudden sense of déjà vu rather overwhelming.

“No thanks,” he said.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she snapped. He took another.

“At least we know Dolores Umbridge will be happy about the Fur-B-Gone, yeah?” he muttered to his sofa-mate. “Wherever the hell she is.”

“Who?” McGonagall asked.

“Dolores Umbridge. Works at the Ministry as Senior Undersecretary to Fudge, or will, in...” He counted back. “Four years or so? Has a real thing against half-bloods and half-breeds, taught DADA the year before the Ministry fell in our world, and specialized in literally torturing her students with Dark devices that she’d invented herself, during detentions under the guise of writing lines.” He examined his biscuit. “Last time you offered me one of these was when I publicly called her out as a toady and an idiot when she publicly called me a liar for claiming that I’d witnessed that Voldemort was back.”

Augusta raised an eyebrow.

“To be fair, Gran,” Neville intervened. “It was our OWL year, and she’d just told us that the entire curriculum would be based on a review of basic theoretical defense. No wand work at all, because when would we, as children, ever be called on to defend ourselves against purely imaginary Dark Lords and his followers? Really, she just wanted to make sure that Dumbledore’s obvious move to take over the Ministry via his personally trained underaged army would never get off the ground.”

“How were you intended to pass your OWL without using your wand?” McGonagall asked.

“That’s what Hermione asked. Umbridge said that there was no reason that if we studied the theoreticals well enough, that we could not pass all the practical when called upon to do so in the controlled and mandated environment.” He dunked his biscuit. “I suppose if it had come down to it, she might have allowed us to call in an Auror apiece to take the exams for us. Just like we were, she said, supposed to call them in to defend us if ever faced with an immediate green ray heading straight at our heads.”

“Mm. You’ll take a tin with you when you go, then, Potter,” Professor McGonagall said briskly. “May we ask how did you manage to pass the practical?”

“That’s what Hermione asked. Umbridge said that there was no reason that if we studied the theoreticals well enough, that we could not pass the practical when called upon to do so in the controlled and mandated environment.” He dunked his biscuit. “I suppose if it had come down to it, she might have allowed us to call in an Auror apiece to take the exams for us. Just like we were, she said, supposed to call them in to defend us if ever faced with an immediate green ray heading straight at our heads.”

“Underground Defense club,” Neville obliged. “Turned out none of the students trusted the word of a woman like that with our academic, never mind personal futures, specially after it got out that she’d likely been the one to order two Dementors to Privet Drive that summer in an attempt to assassinate Harry. Nearly got him too – they would have, if Remus hadn’t taught him the Patronus charm in third year – and then she nearly got him again when she arranged a full gathering of the Wizengamot over the issue of him performing underage magic in front of his own cousin in order to save his life. As it was, he missed expulsion and having his wand snapped by the skin of his teeth, yeah, and she had it in for him really personally after that, because he made her look like an idiot in front of Fudge. Which of course, made Fudge look like an idiot, because he trusted her, and all of the inappropriately summoned Wizengamot again got to witness the fact.”

“The Senior Undersecretary to the Minister just now is a woman named Ursula Forrester,” Madam
Longbottom said. “A very efficient and competent individual with no apparent political objectives besides preventing her immediate superior from presenting too obviously as the great bloody fool he is. Well, Minerva? Umbridge ring any bells from Hogwarts?”

“No,” the Transfiguration Mistress said. “Or rather...” Her brow furrowed as she thought back. “I believe that there was a Ravenclaw named Richard Umbridge enrolled at one point, perhaps ten years or so before Alice and Frank came in, but no one by the name since. Muggle mother, Wizard father, and... Oh, that’s right.” She nodded. “I remember now. An older sister who’d been quite nearly a Squib. Quite unpleasant little wretch, as I recall; she was only at Hogwarts for a single half-term, on probation. She’d gotten a letter, but with a conditional attached.”

“A conditional?” Harry asked, when he’d done sniggering wildly over the poetic justice of it all. Neville was not nearly as subtle; his roars of laughter filled the entire manse and sent every cat present (save for the one sitting opposite in her shawl and spectacles) into fits. “What would that be?”

“Probably just what it sounds like, yeah?” Neville wiped his eyes. “Someone being warned, coming in, that they do register as magical, but not likely enough to make it work in the formal educational environment. Some of the old families in our world would have liked the idea if it had ever occurred to them; they could’ve given their poor disappointment of a kid a family wand if they couldn’t get one of their own, sent them in for a few weeks, and then withdrawn them again with all dignity intact on all sides after citing the sudden desire to home-school.”

“Exactly.” Minerva nodded approvingly to him. “In this instance, as I recall now, Mr. Umbridge’s sister made quite the fuss when it was suggested she lean on her dignity. She insisted that Hogwarts itself was deficient...” She sniffed. “And tried to file a complaint with the Board of Governors toward that end, and a review. Needless to say, she was less than successful.”

“It doesn’t sound like such a bad thing,” Harry said, sitting up. “For the kids’ sake again, if nothing else, and against the inherent prejudices of those old families again. D’you reckon Frankie would have gotten one, if he’d been raised here, Nev?”

“My son,” Neville explained to McGonagall. “Definitely. Though we never thought he was a Squib; he did have a couple of mild bouts of accidental magic early on, and he had his own wand right enough.” He smiled a little at that. “It was Mum’s, actually. He couldn’t do much with it, but it didn’t seem to care. It took to him anyway, and used to get really excited whenever he used it to stir his home-made lemon curd cream, remember?”

Harry laughed. “I do. Thing was absolutely barmy for anything with citrus in it. Not that I blame it,” he added. “Not on the lemon, necessarily, but on Frankie’s cooking in general. I really do miss his steak and kidney pasties.”

“You’re definitely not alone there,” Neville agreed, and reached up to gently displace the kitten as he turned slightly to face him. “So. Now that you’ve settled a bit... D’you think you can manage to decide whether you’re upset - actually upset - or just shocked?”

Harry tucked his foot under himself and considered that.

“I don’t know,” he said finally. “I mean... I just... don’t. It’s not something that we ever anticipated, is it? All those literal decades of setting this up, of planning for all contingencies... And this just wasn’t one of them. It’s all a bit much to take in, honestly, all at once. Shocked, mostly, I think? And.”

He stopped.

“We just found out Gin died,” he said miserably. Desolately. “Staying here for another hundred years... That’s not so bad a thought, ‘specially since I wouldn’t be me. Well, I would be, but it’s like I said about Mum, I reckon. I reckon that as time went on, I’d get more used to this...” He waved at himself vaguely. “And less preoccupied with my last go-around. And having Sirius and Remus full time, that would be brilliant, and it’d really be, as the saying goes, a great adventure to see how the world develops in a different direction. Mostly... Mostly, though, it’s about what’d come after.”

“How do you mean?” His eyes were direct and his attention focused calmly and entirely.

“Af—the trains that go On here... In this world...” He fumbled, not with the concept, but with the implication of the words. “Go to other places? That would mean... Would I bounce then? Would I fit then, and go to where my Gin is? Where you’ll be? Or someplace entirely different? A place without Gin, or... Or our babies, or...”

He struggled valiantly. The room was very quiet. Neville retracted his ears and feet.

“I don’t know, Harry,” he said quietly. “I honestly don’t know. I do know though...” He chose his words carefully. “That if my theory on the Room is right... On what it is; that is, a nexus point for all the universes; a place really, where all possibility is potential...”

Harry said nothing.

“It’s not any kind of heaven,” his friend said finally. “The Room, I mean. Obviously. But... If you look at is a kind of analogy... It makes doors, right? To other places. I think... I think, mate, the trains that go on, from wherever they start from... I think like all the seventh floors, in all the Hogwarts, in all the dimensions, that lead to the one place... I reckon, no I believe... That After is like that. That even if you come in on different trains, and arrive at a different stations, there’ll be more doors there, at those stations, that can take you even further On. Further On... Or maybe... Further In. Till you get, you know, to the center of it all, where it doesn’t matter who you think you are or were, or what you were, or where you were, or when, or even how many versions of you there are there, coming in on all the trains that ever there were, from anywhere, because you’ll be at the centre of all of it. The Source, where all those things, really, are...”

He brought his hands together in a tight knot, then pulled them apart, flicking and breaking the invisible – the ultimately self-imposed, Harry thought in a distracted, confused burst of bright clarity - tangle of ropes that had bound them, away into irrelevant nothingness.

He wiped his eyes again. It was, when it came right down to it, fairly useless.

“I thought you’d brought me here so that your Gran could make me feel better, Longbottom,” he joked weakly. “And help me put it all in perspective?” Neville waved a hand and slouched down a bit further, looking more comfortable than ever.

“This really is brilliant, though,” he said. “In the meantime, don’t you reckon? Being in our primes again, just this bit of it, for however long or short a time we have for it? Only I have to say that being eleven again, physically, and having to sit through all those classes again were the only bits of this all that I was really, really dreading.”

“Can’t relate, I’m afraid,” Harry said dryly. “I only started dreading it after I came back. No offense, Professor,” he added hastily to McGonagall. Neville snickered, or more properly, guffawed.
McGonagall sniffed at him austerely.

“Mind your sincerity there, Mr. Cartwright,” she said. “Better men than you have tried and failed to convince.”

“As much as I would like to agree with you, Minerva,” Augusta said, even more austerely. “This is my grandson. Headmaster of Hogwarts, Potions Master, Herbology Master, PHD and Masters’ degree from Oxford, dimensional traveler, destroyer of Dark Lords…”

“That. Was. Harry. How many times have I told you, Gran? I just got the snake in the end!”

“The snake was rather a crucial prerequisite there from what I understand. I do believe you have earned equal billing, at least. My point is…” She sipped again, proudly and regally. “That there is no better man. Anywhere. On any world. Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Potter?”

“We’ve always worked well together,” Harry obliged. “And I’ve never had any complaints at all.”

“I suppose that it’s consoling, from the one perspective, to realize that your spelling, at least, is actually better than presented,” Minerva said to Neville, and turned to Harry. Her gaze softened a bit as she considered him... She nodded to the scar on his cheek. “I don’t suppose the Room was considerate enough to render the particular disturbing point of concern moot while reinterpreting your physicality?”

“If you’re talking about the horcrux... No. It’s still very much there, I’m afraid.”

She sighed regretfully. Then, bemused... “You’re a hundred thirty-eight? Truly?”

He nodded. Her eyes turned to Neville again. It might have been Harry’s imagination, but her gaze seemed to linger a little longer there, and with rather unapologetic appreciation at that. It came as somewhat less of a surprise that Neville was looking right back, albeit, of course, in approved Gentlemanly Style.... Harry snuck a glance at Augusta. She caught his eye and sipped her tea blandly. His mouth opened slightly as he realized what, exactly, was going through her mind.

No better man anywhere... The listed resume...

And him seventy-three now, and her a very appropriate fifty-six. I wouldn’t be risking a single knut, would I, on the bet that he told you that Hannah was fifty-nine when she had Frankie?

“And if I were to ask to see the rest of you?” Minerva McGonagall was saying in her rich brogue. “Would it be any kind of inconvenience, Neil,”

The rest of...

WHAT?

Oh. OH.

Augusta Longbottom’s expression didn’t change, but her eyes smirked gently at Harry’s as they swiveled, despite himself, again and unbelievingly, in her direction.

Oh for Godric’s sake. You great dirty-minded... Strip him down for her personal delectation right now, why don’t you?

Oh, Longbottom. If there’s any justice in the universe, any universe, Hannah is watching this right now.
Pointing and laughing, probably, and cheering you on; she was just as bad as you ever were, you great ruddy perv, but...

“It’s a bit cramped in here,” Neville was saying. “I don’t know if...”

“Oh, go on,” Augusta said, and waved her wand. The furniture, complete with occupants, slid back against the wall. Neville shrugged, rose, and, as he approached the centre of the room, transformed. Minerva actually gasped, startled and obviously delighted, before rising to her own feet and prodding at him a bit. Augusta smirked again behind her tea cup, not at Harry this time, but in decided self-satisfaction... Harry truly wasn’t sure which he found more disconcerting.

After a few moments, Neville transformed back. They returned to their respective chairs.

“Well done indeed,” the Transfiguration Mistress approved. “May I ask, if any and which of my other students in your world managed this accomplishment?”

“Draco Malfoy,” Neville said. “And Hermione gave it a go, of course, but she had to leave off when she got to the step with the mandrake leaf in the mouth. She had a really vile reaction, and was in St. Mungo’s for a solid month while they regrew her tongue.”

“Pity. What about you, Mr. Potter? Did you ever make the attempt?”

“Yeah. And yeah, I managed it, but now that I’m changed so completely, on that physical level...” He let himself trail off. She actually patted his knee.

“If you’ve managed it once,” she said. “You can manage it again. It won’t take nearly as long a time, since you know how it’s done. If it’s not too personal...”

“I was a hummingbird,” he said. She looked genuinely surprised... Then laughed.

“How, very very appropriate, Mr. Potter. Then again... The form always is.”

“Mm,” Augusta agreed, and waved her wand again. The room returned to prompt and immaculate normal. She set down her cup. Neville reached over promptly and refilled it. She patted his hand.

“Thank you, dear,” she said. Then - “Neville.”

“Yes, Gran?”

“I, too, would prefer, unless you have particular objections, to call you Neil from here on. As you said... The juxtaposition is yet a bit confusing, and now that the Room has put you back to rights again, I think we would both be best served by the more appropriate forms of address.”

“Of course I don’t object,” he said. He put the pot down and took her hands. Both of them, in his. “I love you, Gran, you know that, but honestly, Little Neville is most accurately a cousin to me. That makes the particulars of the blood relationship we two claim when out and about more accurate than the other, and I don’t for one second, not one second want you, even in your own mind, to truly confuse me with the boy who really is your grandson. It’s been hard, I know, because we are mirror images, but Little Nev’s his own person, wherever he is, learning to be even more of his own person. It’d be nice, don’t you think, if we all were to learn, now and in the future – for however long we have together – to value and love each other for those people we are, rather than as the people we just... Look like?”

There was a long silence at that. Augusta took her hands away, and buried her face in them. He knelt before her and wrapped her up.
“I’m so sorry,” she said. He pressed his lips to her hair.

“I know,” he said. “I reckon my Gran was too. She apologized, too, after... When I married Hannah. For trying to make me into Dad, when I was younger. I told her I understood, and I did. Just... Don’t forget, okay, when Little Neville comes back, to tell him? Because you haven’t yet. You’ve just told me.”

“I won’t,” she said, and touched his cheek. “Did she ever tell you how proud she was of you?”

“In her own way,” he said, smiling at her a little crookedly. “Indirectly. Mostly by listing my accomplishments to everyone who’d listen, whenever I was within hearing distance. “

“You may call me Cousin Augusta, then, when we’re out and about,” she said briskly, or as briskly as was possible. “Or Gussie, as a nod to our now-documented long-term and mutual affections, though I do hope, for the record, that you would severely reprimand anyone else who might feel inclined to presume on your invitation? And I shall endeavour too, to remember, Mr. Potter, to call you Lawrence.”

“Sirius suggested Ren,” Harry said. “I think I’d really prefer that.”

“Nice try, mate,” Neville said. “That’s not going to happen. Lawrence was my grandfather’s name.”

Harry blinked at the stately woman before him.

“You gave me your husband’s name?”

“Would you rather I had chose your own grandfather’s name?” she asked dryly.

“No. He might have been a great potioneer, but I always reckoned it was just so that he could work out new and subtle ways to hex the people who teased him there without actually using his wand.”

“Oh, he was quite, quite adept there too,” McGonagall said. “You come by your dueling skills quite honestly, I assure you.”


“Oh yes. He was quite the public figure, and, of course, in and out of Hogwarts quite constantly while your father was there. He and Euphemia both; between them, they really did define fatuous, proud parenthood, and could never stand being away from him for more than a week at a go.”

“What was he like?”

“Intense,” Augusta said. “Passionate in his beliefs; he was absolute iron on his preferred political causes... But at the same time, quite ridiculously and personally amiable and charming. ” She drained the last of her tea. “Mm. Very, very charming.”

“Cousin Augusta,” Neville said, pained. “Please.’

“Oh, do get that stick out of your arse, would you,” Madam Longbottom said. Harry nearly choked on his last bite of biscuit. “We’re all adults, here.” She turned her sharp eye on him. “Though having taken young Potter here shopping, I do believe it’s your turn now?”

“I’m seventy-three again. I do believe that that entitles me to make my own sartorial choices?”

“Not if more jumpers such as that one are involved, it doesn’t.”
“No,” Neville said firmly. “Dress Harry, or rather Ren, to your heart’s content – after discussing the finer points with Sirius anyway; he’d be dreadfully disappointed if you left him out there – but you are not going there with me. Or more precisely... I’m not going there with you.”

Augusta waved a hand in a rather obvious ‘we’ll see about that’ gesture.

“He never liked his hair,” she said to Harry. “Fleamont, that is. He’d be quite dreadfully jealous of yours now. And that’s all there is to be said there, I think.”

“But...”

“There are books,” she cut him off. “If you really want to know more. And the official autobiographical retrospective will be out by the end of next week, I daresay. On the whole, though, and all things considered... I think it best if you tried to restrict your curiosity on those lines. It is quite easy, altogether too easy, Lawrence,” – again, it was quite deliberate – “to find oneself trapped in the pattern of looking for your future in someone else’s past. And, for those who lived through that past, to enable and facilitate that tendency. I cannot afford, any more than you can, to indulge myself there.”

He sighed.

“I know,” he said. “But...”

“Are you aware,” she cut him off, again...“That tomorrow is Sirius’ birthday? He will be thirty two. How do you think he would feel if you were to give him the gift of the knowledge that you will not be leaving him? How would it make you feel on the subject of having to stay, knowing that it will bring him such tremendous and absolute joy?”

Harry opened his mouth, and closed it again.

“I didn’t think of that,’ he said. “I was just...”

“Thinking of everything you’d be leaving behind?” she supplied.

He rubbed his head.

“I don’t even know if it’s occurred to him that I wouldn’t be staying,” he confessed. “After. I only told him who I really am... Was... Two days ago.”

“It has occurred to him, I promise you. The thought can be nothing less than a Dementor preying on the corners of his mind, now. Nine years in Azkaban as an innocent man... His mind is their nest now, and always.”

He looked down at his hands. McGonagall gestured Neville aside and came to sit beside him, touching his knee.

“We are not the loved ones you knew, Mr. Potter,” she said gently to him. “But that does not mean that you can’t come to love us as well, or that we can’t come to love you, no matter the version of you. Even when all is said and done, and your Mr. Longbottom here has gone On... Not everyone who knows who you were will be gone. And never mind Remus and Sirius... Augusta and I will always be here for you.”

Harry snorted, again through the confounded inescapable, bloody undignified tears.

“I’m older than both of you put together,” he said, or rather reminded himself.
“Pfft. It’s all in your head now.”

“Just because something’s in my head doesn’t mean it isn’t real,” he quoted. She snorted at him.

“Dumbledore,” she said. “Albus Percival Wulfric Bleeding Brian. For the love of all that’s holy, Potter, find someone else’s tripe to quote from hereon in?”

“Uh?”

“We at Hogwarts may be shot of him, but his twinkling twaddle is rather harder to forget. We professors only had it shoved down our throats multiple times a day, along with his lies of course, and those blasted lemon drops.”

“Got anything to replace it, then?” he inquired politely. “The twaddle, that is?”

“Aye. As a matter of fact, I do.” Minerva McGonagall got to her feet and went to the kitchen, returning with several small glasses and an extremely dusty bottle. Harry raised an eyebrow at her, but accepted the shot she poured him.

**Here's a bottle and an honest man!**

*What wad ye wish for mair, man?*

*Wha kens, before his life may end,*

*What his share may be o' care, man?*

**Then catch the moments as they fly,**

*And use them as ye ought, man.*

*Believe me happiness is shy,*

*And comes not aye when sought, man!*

Augusta Domitia Claudia, Dame Lady Longbottom smiled approvingly at her friend at that, and tossed back her shot neatly. Neville raised his glass to their hostess from where he sat, and grinned. Harry was quite familiar with that grin. He rolled his eyes and gulped, bracingly.

“Burns, of course. Though you missed the first verse,” Neville, or rather Neil, said, and clearing his throat, quoted quite shamelessly -

**Here's to me and here's to you,**

*And if in the world*

*There was just us two*

*And I could promise that nobody knew...*

*Would you?*

“I’d know,” Harry said after he’d finished coughing up the half of the lung that the biscuit had missed. “And that would be more than enough to be going on with. Bad enough that I had to sit there and listen to you drool over her great dirty mind behind your Transfiguration textbook, Longbottom, and may I remind you that you specifically asked the Room not to change your Animagus form? You’ve still got that train to catch!”

“You really did miss the entire point of the poem, didn’t you. Shut it, Lawrence,” Neil said kindly. “If nothing else, you’ll be wise to remember that I’m your grandfather now, and no matter how good you are at dueling, still quite qualified by virtue of blood to turn you over my knee in any world?”

Harry shoved himself to his feet.
“I’m going back to Malfoy Manor now,” he announced. “The wards might not have softened yet, but it’s always fun to lurk in corners and listen to the Milk-Chocolate Wannabes like Lucy prance about and practice their manifestos in the mirrors. Also, I need to stop by Eeylops and pick up another owl.”

“Why? What’s wrong with Phineas?”

“Nothing. Only, he’s my mail owl, isn’t he? It looks like I may need another one in the future to peck my bloody eyes out.”

He muttered his way to the kitchen floo. Augusta watched him go, tapping her finger against her lips thoughtfully before turning her attention back to the other two.

“As Minerva and I were saying last night after you left, Neil,” she said, collecting herself. “Your leaves of absence from Hogwarts as students will be no problem; the circumstances considered, no one but Fudge is likely to argue over the guardians’ decision to put either of you ‘boys’ under Fidelius. Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley, mind you, will be most distressed, but with the promise of regular letters, and perhaps the occasional discreetly managed short visit, they will be much reassured. Next, then... Minerva, you shall have to call a meeting of the Heads of Houses, and convince them to back our plan for new staffing arrangements to the Board of Governors. That shouldn’t be that difficult, my connections to them considered, and now, especially, that Lupin and Black are positioned, through our comprehensive leak of accurate information to the Prophet, as individuals who, thanks to their new reputations and fortunes, might not want to stay at Hogwarts at all. They can certainly afford to buy out their contracts, and even if they couldn’t... Any number of individuals wishing to recruit them to teach or work elsewhere would be more than happy to do them the favour.”

She reached for the paper tucked behind her chair and opened it.

“I don’t think it will be a problem,” McGonagall said. “At all. Filius will be dizzy over the thought of having a decent playmate on staff, especially one going up for a Grandmastery – he’s always complaining that none of us can give him a proper go – and Pomona will be equally giddy over the thought of having another Master Herbologist there, never mind one who can serve as a go-between her and Severus when it comes to his unholy and ruthless tendency to raid her greenhouses on whim for his potions. And of course, it’s on record now”- she nodded to the Prophet - “that they were both essential to the raid in Edinburgh.”

“What about Dumbledore?” Neil asked. “Will we need to worry on him?”

Augusta frowned slightly at that.

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “I must admit that I’m quite surprised that he is still sitting exactly where the Ministry has put him. He has more than enough power, even without his wand, to leave on whim- but for whatever reason, he seems content to wait till his trial date to make his move.”

“Are you that sure he’s got a move to make?”

“Aberforth says he does,” McGonagall said. “And Aberforth may be many things, but where his brother is concerned... and Remus agrees, though he doesn’t know the details there, and likely never will; the old goat-lover is as closemouthed as he is unhygienic... He is never wrong. There is a reason, again, though no one knows it, that he’s chosen to live within stone’s throw of the castle all these years.”

“Have they booked a date for his trial yet?”
“It was intended to be announced this week, but I imagine things are a bit chaotic down at the Ministry just now. Hosting an impromptu summit of the entire International Confederation of Wizards and their associated delegations is bound to cause a few organizational headaches and shifts in priority.”

“One moment.” He reached for his mirror in his pocket. “Oi, Harry. You there?”

There was a pause, then...

‘Bloody buggering peacocks,” Harry’s voice said, muffled. “Ow! Bugger off, the lot of you, before I A-K you and spit-roast you for dinner at the castle!” His face appeared, harassed. “Sorry, mate. What is it?’

“You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Malfoy’s bloody peacocks. I blasted their pen open so that they’d go wandering as a distraction, but now I’m their bloody hero, and they’re following me around like proper stupid ducklings. Even the invisibility cloak isn’t stopping them.”

“Tactical withdrawal,” Neville advised. “Take a run over to the Ministry, will you, and check on Dumbledore? Only Gran’s a bit worried that he’s being so quiet, and thinks he’s got something planned for his trial. I think that with all the delegates from the International Confederation of Wizards coming here, he may decide to up his schedule. Can you slip in and do whatever it is you do with your runic superpowers to keep him stowed?”

There was a pause, then..

“Sure. I just saw Narcissa anyway, and she’s got Lady Greengrass in tow. That means they’re going to be sitting on top of the drawing room floor, so I’m going to have to wait.”

“Have fun,” Neville said amiably, and signed off. McGonagall got to her feet and shook out her robes, straightening her shawl.

“I shall head back now,” she said. “And have that word with Filius and Pomona.”

Neville stood politely, or more accurately, gallantly. She looked him up and down. He tried to look meek, and failed entirely. Minerva McGonagall shook her head.

“It is very glad I am indeed, Mr. Cartwright,” she said, her r’s rolling deeply. “That you are on our side. I would be quite afear’d, I think, should you ever decide to give up your vocation as a straightforward charming rogue and proceed onto the Dark...”
Monday November 3, 1991


“Yeah. Only it’s not exactly safe for us to stay, is it?” Whatever identity crisis Harry had had, or hadn’t had, upon waking two days prior as Lawrence Cartwright had descended upon him in full now. He was glamoured again as young Neville, while Neville was returning the favour. The four of them, Ron included, were huddled at the end of the breakfast table as they conferred over their last rounds of toast.

“We don’t want to go, Hermione,” he said from behind Nev’s gloomy round face. “But Remus... He did a great thing, an amazing thing, only lots of people – the kind of people that were actually interested in having werewolves around - won’t think so, will they? They’ll want him to pay, maybe even to die, but they’ll want to hurt him first, and that’ll mean they’ll go straight for Harry here. And me, and my mum and dad, and Gran too, since it’s got out that our cousins from America helped Remus and Sirius in Edinburgh.”

“But... Where will you go?” Hermione wailed again.

“Away,” Neville-as-Harry said vaguely. “To a nice place, really nice, Remus says, and Nev will have his family there. And Remus and Sirius will be coming to visit every weekend, and can bring school assignments and stuff. There’ll be house-elves, too, to help with Nev’s parents.”

“Can we visit?” Ron asked. He was obviously trying to be brave and pragmatic, but too, was failing miserably.

“I don’t know. Probably. Not right away, though, not till the Aurors have time to sort out where the biggest threats are coming from. We’re still allowed to write,” he added. “It’s not like a prison or anything.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“We don’t know that either, mate,” Harry-as-Neville said apologetically. “They just told us a couple of hours ago. Gran and Mum and Dad are already gone ahead.”

Ron said nothing more, just slouched down on the bench and poked at his last and much beleaguered fried egg.

“This is bollocks,” he said morosely. “I mean, really bollocks. Finding a cure for lycanthropy... The people he cured should be calling him a hero, not threatening to off his kids and relations!”

“Some might. Maybe, when they have a chance to think about it... But probably not. The kind of people you’re talking on... Greyback’s people... I reckon they’re not really sane. They think they’re the heroes, right? And even if they gave us the choice, if we’re not safe, nobody around us is safe. Do you think we’d feel right risking you? Avada Kedavra is one thing, but there’s lots worse things. Lots worse. I know.”

The unhappy silence extended itself.
“When do you have to go?” Hermione asked at last.

“Tonight. Right after classes.”

“That soon?”

“Yeah. The ICW delegations will be starting to come in by then, and they want us stowed away before anyone notices we’re not around. They’re even putting it in the evening paper; ‘no point in going after the obvious, we’re way ahead of you there’.”

She sniffled. Ron dug in his robe pocket and handed her a tissue. She blew her nose vigorously.

“Well,” she said, and sat up, shaking herself briskly. “If it’s tonight, then there’s only one thing to do.”

“What’s that?”

“Skive. We’re not wasting our last few hours with you here reviewing feathers and mixing wart antidotes.”

“You want to skive classes?” Ron crossed his eyes at her. “All the classes? Sprout’s, and Flitwick’s and Snape’s? Are you barmy, woman? They’ll kill us! It’s one thing for Harry and Nev, they won’t have to deal with the consequences will they, but we’re not going anywhere, are we?”

“They won’t kill us. They can’t. It's written into their contracts. And Flitwick and Sprout at least, will totally understand. They might give us lines, but that’s all. Or tell us to practice our homework in detention, and that’s all to the good too, isn’t it, since we’d have to do it anyway.”

“That still leaves Snape! And my Nimbus! I just got up to an E in his class, and with a zero, and a detention for skiving, it’ll knock me back down to an A again! If I’m lucky!”

“You really need to get your priorities straight, Ronald. Come on; we’ve got twenty minutes left before the bell, that’s lots of time to get wherever we’re going without drawing notice.” She paused. “Where should we go?”

“That I should live to see the day,” Harry murmured to Neville as they left the Great Hall, as brightly, she said...

“Oh, I know! Third floor corridor!”

“Oh for... Seriously?”

“Well, we know no one else will be there, right? Come on! It’ll be an adventure!”

“They’re trying to avoid certain painful death, not court it!”

“Just a peek,” she coaxed. “And Harry’s got his invisibility cloak besides. We’ll be fine.”

“Who are you and what have you done with Hermione Granger?”

“She’s skiving, remember?” There was a reckless gleam in her eye. Neither Harry nor Neville fooled themselves that it was there for any other reason than to hide the outright tears. In the end, and all things considered...

It was reason enough.
“You people are crazy,” Ron complained, as they skittered down the hall and up the stairs. “No, bonkers.”

“All for one,” Neville-as-Harry said philosophically. “Ooh, maybe if we have time, we can go have a look at the basilisk under Myrtle’s loo! That’d be a bit of something, wouldn’t it?”

“What?” Ron stopped in his tracks. “The... What?”

“Basilisk. That’s where I was Hallowe’en night,” he lied. ”After my blub.” The actual Harry rolled his eyes at him slightly at that, amused. “When everybody was looking for me. I was curious, you know, because Director Bones said she was murdered, but nobody said exactly by what, so I went and asked her. Myrtle, not Director Bones. And she said she wasn’t sure, only that there were great yellow eyes, and then she was dead. And I asked her what direction they were coming from, because I want to be an Auror, you know, and that’s the kind of question I reckon an Auror should ask, and obviously nobody had, because she pointed to this row of sinks, and I went and had a look, and there was one with a little snake on the tap. And I poked at it a bit, and I can talk to snakes, and just in case it was magic, I said tell me about the eyes, please, and it told me that it was a door to the snake with the big eyes, and then I told it to open up, and went down and looked it up, and it’s a basilisk alright.”

“Blimey,” Ron said after a moment. Hermione stared, stunned. “You can talk to snakes?”

“Uh? Oh. Yeah. Remus reckons that it was all the magic bouncing around when my mum blew up Voldemort. He had it in his blood, and it was blood magic, and his blood went everywhere, all over me, and I had a cut on my...” Neville gestured with Harry’s hands. “So in it went. Mixed things up a bit. Harmless, but dead useful sometimes, even if it’s not as good as it’d be in three or four years, Sirius says, as if I’d got a bit that helped me speak with girls.”

“Never mind that,” Hermione said, a trifle hysterically. “You went down and looked? At a basilisk? By yourself? And you’re still alive?”

“It was sleeping,” he said defensively. “I didn’t stay to chat. I’m not stupid.”

“That’s highly debatable, mate,” Ron said as they started up again toward the third floor. “Did you think to bring a rooster at least?”

“Uh?”

“A rooster. To kill the basilisk with? Honestly, you people!”

“Explain,” Hermione ordered. He heaved a great melodramatic sigh.

“Fine. Fine. When I was three, Fred and George turned my teddy bear to a great live spider to scare me. I totally wee’d myself, and had nightmares for bloody weeks. I still do sometimes. Anyway, it got so bad that Mum went out and brought me back a toy basilisk. Said it would keep away the spiders, because spiders are afraid of basilisks, and would run away. Perce said it wouldn’t work because was just a toy, and Mum said that it was better, because that way it wouldn’t be able to actually kill Fred and George.”

“So where do the roosters come in?”

“Oh. Barmy – that was the basilisk – came with a book. Well, a pamphlet, aimed at kids again. It had all the information in it on the real thing, including that if you ever want to kill one, the best way is to bring a cranky rooster and poke at it a bit. The crowing offs it straight up.”
“That’s handy to know,” Neville-as-Harry observed. “You still got him somewhere?”

“I’m eleven, mate. I don’t need stuffed toys to protect me anymore; I have a real live wand to cuddle up with.”

The other two boys guffawed. Loudly. Hermione shhshed them as they approached the bend in the corridor, Harry discreetly and silently dismantling the wards he’d set as they went.

“Invisibility cloak,” she ordered bossily. “Now. Hmm.” She tested the handle. “Locked. Let’s see... ALOHORAMA!”

The door swung open immediately. Hermione immediately slammed it shut again. It took her quite several moments to recover her breath.

“Oh my God,” she said furiously when she’d done it. “Oh my fucking God. That’s it. Dumbledore’s not just a bloody accessory to murder, he’s officially ’round the twist! This is a school! What’s he gone and put great bloody things like that in a school for? It’s got three heads! One to eat each of us, without waiting, and one to share for pudding between its heads, as afters!”

“Honestly, Hermione, it’s not that big a deal,” Ron soothed. “It’s just a hell-hound.”

“I may or may not have begged Mum and Dad for the rest of the collection,” he admitted. “For every birthday and Christmas for the three years after. I didn’t get all of them, but I got the manticore and the hippogriff and the chimaera and the hell-hound, anyway. Skipped the lethifold, though, it was just a great bloody bath-towel really, and not worth the price. One thing you’re not short on in a family of seven kids is bath-towels.”

“IT HAS THREE HEADS! AND IS THE SIZE OF A BUGGERING LORRY!”

“The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Asleep, that is, when you sing to them. Do Muggles not have lullabies?”

“Uh?” She actually stopped trembling long enough to look at him peculiarly.

“Lullabies. Songs for babies. To soothe them with their sore teeth, or whatever? Your parents are dentists, you said; tooth healers, so you must know tons.”

“That’s not actually how they treat their patients,” Hermione braced herself. “Alright. Alright. We’re skiving. We’re on an adventure. We possess, as Gryffindors, and if ‘Hogwarts: A History’ is to believed, more bravery than actual intelligence. Though that being said, I did have to argue with the Hat against Ravenclaw, so we can assume on a bit of that too, at least, never mind the surprisingly useful information provided us, Ronald, by your creepy little collection of cuddly toys. We can do this. We can. And then we’re going to fetch up a rooster and go to the loo and kill that great bloody basilisk, because I will not go to a school with that in-house. I will not. It’s just... Wrong.”

There was a pause as the three boys looked at each other, then...

“I love you, Hermione,” Ron said fervently. “Will you marry me when we grow up?”

Harry and Neville blinked at each other, from behind each other’s eyes.

“Oh?” the girl said blankly, one hand on the door again.
“There is no other girl in this world,” Ron said. “Or possibly any other, who would come out with that speech, and mean it. It’s brilliant. You’re brilliant.”

There was another pause.

“That’s very sweet of you, Ronald,” Hermione said. "And don't think I don't appreciate it, because I do; I'm very flattered, really. Only..."

The pause extended itself so far it squeaked under the strain.

“Only... What?”

“I'd thought... And please don’t take this the wrong way, because I really, really don’t intend to insult you with it; there’s nothing to be insulted about there, honestly but... Aren't you...." She waved a delicate hand at his puzzled look. "Er?"

"Er? Er? What the bloody hell are you going on about now, wom..." He stopped abruptly, eyes widening.

"Oop. Wait for it," Neville murmured to Harry. "Wait for it... One... Two..."

"WHAAAAAT?"

“Oh Ron, don't be like that! Honestly. I'm not criticizing, only never mind Professor Black and Professor Lupin, I have three gay uncles of my own, and..." She trailed off, startled, as Ron actually threw back his head and howled, not with fury or indignation, but with uproarious laughter. "Um. Maybe my radar’s a little overdeveloped there?"

“Blimey,” Harry muttered back. “You ever get the feeling that you’ve totally fallen into some sort of weird alternate dimension where everything you ever thought you knew is gone entirely tits-up?”

“Definitely overdeveloped,” Ron was agreeing, as he wiped at his eyes. "No. I do not like boys, Hermione. Well, no, I do; some of my best mates are boys, but... No. Not like that.”

“Are you absolutely sure? Because you seemed awfully...” She flustered at him. “I only mean... You seemed awfully definite about being against Professor Black and Professor Lupin getting married in our first Transfiguration class, and my uncles say that’s usually a sign, you know? And the first one, my Uncle Will, he was in denial a long, long time, and actually married a girl, and had babies with her, and then he came out, and believe you me, that was not the declaration she wanted as her twentieth wedding anniversary gift.”

“What are you... Oh. Oh. I was only surprised because they said they’re getting married, not because they’re bent! Lots of witches and wizards are bent, but they don’t get married. Not officially. Not the bloods like Sirius, anyway. It’s not done; it can be, of course, but there’s too much at stake in terms of inheritance laws, and heirs, and when it comes right down to it, blood always comes first there in court, even if you adopt.”

“Uh?”

“Sirius has adopted Harry,” he explained. “But if anything happened to him, Draco Malfoy could challenge his right to inherit Headship – Harry’s that is – because he’s not a blood Black. And even though Malfoy’s just a cousin, not a son, he’d probably win. So if you want to keep your money to your direct line, you have to produce that line. And that means you have to marry, officially anyway, someone who can produce.”
“What?” Hermione looked indignant. “That’s not fair! That’s not fair at all!”

“No, but it’s the way it works here. It wouldn’t make a difference with me,” he added. “The Weasleys haven’t got any money to keep in the direct line, so...”

He paused.

“Huh,” he said. “I guess we do now. Still, it’s gotta be divided by seven, so there’s that, and...” He shook himself. “Anyway. We can talk about this all later.”

“Yeah,” Neville-as-Harry agreed. “Not that this hasn’t all been very educational, but we still have to come up with a song and all, never mind what comes after.”

“After?”

“Well they wouldn’t just stick a great three-headed lorry with teeth in there for its own sake, would they? It’s got to be guarding something.”

“I... Hadn’t thought of that,” Hermione confessed. “Er.”

“Give yourself a break,” Harry advised her. “It’s not every day a girl meets up with her first monster from fairy tales and receives her first proposal. OW!” He yelped as Ron smacked his head. “Maybe we should start with the basilisk, and work our way up?”

“No, no. We’re here, we might as well get on with it.” She hesitated, though. Harry and Neville exchanged bemused looks again as Ron reached out and took her hand firmly.

“It’ll be fine,” he reassured her. “Come on. Do you know ‘Wizard in the Dell’?”

“I know ‘Farmer in the Dell’,” she said dubiously. “Maybe he was a Muggleborn?”

“Could be. Okay, mates. Wands out, door open, and on three!”

“My brain hurts,” Harry muttered to Neville. “A lot. Who knew there was a universe where Ron – Ron – is actually sensitive, semi-studious and smooth with the ladies?”

“I don’t know about marrying you,” Hermione said to her would-be-knight, blushing. “We’re a bit young to make that kind of commitment. But just in case we die here...”

She stood on her toes quickly and kissed his freckled cheek. Ron flushed furiously, and grinned goofily at her. Harry-as-Neville and Neville-as-Harry gagged at them both. Hermione just sniffed primly in their direction, pushed the door open, and charged in, wand at the ready and singing at the top of her lungs.

Some Time Later

They lay sprawled in the deserted common room, working their way through a stack of chocolate frogs. The Philosopher’s Stone lay between them, glimmering placidly.

“That was fun,” Ron said, through a mouthful of frog buttocks. “Though honestly, I don’t see what the big fuss was, even after we put the Hell-Hound to sleep. Certain and painful death, pfft, and for what in the end?” He poked at the Stone. “Perce wouldn’t even bother taking it for his paperweight collection, it’s that boring.”
“It was a bit of a bust,” Neville-as-Harry agreed. “Where’d you learn to throw conkers like that, Nev? Can’t believe you got that key on the first bloody shot!”

“Dunno,” Harry-as-Neville said vaguely. “Lots of them lying around our country estate. Nothing much else to do?”

“Pity you can’t fly for the piss,” Ron continued. “Aim like that, you’d make a fantastic Chaser. What’d you think of that chess game, eh?”

“WINGAAAAAAAAAAARDIAM LEVI-OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO-SAΗ!” the four chorused, and cracked up.

“Well it only made sense,” Hermione said when they recovered. “We could have played, but I didn’t exactly fancy getting smashed in the head, did you? Much easier to fly each other over the board.”

“And straight into the troll?”

“Not much of a troll if you ask me,” Neville-as-Harry said. “If one little invisibility cloak is all it took to get past it. You’d think they’d have better senses of smell with those great ugly noses.”

“If they had better senses of smell, they’d bathe now and again.” Hermione bit the feet daintily off her frog. “And the logic puzzle was just simple.”

“Well-rhymed though,” Harry-as-Neville noted. “Snape’s a poet, who knew?”

“I’d rather not think it.” Ron gagged. He sat up and poked at the Stone again. “What is it really, d’you think?”

“No idea,” Neville-as-Harry lied. “Must be a bit of something, though, if Dumbledore went through all that to hide it. Never mind that nasty mirror. ‘I show you not your face, but your heart’s desire,’ he mimicked. "All very well if your heart's desire is achievable, innit, but nothing but rot and heartbreak if it's not. Whoever made that up needs more of a Mind Healer than I ever will.”

“I didn’t think it was so nasty,” Hermione protested. “I looked fantastic in my Minister of Magic robes, and you made a lovely trio all lined up as my favoured minions. What did you see, Ron?”

Ron just shrugged and picked up the Stone, holding it in his palm.

“It’s warm,” he observed. “What d’you reckon we should do with it now?”

“I dunno,” Harry-as-Neville said. “Hand it over to McGonagall, I s’pose. She’s Headmistress now; she’ll know what it’s about.” He examined his last card, and the single long tooth that he’d extracted from Chamber of Secrets as a souvenir, lying beside the Stone. It would, they’d all thought, and once properly transfigured into a dagger, make a fantastic birthday present for their resident DADA teacher. “Herpo the Foul, responsible for the creation of the first basilisk. That’s appropriate. D’you reckon they’ll be mad at us for doing our basilisk in the end?”

“Well, they weren’t exactly doing anything about it themselves, were they?” Hermione sniffed.

“They couldn’t,” Ron pointed out. “Even supposing that they knew it was there.”

“Oh, that’s reassuring!”

“I’m just saying. The door could only be opened by someone who speaks Snake. Sirius does know you speak Snake, doesn’t he, Harry? Only that’s a bit of a shocker, to drop on your parents just like
that. I know if I were a Parselmouth suddenly, I’d have to work my way up to it carefully with Mum, or she’d be down at the post registering me for Howlers every breakfast from now till the end of the century.”

“I said he did, didn’t I? Him and Remus both; exploding Voldemort and pity-it-wasn’t-his-way-with-the-ladies and all?”

“I don’t think you really want Voldemort’s way with the ladies, mate,” Harry-as-Neville said. “All in all, I think you got the better part of the deal.” He rolled on his back and cast a *tempus* charm. “All that, and it’s not even lunch yet. What have you got for us this afternoon, Hermione?”

“We could sneak out and visit Charlie,” she suggested. “At St. Mungo’s, and tell him all about it. Professor Lupin gave Harry here a key to his office, for emergencies, didn’t he, Harry? We could use the floo.”

“I’m sure we could,” Neville-as-Harry said, before Ron could reply. “But that doesn’t mean we should. Doesn’t he have his progress assessment with his main Healers today, Ron?”

“Yeah,” Ron nodded. “He does. And with the tests they run, he’s not going to want any visitors, even if the results are good. They’re not nice, those tests. Dead nasty, actually, from what I’ve read, only nobody would tell me what they’re like, so I had to go looking, didn’t I?” His long face flickered with tight worry. Hermione slid over and took his hand.

“We’ll go back down to the basilisk’s room then,” she said comfortingly. “And get him another tooth. Maybe we can get Sirius to transfigure it into a dragon for him, to keep on his table? Just a carved one, not a moving one?”

“That’d be wicked.” He revived a bit. “That won’t take all afternoon, though.”

“I know what will!” Harry-as-Neville sat up. “Why don’t we go down to the kitchens, and ask the house-elves if we can make Sirius a cake?”

“Oooh, yes!” Hermione brightened. “That’s a great idea, Neville! What kind do you think he’ll like?”

“Butter cream,” Sirius said as he clambered through the portrait hole, his teacher’s robes belted neatly about his thin waist (he’d just had his NEWT class and they were practicing curses, Harry knew; a pastime that was best done without an abundance of flowy material about you to trip you up) and satchel of books over his shoulder. “With more butter cream, topped by more butter cream, and just a titch of butter cream. What are you lot doing here? You’re supposed to be in bed, recovering from that bad round of sausage that I told the other teachers sent you all to...” He paused as he looked into the center of the circle they’d made, eyes narrowing in on both Philosopher’s Stone and the still somewhat drippy and decidedly fresh basilisk tooth. Eight guilty, if not convincingly repentant, eyes looked up at him. “Should I even ask? Oh wait. I’m a teacher now. That’s a rhetorical question, isn’t it? Hurrah, I got one!” He dug in his pocket. “Oh, Moonshine?”

There was a pause, then...

“Sirius. Thank God.” Remus’ harassed face appeared. The area about it looked rather dark, and his head appeared to be framed by a mop. “I did the interview for Wizarding Wireless and am back at the Ministry again, but that bloody Skeeter woman caught up with me, and now she won’t leave me alone. It’s absolutely terrible; I’ve literally been driven back in the closet in self-defense.”

“Rita Skeeter?” Harry-as-Neville said with interest, coming to peer over Sirius’ shoulder. “That
reporter whose Animagus is a beetle?"

"Neville? Is that you? And... Sorry? She’s a pain in my arse, but she’s not an Animagus. I saw the Register when I went down to confirm McWolf, and she’s not on it."

“And I saw her at St. Mungo’s, transforming in the loo stall, when I went in the wrong one last time I was visiting Mum and Dad.” He pointed. “Only I was reminded, because there’s one just like her sitting on your shoulder.”

“Wha... The bloody fuck there is!” A rather more violent expletive followed, and a bang, and a feminine shriek. “Oh Miss Skeeter. Isn’t this an interesting turn of events.” Another flash followed. “No, no. Into the flask with you. Fantastic. Here, have a little oxygen charm to be going on with, and I’ll deal with you later. Well, Sirius?”

“The kids ate a lot of bad sausage at breakfast,” Sirius obliged. “And spent the morning in bed, and are feeling better now, only they’ve got Potions after lunch, and we’re not sure they’re feeling that better. Do you mind, oh Co-Head, if I give them a note to go down to the kitchens and bake me a birthday cake instead? The smells will be rather pleasanter, and we’ll both benefit too, quite aside from the lovely Philosopher’s Stone and the fresh dripping basilisk fang that they picked me up as presenties. I know where the Stone came from, of course, and believe you me, I would like the story there – the full story there – but I have to admit, the fang has me stumped. If it’s not too much trouble, kiddos, would you mind telling me where you got your hands on such a rare and exotic specimen, and oh yeah, where, exactly, is the great bloody snake it rode in on?"

There was another pause.

“Downstairs,” Hermione said timidly. “In the secret dungeons under Myrtle’s loo. It’s dead now, don’t worry, Professor. We brought a rooster, just like it said in the book that came with Ron’s toy basilisk, and when Harry called it out, the real basilisk that it, the rooster crowed right away, and it died, just like that. It didn’t even get a chance to see us, really; we had the invisibility cloak and everything.”

Sirius stared down at her.

“Moonlight,” he said finally.

“Yes, my love?”

“I’m not sure you can call it a real emergency, as Miss Granger here has informed me that that mythical Monster of Slytherin’s in the even more mythical Chamber of Secrets, is in fact, dead now, thanks to their prudent and timely application of rooster, but as the entire event clearly, clearly appears to have been pre-meditated, we appear to have Immediate Issues to deal with. Do you think you could get away, truly, because I’m feeling rather in need of personal, professional, and parental support right now.”

“Ah. Well... Yes to the cake, obviously; and as for the other... I’ll be home as soon as I can. May I have a word with Harry, please?”

He handed over the mirror. Neville-as-Harry took it with suitably melodramatic reluctance.

“Moony,” he started.

“I’m sorry? Didn’t quite catch that.”

“Professor Lupin,” he amended.
“Much better. You may go to the kitchens and make Professor Black his birthday cake. Butter cream with butter cream, topped with butter cream, and butter cream roses at whim. First, though, and on your way down, you will stop by Headmistress McGonagall’s office and deliver the Philosopher’s Stone that you found on the third floor, along with whatever explanation she demands of you on how you managed to obtain it. After that... If there’s anything left of you... You will inform her of the incident that led to the demise of one of the school roosters. May I presume that it is dead?”

“No, no,” Neville as Harry reassured him. “Right as rain, actually. We put it right back in the coop by Hagrid’s hut after we were done with it, and it got right back to its bugs.”

“Excellent. There’s that at least. Still, you will inform her of the related incident.”

“Should we tell her that Ron and Hermione are engaged now?” he asked meekly.

“OI!”

“HARRY!”

“I’m sure she’ll be delighted to hear it,” Remus said. “I wouldn’t count on it to improve her mood, though. Ron, Hermione – congratulations. You have my permission to bake yourselves a celebratory cake as well, should you have the time.”

“We’re not actually... I mean,” Hermione said, flustered. “Only it was a contingent offer, on. Erm. Growing up, and. Erhm. I assume, continued... mutual... compatibility...” She trailed off.

“Prudent,” her Head of House said approvingly. “In the meantime, mind the rules. No snogging, no broom-closets, and absolutely no visiting each other in each other’s dorms at any time.”

“OI! WE ARE ELEVEN! Well, Hermione is twelve, but STILL!”

“Are you? Only I would have thought otherwise, Mr. Weasley, considering your obvious status as a trained magi-zoologist specializing in the handling of Class XXXX and XXXXX species, never mind that rather stellar education you received from Cuddly Creatures University. Hell-hounds, trolls, basilisks... Whatever shall you be dealing with next?”

“McGonagall again,” Sirius said. “Off you go, now, the lot of you.” He waited till they went and collapsed on the sofa, howling. From the mirror, and still in the closet, Remus waited. Eventually, Sirius sat up, wiping at his eyes.

“I love you, Moony,” he said. “Cuddly Creatures University? That was brilliant. What do you think she’ll do to them?’

“Not a lot,” he said frankly. “Never mind tonight’s agenda, we’ve been trying to figure out a way to get the Stone out of the damned mirror and back to the Flamels since Dumbledore left, and he’s been less than cooperative on dropping hints.”

“Arsehole. D’you reckon he would really have just let them die, all out of misplaced pride?”

“I don’t know, Siri. I really don’t. I’m just glad we don’t have to find out. I think that’s what it’s likely to come down to for Minerva too, in the end.”

“Still. Skiving, third floor, theft of rooster, endangering selves-and-others via basilisk... Blimey. We’re not going to have a single point left in the hourglass by the end of the day, are we?”

“Maybe a single point,” Remus reassured him. “As they’ll be sure to point out that they really just
borrowed the rooster. And there’s applied creativity, bravery, ridding the school of said basilisk, and
discovery of a *bona fide* historically magical site. Also, Harry and Neville didn’t actually skive,
because they’re not actually enrolled anymore, so that should help too.” He glanced around. “I
suppose I should go soon. I’m due for lunch with the French delegation in ten minutes. I’m sorry,
love. This really isn’t how I intended to spend your birthday.”

“You can make it up to me tonight,” Sirius reassured him. “And if you can’t, we’ll just rebook. I’m
fine with that, as long as you realize that I will apply interest to the owed capital there.” He tucked his
feet under him, tracing the edge of the mirror. “Moony?”

“How long do you think it’ll take, really? For them to finish the job they came to do? I mean... I
don’t want another war, I really don’t. And then there’s the Longbottoms of course, and the hell
they’re in, and if there’s anything to be done there, really, it should be done and as quickly as
possible of course... But once it’s done...”

He trailed off. Remus shook his head in negation.

“One day at a time, love,” he said. “One moment, one hour.”

“I spent nine years living one moment and hour at a time,” his fiancé said forlornly. “It’d be really
nice, you know, to be able to think in terms of years again. Decades, even.” He wiped at his eyes.
Remus reached out from his side of the mirror, and touched the glass between them.

“You’re finished your classes for the day, I know... Give me half an hour,” he said. “I’ll go, I’ll make
my excuses, and I’ll be right home.”

“You don’t have to do that. And this is important.”

“No,” he disagreed. “The cure is important, and they have that now. The rest is just Fudge trying to
profit off the years and years that he and his Ministry punished me, and people like me, for
something that was never our fault. He actually tried to pull the ‘the patent was actually registered
through the Ministry, therefore the Ministry would be delighted to accept a token acknowledging
their sponsorship of his applied talents’ line’, to the persisting point where I actually had to remind
him, in public, that Fleamont was never a government employee at any point in his life. He was
registered and licensed as an independent Potioneer for just that reason, so that the Ministry could
never make any claims on the royalties and residuals on anything he invented while he worked there.
He didn’t even have the native brains, Fudge that is, to, look embarrassed, and isn’t that just
embarrassing in and of itself?”

“Did he not have a single clue there that a Hogwarts History professor might just have an idea of
how the finer points of the process of government work?” Sirius said, bemused. “Or that you might
have had the brains yourself, to, oh, look things up there?”

“Apparently not. I might not be a werewolf anymore, but once bitten, always animalistically stupid, I
suppose.” He shook his head. “A basilisk. Under the school. In the Chamber of Secrets. I should be
excited, I know, but honestly, I think I’m dead done in on the surprises for the moment.”

“They did say they killed it,” Sirius pointed out. “It’s not like it’s going anywhere now, and we can
always wait till next term to make the announcement of your next great historical discovery.”

“Yes. Excellent. Let’s. Anything I can pick you up?”

“Nah. I’ll wait till you get home, and you can pick *me* up.”
His fiancé offered him a soft, fond look... The mirror darkened. Sirius sighed, and tucked it away before heaving himself up and heading to the door that led to the Co-Heads’ quarters.
Harry Potter’s second and quite probably final leave-taking from Hogwarts had been hard – much harder than he’d expected. In the end, it had turned out that he could have taken an extra week as a student - no matter how good Augusta Longbottom was, the introduction of two completely new staff members to Hogwarts, particularly given the particulars of their proposed new positions, was still a matter subject to bureaucracy and paperwork - but after due consideration, taking the interim week as holiday to adjust to his new identity had seemed, not just a good, but necessary plan. Decision made, the two 'boys' had made the quick, clean break, and shortly after the last dinner, having slipped through to the floo in Sirius’ office (laden down with good wishes, reassurances, and a rather stunning plethora of small and hurried gifts gathered by all of their schoolmates), Harry had slipped away on his own. Once done, he’d dropped all his glamours and spent the evening apparaing here and there, poking about the corners of his various old haunts at not-quite-random, and attempting to process the fact that his life, as the song went, was both truly over and truly begun.

Now, though, he was back where he’d started again. He stood, hands in his pockets, on the threshold of the inner door of the Co-Heads' suite and studied the vision before him... Sirius was sitting on the sofa before the crackling fireplace, bony legs crossed as he stared into the flames. His finger was held as a marker in a tattered paperback book, that lay, in forgotten turn, on his lap. He looked tired, Harry thought, and more than a bit vague.

Tidy, though. He always looked tidy now, or more accurately impeccable, in both grooming and dress. It was a bit disconcerting, really. Harry could not imagine the Sirius Black he’d known, even had he been free and had had free access to all of his vaults, caring one bit about the status of his stubble or the crease of his slacks. Quite the contrary; his original godfather had hoarded and flaunted his former bad-boy reputation as the only galleon left him from the rich treasure of his raped and pillaged past.

Given that, Harry was more than aware enough of the subtleties of Local Sirius and Local Remus’ relationship to realize that Local Sirius’ meticulous attention to his own appearance reflected, not any natural inclination toward neatness on his part, but his partner’s dictated preferences. Too, it was part of his ongoing therapy – the myriad of small, precise rituals involved in caring for himself and his physical appearance were both soothing and grounding, and served directly to counter the effects of the brutal, tragic divorce from his own mental and physical sanity that he’d been served in Azkaban.

Still, despite the tidy, expensive clothes and the immaculately shining and braided hair, the permanent physical damage there was obvious. The man before him was rail-thin, verging on clinically emaciated, and, thanks to the damage done his metabolism while incarcerated, always would be. There was too, a distinct tremor to his hands when he was stressed or tired, and he blinked, on the whole, far more rapidly and often than was normal in any human, no matter how trying their day. He took a potion to counter those two effects, Harry knew – if only because that last
in particular rather unnerved his students.

Harry slung off the invisibility cloak and tapped lightly on the door frame. Sirius’ head turned.

“Pup,” he greeted him. “You’re back.”

“Yeah.” Harry slid off his dueling boots, and hung the silvery material from a hook. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to take off without notice.”

“You’re a grown man. You don’t have to ask anyone for permission, yeah?”

Harry smiled at him crookedly.

“No,” he said. “I suppose I don’t, at that – but consideration is a quality to be cultivated regardless of generation, I understand.”

“McGonagall?”

“Quote unquote. And, of course, Madam Longbottom.” He came to sit beside him, helping himself from the tin of biscuits (cinnamon sugar, in the shape of milk bones) on the coffee table as he did so. “What are you reading?”

“Mm?” Sirius looked down at the book in his lap, and brought it up to examine it as if he’d never seen it before. “Poetry. Muggle poetry. One of Fleamont’s favourites; he met the bloke who wrote it once, and kept it in his library. Gave it to me for my seventeenth birthday, and I’ve kept it on my shelf since.”

Harry took it from his hands and examined it.


“You do?”

“Yeah. Charlie – my Charlie – was a big Eliot fan. He never was into Muggle stuff the way Arthur was, but he had a Muggleborn friend at the Reserves who got him hooked on a few select authors, at least. Left me his copy, when he...” He stopped, and to forestall the obvious, read the epigraph out loud instead.

S’io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s’i’odo il vero,
Senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.

"’If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth,’’ Sirius quoted back. ‘This flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy.’ Dante’s Inferno. Count Guido da Montefeltro; eighth chasm of Hell. Guido explains that he is speaking freely to Dante on the particulars that follow only because he believes Dante is one of the dead who could never return to earth to report what he says.”

“I got it, yeah. Are you informing me as Guido, or reassuring me as Dante?”
“Either-or. Never mind the eighth chasm, we do have that Unbreakable Vow to be going on with. Works just as well, I suppose. Hot chocolate? Tea?”

“I’m good.” Harry ran his hand over his perfectly sedate and properly behaved hair as his adopted father re-settled himself, looking around. “Where’s Remus got to? I know Fudge sent him that owl at dinner asking him to drop by for a quick word again, but shouldn’t he be back by now?”

Sirius just shrugged vaguely. Harry frowned at him.

“Is that an ‘I dunno; maybe he’s slowed down by the weight of all the accolades they’ve poured on him’ shrug, or an “I don’t want to say because I’m still mentally picturing you as an eleven-year-old and am not inclined to burden you with inappropriately adult angst’ shrug?”

“That obvious, am I? Or just a predictable take-off of your version of Sirius again?”

“No, and no again. Not really.” Harry helped himself to another cinnamon-sugar bone, even as he dug, in turn, through the bones of his old and long-faded memories. Carefully, so as not to disturb certain of them; even after all of this time, there were those that evoked far more bitter undertones than even the vaunted Prufrock. J. Alfred could manage. “You know, I never got a chance to celebrate one of his birthdays with him? Mine, yeah, but I think... He was shut up for a good three years longer than you were. I think he lost a lot of points of personal reference. And I was young, and no one ever thought to remind me that I should look up the date besides, and it was especially irrelevant to me anyway because I’d never celebrated my own birthday – at all - till my eleventh, when Hagrid came to take me to Diagon Alley and brought me a cake and bought me my owl as a gift. After that... Even now, if I’m honest, all those years later... It always surprises me a bit the fuss people make over the day. Mine, or any other. I mean, I get why they’re important, and kept a calendar and all, and never missed one on anyone I loved, but I could never really internalize any of it.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah.” He put the book down and tilted his head back. “Don’t get me wrong. I loved him. Your counterpart, I mean. A lot. But at a distance, mostly, and the last year... Things got pretty bad. He was never exonerated for his supposed crimes, see, not till after he died - he escaped Azkaban rather than the other- and though everybody important to him understood that he was innocent, he was locked up again for his own protection on Dumbledore’s order. At Grimmauld Place. The unadulterated, unrenovated version of Grimmauld Place, with all of its associated bad memories. He’d offered it up as the Headquarters for the Order, but never anticipated that it would turn into just another sort of prison. It didn’t do much to help with his recovery at all. Exactly nothing, in fact, if not just the reverse, because he never got any of the therapy that’s been helping you, and everybody, including himself, just seemed to expect him to get better by virtue of the fact that he was no longer actively surrounded by Dementors.”

“Wasn’t your Moony there for him?”

“He was, yeah, when he could be... But I don’t know that you were together there. As...” He gestured vaguely and delicately.


“Yeah. That. Those. I don’t know that you were ever any of those. And after you... He died... He got married. To a woman. They had a son. They died in the final battle, and the kid was raised by his grandmother. Well, it was a bit of a group effort there, really. I was his godfather, and Gin and I had effective, if not legal, joint custody.”
The cross-eyed look Sirius offered him at that was both bemused and amusing.

“Remy married a bird?” he repeated. “And had a kid?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh. Well.” He sat back, looked most disconcerted. “Blimey, that’s different, innit? Different, and definitely, definitely one thing I can say that wouldn’t happen here.”

“Is it?”

“Well, yeah. We’ve both known we were bent before we ever got our Hogwarts letters, and the only time he ever looked twice at a girl – I never did, not once, ever - was at that time of the month. That was all the wolf though, succumbing biologically, he explained straight up, to the inherent instinct to procreate and extend the pack, and as soon as he recovered every month he went right back to what we both viewed as normal.” He scratched his chin. “Did he knock her up before he married her? That might have done it; he’d have felt obliged then, I know.”

“I don’t think so? I mean, she got pregnant right away, but there were the full nine months – barely – before he was born. And yeah, she had to push pretty hard to get him to marry her in the first place, because he was convinced he was too poor and old and broken for her, but he never once said that it wasn’t because he didn’t want to marry her. I s’pose one could argue that he was missing you, and she honestly, honestly didn’t give one buggery bollock that he was a werewolf – but if he had been straight, or even bi... Well. There are more differences between him and your Moony than that, even given the eyes.”

Sirius actually sat up at that, pulling an afghan over him. “D’you mind if I ask?”

“No. No. Not at all. He had this really horrid mustache for one. Hideous, really. “ He grinned as Sirius snorted with laughter. “And he was a lot less of a natural control freak. It wasn’t just the raging case of gentlemanly reserve he’s got going on, either. He had that, alright; he just wasn’t as strong as he is here. He wasn’t weak, exactly,” he hastened to add. “When push came to shove. It just took a lot more pushing to get to the point where your Moony seems to set up house.”

“In other words, he was a beta.”

Harry shrugged and nodded. Sirius helped himself to another cinnamon sugar bone.

“The wife and kid would make a lot of sense, actually,” he said thoughtfully. “If that were the case. Betas might or might not prefer their own gender, but that’s only on the personal level. They mate with the women handed them, and if one offers to be their mate... There aren’t a lot who’d turn it down. They might not get another, or the implied invitation to sire a child.”

“He sure wasn’t that enthusiastic about the idea of children at first. I mean, he was thrilled about it later, but when he first found out, he actually left her for a bit. Spouted a lot of rot about how it wasn’t planned, and that even if the kid were normal, it would still be tainted by his presence, and would grow to resent him, and they were better off without him .”

“Yup.” Sirius nodded. “Classic beta. Question for you?”

“Sure?”

“I don’t suppose it was you who told him to get his shit together and get his arse back to his woman?”
Harry blinked at him. “Yeah,” he said. “It was, actually. How’d you know?”

“You just said they asked you to be godfather after he was born. It’s pretty indicative. Never mind your personal, human connection... You’re Jamie’s son, and he would have seen you as inheritor of his old Alpha crown. If Beta-Moony had come to you and told you he wanted to leave his mate and kid, it wouldn’t have been a statement on his part, it would have been a question. Do you grant me the rights to them, O Mighty Son of Alpha, Inheritor of the throne of Pack o’ Potter, or should I slink off in approved and traditional fashion and leave them to you? When you sent him back – I presume you did...”

“Rudely,” Harry admitted. “And he did bring my dad into it, actually. Said that she’d be fine, she was with her family, and he reckoned Dad would have wanted him to watch out for me while I was off hunting Horcruxes, and I said I reckoned, actually, that I was pretty sure Dad would have wondered why he wasn’t off taking care of his own kid. He was mad as shit, but he looked as if he’d been hexed in the bollocks too, and in the end... He went back.”

“Welp.” Sirius crunched his biscuit in satisfaction of a mystery well-solved. “There you go, then. “

_Huh. Doesn’t that just explain so very, very much.

“One more question there. His natural inclinations aside... Would it have made a difference if the woman in question had been related to that Sirius?”

“Oh yeah, definitely,” Sirius said promptly. “If we’d been together there, after my counterpart died his wolf would have instinctively have seen her as having first and absolute rights on him. The man might’ve shied away a bit at first, in that ‘are you crazy, I’m not good enough for you’ kind of way you just mentioned, but in the end... whether he, the man that is, that is, truly loved her or not, love wouldn’t have been his _wolf’s_ final consideration. There wouldn’t have been a consideration at all. It would have rolled over and presented at her first sign of interest.”

_Huh.

“Huh,” Harry said aloud.

“Was she?” his new father asked.

“What, directly related?”

“Yeah. She didn’t bear the name Black, but she was about as close as it got, in consanguineous terms otherwise.”

“There you go then,” he said again. “What about me? Was I straight there too?”

“I’m... not sure? You had all sorts of posters of Muggle girls on motorbikes in your room at Grimmauld place, but in real life... You never seemed interested in anyone at all, really. I think... I think looking back... That Azkaban might have... Er. Taken that from you.”

“Posters aren’t proof. I had them here too, but they were all for the bikes, really. The birds just tended to come along with, and annoyed the shit out of my mum besides. As for the other... S’ definitely possible,” Sirius conceded. “Probable, even. Sometimes I think, even now, that if I weren’t Moony’s mate...” He stopped abruptly. “I guess that answers _that_ question.”

“I still think he may have been bent,” Harry reassured him. “Your counterpart, I mean. I sort of wondered, sometimes, looking back after it was all over, when I had time to sit back and think on things properly, and to remember them objectively... Whether he might have been in love with my
dad. There were hints sometimes. Subtle things. He had problems separating past and present a lot of the time, like you do when you have your flashbacks, but he never got to the point where he could identify them as flashbacks. He just... went back and forth a lot, and called me James, and it was just... Really weird.”

Sirius looked at him warily at that.

“ Weird,” he repeated. “He never hit on you or anything, did he?”

“No, no. It was more the way he talked. The expression he’d get when he came in conversation. Like he would have. You know.” He smiled a little. “Moved all worlds and eternity for him.”

“Yeah. Well, that’s possible too, I suppose. Dunno about your dad, but our Jamie had a way about him. Never got me going that way, mind you, and once Moony claimed me, there was no...”

He stopped.

“Is this making you uncomfortable?” he asked directly.

“I’m a hundred thirty-eight, Padfoot. I’ve had sex before. Quite a lot of it, actually, even if it was just with the one woman. “

“Right. Right. Brilliant. Good on you. I’ll try to internalize that fact for both of our sakes, as soon as possible. Well. I was fifteen when I managed to turn to Padfoot the first time. First full moon after, both Pete and your da... Jamie... missed it. Bad, bad flu. Half the school was down. Remus was fine though, and so was I. Anyway. He went to the Shack, and I showed up as a surprise. He knew who I was right away, of course.” He tapped his nose. “Funny as shit, that. Never seen a bloke look so gobsmacked in my life. After he got over the shock, and he transformed, we went to the forest. Got half in, and he turned on me. Knocked me flat, and ..”

“Aaaaand... Imagination activated. Can we skip this part after all?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. He just... He marked me. Nipped me a bit on the hip here, to make the point that he was.” He actually flushed a bit, self-consciously. “Claiming me as his. The other... the sex... came later. Once we woke up. “

“You shagged each other when you were fifteen?”

“He was fifteen, yeah. I was sixteen. And it wasn’t like that. Honestly, it was like... It was like we were married after that. After that first night, our wedding night, in every way that counted... I never looked at another person sexually again. Not once. Couldn’t even imagine it. He did- but that was the wolf again, and it was just...” He gestured vaguely. “Not even shagging, really. Just the curse manifesting again, in one of its only vaguely redeeming aspects. The wolf is, above all, a biological animal and relates sex, as I said, with procreation and continuation of the pack. It knew it wouldn’t get that with me, so it would go sniffing about for someone it had a chance of knocking up.”

Harry couldn’t help but frown a little at that.

“Didn’t that bother you? I mean... If you felt as if you were married... Didn’t the other feel like cheating, a bit?”

“Nah. It might have, if he’d ever done another bloke, but he never did. Has. Just women, and even then, we had a hard rule. He never went back for seconds. Well,” he temporized. “With one, he did. A few times, but that was okay, because I liked her too. Not like that, but as a person. As part of the extended pack, even; she never said anything, but we always kind of figured that she’d figured him
out, because they were Charms partners all the time we were at Hogwarts, and she had their project calendar in her binder with the lunar cycle charted. And she knew he was with me, and didn’t want anything from him but the occasional rough shag in a rougher corner, so it was just convenience for both of them, I gather, since she couldn’t be buggered with any of the other, more ordinary options on tap. She had very strange taste, that one, never mind the bloke she married. We’re still trying to figure him out.”

Harry blinked at him as that processed.

“You’re talking about Professor Lovegood? You said back on my first day of classes that they’d been on a date or two, but you’re telling me that she and Remus actually...”

“She and Moony,” Sirius corrected. Harry’s mouth dropped wider.

“Oh my God,” he said, and he guffawed. “Oh my God. Moony, Luna... She named her daughter after him! After the wolf!”

Sirius looked hugely startled at that, then grinned in wonder. “I guess she did, at that,” he said. “How very weird. And not, if you know her at all, again.”

“I didn’t know about that,” his new son said. “But you’re going to like her even more than you did then when I tell you this next bit. The potion. The cure. In my world... Luna’s son, Lorcan invented it. “

Sirius stared.

“Pan’s grandson,” he repeated. “Little Luna’s boy? He made all this possible?”

“Yeah. He was bitten by a tribal rogue on a trip to the rainforests with his dad, Rolf – Rolf Scamander, Newt Scamander’s grandson - when he was twenty. Came out of his first transformation like a god possessed. He wasn’t scared, or overwhelmed, or afraid of what happened... He was just offended. He was always such a dignified kid, you know? Not stuffy or a ponce or anything, the furthest thing from it, he just liked things done properly. We used to kid that Rolf’s great-grandmum – she’d bred hippogryphs way back when – must’ve mixed the lines a bit there, magically speaking, because really, everyone who knew Lorrie even a little would swear under Veritaserum that he was part hippogryph himself.”

Sirius snorted.

“Anyway,” Harry continued. “He wasn’t a great student, really - never pulled higher than an A in potions his entire time in Hogwarts; he was a COMC buff like the rest of the Scamanders - but after that first moon... He had one purpose in life. One. To find a cure. It took him six months. When it was done, and the eighth month since he’d been turned came and went, and he was still human... He said... “Thank fuck. I fucking hate potions. I don’t know how anybody can like this buggery subject; I’m going back to the jungle now, Ma, can you make sure the recipe gets passed around to everyone who needs it,” and there it was.”

“Huh. I’ll definitely have to tell Moony that one. He’ll want to make sure that the family is properly and indirectly compensated out of the proceeds. Any suggestions?”

“Dunno about Professor Lovegood, but my Luna spent her entire life looking for the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. Maybe you could send out an expedition to hunt one down for her?”

“Oh, you’ve heard of them, then?”

“Of course. Only they’re not exactly endangered, are they? Great ruddy pests; they think they’re imaginary and that they don’t have an effect on anything, and stumble around poking holes in bloody well everything with those horns of theirs if you don’t keep an eye out as a result. Socks, mostly; they nick them for their nests, though only one of a pair because they’re under the chronic delusion that humans wear them on their heads and only really need one, and cheese, because... Well. Cheese. Who doesn’t like cheese?”

“Are you serious?”

“Always.” He grinned at him. “They’re dead interesting, really. Evolved in Sweden, and moved to Switzerland, and everyone knows that after awhile, all the Swiss cheese manufacturers put out that they designed their product that way instead of just admitting to the chronic national infestation.”

Harry shook his head. They helped themselves to another cinnamon sugar bone apiece.

“What about you?” Sirius asked after a bit, diffidently. “And your wife? You said that she was she your one and only?” Harry chewed his bite and swallowed.

“Emotionally and sexually, yeah,” he said. “I mean, I’m a bloke, we all look at other women, but acting on it... I loved her. She loved me. And...” He shifted a bit. It was odd, he thought. A hundred thirty-eight or no, he’d never really discussed this sort of thing with anybody before. Back in his world, his closest friends had been his brothers-in-law, and they, of course, had absolutely no interest in discussing their sister’s sex life.

“We were good together,” he said at last. “I mean... We had a good marriage. In all ways. We were very. Um. Compatible.”

“That’s good. You don’t need me to tell you that that’s important. And... No thoughts for blokes?”

“No. Never. It wasn’t really on my radar. I honestly didn’t think I knew anybody who was bent. Again, looking back, of course I did... But it never processed as such. It took me over five years as it was to realize that the flowered bonnets and knitting patterns weren’t just quirks on Dumbledore’s part, and things never really improved.”

The snort turned to a guffaw.

“Siri?” Remus’ voice sounded from the door. “Harry! Is everything alright?”

“Course it is. Why would you ask?’

“Reflex?” He shucked his robes, tossing them over the hamper. There was a whoosh, and they disappeared with a punctuating burp. The shoes followed, tucked onto the mat, and he came over, bending over the back of the sofa and pressing a light kiss to Sirius’ upturned lips. “Helo, cariad. Mm. What have we got here?”

“Cinnamon sugar bones,” he said. “From Auntie Min and Cousin Gussie.”

“Brilliant.” He helped himself, coming around and sitting on the arm of the sofa. Sirius leaned against him; he put his arm around him. “What brings you by, cub?”

“I just wanted to talk to Sirius a bit,” he said. “About stuff.”
“Yeah,” Sirius said. “Enlightening stuff. Here’s a mind-bender for you; you were a beta in Harry’s world, Moonlight. And married, to a woman, with a kid!”

“What?” Remus looked down blankly.

“You might have been bi,” Harry offered. “I’m told I’m not very good at spotting that sort of thing. Rather awful, actually.”

“I was still bent though. Thank God. Pining after Jamie, possibly, but at least there weren’t tits involved. Only there was, because he was a great tit sometimes, but...”

“James,” Harry corrected.

“Mm?”

“It’s easier. My father was James there. And mum was – is – Lily. I went through quite a few memories over the years, and talked to a lot of people who knew them, and nobody called them Jamie or Lils. I dunno, I reckon it doesn’t matter, but it might make it easier if we try for the conscious differentiation there.”

“It might, at that,” Sirius conceded. “Yeah, okay. Did you have nicknames for us? Beta-Moony and me, I mean?”

“Yeah. You were Snuffles.”

“Snu... WHAT?”

Remus roared.

“It was your – your counterpart’s – code name when he was on the run,” Harry explained. “We wrote letters, and I couldn’t address them to Sirius Black, or even Padfoot. So we came up with Snuffles.”

“Merlin’s saggy shorts. What about Remus?”

“Mostly I just called him Professor. It’s what he was when I first met him. The curse followed pattern of course, and after he left Hogwarts he invited me to call him Remus, but I was a kid. I couldn’t quite manage it.”

“I can’t believe you had a kid!” Sirius said to his fiance. “Was he a werewolf too, in the end, pup?”

“No. He took after his mum. She had her own special talent.”

“Uh?”

“She was a Metamorphmagus.”

Remus’ eyes widened at that. Sirius sat up.

“Like Dora? My cousin Dora? Dora Black Tonks, Dora?”

“Very like,” Harry said dryly. “Very, very, very like. Some might even say exactly alike.”

“Oh my God! Moony!” He thwacked his mate. “I don’t believe you! You married my cousin? My little tiny baby Auror of a cousin? What kind of dirty old man are you?”
“I bathe regularly, thank you, Sirius, and as I won’t be thirty two till next March, the other too, may be considered entirely inaccurate. As for marrying Nymphadora... any version of her, and I’m not talking on her Metamorphmagic abilities... I did no such thing,” Remus said repressively. “She’s a lovely girl, I’m sure, in any dimension, and though I’m sure again that we’d have beautiful children, here or there, I am not currently interviewing maternal candidates.”

“Uh huh.” He sat up, wiping his eyes. “So what was the big emergency with Fudge? He just saw you this morning, after all.”

“No emergency. Just another object lesson in his version of rather poorly executed diplomatic blackmail.”

“Huh?”

“The Potters are about to come back into fashion in a big way. Hizzoner was quite perturbed again when the Evening Prophet revealed our intention to send you away, Harry, without consulting him first. Offered me Aurors to guard you when I pointed out the security issues, the whole works. “ His lips tilted. “He even suggested that if I wanted to keep it in the family, that I look into hiring Madam Longbottom’s young American cousin – the Dueling Master who’d so obligingly popped in to help with the sting in Edinburgh; he actually had the bollocks to call it ‘our sting’ - to keep an eye on you. “

“What did you say to that?”

“That I’m fairly sure an International level Dueling and DADA Master has better things to do than trail after an eleven-year-old schoolboy, though as a wards buff, and, considering that Neville is blood family, he’d been kind enough to offer to set up the Fidelius on your and his behalf.”

“Did he offer him my job so his days wouldn’t be quite so boring?” Sirius asked.

“He did suggest, yes, that should you, my poor ailing fiancé, be finding your joint positions as Head of Gryffindor, DADA instructor and brand new parent, a bit too much, that it might be worth revisiting as as an option.”

“You refused, right?”

“Of course. Then he tried for the compromise, cub.... Your accepting the Order of Merlin on your grandfather’s behalf, a few interviews and public appearances...”

“Doesn’t that sound familiar,” Harry muttered. He sighed, and put the book he yet held down reluctantly. “I should get going now, I suppose. Leave you two alone to ...” He waved a vague hand.

“Don’t be silly,” Sirius said. “You don’t have to go anywhere. As for...” He waved vaguely back. “We were at it all afternoon. My half-day off; Moony’s as good as skiving mandated meetings as anyone ever was... My birthday candle’s feeling quite thoroughly blown, I assure you.”

“Sirius!” Remus smacked his head at Harry’s duly pained look. “That is our son you’re squicking!”

“He’s a grown up, Rem,’ he reminded him. “Weren’t you the one who told me that we had to respect that? Sorry,” he said to Harry apologetically. “In case you haven’t figured it out yet, he’s the worst control freak this side of this version of the pond.”

“I got a few ideas, yeah.” Harry’s lips twitched. “I’ll be fine. Candles aside, though; I don’t want to keep you up. One thing you’ve probably figured out about me, I’m a bit of a natural night owl. Combine that with years of working in the dark, it’s a bit of a habit to be starting my real workday
after everyone else is settled in.”

“I bet you were a great Auror,” Sirius said wistfully. “I mean, Neville said that you kind of felt shuffled into the job, after, but still. Were you?”

“I had my moments. They weren’t typically the favourite ones of my day, but they were alright.”

“Can I...” He hesitated. “Do you have a few more minutes? To talk more about your life? Only... I’d kind of like to know, you know, more about you. As a person. The more we know, the easier it’ll be to see you for who you are, and not who we think you are, right?”

Harry said nothing, but sat down again. Remus went to put the kettle on.

“What would you like to know?” he asked. “I mean... There’s a lot there.”

“What were you like?” Sirius said. “I mean... From your year... Who were your mates? The ones who shaped you, the way Jamie and Moony and Pete shaped me? Neville obviously, and Ron... Who else?”

It was not an unexpected question. Legions of reporters had asked variations on the precise theme over the decades... Harry had to work very hard at that to resist the urge to offer up his automatic and obvious snide response: “You mean besides Voldemort?”

There was, of course, a very definitive way of countering that instinctive response. In all those decades, he’d never once employed it. In a weird way, he’d never felt he had the right. His reputation had been a burden... but one that he’d never, not once in his long, long life, felt he had any moral grounds to inflict on another. He might have, had he not so fiercely and truly believed his personal interpretation of the Prophecy to be true... But as he did believe it... And his silence on the matter, in the end, had been the best way to honour, and yes, to thank, the man he’d always understood to be his world’s true hero.

Here, though... He found himself wanting to say the words. Because no matter how good his intentions... No matter the matter of honour... The man, by God and Godric, deserved the recognition for what he’d done, right from the start.

“Neville and I were more acquaintances than friends, after the final battle,” the man who had been Harry Potter said. “We got on and all... But when it came right down to it, we had very different essential interests. He always wanted to go into Herbology. He thought his Gran might argue with him, and push him to be an Auror – but after she watched him get hauled up in front of Voldemort in the moment where he’d claimed victory over what he very mistakenly thought was my dead body, and personally invited him to join his side in front of half the wizarding world...”

“What?”

“Yeah. Tom said he’d make a great Death Eater, once he’d wrapped his head around what it meant to be a Pure Blood anyway. And he told him, Nev did, that those who were left yet didn’t need – had never needed - me to point out that he was a great flaming evil cockroach who needed exterminating, and flipped him the bird in every way there was in the name of Queen, country, God and Longbottom.” He offered a small smile. “I reckon if ever there was a moment that Hogwarts decided that he was hers and she was his, for all time... That was it. He’d spent the year previously defending her and her children in her own halls against the Death Eaters who’d claimed it as spoils, see; running the underground student rebellion and being her proper Headmaster, all at just seventeen. Pretty sure by the end of all that if she had been were a mortal woman and not a big castle, she’d have pulled herself out of the mud and dark and blood, right there and then herself, and
proposed on the spot. Instead, she offered him up the Sword of Gryffindor, literally out of the Sorting Hat after Voldemort jammed it on his head and set it on fire for his cheek, and he took it and just...”

Remus and Sirius stared, spellbound.

“Laid waste,” Harry concluded. “Cut down his familiar, that great bloody snake of his, Nagini – the last of the horcruxes – right there – and I swear, I swear, I heard Godric’s own ghost rising up and roaring in joy when he did it. We all did. And with that flipped bird and stroke of the sword, he rallied what was left of our world and brought it all home. Everybody always said it was me, you know? Thought it was me, because I got in the final blow against the Dark Wanker... But that was just cleaning up. Neville Longbottom was the one who really won the second Wizarding War for us. They gave me the credit, but in the end... Half the world, really, living and dead, and that’s no exaggeration, I promise - spent a good thirty years working toward the end of thanking him for what he did, even if they never properly admitted, or even understood, that he was the one who deserved it all along. “

“But about the Prophecy you told us about? The one that said all that stuff about vanquishing and equals? And each having to die at the hand of the other?”

“It was true enough- applicable enough to me on the one level,” he said. “And yes, Tom made a horcrux of me, but a special kind of horcrux – a horcrux that didn’t follow the standard rules because a) it wasn’t a deliberate action, b) the person whose death facilitated the attachment of his soul-bit to me wasn’t the one he’d originally targeted to trigger the completion of his final safe-guard, and c) though she died, there are those who have always argued that she wasn’t murdered at all. She allowed him to kill her, after he’d told her to move. And once he’d accepted her terms – and he did accept them when he shot the Avada at her... The rules of the defensive magics she’d performed took over, or at least mutated the terms of his original intentions.”

“But he didn’t see her as part of the ritual, right? She was just incidental.”

“It doesn’t matter how he saw her,” Harry said carefully. “It only mattered that she was the only one in the room who did die that night. She knew the prophecy, or part of it anyway. She knew that if Tom showed up, that she and Dad would likely die, but that he would only truly be intending to kill me. So she used the fact against him by employing an old, old type of ritual herself, that decreed that one life may be exchanged toward the end of protecting another from their intended murderer. And he fell for it – right into her trap. “

Remus frowned.

“Do you think she knew he had horcruxes?” he asked.

“I’ve never asked her, but I think it’s highly, highly likely, considering what you told me of her fascination with the Restricted section, and her love of just knowing things, just in case... That she suspected it was a possibility, and tailored the magics she was working with to accommodate for that possibility. His magical construction of a horcrux required a death, you see? Not a random one either, a pre-specified murder. He came there with the intention of using my death to do two things, to foil the prophecy and to create a horcrux with me as the catalyst as an ironic statement that my life would in the end, prevent the death that the Prophecy had said I’d take. So... He set everything up in advance. He prepared the vessel – his wand in advance. He did whatever he had to do, prepared the contract, so to speak, and signed it, even... In advance. The only thing left to him to do once he arrived was to take the life he’d chosen to seal the deal. He cared who it was – the ritual cared; he had to state the name beforehand, as I said- but in the end, the final magics set into action once he’d arrived... didn’t care. He killed mum as an incidental, and pointed at me, with intent – but when the AK didn’t work, the magic took my mum’s death in exchange. And that bollocked everything up,
because the death didn’t fit the parameters of the ritual. In that moment, Tom became the only one who could take me out, as a reflection of the fact that he’d intended to take me out in the first place – but my mother’s blood, in me, that he’d spilled became simultaneously the ward that would keep him from doing it, until and unless I were to actually allow it.”

Sirius considered that carefully.

“So... If we were to pour basilisk venom down your throat now,” he said. “Or throw fiendfyre at you... What would happen?”

Harry scratched his chin.

“As I'm not the Harry Potter that this world's Riddle actually attempted to kill... I’m not sure,” he said. “He and I do match, though, so the soul-bit of him in me, would be likely be expelled, and while I reckon there's a possibility I'd die with it, the odds are much higher, since again it wouldn't be Riddle getting me, that the stuff- the venom or fire - would force the horcrux out of me just to have it bounce right back in again. And any vital physical injuries sustained would at least be partially mitigated when it did return to me - enough to keep my body going, anyway, till Riddle did show up to try himself."

"But you were injured by the basilisk in your world, yeah? And Fawkes had to save you?"

"Yeah, but later, when I'd got a few years of studying the Dark Arts under my belt again, I reckoned I was injured there only because the basilisk attacked me on Riddle's order, acting as as his proxy through his essence as incorporated in the memory in the diary. Bit tricky, because though I technically didn't allow it to bite me, I didn't disallow it either, because at that point... I didn't know I could. There's a certain margin for interpretive error there yet, though, because while I'm hypothesizing to the certain extent on what happened the night he went down the first time, and its implications, magically speaking, he only really and definitively and irrevocably buggered things up for himself - buggered them past the point of any margin of interpretive error - when he came back and got his final body in my world. When he did do that the last time, one of the things he had to use in his potions-bath was the blood of an enemy, forcibly taken. And he caught me, and took it, or rather Pettigrew did it for him...”

Sirius growled. Loudly.

“And my blood became his. He thought that would neutralize my ability to hurt him, but in the end, all it did was create a protective loop. Just as I was his horcrux... He became mine, and from that point on, the standardized interpretation of the Prophecy was set. Either he’d have to allow me to kill him, or I’d have to allow him to kill me, for either of us to die at the hand of the other. He thought as long as he had one more horcrux left, after he killed me, he’d be fine – but Nev killed Nagini, and made him totally mortal.”

“So there’s room in there that Neville was the one who killed him after all, by enabling his death? Even though you were the one to cast the death blow?”

“It depends on how you look on it. How far you look on it, past the point of Tom’s death itself, and into the future after his death. I’ve always thought that was the case, though. On the one hand, you could say that he marked me, and made me into his immediate and active nemesis, but on the deeper level... he marked Neville as his equal too, through the very act of ignoring him. By writing him off as nothing worth thinking on or remembering. Because when it came right down to it... That’s all he was, in the end, right? Riddle, that is? All he was destined to be, not in the short, but in the long run. In the future. Nothing worth thinking on, or remembering. And as Hogwarts operates in the long and future terms, not in the short and immediate one – she decided, as far as she was concerned, after
all was said and done, that the Longbottom is where it’s at whenever she needs saving. In her eyes... I’m just the catalyst for what was ever and always his end-game. And, given that... I’d bet you anything I own that that’s how this version of her sees him, and me, even now."

Sirius ran a hand over his head, staring at him again.

“Bugger me,” he said. “Bugger me. I don’t suppose you’d show me a memory of that moment sometime? Of the one where he faced down Voldemort?”

“Siri,” Remus said gently. “I don’t know that that’s a good idea. You have enough of your own kind of nightmares to be going on with.”

“Bugger that,” Sirius Black said roundly. “That’s not nightmare material, that’d be therapy, that would. I want to see it.”

Harry smiled a bit lopsidedly. “I think we can manage that,” he said. He glanced at the magical clock on the wall. It showed just before midnight. “Since it’s your birthday and all. First though...”

He extracted the satchel from his pocket and expanded it. “Reckon I got something for you.” He dug out a small, messily wrapped packet and put it on the coffee table, along with a small vial.

“What is it?”

“Open it.”

He picked it up and unwrapped it - a small, battered black book, monogrammed in faded gold.

“What,” he said and then... “Is this... Is that...”

“The last one,” he confirmed. “But me. “

“But... I thought you said you had to wait a couple of days for the wards to degrade?”

“I did,” Harry conceded. “Yeah, I did. And if this version of Lucius Malfoy had done the appropriate thing and kept it under the drawing room with the rest of the rubbish he’s collected over the years, I’d have had to wait. He didn’t, though. He kept it right on the mantle of his study, beside his best cigars, the great pillock. I stopped in at Malfoy Manor just now to check how things were progressing, and to nick a couple on my way out, just on principle, and spotted it there. “ He reached in the satchel again and held up a handful of quite possibly the best and most expensive cigars on the continent. “Didn’t reckon he’d be sending you any congratulatory gifts on your new addition – that’d be me – so I pre-empted the gesture on his behalf.”

Remus shook his head. “I can see why they made you Head Auror, cub,” he said. “Though that being said one would think that disposing of horcruxes of all things, should be more of a challenge.”

“Oh well. This was always going to be the easy part,” Harry said. “Part two’s going to be a bit trickier, yeah? You ready there, Padfoot?”

“Yeah.” Sirius shook himself and picked up the vial of basilisk venom. “Absolutely, yeah. How do we do this?”

“Open the first page and pour it over. Here, let’s spell the vial open so that it doesn’t slosh when you pull the cork. Brilliant. There we... Oop, hang on.” He shook his wands out of his sleeves, laid them neatly beside the diary, and dug out a Muggle biro. “Hold up. There’s something I want to say first. Don’t know if she can hear me, but just in case... Baby,” he addressed his hopefully eavesdropping wife through the wands. They hissed in the back of his mind inquiringly. “If you’re listening... or if
our friends here can bring you in to listen, anyway... This one’s for you.”

“Pup, what...”

Harry placed the tip of the biro on the open page of the diary.

**HELLO TOM,** he wrote.

The two men froze. The bone white page shimmered. The ink pulsed as a heartbeat, and disappeared.

"Pup,” Sirius said in alarm. What are you *doing*?”

YOU APPEAR TO HAVE THE ADVANTAGE OVER ME, the diary wrote. HAVE WE HAD THE PRIOR PLEASURE?

WE HAVE INDEED, Harry Potter wrote back. LORD VOLDEMORT.

The ink flowed into the paper. The writing that followed was clipped, the letters sliced off sharply as diamond-cut glass.

**WHO IS THIS?**

THAT’S NOT REALLY IMPORTANT, Harry wrote. WHAT IS IMPORTANT, IS THAT I HAVE A MESSAGE FOR YOU.

YOU DO, DO YOU.

I DO. BEFORE I GET ON WITH THE SPECIFICS, THOUGH... I HAVE A QUESTION FOR YOU, TOM. HAVE YOU EVER PLAYED A MUGGLE CARD GAME CALLED RUMMY?

“Oooh,” Sirius perked. “I have! I have! Lils taught it to us, remember, Moony?” Remus said nothing, just threw back his head and laughed, long and loud.

DON’T BE RIDICULOUS. IF YOU TRULY KNOW WHO I AM, AND UNDERSTOOD WHAT I STAND FOR, YOU WOULD KNOW THAT I WOULD NEVER TAINT MYSELF WITH THE DISTRACTION OF SUCH BASE AND FILTHY PASTIMES. PASS ON YOUR MESSAGE, OR GO YOUR WAY.

**TOUCHY, TOUCHY. ONLY BECAUSE THERE’S THIS WORD YOU SAY, YOU SEE,** Harry wrote. WHEN YOU’RE TAINTING YOURSELF THERE. OR DISTRACTING YOURSELF, OR WHATEVER YOU CHOOSE TO CALL IT, WITH THE PARTICULAR ‘BASE AND FILTHY PASTIME.’ In the back of his mind, a slithering hiss of a laugh started up, and, after another moment, a familiar, if startled feminine voice.

<Harry? What is it? What’s going on?>

<Moment for the ages, love> he thought, as clearly as he could, shoving down his emotions as best he could. <Again. Thought you might enjoy watching this one.>

<i’m not supposed to be talking to you, Harry. Hermione’s got all of eternity to nag at me now if she finds out, and...>
There was a pause.

<Bugger it.  I’ll deal with her later. God only knows I’ve got lots of later to waste, now. What'vve you got for me?>

<A present. You’ll  have to share it with Sirius because it’s his birthday, but...>

**WHEN YOU’RE HOLDING THE WINNING HAND,** he wrote in the diary. AND ARE ABOUT TO CLAIM THE GAME... THERE’S A CERTAIN WORD YOU SAY. RECKON WE’VE GOT PART TWO OF OUR PERSONAL REMATCH TO GO YET, BUT THAT’S NOTHING FOR YOU – THIS BIT OF YOU, ANYWAY - TO WORRY ON, BECAUSE YOUR TIME IS UP. PROFESSOR BLACK, IF YOU WOULD?

<No. No way. No bloody buggering bollocking way. That’s not... Oh Harry!>

<It is. I love you too, babe. So much. And remember... No matter the time and eternity, no matter the world or the price, or why we came here in the end, or the beginning... This moment, this one moment of it all... Was always, always, going to be for you. For you, from me.>

Sirius, obviously, could hear none of the exchange, but he was chortling loudly and literally bouncing on the sofa in anticipation.

“Well, go on, go on,” he urged. “Say it! Say it!”

**BLACK? ARE YOU REFERRING TO ORION BLACK?** the diary inquired of him. OR WALBURGA, PERHAPS?

**NOPE. SORRY. THEY’RE DEAD. DEAD, DEAD, DEAD. CAN’T BE HELPED. HAPPENS TO THE BEST OF US.**

“Happy birthday, Padfoot,” he said aloud. “On three, now, and mind yourself. It’s going to get a bit loud and messy.” Sirius bared his canines in boyish, wildly gleeful anticipation... Remus just cast a quick anti-backsplash charm as he backed away prudently. Harry raised his hand, wielding the biro with a final flourish as he wrote the final four words in Tom Marvolo Riddle-the-Local’s fifth and penultimate horcrux.

**ONE...**

**TWO...**

**THREE...**

**GIN!**

The venom splashed. The diary smoked and screamed and leaked ink gracelessly. Sirius and Remus rolled on the floor, weeping with laughter even as they reflexively dodged back. The twin Horntail wands roared in turn, rearing up triumphantly and blasting fireworks in every direction. Harry grinned like an idiot, straightening the hem of his flame-proof chimera-hide tunic as he rolled out from behind the armchair. In his mind, Gin whooped and danced and cheered.

<**BEST. HUSBAND. EVER!!!! BEST. HUSBAND. EVER!!! YEAH! YEAH!!! FUCK YOU, TOM RIDDLE, YOU FUCKING BLOODY-FUCK BUGGERING ARSE-LICKING NOSELESS WANKER!** FUCK..... **YOU! YOU, AND THE DIARY YOU RODE IN ON!**
That last cut off abruptly.

<Shit. She heard me. I think they all heard me. Bugger. Go see Charlie, Harry.>

<Huh?>

<He’s why the Horntails got involved. They owed him, for what he did for them at the Tri-Wizard tourney all those years ago. No time to explain, but... In the meantime... Trust me. Don’t know if I’ll be able to do this again, but if I can’t, remember, I love you. Always have, always will. And don’t you dare... dare... Let that stop you. The girls and I have worked way too hard on this for you to...>

The line, so to speak, cut abruptly. Harry blinked. His wands tapped each other once, mid air. The room was suddenly sparkling, and the remains of the horcrux whirled into a neat, smoking little pile on the coffee table. He was just about to pick them up when...

<Oof. She’s quick. I’m quicker, though. Damn, being dead is great. No aches, no pain, perpetually twenty-year-old ass, all the truffles and beer you can eat without the calories or hangovers, and you never have to wait for a decent game of Quidditch besides. Dunno what Snape was whinging about when he said death was boring, but then again, he never played against Viktor’s Valkyries. Neither did Hermione, fortunately, which is how... Never mind. Tell Nev not to worry about him. He’s fine. Just a little off his game because we think that Doorstop Snape isn’t quite dead, and keeps trying to influence him to do things his way. Which is still mostly our Snape’s way too, only Doorstop’s either got the one hell of a temper to be working with that our Snape doesn’t have, or a lot less self-control, and Holy God, their Dumbledore’s an arse, isn’t he? Be careful there, Harry. Really careful. Wherever they’ve got him stashed now... Go in and make sure he stays there, no matter how many future wards you have to bring to bear for the cause. Oh, and tap the gargoyle’s head; shave-and-haircut twice, six seconds between. Gotta go again. GO SEE CHARLIE!>

<Gin. Gin wait, Gin...>

“Harry?”

It was far away, concerned, and through the tidal wave of tears that hit him, he hiccuped and wailed in anguish, and Remus’ arms were about him, leading him to the sofa, and he was pulling him in, grown as he was, and settling him against his chest, soothing him quietly as he stroked the light brown hair now identical to his own.

“My poor cub,” he said. “My poor, poor cub.” He wiped at his face with the handkerchief. “Don’t you worry. It’d be a cold day in hell before I’d let Fudge near you, even if you aren’t eleven.”

“It’s not him. He’s an arse. Did he suggest that you make a great fat donation to the Ministry with your cut of the Cross of Service?”

“Right after he not-so-subtly expressed his concern that the media might find the timing of the release of Fleamont’s cure somewhat peculiar, considering that you’re now a legal Lupin and Black, as well as a Potter. Nothing like taking in a poor abused orphan with a prospective fortune to his name to legally reinforce the hitherto rather echoing family vaults. Oh, and did I mentioned that he, of course, would never even consider the idea that I might actually have found the cure in the vaults
two years ago, cured myself, and kept the formula in my pocket till I could get my hands on you, and again, your owed half of the proceeds through a marriage foisted upon your poor unstable godfather?"

“You obviously didn’t show them Fleamont’s post-script then,” Harry said, wiping his nose. “Explaining that in the event, for whatever reason and the war considered, you didn’t find the letter in good time, or weren’t allowed in the vault, Euphemia had made a preserved fruitcake with the cure mixed into the icing and a contingency spell that’d ensure it’d show up in your post-box after he died. Okay, you had to wait ten years, only you kept moving about didn’t you, after the shit hit the mixer, and the owl had a dead difficult time tracking you down, poor thing, and the letter with it must have disintegrated somewhere along the decade-long line.”

Remus pulled back and looked down at him. “The fruitcake?” he repeated. “That was you?”

“No. The icing was me. The cake itself was Aunt Petunia. Sorry.”

“Here, pup.” Sirius appeared, tray in hands. “Tea. There’s a calming draft there too, if you want it.”

“I’m okay.” He struggled up. Sirius sat beside him, petting his shoulder.

“You should stay here tonight,” he said. “We can transfigure the sofa here. Did it hurt?”

“Did what hurt?”

“Your ...” He gestured to the scar. “When we did the diary. I mean... Does it feel it, when one of the others go?”

“No, no. Not at all.” He struggled to his feet. “Gotta go take care of something.”

“Harry. No. You need to rest. Tomorrow’s not going to be any easier, and...”

“I will. Rest, I mean. I promise. I just have to duck downstairs for a minute and take care of something.”

He swung his cloak over his shoulders, before they could protest, and made his way through the portrait hole and down the silent halls and stairs. The lamps glimmered quietly in the shadows. 

*Shave and haircut, two bits. Six seconds apart.*

He let his wand slip into his hand, and glanced around. No one was in sight. He cast the warding box around him and the gargoyle, just to be on the safe side.

**TapTaptap**... **tapTAP.**

He counted to six.

**TapTaptap.**... **tap TAP.**

The gargoyle snored, once... And unfolded a stone wing. There was a clatter and something fell to the floor. The wing closed again, embracing the statue in cold graven silence. Harry bent and picked up the fallen object. It glowed with a dark, sickly light in his palm.

“Ah yes,” Harry whispered. “Of course. There you are. And here we are again.”

He turned the Elder Wand in his fingers. Dumbledore, of course, would never have handed such a treasure as this over to the Ministry. He’d handed *a* wand over, to be certain, but not this one.
It felt different from what he remembered. Heavier. *Stickier*. He cast a small light with his Horntail wand – it was the female – and held it up, examining it carefully.

There were runes on it. Harry sat down right there, pushing back the hood of his cloak and brightening the light as he turned it in his fingers.

*Elder wood. Tail hair of a thestral.*

The stickiness increased. He held out his fingers to the light. They were oozing scarlet. Not his fingers, but the wand itself. In that split second, words, not runes, etched themselves behind his eyes.

*The only story I’ve ever heard of a more powerful heartstring is a variation on that old tale of the Elder Wand, where the heartstring (most translations say tail hair, but that’s not as exciting) was donated by a live Thestral – the King of the Thestrals, in fact. I’m not sure how that would have worked, considering that Thestrals are by very definition at least half-dead, but there you are. That’s why it’s a tale, I guess.*

Harry turned the bloody wand in his fingers. The runes shone brightly, enhanced, rather than blurred by the foul excretions.

*If brothers three/ united be/*

Harry turned the wand to read the next lines. The invisibility cloak lay heavily on his shoulders. In his pocket, the Resurrection Stone seemed to twitch.

*Ere wield the deathly elder tree/*

He turned once more.

*E’en Death shall see, and bow to thee.*

Harry looked down at himself, and at the wand. It pulsed violently and greedily, suddenly seeming to rear in his hands and *sniff* at him. He forced it down, and turned it to read the last line of runes – and blanched.

*Be careful there, Harry. Really careful. Wherever they’ve got him stashed now... Go in and make sure he stays there, no matter how many future wards you have to bring to bear for the cause.*

“I do not think so,” he said aloud. And then, as sickly repulsed as he’d ever been in all of his long, long hundred thirty-eight years... “You sick, buggery old *fuck*. I do not *think* so.”

He took the wand in both hands and with a sharp, quick flex of his muscles, snapped it. Around him, the castle seemed to tilt sharply, sickeningly again, before righting itself and settling. When he recovered his balance, and looked down at his hands, they were clean again, and he was standing in the hall. Half of a hollowed, empty, half-rotted elder branch crossed each palm. He dropped them on the floor and let his own wands slip into his palms, pointing each at a half.

*“Incendio,” he said. The wands hissed in the back of his mind in joint tandem, and roared, and reared in his hands, and for a split second, Hogwarts was burning again, and then the flames were gone, just as quickly. He crouched down, casting a double *lumos*. There was not a scorch mark or a single shred of ash to be seen. His stomach twisted to the point of nausea.*

*“Harry,” Neville said from behind him. He turned. His face, as it was reflected in his friend’s concerned eyes, was pale as parchment, and his pupils were blown and dazed.*
“It’s gone,” he said thickly. “The Elder Wand. I snapped it, and burned it. It was different here. Not thestral tail hair, but the heartstring itself. S’too powerful to use without… You couldn’t use it, until you had possession of all three of the Hallows. Oh, and unless you kept it soaking in blood – human blood: innocents’ blood - in the meantime. It drinks it – drank it – to maintain its viability between owners. Of which there haven’t been many. Lots of hopefuls, but none who...”

He stopped.

“I’m fairly certain,” he said carefully and distinctly. “That he’s never used his own blood. Maybe he hasn’t killed anybody... Maybe never even hurt anybody directly; just did things like use a gathering charm to collect, say, fluids from injured kids in the hospital wing, or residue from the walls of the Shrieking Shack every full moon... But somehow... I don’t find that that reassuring, do you?”

It took a moment for Neville Longbottom to process that... He closed his eyes, and not in pain.

My school.

My children.

My revenge.

It was nothing short of a vow. Neil Cartwright opened his glowing gold eyes as his Oath – this new world’s version of an Oath that, as Neville Longbottom, he’d never once forsaken - took full hold.

Me to Mine, Hogwarts whispered. Me to Mine.

I will not fail you, Lady. Me to Mine.

Always.

“He won’t find his way back here,” the Headmaster said to Harry. “But that doesn’t mean he’s gone. We both know that.”

“I do know.” Harry said. “Will it make a difference that it’s gone, d’you reckon? Oh,” he added, almost as an afterthought. “I got the diary. It’s dead. And Gin says not to worry about Snape. She reckons that the Doorstop’s affecting him a bit. Distracting him, with his own priorities. Not dead, she said. But not quite... Not. He had a really bad temper, she says. Ah well. He was paired with m’lady Horntail here after all, and Ollivander did say that everyone who got matched there was touchier than a Knockturn courtes...”

He swayed on his feet. Neville caught him and hoisted him.

“Y’ know, mate,” he said conversationally, as he half-carried him down the hall. “It’s a good thing, really, that you blasted Tom halfway to Tasmania.”

“Tanzania. ‘N not that I’m disagreeing with you, but... Why?”

“No particular reason. Right now, the thought’s just particularly cheering. Now, where am I taking you?”

“No bloody buggering clue. I’d say Sirius and Remus’ sofa, but I’m pretty sure they’re still on it. And I don’t want to go to my mum’s sofa, because Snape’s probably on it. With her. And the Room’s seven floors away, and that’s just too many bloody buggering stairs to be going on with.”

Neville stopped, just for a moment, and concentrated. He suddenly seemed to swell half again to his
normal size, and picked him up and threw him over his shoulder. Harry blinked owlishly at his rear.

“Y’ got fantastic control there, Longbottom,” he complimented him. “How d’you do that? I never heard of an Animagus who can do the partials li’ you can. You wern’ even that good a’ Transfig... Changin’ things, growin’ up.”

“Go to sleep, mate,” Neville advised. “You can ask me all your stupid questions in the morning. They’ll still be relevant, I’m sure.”

“I feel drunk,” Harry informed him. “Wha’s with that?”

“Shock.” The Headmaster approached the staircase to the third floor. “Disillusionment. Grief. Generalized anxiety over a plot-line gone completely batshit insane. Revisiting the scene where you accidentally killed Quirrell, offing a basilisk and disposing of a horcrux all in the same day, never mind coming to the realization that this Dumbledore’s as much a technical Dark Wanker here as Riddle’s an actual one? Oh, and tea with my Gran, of course. I love her to bits, but that always sets me a bit on edge, and the effects are guaranteed to last a full forty eight hours besides. Bugger this. I’m not hauling you up four more floors. Shortcut, please,” he addressed the castle wall. It opened obligingly. He ducked in, made his way down a brief corridor, turned left, and emerged right beside the startled trolls.

“See, I don’t get that,” Harry said plaintively. “He had Fawkes, right? How can he be a Dark Wanker, even a technical non-murdery one, ‘f he’s got a phoenix?”

“Did it ever occur to you, mate, that your phoenix feather – the original one – wasn’t the only one that came from Fawkes? That Riddle’s phoenix feather, in his yew wand, had the same reputedly pure and morally impeccable source? All that shite about them being shining feathery beacons of light is just that. Shite. They’re birds. Pretty birds, magical birds, with admittedly enchanting and intriguing properties, but when it comes right down to it... they’re no more representative of the brighter side of relative morality than your standard owl.”

Harry blinked at Neville’s bum again.

“I gotta go see Charlie,” he announced, apropos of nothing. “Gin said. Dunno why, but she said. Gotta do it. On’y it was her dyin’ wish. Instruc... Instrushun. Same thing, really. You know howzit is wi’ Gin.”

“I do, and - did she? Alright. Only he’s probably sleeping right now, and it’d be really rude to wake him up. You can go tomorrow instead. Here we go. Room of Requirement. What’s your pleasure?”

Harry said nothing. Neville paced three times, back and forth. A door slid open silently, revealing a neat, tidy chamber with a neat, tidy bed, blankets already folded back. Neville dropped his pile of reluctant hero on the bed and pried his dueling boots off... When he’d got him down to his t-shirt and pants, he tucked the blankets around him and sat beside him.

“You’re very reassurin’ like this, you know that?” Harry slurred sleepily as he snuggled into the pillows. “I can really see why Hogwarts likes you so much. You got a real knack, Nev ol’ man, f’r makin’ everythin’ feel like things’ll get better. Not just tha’ thing’ll be alright, but tha’ they’ll get better. Pop your ears.”

Neville’s lips tilted a bit, but he obliged, leaning down to kiss his cheek.

“Go to sleep, Ren,” he said gently. “We’ve got a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“Plonker.” He kicked his shoes off, though, and came round the bed. His clothes shimmered, turning back to a pair of pajama pants and the orange sweater. He climbed in behind him, and threw an arm over. Harry turned, burrowing in.

“Better,” he said. “Much better.” Neville ran his hand over the light brown hair.

“How do you think Frankie’s doing, really?” he said after a moment. “With Little Nev and Little Harry?”

“Brilliantly. Feedin’ them up, and teachin’ them how much more there is to life than Dark Wankers, at the very least. That’s a good boy you’ve got there, Longbottom. Good thing he was mostly a Squib, really, with all he’s got goin’ on, or the world wouldn’t have been able to manage him.”

“Can’t argue with you there. Course, I might just be a bit biased.”

Harry snored, and turning on his side, abruptly shifted. Neville nearly jumped out of his skin as he absorbed the vision now curled up against him.

“Bugger me,” he said, genuinely shocked. “That’s a bit different, isn’t it?”

“Don’t tell,” Harry murmured, shifting back. “’Secret. Could ye’ make the differ’ce, never mind your big buggr’y blabbermouth. On’y he won’ be expectin’ this, will he?”

“You know, I don’t really see how he could, at that?” He tugged the blankets over them both. “Alarm for six, please,” he said to the Room. “And if you could put in the proper ensuite before then, that’d be fantastic. Two of them, with separate pipes. He always hogs the hot water.”

The Room glowed in soft acknowledgement, and faded to full dark.

_End of Book One

To be Continued in Book Two

“The Strange Familiar”
Announcement!

The Sequel is UP!!!!

http://archiveofourown.org/works/7117645/chapters/16167412

To all of you who've encouraged me, left kudos and comments, and generally just been brilliant... THANK YOU!

Blue Maple

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!