Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches - Revenge is Best Served Raw

by LeadVonE

Summary

Harry Potter has been bange up for ten years in the hellhole brig of Azkaban for a crime he didn't commit, and his traitorous brother, the not-really-boy-who-lived, has royally messed things up. After meeting Fate and Death, Harry is given a second chance to squash Voldemort, dodge a thousand years in prison, and snatch everything his hated brother holds dear. H/Hr/LL/DG/GW.
Welcome to Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches.

Moral Tone: Extremely grubby

Sexual Tone: This story adheres strictly to the M rating, which means that there are no explicit sex scenes (lemons), but there are prevalent sexual themes and scenes that, while not actually containing explicit sex, are certainly more than suggestive.

Story Tone: Enjoyable and 'fuck yeah' fun, with occasional dips into darkness and grittiness (but the darkness never lasts too long).

Audio Book:

This story now has a gradually catching up audio version, which can be found either through my profile page, or through my website, www.leadvone.com, which also contains links to fan-run projects such as omakes, the discord server, and the DP&SW wiki.

The Gray Mailing List:

Chapter release schedules, bonus material, and updates on my original fantasy projects are sent out on a regular basis to members of the Gray Mailing List, which can also be found at leadvone.com.

Translation Projects:

Russian — Helen Sergeeva — fanfics.me/fic133819
Russian — Helen Sergeeva — ficbook.net/readfic/7063671

A couple of people have expressed interest in working on translations of Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches.

If you choose to join them, please publish your translations of DP&SW under your own fanfic names, but give credit at the start of each chapter to the original fic (a link to my personal website would be preferred). I'll link any translation project that completes any one of the DP&SW books at the start of DP&SW (until there are too many) and on my website, so long as the translation quality is at a 'reasonable level'.

If you're seriously considering doing this, then you're insane, but I wish you the best of luck! :)

A Note on Writing Quality:

One of my fondest ambitions is to write fantasy books professionally, but to do that, you need to be good at writing — damn good at writing. I use this fic as a tool to help me reach that level of quality. As such, you'll see many places throughout the story where I've experimented with different story telling forms and tools. Generally, you can expect the writing quality to get better as the story unfolds, but if you consider
yourself a sophisticated reader, you may well also see me doing things that cause you to slam your head up and down on the desk in frustration. These are experiments. I make no apologies for head related injuries.

And now, please, pour yourself a relaxing drink, sit back, put your feet up, and enjoy.

A pile of rags sat in the far corner of a high security Azkaban prison cell. The moon shifted a fraction through the window bars and the pile slowly showed itself to be the curled up, skin and bones form of Harry James Potter, the True-Boy-Who-Lived.

Things had gotten a bit better since the Dark Lord had taken over Magical Britain, but not by much. On the plus side, there were fewer dementors around, but on the negative side, Voldemort was now devoting more and more time to torturing him through the mental link they shared. The raids on muggles were increasing, and the viciousness of the treatment of the victims would’ve made him heave, if he’d had any food to speak of in him. The muggle raids were increasing because all the muggleborns had already been exterminated.

He’d been in here for just over ten years now. This year marked the point when his stay in this prison would overtake his stay in the last one, those miserable excuses for human beings that called themselves the Dursleys.

It made no sense. Why had his parents dumped him there? The official reason was that he’d been mistaken for a squib, but that didn’t explain why they refused to speak to him after he came to Hogwarts.

His brother, John Potter, was believed by all to be The-Boy-Who-Lived, but Harry knew that wasn’t true. He also knew the Headmaster knew it wasn’t true.

For some reason, the headmaster really didn't like him. When the chamber of secrets had been opened in his second year, and a girl killed, Dumbledore had convinced the world that he was the culprit.

Everyone in the wizarding world, even his fellow Slytherins, blamed him, and they’d never liked him much to begin with. In fact, no one much liked him. In his two years at Hogwarts he’d never made a single friend. The Slytherins all hated that he was a Potter, everyone else hated him because he was a Slytherin, the teachers hated him for some unknown reason, and his parents hated him because… he didn't know.

He’d been shipped off to Azkaban screaming for someone, anyone, to believe him.

No one did.

The look of disgust and revulsion on his parents faces, fuelled his dementor nightmares for years, until he stopped caring what the dicks thought of him, and Azkaban merely became an edited highlights reel of Durskaban.

And then Voldemort had risen again, and started sending him those thrice-damned visions.

He’d made as much use of the connection as he could, sifting through the Dark Lord's head and grabbing all the knowledge he’d accumulated over his long life. Harry couldn't hope that he'd be able to escape from here to use it—such a happy thought would've been stripped away—but it was
the only thing to do and, as messed up as it sounded, spending time in the Dark Lord's head was preferable to his own when the dementors were on the prowl.

Voldemort seemed to find his rummagings amusing, as though he were an over-eager student. The bastard would grab his consciousness, show him a fortified building the Death Eaters were about to storm, explain the attack plan to him at great length, gloat a bit that he, Harry, was the only one who could warn the defenders, then force him to watch his followers torture, rape, and kill the helpless victims, once they'd broken through.

Years ago, he'd even seen his own brother killed in this way. The arrogant tosser had just walked right up to Voldemort and invited him to kill him.

The Dark Lord would do this with everything, all his political games, all his strategy sessions, each and every one of his recruitment and training drives.

It was getting to be more than he could take, and the darkness of his cell seemed to be getting darker every day.

The sounds of someone clinking and moving penetrated the fog of Harry's mind. Someone was here. That wasn't normal.

"Oi. Potter. Get up. You've been requested."

There were boots where before there was just floor. That also wasn't normal.

"Oh, for crying out loud. He's out of it. Let's get him up."

Pain shot through his shoulders as two pairs of hands grabbed his arms and lifted him from the floor. It was the first time someone had touched him in ten years.

"Can you walk or are we going to have to drag you?"

He tried to put one foot forward, towards the cell door, and every muscle in his atrophied lower body screamed in protest. Eventually, with the support of the men, he managed to get a rhythm going, and Harry Potter, The-True-Boy-Who-Lived, walked out of Azkaban, and into a world ruled by the Dark Lord.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

"Prisoner number 6785," a bored sounding voice called out.

Harry's world was still dark. Tiny beams of light shone through the holes in the carrying box he'd been shoved into for transport to wherever the hell he now was.

"Experiment number 0034," the voice continued.

Light flooded Harry's world. The front of the box had been opened and Harry stepped out onto a wooden platform. Two men, perhaps the same two men from the prison, attached him to the platform with chains. In front of him, was a sight that made his underused eyes widen in shock.

"Modified version of the confundus charm, woven into the arch using Hypthorn's static enchantment protocol; dated the third of September, 2002, approved by the Chief Unspeakable."

It was the veil of death.

"Begin the transfer."
Without making a sound, the platform started moving towards the veil leaving Harry no possibility of escape… not that he wanted it.

'For neither can live while the other survives,' he mused, grinning manically. He was about to die, but he knew that what was going on here was something Voldemort certainly didn't know about, or authorise.

He was halfway to the veil now and suddenly terror flooded his mind, but the raw primal emotion wasn't his.

A loud crack sounded behind him and Voldemort's voice screamed "Accio Potter!" but the chains held him fast to the platform and before another word could be uttered he'd plunged through the archway and darkness took him.

― DP & SW: RiBSR ―

"Good morning, Mister Potter." A four word sentence, male, in a voice of stone, empty caves, and deep gulps of fresh mountain air, conquered his head, and forced his focus.

"Ah, good morning?" Harry replied. He couldn't see his interlocutor. Darkness surrounded him. But his voice… speaking was amazingly easy, not what he'd expected after a decade of non-use. And his thinking… he could think! His mind was clear and fresh, thoughts flowing through it, crisp, like a mountain stream.

"Yes, it's amazing what having no body will do for you."

A pebble of a thought dropped into his consciousness. He'd just been pushed through the veil. He was dead.

"Yes," the voice said, "you are."

And this person?… thing?… could read minds, despite his near impenetrable occlumency shields, mindscape, and decoy memories.

"You may as well start speaking. Talking to myself still makes me feel a bit of a berk, even if I can read your thoughts. And we're not alone."

Harry finally replied again, "Err… who are 'we' exactly? And where are we? Are you Death?"

The darkness lifted to be replaced with a round room, lined with furs from floor to ceiling. An open fire crackled in the middle of the room, shields and weapons lined the walls, and, asleep in a corner, a mess of large wolves were piled on top of one another. On the opposite side of the small room to him, comfortable and relaxed in large wooden thrones, sat two people, a man and a woman.

The woman, clothed in an elegant white-laced dress, held a book.

The man, clothed in dark robes of the blackest black, held a scythe.

"I guess you are," he continued. These people seemed to really like their theatrics.

"Yes, I am," said the man, "and this lovely lady to my right is Fate," he motioned to the woman who inclined her head to Harry, "we have a bone to pick with you."

Harry was nonplussed. "Um… okay," he hesitated before continuing, but Death seemed personable
enough, "does this bone have anything to do with the fact that I just died not at the hands of Voldemort despite what the prophecy says?" He tried to think ahead in the conversation. Why was he here?

Death smiled a smile made of solid oak. "No, that was merely a bit of conniving on our part to get you to us. If we hadn't have done that, you and Voldemort would have continued to live for another thousand years."

He blinked. "What?"

"I don't like things that are owed me being withheld, Mister Potter."

Harry's looked nonplussed. "But… It's not my fault if I was a damn horcrux!"

The lady, who'd up to this point been silent, now spoke in a voice as smooth and soft as the blond hair flowing down her shoulders.

"We know that, Mister Potter. We don't blame you for it. It is Riddle we hold responsible."

Harry settled down a bit. She continued, "The prophecy wasn't carried out as intended. You were supposed to kill Riddle, and I don't mean in a thousand years."

Harry's shoulders slumped. "Pretty hard to do that when you've got demons from hell sucking out your thoughts every minute of the day," he mumbled.

"Yes," Fate stared down at the man standing before him, still all bones and rags, "you were never meant to go to that infernal place."

"So, where did it go wrong then? When I was sent to Azkaban?"

"No. That useless sack of wizard that called himself The-Boy-Who-Lived failed to do the job he took on."

"My brother?"

"Yes. Dumbledore declared him the Boy-Who-Lived when he was a baby, and the child made no effort to disavow others of that impression, even when it became apparent to him that it was you the prophecy referred to."

"He what? He knew!" Harry was shocked; his brother had never given any indication with his interactions with Voldemort that he knew.

"He did."

"When?"

"He first knew shortly before first coming to Hogwarts, when Dumbledore told him."

Harry stayed silent, anger and resentment boiling just under the surface. So, Dumbledore told John… That made sense. In the end, it always came back to Dumbledore. The games that man played with the lives of his followers sickened him. It says a lot about a man when someone like Voldemort enjoyed playing against him.

"Harry…” Fate stood, walked over to him and placed a calming hand on his shoulder.
"Dumbledore deliberately choose John to be the Boy-Who-Lived, knowing full well it wasn't him and tried to keep you as weak as possible."

His eyes narrowed, and he looked up into Fate's ice blue eyes. "Why?"

Fate sighed. "Dumbledore saw the rise of two Dark Lords in his life, both of which he felt partly responsible for, and he was terrified to see another. When a prophecy spoke of a boy who was the Dark Lord's equal, who'd have a power the Dark Lord knew not, he tried to control events such that the prophecy child would not be a threat to the wizarding world as he saw it."

The resentment towards the twinkle-eyed headmaster seemed to double. His fists clenched and unclenched. He'd spent ten years in the worst hell on earth because some old bastard was afraid of something he might choose to do because he might have the power to do it. "So Dumbledore traded the possible rise of a Dark Lord for the certain success of an already established Dark Lord?"

Fate gave a weak smile. "It was never his plan for you to stay in Azkaban for as long as you did, but when he died before John Potter did, he was no longer able to manipulate events and your brother said nothing to anyone who might have been able to intervene, which moves us nicely onto why we are here."

Harry stood silent, seething, but expectant.

"We are now going to intervene."

Harry jerked, not daring to believe the implications of what he'd just heard. "Isn't it… isn't it a bit late now? I mean, I'm dead. The prophecy was unfulfilled."

At this point, Death took over from the beautiful woman now standing at Harry's side.

"Normally yes, however, in this situation, we're going to bend our self imposed rules. That fucker, Tom Riddle that is, not Dumbledore, needs to die."

Fate fixed Harry with a hard sapphire stare. "And I will not subordinate my will to a pathetic excuse of an old man who gets off on lemon drops and playing the puppet master, especially when he's so utterly crap at it."

Harry returned her stare, and for a fleeting second, was reminded of Daphne Greengrass, Slytherin's Ice Queen. "…So, what's the plan?"

"Well," she continued, "unlike your brother, even in the worst of situations, you made the best of it. You spent years absorbing all of Riddle's knowledge. That's a good thing."

Death jumped back in. "We're going to send your soul back in time to several years before you leave for Hogwarts. We want you to make sure Riddle dies, and we want you to make sure the prophecy is fulfilled."

"…What's to stop me being thrown in prison again?"

Fate smiled. "You must save Ginny Weasley."

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment. "I've no problem with that, but didn't you just say the headmaster manipulated events to send me to prison at the first possible excuse? I may dodge that particular bullet, but what's to stop me being sent on some other flimsy trumped up charge?"

Fate's eyes shone. "And this is exactly the reason why you're going to be our champion this time,
Harry, and not John. You think things through. We already let John re-do the timeline once and he still failed."

"Wait, what?"

"Oh, sending him back required less intervention, and since he was already fighting Riddle we figured he might be able to pull it off."

"… But wouldn't that mean the non-fulfilment of the prophecy?"

"It would have been close enough for me to accept. But that's irrelevant. He failed."

"How did he die in the first time-line?"

"In the grave-yard at the end of fourth year."

"Huh… I did wonder how he got such good grades without trying, and how he seemed to instinctively attract witches to him despite his horrific personality, he had a four year lead on everyone, and already knew them."

"…"

Inside his head, the revelations were coming thick and fast. His eyes widened.

"Wait… That's why he let Voldemort kill him! He thought you would give him a third chance!

Death nodded, grimly.

"…"

"And… wait, that doesn't make sense…. He knew Ginny was going to die and let it happen anyway? I thought those two loved each other for years before they even came to Hogwarts!"

Fate looked sad. "In the first timeline the diary of Tom Riddle didn't abduct Miss Weasley until the end of the year, and your brother managed to save her. In the second timeline, John Potter's meddling caused Tom to accelerate his plans."

"Wow. He really messed that up."

"Indeed. And let this be a warning to you, Mister Potter." Her face became sterner. "Do not try to setup master plots based on foreknowledge, and do not worry about 'preserving the timeline'; acquire every advantage you can, as quickly as possible with the power you possess, while exposing yourself to as little risk as possible. Remember, even though we are sending you back, your brother has already gone back. We can't change that, so you're going to have to deal with another time traveller who also thinks they are our chosen. The life you know was in the second timeline, and when we send you back, it will be the third."

"Yes, my lady… er… if my brother saved Ginny in the first timeline, did I still go to Azkaban?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Dumbledore pushed him to provide false evidence that it was still you that opened the chamber."

"That… utter… fucker!"
"Mmmuhmm."

"So, how am I going to stop that from happening then? It seems the old goat is desperate for me to go."

"Well, in the first instance, you now have a good solid knowledge of how the political and legal system of the wizarding world works, and for the second… I am going to grant you a gift."

A gift?

Harry looked away from Fate and towards Death who merely smiled. "No, Mister Potter, not a deathly hollows style gift. I'm never making that mistake again."

Fate laughed. "Mister Potter, how much are you aware of your lineage?"

"Umm… I'm a Potter?"

"Figures you'd know almost nothing. Riddle didn't know after all." Fate walked Harry over to her throne and motioned him to sit down, which he did so, hesitantly. The woman then started pacing in front of the two men.

"Harry," she said eventually, "you know your wizarding world has a highly stratified political and legal system."

"Yes."

"So to grant you the chance you need to fight back against Dumbledore you need to be higher up in the system."

"Makes sense."

"I'm going to grant you a lordship."

Harry's eyes bugged, "Whaa… You're going to kill my father and brother? I mean, I don't really have a problem with that, but even then I wouldn't become Lord Potter until I'm seventeen."

"No no no, Harry. I don't have the power to intervene that much, if I did, I'd have just killed Riddle, and it is as you say; you still wouldn't ascend until you reached your majority, well, in theory anyway. No, what I'm suggesting is for you to take a completely different lordship."

Harry blinked, owlishly.

"There are three possible lordships you are close enough to being able to claim for my influence to work. Peverell, Gryffindor, and Slytherin."

Fate started pacing again.

"The Peverell and Gryffindor lines are closely linked to you through blood, and it would take only a slight modification of your blood to allow you to claim them. The Slytherin line could be yours through old family magics called the right of conquest, whereby the conqueror of the last of a line can lay claim to that line's family magics, provided they didn't initiate the conflict that led to the death of the line. This includes titles since they're based on family magics."

"So because I defeated Voldemort when a child… wait, wouldn't I have that last one anyway?"

"Riddle didn't truly die."
"Ah."

"But! That's exactly the kind of minor adjustment to magic that I can get away with. The difference between dead and not alive is close enough, and the age of your soul gives me enough wiggle room in regards to you being of age to claim."

She took a deep breath before continuing.

"Now, you're only getting one of them, so you're going to have to choose. Any thoughts?"

"Well, screw Gryffindor. I'm a Slytherin, through and through. So it comes down to Slytherin or Peverell. Peverell would grant me greater overall political acceptance. I wouldn't have to worry so much about being immediately labelled a Dark Lord by a third of the wizarding political elite…"—Harry stretched his chin—"...On the other hand, Slytherin would grant me immediate kudos with the very enemy that I'm trying to fight. Any death eaters or allies of Voldemort that I can bring to my side would be a double victory, simultaneously denying the enemy resources while boosting my own. With Peverell, I'd have to play a zero sum game with Dumbledore for allies—A moment of silence passed—Slytherin would also grant me special privileges at Hogwarts… I assume?" he finished, uncertain.

"A few, yes," Fate conceded.

"And it would also give me a mission to rally people around other than just 'defeat Voldemort'. The ideals and beliefs of Slytherin house are nothing like what they should be. Ambition and cunning does not equal evil and bigotry," he mused.

Fate smiled.

"Also…, and I think this is the real kicker, by claiming the title of Lord Slytherin through right of conquest I can easily demonstrate that I am the true child of prophecy to who ever I please, whenever it is necessary."

Fate clapped, and Death just sat there, relaxed, and looking incredibly smug.

"Well done young champion, very well thought out. Your brother never demonstrated even a hint of similar strategic insight."

He smirked. "Well, he is a Gryffindor."

Fate raised a warning finger. "That's as well as maybe but remember not to let house rivalries detract you from strategic necessity. There are Gryffindors it would do you well to bring to your side.

"...Granger." The Dark Lord's memories of the brunette muggleborn were impressive. Hell, she practically carried his brother's team, despite being four years mentally younger than him.

"Yes her, definitely. But also remember my warning. Any advantage, as quickly as possible, for as low a cost as possible."

"Right. Not to mention she grows up to be hot as hell."

Fate frowned.

"I'd advise against falling into the same trap as your brother and collecting too many witches of questionable usefulness around you. They could easily become a distraction."
"Right. So I'll only collect the useful ones. And distractions… I'd prefer to call them strategic team building exercises." He tried his best to look as innocent as a pile of rags and bones can.

Death grinned from ear to ear while Fate looked resigned.

"Well, I've just spent twenty years in hell, yes? I'm not holding back on this second chance. I will do everything in my power to make sure the primary objectives are achieved, which at the longest should only take five to ten years, fingers crossed. I fully intend to make sure the final hundred odd years of my life are as satisfying as possible."

Death spoke up. "Mister Potter, so long as you achieve your primary objectives, I personally don't care if you become a dark lord and destroy the whole of Britain."

"I'd be a bit miffed, but couldn't actually fault you," Fate interjected, "so long as Riddle dies and the prophecy is fulfilled, you have a free pass.

"Excellent, because I fully intend to ruin a few people's lives."

The trio continued to discuss minutia and tactical and strategic options for some time, before Fate and Death waved Harry on his way and his soul was flung back through the veil.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

On July thirty-first in the year 1988, eight-year-old little Harry Potter sat bolt upright, banging his head on his cupboard ceiling.

'Oww', he thought, rubbing his hand on his bruised forehead. He felt a metal band on his finger. Closer inspection revealed it to be the noble head of house ring of Slytherin house. A manic grin spread across his face like the opening to the gates of hell.

"Well, hello world, I'm baaaaaack."

— End of Chapter One —
Harry spent a few moments basking in his new old body. The cramped space of his cupboard wrapped around him like an old friend, the kind you tolerate having a once-a-year drink with, but who soon reminds you why you stopped being their friend.

Right! Time to fly this joint. Prison break! And with a loud crack, the cupboard under the stairs was empty. The Dursleys could fix their own damn breakfast.

He appeared in a park not far from Privet Drive and sat down on a bench. The sky slowly brightened as the sun rose over the nearby trees, flooding the grass with light that refracted off morning dew and painted a picture of peace and happiness in the back of Harry's cornea. Freedom.

Harry would never again let anyone imprison him. Not Voldemort, not Dumbledore, not the Dursleys, not his parents.

To do that he needed power, for without power you were helpless, and if you were helpless everything you have can and will be taken from you.

So, what did he have?

Well, he could do a limited amount of wandless magic. He could summon and banish, apparate, fly, talk to snakes, cast the stinging hex, lumos charm, and incendio charm, as well as basic legilimency and master occlumency. Wandless magic was time consuming to learn and Voldemort had never learnt more than the combat critical necessities.

His ring would protect him from obliviation, mind-altering potions, confundus charms, and other mind altering magics… but not the imperius, nothing could block the imperius — you just had to have the mental will to throw it, which is why it was classified as unforgivable — poor little pureblood lords couldn't defend their families against it. The ring could also become visible and invisible on command and was soul bound, meaning it couldn't be taken from him by force until he died.

All this was very nice, but it didn't make him the all-powerful force of nature he needed to be. Wards could easily block apparition, and his combat spells were very limited. If he got in any trouble in the magical world, he'd be at the mercy of whatever wand wielding weakling with a basic OWL in defence stumbled on him. Worse, he had almost no sneaking abilities. Disillusionment, notice-me-nots, muggle repelling wards, key-in wards, silencing charms — as he was at the moment, he couldn't do any of them.

He needed a wand. Then his repertoire would be vast. Then he could really get on with things… but… how was he going to get one? Ollivander and his British contemporaries wouldn't sell him a wand, he was too young and the wand would have the trace on it. Other countries also wouldn't be any good — they'd still apply the trace, and it would just switch over to Magical Britain the moment he crossed the border. The ministry would be very interested in why there was an unregistered underage wand casting magic all over the place. He could get a wand without the trace if he revealed his status as Lord Slytherin, but he wasn't anywhere near ready to announce that yet. He could try stealing one, but that would be far too risky at the moment. If he were caught he'd be in big trouble.
No, there was really only one option. He was going to have to make one.

It wouldn't be great. It wouldn't be at the level of perfection of one produced by Ollivander, but it would work and be functional until he could buy a proper one. And since it was the wand that chose the wizard, or so Ollivander would say… well… he'd just have to think like a wand.

…Yew. Yes, the wood of death and rebirth, of resurrection and immortality. Voldemort's wand was yew because of its properties associated with eternal life—although how the wand knew of the Dark Lord's future when he'd been just eleven was anyone's guess. His wand, by contrast, would be yew because of its properties associated with rebirth and resurrection, not to mention he was Death's champion.

And for the core… thestral tail hair, definitely. No creature was more closely associated with death than the thestral, except maybe the grim. As for the length… 15 inches, the same length as the elder wand. The wand made by Death. Yes.

Harry leapt off the bench and stretched his arms to the heavens. Shopping time!

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Sue Ruthson was a short plump woman who loved the outdoors in principle, but preferred the comforts of the tearoom in practise. She flipped the sign on the door to the office from closed to open and turned to man—or in her case, woman—the reception.

"Excuse me," said a child's voice behind her. She turned and beheld a small skinny boy in baggy clothes with a mop of unruly black hair and piercing green eyes behind sellotaped glasses. They seemed to stare straight into her soul and force her to reexamine all her hopes, dreams, and fears.

"Y-yes, dearie?" she asked, looking around for the lad's parents. They were no-where to be seen. Probably let him run ahead of them.

"Is this the Royal Forestry Society?"

"Yes, it is, where are you parents dear?"

"Oh, they're around. I'm doing a school project and they said I could ask some questions for it. I'm interested in really old trees." He smiled a smile that screamed future-heartbreaker.

"Well dear. Why don't you just take a seat here and I'll get you something?"

The lad beamed. "Thank you Mrs…?"

"Ruthson dear."

"Thank you, Mrs. Ruthson."

This was one polite kid. "Any particular types of tree you're interested in?" she asked, probing the boy's knowledge while fishing in a filing cabinet behind her desk.

"Um… Yew? They're supposed to be really old, right?"

"They are. Yew trees are among some of the oldest in the country." She found what she was looking for and handed it to the boy. "Is that enough information?" she asked.

The boy flipped through the glossy paged brochure before stopping at one particular page. "Oh, yes, Mrs. Ruthson. Thank you! I need to get back to my Mum and Dad now — they're waiting for
me."

"Not to worry dear, happy to help."

The boy left the office and Sue smiled. What a nice young man.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Alan and Jennifer stumbled into their hotel room from a night of holiday filled excitement and romance when Jennifer noticed something was wrong.

"Alan," she said, sounding worried.

"Yeah, Baby?"

"I can't find my wallet."

"Seriously? Where did you last have it?"

"It was in my pocket. But it's not there anymore."

"I'll check the bags."

"Oh no… oh shit! shit!" She threw up her hands. "My cards were in there!"

"Jen, don't panic, its probably in here." But his search was proving fruitless.

"What if someone uses them! Oh shit! shit!."

"Jen! Calm down! We'll just call up the company and get them to freeze them!"

"Oh shit, shit, there was like a hundred pounds in there, that's like what, 150 dollars? Shit! Shit! … Well!?"

Alan had stopped searching the bags.

"Yeah, it's gone."

"SHIT! SHIT! SHIT!"

Several blocks away, Harry inspected his catch in the privacy of a public toilet. It was a rule of life as far as he was concerned. If you were a wizard and didn't charm your money pouch to be non-summonable, you were an idiot. And if you were a muggle tourist and didn't attach your wallet or purse to your person, or keep it deep in your bag, you were an idiot. Better he snagged it than some less deserving cut purse.

He finished counting out 107 Great British Pounds and smiled… Breakfast time.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry spent a relaxing day eating and practising his occlumency in various hotel lobbies around London. The great thing about hotels was that the staff didn't ask too many questions about kids on their own in lobbies. It was assumed the parents or guardians were around and had dumped them there with instructions to wait. If people had started getting too nosy, plan B had been some tiny village teashop in the middle of nowhere.
The sun was going down and it was time to hit his first target.

He paid for his final drink, left the building, turned down an alley, disappeared with a loud crack, and reappeared in a field on the flood banks of the River Thames. The ground was boggy and Harry had to struggle for his footing on every step before he smacked his head in frustration, and remembered he could fly.

Hovering a half-inch from the ground, and making every attempt not to be seen doing so, he flittered from bush to bush in the rapidly failing light of the British summer.

Ahead, he spied the distinct, majestic outline of his intended — The Ankerwycke Yew.

This tree was ancient. Not the oldest in the country by any measure, but at over two thousand years old, it had been around well before the Peverell brothers played their games with Death. The tree was steeped in myth and legend. It was here that the Magna Carta had been signed, forever breaking the absolute right of the King to rule, which included the magical population, and included passages, now invisible to muggles, granting the magical community autonomy from the muggle government. It was said that under this tree, the muggle king Henry VIII, had started his illicit affair with his future wife, Anne Boleyn, resulting in the split between the churches of Rome and England, and the end of the witch hunts in Britain.

It was perfect.

Harry drank in its beauty, hungry for the potent combined symbol of freedom, death, resurrection, and unofficial polygamy. He could feel the magic radiating from it, even from back here.

He pushed forward and suddenly felt something sweep over him — something subtle, but very definitely noticeable to one trained to sense the flows of magic. His breath hitched. He'd just tripped a detection ward. Dammit! Too late, he realised most of the magic hadn't been coming from the tree, but from the wards around it.

He ducked behind a nearby bush and waited. Who'd go through the bother of putting wards around a tree?

Crack! A figure in a dark robe appeared around the trunk of the tree, wand out and alert. Even at the distance he was hiding, the figure was recognisable. It was Mr. Ollivander.

Oh, damn.

"I know you're there!" Mr. Ollivander called, "I want to know why."

Harry struggled to rip his shirt off and tie it around his head to hide his face, hair, and, most importantly, scar. The eyes might give him away, but there wasn't much he could do about that.

"If you don't come out, I'll just come to you," the old wand maker continued. "Homenum Revelio!"

Merlin damn homenum revelio! Screw it. There was nothing to do but make a break for it.

Crack! Harry appeared in a field some fifty miles away and turned.

Crack! His pursuer appeared right behind him.

Crack! And he disapparated again, appearing in an empty city street at a dead run.

Crack! A red stunner passed mere inches from the back of his head before he turned a corner, out
of sight, and immediately shot up, towards the moon, over the edge of a rooftop, and away over the city skyline.

Crack! The silence lasted only a moment before a quickly fading and frustrated voice shouted, "Homenum Revelio!"

Please, please, please, let him be out of range. Harry ducked behind the massive chimney of a huge industrial building and quickly accelerated right to the top before disapparating with a final, definite, Crack!

There! After several more cracks, he appeared in the graveyard of a small village in Devon. Let the creepy bastard follow me up there!

He stumbled over to a bench and plopped down on it with an audible, "phew."

His breath started to slow, but his pulse was still going at a mile a minute, his adrenal glands still pumping concentrated 'fight-or-flight' into his small body.

He was an utter idiot. Why hadn't he spotted the very obvious fact that the perfect candidate for a yew wand tree in the country would already be 'taken' by another wand maker? He could only hope to Merlin that the old man had neither spotted him flying, nor been alerted to his aerial presence by his last homenum revelio. He wanted to keep every advantage he had secret, and if an identifying skill became public knowledge, he couldn't use it and remain anonymous. Flying was definitely an identifying skill. Only he and Voldy could do it, after all.

Harry sighed. All in all it could have gone worse. With luck, the only thing Ollivander would have learned about the wizard sneaking around was that they were very short for a wizard who — because of their ability to apparate — should be in their late teens, at least.

Oh… He might also have spotted him apparating without a wand… bugger. And since Ollivander could detect him with homenum revelio, he'd be forced to conclude I was a very short, and very powerful, humanoid. I suppose it might be more credible to suspect a metamorphmagus rather than a child… or possibly a half-breed like Flitwick… or someone under the effects of polyjuice… okay, so there were actually lots of possible ways to explain him away.

Harry stood back up and dusted himself off. The night was still young and he still had a list of other trees he could hit. There was a loud crack, which echoed around the church stonework, and Harry Potter was gone.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Angelystor was dead. She'd been dead for a long time now. She'd been in love with a local muggle noble, who'd stabbed her when she'd told him she was pregnant. She wished she could have seen it coming, but she couldn't. Seers could not see their own futures.

And now all she could do was haunt this graveyard, in this tiny welsh village. There weren't any magicals around to talk to and the only fun she had was on All Hallows Eve, when the boundaries between this world, and the world beyond the veil, were at their weakest. Then, she could shout out who in the next year was going to die, and the muggles could actually hear her. It was a small joy, but it was all she had.

She floated around the graveyard's huge yew tree, its trunk split at the base in three, giving the impression of three separate trees growing from the same spot, and stilled.

Something had changed. Her sight wasn't nearly as good since she'd died, and she couldn't do any
divination or scrying that needed a wand or other foci, but something had defiantly changed in the flow of time.

Movement attracted her attention. Despite it being near midnight, the full moon made it easy to see, although why that mattered to a ghost who technically didn't have eyes, she'd never wondered about until that moment.

The figure was hesitant and very cautious. It was small and crept from tombstone to tombstone, as though expecting to be attacked.

She floated over to the child, for it was surely small enough to be a child, and was shocked when the boy, and she could now see that it was surely a boy, recoiled from her. His chest was bare — the shirt he'd presumably been wearing hid his face. He made to bolt and she quickly held up a hand.

"Wait! I won't hurt you!"

The boy hesitated, but did turn to face her.

"You can see me right?" she asked. "Only magical people can see me. You're magical aren't you?"

The boy nodded.

"Who are you? There aren't any magical children in this village. I'd know. Why are you here? Why didn't I know you were coming? Did your parents move here? Are they magical? You can't be a muggleborn or you wouldn't know you were a wizard. Why…why can't my sight see you?"

The boy stood and watched her through emerald green eyes barely visible through his makeshift mask.

"Hello," he said, his voice was guarded, his stance still coiled for flight.

"Um… hello," she said, suddenly realising she must have sounded both silly and aggressive with her question monologue, but she couldn't help it! She hadn't spoken to anyone in over two hundred years.

"What did you mean by, 'I didn't know you were coming?' and, 'your sight,' …are you a seer?"

"Ahh, yes. I am, or rather, I was… I can still see a bit, but it's not nearly as strong as when I was alive."

"And now you haunt this graveyard? There must be a lot of ambient magic to support a ghost like yourself."

"The magic comes from the tree. It's called the Llangernyw Yew. It's the oldest Yew in the country, you know!" She visibly swelled with pride, although the slight baby bump under her ethereal dress might have helped give that impression. "It's among the oldest living things in the world, you know. That's what a muggle science person said."

"Really?" The boy seemed to be warming up to her. "How old is it?"

"Well, they say it might be five thousand years old, but no one really knows. It might be only three thousand."

"And how old are you, my fair lady?"
She mock gasped, "You don't ask a lady her age, young man," a hint of smile played across her lips.

The boy seemed to wince. "Sorry, I mean, how many years has it been since you died?"

"Over five hundred years… and I'm twenty-one, by the way," she smiled, "my name is Angelystor, and I am the ghost that calls out the names of those who will die in the next year on All Hallows Eve."

"The muggles can hear you?"

"On All Hallows Eve, yes."

The boy seemed to think for a moment.

"My name is… Harry."

Her smile was now summer and light and good friends around an open fire. "Pleased to meet you, Harry. So… what exactly are you doing here in this isolated village, at midnight, wearing your shirt on your head?"

Harry hesitated again.

"There aren't any other magicals around, right?"

"You're the first one I've seen in over two hundred years."

"And you can't actually leave?"

"No." Her smile was slightly sad now. "I am bound to the tree where I died."

Harry nodded. "I am here for a single branch of the Llangernyw Yew, to make a single wand with which to defeat Dark Lord Voldemort."

Angelystor felt her eyes widen almost comically. "I have seen the wizard you speak of with my sight. He is a terrible power in the world. How do you, a child, want to defeat him?"

"I am the child of prophecy — singled out by Fate herself — to do the job the wizarding world cannot. I will do it because I must, because only I can."

"And you have no one to aid you?" she asked, looking around as though expecting Merlin or the founders to suddenly appear.

"There are… forces in the world working against me. Forces that would see me incapable of fulfilling my duty. Forces that would risk the almost certain destruction of everything in favour of a plan with a comically low probability of creating an ideal peace."

Silence settled between boy and ghost for a moment.

Eventually Angelystor spoke. "I do not like seeing the tree harmed… but… for such a purpose, I can hardly refuse. Please Harry, take what you need."

Harry nodded, face still hidden, "Thank you, Angelystor."

Together they walked and floated to the tree. And then together they floated to the very top of the tree where the freshest growth was. Angelystor stared in awe. "You can fly."
"Yes, beautiful lady, I can."

Harry produced a folding miniature hacksaw from the pocket of his baggy trousers and deftly removed a six-foot branch of fresh growth.

"Happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me," he whisper-sang, a slight smile playing around his mouth, just before the nearby church bell sounded midnight with a single, low dong. He floated backwards. "Well, Fair Lady, this is where I must go."

Angelystor nodded, "Harry?"

"Yes, My Lady?"

"Before you go… can I see your face?"

Harry floated motionless for a good few seconds before putting the branch down in the nearby growth, reaching up, and removing the shirt around his head.

Angelystor gazed into a young face that promised future strength and nobility. Black messy hair spilled over his forehead, utterly failing to conceal a fierce lightning bolt shaped scar, tinged in an angry red.

She floated around him, inspecting him from every angle at less than a few inches distance, before finishing right in front of his face.

"Thank you, Harry," she whispered, before retreating a few feet, "and good luck."

Harry nodded his thanks, picked up the branch again, and with a single crack, was gone.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Two days later, Harry woke feeling great. Stage one was complete and he'd liberated enough muggle money from people without enough common sense to move onto stage two. It was time for the thestral hair and he had a long journey ahead of him.

There was only one thestral herd in the British isles, and it was Hagrid's on the grounds of Hogwarts — a place Harry dared not tread for fear of the wards being capable of alerting Dumbledore to his presence.

So, he'd have to search further afield, and in Voldemort's memories there was only one other place with a thestral herd. It was the big one — the wild thestral herd of the Mongolian shamans.

He spent the next few days apparating across Europe, through Russia, and down into the Mongolian heartland, arriving near Ulaanbaatar—Mongolia's capital city—sometime around midday on the third day of his travels. Magically exhausted from his trip and still wearing his shirt around his head, he scarfed down the last of the food he'd packed and stretched out on the luscious grass.

Grassland stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction, broken up by the occasional mountain. There was zero cover and anyone within fifty miles would be able to see him. On the other hand, there were so few people here, and the country so vast, the chance of being happened upon by someone who cared, was tiny.

Several hours of kip later and Harry moved on.
After another few hours of apparating southwest, he finally arrived at his destination, the Ongiin Khiid Monastery complex, the centre of the Mongolian magical community. When the communists took over the country in the 1920s, they'd destroyed most of the Buddhist temples throughout the country, and now most of them were little more than ruins.

While the muggle population of Ongiin Khiid had been slaughtered or forced to serve in the communist army, the magical community had hunkered down behind their powerful wards. After the initial destruction, they'd gradually taken back the complex, rebuilding and warding it until the entire area was bristling with muggle repelling and illusion wards. To any muggle walking by, it now looked just like any other ruined temple complex.

Harry walked through the gates and beheld the grandeur of the Tibetan architecture — row after row of houses and temples, all with the same distinctive white stone wall and square, curved, sloping roofs. While Diagon alley looked like a stroll down a history timeline, Ongiin Khiid looked like a uniform shopping street designed by an architect with a fetish for old-green copper and spruce.

With the exception of one building of course.

Harry ambled down the street and turned to face a building that looked like a melting roman temple. Gringotts.

Knowing the goblins would react unfavourably to disguises, Harry unwound his make-shift shirt-mask from his head, slipped it back over his chest, and walked past the guards, up into the bank.

Ten minutes later, Harry exited the bank with five galleons exchanged from 250 pounds — the results of his morning and afternoon of summoning training on the London underground.

The goblin serving him had certainly raised his eyebrows at serving a lone, clearly western, English accented child, but hadn't asked questions. Merlin he loved goblins.

Harry continued to walk down the street until he found what he was looking for — a small shop with a thestral tied up outside, eating noisily from a bucket of unidentified meats.

The shop contained everything thestral. Cured thestral meat hung along the rafters, thestral bones aligned the walls, bottles of thestral glue stood next to bars of thestral soap. The floor along the wall was lined with thestral shell cordovan boots.

And next to the counter, pride of place was given to a wooden mannequin wearing a black, full-length, duster style thestral shell cordovan coat with a robe style hood. It looked amazing and Harry knew he wanted it. It truly was a coat deserving of being worn by Death's champion. He sauntered up to the work of art, and nonchalantly flipped the price tag. Two hundred galleons (£10,000). Ouch.

"Би эрхэм тусалж чадах уу?" a voice said.

Harry turned to see an old man standing in the doorway.

"Sorry?"

The man looked a little surprised at Harry's western features, but quickly rallied. "Can I help, Sir?"

"Yes, I'm looking for thestral tail hair."
The man smiled. "You cannot see it?"

Harry gave him a look. "I cannot see it because it is not on display."

"Ah, well done, Sir. But I am surprised to see one so young who has seen death."

Harry shrugged. If old man only knew.

"How much you want?"

"Ten strands — in a wand core braid."

The shopkeeper suddenly looked cautious. "You want for wand core."

"Is that a problem?"

"Where you go after here?"

"Back home to Europe."

The man was silent few a few moments.

"Okay. But you did not buy from here, right?"

"Sure, I understand."

Five minutes and two galleons later, Harry pocketed a long wrap of thestral hair cord and a small bottle of thestral glue (£100).

"And for another two galleons, I'd like to reserve that coat for a year," Harry said, pointing at the breathtaking black duster on the mannequin."

The shopkeeper grinned. "You like it."

"Yes, but I cannot buy it just now."

"Okay. I can do that, Mister…?"

Harry scrabbled for an appropriate name. "Death." Dammit!

The man raised a single eyebrow. "Okay then, Mister Death. I hope to see you again for your purchase… but only for that, of course."

Harry left, berating himself for his dumbass name choice, and decided to get a room to rest his core before the long-as-hell apparition trip back home.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

And now, after three whole weeks back in the past, here it was.

Harry reverently opened the wooden box, which the muggle war-veteran carpenter and wood carver had made to go with the wand, and, eyes shining, gazed upon a thing of beauty.

The handle was ornate and featured many little discrete motifs of Harry's own design along the hilt, which curved down in a graceful arc to the wand proper, before spiralling all the way down to the wand's point, like a wrought iron twisted fence.
Harry spied, among the hilt motifs facing him, a tiny lighting bolt killing a snake, and another striking a goat. The handle itself was textured in an interlocking lightning bolt pattern and the pommel was perfectly round and used the wood's swirling grain to suggest a smoke filled orb.

It was perfect.

"Yep, some of my best work that," the craftsman said, noting the look of extreme delight on Harry's face. "Still say it's a mighty weird request, and some of the materials you wanted... well, I've never seen anything like that glue ever. I'd swear there wasn't even a visible join between the middle and the tip. And that cord... my friend insisted he couldn't even see it! But in the end, I figured you certainly knew what you wanted and was willing to pay for it, eh, Young Man?"

"Yes..." Harry said, only half listening, distracted by his own internal musings. "It is strange like that."

He reached for the wand and felt the connection before his digits even touched it. As his finger tips wrapped around the handle, warmth shot through him, quickly building into a crescendo, pulsing power down his arm and through the wand, sending emerald green sparks up and all over the wood shop counter.

"Bloody hell!" The man shouted. "What was that?"

"Magic."

The man stared. "Huh. Whad'ja know. And my wife's always going on about horoscopes and psychic readings, and all that. Figures there would be something to it all."

"Yes. You've really done an excellent job. This has got to be the only muggle made wand in the country, if not the world. And it looks and feels better than any I've seen or felt."

"Err... Thank you, I think?"

Harry casually fingered the wand's tip before pointing it at the master craftsman.

"Obliviate."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry stepped outside the woodwork shop and spent a good twenty minutes throwing up a casual detection ward to alert him if any other wizards gained entry. There wasn't much magic around, so it wouldn't last long, but it would do the job for now. He felt he owed a tiny bit of protection to the man for such good work, and who knows, he may have need of him in the future. That, and it would give him early warning if someone managed to somehow trace his wand's origins.

Wow it felt good. His old holly and phoenix feather wand hadn't felt half as natural, or as powerful, as this one did. And there he'd been, thinking this wand was just going to be a rough and ready stopgap measure. Hah! All that, 'wand chooses the wizard,' dragon crap... turns out the wizard just needs to really know himself.

And now that he had a wand, he could attack his next greatest vulnerability, his rather empty and nonexistent vaults.

— End of Chapter Two —
A/N: The exchange rate in my fics is 50 GBP to 1 Galleon. 5 GBP to 1 Galleon, as in canon, makes so little sense as to be world breaking.
"Hello, my dear. Are you all alone? Where are your parents?"

"Confundo."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

"Where the hell did you come from?!"

"Obliviate."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

"Sorry kid, that information is restricted."

"Legilimens."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry luxuriated on his pool lounger, enjoying the shade cast by a huge umbrella, sipping from a glass of iced orange juice. The crystal blue waters of the Mediterranean lapped but a stone's throw from his new rented apartment, and both the sea, and the pool a few feet away, called to him.

Damn, life was so much easier with a wand!

Harry returned his focus to the pad of paper he'd been making notes on, and once more went over his plans, looking for any loopholes or unthought of problems.

It was now mid September and he'd been back in the past for six weeks. He'd spent the last month continuing his opportunistic little pilferer spiel and for the first few weeks it had been great. He now sat on the tidy sum of just over four thousand pounds, but the rates of return were now too low compared to the risk of getting caught breaking the international statute of secrecy and muggle baiting laws.

He needed something bigger.

The biggest problem was that he needed to use his magic to his advantage, but couldn't do anything that might draw attention to himself, or risk breaking the ISS.

His very brief foray into bank robbing ended in near disaster when he realised, just in time, that the bank—the bog standard normal high street muggle bank—had goblin wizard-detection, key-out, and anti-apparition wards. They even had an invisible-to-muggle, miniature thief's downfall. Gringotts, apparently, took their banking monopoly very seriously.

He'd considered stealing other high value items like artwork or jewellery, but decided wasn't worth it… They were too difficult to get rid of, especially when compared to certain other goods.

He took another sip of orange juice and leafed through the stack of academic journal articles he'd acquired from various British universities. They all had titles like 'the organisation of high-level drug markets' and 'Drug markets and law enforcement'.
Magic could be very flashy. McGonagall demonstrated it to new muggleborn parents by transfiguring various household items into other things… or possibly turning into a cat. Very impressive stuff. But economically valuable? Not so much. You could use it to commit fraud, and be a damn good con artist, but again, you ran the risk of breaking the ISS and getting the improper use of magic office on your tail.

But magic didn't need to be flashy to be damn valuable. The ability to move a small cargo, unseen and undetected, across a national border at low risk to the carrier… now that was damn valuable. And he was probably one of the few wizards that had both the power and skill to pass through the low powered wards governments erected around their borders.

If he were caught, wizarding border control would be looking for contraband magical artefacts. Muggle drugs weren't on the list, why would they be? Wizards routinely made potions that could do the same thing far better, with low risk of complications or addiction. Hell, they taught thirteen year-olds the cheering charm, which was an almost textbook example of an upper. It was amazing the entire wizarding world didn't run around with it cast on them all the time.

That didn't mean being caught had no cost. No, the consequence would be that he'd be back on the wizarding world's radar. Illegal apparition, underage magic, illegal possession of a wand… the list of charges would quickly pile up. True, he could get out of most of them by playing the emancipated lord card—except for illegal apparition—but, when he re-entered the magical world, he wanted it be on his terms.

He wasn't worried though. He'd already made the crossing three times now, and if this little project worked out, he'd only need to sneak over the border a few more times for quite a while.

Putting his drink down, Harry padded over to the pool's edge, and carefully slid his hot, sweaty body into the water's cool embrace.

This was nice. Very nice. Maybe making Cyprus his holiday base would be a really good idea…

But he also knew he had to get on with things. Time was marching on.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry stood, disillusioned on the Turkish mountainside overlooking the poppy fields. Most of the fields he'd passed in the last few weeks were bare, the winter harvest having already been brought in months ago, sold to the muggle government as part of a UN agreed effort to crack down on the drugs trade. Those harvests were being processed into medical grade morphine to help prop up the world's very real shortage.

But not these fields, oh no. These fields—in a remote mountain province, hidden away from prying eyes—were halfway through an additional, illegal, summer harvest.

Harry uncorked the vial of a carefully measured out ageing potion, which he'd bought in Istanbul's Grand Bazaar, and swigged it in one gulp. Ugh. he shook his head. Foul tasting as always. A second later he felt himself getting taller, and anyone who could see him would tell him he now looked to be in his mid-twenties. He'd stay looking that way for a good six hours, or until he drank an antidote.

Cancelling his disillusionment, Harry walked down the mountain path towards the lone building near the fields. He stepped inside. Concrete floors, concrete walls, and a sheet metal roof. Around the wall edges, Various machines lay in questionable states of repair, Metal barrels were stacked in a corner, and in the middle, crouched three men, hunkered down over a metal barrel on an open
fire, sieving what looked like chalky sludge over the top.

"Hello," he called out, in the little Turkish he'd picked up over the last few weeks. Voldemort had learnt many languages in his quest for obscure magical knowledge, but Turkish wasn't one of them.

"Hello friend," answered one of the men, presumably the boss — he had that older, done-everything look. He sounded uncertain. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking to buy"

"Buy?"

"Yes"

"The goods?"

"Yes"

"Oh, I cannot. I must sell to my buyer."

"Would you be willing for a higher price?"

"No," he shook his head and held his hands out, palms open in front of him. "I'm sorry, my friend."

"Like, double your usual price."

The man paused at that and looked deep into his eyes. Harry's legilimency could feel desire, greed, and longing for what such a deal could do for his family, but also reluctance to damage the business relationship he had with the men who bought his summer crop.

"I can buy your goods every year for the next three years."

""

""

"How much do you want to buy?"

YES! Harry did a little mental jig while keeping his face impassive. "How many acres do you grow?"

"Five."

"So, you yield, what? Three to five kilos?"

"I have four kilos now. By tomorrow, I will have another one kilo."

"And your price?"

"Well, normally we would sell for 1,750 Lira per kilo, so your rate would be 3,500 Lira."

Harry could see the mental math flying through the man's head, the margins, expected bluffs, and mild hope to get an even better deal. "Ahhh, I know what this sells for, sir. I can pay you 2,500 Lira for each kilo." That put the price below the man's true price by the exact amount the man had priced above it.

The man smiled knowingly, seeming to slip into full-on haggling mode, and placed a big arm
around Harry's shoulder. "Oh. My friend. You know I am taking a big risk selling to you. I cannot take less than 3,250."

"Well, I understand about risks... See here, I have the money, right here, for our deal." Harry brought out a wad of bills from his pocket. "2,750 and we can do the deal right now for the first four and I'll come back tomorrow for the last one."

"Ahh, You drive a hard bargain. Tell you what," the man said while patting Harry firmly on the shoulder, "You go up, I go down, that is the way of things, Yes? We meet in the middle. Three thousand a kilo and we both have a fair deal. Okay?"

"Okay," he said smiling, turning around and holding out his hand.

They shook.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry was soaked. The rain poured down from the sky in torrents, giving not one wit to the precious cargo he had stored in his backpack, wrapped up in a dozen layers of plastic bags and wrapping.

The cloudy night sky made it pitch black and he could barely see in front of his nose. The only good thing, he reflected, was that if he couldn't see anything that meant no muggle on the British coast, looking out to sea, could see him either.

He was nearing the border wards now, he knew. He could feel the slight hum of their magic against his skin as he floated forwards. The buffeting of the wind was making it very difficult... Ah. There. Yes. He could just sense the first ward in the line — the wizard detection ward. He concentrated on the space, some five metres in front of him, and with a definite, crack, felt the weight of the ward shift from his front to his back, only to be replaced with a new magical pressure in front of him, the anti-apparition ward line.

Harry continued his forward push, feeling the magic of the ward build up as he passed through and dim down as he came out the other side. The final ward, a key-in portkey ward, presumably for sanctioned international portkey travel, was similarly flown through, and Harry found himself back in good old English airspace, still soaked to the bone of course, but it was definitely English rain now.

He hoped it was a bit dryer up in Scotland before disappearing with yet another loud crack.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

It turned out to be quite a bit nicer in Scotland. After many, many cracks, Harry arrived in the Outer Hebrides to a choppy wind, but no rain. This did mean that Harry was now getting cold, fast, and it took several warming charms to counteract the biting Scottish wind.

Flying over the islands that made up the archipelago, Harry soon found what he was looking for — a small island, steep, rugged, no sign of human inhabitants. He landed next to a cliff face and immediately got to work.

"Defodio!"

The gouging charm ripped through the stone, creating a very definite indent in the cliff face. He kept his focus on the charm and watched as it started to hollow out a cave.
Several hours later, Harry was exhausted, but had succeeded in digging himself a passage way leading to two hollowed out rooms. Really. He collapsed against a corner wall. Things would be a lot easier if he could just use Gringotts for his bank vault. But he really didn't want to have to explain where he was getting constant influxes of muggle money. Much better to deposit it all in one go when he introduced the wizarding world to Lord Slytherin. Plus it would be good to have an emergency stash in case Gringotts was unavailable for whatever reason.

Having gotten his breath back, Harry picked up his wand and conjured a small camping bed, complete with sleeping bag, threw up a notice-me-not on the entrance, along with a couple of temporary detection and muggle repelling wards, and lay his head down for a good long kip.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

FWHOOOOOOSHHHHH!

Heat and light filled Harry's world.

"AAAAANNNNNNNNNNNGH!"

A roar, louder than anything Harry had ever heard, shattered through whatever final remnants of sleep he'd been hanging on to. He struggled out of the sleeping bag and snatched at his wand. He was still in the cave he'd dug last night, but something seemed to be making a good attempt at joining him.

FWHOOOOOOSHHHHH!

Outside the doorway he'd carved last night, leading to the hallway that led straight to the outside world, a train of fire was crashing its way through his makeshift hideaway. The heat was incredible.

When the fire stopped, he pounced over to the doorway, cast the strongest shield charm he knew, rolled into the corridor, and aimed down his brand new, powerful as hell wand, ready to take on whatever the world had thrown at him.

Filling the space of the entrance of the passage was a head — a head with midnight blue scales, spikes, and a few sharp teeth visible along a large closed mouth. A single dark-blue eye pressed against the passageway opening. It was a dragon.

"FUCK!" Harry shouted, rolling back into the room he'd been in before, just as another train of fire thundered past where he'd been crouching moments earlier.

"A dragon! A mother fucking dragon!" Harry screamed at the roof, "Seriously!? Why not a hydra while you're at it! Or maybe a nundu! Because, you know, I don't have enough crap to deal with already!"

His shield would've held for a while, he knew, but it would also have drained him a lot for no good reason. He glared at the doorway and tried to think snakelike thoughts before scream-hissing,"$Hey! Winged Serpent! Would you mind not toasting me? I mean you no harm!$"

There was silence for a moment, before another train of fire answered his call, forcing him further into the room, arms held protectively against his face. It roared again.

Well, it might have worked. Old Voldy had always been too much of a pussy to go one-on-one with these buggers.
Harry hit himself on the head with his wand and felt the familiar egg dribbling over his body, signalling the sensation of being disillusioned, then disapparated with a crack.

He appeared, floating, some fifty metres behind the dragon, which was now scrabbling at the entrance. He recognised it as a Hebridean Black. A very sarcastic part of his brain screamed, 'A Hebridean Black!? In the Hebrides?! No really?, but he shoved the git into an occlumency prison to focus better on the task at hand.

The dragon seemed to realise Harry wasn't there any more, and turned to look for him.

Harry shot towards the beast and passed just beyond its lunge range.

Probably both seeing the change in colour of Harry's body as he moved, and picking up his smell, the dragon reared onto its hind legs and with one more deafening, "AAAAANNNNNNNNNGH!" leapt into the sky.

Harry didn't look back. He sped away from his cave, trying to lure it out as far as he could.

Come on. He dodged a random fire ball. These guys were known for being aggressive bastards. He'd see just how far it would go.

Thirty minutes of chase later, and it was still right behind him.

Okay. That was more than enough of this bullshit.

Crack!

Harry appeared back at the entrance of his cave and immediately started the complex wand movements for one of the most overpowered charms in the wizarding world's arsenal… The fidelius charm.

Ten minutes later and he'd finished the wand waving work and switched to using his wand to carve the runes at each corner of the cave. The fifteen-inch yew focus had never meant to be for carving work and the runes were massive as a result, but they'd do for now.

Fifteen minutes after that, Harry ran to the cave's entrance and started the visualisation exercise, putting his master occlumency to good use, imagining the cave in every minute detail with pin point accuracy. It was a good thing the cave was so basic or this would take ages.

He opened his eyes, and saw the returning dragon in the distance, surrounded by a team of wizards on broomsticks, all shooting red spells at the fearsome creature.

He smiled and brought his wand up and down in a single strong gesture, touching a single rune on the floor, and channelling all the power he could into it.

"Fidelius Occultum!"

And knowledge of the cave, and its soon to be hoard of treasure, disappeared from the world.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Curtis Lawless was frustrated. Why couldn't those Gobshites get anything right? He'd been expecting a big shipment to arrive last week, but they'd been intercepted by the plods and his stocks were starting to run dry. He had a good chunk of the city to supply and there were plenty of other wholesalers who'd take advantage and move in on his turf, if he ran out.
Normally, he mused, if some unknown ponce had walked in off the street promising to supply, he'd have told him to fuck off, but right now? He was getting desperate.

He glared at the open door to his office in the nightclub he'd made his base of operations. Well, he'd give the wooler five minutes and if the man was fake he'd throw him out and let the lads deal with him.

Said man now entered, being led by his chief enforcer. The would-be supplier looked… different. His hair was platinum blond, messy, and came down in a sweeping fringe, covering half his forehead. His beard was short and trimmed and blond like his hair. But his eyes… Curtis stared. The eyes were gray and, when they met his, seemed to pierce straight into him to examine his soul.

"A-alright," he started, "What's your business then, Mister? I'm a busy man."

The man nodded. "Mister Lawless. I have a way to move goods across the border safely and quickly. I supply when no one else can. I can supply all your needs without inconvenient interruptions… like shipments being seized at petrol stations."

Curtis looked the man over again. Most drug smugglers looked ordinary so as to attract the least attention possible. This man did not look in any way ordinary, and he doubted the posh looking tosser had ever not been stopped at customs.

"Look Mister… ah, what's your name?"

"Malfoy."

"Look Mister Malfoy, I don't need to hear stories about what you think you can do. Do you have something for me right now?"

"I have five kilos stored in a safe place from my test run. Now I've sorted it, I'm doing a much larger run in the next few months. The price is ten thousand a kilo."

Curtis exhaled. Five kilos would keep him going for another two months, which would give him breathing room, at the very least, and ten grand a kilo was surprisingly fair. He doubted the man was a plod, he was too flamboyant for that. He was either the real deal or a conman.

"Fine," he said, reaching down into a desk draw, drawing out a chunky mobile phone and tossing it to the blond. "I'll call you sometime in the next few days to give you the where and when. I hope for your sake that you can deliver."

The man nodded respectfully and left the office, leaving Curtis and his chief enforcer alone.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry, deep in his makeshift, accidentally dragon-guarded vault, collapsed into a conjured armchair, and contemplated his progress. Mr. Lawless's men had been shocked when he'd just stepped out from behind one of the trees—he guessed they'd been expecting him to drive to the specified, middle-of-nowhere field—but it had all gone well, for once. He now had a small bag filled with fifty-thousand pounds in fifty-pound notes.

He looked at the phone, now resting on a table. He'd had to camp out in a muggle hotel for two days to wait for the call—the phone wouldn't receive reception under the fidelius, or other high magic areas—and it had taken a lot to convince the men they wouldn't be able to contact him in future. He'd placated them by explaining he was working on a communication method that was safer and more secure than the public phone network, but it hadn't been easy.
It was now mid October and he needed to get a move on to keep things on track. He was working to a schedule and the first deadline was getting closer… the winter solstice. On December 21, his family magics would kick in and create a seat for him on the Wizengamot. If he didn't have a proxy ready to accept it for him, then, if a full assembly were called, he'd be legally required to turn up in person, which he still wasn't ready for. Annoyingly, the winter solstice was one of those full assemblies.

He sat up straighter, grabbed his wand, and started transfiguring his appearance again. It was time to make his first foray into the British magical community. He needed a trunk—a nice, expensive, roomy, multi compartment, shrinkable trunk—and he sure as hell wasn't going to look like either a Potter or a Malfoy as he did it.

And after that… well, if he hurried, he could dash to Afghanistan—Turkey couldn't really supply in bulk with the new regulations—load up his new trunk with farm-gate priced junk, pop it in his pocket, and be back in Britain for early to mid November.

That should net between 400 thousand to 600 thousand pounds, or around eight thousand to twelve thousand galleons, which should be sufficient for what he was planning next. Lord Slytherin was an unknown quantity after all, and if he wanted any hope of securing the allies he'd need, he needed to make quite an impression.

— End of Chapter Three —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The responses to this story continue to shock me. 0_0 Apparently, you really like it. We'll see if you continue to like it as the amount of bastard on display starts to ramp up.

A/N: One of my reviewers pointed out that there is no reason for Harry's new wand to have the powers of the Elder wand just because it has the same core.

Clarification point: Harry's wand doesn't, and was never meant to, have the same powers as the Elder wand. The reason Harry's wand reacts so much more strongly than his old holly and phoenix feather wand did is that the holly wand was reacting partly to the horcrux in his forehead. I mean, do we really believe that Harry and Voldemort are actually so alike as to possess brother wands without an outside interference? Does a wand understand about destiny and prophecy? Probably not. There are only three theories I've seen postulated that make sense to me:

1. Horcrux interference
2. Dumbledore meddling
3. Harry is evil/dark/messed up

For this fic, I'm going with 1. In my interpretation, Harry's use of the holly wand handicaps him the same way Neville's use of his father's wand does. Which just goes to show how powerful Harry actually is.
A/N: All prices have been normalised to 1991 values.
Lord Jacob Greengrass, of the Ancient and Noble house of Greengrass, was looking through Flourish and Blotts for the latest edition of *Who's Who of Magical Britain*.

"Good day, Lord Greengrass," said a voice behind him. He turned and found himself face to face with the all too familiar face of Lord James Potter.

"Good day, Lord Potter," he said, his voice making it clear it had just become less so.

"I was wondering if you've given any more thought to supporting the upcoming bill on restricting dangerous artefacts?" The man smiled the smug smile that he wanted to hex off every time he saw it. "You know it's something that has to be done."

"I still know nothing of the sort, Lord Potter. Perhaps I'd be more willing to support such a bill if what it defined as a 'dangerous artefact' wasn't worded as to potentially include such things as quills and trunks."

"Oh, come on. It's not *that* bad. And we have to give the ministry *some* room to interpret the law as needed for the situation." Lord Potter gestured to the figure of Lord Sirius Black, chief auror of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, who was standing and chatting to his Lady Greengrass.

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

"I'm sorry?"

"You're asking us to ratify a bill that would give him," Jacob nodded towards Black, "the power to confiscate any item at all, on his own discretion."

"Oh nonsense, there will be safeguards."

Jacob suppressed a snort. "To be decided upon later no doubt? Preferably when Merlin returns from beyond the veil, no — I'm sorry Lord Potter. The neutrals, as we seem to be known, will not be supporting this bill — not until it includes sensible wording, safeguards, and a specific list of prohibited items."

Lord Potter's eyes narrowed. "We're going to win this, you know."

"I know you're going to try."

"You think we aren't aware of how much of the Greengrass wealth comes from items of dubious legality."

"There is nothing we trade in that is not legal."

"Only because of loopholes in the law." Potter's voice lowered. "Loopholes that you are trying to stop us fixing."

He sighed, frustrated. "The so called loopholes you speak of are not loopholes, they are exemptions, put in the law for good reasons. And now, if you'll excuse me, I really have to find this book and be on my way."
Lord Potter straightened, but couldn't quite suppress a sneer. "Of course, Lord Greengrass." He left.

Jacob stared after the man who was now fussing over his son, John Potter, the much worshiped Boy-Who-Lived. A small girl with weasley-red hair was hanging off the boy's arm.

"How was your conversation with Lord Potter, Dear?"

He turned and beheld the most beautiful woman in the universe. "Still a sanctimonious git," he said. "I'm really not feeling great about this bill."

"Oh?" His wife, the Lady Sunny Greengrass, took his arm, and gently led him away from the bustle, towards a quieter nook.

"Our position is worsening. In the last year we've lost Parkinson to Malfoy, and Abbott to Potter. How much more can we take until there is no one left to fight for a sane world?"

"We are doing everything we can, my love."

Lord Greengrass sighed. He knew that was true. He was pulling out everything he had to shore up the rag tag alliance that was the neutral faction, no matter how distasteful.

"How did Daphne react when you told her?" he asked.

Sunny's smile faded. "She was… less than pleased."

Jacob winced. He loved his girls with all his heart, and to do what he was doing tore him up. But what choice did he have? If the alliance fell apart the Greengrass family was finished. Politically, socially, financially, and, if they chose the wrong side in any potential war, physically. Over a thousand years of history, gone. And it would all be his fault.

He desperately wanted to change the subject. "How was your conversation with Black?"

"Oh, he's his usual loud self." She smirked, looking over a nearby shelf towards the wizards of the Light. "Although, it does seem he may be having a problem with his beloved daughter."

"Oh?"

"Apparently, she's starting to get dangerous ideas." The smirk widened. "She keeps asking questions about the morality of magic, about why some magic is classified as dark and others as light."

"Oh yes," he said, starting to smirk as well.

"Her Daddy is worried she may be going down a dark and dangerous path."

"A Black? Walking the path of dark magic? Surely not."

"Apparently his biggest worry is that she'll get sorted into Slytherin, and he'll lose his little baby girl forever." Sunny was barely holding back laughter now.

Jacob craned his neck over the nearby shelf and spied the distinctive long, black hair of Alexandra Black. While most of the Potters, Blacks, and the Weasley hanger-on were grouped together, laughing and being loud, the Black heiress was on her own, and if his memory of Flourish and Blotts served him, was in a less than light section of the bookshop.

"I suppose it would be too much to hope that we could drag her into our camp," he said.
"Well, she is just a year below our Daphne, and a year above Astoria, so if she gets sorted into 
Slytherin, it's not impossible."

"I just hope we last that long."

"We will." She kissed him on the cheek.

Ten minutes later, after finding and buying the book, Lord and Lady Greengrass walked back down 
Diagon Alley to the Leaky Cauldron floo connection. He'd entered the pub, and was about to reach 
for the floo powder after his wife, when a man approached him.

"Lord Greengrass, of the Ancient and Noble House of Greengrass?"

"Yes?" Jacob answered.

The man was hooded — his face, hidden.

"I was wondering if I might impose upon you for a chat at some point in the not too distant future? 
I have something to discuss with you that will be of interest."

He was about to firmly rebuff the unknown, hooded gentleman when the man brought his empty 
hands to his front and very deliberately rubbed the back of his hand, drawing attention to a ring that 
appeared on his finger. Jacob's eyes bulged.

It was a head of house ring, but that wasn't what shocked him.

'No,' he thought, his brain struggling to make sense of what he was seeing. 'The line's lost. It's been 
lost for centuries.' But there was no mistaking it. Every boy and girl who'd spent seven years in the 
snake pit could draw that crest by memory, blindfolded.

Then his brain finally caught up with his eyes, and he remembered who the most probable 
candidate for heir to the Slytherin line had been. He gulped.

"No, I am not he," the man said, presumably seeing the fear that must have leaked onto his face 
through his occlumency barriers.

"...But, you are...?" he looked at the ring again.

"Yes."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"I know of the situation you face in the Wizengamot. I believe that I hold the answers to many, if 
not most of your problems."

Lord Greengrass looked at the man, properly this time. The black robes, tinted with green, and 
tastefully embroidered at the edges with silver, were of the finest acromantula silk, and below the 
robes he caught glimpses of dragon hide. What little the man displayed screamed wealth, power, 
and sophistication. "I would be honoured to welcome you into my home, at two o'clock tomorrow, 
if that suits your fancy."

"It does, Lord Greengrass." And with a short bow, he turned and walked away, before 
disapparating with a loud 'crack!'

Jacob stared into space before realising Sunny was probably going mental on the other side of the 
floo. Although, now he thought about it, it was likely nothing to her reaction when she learned that
they had less than twenty-four hours before they hosted Lord freak'n Slytherin.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry stood in his cave-vault and cast a critical eye over himself in a full-length mirror.

Yesterday's time in the alley had brought mixed feelings.

One the one hand, he'd barely been able to suppress his instincts to lash out when he saw the Potters walking down the street. The bitterness fuelled by ten years of dementor hell was still almost overwhelming. On the other hand, seeing how smug and content his brother was with Weasly on his arm, stayed his hand, and reminded him how good it would feel to rip the two apart and mould her to his whims.

John Potter was still a child at the moment, and wouldn't return back in time from his first death at the graveyard for another few years. The knowledge that John would lose Ginny, not once, but twice, made him feel warm and fuzzy. How he hoped he could see the look on The-Fake-Boy-Who-Lived's face when he 'woke up' on his eleventh birthday to find the girl, who'd obsessed over him since he was five, and who John had grown to love, now loved his dark, evil, future-criminal brother instead.

Then there had been Alexandra Black.

In the last timeline, she'd been… amazing.

She was a year below him, but had quickly made her mark in the snake pit. When she got a letter from home saying her father had purged the Black library of all the 'dark' books, she'd pitched a fit that had been etched into the mind of every student who'd seen it. It had taken the house elves days to fix all the damage, and she'd only been a first year.

Later on, she'd joined Voldemort straight out of Hogwarts, and the visions he'd received painted a picture of a younger, saner, Bellatrix Lestrange. She was smart, driven, beautiful, deadly, and—if the visions from Voldemort were any indication—trainable. In other words, she would make a perfect Lady Slytherin.

Finally, there had been Lord Greengrass. The man seemed amiable, and the one fight he'd seen him in had been solid, even if the former king of Slytherin house had died on the end of Voldemort's wand. It was his unofficial position as leader of the Neutrals that drew Harry to him. That, and his daughter, the Ice Queen of Slytherin, would no doubt make a good ally.

Harry finished getting ready, checked his transfiguration one last time, chain apparated to the Hog's Head, and stepped into the floo.

"Greengrass manor!"

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Lord Greengrass jumped to his feet as the floo flared green and the same hooded figure he'd met in the Leaky Cauldron stepped out. The figure immediately drew his hood down and smiled.

"Lord Greengrass, thank you for inviting me."

Jacob stepped forward to shake the man's hand. He was shocked. Lord Slytherin's face was far younger than he'd expected. Maybe twenty? Maybe twenty-five?
"Lord Slytherin, we are both honoured and surprised to be welcoming you to our home," he gestured to the witches in his life, who stepped forward.

Lord Slytherin took Sunny's hand and brushed his lips against her knuckles, who looked quite happy at the charm offensive. The new lord repeated the gesture with Daphne and Astoria. Daphne giggled, and Jacob thought he saw a flicker of surprise flash across Slytherin's face.

Ten minutes later both he and Lord Slytherin were sat opposite each other in his office, comfortable in plush leather armchairs.

"So," Jacob started, "the Wizengamot."

Lord Slytherin inclined his head. "Indeed. Let's get the obvious stuff out of the way first. The winter solstice is coming up soon, and the chamber will be acknowledging my ascendancy."

"Which I am very interested to hear about. But I suppose you want to know what's in it for you, to ally yourself with the Neutrals?"

Slytherin smiled. "We can talk about how I became Lord Slytherin later. As for your other question… No."

"No?"

"I already know what's in it for me. I am Gray, through and through. For the purposes of this discussion, I am also neutral."

"And by neutral you mean…?"

"I mean I side neither with the bigots of the Dark, who would see our world destroyed in a sea of hate, nor the fools of the Light, who would see our culture destroyed and our lives ruled by an almighty, draconian ministry."

Jacob nodded, "So you are offering unconditional support. That is most welcome."

"Well, sort of."

Jacob frowned. "Sort of?"

"The neutrals are losing and I don't accept losing. Tell me Lord Greengrass, what do the Neutrals stand for?"

He was momentarily thrown both by the blunt statement and by the question. "Well, I think you said it yourself. We are a group of people who believe that both the Light and the Dark are extremists who will tear apart our world if left unchecked."

"And what are you fighting towards?"

"I'm sorry, isn't that what I said?"

"Not really, you said you are fighting to maintain the status quo. That doesn't move towards anything. It is keeping things as they are."

"But keeping things as they are is the point, for the most part anyway."

"Yes, but that which doesn't change the status quo is neither sexy, nor appealing to the young and impressionable. Think about how Voldemort was able to forge the Dark out of the children of the
pureblood lines. And how Dumbledore rallied the children of both half-blood and non pureblood noble houses into the Light."

He turned over the implications of what the young lord was saying in his head. "So, you're suggesting we need a mission? Something to rally a new generation around?"

"Yes."

"And no doubt you already have such a mission in mind."

Lord Slytherin swirled the brandy he'd given the man earlier and looked far away before returning to the here and now. "I am sick and tired Lord Greengrass — sick and tired of the aspersions made against my house, sick and tired of those who believe that Slytherin stands for hate and bigotry. Sick of those who believe that to be cunning and ambitious is to be evil — that to use old magic is to be evil. And sick of those who use my house's name as justification for their horrific actions."

Jacob was surprised. Sure, he'd heard the same points made many times before, usually whispered from one neutral to another at parties, afraid they'd be overheard by a Dark sided wizard and denounced for heresy, but to hear Lord Slytherin himself speak them so brazenly had a galvanising effect.

"You are proposing the resurrection of Slytherin house with neutral ideals as a rallying point for the neutral faction."

"Yes."

He sat back and thought. It was an ambitious plan. It involved shifting the entire philosophical stance of a good chunk of the wizarding world. But with Lord Slytherin as a legitimising force, it might be possible to win back a good number of more liberal Dark siders and more conservative Light siders.

"Such a plan depends heavily on your abilities and power as Lord Slytherin."

"Well, money is no issue, with the ascendancy to the Slytherin Lordship I was made privy to a number of family secrets that secure more than enough wealth. As for magical power... well... Do you have a duelling room?"

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry stood, tall, powerful, robes whipping around his feet in a swirl of barely contained magic. Time to see how much all that battle time camped in Voldy's head translated to actual duelling instincts.

"Standard European Duelling Rules," called Lord Greengrass from the far side of the huge, warded duelling room.

"Standard? How about Extended Class B?" he countered. "We are the Gray faction after all."

Greengrass looked at him for a long moment before offering a small smile. "Very well, Extended Class B Rules. Joint countdown from three — starting on one."

Lady Sunny stood to the side, fidgeting incessantly with the cuff of her robes.

They both raised their wands.
"Three, Two, One!"

"Three, Two, One!"

A flurry of spells shot towards Harry, all intending to take him out, but he swatted them out of the air before they reached him. One particularly nasty looking purple spell felt unswatatable, and he dodged it, bringing up a shield to absorb the stunner his opponent had hidden in it's shadow.

Nice and steady.

A stun, shield-breaker, stun combo failed as Harry conjured a rock to block the shield-breaker, and let the stunner splash, uselessly, on his wordlessly cast protego.

Lord Greengrass, seeing that Harry wasn't attacking him, started casting more complex spells. Transfigured animals fell to his mid-range flame whip, magical fog was blown away with a miniature hurricane, and illusions totally failed to fool his magical sensing ability.

Going well.

Then, Jacob Greengrass struck.

All at once, Harry found himself boxed in by a banish, shield breaker, stun combo on one side, a transfigured animal attack on another, and a delayed firewall activation on the third. It was a masterfully executed pincer movement, and left no normal escape route.

The brief look of victory on his opponent's face died when Harry shot upwards and floated some ten feet above the ground.

He grinned. His turn.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Jacob realised he was being humoured less then thirty seconds into the duel. He'd been a high ranked duellist on the international circuit earlier in life and was used to the back and forth rhythm of a good solid duel. This guy though… this guy was simply more powerful than him. Slytherin wasn't even trying to conserve energy. He shielded against spells instead of dodging them, made no effort to move around the duelling arena, choosing instead to just stand in one spot, and he left huge holes in his casting lineup, in which he should have been attacking.

Okay, so that's how Slytherin wanted to play it, was it?

Conjured rocks became a pack of attack dogs charmed with a confundo.

Magical Merlin, had Slytherin just used a flame whip?

Conjured fog surrounded Lord Slytherin and was moments away from freezing solid.

Damn! Jacob struggled to maintain his footing as a blow-him-away wind shredded his fog.

Two copies of himself sprang from his body and started casting, rapid fire, which Slytherin just ignored and allowed to pass through him.


After several more failed attacks, he sprang his trap, the one that had earned him his highest ever rank in competition, and watched as a brief moment of shock passed across Slytherin's face.
HAH! Yes, that's right! Got yo—.

He gaped. His infuriating opponent had somehow, inexplicably, flown up into the air, completely
dodging his best shot at winning.

Lord Slytherin grinned at him.

Ohhh shit.

 Barely twenty seconds later it was all over and had mostly been an exercise in showing off. He was
now trapped, helpless, in the coils of a live, giant snake, and surrounded on all sides by conjured
swords, all pointed straight at him.

"Do you yield?" Slytherin asked, descending to the floor like an avenging angel descending from
heaven.

He looked at the man who'd just completely over powered him with incredulity. "Yes, I yield."

Slytherin hissed a command at the snake and it slithered away, releasing him as the swords all
disappeared.

Jacob shrugged. After everything he'd just seen, that Lord Slytherin was a parselmouth was
possibly the least surprising revelation.

He briefly shared a look of understanding with his wife, who'd been standing off the side, staring at
the young man in the middle of room with undisguised awe.

"I hope you're convinced of my abilities now, Lord Greengrass."

"Certainly, and please, call me Jacob."

Slytherin smiled, "Then please call me Harry."

They shook hands.

Jacob nodded at the ceiling. "I guess that flying spell must be a Slytherin family spell. The only
other I've heard who could do that was You-Know-Who."

"Yes, the legacy of Slytherin is quite amazing."

"I'll say. So, Harry, going to let us in on how you came by the Lordship?"

"Yes, but before I do I have one more request of you. I need someone to stand in as proxy for my
seat. Do you have any recommendations?"

Jacob's eyebrows rose. "Why would you want a proxy?"

"I have a very good reason, at least in the short term, which is part of the details of how I came by
the Lordship. Anyone spring to mind?"

"Well," he glanced at his wife, "I suppose Sunny could if it's really necessary. She's had all the
training."

Sunny nodded, still staring at Harry.

"Okay," Jacob said."Shall we retire to somewhere more comfortable?"
Ten minutes and some Wizengamot strategising later, Jacob was sat across from Harry with Sunny by his side on the comfy living room sofa. They'd developed quite a good rapport — Sunny especially seemed to be getting on well with him.

"So, Harry, going to keep us in suspense all night?" Sunny joked.

Harry smiled. "You have to understand, by telling you what I'm about to tell you, I'm trusting you with a good number of very important secrets. I know we are now allies, but if these facts became public knowledge-
"
"You don't have to worry about that," Sunny interrupted, possibly with a bit more force than necessary, before reddening slightly, "I-I mean."

Jacob smoothly cut in. "What my lady means, is that we'd like to think ourselves worthy of our word."

"Of course…. Okay then, big reveal time." Harry took a vial of milky blue liquid from the inside pocket of his robes. "Do you know what this is?"

"No," Jacob replied.

"This is the antidote to ageing potion." The young man then uncorked the bottle and swigged the whole vial in one go.

Before their eyes, the man started to transform. His strong features softened, his eyes got larger in proportion to his face, his whole body shrank, and his clothes morphed themselves to his new form. The man sitting across from them was now a boy.

"Whaaa?"

Sunny was speechless.

"This is the main reason I cannot take my seat on the Wizengamot. I was born on July thirty-first, a mere eight years ago. It would cause too many questions to be asked."

Jacob was stunned. Too many questions was right. Too many questions were piling up in his head right now. He'd had no idea what to suspect when the man… boy… when Harry had said he couldn't take his seat — a long lost descendant of the Slytherin line? A bastard perhaps? The son of a squib, maybe? But whatever he was expecting, this wasn't it. One main thought fought its way to the front of his mind and shouted loud enough to be heard.

"So… I just got my ass handed to me by an eight year old?"

Harry smiled, "Yes, Jacob, yes you did."

Sunny spoke up. "How Harry? How did the family magics recognise you so early? You're not supposed to be recognised until you hit your majority. And why now? Why not a year earlier or a year later?"

"Ah, that is very much a Slytherin family secret."

"But you are going to tell us how you are of the Slytherin line?" Jacob asked, remembering the incredibly one-sided fight he'd just had. "You're not You-Know-Who's lost son or something are you? Come to think of it, how are you so damn powerful? And know so much magic? And how do you have a wand? I can't imagine th—"
"Please, one question at a time. And most of those are also Slytherin family secrets. But I can tell you how I ascended to the Lordship. Even if I can't explain the timing."

They sat, expectant.

"Before I continue, I must remind you that my name is Harry. Not anything else, okay?"

They nodded.

Harry pointed his wand at himself, said, "finite incantatem," and his face was wiped clean, to be replaced by another face, a far more annoyingly familiar face.

"John Potter!" Jacob jumped up, anger flowing into him.

"Lord Greengrass! What did I just tell you?"

Jacob stilled, taken aback. "Oh. Ah, yes. My apologies." He sat down again, very carefully, feeling sheepish for his outburst while everyone remained silent.

Sunny was staring intently at the John Potter lookalike, as though trying to work out a puzzle.

"My name is Harry. I was born on the July thirty-first, 1980. I have a twin brother. I'm sure you can see where this is going."


"That is because after Voldemort's"—both he and his wife flinched—"attack, I was abandoned by my parents."

"What!" Sunny shouted. "How could they? Why?"

"Tell me, what are the ways you can acquire a Lordship?"

Jacob thought for a moment. "You have to be male — and blood related within three degrees of relation."

"Other ways?"

"Um… You can be blood adopted, but that's considered dark magic now, and illegal."

"Yes, that's two ways. Any others?"

He sat in silence, stumped.

Sunny spoke up, quietly. "Right of conquest."

Harry sat back and smiled a smile with no warmth. "Exactly."

Something seemed to be passing between Harry and his wife, her eyes were widening, and her breathing had become laboured.

"No," she whispered.

"Yes," said Harry.

"What?" he said, totally in the dark.
"Dear," his wife said, "who was the last of the Slytherin line?"

"Well… Rumour said it was You-Know-Who."

"And what is right of conquest?"

"It says that a line will pass to the conquer of the last of the line, so long as the last of the line initiates the conflict that ends in their death."

"So?"

"But… but Harry didn't defeat You-Know-Who, John Potter did."

"Oh come on, Jacob!" she cried, exasperated. "Can't you see what's going on here? If John were the defeater of You-Know-Who, he'd be Lord Slytherin. He isn't. Harry is."

Jacob's eyes widened. "John Potter isn't the Boy-Who-Lived? You are?"

Harry sighed. "Yes."

"Why did they abandon you then? Wait, why would they abandon you anyway? And why does everyone believe John Potter defeated You-Know-Who?"

"Three answers, Dumbledore, Dumbledore, and Dumbledore."

"What did Dumbledore do?" Sunny asked, she looked to be getting agitated and he couldn't blame her. How could anyone abandon their child, especially when they were so obviously magically powerful? He could understand if a family abandoned a squib, even if he didn't approve of it, but someone like Harry? It was unthinkable, despicable even.

"I could tell you, but it would put both you and your family in very real danger from very powerful people who will want the knowledge. Do you still want me to tell you?"

They looked at each other and nodded.

Jacob looked back at Harry and said, "Yes." They were in too deep to back out now.

"Very well. Some nine years ago, there was a prophecy made. A prophecy which said a child would be born with the power to defeat the Dark Lord — a child who would be marked by the Dark Lord as his equal, and who would have a power that the Dark Lord knows not, and that either must die at the hands of the other."

They both stared at him, wide eyed.

"Dumbledore decided that any wizard who fit the criteria laid down by the prophecy was too dangerous to be allowed to freely develop their abilities, so, when he realised the prophecy referred to me, he arranged for me to grow up with muggles, unaware of my heritage, and unaware of my magic."

Sunny was starting to get teary eyed now.

Jacob just looked on, stony faced.

"I'm still not sure how the bastard managed to convince my parents — they don't seem to know John isn't the true Boy-Who-Lived, but I have a few theories." He sighed again, "Dumbledore's plan was to keep me as weak as possible, all the way through my early years, through my time at
Hogwarts, until it was time for me to 'face my destiny,' where upon I'd be rolled out to either kill or be killed."

"Wait," Sunny interjected, "why would you need to do that? You-Know-Who's dead."

Harry gave her a look.

Sunny shrieked. "He's not dead!"

Harry shook his head.

Jacob's mind reeled, but a loose strand tugged at him. Something wasn't quite right here, but he couldn't put his finger on it… "Wait," he finally said, "if You-Know-Who's not dead how did you claim the lordship?"

"That's part of the power he knows not. It's the same reason I'm so much more powerful than most children my age, and is something I am very definitely keeping to myself for the moment."

Jacob collapsed backwards into the sofa, still trying to reconcile the eight-year-old boy sitting in front of him, with the commanding, charismatic, powerful young man he'd fought against not thirty minutes before. "It's all so much to take in. I don't know where to start thinking."

Sunny spoke up. "We should start with the winter solstice Wizengamot session, and work from there."

"Right."

— End of Chapter Four —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Damn, this was longer than I thought it was going to be. I was planning to introduce Daphne in this chapter, but I guess that's not happening until the next one. We've got quite a few chapters to go before we get to Hogwarts, but I assure you, Harry isn't going to wait around for another two and a half years before he starts meeting and building relationships with the girls. Remember, this Harry is the anti 'don't-alter-the-timeline' Harry.
Greetings, I am Lord Slytherin - Part Two

Daphne Greengrass, Heiress of the Ancient and Noble House of Greengrass, sat in a garden chair, bathing in the mid-morning sunlight, practising her occlumency. It helped her focus and she needed the distraction. The feelings of helplessness had been getting stronger, like a fist squeezing her heart.

"Daphne, we have a guest for you to meet."

She looked up to see her mum leading—no, walking with…

"I already know John Potter, Mother," she said, disdain etched across her face.

The boy continued walking right up to her. "I assure you, Miss Greengrass—"

Miss?

"—although I may look like John Potter, I most certainly am not John Potter." He held out his hand, and, creating an overwhelming sense of déjà vu, took her hand as she reached out, and brushed his lips against her knuckles.

This certainly wasn't John Potter. Daphne's eyes trailed over a very obvious lightning-bolt shaped scar on the boy's forehead. So, who was he?

"Harry is taking a break from business with your father and I suggested that since you are the same age, and will be going to Hogwarts together, you might show him around the gardens?"

She looked over the boy. Something wasn't quite right. "Harry who?" she asked.

The boy smiled. "Just Harry for now, Miss Greengrass. My family name is a Greengrass family secret."

Daphne's head whipped around to her mother who just nodded.

She returned her gaze to Harry and narrowed her eyes. If this boy was going to be all secretive then she had no reason to be familiar.

"Very well, Mister Harry. Would you follow me?"

"Lead on, Miss Greengrass."

The pair walked away from the patio and into the garden proper. It was a big garden.

Daphne couldn't help stealing glances at the boy walking beside her. Something about him was different. He walked with confidence, but he didn't strut, like many of the other boys did. He wasn't talking much, but it wasn't shyness — more a comfortable silence. She'd never seen him at family parties, but his clothes were very rich.

"Mister Harry, what kind of 'business' do you have with my father?"

"We were working on a plan for something he's doing in the Wizengamot."

She scoffed. "There's no way Father would ask for help from children like us for his Wizengamot work. You're a liar, Mister Harry. What were you really doing with him?"
They'd reached the top of a ridge overlooking the flowerbeds.

She expected him to react angrily to her comment. Any of the other boys would have, especially after being caught in a bare faced lie, unless they were timid, which the boy didn't seem to be. Instead, he smiled at her. It was quite a nice smile.

"Miss Greengrass, in the wizarding world, you have to accept that sometimes everything is not quite what it seems. This is a nice place isn't it," he said, turning to the beds.

"Wha? Er. Yes. Wait, what was that before supposed to mean?" She glared, putting her hands on her hips and tried to look indignant like she'd seen her mum do when her dad was failing to be funny. It didn't seem to be working.

"Care for a seat?"

Now she was just confused. "There are no seats."

Her eyes widened when the boy produced a wand from somewhere, and her jaw dropped when the boy silently conjured a large, comfy looking garden chair for her.

"W-w-w-w-wha-what. H-how?"

Boys weren't supposed to be able to do that. She'd never even seen an adult wizard do that, but this boy had just done it.

"Like I said," the boy said, conjuring a second chair for himself and seating himself with a loud Whumpf, "things in the wizarding world aren't always what they seem."

The boy was looking at her expectantly and she carefully sat down in the chair, as though expecting it to disappear the moment she trusted it to hold her weight.

"Your garden really is very nice, do you come out here a lot?"

Daphne was being thrown. Somehow she'd lost control of the momentum of the conversation. And the boy still hadn't answered her question, or gotten angry.

"Y—yes quite a lot. I—" She hesitated "I like the outdoors."

He smiled that annoyingly nice smile again. "I like the outdoors too," then his smile faded, "there's nothing worse than being trapped inside."

Silence descended on them again, and again, the boy didn't seem to mind. He stared out over the grounds, and she couldn't help think how mature he looked. Was it possible he'd been serious before?

"Um, Mister Harry?"

"You can call me Harry you know."

"Okay, Harry," she said, belatedly realising she'd just happily accepted his permission to use his first name, when she was the one who'd decided to snub him with the honorific. "How do you have a wand? We're not supposed to have a wand until we go to Hogwarts."

"That is one of my own family secrets."

She harrumphed. "I wish I had a wand. We have lots of old ones, but Father won't let me use them."
"You are practising wandless magic though, aren't you?"

"What? No. Only really powerful wizards can use wandless magic."

"That's not true. You were practising occlumency before weren't you?"

"I… that doesn't count."

"It really does you know. Being good at occlumency is the first step in being able to learn wandless spells."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. And there are lots of other types of magic for which being a good occlumens is important — like transfiguration, and becoming an animagus."

Daphne sighed. "I so want to become an animagus." She looked up at the birds flying around the gardens. To be free like them, what she wouldn't give.

"Yeah, me too," the boy said. He paused before continuing, "tell you what, when we're at Hogwarts, why don't we learn it together?"

She widened her eyes again. "Can we do that?"

"Sure, why not, just don't tell your parents we had this conversation, Okay?"

She smiled. The boy, Harry, may be keeping secrets, but he didn't seem too bad. And if his skill with a wand was any indication, he'd be a useful person to have around. "Okay."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry sat opposite Jacob and Sunny, finishing up the latest round of correspondence between Lord Slytherin and the various members of the neutral faction.

"Harry, we'd like to talk to you about Daphne," Sunny said, breaking him out of his focus.

"Oh yes?"

Sunny seemed to hesitate before plunging on. "For the last few months we've been engaged in talks with Lord Walter Slughorn about a possible betrothal contract between him and Daphne."

Harry nodded slowly. The nephew of the famous potions master. He could see why they'd do that — the Slughorn family were notorious networkers.

The Greengrasses were looking at him, at though expecting something.

"Well, it makes sense," he said, "from a strategic point of view."

Jacob took over, "Yes, that's why we were doing it, but, well…"

"Daphne isn't really that happy with it," Sunny jumped in again, "he's quite a bit older than she is, when they marry on her majority he'd be almost fifty, and I think she was expecting something else, and we really don't like it much either, but if we don't have a good excuse for breaking off the negotiations we might alienate an important lord who we were trying to secure," she finished in one long breath.
"I see."

"We were wondering." She took a second deep breath, "we were wondering if we could offer you her betrothal instead."

Harry's eyes widened slightly, he really should have seen that coming, but it still blindsided him. "Um, wow… Lord and Lady Greengrass, I'm very honoured. Daphne is a wonderful person and I'm sure one day she'd make a wonderful wife… though I must admit I was already considering another."

"It's okay, Harry. You don't have to give an answer now, but promise us you'll consider it… please?" Sunny implored.

"I will consider it."

"That's all we ask."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Daphne was waiting in the manor foyer. She'd been told Harry was taking her somewhere today. Recently, for some reason, her parents seemed to be very keen for her to spend time with Harry.

Her mother had made it very clear that Harry was in charge, and that she should listen to him, which had annoyed her. She could look after herself after all, but, at the same time, she could see where they were coming from. In the last few weeks, Harry had shown a skill with magic that bordered on the mythical. It seemed to her there was nothing he couldn't do.

"Good morning, Miss Greengrass."

She turned. "Good morning, Harry. Are you going to tell me where we're going, then?"

"Well, I thought I'd make it a surprise, but I suppose I could give you a clue."

"Go on then."

Harry took out his wand, waved it over her, and her robes changed into something that could only be described as extremely muggle.

"What is this?" she shouted, "Why am I wearing boys clothes?"

"You've never seen girls wearing trousers before?"

"Well, yes." She blushed. "But I've never worn them myself."

"Wow. Pureblood princess indeed."

"Shut up, Mister. What is this stuff anyway?" She felt the cool, smooth material that covered her. It felt warm and snug on the inside. The top was bright blue with orange dangly things attached. The trousers were dark green and made of the same material. Her shoes now felt massive, like wearing bricks.

"It's outdoor gear. It's what muggles wear when they're going exploring."

Daphne perked up at that. "Really? We're going exploring?"

"Well, neither of us have been where we're going, even if I do know quite a bit about it, so sure,
let's go with that."

"And we're getting there, how?"

"Knight bus."

"Oooo, I've never been on the knight bus before! Lead on then, Harry."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Daphne was on a buzz high.

"That was amazing!"

"..."

"It was just so wavy! All over the place."

"..."

"You okay, Harry?" She suddenly noticed he looked a little ill.

"...Next time... I'll just disillusion us, and we'll go by broomstick," Harry said, bent over slightly, hands on his knees.

"Oooo! That would be amazing too!" She looked around. "Where are we anyway?"

The bus had dumped them on a roadside, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Green hills stretched as far as the eye could see. Down in the valleys she could see woods growing around streams. There wasn't a single other person, muggle or magical, anywhere. A light mist hung in the air, peaceful, ethereal.

"Welcome to Dartmoor."

"Dartmoor?" she exclaimed. "Home of the faeries?"

Harry grinned. "Not for a very, very long time. And what we're here for is far less likely to bewitch us into insanity, so don't worry."

"That's very reassuring, Mister Harry... It is very pretty though."

"Well, we're going deeper now. Have you ever side along apparated?"

Daphne nodded, not even bothering to register shock that someone her age could apparate. The normal rules didn't seem to apply to Harry. The fact they were here, on their own, was testament to that. Her parents had barely let her out of their sight her entire life, and suddenly here she was.

Harry held out his arm to her, she took it, and they both felt the distinctive squeezing sensation.

Crack!

Daphne, still on Harry's arm, appeared on the top of another hill. She quickly looked around.

"What's that?" she asked, examining a landscape filled with grass and rocks. The rocks were laid out in a big circle filled with lots of smaller squares and circles. It looked like a blueprint drawn in the earth.
"That is Grimspound," Harry replied. "It's an ancient Bronze Age settlement — both muggles and magicals lived there, probably either druids or Viking rune-smiths — hard to say though. It was named after grim, the god of war, or Odin as he's better known today. The muggles bred cattle while the magicals bred unicorns."

"It's beautiful."

"If we walk down we can go explore it. It's a really cool place."

Harry wiggled his arm and she realised she was still holding it, and quickly let go, face flushing red. It had felt entirely too natural.

Five minutes later, Daphne was running from ruined hut to ruined hut, thoroughly enjoying the squelching feeling of her boots in the boggy ground around the settlement.

"I don't suppose there are still unicorns around are there?" she called over to Harry who sat atop a stone pillar — the remains of a large gate.

"Afraid not," he called back. "The only herd in England is in Cumbria."

She stilled. "Where I live?"

"Yeah."

"You mean, I've lived near a unicorn herd all my life, and didn't know it?"

"Sounds like it."

"Damn," she whispered.

"You okay?" He walked closer.

"Sorry, Harry. I think I just realised how little I've seen of the world. I was raised in Greengrass Manor. I've been to the other manors of the ancient and noble houses, and occasionally the alleys, but that's it. My idea of outside, up until now, has been the garden, but this," —she gestured to the vast expanse of moorland— "is so much more."

Harry smiled. "Want to see even more?"

"Yes!"

Several hours of hiking across moorland later and Daphne found herself in front of a gate leading into a wood.

"And this place is?" she asked, still breathless from the long hike over the hills. She had never felt like this before. She felt so... alive.

"This is Yarner Wood. The muggles have a bird nesting program going on here, so there are a lot of different species in there."

"Then let's go." Daphne grabbed his hand and pulled him forward.

Soon she was surrounded by the happy sounds of songbirds.

"It's winter at the moment, so there aren't as many as other times of the year, but it's still nice, don't you think?"
"Yes, it is," she said. It was so tranquil.

"We've still got a ways to go — c'mon." This time, *Harry* grabbed *her* hand.

"Gah!"

Three hours later, Daphne was exhausted. She felt like they'd walked all over this forest. She'd cooed over bird boxes and pointed, excited, to every bird she'd seen.

Harry seemed distracted though.

"You okay?" she asked, sitting on a convenient rock to catch her breath. Her calves, thighs, and butt were on fire.

"Yeah, just didn't feel what I was looking for."

"What were you looking for?"

"I'm on the lookout for a specific bird species. It's a little side project of mine. I'll let you know more later, but we should be heading back now."

"Okay." She paused, looking deep into his green eyes, before continuing, "Thank you for bringing me here, Harry."

"Hey, no problem, we're friends right?"

She smiled, hearing him say it felt nice. "Yeah, friends."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, arrived in the Wizengamot chambers. There was a group of wizards and witches standing in a huddle around one of the seats, and, with a politician's instincts for where the action was, he wandered over.

"Good morning, Jeffery. Good morning Richardson — Cliff — Abbott."

The wizard addressed as Jeffery turned.

"Good morning, Albus. Have you seen this?"

"No, I don't think—" Dumbledore froze, gaze falling on the crest adorning the back and arms of the chair the other wizard's had been crowding. "Ah, that… oh dear."

"Albus," said the one known as Richardson, "surely there has been some kind of mistake, or it is a joke."

"I'm afraid that's not possible. The Wizengamot chambers are controlled by the Albion family magics. There is no way to fool it — to do so, you'd have to tamper with the ancient magics woven by Merlin himself."

"Well then," another wizard said, "who is it? After all this time?"

"No doubt we are about to find out." Without fanfare, Dumbledore slid the elder wand out of its holster on his wrist, keeping it ready in his wand hand. He remembered damn well who the last heir was, and since there was currently no possibility of any other succeeding the line, that could only mean one thing. Somehow, Tom had found a way to both return, *and* finally claim the
Lordship that had eluded the former Slytherin king all his life.

Was it all about to kick off again? Did he need to reconvene the Order? Was it time to grab Harry Potter from his muggle prison to let fate have her way with him?

As more wizards and witches flooded the chamber, the hubbub grew as rumours flew among them. Some voices were raised, some looked horrified, others fascinated, and yet others thought it was all a big joke.

Eventually the room, save one chair, was full, and Dumbledore rose to the podium of the Chief Warlock.

"Good morning Lords and Ladies, wizards and witches, of the Wizengamot, and welcome to the 1470th winter solstice since the establishment of the Albion family magics. Normally this would be a somewhat standard session, however, it seems we have an old family seat reactivated."

A susurration of murmuring filled the chamber.

He tightened his grip on the elder wand.

"Could they with the required ring, please come forward to take the swearing in oath before they take their seat?"

One figure stood and Dumbledore had to reign in his surprise. In fact, he was so shocked he forgot he was supposed to be on alert.

Lady Sunny Greengrass, wife of the leader of the Neutrals, descended the stairs from the visitor gallery to the Wizengamot floor, decked out in full Wizengamot regalia. And on her robes, clear to be seen by all, was the crest of Slytherin house.

What did this mean? Had the Neutrals fallen to the Dark? That would be the worst possible outcome. With the Neutrals in their pocket, the Dark would, for the first time ever, command a majority in the chamber, and could push through whatever laws they wanted. That would be a disaster of the highest order.

But…something didn't feel right.

He looked out across the hall and took in the faces of the chamber.

Despite the advanced occlumency every member learned as a matter of cause, he could clearly see the emotions broadcast across the hall. The Dark and Light were shocked, but not a single neutral looked surprised.

Lucius Malfoy looked like he'd just bitten into a cockroach.

What did it mean?

He returned his focus to the elegant, blond-haired witch standing in front of his podium. "Lady Greengrass," he said, "do you stand here today to accept the seat of Slytherin House on behalf of Lord Slytherin, and wear his proxy ring?"

She flashed a hand, on which appeared a very distinctive silver ring. "I do."

"And do you swear on your family's honour to uphold the laws, customs, and honour of this chamber, and work towards the betterment of magical kind in all its forms, both present and future?
"I do."

"Very well, please take your seat."

"Chief Warlock," the Lady said, "I believe it is customary for a newly seated member to give a speech to the chamber."

He considered. This would give them an insight into what Tom's positioning was. So much about what was going on confused him, Any information would be helpful.

"Very well, Slytherin Proxy Lady Greengrass. Please go ahead."

The newly minted Slytherin Proxy turned and beheld the chamber.

"My fellow Lords and Ladies, wizards and witches. My Lord Slytherin has asked me to give you this speech, prepared by him.

A thousand years ago, the founder of my line helped build an establishment that has lasted to this day. Hogwarts castle and its school stand as a monument to what a person, supported by friends, can achieve. Since that time, many of the greatest wizards and witches of our world have been members of my house, a fact I am immensely proud of. That notoriety has also, for some, become a tool in and of itself.

In recent years, it has become fashionable to wear the clothes of the ancients to better pitch a modern ideology. None has suffered from this more than Slytherin house, and it is my intention to work closely with all those who identify with my house to reestablish the primacy of the honourable and ancient traditions of the house that Salazar Slytherin founded.

Those traditions are, ambition, drive, and the ability to understand what lies at the core of our humanity, both the good and the ugly, and work with it to achieve great things. These traits give those who call my house theirs the potential to achieve greatness, and with that potential, and its realisation, comes power. If there is one absolute law of power, it is that it brings out the true character of those who wield it. Slytherins must, above all others, exercise restraint, sound judgement, and, dare I say it, cunning, in all their dealings, to prove they are worthy of being called a Slytherin.

Those that prove themselves worthy can truly be included in my house and my family.

Ever since Merlin forged the Albion family magics, the value of family has been spellbound into the very fabric of our people. Those old and ancient magics rule over our lives and help ensure our culture and society continues.

The Hogwarts houses are unique among the ancient families of our culture in being the only houses that accept members from outside their direct bloodlines or unions, into their families. For everyone who ever sat on the Hogwarts stool, and was called to the Most Ancient and Noble house of Slytherin, a small amount of Slytherin family magic runs through your body forever, regardless of how high you rise, or low you fall.

As Lord Slytherin, the head of said Most Ancient and Noble house, it is my intense wish to see you, the members of my family, rise high.

Who here doesn't fight for their family. Who doesn't fight to ensure we have a future we are happy to hand over to our children. Ensuring the families of our world have a place and future is the legacy of those old, ancient magics, and I look forward to the day I can pass on the baton to future generations, happy in the knowledge that they do.
Thank you."

She walked up the stairs to take her new seat.

There was a smattering of applause, mostly from the Neutrals, but most, Dumbledore knew, were too busy decoding all messages in what they’d just heard.

He certainly was.

What the hell had that been? That wasn’t a speech Tom would give. Hell, there were plenty of positively Light messages in there, mixed in with Darker ones, but definitely more traditionalist than blood-supremacist. It was practically, well… neutral.

The realisation hit him, hard.

Despite how seemingly impossible it was, Lord Slytherin wasn't Tom. But then, who would it be? Who was Lord Slytherin? The only name even remotely in the running was Harry Potter, because of the right of conquest, but that was impossible, both because of Tom not being truly dead, and the boy's age.

Might Morfin or Marvolo Gaunt have sired a bastard child without anyone knowing? It seemed impossible given what he knew of the family, but it was less impossible than it being Harry Potter. Come to think of it, if there was an unknown male line running around, it might explain why Tom was never able to claim the Lordship.

It wouldn't explain why they'd never been picked up before though… they'd have had to have been outside the country. Okay. So what he had here was a recently returned male bastard line of the Gaunt family, which, apparently, was extremely neutral and gray in its philosophy.

And they were about to attempt to massively influence the students and graduates of Slytherin house. That was something that couldn't be allowed to happen without careful oversight. He'd have to talk to this Lord Slytherin and persuade him to work with him to ensure he wasn't making any grievous errors. He couldn't allow a breeding ground for dark lords to form.

Someone in the chamber coughed loudly, and he realised he'd been lost in his thoughts, silence filing the hall, for a full thirty seconds.

"Ah, yes. Thank you, Slytherin Proxy Lady Greengrass, for those words, and please pass on our thanks to your Lord Slytherin. I'm sure you've given many people a great deal to think about. Let's now proceed onto other business."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

The new Slytherin Proxy Lady Sunny Greengrass, temporarily the most interesting person in the wizarding world, arrived home after many hours of snacking on finger food, pretending to drink, and fielding questions.

She immediately felt something wrong.

From the sitting room, came the sound of sniffling and sobbing.

She walked in.

"Dear?"
The sight of her daughter, Daphne, curled up in a ball on one of the couches, gently rocking herself, tears streaming down her face, wrenched at her heart and shredded all thoughts of work.

Daphne looked up, and hiccupped. "I don't want to," she said, her voice barely reaching across the room.

Oh dear. She closed her eyes. The regular after-Wizengamot meeting with Lord Slughorn had obviously not gone well.

"I don't want to," the girl repeated, a little louder this time.

She walked across the room, sat down next to Daphne, and wrapped her up in her arms, holding her close, stroking her hair. She didn't say anything. She couldn't think of anything to say.

"He's horrible!" her daughter suddenly burst out. "I don't want to, I don't want to, I don't, I don't," she cried, clutching at her robes, and soaking them with tears.

Lady Sunny's heart broke. She felt so helpless. If nothing changed soon, the signing would happen in the next few weeks, and her daughter's match would be sealed. She couldn't bear to see her Daphne's spirit slowly crushed like this. It was too painful.

Screw it. She knew she could get in a lot of trouble for doing this, but she didn't care anymore.

"Dear," she started, softly, continuing to stroke the hair of the little blond in her arms, "I really don't want to get your hopes up, but I think I should tell you that we have spoken with another about your betrothal."

Daphne sniffed. "Who?"

"Harry."

The girl stilled in her arms, and stayed that way for a long time.

Finally, Daphne spoke. Her words were barely audible. "And what did he say?"

"He said he'd consider it."

More silence.

Suddenly, the little girl moved, and before she could register what was happening, Daphne was up and running for the door, almost tripping over her robes in her haste.

Lady Sunny watched her daughter disappear from sight, hoping something good was going to happen, and praying she hadn't just made a huge mistake.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Daphne ran through the halls of Greengrass manor. She needed to find Harry. She needed to.

Eventually, she opened a door to an unused room and found him, sitting at a desk, reading something. Her throat constricted, but she choked out, "Harry."


She ran at him and threw her arms around him, clinging to him.
"Please," she said, desperation weighing every syllable, "Please don't leave me to that man. He's horrible! I told him about wanting to explore the world, and he laughed at me! He said that wasn't what witches should do. He said when I was married to him, I was going to stay at home, host his parties, and raise his children, and that was all I was for. Then I got angry, and did some accidental magic that turned his skin blue, and he slapped me! He said that I would learn to be obedient, or he'd never even let me step out of the house."

She looked up into his face. It was hard, and he wasn't smiling.

"Please Harry," she repeated, "I don't want to be a prisoner for the rest of my life."

Something flickered in his eyes, and she thought she saw his face soften a little.

Eventually, after what seemed an eternity, he spoke. "Daphne… living by my side would be very dangerous."

"I don't care!" She gripped him harder.

"You know you wouldn't be the only witch in my life."

"I don't care!" she repeated, "I trust you. I'll do anything you want, just don't let him have me… please…"

They sat in silence for a moment more before Harry extracted himself from her, and walked to the door. He paused.

"Excuse me for a moment. I'll be back soon."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Daphne sat in Harry's office.

She'd been sat here for hours now.

The thoughts just wouldn't stop. Again and again her mind tortured her with horrible images of Harry running away from the manor in disgust, or changing his mind, or her parents asking for things Harry wouldn't accept, or changing their own minds, or deciding that Lord Slughorn was the only real choice, or Harry not being able to afford her bride price, or the family magics not accepting the contract, or, or, or…

She'd tried drawing inwards into her occlumency training, but that just made the images running through her head all the more vivid and unbearable.

Somewhere, far off in the manor, a clock struck late.

She was getting tired now. All her energy had been burned in worrying. She looked around the room, perhaps for the first time since she'd walked in.

Why did Harry have an office in the manor anyway?

Come to think of it, she never did get an answer on what business Harry had with Father.

Daphne stood on shaky legs and walked over to the desk.

She ran her fingers, light as a feather, along the desk's edge — across the letters and papers strewn across its surface.
She looked down at a pile of sealed letters in the out-tray. That was odd. The top letter, the only one she could see, was wax sealed with a crest that looked familiar.

It was a shield with a snake on it.

It looked like the crest of Slytherin she'd learned in heraldry lessons.

Why would Harry be sealing his letters with the crest of Slytherin? There had been that man that had visited a month ago, but Harry didn't look anything like him, and the man had been too young to be his father.

Something niggled at the back of her mind, but she was too exhausted to pin it down.

She looked around for a seal stamp, but couldn't see one, and she wasn't about to start rifling through draws.

Daphne looked down at the letter again. The seal really was small, and the crest so intricate.

She turned her hand over and laid the back of one finger over the seal. Her finger didn't cover the width of the seal, but it wasn't far off.

A signet ring?

Strange.

"Ahem."

Daphne spun around, red faced, heart leaping into her throat, and saw the one she'd been waiting for.

Harry stood in the doorway, casual, smiling, and in his hand he waved a very ornate looking parchment.

"All signed and official," the boy said, as though he'd just got back from shopping in the Alley. "We shall become Lord and Lady in our fifth year at Hogwarts, some eight years from now."

Daphne covered the distance between them in a heartbeat and hugged him as tight as she could.

"Thank you, Harry. Thank you, thank you, thank you," she cried, doing her best to hold back the rapidly forming tears.

For a long time she held him, Harry easily supporting her weight, until, eventually, she let go, wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her robe, and looked at him, impishly.

"So," she began after a quick sniff, "am I now to learn what Lady I am going to be?"

Her new betrothed grinned. "I thought you'd have figured that out already by your snooping on my desk."

She felt blood flushing her cheeks. "No. I just saw the Slytherin crest."

Harry brought his hand up and wiggled his fingers in front of her face. A ring stood out on them.

Her eyes widened. " Seriously, Harry! You're the heir of Slytherin?" she shouted.

"Yep, well... actually I'm a bit better then that. I hope you can take the limelight because you're going to be in it."
"What do you mean, a bit better? And... how can we become Lord and Lady Slytherin if there's already a Lord Slytherin?"

"You remember what I said in our first conversation in the garden? Things in the wizarding world are not always what they seem."

Daphne remembered. She was unlikely to ever forget.

"Now we're betrothed, there are quite a few family secrets I refuse to keep you in the dark about. Your parents are downstairs, and we're going to have a long chat about a bunch of different things."

"Will that include what you've been doing with Father?"

"Yes. Although I've no doubt you'd be able to piece that together from tomorrow's Daily Prophet."

Daphne looked into his green eyes again. Somehow, Merlin only knew how, she'd just dodged a killing curse, and found the philosophers stone. She was going to be Lady Slytherin, and married to someone who, in the short time she'd known him, had shown himself to be strong willed, understanding, mature, and impossibly magically powerful.

She'd gone through hell, and came out into the sunlight on the other side.

"Lead on, my future Lord Slytherin?" she suggested.

"After you, my future Lady Slytherin."

― End of Chapter Five ―
[May 1989 (Five months after Harry and Daphne's betrothal)]

Hermione Granger, holding a book to her face, lay upside-down on her bed, head and shoulders hanging off the edge, resting but an inch from the floor, long brown hair spreading out like a curly halo. It was a position only a serious book lover could adopt, and she knew she was a serious book lover.

"Hermione," her Mum's voice called through the closed bedroom door, "he's here."

She sighed, snapped the book shut, rolled her body off the bed, onto the floor, and scrambled to her feet.

"Ready Mum," she called.

The door opened, and in walked her Mum and... a boy? Her eyes narrowed.

"This is Harry, dear," Emma Granger said, "Harry, this is my daughter, Hermione."

"Isn't he a little young to be tutoring maths?" she asked.

The boy gave a small smile.

"Harry's math skills are beyond A-level level." Her Mum grinned. "I think the two of you will find you have a lot in common."

Her eye's flickered, and she looked at the black-haired boy again. She'd always fancied herself to be one of those prodigies you occasionally saw on the news, but this boy sounded like he actually was one.

"Well, I'll leave you two to get on with it," Mrs. Granger continued, "if you need anything, Harry, don't hesitate to ask."

The door closed, and she found herself alone with Harry.

"Are you really as good as that?" she asked. Not quite believing this boy was at university level.

"I am."

"Okay then." She snatched her maths book from the desk beside her bed, flipped through to the end, and thrust it in front of his face, pointing at one the equations. "Let's see you solve that then."

The boy looked at the equation, took the book from her, laid it down, rummaged in his bag, and drew out a text-book of his own. He then flipped to the end, and gently handed it to her, pointing at one of the equations.

"This one's for you, Miss Granger."

She looked down at the book the boy had handed her, and blanched. Masses of unknown symbols stared back at her. She didn't have a clue where to start.
After staring at the indecipherable mass of squiggles for a good twenty seconds, gradually feeling the red blush of inadequacy creep up her neck, she looked up. The boy was offering her a notebook. She took it. The answer to the equation she'd given him, complete with working, displayed itself in all its humiliating glory.

The boy looked into her eyes, and smiled.

"That's not fair!" she cried. "You're obviously at a higher level than I am!"

"And now you know that, Miss Granger. I am not your peer, I am your teacher."

She fought to keep the flush, creeping up her neck, from taking over her face.

"So, are you ready to put some hard work into this? Or am I wasting my time?"

"No! I-I mean, yes, I'll work hard."

"Excellent."

For the next two hours, she tackled arithmetic, fought with geometry, and wrestled algebra into the ground. It was intense, but her new teacher made it enjoyable. This was so much better than the snails pace her teachers at school insisted on. The feedback loops were short and tight, and she could feel herself getting better.

"Well, this has been a productive session," her new teacher said, putting his books back in his bag.

"Yes," she agreed, "when's our next one?"

"Your Mum suggested twice a week would be good. How does Saturday morning sound?"

"Great!" she exclaimed, then realised she sounded a little too enthusiastic.

Harry smiled. "Miss Granger, have you ever read Alice in Wonderland?"

"Yes," she replied, thrown by the sudden conversation shift.

"Did you know Lewis Carroll was a mathematician?"

"No." She was shocked that the absurdist story had been written by someone who dealt in rules and logic.

"Your homework is to re-read Alice in Wonderland while looking for relevant principles that Lewis Carroll wove into the story."

Her catlike grin threatened to break free from her face. Now, this was her kind of homework.

"Okay."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Hermione sat on her bed, arms around her knees, watching the clock tick closer and closer to nine o'clock. She hadn't found any mathematics in the book. She'd tried. Oh, she'd tried. She'd put all her mind into it for hours. But Alice's adventures through wonderland seemed to touch on everything but mathematics. It made a mockery of it. Nothing was consistent, not even the way things changed.
She hated failing at assignments, and she felt she had failed. Harry was the first person her age she'd ever met that could keep up with her, and now he was going to think she was stupid. Being smart was all she had. She wasn't athletic, or pretty, or popular.

The clock struck nine. Her execution was due.

The door opened.

"Good morning, Miss Granger." Harry walked through the door. The door closed with a definite click. "Are you ready for today's journey through the looking glass?"

"Ahh… well, Harry…"

Her teacher dragged a chair to the side of the bed, sat down, and stared at her. "What was the single most un-mathematical thing you found?"

"The single… un-mathematical?"

"The single most absurd occurrence, something that defies mathematics and logic."

Hermione was confused. She was grateful that Harry wasn't disappointed with her, but couldn't see how this was relevant to their studies. She thought about his question. "I guess it would be the Mad Hatter's party," she started, feeling a bit more confident "when time stopped at six o'clock but continuity continued."

"Ah, yes. That was a good one. I haven't figured that one out yet. Someone may have, but if they have, they aren't telling."

She blinked at him. Figured it out? Figured what out? Were they playing some kind of metaphor game?

"Can you give me another?"

She thought for a moment. "When the animals throw pebbles at Alice, and they turn into cakes."

"Another good one. Gamp's law stops us doing that one."

"Gamp's law?" Okay, this must be a setup for the introduction of a new concept. She'd seen something like this when someone tried to explain calculus to her using a story about a tortoise and an arrow.

"Not important right now," Harry said. "Can you give another?"

She was getting into the swing of this. "The drink labelled 'Drink Me' that causes Alice to shrink."

Harry's face broke into a wide grin. "Well done, Miss Granger."

Despite herself, Hermione felt the familiar surge of happiness for getting a question right, even if she didn't understand what she was getting right. This whole line of questioning was strange.

Harry reached into his pocket, and brought out a small bottle of acid green liquid. He placed it on the desk to his side. The bottle had a small label on it that said, 'Drink Me'.

She stared at it. Her confusion was growing.

"Miss Granger,"—Harry brought her attention back to him—"Do you ever find strange things
"What do you mean?" she said, but she instantly knew what he was talking about. This discussion of things shrinking, and changing, without rhyme or reason cast her mind back to those times. The times her rational mind desperately tried to force down, and ignore.

"You answered the last question correctly. Let's see if you can go for a more difficult one. Give me one example of a situation in your life where something happened that defied logic."

Hermione's breathing quickened, became shallower. He couldn't be talking about those times. If she said something so outrageous he'd think she were insane.

Harry reached over and took her hand in his.

"It's okay, Hermione. You know what I'm talking about."

When it finally came out her voice was quiet, almost timid. "I was being bullied at school. They took my books, and threw them across the playground. They started to hit me. The next thing I knew, they were all thrown across the playground. Some of them were badly hurt."

Harry nodded. He leant back, and made a hand motion to indicate she should continue.

"Another time, I desperately wanted this book from this shop. I was outside looking in through the window, and the next thing I knew, I was holding the book in my hands. I was so afraid of being caught stealing that I dropped it and ran away."

"Wow. Non-spatial summoning. That's amazing."

Her breath hitched, her voice got desperate, more urgent. "What is? Do you know what's going on? How these things keep happening?"

Harry produced an ornate looking stick of wood and waved it at the door.

"I do know."

"I do know." He was smiling now. "Because I am like you. You are special, Hermione. You have the talent."

"Talent?"

"Magic."

"Magic?"

"You are part of a secret community of witches and wizards. People who use magic in their everyday lives to achieve feats the non-magical world can only dream of."

Her teacher pointed the stick of wood at the lampshade on her desk. It morphed into a vase.

Her body relaxed. She stared in wonder.

"Normally, because your parents aren't magical, you wouldn't begin your magical education until you're eleven, but..."

"But?" she whispered.

"You are special even among witches and wizards, Hermione. You have the potential to become one of the most accomplished witches ever. A prodigy if you will."
A prodigy. She'd always wanted to be one of those.

"But," Harry said.

"But?" she replied.

"Do you remember the scene in the book when Alice is in the court, and starts to grow in size?"

Hermione nodded.

"Do you remember what the dormouse tells Alice?"

She nodded. "It said that she had no right to grow so fast, and that she was taking up all the air."

"And what did the King and Queen order her to do afterwards?"

"They said, 'rule forty-two says all persons over a mile high must leave the court.'"

"The magical world can be like that. I want to teach you, Hermione, but it will have to be in secret, both now and when we go to school together."

"School?"

"At age eleven we'll go to a magic school called Hogwarts with most of the other witches and wizards of magical Britain. By the time we're ready to go, you'll have more than caught up to the other students who've lived with magic all their lives."

Hermione was ecstatic. Magic was real. She'd just seen it. And she could learn it. It was like all the fantasy books she'd ever read. And… catch up… Yes. She had to catch up.

"When do we start?" Enthusiasm radiated from her like a beacon.

"Right now. We'll go over your curriculum for the next two-and-a-bit years. What I'd like to teach you, and why."

She nodded.

"But before that, a few more demonstrations of what the other side of the looking glass can do. Sound good?"

Her eyes gleamed and darted to the bottle of acid green liquid, still sitting innocently on the desk.

"Yes, Harry."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

It had been three months since they'd started training. Hermione sat cross-legged on the floor. Opposite her, sat Harry.

She was nervous.

Occlumency was fascinating. She could feel her mastery over her mind growing day by day. Homework that used to take an hour was now dispatched in a quarter. Revising for tests had become a joke. A single pass over the material, filed into her mental library, was all she needed. She now had even more time to practise.
Her willpower seemed to be improving too. Before, she'd had to drag herself from her books to do things she knew she must, but now, she seemed better able to prioritise activities based on rational thought. Harry had started her on an exercise program — "It helps develop your body's ability to process magic," he'd said, — and she thought it would be hell, but retreating into her occlumency made it surprisingly enjoyable.

But this?

This was frightening.

Harry continued talking. "Once I'm in your mind, I will be able to both test your defences, and help you improve them."

"Are you sure about this?" Everything Harry had taught her suggested letting someone play around with her mind was a bad idea.

"You have my word that I will not make any changes without your explicit permission. I may end up seeing memories you're not comfortable with me seeing, but actively testing defences is the only way to be sure they are doing their job properly."

She fidgeted on the hard floor. There were memories she definitely didn't want Harry seeing. In the last few months, she'd felt closer to him than anyone else in her life—except her parents. The idea of losing him, terrified her.

"We can put it off, but if we do we'll have to push back your education in other areas."

"No. I'm okay. It's just…"

"You're nervous about me seeing certain things."

She nodded and bit her lower lip.

"Hermione. I will never think less of you for anything I may end up seeing. You're far too amazing a person."

She smiled. She knew he didn't mean it. She may be intelligent compared to her peers, but she was far too plain in everything else to be amazing. But it still felt good to hear him say it.

"Thank you, Harry."

"..."

"Okay, do it."

Harry raised his wand at her forehead.

"Legilimens."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Hermione stood in the trunk Harry had bought her for her birthday. It was amazing, like having a second room in her room. Bookshelves covered the walls, filled with hundreds of books from the mysterious magical world. It was the most amazing gift anyone had ever given her, and part of her wondered how rich Harry must be to be able to afford this kind of thing.

Harry had said learning the culture of the world she'd be entering was the most important, and most
difficult, part of her education. The books she now possessed ranged from legal practices, to politics, history, adventure, and romance.

Like the trunk, every book had been charmed both with notice-me-nots, and illusions, so that anyone looking at it would see a non-magical, or 'muggle' book. Magic was incredible.

Harry had given her one instruction. In the next twelve months, he expected her to have read every book in the trunk.

At the end of those twelve months, he had a test for her. When she'd asked for more information, Harry hadn't explained — just smiled, and said if she prepared properly she'd be fine.

Well, never let it be said that Hermione Granger was ever unprepared for a test.

Occlumency at the ready, she pulled the first book from the first shelf, 'The History of the International Statute of Secrecy,' flopped down on the comfy armchair in the corner, and began to read.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Hermione was agitated. "I don't see how anyone can stand it," she said.

Harry sat in the armchair in the opposite corner of her trunk, sipping on orange juice and practising wandless magic — the showoff. "You know, it wasn't that long ago that affairs in the non-magical world were similar to the magical one."

"I know that, but it seems these family magics exist specificity to stop anything from changing."

"Well, when Merlin created them, stability was the most important thing on everyone's minds. Remember, this wasn't long after the Romans left, and the English kingdoms were still forming. War was rife, and magicals were seen as strategic assets to any kings who could find them. The family magics enforced a structure on the magical families, ensuring they'd work together in the interests of magicals as a whole."

She shuffled her feet. "And now we're stuck with it?"

"Yep."

"And it can't be changed?"

"All the books with the rituals to manipulate the family magics were destroyed centuries ago. There may be some copies left, but if there are, we don't know about them, and the people who hold them sure don't have any incentive to change things."

"What about the rune stones? The family magics are ward based aren't they?"

"In theory yes, you could reprogram the family magics by hard altering the rune stones, but good luck finding them. No-one's ever managed it. Many have tried."

She sighed and slammed the book she'd just finished shut. "Well that sucks."

"Yep."

She stood and walked over to a bookshelf. The latest pile of finished books was starting to become unstable again. Book piles merged into book piles, and occasionally toppled down forming book rubble piles. She'd have to put them back on the shelves soon. She picked out another
book, *Fashion and Clothing of the Magical World*. She sighed. She had enough of this kind of thing from the girls at school.

She slumped lengthways across her armchair, and started to read.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Hermione's face was crimson. She looked at Harry over the top of the romance novel she'd been reading, *A Muggleborn and a Lady*. She'd just learned her best friend and teacher was also one of those all-powerful lords she'd been ranting about for the last six weeks.

"You're Lord Slytherin?"

"I am."

"Eep," she squeaked.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Hermione slammed the final book closed. She had finished. She put the book away, and looked around the trunk that had been her second home for the last ten months. So much knowledge. Harry's goal had been for her to cram a lifetimes worth of pureblood education into a year, and she'd risen to the challenge.

The more she'd read, the more she'd realised what she was letting herself in for.

The magical world was scary.

But it was also… well… magical. And she wasn't overly worried. She had Harry.

Harry was amazing. When she'd first seen him doing wandless magic, or seen him transfigure that lamp into a vase, she'd been impressed at *magic*. The more she read though, the more she realised how insane *Harry* was for being able to do those things. He truly was a prodigy… and Lord Slytherin. And she was his student, under his protection.

She hoped she'd eventually prove herself worthy of his house. She had ambition in spades, but cunning? Something she'd have to work on.

"You finished?" A voice came from the trap door above her.

"Yes, Harry."

"Great! Two months early, as well."

She beamed.

"I think someone's earned themselves a reward."

"Ooh!"

She was learning, and Harry was happy with her. All was well in the world.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Hermione was worried. "A party?"
It was two months after she'd finished the reading project.

"This is your test," said Harry. "You're going to one of my political gatherings while taking on the identity of another. Your goal is to convincingly play the part of a pureblood from New Zealand."

"But-but, what if I'm found out? What if they realise? What if I embarrass you?"

This all sounded far too much like the plots from one of those romance novels she'd read during the 'ten-months-of-reading'.

"You'll be disguised," Harry said. "No one will know who you are, even if you do slip up. I'll be there in disguise as well — to rescue you if it gets too bad. This is important for your education. I need to know you can handle yourself in these situations."

She bit her lower lip.

"But what about dress robes? And jewellery, and stuff? They'll expect me to have all that, and I don't, and what about being too young? These political parties are for grown-ups."

Harry smiled and held up a vial of green liquid.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Ten-year-old Hermione Granger stood in front of the full-length mirror, and stared. Twenty-two-year-old Hermione Granger stared back.

Plain, boring, bookish. These words haunted her school playground days. Her bushy hair was untameable, and her teeth were massive. They'd called her beaver face.

She reached out to the mirror and stroked the reflection. The reflection's hair was calmer, still curling at the ends, but otherwise straight. Her teeth fit her face perfectly. Her face had lost the baby fat — it was elegant, symmetrical, and dignified. She looked like something out of those magazines her classmates were always giggling over. She was beautiful. This is what she'd be like in twelve years?

A pop beside her made her jump.

"Is Missy Grangy ready to be dressed?" asked the female house elf, another thing she'd have to get used to.

"Oh, yes, please, thank you, Tropsy."

Half an hour later, she looked in the mirror again. Her floor-length, emerald-green dress hugged her hourglass figure, perfectly matching the snake-decorated chocker and earrings Harry had leant her for the party.

"I told you, you were amazing."

She turned to her best friend and teacher's voice. Her breath caught.

Harry looked incredible. His shoulders were broad, his over-six-foot-frame, hidden under layers of dress robe, was still obviously well muscled. His face, also, had lost the baby fat, leaving a strong, firm visage of man.

Deep inside, she felt something she'd never felt before. It tingled.
"You look pretty good yourself," she said, before blushing. Had she just said that?

Harry chuckled and waved his wand over his face, transfiguring it into his private persona of Lord Slytherin, before putting on an emerald green mask, his public face. He held out his arm for her. She took it, still feeling that unidentified feeling.

Together they walked to the main doors.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Charlotte Timberland, secretly Hermione Granger, stood in a small circle of adult wizards and witches, trying her best to remain cool. She'd just quoted one of the classic stories from her 'ten-months-of-reading'.

"I must say," said one of the wizards, "it's nice to see a young lady who knows her literature."

"Indeed," said another, "so many of the youth today think they can get by with loud explosions, and puffs of smoke."

"Where in New Zealand did you say you came from?" asked one witch.

"Auckland."

They all nodded the nod of those who have no clue where a place is, but aren't about to admit it.

"Well, it must be amazing to be a friend of Lord Slytherin," the witch continued.

"It is certainly educational," Hermione said, hedging her reply.

The witch looked around and leaned in, whispering so only their group could hear. "Tell me, have you ever seen his face? Is he handsome?"

Hermione blushed. What was wrong with her tonight?

"Ho hah!" the witch said, triumphant. "So you have!"

"I…I can't possibly betray my lord's secrets."

They nodded again, understanding, while filing away the 'my lord' honorific for further inspection later.

"Charlotte."

She turned. It was Harry.

"May I borrow you for a moment?"

"Oh, of course, please excuse me," she said to the slightly disappointed group.

Harry led her over to the food table.

She felt that tingly sensation again when he touched her arm. She felt her face flush.

"How are you doing?"

"Managing. It's actually not as bad as I thought it would be. Most seem shocked anyone 'my age' can quote from the magical canon."
Harry snickered. "There's a chance I may have over prepared you. But that's the point. I wasn't joking when I said you have the potential to become one of the greatest witches ever. And as your new friend over there said," he nodded to the second wizard in the group, "many people feel they can get by on large explosions, and puffs of smoke."

She nibbled on a pastry thing. Harry had damn good hearing.

"Anyway, I'll be right back. I have to take care of something," and with that, he fled.

Strange.

"Hello, Miss Timberland."

Hermione turned. She was being addressed by a girl. A really pretty girl, with long blond hair, and piercing blue eyes. She must be about her age…. Was she normally really that small?

"Hello Miss…?" She let the question hang in the air.

"Greengrass, Heiress of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Greengrass." The newly declared Heiress Greengrass stared up into her eyes.

Of all the wizards and witches she'd met tonight, she'd yet to feel a more calculating gaze. She felt she was being sized up, weighed, and judged. Two months of drills and training instantly processed the input and short wired the appropriate response straight to her mouth.

"Heiress Greengrass, thank you and your family for hosting tonight's festivities. And thank you for extending an invitation to a foreign witch such as myself."

"Nonsense. You are a guest of Lord Slytherin. Any guest of his lordship is a guest of House Greengrass." The young witch smiled. "I do find myself wondering though, just how well you know his lordship."

She stared at the young pureblood heiress. A girl the same age as her and Harry. The daughter of the Lord who was hosting the party Harry was using for his political games. The wheels spun.

"He is my teacher. He has taught me many things."

"You are lucky, Miss Timberland. Lord Slytherin is an amazing person."

"I know that."

"I would hate him to put his trust in someone who may not truly understand his value."

She bristled at that. "I do understand his value," she said, the last word dripping with distaste. "He's one of the most amazing wizards of his generation. He can do things many adult wiz—" she clapped a hand over her mouth, appalled at the words that slipped out.

Greengrass smiled a stony smile, but ignored her slip. "The fact that you are still comparing him to 'those of his generation,' shows you still don't truly appreciate his value."

Hermione tried to compose herself.

"But don't let it get to you," Greengrass continued, "You really are doing amazingly well. I can see why he's putting so much effort into you."

Hermione didn't respond. She didn't dare herself to speak.
"I hope to meet you again soon, before our paths inevitably cross in a more permanent fashion."

Hermione watched the annoyingly precocious blonde walk away. She felt she'd just been received a massive backhanded compliment. What had the little witch meant? That she might not appreciate Harry? Rubbish. She'd completed every piece of work Harry had ever given her, often ahead of time, and always to his satisfaction.

Lost in thoughts, she failed to notice her teacher's presence until he was right on her.

"Knut for your thoughts."

"Ack!" She jumped, breathing heavily, "Don't do that!"

Harry, still wearing his emerald green mask, snickered. "You ready for the next round?" he asked, waving towards the groups of wizards and witches still milling throughout the grand-ballroom of Greengrass Manor. "You're creating quite a stir, you know. Everyone wants to know where such a beautiful, well-mannered, and cultured witch sprang from."

She blushed.

"Sure. Okay."

Face still flushing from the unknown feeling rushing through her, she let herself be led across the floor to another group. Despite her recent slip, she allowed herself a moment of satisfaction. She was doing well, and Harry was happy with her.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Back in her ten-year-old body, Hermione stood in front of her desk mirror, and thought about that night.

The feelings that had rampage through her all-night had been scary. She'd felt she wasn't in control of her own mind or body. Every other thought would stray towards Harry. Not for any good reason that she could identify. Just because.

The blonde's comments hadn't helped.

As soon as she'd arrived home, wearing her standard jeans and t-shirt, she'd grabbed, and re-read, the book on puberty her parents had gifted her a year ago. The first time through, she'd understood what was being said at an intellectual level, but the difference between that and living it was as large as the difference between the river and the ocean.

The feelings were slowly fading back into nothingness. But she understood she'd been given a taste. And that was the taste of a twenty-two-year-old, when the throes of puberty were supposed to be over. What was it going to be like in the next few years?

She shivered.

A week ago, the idea of living in a castle, full of other witches and wizards, with Harry, seemed like a dream. Now it seemed like a plot to drive her insane. But, even if her body was no longer pumping hormones, her mind still remembered the feeling. It remembered that at some deep level, she'd enjoyed it, and wanted it.

She shook her head, and, like a good student, switched focus to the next few weeks.
Soon, Harry would start teaching her magic. Real magic. There was almost a whole year left before Hogwarts started, and she'd be getting her letter in just a few weeks. Her parents would then find out about magic. That scared her, but Harry would be there for her. Her parents liked Harry. And Harry… she was pretty sure Harry liked them too…

[Chapter end - September 1990]

— End of Chapter Six —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I've finished outlining the next seven chapters, which should take us to the end of the pre-Hogwarts story arc/book. After that, there'll probably be a break, while I work on other projects.

A/N: It's become clear to me I need to better explain the mechanics of the timelines within the story. I plan to slightly alter the first chapter, as well as have an in-story discussion in a later chapter. When I upload the updates, I'll let you know in an A/N.
[August, 1989 (One month before Hermione started the ten-months-of-reading project)]

Eight-year-old Ginny Weasley slipped out the back door of the Burrow, broomstick in hand, righteous indignation just outweighing fear of getting caught. She picked her way across the lawn, the moon highlighting gnome hole shadows, and entered the orchard.

It wasn't fair.

Ginny fiddled with the bent bristles of the borrowed broom.

Why couldn't she play? Because she was a witch? Humph.

Ginny swung her leg over the broom's shaft and kicked up off the damp floor.

If she was going to be treated like a pureblood princess, she should at least get the good things that went with it. Money, fancy balls, dresses, jewellery, and stuff.

She pitched the broom, making a gentle curve before diving and snatching a pinecone from the ground.

And if she wasn't getting any of that stuff, then she was damn well going to do what she wanted.

Ginny tossed the pinecone and watched it sail through the two branches that stood in for a quidditch hoop.

Of course, she knew that one day, she'd be married to The-Boy-Who-Lived, John Potter. She'd be Lady Potter. It was destiny. But that wasn't now, that was forever away.

Ginny swerved, looping around in a figure of eight, pretending the moths flitting in the moonlight were bludgers.

John Potter had warmed up to her recently. He still didn't care to defend her quidditch playing to her brothers, but he'd accepted the idea she wasn't just his best-mate's little sister. That was good.

Ginny slowed, hovering just below the tree line.

Something felt off.

She floated to the nearest tree. The feeling got stronger. She backed away. The feeling faded.

Weird.

She approached again and circled the trunk. She looked around. Nothing. Wait, what was that?

Far away, on the tip of a tree branch, something was hanging on the far side of the ward line.

She edged forward, slowly, cautious, and stopped just before the ward line — the hedge below marking the limits of her safe haven.
Ginny could see the object of her curiosity better up here. It was a necklace. What would a necklace be doing hanging on this tree? Still, she shouldn't go any further. It would be too dangerous.

She inspected it from a foot away. She could see every detail. It was a silver chain, holding a silver pendant. A pendant in the shape of lightning bolt.

It was beautiful.

*It would look even better on your neck.*

The pendant felt light in her hand, the chain hung over her palm.

It would look even better on her neck.

Legs gripping the broomstick, Ginny unfastened the chain's clasp, bringing it around her neck. She flicked her long, red hair out of the way.

Wait. Was this really a good idea?

*Click*

"..."
"..."
"..."

What was she doing all the way out here? The orchard was way away. If Dad caught her out here she'd be in trouble. She wasn't sure how the wards worked. She hoped he hadn't felt her leaving them. Then again, he always looked surprised whenever she and Mum got back from shopping, so he probably couldn't.

Gripping the broom with one hand, Ginny zipped back to the orchard, grabbed an apple from a tree, and pitched it straight through the makeshift hoop.

Hah! She'd show them all.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Ginny's broom floated just outside her grasp.

She tried to reach it.

The broom turned into an apple.

The kitchen door opened.

"You're going to be a proper lady, Ginny, and proper ladies don't have brooms."

"But Muummmm," she tried to protest.

"No." Her Mum morphed into John Potter. "I need a real pureblood. Your house isn't even noble."

"But, but."

John Potter disappeared. Her bedroom window opened.
A bird flew in.

It perched on her shoulder, before lifting her high up in the sky.

Desperation flooded her being. It mustn't drop her. She didn't even have her broom.

She fell.

She landed.

That was a weird dream.

She looked around a small, comfortable living room, but something didn't quite feel right.

She was still dreaming? This felt a lot more real than a dream. She could smell the scent of baking. A baby started crying. No. Two babies started crying.

A younger looking Mrs. Potter walked in from another room wearing an apron. The adult redhead walked up to a cot in the corner of the room, reached in, and lifted out a small toddler.

Ginny could recognise the still-growing, scruffy black hair anywhere. John?

Mrs. Potter reached down again, and drew out a second, identical looking toddler. "There there boys. Mummy's here."

One of the toddlers threw up.

"Oh, Harry," the mother sighed, putting the other child down before cleaning up the one called… Harry?

This was strange. It felt far too real to be a dream, but it was showing her things that clearly weren't real. Why did Mrs. Potter have two children?

Her world faded to black.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Back in the waking world, Ginny sat at the kitchen table eating toast. John was supposed to be coming over to play with Ron today. She was hoping he'd say something to Ron about letting her fly with them too.

The floo flared green and The-Boy-Who-Lived, John Potter, stepped out.

"Hey mate," Ron called.

"Hey Ron, you ready for some serious action?"

"Well I don't know what your godfather has to do with it,"—they both snickered—"but yeah, let me grab my broom."

Ginny sat, hoping… but no, John walked out after giving her naught but a wave, and a smile.

She followed the two boys down to the orchard. Ron had run on ahead, so she latched herself on to John's arm.

"You know," she started, "you're really good at flying."
"MMmmmhmmm," he hummed.

"Wouldn't it be amazing if you got on the Gryffindor team?"

"I am going to be on the Gryffindor team."

"So am I."

John looked at her, surprised. "But, you don't fly."

"Only because Ron and the others won't let me."

He looked uncomfortable. "Yeah, well, that's their business isn't it?"

She pouted. Why didn't he ever take her side?

Half an hour later, John landed for a drink after a good hoop shot.

Now was a good chance to talk to him again. She could ask him about that dream.

But what if he laughs at you?

John Potter grabbed a bottle of pumpkin juice from a bag sitting below a tree, and took a swig.

But what if he laughed at her? That would be bad. John was just starting to warm up to her. No need to endanger that by making him think she was being a silly little girl.

The-Boy-Who-Lived dropped the empty bottle, swung back on his brand new Nimbus 1700, and took to the sky once more, waving at her before returning his focus to the game.

She walked over to the empty bottle, picked it up, and put it back in the bag they'd brought with them.

One day, it would be her up there.

― DP & SW: RiBSR ―

Ginny watched, helpless, as the cruellest looking man she'd ever seen walked through the rubble of the door he'd just blasted to pieces, eyes glowing blood red.

No. That wasn't. It couldn't be. Panic flooded through her.

The man swept over to the twin cots on the far side of the room, and loomed over the two screaming infants.

No. Don't.

"To think that something so small and delicate could ever be fated to be a danger to me," the man spoke, words as heavy and blunt as lead.

Realisation froze her heart. He was going to kill John's brother. No. Stop.

The man pointed his wand at one of the infants. "Avada Kedavra." There was a flash of green, a loud *BOOM*, and her world exploded around her. Bits of ceiling fell, shards of broken glass flew through her body, and the man standing by the cots disintegrated, sending a ghost-like apparition screaming through the roof, leaving nothing behind but the smell of chlorine.
Despite everything harmlessly passing through her, Ginny remained crouched, hands held to her face, waiting for the smoke and dust to settle.

Silence.

What happened?

Ginny stood and crept towards the cots, dreading what she'd find.

There, in the cots, lay the two boys, awake, and unharmed, save for an inflamed, red, lightning-shaped cut on one of the boy's foreheads.

They were alive.

Footsteps from behind her caused her to whirl around. In strode Albus Dumbledore, who made his way to the cots, stood next to her, and looked down at the boys.

He frowned at the forehead cut and mumbled, "So he chose Harry."

So he chose Harry? Harry was the boy with the cut? He'd been the one attacked?

Dumbledore waved his wand at baby Harry and the cut faded from view, not healed, she noted, just faded.

Another crash heralded the arrival of the Potters. They were frantic.

"Professor!" Mrs. Potter cried. "We came as soon as we felt the wards fail! Please tell us. Are they? They're not."

"Calm yourselves Lily — James. It seems he tried to kill John, but John destroyed him."

Dumbledore picked up the un-marked child and held him up to them.

"Oh, thank Merlin!" Lily Potter took John in her arms, cradling him, whispering to herself and the toddler that everything was all right.

James Potter stepped forward, putting a hand on his wife's shoulder. "And Harry?"

"Ah yes, Harry." Dumbledore suddenly looked sad. "I need to speak to you about Harry."

"What? Why?" Lily looked up.

"I suggest we adjourn to the kitchen, a drink will do us good, and we don't have all the time in the world."

The uncertain Potters, followed by the sad looking headmaster, left the room, and Ginny's world, once again, faded to black.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Ginny sat alone in the shade of an orchard tree.

The dreams were becoming more frequent. It had been months since they started and it seemed she was now getting them every other night.

She'd watched, confused, as Harry was dropped off at a muggle house, then watched in horror as
Harry went through years of shouting, beatings, whippings, starvation, confinement, and mental torture.

It made her sick.

Why had they done it?

She didn't understand.

She'd decided after the first few dreams that she wasn't going to tell anyone about them. What could she say? That she dreamed dreams of You-Know-Who, and Dumbledore, and the Potters abandoning their child to the life of a slave? They'd laugh at her at best and say she was going dark at worst.

But what about Harry?

In all the dreams she'd had, Harry had been younger than John was now. What was Harry doing now? Was he still alive? Was he still living that life? Was this a cry for help? Was she supposed to help him?

She trembled. What could she do? What was she supposed to do?

And John? Did he even know he had a brother?

She suddenly realised she hadn't thought of John as 'The-Boy-Who-Lived' for ages.

She sucked her breath in. Her eyes widened.

John wasn't The-Boy-Who-Lived. Harry was.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Ginny walked into the muggle greengrocer of Ottery St Catchpole.

"Ginny, can you get the bread and milk while I go pick vegetables?"

"Yes, Mum." She walked to the back of the shop and inspected several loaves before picking one up and placing it in the wicker basket she carried.

Ginny looked up.

John Potter was standing at the far end of an aisle looking at jam.

Weird, what was he doing here?

She'd had mixed feelings about John in the last few weeks and wasn't keen to speak to him at the moment.

John picked up a jar and turned his head as he rounded the aisle corner.

Ginny gasped.

On his forehead was an inflamed lightning bolt shaped scar.

"Harry?"

She ran to the end of the aisle and bolted around the corner.
The aisle was empty.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Ginny stood in what had to be the Hogwarts great hall. Hundreds of students stood in rows, all dressed in black. They all looked serious. Some were crying.

"We are gathered here today to pay our last respects to Ginevra Molly Weasley, a young witch snatched from us long before her time."

What?

"Ginny epitomised the qualities of her house and family. We are unlikely to see such an outstanding example of bravery and courage in one so young in a long long time."

No. No. No.

She ran to the front of the hall and stared in horror at the picture sitting, surrounded by flowers, on top of a coffin. Words washed over her, but she didn't hear anything being said. The coffin and photo filled her world, freezing her blood, shortening her breath, decrying all that was fair and just in the world. Her image, looking a few years older, beamed happily in the arms of John Potter.

She looked around the hall, seeking John's face, but couldn't find it.

Wait. There. In Slytherin house? No, that wasn't John. Standing all by himself, a circle of isolation surrounding him as though he were contagious, was Harry, telltale scar clear for all to see.

She turned again to look at the coffin and, despite being a dream, her knees gave out.

What had happened? This was the future? She was going to die?

The dream continued to sweep forward. Ten minutes? Thirty minutes? She didn't pay any attention.

She couldn't think.

Then her world faded to black.

…

And faded back a few moments later.

Ginny watched You-Know-Who resurrect in a graveyard.

She watched John try, and fail, to duel You-Know-Who in the ministry of magic atrium.

She watched Ron and a brown haired witch being tortured by You-Know-Who in a large manor house, their screams of terror and pain forcing their way into her head.

The tremors started again, she couldn't take this any more, she just wanted out. Out. Out! Please!

Don't worry. You are okay. You are safe. You are safe.

The tremors subsided, her breathing slowed.

It was just a dream. It couldn't hurt her. It hadn't happened yet.
She watched an older Luna Lovegood throw herself in front of a killing curse aimed at John.

She watched John walk towards You-Know-Who in a forest, as though taking a stroll in the gardens.

"Go ahead," he said. "Death will not allow your victory. I will defeat you."

"Avada Kedavra."

She watched hundreds of witches and wizards being rounded up, ripped from their families, mothers from daughters, husbands from wives, brothers from sisters, and executed in mass killings, or else enslaved, forced to serve their new master's every menial or depraved whim.

She watched all this on the verge of panic, but every time she thought she couldn't take any more, calmness flooded her body.

Her world faded to black again…

…

…And faded back in a prison cell. A pile of dirty rags sat in a corner.

Nothing happened.

At least no one was being killed or tortured here.

The pile moved and resolved itself in her mind as a person. A person of skin and bones, of greasy hair and shaggy beard.

She edged forward to get a better look.

A person with an enflamed lightning bolt scar on his forehead.

"Harry?" she whispered.

Nothing.

The cell door was flung open and two guards marched in, grabbed Harry, and half dragged him down the corridor.

The scene changed again.

She watched Harry being dumped through an eerie looking archway while You-Know-Who screamed in terror.

The scene changed yet again.

This time, the room felt warm, it felt comfortable, like an Anglo-Saxon chieftain's roundhouse in times of old.

Harry was talking to a man and woman. They felt beyond powerful. The man held a scythe. The woman held a book.

Ginny's eyes widened as the meaning of their conversation sunk in.

Sentences crashed through her head like tidal waves, drowning out all other thought.
Dumbledore declared him The-Boy-Who-Lived when he was a baby and the child made no effort to disavow others of that impression, even when it became apparent to him that it was you the prophecy referred to.

Shock.

"It was never his plan for you to stay in Azkaban for as long as you did, but when he died before John Potter did, he was no longer able to manipulate events, and your brother said nothing to anyone who might have been able to intervene."

Anger.

"He knew Ginny was going to die and let it happen anyway?! I thought those two loved each other."

Betrayal.

"You must save Ginny Weasley."

…Hope.

The scene faded in and out, words flowing into other words, as though parts were being skipped. Before long, Harry was flung back through the archway, and the scene, once more, faded to black. This time, when the world faded into being, she was standing on a rock, looking out over the bluest sea she’d ever seen.

Harry—a Harry who looked the same age as John—stood to one side, looking out across the water. She picked her way across the rocks to stand next to him — so that she might get a better view of whatever he was looking at.

"Hello Ginny."

She started. Her head turned so fast her hair whipped her face. Harry was looking at her, right at her, straight into her eyes. Her heart pounded.

"I won’t let it happen, you know. I’m going to stop it."

"I…I…"

"…?"

"I can't believe they did all that too you," she said.

Harry laughed a mirthless laugh. "Sucks doesn't it?"

Ginny nodded.

Harry looked out to sea again, as though lost in thought.

"…"

"How?" Ginny asked.

"Mmmm?"
"How did I die?"

"You weren't listening during your eulogy?" Harry asked.

"I was… a bit distracted."

"It doesn't matter anyway. I told you, I'm not going to let it happen again."

"I'd still like to know, and you were happy for me to hear it before."

Harry sighed. "Your soul was sucked out by one of You-Know-Who's toys. It forced you to open the chamber of secrets, and spent half your first Hogwarts year possessing you, attacking students with a one-thousand-year-old, sixty-foot-long basilisk."

She stared at him, appalled.

"Slowly losing your mind to Lord Voldemort isn't fun, and John could've easily stopped it at any time by taking the object from you and destroying it, like he should have, but because of his obsession with 'preserving the timeline', he condemned you to another year of torture."

The stood in silence again.

Eventually, Ginny asked, "So, what are we going to do now?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "We?"

Despite everything she'd just been through, Ginny felt fine. In fact, she felt free. She finally knew what had been going on for the past few months — that she wasn't losing her mind — that the dreams she'd been having were for a reason, and that Harry, whose living conditions she'd been getting panicky about, also seemed fine.

She grinned impishly at him. "Yes, we. I assume you didn't spend months showing me stuff just so you could declare yourself my hero?"

Harry returned her grin. "You're damn right about that. I want to train you."

"Train me?"

"For better or worse, our fates are intertwined, decreed by the powers that be themselves, and if you, and a few others, are going to walk the path with me, then you'll need to be ready for it."

She thought back to what she'd just seen. The death, the horror, the suffering. If that's what the world had in store, then she damn well did need to be ready for it. She nodded. "Okay."

"Great. Meet me in the orchard one week from tonight at mid-night."

"But the wards-"

Her world faded to black.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Ginny paced. The half-moon illuminated the orchard.

Despite the cheerful, jokey attitude she'd displayed to Harry, the truth was she'd mostly been running off adrenaline at the time. After waking up from her dream that night, it had taken all her
willpower not to have a breakdown. The full enormity of what she'd seen kept crashing in on her.

It was only the thought of meeting Harry for real, The-True-Boy-Who-Lived, that got her through the week. Harry felt more like the hero the Boy-Who-Lived was supposed to be. The hero from the adventure books.

But how was he going to meet her? Ginny was sure Harry had never been keyed in to the wards.

"Hi Ginny."

Ginny jumped. "Harry!" she said in a fierce whisper. "How did you get in?"

"C'mon, I'll show you." Harry grabbed her hand and led her to a space between two trees on the far side of the orchard.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Harry? What am I looking at? There's nothing here."

He grinned. "Oh yes, ahem... 'The secret passage into the Burrow is located between the two most northern trees in the orchard.'"

Ginny processed his words and was shocked as a trapdoor appeared in the ground.

"What was that? How did you?" she spluttered.

"That was a fidelius charm," Harry said. "It preserves a secret, and only the secret keeper can reveal the secret. I'm the secret keeper. C'mon." He opened the trap door and descended the stairs beneath.

Ginny hesitated, then followed. "But where did the secret passage come from?" she asked as they made their way along. "I've never seen it before."

"I built it," Harry said. "There are ways to get around tight, interwoven perimeter wards like the Burrow has, but doing it without anyone noticing either takes hours to do it once, or leaves very obvious signs of a permanent entrance. Creating an underground passageway, hidden by a fidelius, lets me create a permanent way without anyone being any the wiser, and only the secret keeper, and those who posses the secret, — i.e. you — can use it. Ah! Here we are." He stopped in a small room hollowed out of the earth.

Ginny could see runestones lining the walls, floor, and ceiling. A wooden walkway elevated the path they were walking on above the stones.

"The runestones trick the ward system into thinking they are the next ward stone in the system, and that the system is still complete, when, in fact, there is now a hole," Harry said. "It's called a man in the middle attack. It's often pretty useless, because most warded systems have area wards as well as perimeter wards, but the Burrow doesn't."

Ginny bit her lip. She didn't want to imagine the trouble she'd be in if her parents ever found out about this. "And only we can use it?"

"Yes. Only you and me. C'mon."

They crept down the passage until they came out of another trapdoor. Ginny looked around and found herself in the middle of a small copse. "Hey, I know where this is. We're training here?"
"Nope, we've a little way yet." Harry reached into his pocket and drew something out. "Here," he said, handing her what looked like a tiny broomstick. "The activation phrase is 'Harry's awesome broomstick.'"

Ginny inspected the tiny broomstick and grinned. It looked like a nimbus 1700. She'd only ridden one of these once, for two minutes. John had let her have a go on her birthday before Ron had glared daggers at John and he'd asked it back.

"Say it," Harry urged.

"Harry's awesome broomstick."

The tiny broomstick expanded into a full adult version, and, laughing, she swung her leg over the shaft.

"Hold it!"

She looked at him.

Harry brought out a wand and tapped her on the head. She felt like an egg had been cracked over her. "What the?"

"Disillusionment. We'll blend into the background, which in the night-sky makes us damn near invisible."

"Wow… ah… Harry, how do you have a wand?"

"Later," he said, pulling out his own broom.

They both shot into the sky, Harry occasionally calling out to guide her. Flying while almost invisible was thrilling, but also disconcerting. She felt like a bird, swooping and curving around the sky on this incredible broom, but, at the same time, she didn't know exactly where Harry was, and couldn't shake the feeling she was going to crash into him.

After twenty minutes of the most enthralling flying she'd ever had, they touched down in the clearing of a wood. A small waterfall splashed and flowed to one side.

Harry faded into view before dispelling her. He then started waving his wand in patterns causing several bluebell flame lanterns to appear from nowhere. They floated upwards, hanging themselves on nearby branches, casting a soft, blue light on everything. It was beautiful.

"Muggle repelling wards," he said, by way of explanation. "So, what do you think?"

"It's a very nice place. Having a picnic here during the day would be nice." She walked over to the stream, squatted down, and dipped her hand in, testing the water. "So, what are we going to learn?"

"How are your occlumency studies going?"

She stood back up and shuffled her feet. "What's occlumency?"

Harry looked shocked. It was the first time she'd ever seen him surprised. "Oh wow… that… actually explains so much."

"Explains what?" she asked, getting agitated. "What's occlumency?"

"It's the magic of the human mind. All pureblood houses that I've encountered teach their children
occlumency, because, without it, anyone trained in legilimency can pull family secrets straight from your head… or any other secret for that matter. It also gives those who study it better concentration, memory, and skill acquisition."

Ginny was aghast as the implications sank in. She'd never heard her parents so much as mention such a practise to her, or any of her brothers.

"You mean, people read our minds?"

"Well… you might have some latitude. A lot of wizards might assume your family practises occlumency, and so don't try to probe you. It's considered a large faux pas to be caught using legilimency on someone with the defences to detect intrusion. But anyone who knows you don't practise it…"

"Why isn't using legilimency illegal?"

"Because the noble houses, most of which are pureblood, learn occlumency, but the muggleborns—and to a lesser extent non noble halfbloods—either don't know to, can't, or decide it's not worth it. This gives the noble houses, and other traditional houses, a massive advantage over everyone else, and they mostly control the law, so why should they outlaw it?"

Ginny thought about it. It made sense. It wasn't right, but it made sense. "So I need to learn this?"

"Yes."

"How long will it take?"

"Normally it would take years, but I have a trick that'll cut that down to just months."

Ginny perked up. "Really? Oh, thank Merlin. I thought I was going to be massively far behind."

"Once you've got intermediate occlumency down, we'll move onto wandless casting."

"What! I thought only really powerful wizards could use wandless magic?"

"Not true. It just requires the combination of a specialised form of occlumency—which most practitioners don't bother learning—and the time to learn how each spell you want to learn should feel moving through you, rather than through the crutch of a wand."

Ginny grinned. This was awesome. This is what she imagined being the friend of the Boy-Who-Lived would be like. "And then?"

"That'll be plenty for the moment. We'll practise duelling as well, but that's just further application of our wandless studies."

"Okay." Her face set in determination. "When do we start?"

"Right now."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Ginny danced around the secret training spot, letting her happiness wash over her barriers and through her mindscape like a flash flood. She'd gotten it down. Harry had just spent half an hour inspecting and probing her mind, and declared her fit for the fight.

"Yes, yes." Harry said, grinning at her as she jumped in the stream, splashing him with cooling
"You're happy, we get that."

"Harry, you've no idea what it feels like. This is the first time I've gotten good at something that is just mine. Something none of my brothers can do. When Mum would yell at me before, I felt like I was being beaten into the ground. I just wanted to shrivel up and disappear. Now, I feel like I can easily take it. It feels amazing."

She leapt from the stream and wrapped her arms around Harry. "Thank you."

Harry returned the hug and smiled. "Well then, there does remain one more thing to do."

She looked at him. "What?"

"Close your eyes."

She suddenly realised how close they were.

"W-w-what?"

"Close your eyes."

She hesitated for a moment, but closed her eyes. He wasn't going to… was he? Was he?

She felt Harry's hands reach up to her neck and flick her hair away before withdrawing. Something dragged across her neck and upper chest.

"There we are. No need for this anymore."

She opened her eyes. Harry was holding a silver chain necklace with a lightning bolt pendant attached to it.

She was puzzled. "I don't remember putting that on."

"This has been serving as your basic occlumency for the last seven or eight months, and letting me send you those dreams. Now you've got your own occlumency, you don't need it any more."

Ginny bit her lip. Conflicting emotions clashed, not the least of which was disappointment that he hadn't. She felt she should be angry that she'd been wearing a magical artefact, which had been messing with her head for over half a year, without knowing, but, on the other hand, she couldn't deny it had turned out for the best. Harry knew what he was doing… right? She trusted him, didn't she?

She thought back to the memories of the future — to the conversation with Fate and Death — to John committing suicide on the end of You-Know-Who's wand, thinking Death would give him a third chance, … to her eulogy.

Yes. Yes, she trusted Harry.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

"Harry?" Ginny sat cross-legged on the grass of the secret training spot. She was trying to feel her magic flow through her while focusing her intent on creating a lumos light in her palm. It had been weeks since Harry had deemed her occlumency sufficient to move on to the next step.

"Yes, Ginny?"
"Can we talk?"

"Sure."

"It's about John."

Harry seemed to stiffen. "Oh, yes?"

"I-I..." Ginny hesitated before plunging forward, "For months I thought I was over him, I mean, he did all those things — or will do them — but, in the last few weeks, I haven't been able to shake the feelings I had for him before. I guess I just can't connect the boy he is now to the John who utterly failed to do what he should have done... and what he did to me."

Harry looked thoughtful.

"I still want to continue our training," she added, quickly. "I just feel torn, between what I feel for John," — her voice dipped down to barely audible level — "And what I feel for you." She blushed lightly.

"Do you want to like him?"

"No!" She shook her head causing her red hair to flail.

Harry looked thoughtful again. "One moment." He stood up, and with a *Crack!* was gone.

She waited.

Five minutes later, Harry returned with another *Crack!* He held a vial of crystal-clear purple potion. "This is a potion that reveals all the worst traits and habits of a person to the drinker," he said. "It's supposed to be very difficult to continuing liking someone after having drunk one of these. The effects only last a few days, but the mind still remembers all the bad things, even if the magic is no longer present."

Harry handed the potion to her. She looked at it, uncertain. She didn't know what she'd been expecting when she brought this up with Harry, but this wasn't it.

"How did you prepare this so quickly?"

"I have his hair in my supplies."

"How did you get his hair?"

Harry grinned. "You don't want to know."

Ginny looked back at the crystal-clear, purple liquid sloshing around as she turned the vial this way and that. She bit her lip.

Could she really do this? She didn't like the feelings she had for John, but they were still her feelings. Could she choose to hate him? To decide he was no longer part of her future and permanently shut him out from that?

She looked up at Harry who was sitting with his legs out in front, pointedly angled away from her, looking towards the waterfall. The message was clear. This was her decision.

Her hands trembled. Her entire world shrunk to the tiny glass vial in her hands.
She rubbed the tip of the vial's stopper between her thumb and forefinger and forced herself to remember all those times John hadn't stood up for her.

She popped the stopper.

She drank.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

John Potter exited the Burrow's floo and looked around. Ginny wasn't here. She and he had been drifting apart over the last few months and it was only now that he realised he'd missed having her hanging around. It was true he hadn't been doing much for her, but he'd never seen the need when she wouldn't ever leave him alone.

He'd asked Dad what to do, which had been educational.

"Son," James Potter had said, "girls expect you to chase them. If you don't, they'll eventually give up, no matter how into you they are. I chased your mother for six years before she finally agreed to date me."

"But I don't want to d-d-date her… I just like having her around."

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, Son. Face it, Potter men can't resist a pretty redhead."

A quick check in with Mrs. Weasley confirmed Ginny wasn't in the house.

"She's recently been spending a lot of time in the orchard, John dear."

John walked the path to the orchard. Maybe Ginny would like a ride on his broom. That would surely work. Ginny seemed to like flying, even if she never did any.

He reached the orchard's edge and saw her sitting below a tree… practising occlumency? That was different.

"Gin Gin!"

Ginny raised her head, and his world shattered.

Hate.

It shouldn't be possible for eyes to contain such loathing. Such malice. And for those chocolate-brown orbs to be directing all that revulsion at him.

"G-gin?" he stammered. "What's wrong?"

Ginny stood and walked off without saying anything, giving him nothing but a final disgust filled glare.

He felt like he was going to cry. Tears welled up, and his breath started to shudder. What had he done?

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Ginny felt her magic course through her, felt it ride the currents of nerves and blood, felt it pool in her hand, felt it seep into her finger tips, and watched the stinging hex shoot towards her intended target who instantly swatted the spell away with his wand.
"I did it!" She leapt up, ran at Harry, and threw her arms around his neck, forcing him to spin her around, or risk losing his balance.

"Well done." Harry smiled. "Keep it up and at this rate we'll be doing actual duelling soon. I'll have to start thinking about introducing you to your duelling partner."

Ginny's face fell. She looked at her feet. "Duelling partner? I thought we were going to…"

"Oh, we are." Harry lifted her chin and grinned. "But you're going to be stuck here for a whole year while I'm in Scotland and I don't want you getting rusty. I've been training a few others, so we're not going to face this future alone. There will be a good number of us to rely on."

Not alone. That sounded good.

"Oh, that reminds me," he said, snapping his fingers and reaching into his pocket. "I have something here for you. Since you've just mastered your first wandless spell, I guess this will do well for a reward."

She took the object and looked at it. It was a ring, but it clearly wasn't a ring. It was silver and had a small lightning bolt design on the face.

She raised an eyebrow.

"I'm giving these to those who know all three of my secrets. They're invisible to all but those who also wear one. They're also soul bound, and have most of the usual goodies you'd expect from a high end piece of jewellery."

Ginny fingered the ring. It was a gift from Harry. "It doesn't make you have weird dreams does it?" she asked, tracing the ridges of the lightning bolt with the sensitive tips of her fingers.

"Nope, no dreams," Harry said. "Although they do have a few cool features. They can send very basic messages to each other using vibrations and they make you immune to compulsion charms. That was the only immunity I could get to work. I swear, Merlin was a freakin' genius when he created the noble-house rings."

"You were trying to re-create the noble-house rings? Ambitious aren't we?"

"Well it is my house's nature."

"Well that's true," Ginny looked thoughtful. "You know, if you'd told me a year ago I'd be going to Slytherin, I'd have said you were mad, and to piss off."

"How we change, mmm?"

"Yah."

"How's my brother doing?"

Ginny's expression darkened. "Still whining that his love detests him for no reason. Ever since the hate potion wore off, he's become so needy it's sickening. My family even tried to hold a mediation between us the other day."

Harry cringed. "I bet that went well."

"They spent the whole time trying to tell me that I was being unreasonable — that we looked so cute together. Well, Mum did anyway."
Silence descended on the pair for a moment.

"So, you want to put that on?"

She perked up. "Sure, which finger?"

"Pinky of your right hand. So it's very obvious when you shake or kiss hands."

"So, it's kind of like a secret club."

"In a way."

"Cool."

She slipped the ring on her pinky and felt the magic catch. It was the first time she'd ever worn a magic ring. For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine she was a real pureblood princess.

"Back to training?"

She beamed. "Yes, Harry."

[Chapter end - May, 1990 (Four months before Hermione's 'final test')]

— End of Chapter Seven —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Whew, this chapter turned out to be the longest I've written yet. Writing Ginny is difficult because she received so little characterisation in canon (Choo Choo, all aboard the obvious express). The fanfic community has fleshed her out quite a bit, but, unlike Daphne, whose fanfic characterisation is pretty uniform (Ice-queen), Ginny's character differs A LOT between fics. The two most common that I see are 'potion-princess stalker Ginny', and 'kick-ass fun-loving prankster Ginny'. I see these two as the 'canon' fanfic Ginnys and so use them as my base reference points in writing my own Ginny.
Harry, disguised as Child-Lord-Slytherin, and wearing heavy winter robes, sat outside a Diagon Alley cafe. He polished off his full-English breakfast, and considered the top-floor-office four shops away, headquarters of most innovative newspaper in the country, The Quibbler.

Luna Lovegood had been a nervous, frightened child when he'd last been at Hogwarts, but Voldemort's memories showed her to be both loyal, and a competent duellist. She'd gone one-on-one with Yaxley, lived, and then taken a killing curse meant for his incompetent brother. She was an obvious asset. Luna and Alexandra would make perfect duelling partners for Ginny who were all childhood friends. The Lovegoods were also noble, owned a national newspaper, and were a light-sided family sitting on the edge of being Gray. Courting them was a no-brainer.

Being noble, he'd have to be more careful in how he handled Luna. With Ginny, he knew that if everything went to dragon dung, he could wipe her memory, and start over again. He'd have never dared use a compulsion-charmed necklace with a mental backdoor if Ginny were noble. The noble house rings made such tactics impossible.

He'd have to build his friendship with the Lovegood Heiress without such tactics, and there was an obvious point in the timeline where he'd be able to build a solid link. In the year before Hogwarts, Pandora Lovegood, Luna's mother, died during a spell crafting accident — an accident that was both predictable, and preventable. Stop Lady Lovegood's death, and Luna would be putty in his hands.

But that event would be less than six months before his first Hogwarts year, a dangerously small timeframe to both befriend and train her. He wasn't even sure the timeline would repeat itself anymore. He needed something sooner, but despite thinking for weeks, he hadn't come up with anything he liked.

He raised his orange juice to mouth-level, and fumbled for the straw with his mouth.

"Hello."

He tore his distracted focus away from The Quibbler Building, glanced towards the voice, and did a double take. He found himself looking into the silvery-gray eyes of Luna Lovegood.

"Would you like to be my friend? I don't have many friends."

No fucking way. His mouth switched to emergency autopilot while his brain malfunctioned and shut down.

"Yes, I would like to be your friend."

"Yay." The girl raised her hands in the air, glided over to him, and hugged him. She pulled away. "What's your name?"

"Harry."
"I'm Luna. Did you know you're surrounded by kerfuffling scribblebugs?"

"You know, I did not know that," he said, still stunned. His brain started to reboot. This was Luna Lovegood? Hogwarts must've really knocked the spirit from her. "What is a kerfuggling scribblebug?"

The short blonde smiled. "It's a type of flying beetle that hunts Nargles; they breed very fast when there is enough magic to support them."

"And they're incorporeal, invisible, and completely undetectable?"

Luna frowned. "I can see them."

"I believe you."

Luna's smile broke out again. She was wearing green, flowing, modern, open-robes with a white summer dress. It was an odd combination, and made her look like a white flower surrounded by long, green leaves. She must be really cold.

He thought for a moment. "How many do I have around me at the moment?"

She counted. "Fourteen."

Harry flipped open a notebook, and made a note. It stood to reason that if these possibly non-existent beetles were supported by magic, and reproduced, then there must be an environmental carrying capacity. If he had fourteen now, and that changed, it might mean something. Like an increase in magical power? It certainly wasn't the best way to quantify raw magical power, but if Luna could see them, it would be easy, and could be measured without the subject's knowing.

"Luna, do you have any kerfuffling scribblebugs?"

"Oh no Harry, very few wizards do."

Well scratch that idea then. He flipped the notebook shut.

"Fancy some cake?" he asked.

"Do they have pudding?"

"I'm sure they have pudding."

The girl clapped her hands, once. "I like pudding."

He smiled. 'Sometimes,' he thought, 'Fate can be such a sweet mistress.'

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

'And sometimes,' Harry thought, 'Fate can be a right bitch.'

He crouched behind a bush in a small park, opposite a line of drab looking London town houses, and recast his rain repelling charm. It was chucking it down. The sky was dark, the buildings were gray, and the ground slurped and squished around his dragonhide boots. It was just as well he'd already performed the ritual to give him near perfect eye-sight and hearing, or he'd have had serious problems with his glasses.

Twelve Grimmauld Place stood taunting him. So close, and yet, with its ancient war wards, it
might as well be on the moon. The Weasleys had skimped when they'd constructed the ward system around the Burrow. Keyed portkey wards, keyed apparition wards, key-in and key-out wards, muggle repelling wards, and a basic magic shield. That was it. They didn't even have an anti-animagus ward. The Blacks, by contrast, believed that the strongest protections available, still weren't strong enough. They'd put up everything short of fidelius, and getting past them with discretion was not happening.

Direct mind magics also wouldn't work. Alexandra Black certainly wore a noble house ring. The only way he was going to get to her was by luring her outside. But how? Her father wouldn't have anything to do with the Neutrals, unless he thought he could persuade one of them to the Light. Ginny said her friendship with Alex had deteriorated recently, ever since Alex started becoming interested in darker magic, and Ginny started going after John Potter, the symbol of the Light. She never left the house by the front door, always by the floo.

Whatever he was going to do, it wouldn't be done standing here while the heavens tried their level best to drown him.

He apparated away with a *Crack* leaving two foot-shaped impressions in the ground, which quickly filled with muddy water.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry gazed up at the rook-shaped building in front of him. It looked more serene during the day, when not surrounded by death eaters, and engulfed by fiendfyre.

"Look Harry. These are our dirigible plum bushes." Luna danced like a fae from stories of old around the magical and mundane plants that littered the rookery's garden. All she needed was the flowers in her hair and the tendency to claw her way through people's intestines.

"Interesting plant. I don't think I've seen them before. Do they have magical properties?"

"Their fruit enhances your ability to accept the extraordinary."

"Really?"

She paused by one of the bushes. "You sound like you're having problems believing it." she plucked one off the bush and proffered it to him. "Would you like one?"

"Oh, I believe it. Umm… could I take it and eat it later?"

"That's probably a good idea, Harry. They're poisonous if not cooked before eating."

He coughed, and looked down at the fruit he'd just accepted from Luna. He wondered if she'd have told him that before he'd started to chow down. He had a bezoar in his bag, but getting poisoned still wasn't on his to-do list. He carefully put the fruit into his bag. "Thank you Luna. Do you eat them?"

"Oh yes."

He grinned. A plant that made you more gullible would definitely come in useful, especially if the noble house rings didn't block it.

"A Nargle just appeared by your head, Harry."

"Oh?"
"Oops, it just got eaten by a kerfuffling scribblebug." She smiled a dreamy smile. "They're really very useful."

He shook his head. Being around Luna was an experience. He'd been in Voldemort's head for years, but Luna's presence was surreal.

"Are we going to see the back garden too?"

Luna beamed at him. "Yes, Harry."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry stalked his prey down Diagon Alley like a lion stalks an antelope. His quarry spent a few minutes window-shopping the quidditch store, another ten minutes eating an ice cream in Florean Fortescue's Ice-Cream Parlour, before finally stepping into Flourish and Blotts.

He crept, unseen, through the rows of books, keeping an eye on the long black hair that swept around corners. Its wearer was clearly looking for something specific. Something that would get it into trouble if found buying it. Why else would she be alone?

The girl spent a long time looking at one book in particular. From two bookshelves away, he recognised the oversized tome as Hatcher Romulo's Updated Compendium of Defence Against the Dark Arts. She tucked it under her arm, walked to the counter, head held high, and proceeded to have a loud argument with the store clerk, who refused to sell her a book restricted to those who were of age.

Eventually, frustrated, the girl gave up and left the store in a huff.

Opportunity.

He swigged an ageing potion, ghosted to the counter, bought the book the girl had left behind, causing more than a slight eyebrow raise from the clerk, and left the store, drawing his hood up over his head to hide his face.

He'd been waiting a long time for a good moment to slip Alexandra Black a private invitation to a Greengrass party. This would do fine. He lifted a small envelope from his bag, and slipped it just behind the tome's front cover. His rapid footsteps soon caught up with the Black heiress outside a junk store.

"Heiress Black."

She hesitated before turning. Even her shoulders looked guilty.

"Here." He handed over the book, which she took in stunned silence. "Next time, use one of these." He wiggled another ageing potion before turning to leave."

"Wait!" He heard Alexandra call from behind him, "Who are y—."

He disapparated with a *crack*.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry was impressed.

He sat, cross-legged, opposite Luna who was likewise seated.
"Your occlumency barriers are very good Luna."

"Thank you, Harry. Mummy always insists I work hard on them."

"Have you ever thought about taking the next logical step and learning wandless magic? With the level you're at it shouldn't be that difficult."

"But I don't have anyone who can teach me wandless magic. Could you teach me wandless magic, Harry?"

"I- yes. Yes I can, Luna."

"Yay. I like being your friend, Harry."

Harry made another mental notch on his surreal-Luna-Lovegood-moment tally.

"I like being your friend too. You make it very easy." And he meant it. Luna was so open and accepting of everything. Maybe it was time to take the next step.

"Luna, I need to tell you something."

"What do you need to tell me, Harry?"

"I don't really look like this."

"Oh? What do you really look like?"

"Like this." He swigged a liquid finite.

"You look like Harry Potter."

"Yes I— wait what?"

"Well obviously you sort of look like John Potter, but John Potter doesn't have that scar on his forehead, so the only thing you can look like is Harry Potter."

"But, you know about Harry Potter?"

"I know he's a nice boy who's going to teach me wandless magic."

"I- right. That works. Let's go with that."

That little exchange was surely worth at least three notches.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Adult-Lord-Slytherin-Harry, complete with black and emerald mask, stood in the grand ballroom of Greengrass Manor, sipping on a glass of white. Child-Daphne stood to his side, sipping on a glass of pumpkin juice, scanning the hall for interestingness. The party had started a good hour ago, and one guest in particular had yet to show.

"Do you think she'll come?" Daphne asked.

"She may. She seems quite capable of sneaking out to the Alley. On the other hand, she might have been caught, or she never opened the book, or the Blacks have a prior engagement, or, and I admit this is a low chance event, she didn't want to."
Daphne stifled an unladylike snort. "A witch seeking the dark arts not wanting to attend a party after being invited personally by Lord Slytherin? I just don't see that happening."

Harry looked towards the small blonde beside him. "I do find it unlikely, but remember, we've been purposefully altering people's perceptions of what Slytherin stands for. It's bound to alienate the more hardcore blood-supremacists, and we don't know how indoctrinated Alex is by the stuff she's read in the Black Library."

Daphne acknowledged his point with a slight tip of her glass.

Suddenly, the floo flared green, and a small figure stepped out, wearing an elegant black-laced dress robe, and a Lord-Slytherin-style, black mask.

Harry and Daphne watched the figure hand the master of ceremonies an invitation before holding a short conversation with him. The man nodded, straightened, and called out…

"Miss Incognito."

Harry snorted. Daphne looked dumbstruck.

"Wow. Way to call attention to yourself. Someone reads far too much historical fiction," he said, as every head in the hall turned to the floo.

The young witch looked uncomfortable at the sudden attention, but rallied, and strode over to a food table on the opposite side of the room to him and Daphne.

The general hubbub of the party resumed, and Daphne spoke. "I'm guessing Lord Black has been taking it light on the social training. What do you bet everyone in the hall knows she's the Black Heiress by the end of the party?"

Harry grinned. "You know I don't take losing bets."

"Are you going to introduce yourself now?"

"Nah. Give it a half-hour. Let her sweat for a bit. She's not getting any good conversation when no one knows who she is, apart from being treated like a guess-my-name-puzzle. Oh. I spoke too soon."

An even smaller blonde, this one a centrifuge of energy, had barrelled over the ballroom floor towards 'Miss Incognito,' and was now attempting to draw the lace-dressed witch into a mile-a-minute dialogue.

Daphne sighed. "Oh, Tori."

His grin widened. "You love her."

"I do, but I wish—"

"—Hey, I wouldn't change a thing about her. Enthusiasm like that is a rare commodity."

The Black heiress was now being dragged out of the ballroom and into one of the many antechambers.

"Guess I'll go introduce myself earlier then."

Daphne nodded. "Good luck, my lord."
Five minutes later, Harry opened the door Astoria had dragged Alexandra through to find them both happily engaged in conversation, Alex leaning on an ornate dinning table. When Alex saw him, she snapped up, and immediately dropped a curtsey.

"My Lord Slytherin."

"Miss Incognito. Although I'm sure our inimitable Astoria has already done so, I'd like to personally welcome you to Greengrass Manor. Astoria, could you excuse us a moment?"

Astoria giggled and also dropped a curtsey. "Yes, my Lord Slytherin." Before dashing out of the room.

The door clicked shut.

The two regarded each other, both masked, one, tall and comfortable, the other, smaller and stiff.

"You made quite an entrance, Miss Black. If your purpose was to keep your father knowing you're here, that may not have been the best way."

"Kuh. It wasn't easy getting here you know." She sounded defensive. "I had to slip sleeping potion in my old man's biscuits."

"But you managed it."

"Yes, I did. Umm... Thank you for buying me the book."

"You're welcome."

"What was that potion you said I should use? I didn't recognise it."

"Ageing potion."

The girl slapped her mask in a theatrical gesture of chagrin. "Of course. And...—her voice changed to confused—"...you carry ageing potion around with you?"

"Why are you interested in the dark arts, Miss Black?"

She shifted, uncomfortable. "Well, they're really interesting."

"You don't need to pretend with me. I know more dark magic than perhaps any other person alive."

"More than held in the Black Library?" She sounded hungry.

"The Black Library no doubt holds many secrets that I do not know, but, as a whole, yes, far more than the Black Library."

"Is that why you invited me here? The Black Library?"

"No. I'm far more interested in you, Miss Black."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. It's rare these days for a young witch to be both independently interested in the dark arts, and have the potential resources to pursue those interests. And I'm also still interested as to the
"I'm... I'm not sure I'm comfortable discussing that right now."

"That's okay. There are many reasons for walking the path we walk, and many of them are very private."

She made a gesture of grateful thanks.

"There is another thing. There is someone I'd like you to meet."

"Who?"

He walked over to a nearby low chair, sat down, and wordlessly invited Alexandra to sit opposite him. "Miss Black," he started after the raven-haired girl had sat down, "what I am about to tell you is a closely guarded secret. If you can't keep secrets then I suggest you say so, and we'll part ways now."

She paused for a moment before continuing. "No, I can keep secrets. I succeeded in keeping out my instructor's probes last month."

"Very well. His name is Harry."

"...?"

"He is the estranged twin brother of John Potter."

"What? That wuss doesn't have a brother!" she shouted.

"The Potters abandoned Harry with Lily's muggle relatives just after Voldemort's attack. I've been raising him in secret for quite a while now."

He couldn't see under her mask, but he was pretty sure her mouth was hanging open.

She huffed. "And you want me to meet him? All Potters are pathetic."

"You never met Harry's great-uncle did you."

"Well, no. Why?"

"Charlus Potter was not a man you wanted to mess with. He was one of the few who almost defeated Voldemort during his first rise."

"You mean his only rise."

"Of course."

"..."

"..."

"Harry will also be just one year above you at Hogwarts, and will likely also be sorted into Slytherin."

"Okay. I'll meet him."

"Excellent. My hope is that you can both further your studies together. You'll find he is very
"I'd rather learn with you!"

"Unfortunately, right now, that isn't possible, but you will find Harry is more than capable of taking my place."

Alex didn't look convinced, but it was the best he was going to manage for the moment.

Harry stood at the far edge of a clearing in the Rookery gardens and regarded Luna. She had just succeeded in casting her first wandless protego. She was a quick learner. There were only a few more spells she needed.

"Well done, Luna. Pretty soon you'll be able to start duelling practice with some of the others I've been teaching."

"Yay. More friends." She glided over and hugged him... again. Luna had turned out to demand more hugs than even Ginny. Considering he'd spent the first twenty-some years of his life without a single hug, he wasn't complaining.

He was just pulling away when he noticed they weren't alone. A man and a woman stood, side-by-side at the garden's edge, watching them. It was still early afternoon. Luna hadn't mentioned her parents would be home today.

"Um... Hello," he said. Luna turned around to see whom he was addressing.

"Well hello there young man," said Xenophilius Lovegood, his shoulder length blond hair framed his young but well-travelled face. "I hope your intentions towards my daughter there are honourable."

He glanced at the nine-year-old girl in front of him before looking back at the man. Lord Lovegood didn't look angry, just curious.

"Yes?" he said, very uncertain.

"Excellent." He seemed pleased. "Then we can start writing up the betrothal contract."

"..."

He hadn't just heard that correctly? Had he? He'd accepted Luna being a bit odd, but her parents too? Lady Lovegood wasn't making any effort to disapprove of or contradict her husband, and they didn't look like they were joking. The Lovegoods weren't poor. They ran the second most circulated newspaper in the country, and were noble, dealing with the backstabbing politics of the Wizengamot on a regular basis. They were powerful, and powerful people who made stupid decisions didn't remain powerful for long. Therefore, this offer wasn't stupid. But he couldn't see the reasoning behind it.

Oh.

"Lord Lovegood, you know that I'm not John Potter, don't you?"

"Yes Harry. I know that you are Harry."

"Just Harry?"
"Luna made it very clear that your last name is," —he made quotation marks with his fingers—"a super duper secret. But, having seen you, I suspect I can guess what it is."

"I am not next in line to the Potter Lordship."

"That is not a problem."

It still didn't make any sense.

"I am already subject to a betrothal contract."

"Even better! A consort contract will even allow Luna to continue the Lovegood name."

Every political brain cell in his head was screaming in terror. It was too easy! Life doesn't work like this! You don't just get given awesome stuff! He glanced to Luna who stood to the side beaming a lumos-maximus smile towards her father.

"Lord Lovegood, I'm very honoured. I don't understand though. Why would you offer me Luna without knowing anything about me?"

"I know you've been practising wandless magic with Luna — a skill that you are proficient in despite your age."

'Okay,' he thought.

"I know that you are independent and responsible, since you are able to move freely, and without parental oversight or consent."

'Okay.'

"I know you are politically intelligent from your questions to my offer."

Harry raised a mental eyebrow at the post-decision rationalisation.

"I know another family, traditional enough to use betrothal contracts, deems you worthwhile enough to be party to one."

'Social proof,' he thought, 'But Lord Lovegood knows he doesn't know the political alignment of my betrothed.'

"I know you were able to afford said contract, and that you are dressed in acromantula-silk closed-robes, and dragonhide boots."

'More post-decision rationalisation.'

"I know you are brave and stouthearted by your pose and manner when confronted by a powerful Lord and parent who you've been trying to avoid and keep secrets from."

Harry winced.

"I know you are diligent since the wards record your presence every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for the last six months without breaking the pattern once."

He winced again.

"I know Luna likes you very much."
"And I know that sooner or later, some Lord in the Wizengamot is going to try to include a betrothal contract with Luna as part of some strong-arm political manoeuvre."

Ah. Ahhhhh. Was it that simple? A preemptive move to protect Luna with a boy she likes, and seems to not be terrible?

"Was that enough reasons, Harry?" Xenophilius smiled.

…That was actually only one real reason, the rest were reasons why he wouldn't be horrible, or just weren't good reasons. It still didn't seem right. You just don't ask boys you've only just met to be your daughter's consort even if you have a good reason. You spend time to sniff out potential land mines. You feel for family compatibility.

At this point his as yet unformed mortal passions got sick of his overthinking, and reared up from his deepest memories of puberty, spent in the company of happiness-sucking demons, the nails-on-blackboard cackle of Bellatrix Lestrange, and not a single feminine curve, screaming at him to shut up and accept the damned offer!

"Yes, Lord Lovegood," he said weakly.

"Wonderful!"

Pandora Lovegood clapped. Luna turned, jumped, and hugged him. Her fifth hug of the day.

Harry waited in the park, two blocks from the old London town house of the Blacks, hidden from the casual glance of passing muggles. A recognisable, slight figure, wearing black, traditional closed-robgs, walked towards him, crossed over pavement and road, onto grass, and halted a few metres from him.

"Dear Merlin, you really do look just like John Potter. I feel so sorry for you."

"A pleasure to meet you too, Heiress Alexandra, of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black. And I prefer to think that John Potter looks just like me."

She snorted. "Whatever, Potter. So what are we going to do here?"

"I thought we'd start with occlumency and then move onto wandless magic."

"I already know occlumency, and why should I bother with wandless magic? We're getting wands when we go to Hogwarts anyway."

Harry summoned a stick from the base of a nearby tree. Alex looked surprised for a fraction of a second before her expression relapsed to her attempt at a mild sneer, although on her it looked more like a pout.

"When someone takes your wand, it's important to get it back," he said, waving the stick for emphasis.

"So that's one spell. And I could just keep my wand attached to my wrist in combat."

"And if someone shatters your wand? Or cuts off your hand?"
The Black Heiress spluttered. "Shatter my wand? That's despicable," she said, rubbing her wrist and ignoring his comment about severed hands.

"You're the one studying the dark arts. You must have seen the requirements for many of the rituals, and the personal anecdotes of the authors. It's not a pretty world out there, Alex."

"Don't call me Alex," she shot back. "And of course I've read those rituals, do you think I'm stupid?"

"No."

"Good. I'm not interested in wandless parlour tricks. I'm interested in learning more of what's possible with the full range of magics, not just the tiny amount authorised by the ministry. Why should we not learn everything magic is capable of?"

"Well, there are good reasons the ancient families keep knowledge of the old magics hidden from the general population."

"Che. I'm not talking about them. I'm talking about the ancient families. The Light is trying to take our birthrights from us."

"Yes, they are. But what use is learning that stuff now, when you don't have a wand? Our time is better spent learning the things we can with the tools we have."

She didn't look convinced. "Is that all you can teach me then? Silly little party tricks?"

"I can regale you with story after story of what all the magics are capable of, but without a wand, such knowledge isn't very useful. We can move on to that stuff in our first year of Hogwarts. It's useful then."

She pursed her lips. "You're wrong," she said, walking until she was nose to nose with him. "It is useful now." She smiled, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

He raised an eyebrow.

Alex brought her hand down to his arm, and gripped.

Strong! He made to shake her off, but couldn't. Too strong. Far stronger than any nine-year-old girl had any right to be.

Quick as a wand draw, Alex grabbed his shoulder, and effortlessly turned him around, arm twisted around his back, grabbed his other hand, and pinned it with the first. Her grip was like a vice.

He grimaced, and stopped struggling. He hadn't been expecting that.

Alex leant into his ear. "Do you see, Potter?" she said, sounding pleased with herself. "There are many old magics that are very useful right now."

Shit. This was going to hurt like a bitch. Bracing himself, he unleashed a wandless area-of-effect banishing spell, pushing the witch away from him, and dislocating his left arm, sending a bolt of pain shooting through him.

Alexandra stumbled backwards, tripped on the hem of her robes, and landed on her bum with an "Uff". She looked up, seemingly unhurt. "You jerk!"

He turned, and popped his arm back into place. "See? Wandless magic isn't useless either. And
you are aware that the ritual of krazenkart is best done on one's thirteenth birthday for best effect?"

Her cheeks tinted. "S-Shut up, Potter!"

He silently regarded the raven-haired girl still glaring up at him. She was so hostile. He needed to establish authority and dominance, but she wasn't buying it. Dare he reveal he could use a wand to show her something more impressive? No. It was too risky to reveal any more of his secrets to someone who didn't implicitly respect him. It would have to wait until they got to Hogwarts. In the meantime, he'd have to throw her a bone to stay in her moderately good graces. The rapport they had now was much better than they'd had last time around.

"Fine. I'll see what books we have that are of interest. Maybe we can do a book swap."

She smirked, stood up, brushed herself down, flicked her hair, and put a hand on her hip. "That sounds more acceptable, Potter."

[June, 1990 (One month after Harry gives Ginny the lightning-bolt ring)]

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

[June, 1991]


They'd both just got back from a four-week-trip around the UK and Europe, building and warding emergency boltholes, complete with supplies. Daphne had got a lot of use out of her muggle outdoor gear. It had been a long time since she'd first gone out in it.

"Has it really been three years?" he mused.

"Pretty close to it," she replied.

"We've got a lot done."

"Yes. Project Save-The-World is going well." Daphne hummed. "I still can't quite believe all the stuff that happens to you, and all the places we've been."

"Welcome to the life of Mister Harry."

She smiled sweetly at him. "You've put a lot of work into Project Harem too."

"Hey, Project Harem is an integral part of Project Save-The-World," he joked.

"Sure. Just remember, as the future Lady Slytherin, I'm the one that has to keep all these extra girls in line."

"You met Hermione."

"I did."

"And?" he grinned.

"I grudgingly admitted she's not horrible. But she still doesn't have the political killer instinct."

"Give her a chance, she's still only eleven. Not everyone can grow up with politics engraved on their soul."
Daphne cast her gaze around the alley before returning her focus to her Betrothed. "I'd have liked to have met the original eleven-year-old you."

He snorted. "Oh no you wouldn't have. I was everything you hated. Weak, validation seeking, naive."

"Easier to control?"

"Pshhh. You don't want a husband who's easy to control. It would take all the challenge out of it."

The blonde's voice dropped. "Yes, but it might be nice to win occasionally," she mumbled.

"Then you'll just have to keep getting better won't you?" He grinned.

"Better than The-Boy-Who-Is-Going-To-Cheat-His-Face-Off?"

"If you want to spend ten years in Azkaban, camped out in the Dark Lord's head, just to get good grades in school, be my guest."

"I just think it would be amazing to have all that knowledge at such a young age, while all your peers are so far behind."

"Well, you have the next best thing at least."

She unconsciously drew closer to him. "Yes, I do."

They reached the steps of Gringotts.

"And now," he continued in a semi-serious whisper, "it's time for Lord Slytherin to start throwing around some serious gold."

— End of Chapter Eight —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Play time with the girls is over, the countdown to Hogwarts has begun, and Harry and company have got stuff to do!

A/N: For the occasional person who asks me to publish everyday… it takes around twenty-ish hours to layout, draft, edit, and polish each chapter, so that kind of pace isn't happening. Sorry :)

[Edit: 27th June, 2017 — Only twenty hours! Bwuahahaha. Oh, how I look back and laugh.]
[Earlier that morning]

Harry sat at the Greengrass breakfast table. Papers were strewn across the surface. Daphne sat opposite him, financial report in one hand, jam spread toast in the other. The two adult Greengrasses had already eaten. Astoria was still asleep.

Daphne finished swallowing. "So, a single underline is a calculation, and a double underline is the final amount?"

"Yep."

"And the exchange rate between 'pounds' and galleons is fifty-to-one?"

"Yep." Harry knew pureblood heirs didn't usually start learning business until their teens, but Daphne was always a fast learner.

His betrothed whistled. "That is a big number above that final double underline."

"Traditionally, it's called the bottom line. And yes, I got lucky. Three months ago one of the national distributors got caught short, and agreed to buy the rest of the goods I'd stockpiled to last while we were at Hogwarts."

"I can't believe anyone's business is so big that they'd buy that much all at once."

"In the muggle world, £1,200,000 isn't that much."

Daphne shook her head in wonder. "And so far this year you've netted £1,523,424, for a total balance of...." She dropped the income statement and picked up the four-year balance sheet. "£2,482,761."

"Yeah, but we can't expect those kind of numbers moving forward. That deal was a one-off. Without it, we bring in about £450,000 every six months, plus a bit extra from customer growth."

Daphne was still inspecting the balance sheet. "I see business wasn't that good for the first two years, 1988 and 1989."

"Oh no. Business was great. It's just that I had some rather large expenses. You may recall them. Daphne."

Daphne blushed. "Y-You said yourself, that paying that much was the only way Lord Slughorn wouldn't—"

Harry laughed. "Relax Daph. I know. And I wouldn't take it back for anything."

Daphne blushed a different kind of blush.

"And you must admit," he continued, "having the highest bride price in history did a lot for both our reputations."
She nodded. "It did. When it was leaked to the Prophet, no one would talk to me about anything else for months."

He chuckled.

"Don't you think there's a risk someone at Hogwarts will figure out that you're Lord Slytherin? Since I'm betrothed to him, and we're always going to be together?"

"It's a risk. One we'll have to work with. Hopefully by the time anyone finds out, we'll be well positioned."

Daphne set the balance sheet down and reached over to another pile of papers. "And this"—she gently waved the new papers in her hand—"is the next step in that positioning?"

"Yep. Slytherin Manor. We've been holding the Gray together for the last three years, and even persuaded some back, but we need to push our influence. With Slytherin Manor, the three manors of the Light, Dark, and Gray, will become four. A critical mindshare shift towards the Gray, and a perfect base of operations for us. A place we can be daring without the fear of damaging the Greengrass influence."

"How much are you thinking about putting into this?"

"We've £2.5 million at the moment. I've been playing with the numbers for a while, and I think we can have our twenty-five thousand square-foot mansion—which is what's needed for the project to be worthwhile—for £6.6 million. Although I still need to check some numbers with the goblins."

Daphne's eyes widened. "132,000 galleons. But we can't afford it. We only have fifty-thousand galleons."

He smiled. "Of course we can. We have a profitable business and we're building a house with the money. Those two things, taken together, should be more than enough collateral for a loan."

"You're going to borrow money? From the goblins?" She looked worried.

"Yep."

"Is that a good idea? Only, I've heard stories of axe wielding debt collectors, and defaulters being fed to dragons."

"Those are legitimate concerns. So we'll do everything in our power to make sure we don't default. We can't afford to wait five years, and I trust our goblin friends to keep certain details confidential." He took a sip of orange juice before continuing. "The payments for a ten-year, £4.6 million mortgage would amount to £600,000 a year at today's interest rates. I dropped in on my three main customers six weeks ago, and got them to agree to larger purchases at fixed times through-out the year in exchange for a better deal."

Daphne watched him, expectantly. "Meaning?"

"Meaning we'll keep back £500,000 as safety in the vault, and before we head off to Hogwarts, we'll have another £612,000. That'll keep us afloat for almost two years, even if everything went to hell."

"How secure are these businesses of yours?"

He sighed. "Honestly? Not as secure as I'd like. I'm the sole runner for three regional suppliers.
Everyone else is happy with their suppliers, and isn't interested, unless they're desperate. Those three customers make up fifty percent, twenty-five percent, and twenty-five percent of my total ongoing business. That's never a good thing. Ideally I'd have at least five customers, each having only twenty percent.

"And how secure do you think those customers are?"

He grinned. "Individually? Not too bad — so long as they don't get shot or caught. Curtis loves me. His business has doubled over the last three years on my supply. Riversmith isn't growing all that fast, but he's solid, and Kovac is expanding like crazy. Still small, but give him a few years and he might start to close in on Curtis."

Daphne regarded him. Her look was calculating. "It's not enough."

"Mmm?"

"I know you. You wouldn't make a massive play like this unless you had multiple fallbacks. Your smuggling business is only one, and you just admitted it wasn't as secure as you'd like."

"Ah, Daph. You do know me. Yes. I have another plan for making obscene amounts of money, and paying off the mansion before we hit third year."

She smiled sweetly at him. "And will I know this plan?"

"Yep." He took another sip, and leaned back in his chair. "Let me tell you about something that is probably happening at Hogwarts, this year."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

[Back to the present]

Daphne looked up at the wonky facade of Gringotts bank. A building currently holding one of the most sought after artefacts in wizarding history, the philosopher's stone. Right now though, they cared more about goblin gold than the stone.

"Shall we?" Child-Lord-Slytherin-Harry said.

"Yes." She took his arm, and together they walked into the bank, across the main floor, and up to a teller. The goblin had to lean over his desk to see them.

"Yes?"

She noticed Harry glance around before replying. "I am here to open a family vault for The Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin… along with some other related business."

The goblin raised an eyebrow.

Harry flashed him his head of house ring.

The teller drew in a sharp breath. "Please follow me."

And that was pure Harry. She was sure if any other eleven-year-old had tried that they'd have been laughed out of the bank without even a raised eyebrow. It was something about his stance and speech — it whispered 'I know what I'm doing, and I have every right to do it'.

They were led through a long series of passageways and corridors and into a well appointed
waiting room. A pair of large double doors on the far side of the room opened, and they were ushered in. A large goblin wearing a pinstripe suit stood up from the far side of a desk and waved them in with an equally large, toothy grin.

"Lord Slytherin," he said, sounding happier than any goblin she'd ever encountered before, "I have been waiting for this meeting for almost two years now. Please, please sit down. We have much to discuss."

Her eyes were drawn to a small ceremonial battle-axe on the belt of the goblin's suit.

"My name is Ragnok Boneslicer of the Boneslicer Clan, and I won the right to be your vault manager two years ago."

They all took their seats.

Harry matched the goblin's grin. "Ragnok Boneslicer. May your gold flow, and your enemies fall under your blade."

She flashed her betrothed a surprised look. The Dark Lord studied goblin culture? She'd have never guessed that.

Ragnok looked mildly surprised too. "And may your enemies die in a pit of fire, and your vaults always be full…"—he grinned his toothy smile again—"something I'm hopeful will soon be true."

At this point she couldn't help herself. "Excuse me, Mister Ragnok. You said you won this account?"

Ragnok smiled at her. "In combat, young witch. With the blood of my enemies on the blade of my sword."

She shuddered.

"But that was two years ago. When the Prophet announced Lord Slytherin's ascension, it was expected you'd be at our doors in weeks. When the details of your betrothal were leaked, the clans started fighting like young'uns over a breeder. Where have you been?"

Her betrothed smiled. "I've been trying to keep a low profile for the last few years, but now that I'm about to start Hogwarts, that's no longer possible. Plus I have a large project to discuss with Gringotts."

Ragnok blinked. "About to start Hogwarts?" He sounded incredulous. "You mean… you really are as young as you look?"

"I am."

Ragnok turned to her. "And you?"

"Yes," she said. "I am Heiress Greengrass, Harry's betrothed. We're both eleven. Well, Harry is soon anyway."

He turned back to Harry. "And yet you hold a Lordship."

"I do."

Ragnok leaned back in his chair and looked thoughtful. He grinned, and leaned forward again. "I like the interesting clients."
She let out a breath she didn't realise she'd been holding.

"Let's get this cart on the tracks then. A drop of your blood if you would, Lord Slytherin."

Harry proffered his hand and Ragnok gave him a small nick with an ornate looking dagger. The blood ran down the blade, and into a small chalice on the desk. A quill started writing.

"You mentioned another project," Ragnok prompted while the quill filled out the parchment.

"Yes. A large land purchase, building, and warding project."

"Excellent, we can discuss that in a moment. Now, let's see." Ragnok took the finished parchment, and gave it a once over. His face went white. He stared at her and Harry with the air of a cat who'd been regarding a pair of mice… a pair of mice who had just turned into a pair of wolves. He wasn't smiling. "Lord Slytherin. You took your Lordship on the thirty-first of July, 1988?"

She glanced at Harry. He looked calm as always, which was reassuring. The goblin's sudden change in demeanour was a little freaky. Had Ragnok learned something he wasn't supposed to?

"I did."

"And you were born eleven years ago, on the thirty-first of July, 1980?"

"I was."

Ragnok glanced at her before looking back to Harry, and continuing. "And you have lived for almost twenty-five years?"

Her breath hitched. Oh, Merlin. They'd been caught.

Harry was silent.

Ragnok put the parchment down, leaned back in his chair, and rubbed his temples.

"Lord Slytherin. Heiress Greengrass. Let me tell you a story." He paused for a moment before continuing. "Two years ago there was a minor crisis in the Goblin nation. The great accounting we call it. For centuries, Gringotts has used a standard method in all our records for determining people's ages. Blood magic. The same method used by the family magics. It's very convenient since it can't be fooled by anyone. It allows us to know the rights and ownership of many inheritances and legacies without directly intervening with the parties involved. But most importantly, it can't be changed. Not by us, not by the Wizengamot. The higher powers themselves determine the laws of magic. All our records used a person's date-of-birth, since that's what blood magic, and therefore the family magics, uses to determine age.

She noticed the goblin looked agitated as he spoke. She tried to see where this was going.

Ragnok closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. "Then, two years ago, something happened that had never happened before. Two adult witches, sisters, one born a half-hour after the other, were to inherit a modest amount, and the will stipulated that the older sister would inherit the majority, including an old gauntlet. The gauntlet was tied to the family magics. When the older sister attempted to take possession, the gauntlet rejected her, causing her great pain. We were puzzled, and re-took blood from the two sisters. Just like we thought, the older sister had been born first. It took some of our cleverest researchers days to figure out what had happened. When we adjusted our ritual to write down not just date-of-birth, but years lived as well, we saw that the younger sister was now older."
Daphne could now see where this was going. This was not good.

"It turned out that the younger sister had once journeyed with a time-turner, and was now a half-hour older than the older sister." Ragnok opened his eyes. "This might sound like a one off, but it isn't. We've been dealing with the shifts in time of our clients for hundreds of years. It's not something we're unfamiliar with. We had to go through all our records and re-adjust them all to include a 'current-age' line. Hundreds-of-thousands of documents. We had to re-take blood from many of our major clients, and introduce new rules requiring taking blood before any age related decision is made. Somehow, something had happened to change the very laws of magic. And eventually, we determined the change had happened in the summer of 1988, in late July or early August."

Morgana's bum. She glanced at Harry again, who hadn't moved an inch the whole time.

"The same time that you, a time-traveller who has travelled further than anyone outside of myth and legend, took a lordship, which your date-of-birth should have precluded you from taking." Ragnok's knuckles were white where he gripped his desk. "You, Lord Slytherin, somehow changed the laws of magic."

Her heart pounded. Was this the moment a dozen goblin guards would pile into the room, and drag them away?

Harry opened his mouth. "I didn't."

"..."

"...

"Then what?"

"It is as you said. Only the higher powers can change the laws of magic."

Ragnok's voice softened. "One of the higher powers intervened in the world, and changed the laws of magic, to give you a lordship?"

"Two higher powers actually."

"Karzak Turlk!" Ragnok swore.

"Can we assume your discretion in this matter?"

Ragnok looked at her betrothed as though he had grown five extra heads. "Lord Slytherin. I will have to make a report to my king, but other than that I will do my best to endeavour your secrets stay secret. I always do for all my clients, and I have no interest in annoying any of the higher powers."

Oh, thank Merlin. It looked like they weren't in trouble. Dragon stomachs were not in her immediate future. Daphne's breathing slowed.

Harry wore the smile of a man who has been told today's weather will be sunny. "Excellent. Then maybe we can move onto other business? I think you'll find it quite interesting."

Ragnok remained silent for several moments. He leaned back, and barked one loud laugh. "Certainly, Lord Slytherin." The goblin flashed that toothy smile once more. "Like I said, I like the interesting ones."
Two hours later, they left the bank. The exchanges after the time-travel revelation had been all business, and the two males had been throwing around many words and phrases Daphne didn't know. The gist of it was that Harry's numbers were mostly correct, that the goblins would look for a suitable piece of land for Slytherin Manor, and they'd be staying in contact by owl while they were at Hogwarts. If everything went well, she and Harry would inspect and approve the site plans during the Christmas break. Construction would begin within weeks, and if everything went well, the manor would be finished less than a year later. Just in time for Christmas of their second Hogwarts year.

She glanced towards her betrothed. "I still can't believe we got out of there alive. I thought we were done for."

Harry grinned. "You doubted me, Daph? I'm hurt."

"Prat."

"You seemed quite happy once we got into discussing the details of the manor. I thought you were going to start picking out curtains."

Her cheeks tinted. "Well, it's important! I mean, I know it's going to be years until we're married, but this is going to be our home for the rest of our lives."

"We have a good six months to talk about the details."

"True."

"There is one thing that worried me though."

"What?"

"Remember when he mentioned our Hogwarts letters, and how they work on family magics?"

"Oh yes." Daphne recalled a short discussion about how various artefacts determined people's ages. "Ragnok called it the Book of Names, but he said it still used date-of-birth, not time-lived."

"Yes… but what name will it give me? Who will my Hogwarts letter be addressed to? What will the class registers refer to me as?"

She immediately saw the problem. "Oh, damn."

"So, to safely get into Hogwarts and confundus the Book of Names, you need to get hold of this invisibility cloak?" Daphne was sat in a Harry-conjured garden chair overlooking the Greengrass flowerbeds, where she'd first seen Harry whip out his wand, two and a-half years ago. Harry sat opposite. An afternoon breeze blew through her long, blonde hair. Birds sang in the trees.

"Yep. And the cloak is in Potter Manor."

"Mmmm…." She thought about it. Harry was testing her, she knew. He often did this. Instead of just telling her what they were going to do, he'd ask her for a plan, and then poke holes in it. She took out a quill, and started doodling on Harry-conjured parchment. Damn, he was useful. Harry went back to his book.
Eventually, she looked up from her work. "Okay. I have it."

Harry gave her a nod to continue.

"Your Weasley girl is tied to the Potter wards, right?"

"You mean Ginny? Yes, she is."

"Right. Ginny. We wait until John Potter tries to invite her over again, then you sneak into the Burrow, stun the male Weasley who's friends with John Potter, and give him draught of living death. Then you levitate him over the Burrow wards where me and Ginny will be waiting. That's so the wards record him leaving." She glanced up to see if Harry was following.

Harry nodded.

"Then, you sneak back through your secret passageway, and cast the imperius curse on Ginny. Ginny floos to Potter Manor, and you apparate me and the male Weasley to the edge of the Potter Manor wards, where you'll have already set up a small-area fidelius charm."

He nodded again.

"Then Ginny loses John and sneaks off to find the cloak. You take control of Ginny, and use magic to help the search—summoning spells, point me spells, et cetera."

He nodded again, although his eyes were starting to glaze over.

She forged ahead. "You have Ginny take a ten-minute polyjuice potion to make her look like the male Weasley, and I push the real male Weasley over the Potter wards so they record him entering the Manor. You, controlling Ginny, find the cloak, and make a break for the ward line. Ginny waits there under the cloak for the polyjuice potion to wear off, then throws the cloak to me, and I pull the male Weasley back over the ward line. Then Ginny leaves to find John, they have an argument, Ginny leaves in a huff, we take the male Weasley back to the Burrow, give him the living-death antidote, implant false memories, and Ginny spends the next week popping veritaserum antidote sweets every morning and evening."

"..."

Harry blinked owlishly at her. He leant back in his chair. "Okay, good effort. Seriously. Now you're going to tell me what's wrong with that plan."

She felt a bit sheepish. "Too complex?"

"There's nothing wrong with a complex plan, if it's also the plan with the best risk-to-probability-of-success ratio, but the more complex a plan is, the more likely it is for something to go wrong. That plan is pretty complex. What else is wrong?"

"Um... John Potter might not invite Ginny over?"

He shrugged. "That's just a matter of waiting for an opportunity. If one didn't turn up we could always make one."

"Can't really think of anything else."

"Really? You pretty much acknowledged the biggest weakness yourself, right at the end."

She looked at him, face as blank as a clean slate.
"You want Ginny to take veritaserum antidote for a week after the mission. By doing so you acknowledge the danger that Ginny could be suspected of involvement, and even questioned."

"Ah. You're saying it would be better if none of our people were seen by anyone the whole time."

"Exactly."

"But how do we get into the manor then? The wards will record all our presences. Even yours. Especially yours. Merlin, they might not even have taken down the child safety wards tied to you."

"True."

"Then how?"

"You were almost there when you suggested we use the imperius curse on Ginny."

Her eyes darted around his face, looking for a clue. "But, using the imperius curse on anyone who isn't on our side is incredibly dangerous. If anyone ever found out, it's life in Azkaban. And most people who are tied to the Potter wards will have noble house rings, so no obliviating. I know the Weasleys don't, but it's still more risk than I thought you'd be willing to take."

"Yes. So we use the imperius on someone who can never complain, who can pass straight through the wards without issue, who won't be recorded by the wards, and who it's even legal to cast the curse on."

She looked at him, puzzled. "Who?"

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Daphne lounged in Harry's trunk, reading a muggle travel book, making notes, and bracing herself for an apparate-squeeze every sixty seconds. The first time she'd climbed into his trunk, been shrunk, popped into his pocket, and chain-apparated across Europe, it had been nauseating. She'd gotten used to it. This time, she could even read while Harry flew and apparated, five miles at a time, all the way across the Atlantic.

It had been seventeen hours, and flight-Harry should be landing soon.

Daphne stood and walked over to the cooler, runes alight with pulsating magic. She found a bottle of pumpkin juice amidst the pile of orange juices.

Daphne braced for the next apparate. It didn't come. The lack of squeeze was like a landing announcement. She waited. The door at the top of the stairs opened. Birdsong of every describable variety poured into the trunk, filling the cozy interior with promises of the exotic and exciting.

"We're there!" called Harry.

Daphne climbed the stairs, stepped out of the trunk, and was engulfed by a wall of heat and wet. The air pressed down on her body, and filled her lungs with soup. A mass of organic dark-green and brown rose in front of her. Behind her, a massive river pushed and roared with the unstoppability and ferocity of a dozen nesting dragons.

"This is Brazil?"

"Yep. On the edge of one of the forests. Wha'dja think?"
"It's... bigger." The trees were massive and interwove into each other forming a solid, living cliff.

"You've no idea just how right you are," Harry said, shrinking the trunk and popping it back into his pocket. He handed her an ageing potion and they both drank. The soon-to-be first-years morphed into twenty-year-olds. Their clothes morphed with them.

Pointing themselves downriver, they trekked along the riverbank for a half-hour, and eventually found themselves at the edge of a small muggle village.

A short conversation with a bemused group of villagers sent them to another village some two hours walk down the river. They climbed over huge tree roots, cut through dense undergrowth, and, occasionally, Harry flew her over boggy mud-banks, much to her secret delight.

Eventually, tired, soaked, and high on endorphins, they stood in front of a small, dilapidated, wood-built shop. Birds sung in cages hung around the entrance. Lizards and spiders sat in boxes made from the lithe, green growth of bushes and trees. She drank in the new sights and sounds like a Gringotts prisoner might drink in the sky.

Harry's eyes gleamed when he spotted a medium sized snake in a large see through box by the door. He crouched down, and a series of hisses were exchanged between them. Eventually he stood up. "Yep, this is what we're looking for."

"You know, that wasn't any less creepy than when I first saw you do it."

Harry just grinned, took her hand, and led her into the dark interior of the shop.

A short, tanned, middle-aged man sat on a low stool in a corner smoking something foul. She wrinkled her nose.

Harry dove straight in, chatting with the man in a tongue she didn't recognise. It may as well have been parseltongue for all she was able to understand it. Harry laughed a few times. The man looked at her.

"You have very beautiful wife."

She blushed.

Harry chuckled. "Yes. She is the snowdrop of England."

Kuh. An elegant flower that opens just as the snow and ice starts melting. She blushed harder. Damn ageing potions.

Eventually, the man stood, and left the shop by the back door.

She looked towards Harry, not quite meeting his eye. "Does he have what we're looking for?"

"Sounds like it."

They waited in silence. Harry wandered around looking into cages and boxes, occasionally chatting with a snake. It was weird the way they'd all perk up when he passed by.

The man walked back in, ferrying the cutest thing she'd ever seen on his shoulder. She cooed and clapped her hands, all thoughts of embarrassing flower metaphors forgotten.

Its fur was black, its tail long, and its small face was framed with two large tuffs of white where its ears would be. The small monkey-like animal gripped the man's shirt with tiny human-like hands,
and pivoted its head with quick, sudden turns.

Her eyes shone staring at the endearing fluff-ball.

"The common marmoset," Harry said, by way of confirmation. "New world monkey species, generally grows to a maximum size of twenty to thirty centimetres in length. Very intelligent, very social. Weighs around 250 grams."

"He's adorable." Daphne made to touch the small creature, which backed off, seemingly uncertain, before leaping to her shoulder and trying to climb into the front of her shirt. "Gah!"

"She, actually. And a good thing too, or I'd have to have some serious words with it." Harry glared at the animal trying to burrow its way into her chest.

She giggled, and fed it a piece of fruit the man had offered her.

Harry handed him some muggle money. "Any idea what you're going to call her?"

She turned to regard the inquisitive animal now clutched to her shoulder, playing with her long, blonde hair. The small monkey was a gift from Harry. Not the first to be sure, but she was definitely the cutest.

The idea of having a marmoset for a pet, rather than the more traditional cat, meant something to her. A powerful statement that said, 'I'm not going to do things the traditional way. I'm free to explore and travel, and damn society's yardstick. Harry is my yardstick'.

She turned back to Harry. "How about Free-key?"

Harry's expression blanked for several seconds, before slowly spreading into a broad grin. "Perfect."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry crouched at the edge of the Potter Manor wards, under a three-by-three metre fidelius charm. His breath was calm, his clothes dark, and his eyes alert. Daphne crouched opposite. Her breath was short, her clothes muggle, and her eyes nervous. Freekey sat on her shoulder.

"You ready, Daph?"

Daphne nodded.

He raised his wand, and pointed it at Freekey. "Imperio." The strange sensation of being in two places at once flooded his mind. The imperius curse took a lot of practise, not because the spell casting was difficult, but because learning to control two entities at the same time—to see through two sets of eyes, distinguish two sets of smells, and two sets of balance—was not easy.

He, as Freekey-Harry, leapt to his human shoulder, and gave the pretty blonde a miniature thumbs up.

Daphne reached into a pocket, drew out a bright yellow potion vial, popped the top, and offered it to him. He grabbed the vial with tiny hands and drank, feeling power flood his system as the strengthening solution took hold.

He, as Human-Harry, disillusioned Freekey-Harry, and settled down on the ground, the better to focus on his monkey half. He jumped to the ground, glanced once towards Daphne, and marched
on all fours to the ward line. This was the moment of truth. He'd sensed the wards to the best of his abilities, and he was sure they didn't include a ward that could stop non-magical animals, but there was always a danger. He reached a tiny hand over the wards and tensed. Nothing. He stepped over the line, all the while waiting for the throw back. Still nothing.

A few moments later he was through. He gave a little monkey smirk.

"Did it work?"

"Yes," said Human-Harry

The grounds of Potter Manor lay before him, open and inviting. He slunk through gardens and vegetable patches, across gravel paths and patios, and eventually found a drainpipe fixed to the manor wall. Freekey was a natural climber, and the strengthening solution made it all the more easy. In just a couple of minutes of careful clambering, he was on the roof, a mirror of the background, shifting unseen across the night sky.

"Where are you now?"

"The roof, heading towards the chimney. No problems so far."

He found the red and white smoke stack, and started to climb. His tiny fingers easily found their way into the concave curves of cement between the bricks. He reached the top, tipped over the edge, and started down. He felt his tail come to rest on something.

"Damn."

"What?" Daphne was holding her breath.

"There's a grate blocking the chimney floo. Looks too small for me to fit through. I'm going to have to use the owlery."

He climbed out of the chimney, and padded over to the wall he suspected held the owlery. He peeked over the edge, and his nostrils filled with bird.

"Found it."

He shimmied down the wall and swung into the small open window to the owlery. Despite the late hour, two owls were asleep on their perches—a tawny, and a greater sooty. One owl that was definitely not yet here was a snowy. His eyes flashed hunger. There was another girl he needed to nab. One that would surely drive his brother spare.

He crept through the owlery, knowing that if the large birds-of-prey awoke—with their highly developed sight, and razor sharp talons—they'd probably be able to spot the shifting background gliding through their territory. He cringed to think of Daphne's reaction should he get Freekey injured or killed.

Harry reached the door, looked up, and inspected the handle. It was a lever, not a knob, thank Merlin. He leapt above the handle, grasped it with both hands, planted his little feet above him, and pushed down, forcing the door open with a faint *click*.

The owls didn't stir.

He jumped down, leapt through the gap, and closed the door just enough to eliminate the gap.
"I'm in."

Daphne took in a deep calming lungful before letting it out again.

The corridors of Potter Manor were wide and dark. There were many doors. He tried nearly ten, all leading to empty or otherwise boring rooms. Then, he opened one that led into a storage room. Boxes were everywhere. He spied a thin, wooden box buried under several larger boxes, and his little monkey eyes widened in glee. There, on the side of the box, was a triangle, containing a circle, with a line through the middle.

"Found it."

Daphne sat a little straighter. "You have it?"

"Not quite, it's under a few heavy boxes, but I think…"

He wedged himself between the boxes and the wall and pushed with all his potion-improved power. The strengthening solution increased his strength by several times—a quirk of his tiny size—but Freekey was still a small primate, and it was tough. The boxes tittered. The boxes fell. A solid thump vibrated through the walls. Hopefully the size of the manor would stop that being heard. Bedrooms were often silenced from the rest of the house for obvious reasons.

"Got it. It's in a box."

The box was locked and warded. He had no chance of opening it with a body that lacked magic of its own. Gripping the sides of the box, he dragged it across the floor, through the door, and across the manor. He reached the door of the owlery before he realised he had a problem.

"Damn it."

"What?"

"Even with the potion, I won't have the strength to pull the box up to the owlery window."

"Can't you open the box?"

"No. Not without magic. It has wards, and I don't have the strength to break… no… wait. Yes! Great idea, Daph!"

"Wha?"

"One moment."

He dragged the box to the ballroom landing, overlooking the Potter Manor ballroom… from three stories up.

"Here goes nothing."

He tipped the box on its side, pushed it through a banister, and watched it hit the marble ballroom-floor with a loud crash. Splinters went everywhere and a cloak of liquid cloth spilled out. He tore down the spiral staircase, dashed for the cloak, and threw it over his small body, just as a pair of house elves popped into being only a few metres from where he stood, hidden, even from the gaze of death himself. The elves stared at the wreckage, and started a rapid and heated discussion. He edged away, and made a bolt for the stairs.

"Damn. That was close. I have the cloak, but was almost rumbled by a pair of house elves."
Daphne gasped.

"Get ready to leave. The area's going to get hot."

He jogged and hopped, trying to keep the oversized cloak from tangling around his miniature form. The Potter patriarch ran past in a bathrobe, heading down the hallway he was heading up. Oh how he wished he could land an unseen stinging hex.

"Homenum revelio!"

Smirk. Hah. Not this time, dickhead.

He dashed through the owlery, leapt the window, and swung down the outside of the building. Lights were coming on throughout the manor. Shouts could be heard.

He fled across the grounds, and reached the outside of the manor wards. Daphne was already half way into his trunk. He leapt to her shoulder, flung the cloak to his human self, and cancelled the imperius curse on Freekey.

"Let's move it!"

Daphne gave a sharp nod, Freekey gave a chirp, and both girl and monkey vanished into the trunk.

He slammed the trunk shut, shrunk it, shoved it into his pocket, set the fidelius runestones to self-destruct in ninety seconds, donned the cloak, crouched to the ground, and shot into the sky, accelerating from zero to sixty miles-an-hour in seconds, reached a mile up, and disapparated. The resulting *crack!* could not have sounded more satisfying.

— End of Chapter Nine —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: All prices in this fic have been normalised to 1991 values. To get the equivalent prices today, multiply by two. To get the equivalent prices in USD today, multiply by three.

A/N: Thank you to Joe Lawyer for pointing out the very obvious bolt hole contingency. This is something Harry would no doubt do because it is low cost, low risk, and provides a valuable fallback if the dragon dung hits the fan. Plus, Daphne no doubt enjoyed traipsing all over the place.
Harry stood on the Greengrass Manor lawn, wearing only swimming shorts and sandals. The sun warmed his pale skin. A slight breeze ruffled his messy hair.

"Soak me, Harry!"

He whipped his wand in the direction of the voice. "Aguamenti." A jet of water shot from the end of his wand. It hit something, vanished, and reappeared a foot away.

"Gah!"

He stopped the charm and regarded the unseen obstruction. He still couldn't see anything.

"It went straight through the cloak, curved along the insides, and shot out the back of it!"

Harry picked up a clipboard and walked towards the voice.

Daphne appeared, slightly moist, and dressed in full rain gear. Earlier, he'd suggested she also wear a swimsuit. She'd panicked and threatened to sting-hex him if he so much as transfigured her hat.

"It felt like I was in a cave made of flowing water."

Harry unclipped a muggle pen from his waistband and made a note on the clipboard. "So, it hides against water too. Although, if you know what you're looking for it is still possible to spot you, but only while the spell is being cast."

Daphne folded the liquid-like cloak. "That's four things it protects from so far — sight, chalk, water, and homenum revelio. Now at least, anyway. I still don't understand why anyone would charm the cloak to be vulnerable to homenum revelio. It's their own cloak isn't it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. The charm's been removed now." Harry looked down at the clipboard. "But the cloak doesn't stop you being heard, nor smelt, and calor revelio still picks up a heat signature. I'm glad so few people know that spell."

Daphne snapped her fingers. "It's about going in versus going out."

Harry smiled. "Continue."

"Well, light bounces off things right? That's how we see. The water came from the outside, so did the chalk, and the homenum revelio feels like a wave going over you if you're hit. I didn't feel anything under the cloak."

Harry scribbled on the clipboard.

"Sound is vibrations, but it radiates out from you. So does smell. So does heat."

Harry grinned. "Sounds like you're on to something. Although it doesn't explain how you can still see while wearing the cloak. Chalk that up to magic, I guess. What would this mean if it were true?"
Daphne hesitated. "That… that other things coming from the outside might also not work on the cloak?"

Harry dropped the clipboard, took the cloak from her unresisting hands, and whipped it around himself, vanishing from sight. "Stun me."

"W-what?"

"Duelling practise time, Daphne. Stun me."

The adventurous blonde stared, shrugged, closed her eyes, and raised her hand in his direction. Red lights appeared on the tips of all five digits. A bolt of red shot towards him. Harry watched in fascination as the bolt hit the cloak, passed through it, hugged and curved along the inside, and hit his shoulder. Darkness.

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"Harry. Harry!" Daphne's voice called to him from the fog of nothing.

"Ugh." He sat up on the grass.

Daphne was peering at him from a half foot away.

"Guess that didn't work then." He smiled sheepishly.

"What happened? I saw the bolt disappear. It didn't flash when it hit you."

"It passed along the inside of the cloak like you described the water did, but it happened to hit my shoulder. I'm guessing you've got a one in three chance of dodging a spell that hits you under this thing."

Daphne raised her eyebrows and bit her lower lip. "That's pretty cool, but it would have been even cooler if it made you immune to enemy spells."

He pointed a finger. "That would be a total game changer." He stood. "It's still pretty good though. Better than a demiguise cloak. Much better than a disillusionment charm."

Daphne frowned. "Still doesn't get us into warded areas."

He winced. Their one experiment at ward breaking with the cloak had been painful. They'd keyed him out of the Greengrass wards, and he'd tried to enter. It had gotten him past the perimeter wards, but the moment he'd fully entered the area-wards he'd been forcefully and painfully ejected. "If the cloak could get us through wards, that would be game over. But at least we now know what it can do."

He stretched his arms. "You ready for a super secret Hogwarts scouting mission?"

Daphne's eyes gleamed. "I am so ready for that."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Under the invisibility cloak, Harry flew. He weaved his way through the trees of the forbidden
forest, dark and foreboding. Cobwebs lined the branches. Sharp brambles and bushes littered the ground. Things made strange sounds in all directions. Water dripped from a recently passed storm. Fresh earth and decomposing wood filled his nostrils.

He touched down by the humming ward lines of Hogwarts Castle, pulled out his trunk, disillusioned it, un-shrunk it, and opened the lid.

"Ward stone A," he whispered.

A dainty hand appeared holding a rune-covered, ruler-sized wardstone.

He took it and started installing it a few metres away. A minute ticked by. "Ward stone B."

The hand appeared again.

Four minutes later, he'd set up five ward stones to make a three-by-three metre square. The final stone was in the centre for the key-stone. He closed the trunk again, shrunk it, and popped it back in his pocket. He sat down, under the cloak, and started the occlumency meditation. Twenty minutes ticked by. Harry stood up and touched his wand to the key-stone. He murmured, "fidelius occultum." He felt the fidelius charm catch.

A minute later the trunk was open again. A blonde head popped out, looking around like a meerkat from a burrow. She looked extremely confused. "Where are we? I don't understand."

"We are in the three-by-three metre space just outside the Hogwarts wards, between the large split oak, and the twenty-second dead birch west of the lake."

Daphne blinked.

"Merlin, that felt weird." Her brow furrowed. "So, where's the castle? Why are we in a forest?"

"We can't actually see the castle from here, and anywhere we could carries a higher chance of being spotted before we got the fidelius set up."

Daphne pouted. "That's no fun."

"Yeah, well." He rubbed the back of his head. "How about getting over here, and telling me what you can feel coming from these things?"

Daphne clambered from the trunk and joined him at the edge of the ward line. She closed her eyes, raised her head, and took a deep breath. "I can feel it."

"Good. What can you feel?"

The blonde shifted and tilted her head, as though trying to hear something very faint. "Not much. I can just feel it. I know it's there."

"Okay. Draw your wand. Be very careful not to cast anything."

Daphne drew her brand-new, thirteen-inch Hazel and unicorn hair wand, and held it, tight and uncertain.

He took her wand hand in his and guided her towards the wards. "There," he said. "Feel the magic pooling in your hand from the wand. Can you feel it?"

Daphne's breath hitched. "I can feel it. So many feelings. It's like eating a whole bag of bertie bott's
every flavour beans."

He nodded. "You see now why wizards are so fond of their wands, and become reliant on them?"

Daphne gave a small nod. "Is there anything different from what he remembered?"

"No. The wards are as pathetic as ever. You feel the strawberry one?"

Daphne scrunched up her face. "Strawberry? I don't see what—wait. Yes! I feel it. Wow, it really
does feel like strawberry. How does that work?"

"It's called synaesthesia. It's a weird thing our brains can do. It allows us to perceive the sensations
of one sense as those of another. In this case, our magic sense has a 'taste.'"

"That's so weird."

"Yeah. And the strawberry one is the one that detects dark magic. Only, it's supposed to be
raspberry."

"And the detection wards?"

"I'm going to see about them now." He stepped forward, raised his wand to the wards, and closed
his eyes. Flavours flooded his mind. He picked them apart until he felt a taste that was
overwhelmingly sweet. The detection ward. He focused on it and was surprised when it unravelled
in his head, laying itself out to him like a sweets only buffet. Chocolate, cake, carrot, and blueberry
were just a few of the tastes he could sense. He counted sixteen tastes in total. "Wow."

"What? What?" She sounded impatient.

"I can feel them. All the people in the castle. The wards let me through their security system. They
never let Voldemort do that."

"Because you're Lord Slytherin?"

"That can be the only reason. Huh. That'll make this a lot safer." He thought for a moment. With
this, he'd be able to enter the castle, and erase his presence. For anyone who relied on the wards, it
would be as though he were never even there. He smiled. "Well, that's all we needed. Let's get
going—." He turned, and froze. His voice turned to steel. "Daphne! Don't move!"

Daphne froze, still facing the wards.

There, milling around their square ward perimeter, silent as a shadow, and as large as muggle cars,
were three confused-looking giant spiders. Visions of a pet spider kept in a box shot through his
head. A spider racing away from Tom Riddle's wand.

He readied his own wand. One of the quirks of the fidelius charm was that shooting anything out
of it, in visual range of someone who didn't know the secret, counted as revealing the secret. If he
cast a spell against them, they'd be able to see them both. Daphne wouldn't even be capable of
casting a spell, not being the secret keeper. Not that she was powerful enough to kill one of these
buggers yet.

The acromantula clicked their mandibles at his sudden outburst. They'd heard his conversation
with Daphne. They needed to be memory wiped. Or killed.

"Daphne, whatever you do…Do. Not. Leave the wards." He leapt out of the perimeter and
immediately hit one of the spiders with an over powered cutting curse. Ichor sprayed everywhere. He heard Daphne scream behind him.

The other two spiders whirled around and closed on him with supernatural speed.

The first crashed down from another cutting curse to the face, exploding spider brains all over the clearing. The last pounced, venomous pincers stabbing the ground where he'd been only a moment before. He flew backwards, cloak whirling in front of him. He took aim, and cast.

The final spider exploded in a shower of spider bits. Decorating the clearing with a fine shine of gore.

He flew back to the wards where Daphne still stood, wide-eyed, shocked, and shaking. The smell was visceral.

"You okay?"

"Y-y-yes I… I'm okay. I just." Her knees gave out. She collapsed to the ground."

"C'mon, let's get out of here. There's a change of robes in the trunk."

Daphne nodded, took his proffered hand, still shaking, and climbed back into the trunk. She took every step as though her legs would betray her again.

He looked around the gore-filled clearing, and sighed. They needed to evacuate fast. Who knew how many others were around? There was no time to recover the ward stones as he'd have liked to. They'd have to be destroyed instead. It seemed he was getting through miniature ward stones almost as fast as ageing potions these days.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Daphne suffered nightmares for weeks. Most featured giant spiders eating Harry whole, while she looked on, helpless, before they exploded in a sea of spider guts. Then she'd wake up, sweating and shuddering. Thankfully, she hadn't had one for five days now, so she probably wouldn't have to ask Harry for help. That would be embarrassing. She already owed him far too much.

Today was the twenty-first of June, the summer solstice, the first mandatory Wizengamot of the year, and the day they'd decided to solve their Book of Names problem. By breaking into the office of the most powerful wizard in the world.

"You ready, Daph?"

She stood by the Greengrass Manor sitting-room floo, wearing her brand-new, emerald-green, formal Wizengamot robes. The highlights were silver. Harry was dressed in new Hogwarts open-robes and muggle clothes. She fingered the silver, lightning-bolt ring on her right pinky.

She nodded. Her hands were sweating. "Get in. Alert you when Dumbledore starts the session. Warn you if he leaves."

Harry smiled. "That's about it." He took a deep breath. "Right, I'm off then." He turned to leave.

"Wait."

The boy she was to marry one day turned back to her.

She hesitated, then hugged him. Despite their close relationship, she'd never felt comfortable
enough before. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him close.

Harry also hesitated, but then relaxed and returned her hug.

"Don't get caught, Harry."

"...I won't."

"Promise me."

"I promise. Focus on your task, and I'll focus on mine. Together, we'll pull it off."

Her parents entered the room, both wearing full Wizengamot regalia, and highly amused smiles. She broke the hug, cheeks tinting.

Harry grinned.

"You ready, young lady?" asked her father.

"Yes, Dad."

"Good." They joined the two pre-teens by the floo.

"Now remember, you are a guest. Best behaviour."

"Yes, Dad."

Her father looked Harry up and down, taking in his Hogwarts open-robes and muggle clothes. He smirked. "Don't study too hard, Harry."

Harry returned the smirk. "Wouldn't dream of it, Jacob. That would just be confunding."

Despite her worry, she groaned. Her mother rolled her eyes. She turned and marched into the floo. "Ministry of Magic Atrium!"

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

A half-hour later, Harry hovered a foot above the still waters of the Hogwarts Black Lake. The invisibility cloak billowed in the Scottish highland wind. He was sure it would have looked cool if anyone could have seen it.

That was unlikely.

He was both disillusioned and under the invisibility cloak. He'd silenced himself, and had been practising wordless and wandless tergeo spell casting for weeks. He could now vacuum up all his dead skin-cells and hairs while running. That sorted out the smell problem. It wouldn't be good if a trained animal, animagus, or werewolf could identify him. It did take all his concentration to pull off that trick though.

The wards welcomed him with open arms, overwhelming his senses. His occlumency departmentalised the sensations. He pushed his hand through the wards, and noted a new taste added to the detection ward. His own. His identifier tasted of oranges. He smiled wryly.

A few moments later, his taste was deleted from the detection ward. He nodded, satisfied. Now he just had to wait.
Daphne stuck to her mother's side while they made their way through the packed throng of lawmakers in the corridor outside the main Wizengamot room. As the betrothed of the mysterious Lord Slytherin, she was getting a lot of attention.

"Ah! Lady Greengrass!" a voice called.

Her mother turned.

Daphne saw an older, shorter wizard, with a full gray beard.

"Lord Ogden. A pleasure to see you again." Her mother motioned to her. "Have you met my oldest daughter, Daphne?"

She remembered Lord Ogden from her lessons. He was Gray, and likely the sixth richest person in Magical Britain.

Lord Ogden smiled all the way to his eyes. "No, I don't believe I've had the pleasure, although I know I've seen her at the edges of your parties, Lady Greengrass. But, of course we all know about you, Miss Greengrass. Betrothed to our favourite masked Lord, aren't you. Any idea when he'll finally grant our august body an audience?" His eyes danced with mirth.

"I couldn't possibly speak for Lord Slytherin, my lord."

His deep laugh rang out across the hallway. "Of course not." He turned back to her mother, and lowered his voice. "So, what do you think of this new legislation?"

Her mother sighed. "This is just a re-run of what they tried to push two years ago. And I don't think our position should be any different to what it was then."

"I quite agree."

A gong sounded and the double doors to the chamber opened.

"Oops, that sounds like our cue."

They all walked into the chamber and Daphne broke off from her mother to climb the stairs to the visitor gallery.

Half way up, she caught sight of someone she definitely didn't want to see. Lord Slughorn was busy talking to a group of wizards whom she thought belonged to the Light. Before the spiders, that man had been the subject of most of her occasional nightmares.

He spotted and leered at her.

Daphne shuddered. She continued to climb as fast as she could while maintaining her dignity. Lord Slughorn was a key-stone of the Gray. She knew they had to deal politely with the man, but that didn't mean she had any interest of being within a hundred miles of him.

She was sure the man secretly wanted to pry her away from Harry. It had only been some fast political tap-dancing that had stopped him jumping ship from the Gray when her betrothal had gone through. She was sure it had been him that had leaked their betrothal to the Prophet.

Daphne found a seat and sat down. The other seats were filling up fast. No one wanted the semi-annual mandatory Wizengamot session to go on any longer than it had to. There were too many
magical rituals and ceremonies that required the solstice.

The grand warlock entered the chamber, and briefly caught her eye. She braced for a legilimency probe, but it never came. Harry’s memories had shown the headmaster was quite liberal with his legilimency, but Harry also suspected the old wizard only used it on muggleborns and half-bloods from newer families. Those he thought couldn't defend themselves. Seems Harry was right.

Dumbledore stood at his podium and banged his gavel three times.

"Good morning Lords and Ladies, wizards and witches, of the Wizengamot, and welcome to the 1473rd summer solstice since the establishment of the Albion family magics…"

Daphne pushed a minute amount of magic into her lightning-bolt ring. It made a single vibration.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry felt the vibration in his lightning-bolt ring. It was time. He pushed forward, past the lake, across the grounds, up the side of the ancient castle wall, and onto the top of the astronomy tower.

Safest place in Britain. Yeah right. Any random group of broomstick-riding wizards could get in this way.

He tap-danced down the stairs. He glided along the corridors. He flew past the grand staircase. The massive castle was dead to the world. Not a ghost, not a teacher, not a house-elf.

Harry reached the stone gargoyle. He felt for the magic in the stone creature, felt himself welcomed into its control system, felt the shift.

The gargoyle stood up and moved aside, leaving the spiral staircase open to him. That was a relief. He hadn't been sure that would work. Not having to break in through the window was definitely a good thing.

He opened the door, trod on the humorous welcome mat, and scanned the room for his goal.

One painting frowned at the open door; another looked confused.

He spied the book sitting on a raised pedestal, next to the sorting hat. Excellent.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Headmaster Dumbledore listened to the assembled aristocracy of the wizarding world bicker and snipe at each other. Not much was likely to happen. Not much had happened for a while. A few years ago, it had looked like the Neutrals were set to collapse. That would have been… volatile. But it hadn't happened. A new player had shown up, with a new ideology, and new energy. The neutrals now called themselves the Gray, and were blocking almost every law the Light or Dark put forward. Stability seemed to be their watchword.

Rumours ran rampant about Lord Slytherin. He'd heard stories of the man. Rumours of a powerful charismatic wizard in an emerald green mask. Rumours of expensive gifts, lavish parties, and stirring speeches. The methods were uncomfortably familiar.

But, despite his first words to Magical Britain, Slytherin had seemed content to let things be. He hadn't interfered at Hogwarts, hadn't tried to recruit students to his cause, and hadn't pushed many laws of his own.
He had a feeling that was about to change. The man's eleven-year-old betrothed was watching him from the visitor gallery. Her gaze was more intense than an auror interrogation. She would be joining Hogwarts this year. So would Harry Potter. It made him uncomfortable.

Most of his contingencies for the boy depended on his being an outcast of both the Light and the Dark. If the Gray took him in…. Would Lord Slytherin appreciate the risks the boy posed, even if he explained? He didn't know. The man still refused all contact with him. Slytherin was harder to pin down than fog.

He jerked. He felt his moon-shaped spectacles heat up, saw them flash a warning onto the lenses. Someone had entered his office, alone. Someone who wasn't on his personal okay list. But how? The security systems shouldn't let anyone in who wasn't okay'd. Even Minerva couldn't give permission without his clearance. Who could possibly— his eyes widened and flickered to the ice-blue stare of Miss Greengrass.

_Slytherin_ could possibly.

And he was trapped here. He didn't even dare patronus Minerva. Not in the middle of a full Wizengamot session.

Merlin damn it!

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry fired a point blank killing curse at a sleeping Fawkes who gave a loud Cawwww, burst into flames, and fell to the floor in a pile of ashes. He conjured three boxes, scooped the ash into one, the newly moulted phoenix chick into the second, and the sorting hat into the third.

He pocketed the ashes. The hat and phoenix chick boxes should be left here. As much as how utterly broken phoenixes were, there was no point swiping him. Phoenixes were extremely loyal. If he wanted one, he'd have to find his own.

He glided to the paintings, and turned them all to face the wall. They weren't happy about this, but what did he care.

That should take care of anything in the room that might tattle on him. Now time for the main event.

Harry opened the Book of Names, and turned to the latest year —1991. There he was — Lord Harry James Potter Slytherin — Current Residence: The master bedroom, Apartment 3, 63 Loather Street, Penrith, Cumbria. The private apartment he rented near Greengrass Manor.

He focused his magic and weaved enchantments. The name faded, replaced with another. Harry James Potter — Current Residence: The Cupboard Under the Stairs, 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey. Harry smirked. Seeing the look on his aunt and uncle's faces when he turned up for a night would be priceless.

He closed the book and turned to the rest of the office. What else could he do while he was here?

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Daphne could see the grand warlock was agitated. He showed all the signs. Excessive beard tugging, beard stroking, beard fiddling, beard curling, the lot. Not only that, but he kept shooting glances at her. Did he know? Did he suspect?
The Lord who'd been droning on finished his piece and sat down.

Before the next person could stand up, the Headmaster jumped in.

"Thank you, Lord Nott. We'll now take a twenty minute unscheduled break. That is all."

Daphne felt a rock fall into her stomach. She quickly pushed three successive bursts of magic into her lightning-bolt ring.

Dumbledore all but ran out of the chamber.

The assorted wizards and witches murmured, surprised and confused by the grand warlock's sudden exit. They all heard Dumbledore shouting for his phoenix all the way down the corridor.

Please, Harry. Get out of there.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry felt three vibrations on his lightning-bolt ring. He cursed.

The pensieve had been so tempting. He could watch some important memories and give Dumbledore a perfect red-herring reason for a break-in. It was only when he'd entered that he'd spotted the obvious drawback. You couldn't leave in a hurry.

He watched, frustrated, as a younger Trelawney fumbled her way through an interview. She stiffened and spoke the fateful words that condemned him to a life that could never be normal. He knew all this already of course. Voldemort had learned the contents of the prophecy, which is why he'd been happily left in Azkaban. But he'd never seen the original. As far as he knew, only Dumbledore had.

The foggy room faded. He felt himself yanked out of the pensieve, and thrown back into the headmaster's office.

Harry didn't bother to look around. He cast a room-wide, overpowered tergeo cleaning charm, and lunged for the door.

The floo flared green.

His heart stopped. He flung open the door.

The headmaster stepped out.

His heart pounded. He leapt though the opening.

A bolt of red slammed into the door behind him.

The stairs were before him. He jumped down them, three at a time, not trusting himself to fly, lest he crash into the curved wall. The gargoyle blocked his escape. The security system dialled him in, and activated, but it cost him precious seconds. Another bolt of red smashed into where he'd been only a split second before.

How the hell?

He ran into the hallway, careful to keep removing his scent as he went.

Halfway down the passageway, his pursuer stepped out.
The suits of armour immediately tried to grab him.

He dodged.

A terrible realisation settled over him, seeping into his veins, freezing his blood. Somehow, the headmaster could detect him. He knew where he was.

Shit. Now he dare not fly at all.

"Come now, Lord Slytherin," a genial voice called from behind him, "is all this necessary?"

He continued running. The voice also continued, never seeming to get further away.

"I mean, we all want the same things, I'm sure."

He bolted onto the grand staircase and took the first staircase available.

"And there is so much good we could do if we put aside our small differences."

_How the hell_ was the bastard _following_ him? He made to jump through the first window he could see. The shutters slammed shut.

"Is all this cloak and dagger nonsense really needed?"

He was being shepherded away from the towers. He needed to get off the path that led to the dungeons. He'd be trapped there. He dived through the next tapestry.

"You want stability in the wizarding world, that much is obvious."

He screeched to a halt. The voice was in front of him.

"Don't you think it would make more sense to work together with those who share your ambitions?"

He shot out a wordless homenum revelio. Dumbledore was still behind him.

"It's called ventriloquism, Lord Slytherin. Can be very amusing at dull parties."

He wanted to brain himself on the wall. The old man could sense magic! Just like he could. Duh! No wonder the bastard could follow him. He'd been casting cleaning charms every half-dozen steps. He might as well have been sending out a beacon announcing himself.

"Ah, I see you've decided to be reasonable."

He ran.

A sigh. "Or not."

He couldn't stop using the cleaning charms. That would be brain-dead stupid. But he had to get away. He arrived at the steep-climb staircase to the astronomy tower.

Two statues lowered their lances, baring his path. He wordlessly blasted them apart. Several powerful spells splashed against his rear shields.

"There are forces at work in the world, Lord Slytherin. Forces that could end up destroying the world you obviously care for."
You mean *me*. Harry forced down the impulse to swear at the fucker as he passed the fourth floor landing.

"And there are old threats too, threats considered past that could once more raise their ugly heads."

He reached the top of the tower and made for the edge.

"And your betrothed will be entering Hogwarts this year. There are many dangers she might face. Wouldn't it be better to work together?"

Harry stopped dead on the edge of the tower. All the time he'd spent with the full-of-life witch flashed through his head. He saw red. How dare he? How DARE he? He normally kept his magic under tight control. Now, it flared, overwhelming the area with pure power. He turned.

The disillusioned figure of the headmaster shimmered into being by the door. Dumbledore sighed; his shoulders drooped. "That wasn't supposed to be a threat, Lord Slytherin."

Barely controlling his rage, Harry reached into his pocket, retrieved his tiny flying-with-Ginny-broomstick, and un-shrunk it. The broom seemed to hang in the air.

Dumbledore took a step forward, holding out both empty hands in a gesture of peace. "I don't know why you distrust me so. I mean you no ill will. I hope one day, we *can* work together."

Harry leaned back, and dropped.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Albus Dumbledore slumped into his high-back chair and rubbed his temples.

After his unscheduled break had ended, the Wizengamot session had gone on for far too long. He'd only just got back, and discovered the extent of Lord Slytherin's machinations.

Lord Slytherin knew the prophecy. He was only the second to know it in its entirety. It was now even more critical that he find a way to bring the powerful Lord to his side.

He looked around his office. There wasn't a speck of dust anywhere. The man was thorough — he'd give him that. He couldn't think of a single way to pin the break-in on him. No fingerprints, no smells, no memories. The only thing he had was the lack of an identification ward record. He doubted Amelia Bones would accept a proof-by-lack-of-proof argument.

The man had walked in like he owned the place, done what he wanted, and who knew what else. Then left.

He reached into a drawer, and withdrew a stack of parchments. Each one was as dust-free as the rest of his office. He flipped through them. Giant dog, chess set, flying keys… all useless now. All compromised.

He sighed.

Add to that, there was a powerful wizard running around who could breeze through Hogwarts security, and he was faced with little choice.

The protections surrounding the stone would have to be re-thought and beefed up. Beefed up, a lot.

— End of Chapter Ten —
A/N: The next one or two chapters are the season finale, and the end of book one. Not sure if it will be in two parts yet. Season two—and book two—will probably start several months from now. *Waits for booing to ease off*. Yes, yes — I know — you want more now. If I could make a living writing fan fiction then I so totally would. But that isn't happening. I need to work on original projects too.

I also think it's better to concentrate chapter releases into a season rather than give you infrequent, unpredictable updates.

A/N: Comment: You should update your summary to include Luna and Alexandra in the official pairing.

Answer: Unfortunately, [Fanfiction * net] only allows a maximum of four people in a pairing (how unreasonable). Besides, I think Alex would kick me in the nuts.
Harry stretched his tense muscles out in the unkempt grass and chewed on a dandelion stem. The weeks following the Book of Names mission had driven him to distraction. John would wake in just a few days time, and he'd gone over things in his mind so often he was having trouble sleeping.

The crisp midnight air ruffled his hair. He shook himself and settled down to watch the entertainment.

In the middle of their secret training spot, illuminated by the light of bluebell flames, red hair faced off against dirty blonde. One intense, determined, and focused, the other relaxed, casual, and dreamy.

He spat out the dandelion. "Begin!"

Four hands rose, one alight with pure white light, three alight with red.

Ginny leapt to the side, sending two stunners hurtling towards Luna, who danced away from one and let her shield absorb the other. Luna's stunner sailed towards Ginny. It passed over the red head's shoulder, and she landed on the ground.

Ginny rolled. She fired off another pair of stunners in quick succession.

Luna's shield absorbed the second stunner, but shattered on the third. She twirled. Both her hands lit up red, then pearl white, then red again.

Harry watched Ginny dodge and shield against the barrage of stunners and stingers. Her movements were close and sharp. Her eyes burned.

The two witches edged towards each other. The dodges became closer, the misses nearer, neither willing to back off.

Luna lunged. Two shields appeared from her hands, leaving her no attack.

Ginny's eyes widened at the sudden advance.

Harry's eyes narrowed.

Ginny poured stinging hexes into the shields as the blonde drew closer.

The shields held, power constantly flowing into them. Luna stood right in front of Ginny, full-shield versus full-assault, neither gaining ground on the other.

Then Luna shouted, "Stu-Pi-"—Her mouth glowed red—"-Fy!" A tiny, red light shot from the tip of her tongue, straight into Ginny's stomach.

The redhead blanked. Then collapsed into the soft grass.

Harry blinked.

He blinked again.
"Luna. Did you just fire a stunner from your tongue?"

"Yesh, Hawwy," Luna said, holding her tongue with her fingers.

He stood up and walked towards Ginny. "That's just... wow. How did you think to do that?"

"It's long and pointy, Harry. You said that's why we use our fingers. I bet boys can cast from their special boy parts too."

He coughed and lowered his wand from where he'd been about to enervate Ginny. "I wasn't planning on going into battle naked."

"Oh, Poo."

He shook his head, and turned back towards Ginny. Sometimes Luna freaked him out with how disturbingly adult her thinking could be.

"Enervate."

Ginny stirred and pushed herself into a sitting position. "What happened?"

"Luna got you with a stunner that she shot from her mouth."

Ginny's jaw dropped. "Wha—?"

"Yeah, I know." He looked back to Luna who was demonstrating by holding her tongue with her fingers, and pointing to it while making 'Ahhhh' noises. "I'd really like to know how that mind works."

"I just want to beat her. Just once!" Ginny pouted.

Harry shook his head. Despite coming close many times, Luna always managed to stay just one step ahead of Ginny. "Well, you'll have a whole year to practise against her. If anything else, you two are going to rock your duelling bracket when you get to Hogwarts."

Luna had wandered off, and was now busy plucking grasses and tying them together.

He turned back towards the fidgeting redhead. "You sure you don't want back-up when John awakens?"

Ginny stiffened. She held her head high. "I already said. I need to do this by myself. I can handle it. And we've been training for it for ages now."

"He's still going to be five years older than you."

"I don't care, I need to do this, Harry." Her chocolate eyes looked straight into his, as though daring him to push his opinion.

He sighed. He'd suggested Ginny start wearing the mind-backdoor necklace again so he could take control if the shit hit the fan, but she'd refused. She'd said if she couldn't handle things herself then what use was she. She'd said she didn't want to be a helpless little girl who always needed protecting.

He'd pointed out that it was merely a fail-safe, a measure of last resort, only to be used if she really couldn't handle something that happened. Ginny was having none of it.
"Okay, I was just making sure you really were sure. You remember the emergency signal for your ring?"

She nodded, and recited their prearranged signal.

He nodded back. "Just make sure to contact me the moment you feel you're out of your depth."

She let out an exasperated breath. "Of course. You don't need to be so worried, you know. What can he do? He can't even use his wand yet."

He closed his eyes and tried to keep the frustration from his voice. "We don't know what he'll do, that's the problem. He's going to wake-up into a situation that is totally different to what he remembers. He's just been killed, then brought before two deities, then resurrected, and his girlfriend now wants nothing to do with him. People do stupid things in high emotion situations."

"I can stun, sting, shield, and summon, all wandlessly. He can't. If he tries anything, I'll just stun him."

He looked at the girl in front of him, all righteous passion and fiery indignation.

He took a deep breath, and looked into her eyes. He tried to make his voice as soft as he could. "Just be careful, okay."

She relaxed a little. "Yes, Harry."

"Look!"

They both turned to the voice. Luna twirled around. A grass necklace rested on her neck. A grass crown adorned her hair.

"I'm fully green grassed!" She smiled a dreamy smile.

Ginny's mouth opened, but no words came out.

His eyes glassed over. "On second thoughts, maybe it's better not to know what goes on in there."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

It was morning. Harry appeared on the corner of Privet Drive and Magnolia Crescent. He wore well-made and well-fitted muggle clothes — jeans and t-shirt. Regular exercise, along with good diet and potions, had fixed most of the effects of seven years of malnutrition. He was now taller than average for a one-day-away-from-eleven-year-old.

He strolled up to number four and rang the doorbell.

He waited.

The door opened. It was Aunt Petunia, just how he remembered her from fourteen years ago.

"You!" she screamed and tried to slam the door.

Harry stuck his booted foot in the crack. "Ah ahh, Aunty. Not so fast."

She got ahold of her voice. "What are you doing back here?" she hissed.

He smiled the smile of an utter bastard. "I have a business proposition to discuss with you and
"Uncle."

"Business…? What does a little freak like you have that could interest us?"

"Maybe I should come in and we can talk about it, rather than right here on your doorstep where I'm sure all the neighbours will be very interested."

Petunia looked like she was swallowing a lemon, but did open the door and allow him in. "Where did you run away too? Do you have any idea how freaked—how…troubled we were when you disappeared?"

"Yes," Harry drawled. "I've no doubt you were sweating buckets about what would happen if the freaks who left me with you realised you'd lost me."

"That's not—"

"As far as where I've been. I think it's best that remains unknown for the moment. Oh, hello, Uncle."

Uncle Vernon rose from where he'd been sitting at the kitchen table. His face was rapidly turning red. His little piggy eyes bulged. Dudley wasn't anywhere to be seen. "Boy! You dare to show your miserable little face here? Do you have any idea what you put your Aunt and I through?" he yelled.

"I can imagine Uncle, which is why I'd like to give you a lot of money in compensation."

"You think we need anything…from…what do you mean?" His voice had turned from furious to just angry and curious.

"Well, you're always going on about what a burden I am, and how I'm ungrateful, so I thought I should do my bit to chip into the family coffers, so to speak. After all, you've been feeding and housing me for the last ten years. It's only right."

"What are you talking about, boy? You haven't lived here for—"

Harry opened his bag and slapped a large pile of taped twenty-pound notes onto the table.

Vernon's piggy little eyes widened even further. He reached for the pile and thumbed through it. "Fifteen-thousand, Uncle." Harry reached into the bag again and slapped another pile down. "And another fifteen-thousand over the next seven years, or until I reach my majority as recognised by my fellow freaks, whichever comes first."

Vernon's face twisted into a greedy smile.

Harry summoned the first pile back from his uncle's hand.

Petunia gasped.

"But," he continued, "only if I've lived here for the last ten years."

Vernon's face turned red again, presumably torn between ranting about freakishness, and wanting to keep the money on the table. Eventually he calmed, sat down, and regarded Harry as though for the first time. "So, Boy. You want us to pretend you haven't been anywhere. Is that it?"

"That's it, Uncle. I'll also need to sleep here occasionally. But probably not too often."
"And where exactly is this money coming from? Freaks like you don't have well paying jobs."

Harry looked between his uncle and aunt, slightly perplexed. "Aunt Petunia, did you never visit Potter Manor?"

Petunia looked uncomfortable. "Once."

Uncle Vernon looked confused. "Pet?"

Petunia squirmed. "The Potters are… well, they're not quite as poor as I may have led you to believe. It's just…"—her voice hardened—"I don't want anything to do with them! Okay?"

Vernon leaned away from his ranting wife. "Okay, okay." He turned back to Harry. "So, this money comes from your freakish parents?"

"Good god, no. It's them I don't want knowing where I've been. They'd probably throw a fit and do a whole bunch of freakish things to you and your house."

Vernon's eyes bulged yet again. Harry wondered if the man practised in front of a mirror.

"Let's just say the money comes from a wealthy patron who has been taking care of me and who doesn't wish his name floated around all over the place."

"Mmmm." Vernon stroked his many chins.

Petunia bit her lower lip. "And are you going to go to that… that school?"

"Yes. My letter should be arriving tomorrow, and someone will probably turn up the day after to take me shopping. Then I'll be on my way again, and we won't see each other for another year."

Petunia looked torn. She shuffled her feet and twisted her apron. "Why?" she eventually asked.

"Mmmm?"

"I told Lily you were a freak. Every year, whenever you did something, I'd send her a letter saying you'd done something freakish. But she never listened. She always insisted you were normal. Now that you're going to that school, are they not going to take you back?"

"My parents knew very well that I wasn't a squib. That was just an excuse to send me away."

Aunt Petunia spluttered. "But. Why?"

"I don't fully know. They might have been tricked, or they might believe that throwing away your children like garbage is okay if it turns out they're a bit inconvenient."

Petunia's eyes narrowed. "The next time I see that red-headed, little miss perfect, double-dealing bitch—."

"—Feel free to make her feel as guilty as possible, but remember to keep my situation secret."

Petunia blinked. "Yes. Yes of course. Well then, er… Harry." She stood up. "Dudley's spare bedroom? You're getting a bit big for the cupboard." She had the grace to look sheepish.

Harry smiled, amazed things were going as well as they were. He hadn't even needed to use compulsion charms.
Vernon was busy counting the notes in the two piles.

"That sounds like an excellent idea."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Quiet. It was quiet. And warm. Quiet and warm. And comfy. Quiet, warm, and comfy. John Potter's eyes shot open. He sat bolt upright, and looked around. He was home. The familiar red and gold of his bedroom in Potter manor felt odd. Like seeing an old friend after a lifetime. He breathed, acutely aware of the lack of pain shooting through his body. He couldn't feel the cruciatus. But, of course. It hadn't happened yet. None of it had happened — The stone, the chamber, Pettigrew's breakout, the tournament, Voldemort's resurrection… his death — None of it.

He'd been given a second chance. Death and Fate had chosen him. His eyes gleamed.

Ever since the headmaster had sat him down four years ago, a week from now, and told him he wasn't really the boy-who-lived, he'd felt like a fraud. Every time someone had used that damn title, a little bit of him had cringed in terror, terror that someone, anyone, would find out, and he'd be branded a liar — a cheat — the very opposite of what a hero of the Light should be. How much he wished for a chance to prove himself to be the hero the world thought he was.

Now, he'd been given that chance. Now, he actually was the chosen of Fate. He'd have to careful of course. He couldn't let anyone know he was from the future. That would risk changing things too much, and future knowledge was one of his only real weapons. Always have a plan. That's what Hermione always said.

Wow. Hermione. She was still a child at the moment, wasn't she? And Ginny. His thoughts strayed to a few hours ago, a lifetime ago, in a time that hadn't happened, and to the beautiful girl who'd kissed him and begged him to stay safe in the maze of the fourth, and final task.

Ginny would have to go through the whole chamber of secrets thing again. He cringed. That… really sucked. But it was part of who she was. His Ginny had gone through the chamber of secrets, and come out the other side stronger and better for it.

Then there was his brother… he'd felt guilty when he'd helped send him to Azkaban, but Dumbledore had made clear the danger he posed, the reason he'd been sent away. Even if a part of him found it hard to connect the scared, needy, weak, scrawny Slytherin, with the danger to the world the leader of the Light painted him as.

But there wasn't anything he could do about that. Events needed to match the previous timeline as closely as possible. If that meant his potential dark lord brother needed to go to Azkaban then so be it.

On the other hand, there were plenty of little things he could do that wouldn't change things too much, but that would be very helpful. Looking back, he'd been standoffish and arrogant, mostly because of his insecurity over the whole not-really-the-boy-who-lived thing. This time, he'd make the effort to reach out beyond his tiny circle of Ron, Hermione, and Ginny.

He swept his legs over the side of the bed and hopped off. He looked at himself in the full-length mirror, dressed in red and gold pyjamas. Merlin, he was short now. He grinned. Voldemort didn't know what was going to hit him. His stomach rumbled.

Ah. But first, breakfast!

— DP & SW: RiBSR —
John arrived in the dining room and was brought up short by the massive stack of presents on the table.

Oh, that's right. It was his birthday.

He pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Tippy!"

A house elf popped into being beside him.

"Young Master is up very early this morning," the elf said, waggling his ears.

"Yeah, I just thought it would be a good idea getting up earlier in the morning. Is there any breakfast? Maybe something healthy and nutritious, and high in protein?"

"Of course, Young Master." Tippy popped away.

A few minutes later, breakfast appeared — A plate of egg-white omelette, with carrot and broccoli, a small lean stake, a small mountain of chopped, sautéed sweet potatoes, a bowl of yoghurt with mixed fruit, sliced almonds, and raisins, and a glass of whole milk.

Now, this was more like it. He dug in.

Half way through demolishing the mountain of magic and muscle fuel, his father arrived.

"Morning, Son. You're that desperate for presents mm?" His father's eyes radiated mirthful knowing.

"Not really, Dad. Just thought getting up earlier in general would be a good thing." He speared a chunk of steak.

"Hah, thinking of taking after your mother then? I see you've also started eating different too. Where's your usual sugar staves cereal?"

"I figured high protein and veggies would be better from now on, I'm a growing boy, right?" He grinned.

"That's right, Son." Glad to see you taking your body seriously, now.

John smirked. "On that note, could you help me with that? I know you and Uncle Sirius work out."

His father smiled. "You want to be shown the ropes? Sure."

They chatted back and forth for a while, before his mother walked in wearing a dressing gown. She swept over to him, and enveloped him in a warm hug.

"Happy birthday, Darling."

He knew he'd normally have been embarrassed by such displays of affection at this age, but he didn't care. Being tortured and murdered certainly changes your outlook on life. He returned her hug. "Thanks, Mum."

She looked surprised. "Not shoving your Mum away? I like this new young gentleman." She glanced at the present pile. "And you haven't even touched your presents. Should I get the healer?"
He grinned. "Maybe this new young gentleman has learned patience and the value of family over mere things."

His mother put her hands on her hips, and gave him a look. "Okay, who are you and what have you done with my son? Do we need to flush polyjuice?"

He rolled his eyes. "Is there a prophet around?" It would be a good idea to keep up to date with what was going on. Plus, it had been four years. Getting some reminders would be helpful.

His father eyed him "You need to steady with the growing up, else we're not even going to recognise you when you get back from Hogwarts." Lord Potter threw him a copy of the prophet sitting on a nearby serving tray.

John smiled and spread the newspaper in front of him. His smile vanished. His brow furrowed.

The headline read — ‘Lord Slytherin Announces Construction of Slytherin Manor — Set to Personally Increase GNP by three percent for 1992 through 1993.’

What the hell? He didn't remember this. "Lord Slytherin?"

He father looked over his copy and grimaced. "Yeah, he's going to get a lot of support from this. Parkinson will probably get one of the contracts — he's in construction. Not that I've got anything against stripping the Dark of their support, but you can bet your arse—"

"James!"

"Sorry dear, you can bet your… bottom, that some of the contracts will go to supporters of the Light that are on the fence too. Losing Lovegood was a hard blow. We don't need any more to jump ship."

John bit his lip. This wasn't what he remembered. Not at all. There was no Lord Slytherin. He was sure of it. The heir of Slytherin had been Riddle. And the timeline couldn't have been changed. He'd only just got back. What was going on?

He rubbed his face. If things were different than what he remembered… Oh Merlin, what was he going to do? He couldn't rely on foreknowledge. No, he mustn't panic. So long as the important events happened it shouldn't be too bad…. He needed to know what else had changed. Asking someone would be best. He wasn't going to meet Hermione for another month, but Ginny… Ginny could help him. Yes.

"I think I need to speak to Ginny."

His mother looked at him, eyes dimmed from their usual brightness. "Are you sure that's a good idea, dear?"

What? His eyebrows drew together.

"Of course it is!" his father said, rather forcefully. He grinned. "I told you, Lily — Potter men don't give up easily, see? Don't you remember what happened with us?"

What were they talking about? A sick feeling started to pool in his stomach.

"Yes, but it was different with us, dear." She looked pained. "Ginny is different."

Wha?
"Nonsense! I'm sure John will win her back. Eh, Son?"

Win her back? "Excuse me… I…I'll be right back." He bolted from the room, and fled up the stairs to his room, barged in, and flung himself at his writing desk. He reached for his diary. His hands trembled — they sweated. He flipped to a random page in the last few months.

'May 23rd, 1991 — Ginny still hates me. I tried sending her an owl with an invitation to a quidditch game, but it didn't work. Her reply said she wasn't interested. She asked me to stop trying to buy her. I sent a reply asking what I needed to do to be her friend again. She said it didn't matter. That by the time she could learn to forgive me it would be too late. That I wouldn't be me anymore. What does that even mean?'

His eyes watered. What was going on? It sounded like his yesterday self was just as confused as he was. He flipped around the diary until he found what looked to be the incident.

'April 15th, 1990 — Ginny hates me and I don't know why. I was going to invite her broomstick riding because we hadn't really hung out for a while, but when I went out to the orchard she looked at me like I was the worst dark lord ever. Then she left and I couldn't think of anything else. What have I done? I don't understand. I can't stand being hated. Ginny likes me. I know she does. We've been friends for ages. You don't just suddenly hate someone. I'm going to ask her tomorrow what's wrong. I'm sure it's all just a misunderstanding.'

The writing shook more and more as the entry went on. The ink and parchment was rife with inkblots and water stains. It was clear he'd been crying. His hand had been shaking, just like it was now. Something had changed, and now Ginny hated him. That was… ridiculous. Ginny couldn't hate him. Not the beautiful, kind angel who'd been part of his life as long as he could remember.

He remembered those sweet, moist, chocolate eyes that had made him promise to come back safely, before the fourth task, only a few hours ago. His eyes narrowed, even as his hands shook. Something was off, and he was going to figure out what it was.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

John flooed into the Burrow three hours later. His parents had a birthday party prepared for that afternoon. He'd talked his way into trying to invite Ginny personally. His father had been all over the idea.

He walked down to the orchard.

A figure stood among the trees, facing away from him, dressed in a familiar blue summer dress, faded from too many washes and re-sizing charms.

"Ginny?"

Ginny turned her head, giving him a profile view of her young face, framed by fire-red hair. He gave a quiet gasp. Her eyes looked so sharp. So not innocent. In the last timeline, he hadn't seen that look on her until a few weeks after the chamber incident, when some Slytherins had publicly suggested she'd been… used… down in the chamber.

"I wondered how long it would take for you to come here." Her voice dripped venom.

"G-Ginny. What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Is anything wrong? I don't know. Why don't you tell me, John. Is anything wrong?"
He scrabbled, but couldn't think. His diary entries had given him no clue what had happened.

"I don't know. Please. Help me understand." His heart ached. The way she looked at him burned a hole clear through his soul.

She sighed. "Unfortunately, that isn't an option. If you can't figure it out yourself, then I can't help you. Not that I want to."

"Please, Ginny."

She turned, and shook her head. Half her hair fell across her face, the other half held in place by an ornamental hairpin. "No." She walked towards him. Her eyes hardened further.

He fought down the instinct to draw his not-yet-bought wand. Her pose radiated hostility and readiness to attack. She drew almost level with him.

Then, he saw it, something he hadn't seen before. His eyes widened. Then narrowed.

She passed his field of view. "I suggest you forget we were ever friends. It will be easier for you."

She carried on walking behind him, back towards the Burrow.

He continued to glare ahead, his eyes still narrowed. His fingernails bit into the palms of his hands.

That hairpin — it wasn't a normal hairpin.

He'd seen one of those before. Once. They were damn expensive. And he knew that Ginny hadn't had one in the last time-line. There was no way that Ginny Weasley— poor, second-hand-clothes-wearing Ginny Weasley— could possibly afford a shrinking, super-rare, limited edition, hairpin Nimbus 1700 broomstick.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

John lay awake in bed. Ron snored in the bunk below him. Their parents had been surprised when he'd asked to sleep over at the Burrow, but hadn't objected. He shifted to his side.

Somewhere far outside the Burrow, an owl hooted.

He'd been surprised when none of his birthday presents contained the invisibility cloak, but he wasn't sure how to ask about that without having to explain how he knew about it.

He slipped the covers off and slipped on his indoor shoes.

Not having the cloak made him feel naked. He'd have to learn the disillusionment charm as soon as possible.

He crept out into the hallway.

Either that, or he'd have to figure out where the cloak was. Maybe one of the elves could help him. Damn. He wished he'd thought of that earlier.

He descended the stairs, careful to step over the one that always squeaked.

The more he thought about the hairpin and Ginny's strange behaviour, the more he thought back to second year, and to a Ginny who'd been distant and jumpy. Who'd seemed to be a completely different person. And to a cursed object that'd been possessing her — controlling her.
He arrived outside Ginny's door. He opened the door, carefully, quietly, expecting shrieks of hatred and indignation at every inch of progress.

Not that, that would stop him. It was painfully obvious something was wrong with Ginny. And he was going to save her.

He padded to her bedside and gazed at the peaceful angel, fast asleep, one leg stuck out from the covers. A line of drool ran down her elegantly freckled cheek.

He dragged his gaze from Ginny to the side table. Ahh. There. He picked up the tiny broomstick and pocketed it. If this was what was wrong with her, then he knew just who'd be able to tell him.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Early next morning, John zoomed by the vast numbers of floo connections until a familiar sitting room filled his vision. He stepped out into the ancestral home of the Blacks. A most unwelcome sight immediately greeted him.

"What are you doing here, Potter?"

Alexandra Black, winner of his personal award for most-frustrating-Slytherin, and fellow Tri-wizard champion, sat in a high-back chair, reading a thick and ancient-looking tome. The last time he'd seen this witch, they'd been trading curses in the maze. As much as he hated admitting it, it had only been by luck that he'd won that little skirmish.

"Alex." His tone was cool.

She narrowed her eyes. "Don't call me that."

"I'll call you what I want."

She looked surprised by the retort. Then her eyes narrowed. "What's got you so full of yourself? Not that it matters. Almost all Potters are pathetic."

"Whatever, I'm here to see your Dad. Where is he?"

"Why?"

"That's not your business."

"Maybe I want to make it my business. After all, you want to know where my Dad is."

He clenched his teeth. "What do you want?"

She smiled. "How about a book swap from the Potter library?"

"Are you out of your mind!" he all but screamed. He got a control of himself. "All I want to know is where your Dad is. How about a box of chocolate frogs?"

She stared at him for a whole two seconds, before laughing. "Wow, I really don't know how you two are related. You have all the political understanding of a typical Gryffindor brick, Potter."

He hated this. Even when she was ten—or almost ten—she still had that sharp tongue and unerring ability to get under his skin. Seeing her this young again made him wonder where the little girl who'd played 'wizards and witches' with him, Ginny, and Ron had gone.
"What's all this shouting?" Lord Sirius Black marched out of a side room, wearing full auror uniform.

Oh, thank Merlin.

Alex huffed.

"Oh, morning, John. You're here early. I was about to head into the office."

"Padfoot, I've got a problem. Can I talk you about it? It's kinda to do with your work."

Sirius eyes turned sharp and flashed him a questioning look. "Sure thing. This an at-the-office kind of thing? Do your parents know?"

"Yeah, and no. It's kinda sensitive. I need the input of my favourite Godfather."

"Hah!" Sirius barked. "Alright then, Pup. See you there." He hesitantly turned to Alexandra before stepping into the floo. He cleared his throat, and tugged his collar. "Err. Be good, Alex."

Alex lowered her head. "Yes, my Lord Black."

Sirius grimaced and turned away again.

He waited for Sirius to floo away, before stepping in, turning, and smirking at the doll-like dark witch.

She growled back.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

John landed firmly on his feet in the auror department. He followed his godfather to his office. The early birds were just starting to arrive. There weren't many of them, but then, there weren't many aurors, just twenty-six. They were the elite — the best. In a country of only twenty thousand, you couldn't expect there to be a massive standing army to battle the likes of Voldemort. They dealt with dark wizards. Regular law enforcement was handled by DMLE security wizards.

Sirius landed in his large chair, spread his legs, planted his large hands firmly on his knees, leaned forward, and looked him square in the eyes. "Alright kiddo. What's up?"

"You know how Ginny's been acting oddly recently?"

Sirius's expression turned pensive. "She does seem more distant."

"You know how the Weasleys are"—he hesitated—"not exactly the most well off?"

"Yes."

"Yesterday, I noticed Ginny was wearing this." He brought out the hair-clip and handed it to Sirius. "It's a limited edition, Nimbus 1700 broomstick that can be shrunk and used as a hair-clip. They cost one hundred Galleons. That's two and a half times more than a standard Nimbus 1700."

Sirius whistled and examined the hair clip up close, turning it this way and that. "And you nabbed it from her?"

"I want to make sure there's nothing on it that might be affecting her behaviour. I know how you always say to be on the watch for things that don't add up."
"That I do." Sirius rubbed his short beard. "Fine, we'll take a look at it and see what's what. But next time, I advise you to bring this sort of thing to me before you start grabbing things. If this really does have dark magic on it there's no telling what it might have been able to do to you. Besides, I don't think I have to remind you that until you handed it to me under suspicion of being a dark artefact, what you did was legally theft."

John shrugged. "Sure thing."

Sirius stood, placed the hairpin broomstick on the desk, and started waving his wand and muttering under his breath. The wand waving and muttering went on for a while. A second wizard was called in, who also waved his wand around and muttered. A conversation was held. More wand waving and muttering. Then, Sirius's eyes looked mildly shocked. Then confused. Then worried. Sirius looked sidelong at him before shaking his head, as though getting rid of a thought.

"Well, Pup, the broom's clean. That doesn't mean there isn't anything suspicious going on though. I'd like to know if Molly and Arthur know someone is gifting their little girl really expensive presents."

John sighed. Half relieved that Ginny wasn't under possession, half frustrated that his only lead had come up dead. "So, we don't know anything more then?"

Sirius looked uncomfortable. "Well, not quite. We did crack the passcode to un-shrink the broomstick."

"Well?"

"Whoever gave Ginny the broomstick could be anyone, really. But we know he may be called Harry."

John's face blanked. "What?"

"The passcode is 'Harry's Awesome Broomstick'."

Harry. His breathing sped up. Images of his scrawny, evil Slytherin brother shot through his head. His adrenaline raced. That slimy little bastard. How dare he cosy up to HIS Ginny. Ginny who he loved. He stilled. Harry meant evil, which meant dark magic. Ginny could be enslaved. Love potions, hate potions, there were so many things. Confundus charms, compulsion charms, legilimency, the imperius curse, possession. HIS Ginny on the floor of the chamber, soul being drained, body cold as death. How dare that bastard! He'd rip him to pieces. Break every bone in his body. No, that wasn't nearly enough. Skele-gro, then break them all again, and again, and again.

His thoughts ran far ahead of anything his rational mind told him his brother was capable of. His hands clenched and unclenched.

"Err. You okay there, Pup?"

He fought for control, passed his emotions through his occlumency exercises, and forced a sliver of rational thought into the saddle of his consciousness. He took a deep breath, and his eyes hardened.

"Yes, Sirius. I need to speak to my parents — now."

— End of Chapter Eleven —
A/N: And so we finally meet John. Needless to say, he's both confused and distressed.
Ginny paced in her usual spot in the orchard. The air was stuffy and oppressive. The shade of the trees offered the only nearby respite. She glanced towards the Burrow and wrung her hands. It was long past lunchtime, but she wasn't hungry.

She couldn't find her broomstick. She'd looked all morning, checked all the pockets of her clothes, and underneath her bed. She'd even tried summoning it, walking around the Burrow, waving her hands when she was sure no one was looking — but nothing.

What would Harry say? Would he be angry? She knew those broomsticks weren't cheap; that they cost more than her parents made in a couple of months. Here she was trying to prove she could handle herself and she couldn't even keep track of her things. She'd handled John well enough. She'd known the boy didn't have the guts to try anything. But that little victory was overshadowed by her newest problem.

Ginny ran a hand through her flame-red hair and bunched it into a fist. Sweat beaded on her brow in the summer heat. She was going to get a headache at this rate.

"Ginny." Her father's voice called though the fruit trees.

She briefly raised her eyes to the sky. "Yes, Dad?"

Her father came into view. "Could you come into the kitchen? Your mother and I need to discuss something with you." He looked unusually serious.

She groaned. She knew she shouldn't have missed lunch. "Yes, Dad."

Ginny walked with her father into the compact kitchen and dinning room. Her eyebrows raised slightly when she was met, not only by her mother, but also by a tall witch with long, wavy black hair. The witch sat at the table end. Her mother stood by the sink sipping a mug of tea. Neither were smiling.

"Sit down, Ginny."

She sat and felt a shiver go up her spine. She couldn't ever remember seeing her mother look so serious before. Molly Weasley didn't usually look serious — she usually blew-up long before then.

"This is Andromeda Tonks," her father said, motioning towards the black-haired witch. "She's Sirius's cousin and a healer working at St. Mungo's." He sat down adjacent to Mrs. Tonks, opposite her.

Ginny frowned. A healer? Why was she seeing a healer? She felt fine.

"Now, Ginny." Her father re-directed her attention back to him. "Have you made any new friends recently?"

She stared blankly at him. "No."

"No one?" he pressed. "No new people you keep in contact with by owl? No one who approached
you while out shopping maybe? Perhaps a friend of one your friends that you met while at their house?"

"Dad, I hardly ever go anywhere. When would I have time to meet any one? And I don't have an owl."

Mrs. Tonks raised an eyebrow.

Her father sighed. "Ginny, I really need you to be honest with us here. It's very important."

Her jaw clenched. "I am being honest. I haven't met anyone I'd call a friend for ages."

Her mother stood behind her father and Mrs. Tonks. She looked like she was visibly restraining herself.

"Okay then," her father continued, sounding out each syllable like a death knell. "Could you tell us why you spend so much time alone now, rather than with your brothers?"

Ah, her occlumency study time. She and Harry had long ago figured a cover story for that.

"Well, I like to read don't I?" She held up a slim volume she'd taken to the orchard with her. "And all my brothers are at Hogwarts most of the time aren't they? Except Bill and Ron. But Ron's become such a jerk recently."

Her mother took a sharp breath. "Ginny!"

"It's true. Ron thinks just because I don't worship the floor John walks on anymore, that means I'm evil."

Mrs. Tonks tapped her fingers on the tabletop. "Yes... why don't you tell us a bit more about that? Why do you hate John Potter?"

"Why do I need a reason to hate that tosser?"

"Ginny! Language!"

"No, Mum, I'll call him what I want." She folded her arms.

"Now see here—" her mother began.

"—Molly, please," healer Tonks interrupted.

Her mother shut her mouth, grabbed her mug and held it like a lifeline.

"Ginny," Mrs. Tonks said, "You said you did used to like John. What was the specific thing that made you change your mind? I've seen some memories of how you used to behave around him, and it must have been something pretty big."

Ginny squirmed in her seat. She couldn't tell the whole truth, but she did need to give at least a plausible reason. "Maybe I learned some things about him that made me see him in a different light."

"What did you learn?"

"That's my business."
"Ginny!"

Andromeda held up a hand. "Please, Molly." The healer continued. "Ginny, your parents are concerned by your sudden change in behaviour. It's very unusual for people to swing from such an extreme to another."

Ginny frowned. "Well, like I said, that's my business, isn't it. And it's not sudden — it happened ages ago."

"It was sudden at the time."

"It's still my business."

Andromeda gave a slow nod, and made a note on a piece of parchment in front of her. She turned to her father and made a hand signal that looked pre-arranged.

Her father took a deep breath, reached below the table, and brought out something very familiar.

Ginny's breath hitched.

He placed it on the table. It was her shrunken broomstick.

Her eyes darted between each of the adults in front of her. Her mother had crossed her arms, foot tapping, clearly agitated; her face was reddening. Mount Molly looked set to blow.

A bead of sweat rolled down Ginny's face. She put on her best confused voice. "My hairpin?"

"YOU know full well that is not a hair pin!" her mother screamed.

Ginny flinched.

Her father maintained his serious face despite the verbal assault just behind him. "Ginny. Who gave you this broomstick?"

"...That's my business."

"Ginny," he said, more forcefully. "Who. Gave. You. This. Broomstick?"

"I told you, Dad. That's my business."

Her father rubbed his face. "Ginny. Whoever gave you that may have bad intentions. He may be trying to hurt you. He may be trying to control you."

"You don't know what you're talking about. This is my business." She looked at the first gift Harry had ever given her. "And that is my broomstick."

Mrs. Tonks watched the exchange, making notes on her parchment.

Her mother smacked her mug down on the counter. "Don't think you're getting that back, young lady! Now you tell us everything you're hiding, understand!"

Her eyes hardened, even as her hands started shaking. "No."

"Ginny, dear." Her father's voice strained calmness. "It's not impossible that you might get the broomstick back. But we have to know who gave it to you so we can talk with them, and understand their intentions. You understand that, don't you? If you believe whoever gave you the
broomstick wouldn't harm you then you've no reason not to tell us who it is."

"No." She shook her head.

"Ginevra Weasley!" her mother shrieked. "You tell us now or you're on double chores, and grounded until you do!"

Ginny clenched the skirt of her dress with her fists. Tears started forming at the edges of her eyes. "No."

"Ginny—" her father tried again.

"No."

Her father seemed to deflate. He sat back on the table and looked towards Andromeda. Something unsaid seemed to pass between them, and her father gave a slight, apprehensive nod. "Okay. Andromeda here has a few more questions for you."

She looked towards the raven-haired witch.

The healer leaned on the table. "Miss Weasley. Do you have a boy friend?"

Her eyes widened. Her mind blanked. "Wha—?" She felt her cheeks flush. Then she felt something else. The incessant nudge of a legilimency probe.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

John climbed The Burrow stairs to Ginny's room.

His mum had just got back from the Dursleys. Her red cheeks and puffy eyes suggested it hadn't been a happy reunion. Apparently, his brother still lived there, and was as ignorant as ever. Hagrid had turned up earlier that morning and was taking him shopping.

His parents had been distressed by the possibility of someone called Harry manipulating Ginny. From that, he'd managed to force a confession of his brother's existence, one month earlier than in the last time-line. From there, it hadn't been much work to get things moving. Ginny was being flushed of potions, enchantments, and mind magic, and it shouldn't be too long before he had the real Ginny back.

For a moment, he'd been afraid his brother had somehow also come back in time, but that seemed not to be the case. Not that he couldn't have dealt with it if he had. Harry would've only been a fourteen year-old weakling with two years of magical education, and two years of prison, after all. But if not his brother, then who was the Harry the broomstick spoke of?

He arrived at Ginny's door and pushed it open.

The sight that greeted him made him feel ill. Ginny was rope-bound to her bed. Her face was chalk white, and a foul smelling bucket stood by the bed. Her head, previously staring up the ceiling, turned to look at the opening door.

Her eyes narrowed. "You," she all but hissed.

"Hi, Ginny," he said, not keeping eye contact. The continued venom vanished the pit of his stomach. "You don't have to worry. You'll be better soon."

"Better!" She croaked, coughed, and a stream of green liquid dribbled from her mouth; it flowed
into the bucket. "There's nothing wrong with me!" She struggled on her bindings, but her attempts were weak.

"Ginny, if you're under someone else's influence then you wouldn't know it."

She stared at him. "It was you, wasn't it? You took my broomstick. That's why you stayed over last night."

"Ginny—" he began.

"You! You!" She sputtered and coughed, and more green liquid poured from her mouth. She stopped struggling and collapsed back. "Get out."

"Ginny."

"Get out!"

She flailed again, and an unseen force hit him square in the face, knocking him back and onto the floor. His face stung. Accidental magic. Ginny was getting unstable. He scrambled backwards, out of the door, and safely around the corner, trying to ignore the continued stream of insults hurled at him.

He reached and closed the door. He trembled. What had happened that required Ginny to be tied down? It must have been something severe. Maybe Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would tell him.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

"...And then Andromeda was thrown backwards, off her chair, and slammed into the cabinet. Apparently Ginny has a fully built mind-scape." Arthur Weasley had dark circles under his eyes. "That shouldn't be possible. We've..." He shifted, and wrung his hands, "We've never taught any of our children occlumency. Couldn't afford the tutors, see? And mind-scapes are advanced."

John perched on a stool and watched the unfolding drama of the Weasley household adjusting to their only daughter cursing their names while suffering real pain and discomfort on their orders. His face was still swollen from Ginny's outburst.

Molly Weasley bustled around the kitchen, cleaning and re-cleaning pots by hand, making far more noise doing so than was necessary. Her eyes were red-shot.

Fred and George sat off to one side, bent over parchment, mostly ignoring the exchange.

Percy wasn't. "There's no way a child like Ginny could build a mind-scape — it's dark magic I tell you."

Molly wailed.

"Percy!" Arthur snapped. "It isn't necessarily dark magic. And just because you don't understand something doesn't automatically make it dark."

Percy looked affronted. "Current ministry regulation designates all new forms of magic as dark until they've been proved otherwise."

"This isn't a new form of magic. And the occlumency isn't the problem. The problem is that she's hanging around people who are influencing her, and forcing her to keep secrets."

John looked around the faces. Left unsaid was that attempting to force those secrets out of Ginny
with legilimency had turned out to be a bad idea.

He felt the Weasley's pain, but just like them, knew it was necessary. Exactly how this change had happened was still a mystery, but he was determined to find out. He also needed to find out what else had changed so he could get the time-line back on course.

The door opened and he watched Andromeda Tonks walk in and take a seat.

Molly turned from the sink. "Well?"

Andromeda sighed. Her shoulders slumped forward. "The results have come back negative. There was and is nothing in her system. No potions, no enchantments, no mind-magics." She avoided catching anyone's eyes. "All your daughter's actions are completely her own."

John's mouth dried in an instant.

"In fact, far from being vulnerable to mind-magics, she seems immune to some forms, including compulsion charms."

He started to sweat.

The older Weasleys were staring at Andromeda. Their gazes resigned. Mister Weasley put his head in his hands.

"No." A steel voice rang around the kitchen, and he realised it was his own.

Andromeda turned to him; her voice was monotone. "I'm sorry, John."

"No. You must have missed something."

"We performed a complete system cleanse. Any and all forms of foreign magic residing in the human body are catalogued and cleansed. I'm sorry."

"Then there's something else then!" He screamed.

The assembled Weasleys and Tonks flinched.

He slid off the stool and stumbled his way towards the floo, ignoring the concerned calls of the adults.

It wasn't true. Something else was going on. He'd seen too much weird stuff to just accept someone's word that there were no other possibilities. Ginny was being controlled and he would save her.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Ginny sat on her bed, hugging her knees to her chest, no-longer bound, but still very much a prisoner. She forced herself to retreat into her mind-scape to keep the tears from welling up.

Her parents had locked her bedroom door from the outside. She was grounded. Grounded—"until you come clean, young lady,"—her mother had said. They had apologised for the legilimency and putting her through several hours of massive discomfort, but the apology had been weak and was immediately followed by another interrogation about the evil dark wizard trying to corrupt her, and how they just wanted what was best for her. As though they hadn't just tried to force the information from her by mind raping her.
She felt miserable. She wished Harry were here. He always made her feel safe, something she no longer felt in her own home.

She heard a small click, and the door creaked open.

The twin's heads peeped around the corner. They scuttled in and closed the door behind them.

She stared at them over her knees.

"Well look who it is, George."

"The mistress of mind magic herself, Fred."

The two stood to attention, and gave duel, theatrical bows with lots of extraneous hand waving."

Despite feeling terrible, she couldn't help but giggle.

"You are very impressive, Little Sister."

"Indeed, oh brother of mine. The tales of your magical prowess have spread far across these lands —"

"—Straight to the ears of these two humble rapscallions."

Fred shook his head. "Knocking a fully trained mind-healer out of your head, and onto the floor—"

"—Striking down the defeater of You-Know-Who with accidental magic."

She managed to suppress a frown. Oh how badly she wanted to land another dozen stinging hexes on that fraud.

"—And above all, succeeding in sneaking around, learning all that, and who knows what else, without Mum and Dad finding out—"

"—Until your favourite person in the world squealed on you."

This time she did frown.

"No worries, Little Sis. You have clearly shown to have what we need—"

"—And we would like to formerly invite you to our merry band of pranksters… The Hogwarts Buccaneers."

She stared at them. "You don't care about the evil, dark-wizard corrupting your innocent baby sister?"

They frowned.

"Of course we care."

"But, it would be hypocritical of us to not take your side."

"Besides, we figure the best way to protect our little sister is to make sure the trouble she gets up to —"

"—Is the kind that doesn't end with her being used as potion ingredients in some hideous dark ritual."
Ginny's eyes widened. "They're not really saying *that* are they?"

"No. But it's pretty close."

She pursed her lips. "You don't expect me to betray my… err… version of the 'Hogwarts Buccaneers' do you?"

Their faces lit up.

"Betray?"

"Another prankster group?"

"Never," they declared in unison.

She smiled. Harry didn't really know much about the twins. She was sure he'd like them. But getting them on the inside of Harry's circle wouldn't be easy. Harry was the most paranoid person she'd ever met. Given what he'd gone through, she couldn't blame him.

"Anyway. Chatting about your deeds of myth and legend isn't what we're here for."

"Oh?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah. We're giving you a heads up."

"Downstairs, that healer, Tonks, is talking with Mum and Dad about the possibility of using veritaserum."

Ginny's eyes widened in horror.

"They're really not sure about it, but apparently, as head of a pureblood house, Dad can request some from the ministry, and have a specialist handler administer some to a member of the house."

"But, he's more than a little bit uncomfortable with the idea. Especially after what happened with the legilimency."

"Mum is a bit more enthusiastic."

"It also wouldn't be cheap."

"Just thought you should get some warning, Little Sis."

"We'll keep you updated."

They left, and closed the door behind them.

Ginny started to sweat. Veritaserum? They wouldn't. Would they? Her breathing became strained. She started to shake.

She didn't have a defence against veritaserum. If they gave that to her and asked the right questions, she'd squeal all of Harry's secrets. Her mind flooded with images of Harry in Azkaban, all skin and bones, wearing rags, eyes dead to the world. Her chest tightened.

Tears of frustration and desperation welled up in her eyes. She looked down at the ring on her pinky. The hand it was attached to was trembling.
She should have alerted Harry already. She *should* have alerted him the moment she realised they knew about the broomstick. She *should* have alerted him the moment they started to pump her for foreign magic. But she hadn't — so desperate she'd been to prove she could handle it herself.

And now it was so time-critical she didn't know if Harry could even get here in time.

She focused her magic into her right pinky and pulsed it into her ring. Long long short, short short short, long long long, short short short.

She collapsed side-ways on the bed, rolled into a ball, and gazed towards the clock.

…

…

The second-hand moved.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

[Forty-five minutes earlier]

"Potter." The words were ground out through clenched teeth.

"Greetings, Heir Malfoy of the Noble House of Malfoy" Harry said, lightly stepping onto Madam Malkin's measuring stool. His Dumbledore orchestrated introduction to the wizarding world was turning out a *lot* better than first time around.

Draco Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "What's with the formal greeting? Finally decided to stop acting like blood traitor scum?"

Harry grinned. "The formal greeting is because we've never met before."

"Wha?"

"Allow me to introduce myself. Harry James Potter, estranged member of the Most Ancient and Noble house of Potter. John is my detested brother."

The young sales-witch measuring him gasped. Although whether due to realising this *wasn't* John Potter or to his declaration of sibling loathing, he couldn't be sure.

Malfoy's eyes widened. "The Boy-Who-Lived has a brother?"

"That is a one-hundred percent true statement." The cords measuring him were suddenly pulled a lot tighter. Yep, definitely the declaration of loathing.

"You hate him?"

"I believe the ways and means employed by him and my family to be short-sighted and contemptible."

"You...you're Dark?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that... although I've got nothing against dealing with people who needlessly antagonise me." He glared at the sales-witch who returned his look with one of pure contempt."
"So…" Malfoy regarded him as one might a puzzling quidditch play. "What house do you think you'll be in?"

"Slytherin. No question."

Malfy nodded slowly. "Yeah. I'll probably go there too. Although my Father did say he wouldn't be furious if I went to Ravenclaw."

Harry smirked. Malfoy had been the bane of his existence during his brief and lonely two years at Hogwarts. Looking back it wasn't hard to see why. He'd turned up in the house of the aristocrats wearing rags and standard Hogwarts modern open-robeks. Scrappy and dirty. No hygiene products, no grooming knowledge. Was it any wonder he'd been treated like a walking dragon-pox victim?

"Harry," Malfoy said, his voice relaxing into a bored drawl, "there's a man outside trying to get your attention."

Harry glanced around and spied the half-giant making impatient jerking motions while holding a single massive multi-layered ice-cream. The man took a long lick of it.

"Oh, don't worry. It's just my parole officer."

Malfy frowned.

Harry turned to the window. "Five more minutes!" He turned back. "Merlin. Some people, eh?"

Malfy shrugged.

He grinned at the boy. "So, do you have your real robes ready yet, or are you getting them later?"

The Malfy scion eyed him; then smirked. "Later. Acromantula silk — closed of course. You?"

"Closed and duelling. Acromantula silk and dragon hide… which I'm certainly not getting here," he added to the reddening, commission-based sales-witch.

Malfy raised a single eyebrow. "You're bringing duelling robes?"

"Yeah. Not planning on wearing them normally though. Not unless it's needed. My parents"—he lowered his voice so only he and Malfy could hear—"would pitch a fit if they found out."

Malfy nodded again, smirked his trademark I'm-better-than-you smirk, and reached out a hand.

"By the way, I don't think I properly introduced myself. Draco Malfoy, Heir of the Noble House of Malfoy."

Harry smiled and took the boy's hand. Yep. Definitely better than last time.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry was frog-marched into a trunk shop, and walked out a few minutes later with a trunk so cheap it probably wouldn't survive a kick to the side.

A visit to an apothecary yielded a half-broken set of scales and potion ingredients from the half-price, soon-to-expire shelf.

A second-hand bookshop produced textbooks with their covers spell'o'taped together, and their pages torn out.
All the time, Hagrid glowered at him, and continually made comments about how thankful he should be his parents were spending their money on him. It was scary just how much the huge man sounded like Uncle Vernon.

And last time around, he had been scared. This time around, he was just getting pissed off. He also vowed to sneak Ginny out of The Burrow next year, and take her shopping before Hogwarts started. No way she was entering Slytherin like he had last time.

Hagrid left him and the tinkle of a shop bell snapped him out of his thoughts. He was suddenly face to face with an uncomfortably familiar face.

"Hello, Mister Potter," said the wizened face of Mister Ollivander from only a few feet away. "But. Also not Mister Potter…"

Harry suppressed a shiver. "I'm Harry Potter."

"Really?" Ollivander raised his eyebrows. "I've never heard that the Boy-Who-Lived had a brother… and yet… and yet… you somehow feel familiar."

Harry's thoughts flew back to a dusk-light chase away from an ancient yew tree. He met the old man's gaze with his firm one. "I've been exiled from the wizarding world for the last ten years."

"Most extraordinary. And your parents are not here on the most important occasion of a young wizard's life?"

Harry's back straightened. His eyes narrowed, and his voice lowered. "Quite. But I'm not here to discuss them."

"Indeed, indeed. Let's find your match then, shall we. Mmmmm, how about this one?"

Close to one hundred wands later, Hagrid was tapping on the window, clearly unhappy at being made to wait.

Finally, the holly and phoenix feather wand was trundled out and gave its debut performance of sparks.

Ollivander looked puzzled. "Most curious."

Harry mentally rolled his eyes and decided he'd let the old man go for it. "What's curious?"

"Oh, that this wand should be meant for you. I was expecting your brother to get it, if anyone. That it should go to you is most, most curious."

"Yes," he drawled, sarcasm dripping like a leaky tap, "most curious."

Ollivander frowned, and he beat a hasty exit. He really shouldn't give people that attitude, but he was damn sure Ollivander had realised what his wand match meant last time around, and also hadn't told him then.

His thoughts strayed back to Privet Drive. He grinned. Then, he felt a series of vibrations on his right pinky. The grin vanished. Oh, Damn.

"C'mon you," Hagrid said, pulling him along as though he were a dog on a leash.

Harry looked around. There was no one, thank Merlin. Voldemort may have been able to control animals before the age of eleven without a wand, but Hagrid wasn't an animal. Hell, giant blood
even gave him magic resistance. He whipped his true wand from its holster and forcefully whispered, "Confundo." He whipped the wand away again.

The half-giant looked back at him. The look was cautious, calculating. "Actually, yeh can make your own way home, can't yeh?"

He nodded.

"Good. I'm gettin' a pint." He continued to stroll to the leaky cauldron.

Harry's eyes hardened. His muscles tensed. Something had happened to Ginny. He ducted into a side alley, ran behind a discarded crate, and apparated.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Harry cracked his way to Devon, nightmare scenarios playing out in his mind. He arrived in Ottery St. Catchpole, took out his trunk, un-shrunk it, and descended into its depths. He grabbed the invisibility cloak, and a poly-juice. He swiped a strand of Ginny's hair, dropped it in the vial, and shook. The potion turned green.

He faced the trunk's full-length mirror and hesitated. He'd never actually used poly-juice to turn into a girl before. Oh, well. Harry drank. His hair lengthened, turned red. He shrunk. His slight musculature vanished. His lower internals re-arranged themselves. He squirmed. It felt weird.

His clothes shrunk with him, but didn't change style. He flashed a look in the mirror. His clothes now looked wrong; they gave too many clues. Making a split decision, and cursing his lack of foresight every second, Harry stripped off his clothes and slipped on one of Daphne's dresses, re-sizing it with a wave of his wand. He inspected himself again. Yes. Better.

Harry then whipped the invisibility cloak around him, ascended the trunk, re-shrank it, and scowled, only then realising that his dress had no pockets, and he didn't have the time to do anything about it.

With no time to use the tunnel, he apparated to the Burrow's perimeter wards, and then cloaked straight through them, wand in one hand, trunk in the other.

He crouched under the kitchen window and listened.

"—Dragons can wait. Family comes first."

"If Ginny's not being magically influenced is it our business?"

"Of course it is! Just because it's not magic doesn't mean it can't harm her."

"But using magic to force her… it's wrong. It's a massive violation of trust. We should limit ourselves to keeping her away from him."

Harry had heard enough. He flew up to the upper windows and peeked into them. Eventually he found the one holding Ginny, stretched out on a small bed. The whole room was pink.

He rapped at the window.

Ginny's head shot up. She leapt off the bed, ran to the window, and looked around, but obviously couldn't see him. She opened the window, allowing him to fly past her, brushing against her as he did.
"Harry?" Her voice trembled.

Harry whipped the cloak off himself and cast a privacy spell.

Ginny's eyes widened at the sight of her doppelgänger.

"Yes, it's me, but you don't know that."

Ginny hesitated, and then took a deep breath. "The secret passage into the Burrow is located between the two most northern trees in the orchard."

He beamed.

"Harry!" Ginny leapt, wrapped her arms around him, and clung to him like a limpet. "Thank Merlin you came. Oh, it was horrible, and I'm so, so sorry I didn't alert you sooner. Every word leaked from her through sobs and sniffs. "I woke up and..."

Sixty seconds of condensed summary later, Harry's eyes were abaze, and his gut burned. It all smacked far too similar to his own situation. How dare Ginny's own family treat her like that?

Ginny lowered her eyes. Occasionally they flickered back up to his, chocolate meeting worried chocolate. "You're... you're not angry with me, are you?"

Harry snapped out of his furious staring match with the wall. His features relaxed. "With you? Of course not, Ginny. You made a judgement call that turned out to be inaccurate, that's all. We both did. And you did a brilliant job holding on for as long as you have."

She shifted her embrace. Her trembling abated.

"Neither of us thought they'd actually consider using veritaserum."

Ginny stood back and looked straight into his eyes. Her red hair fell over her face, just like his did. She raked it behind her ear.

He blew on his, but it just fell back on his face.

"I want the necklace," she muttered.

Harry nodded, un-shrunk the trunk, grabbed the silver lighting-bolt pendant, and a pack of veritaserum antidote sweets.

"Here." He proffered them.

She took them, put the necklace on, and tucked it under her shirt. The magic caught.

"Eat two sweets a day, morning and night."

"Yes, Harry." She popped one into her mouth.

"If you lose them, or they get taken, or they put you in solitary confinement, or you run out, let me know, and I'll take control. I'll be able to resist through my noble house ring."

Ginny nodded her understanding, taking deep, calming breaths. Then smiled impishly, eyes turning playful through the tears. "Nice dress, Harry."

He rubbed the back of his head. "Er, yeah, it's one of Daphne's."
Ginny frowned. Then sighed. "This is the last time we're going to see each other for a whole year isn't it?"

"You're not going to see off your brothers?"

"I doubt they'll let me now. I don't even know how long it'll be until I'll be able to visit Luna again."

"Well, we can see each other if you want."

Ginny tilted her head, her eyes questioning.

He tapped the pendant.

Her eyes widened in understanding.

"How would you like to go sightseeing in dreamland?"

Ginny grinned. "That would be cool."

"Okay, then."

A creak came from the hallway.

They both froze. Their gazes locked on the bedroom door.

"You need to go," Ginny whispered fiercely.

"Yes."

He reached for his trunk, and felt a pulse of magic shoot through the room. He felt the privacy charm fail.

He froze.

"Got him!" A voice yelled.

His eyes widened. Oh fuck.

"Got him? What did you do!" another, older voice screamed.

Ginny looked around, frantic. "What's going on?"

"We trapped him with a containment ward!"

He dashed to the window, and smashed the glass. He reached out, and pushed his magic into the ward.

"You trapped him in there with your sister! You idiots!"

The ward threw him backwards, onto his side, and across the floor. Pain shot through him. His skin scrapped off leaving raw streaks down his thigh.

"Bill! Go floo the aurors! Now!"

Harry scrambled to his feet. Ginny's body was so much weaker than his own.
"No!" Ginny shouted.

Aurors? That would be game over. He started to sweat.

"Be quiet, Ginny! You're in enough trouble already!"

His breathing quickened.

"No! You're being horrible!"

His heart pounded. He couldn't think of a way out. Panic gripped his soul.

"Ginny! Who's in there with you?"

His nostrils flared, desperately trying to suck in enough oxygen to feed his rapidly overloading system.

"No! I'm not telling you! If you don't let us out now! I'll... I'll..."

Images flashed through his head of Azkaban. Of being trapped. Of being helpless. The walls seemed to close in on him. No. No! His magic flared.

"Holy Shit!"

He could feel it running through him like an out of control storm. Pouring out of him, like a flash flood.

"Harry!"

His nerves lit up like fire, the very air in his lungs whirled around. The world turned green. Voices filtered through, but were indistinct and distant.

"The ward!"

"Do something, Bill!"

"I'm trying!"

His whole body was coiling like a spring, tension upon tension building to an unstoppable crescendo. His back curved forward.

"Your wand, Harry!"

A hand thrust something into his hand, something long. Someone hauled him, pulled him forward, towards the magic. He could feel it, trapping him. How dare it. Something inside him broke.

"Harry, Let it out, now!"

"Dad! Get away from the door!"

"No! Ginny! No!"

His magic whirled around, bending his body, searing his nerves, moving through him like a whip, down his arm, into his wand, and cracked.

His world exploded.
The ward shattered. Dust fell around him, the floor shook, the Burrow creaked and lurched.

His wand was yanked from his hand.

Clarity shot through his brain. He whirled around.

Ginny threw his wand and cloak into the trunk. "Go now!"

He stumbled forward and shrunk the trunk.

The door slammed open.

Three Weasleys barged in, wands out, shocked at the two Ginnys, unsure where to fire. "Wha?"

He found his footing. He ran.

He felt a stunner whizz by his head, felt another impact into his shield, but the third?

"Ginny!" someone angrily yelled.

He dove through the broken window, and stopped his fall a split second before he hit the ground.

He landed. He ran.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

Another stunner sailed past his head. He dashed down the path to the orchard.

"Stop, you bitch!"

He skidded into the quidditch clearing. Fuck. He couldn't open the trapdoor. Not while they were still here. They'd see the secret. He turned, and shoved his trunk between his teeth. He bit down, hard.

The two older Weasley children bore down on him.

The moment they were in range he shot off duel stunners from the tips of his fingers — weak, far weaker than normal. His control was shot. He could barely muster the ability to swat.

The two Weasleys gasped, eyes widened in shock. They dodged. They fired.

He dodged. He shielded. He fired.

They dodged.

"Fuck!" one yelled.

"Go round. Circle her!"

A stunner barely missed him. He stumbled, felt another stunner slam into his shield, felt the shield fail, saw his opponent's look of triumph, realised his hands were instinctively catching his fall. His eyes widen.

Time slowed. He could see the way the wizard's wand was angled, the way his cloak whirled at his sudden halting motion, the way his dragon tooth earring bounced. The way his long ponytail curved. Saw the faint glow of red build on the tip of his wand.
His heart seemed to stop.

Then, suddenly, a flash of red shot from the trees and hit the young man in the side. The triumphal look blanked, and he fell to the ground.

Harry blinked. Time returned. He found his foot, spun to his second adversary, and sent two stunners at a hastily cast shield. They smashed into it, still weakened, but now strong enough. The first absorbed, the second shattered. The spell hit and the second young-man hit the ground with a finalistic thud.

Harry's breath returned. His heart hammered. He spun, eyes darting around for other threats, adrenaline still surging through him.

His eyes spotted movement, and his world re-aligned itself. Relief flowed through him. His trunk fell from his mouth. He laughed. Through the trees towards the Burrow, he spied a familiar lone retreating figure, long red hair waving behind her like a roaring fire.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Sometime later, Harry, still wearing Ginny's form, apparated into his fidelius-hidden cliff vault. Everlasting torches flickered light and warmth across the stone walls and wooden furniture.

There had been no further distress signals on his ring, but the events of the past hour had certainly been a wake-up call. The moment he'd escaped The Burrow, he'd immediately gone to the available hiding spots of Voldemort's soul anchors to grab what he could. Now more than ever, he knew he couldn't afford to just sit around and allow history to repeat. And in his hands was the cold, hard proof.

His left hand clutched the Gaunt ring, sans withering curse. It had been the work of a moment to bypass the security systems, and snatch the ancient heirloom. Voldemort's memories made sure of that. His other hand though... his other hand clutched the locket. And it was fake. His high-pitched female scream of frustration had startled even him, bouncing and echoing off the inferi-filled cave walls. He was going to have to find some way to track or find the missing Horcrux, but that wasn't happening for a while.

Trunks lined the wall of his vault, one contained his drug supplies, another contained a back-up stash of galleons, another held a stash of muggle money, another, a supply of potions, and yet another, an assortment of clothes. A final trunk, in the corner, was empty and lined with lead and acromantula silk.

Harry opened the final trunk's first compartment and dumped the oddly bland ring inside. By this time next year, he'd have a second soul anchor. He straightened and started to feel the sensation that told him the polyjuice was wearing off.

He opened the clothes trunk and rummaged around for a suitable selection. His fingers closed over a long leather coat and he grinned, fingering the thestral hide duster he'd bought from the Mongolian craftsman some years before. He wouldn't be tall enough for that for at least two more years, and the coat seemed to suck at holding a re-sizing charm. But when he was tall enough... he smirked.

He pulled off Daphne's dress just as it started to tighten. His muscles reformed, his hair receded to his normal messy mop, and his eyes lit up Avada Kedavra green.

He quickly tugged on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, followed by an informal open-robe.
Harry stepped back and surveyed his tiny safe house. He had just under a month before Hogwarts started. He might as well pack everything he'd need now while he was here.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

The hearth of Greengrass Manor's family quarters blazed merrily, spreading warmth through the room and into Harry's cold body.

"So, you were on your way to save the day, turned into a girl, and your first thoughts were you needed to dress the part?" Daphne giggled.

Freekey sat on Daphne's shoulder, nibbling on a macadamia nut.

Harry smiled a thin smile. "Yes well, I couldn't give any clues, could I? Besides"—he continued, looking contrite—"it did look wrong."

Daphne reclined back in her comfy armchair and regarded him. "Well, that was quick thinking on Weasley's part at least. If she hadn't hidden your cloak and wand when she did they could've linked you to Lord Slytherin through memory examination."

"Yeah." Harry rubbed the back of his head. "That was far too close for comfort."

"She did say your name though…"

He shrugged. "They already knew someone called Harry was involved, so it wasn't too bad."

"And the containment ward?"

Harry shuddered. "That thing was a monster. It isn't normally possible to power a ward that strong so quickly. The only explanation I can think of is that the curse breaker tied the ward directly into The Burrow's own perimeter wards." He snorted. "If so, I could've just apparated straight out when I broke it. As it was, smashing that thing almost completely drained me. I was weak, vulnerable, and not thinking straight. Add to that the lack of wand, and the need to keep my signature moves secret, and there you have it." His face contorted in disgust. "The perfect recipe for me being almost beaten by two kids who just graduated."

Daphne's eyebrows knitted together. She looked puzzled. "What caused it though?"

"What?"

"Your reaction. I mean, you've never lost control like that before. Have you?"

He thought back to what happened the moment he'd realised he couldn't escape from the containment ward.

"I… I don't know. You're right. I don't know what happened. It just felt like I was trapped. It felt like the walls were closing in on me. I felt powerless. I've never reacted like that. Not even in Azkaban or while at the Dursleys." He shivered. "I couldn't even breathe properly. It wasn't a good feeling." He looked at his feet, and continued in a whisper. "The closest I ever felt like that was when I was at Hogwarts, before they locked me away."

Daphne was quiet for a moment. She stood, plopped down beside him, and took his hand in hers. "Harry, look at me."

He raised his gaze to meet her ice blue one.
"You saved me from a life of imprisonment, Harry. And I will do everything I can to ensure you never have to go through that again."

He smiled weakly at her. "Thanks, Daph."

"I mean it, Harry. You have me with you this time. And Granger." She frowned briefly before her face changed back to concern. "And the others next year, too. You aren't alone this time."

He smiled again, and this time allowed it to spread over his face.

His focus snapped from Daphne's face, distracted by a sharp tapping from the nearby window.

"Oh," said Daphne, "speak of the fey." She stood and let in Hermione's new pet.

The beautiful snowy owl, formally known as Snowy, now known as Hedwig, alighted on the low table and stuck out her leg.

Harry detached the letter and read it. Hermione was so enthusiastic about getting to Hogwarts, so ready to prove herself. They all knew it was going to be tough. They knew they were walking into a multi-year battle for control of the wizarding world, but that didn't squash her spirits. If anything, she seemed even more focused than last time around — sharper, more aware — and while he knew a lot of it was down to his own meddling, he couldn't help but respect the witch.

Daphne stood to his side, reading over his shoulder. "Sounds like she's doing well."

"Yes." He looked around at Daphne. "She's about as ready as she'll ever be." He looked down at the letter again, and to the table where Hedwig and Freekey were nipping and scratching at each other. He rubbed the letter between thumb and forefinger, and spoke softly. "I think we all are."

— End of Chapter Twelve —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm planning two bonus chapters that I was going to put in this season, but which didn't fit in with the flow of the story, and were dropped. They are:

1. Hermione goes Shopping — which takes place a few weeks before the end of the book, and

2. Alexandra's Birthday Party — which takes place towards the end of the summer.

I'll probably upload these at random points over the next three to four months when I need a break from my other non fan-fiction project.

A/N: Thank you everyone for reading and leaving reviews for this story over the last few months. I value every one of them, and the longer the better. I had no clue when I started that by the end of the Pre-Hogwarts book, this story would be sitting pretty on over 2,400 followers. I mean... damn. Thank you all.

A/N: Happy New Year!
[Earlier in the summer of 1991]

She couldn't find them.

It was time. Today was the day that she, Hermione Granger, was going to irrevocably bind herself to Harry's cause. She thought about everything she'd learnt from him, and all the revelations and shocks she'd gone through. She thought about the mission Harry had brought back in time with him, to defeat a dark lord, and recreate the wizarding world. But most of all, she thought about her best friend, her confidant, the one person who she knew she could count on. And after today, he would be even more than that. He would be her magical guardian, her protector, her Lord. But right now, she couldn't find them.

Hermione ducked around the smoked-glass door to the garden, and looked across the wide lawn. They weren't here either. They weren't in the kitchen. They weren't in the living room. They weren't in their bedroom, and they weren't in either of the bathrooms, or the study, or the garage. That only left one place.

She sighed, stomped up the stairs, slammed open her bedroom door, marched to her trunk, threw open the lid, and poked her head in the space beyond. There, sat her parents, looking as guilty as the kid in the biscuit tin, each holding an open book with another large pile sat beside them.

"Mum! Dad! We're going to be late! And you now know goblins don't like to be kept waiting."

"Ah," said Daniel Granger, "is it that late already?"

"It's been that late for a full ten minutes, Dad."

"Right." Emma Granger stood and slammed her book shut. "Enough reading!" She raised her hand theatrically in the air. "Time to hit this mystical world! Through the looking glass, into the wardrobe, past the second star to the right, and straight on till morning!"

"Orrr," Dan interjected, grinning, "just on Charing Cross Road off Tottenham Court Road.

"Yeah, or that."

Hermione pursed her lips. "Your clothes are in the bedroom in the bags. Can we ple-e-e-ease go now?"

"Of course dear, we're just getting in the right mood." Her mother smiled.

Hermione shook her head. She'd no idea what she'd been worried about before. Her parents had eventually reacted to the news of magic's existence like any self respecting intellectually curious person would react, with awe and the enthusiasm of true fantasy geeks, which they were.

Harry had helped. So had Lord Slytherin. And seeing them both on her doorstep at the same time, warm plum pie in hand, had certainly thrown her, but only for about as long as it took to say 'would you like polyjuice with that'.
She'd felt strange, watching the two of them play off each other, knowing one of them wasn't Harry. Figuring out which one was the real one hadn't been easy. After a few hours of intense discussion about the political and social realities of the magical world—during which her parents had run the emotional gauntlet from mildly horrified to mildly angry to mildly depressed to resigned, to hopeful and grateful, before finally returning to their previous state of mild enthusiasm—'Harry' had come back from the kitchen, and sat back down on the living room sofa, legs firmly together and bent slightly to one side, hands placed on 'his' knees, one on top of the other, back perfectly straight, head angled slightly downwards... the perfect poise of a pureblood princess.

Hermione had raised an eyebrow, and the girl wearing Harry's body immediately realised her mistake, blushed slightly, and shifted into Harry's more signature 'take-up-as-much-space-as-possible' sitting position.

She'd later learned that, yes, it had been the Greengrass Heiress under there.

Since then, her Mum and Dad had spent most of their free time sneaking into her trunk, and devouring everything they could. Her mum was particularly interested in magical theory, which gelled with her dabbling in theoretical physics in uni, while her dad had called dibs on all the books on ancient runes, in keeping with his interest in engineering.

Since both of those fields were rather specialised, they'd both already read all the books the trunk had on them. The bookshops of Diagon Alley promised to greatly expand their family's secret library, and so it was with great excitement that the Granger family piled into the family Range Rover, and sped down the road, towards the magical world.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Daniel Granger drooled.

Emma stood in front of him wearing what Hermione called 'robes' and what he called a figure hugging, form fitting, curve showing, dress. The material around the forearms, legs, and feet hung loose and billowed, but was tight at the shoulders, chest, waist, and bum.

"This is amazing," Emma said, spinning and twisting to inspect herself, "It was all loose before I put it on, but as soon as I straightened it, it just sort-of moulded itself to me."

He nodded, still staring.

"The material is so soft, but it's also quite thick. It doesn't seem to stretch much, but I have no problems moving in it at all... how does that work?"

He continued to stare, before realising he should probably say something. "Magic?"

She giggled. She actually giggled. He hadn't heard her giggle in years.

He swallowed.

"You look pretty good too, Dan."

He snorted. "I look like a monk."

"Monks don't have finely embroidered, black on black robes." She stepped towards him, swaying as she neared.

His pupils dilated.
She leant in to him, and whispered by his ear. "I think they make you look like the manly man who once ravished me in a club bathroom."

His breath hitched. He brought his hands around her waist, and felt the curve of her body under the silk-like material. "That was quite a while ago," he breathed.

"Too long ago," she murmured.

Emboldened, he skimmed a hand up the feminine curve of her back, reached her hair, bunched it in his grasp, and pulled back and down, firm but also gentle.

She gasped, and moved with him, exposing her neck, and forcing her to look into his eyes.

He gazed into those twin hazel beacons, and saw something he hadn't seen in close to a decade. Lust, excitement, nervousness.

Her breathing shuddered, and he was sure she could feel his excitement pressed against her, even through the clothes they wore.

His lips moved closer to hers.

*Knock* *Knock* *Knock*

"Mum! Dad! Are you ready yet?"

They both froze. Reality poured back into their world, and the dim, dark interior of the Leaky Cauldron bathroom came back into focus.

Emma cleared her throat. "Yes dear, we'll be out in just a minute."

He heard something sounding vaguely like a huff from beyond the door, and footsteps walking away. He returned his attention to the beautiful woman still pressed against him. His hands returned to her waist. "We will continue this later," he stated in a voice as immovable as a mountain.

She continued to gaze into his eyes. When her voice finally escaped it was low and husky. "Whatever you would command of me, my sexy head of house."

A shiver ran up Daniel Granger's spine. Truly, sometimes, there was something to be said for wizarding culture.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

The goblins working the tills of Gringotts Bank, London, really hated the run up to Hogwarts new year. Pureblood parents would act extra snooty to show their impressionable children how to deal with 'their kind.' half-blood parents would utterly butcher their attempts at goblin culture while giving themselves smug, self-congratulatory pats on the back, and muggleborn parents would run around like humans with their heads cut off, alternating between bemused worry and indignant outrage.

Of course, this was a generalisation, but generalisations generally hold true, which is why teller clerk Spatial-Arbitrage looked on with resignation as a small human female, wearing extremely muggle clothes with bushy earth-coloured hair, walked in the door of the Gringotts main hall, and looked around with the awe struck countenance of a typical muggleborn.
Then the girl's parents walked in, and his goblin mind rang a warning bell. They walked like muggles, looked around like muggles, but wore what wizards would consider high-end, expensive fashion. They dressed like members of a pureblood or noble family. But no pureblood or noble house that he could think of would allow their daughter to walk around dressed like that — not even those of the Light.

The girl now walked towards his counter, and his attempts to pin her down into some kind of box failed even harder. Despite her muggleborn-like awe of her surroundings, she moved like a human pureblood female, like the heiress of an ancient and noble house. How odd.

She now stood right in front of his desk, looking up at him. Her parents, or what he assumed were her parents, stood a few feet behind her. They seemed to be deferring to her. Why?

He raised an expectant eyebrow at her.

"Greetings, teller clerk Spatial-Arbitrage. May your day be profitable and your enemies bleed."

Well, that was one for one.

"And you, young witch, may your affairs bear fruit, and your foes suffer. What can Gringotts help you with today?"

"My patron has made an appointment for us to meet with account manager Ragnok Boneslicer."

Now that raised both his eyebrows. Ragnok Boneslicer held the accounts to several ancient and noble families, and the Boneslicer clan was a rising power. "And you are of house…?"

"Granger, clerk teller."

Granger… Granger… didn't ring any bells. He glanced at the adult witch who watched the scene with a mother's oversight, like a lioness watching her cub play with live food. Her face didn't seem to have any of the classic tells of any of the ancient lines. Nor was there a noble house ring visible that might hint at her birth house. But, then again, it was easy to be wrong with humans, even with his training, and rings didn't have to be visible.

"Well, if you will wait a moment, I will confirm the appointment and see you to the account manager's office." He slid off his high chair and walked past the family. He turned to the adult wizard and witch. "And I will say it is good to see wizarding parents who properly educate their children in our ways." He turned back and walked off.

Behind him, Daniel and Emma Granger shared an amused glance between themselves before turning their proud gaze on their daughter, who was trying hard not to look smug.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Hermione strode down the many passageways of Gringotts, careful to maintain a respectful distance from the goblin in front of them while occasionally glancing behind to ensure her parents were still with them. This was all mostly formality. She and her parents had spent days going over the contract they were about to sign, and had even pulled in both a muggle and magical lawyer to give it a careful picking at.

A pair of large doors swung open in front of her, and they were ushered into a waiting room.

 Barely a few minutes had gone by before another pair of doors at the end of the waiting room swung open, and a large goblin waved them inside. The goblin took a seat behind a large
mahogany table. The three of them sat in the chairs lined in front of the desk, her father in the middle, she and her mother on either side.

The goblin looked towards her father. "Welcome to the wizarding world Mister Granger, I am Ragnok Boneslicer of the Boneslicer Clan. May your practice prosper, and your enemies get cavities."

Hermione and Emma giggled.

Her father tried to hide an amused smile. "And may your gold flow and your enemies wind up in a bloody decapitated mess a coins toss away from an occupied dragon pen."

Ragnok grunted. "A bit much for a first meeting, but a very enthusiastic attempt none the less, Mister Granger."

Daniel Granger smiled sheepishly.

"Before we get to the meat of our meeting, Lord Slytherin suggested our young Miss Granger here undergo an inheritance ritual. Would you have any objections?"

Her father glanced at her, to which she gave a short nod.

"That would be fine," he said.

Ragnok stood up, picked up an ornate silver knife from the table and looked towards her. "Are you familiar with the inheritance ritual, Miss Granger?"

She took a deep breath. "The inheritance ritual dates back to the fifteen hundreds and the founding of Gringotts. It uses a combination of Gringotts records and the Albion family magics to place a person within a family line, and highlights any titles, or inheritances they are eligible for. It is one of the more basic rituals used in modern wizarding society, requiring but a single drop of blood to be sacrificed into a purpose made runic chalice. The ritual is owned by the goblin nation, and may only be carried out by citizens of said nation." She took another long breath.

Ragnok blinked. "Hmm, I think I can see why Harry likes you."

She went slightly pink. The adult Grangers smirked at each other.

"Yes, that is more or less right. Here you go." Ragnok handed over the knife to her and watched her expectantly.

She held the knife, and nervously made a small prick at the tip of her index finger, letting a single drop of blood fall into the silver chalice on the desk. Both she, and her parents watched in fascination as the prick healed itself, and the blood stopped flowing.

Ten minutes later, after a very interesting conversation, they'd confirmed that she was indeed a true muggleborn, and not the long lost squib line of Merlin. They all pulled out their papers and got down to the real business.

Ragnok crouched behind the desk and brought out an ornate stained oak box. He opened it. Inside sat six silver rings. Three of the rings had a small snake wrapped around the setting, while the other three featured a wreath of wheat. "We just received these back from the enchanter. A most unusual request, to be sure, but when does our Lord Slytherin ever do things the normal way?" He laughed at what appeared to be an inside joke before gesturing to the rings. "The wheat ones are, of course, yours, just sign here and the house of Granger will be officially recognised by the ministry
as a house." He pushed a filled out form towards her father who picked up the quill offered and signed where shown. A small cut on the back of his hand briefly showed his signature etched in blood before fading.

Her father picked up the box.

"Well, here's to the magical world. Hermione, Emma," he intoned, handing each a ring.

They each put on a ring and felt the magic catch. Dan's glowed for a split second before re-colouring itself gold.

"Congratulations, Head of House Granger."

Dan grinned. "How long until the wizard ministry challenges it?"

Ragnok returned his grin. "With this next bit, hopefully never."

They returned their gaze to the papers in front of them, and Ragnok cleared his throat. "Ah. Allow me to read out the salient points. I know you've already read it through many times, but it is only proper. We haven't done one of these for hundreds of years after all."

Hermione smiled. It had taken a lot of work to get to this point but once she had a firm grasp of the legal position she and her parents were in, it was only a matter of time before she and Harry worked something out to safeguard herself and her family.

"Point one," Ragnok read, "Vassalage of House Granger to the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin.

Responsibilities of Most Ancient and Noble (MAAN) House Slytherin

A - MAAN House Slytherin will arrange for and authorise the installation and maintenance of war-level goblin wards around the Granger residence.

B - MAAN House Slytherin will offer permanent residence at Slytherin Manor for members of House Granger during times of war.

C - MAAN House Slytherin will champion House Granger in any legal disputes that may arise in the magical world.

D - MAAN House Slytherin can stand in loco certatior for any members of House Granger challenged to an honour duel, and will for any non-magical members.

E - Lord Slytherin will act as magical guardian to minors of House Granger born to non-magical parents.

F - MAAN House Slytherin will magically defend the interests and honour of House Granger within the means offered by the law, up to and including declaring blood feuds.

G - MAAN House Slytherin will grant House Granger unfiltered access to the Slytherin Library.

H - MAAN House Slytherin will make all reasonable effort to secure places for all eligible children of House Granger at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

I - MAAN House Slytherin will train all magical members of House Granger in the mind arts from age five until they have reached mastery level three.
J - MAAN House Slytherin will extend MAAN House legal rights to House Granger within the extent permissible by the law.

K - MAAN House Slytherin will grant House Granger a one-acre parcel of land in the grounds of Slytherin Manor along with the option to build a medium sized country house.

L - MAAN House Slytherin will respect the family secrets of House Granger and not divulge secrets to other houses, including other vassal houses, without consent of the Head of House Granger.

Responsibilities of House Granger

A - House Granger will grant right of first refusal of any betrothal contracts to MAAN House Slytherin.

B - House Granger will support MAAN House Slytherin during times of war with able wands and minds.

C - Working age members of House Granger will provide fifty workdays a year (or an equivalent) to MAAN House Slytherin.

D - MAAN House Slytherin will be granted twenty-five percent royalties on intellectual property held by House Granger.

E - MAAN House Slytherin will be granted a five percent share on all earned and business net incomes owned by House Granger along with options for a position on the boards of said businesses.

F - House Granger will not divulge Slytherin family secrets without the leave of Lord Slytherin.

G - House Granger will provide MAAN House Slytherin with unfiltered access to the House Granger Library."

Hermione nodded through most of it. The actual contract was much bigger and contained a lot more legalise but the intent was clear. Whatever happened in the future, so long as the House of Slytherin survived, the House of Granger would be protected.

The biggest sticking point for her parents had been the betrothal contract clause, until it was pointed out to them that it only became an issue if House Granger actually wanted to use a betrothal contract. Mostly, the clause was just to stop other houses trying to force a betrothal contract on her through some other method. In such a case, her father could just point out that of course they'd love to do a contract, but Lord Slytherin would always get 'first dibs'. That had never happened in the second timeline, but considering how she'd acted then, it wasn't surprising.

Another interesting clause was the war wards. These would give the Granger residence high-level protection, and the house rings that both her Mum and Dad now wore, drew power from the wards of the house to offer basic shielding from magical attacks. So long as they were at home, they were reasonably safe. The rings were also voice-activated portkeys, and altered clothing worn to show the coat of arms of Slytherin house, complete with vassalage crest.

They weren't noble house rings by anyone's opinion, but they were as good as money could buy for a small, warded area.

Eventually, her father picked up the blood quill once again, and signed.
Ragnok grinned a goblin, toothy grin. "Welcome to the family".

Outside the bank, Hermione stretched her arms to the sky. "Whew." She looked around the alley. "Can we go clothes shopping next? I really want to get my new school robes." She glanced with a little envy at her parents' clothes. The Slytherin shield didn't look so good on her currently very muggle clothes, and she was loathed to take off her brand-new magic ring.

Her mum chuckled. "Certainly, Hermione. I think your father and I will wander over to the Leaky Cauldron, and get some lunch. Do you think you'll be okay on your own?"

She nodded. "Yes, Mum." She hesitated before eyeing her parents. "Do you think you'll be okay on your own?"

Emma looked at Dan. "I think if we can't survive a few hours on our own in the magical world, it's better we find that out now."

Hermione nodded again, turned, and wandered down the alley until she arrived outside Madam Malkins Robes for all Occasions.

"Hello, Dearie," said a middle aged witch, upon entering. "Hogwarts is it?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Right along there then, with the young man being fitted in the back."

She wandered to the back of the shop, stepped up on the stool, and found herself facing a boy of about her own age with brown hair so light it was almost blond. It was neatly combed to the side, and he held himself with a dignity that made Hermione immediately conclude 'Pureblood'. His robes were pinned all over him. The assistant was to one side, busy taking notes.

The boy looked her over. "How do you do. My name is Justin Finch-Fletchley." He held out his hand.

Oh, Damn. Not pureblood. Hermione's mind scrabbled. Finch-Fletchley was one of the muggleborns in her year, but she wasn't supposed to be dealing with this until September the first. On the other hand, this boy practically screamed 'upper class'. If any muggleborn could take it, it would be this one.

She took his outstretched hand between thumb and forefingers, and bobbed a shallow curtsey. "Pleased to meet you. Hermione Granger, of the House of Granger, vassal of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin."

Justin raised his eyebrows at this, but quickly recovered, giving a little bow of his own.

"Ah, my apologies, I didn't realise we were 'on display' as my parents like to say."

She smiled. "In the wizarding world, you are always 'on display'."

"Is that so? I was going to Eton. Thought I'd got away from all that by coming here."

"I'm afraid not. The wizarding world has many of it's own customs and rituals, and many of them aren't well spelled out to new comers."

Justin looked uncomfortable. "You mean, I'm on display, and I don't know any of the rules?"
"Pretty much."

"I haven't already messed up talking to you have I?"

Hermione gave a winning smile. "Well, it isn't exactly polite to extend your hand to someone of higher rank. Of course, I'm not of higher rank than you, but you didn't know that. Best to wait for the introductions first before offering your hand."

"And how do you tell if someone is higher rank?"

"That's… not an easy question to answer. Best just to not offer your hand to anyone until you've learned the rules."

Justin looked back towards the assistant who was still scribbling notes. "And how do I learn the rules?"

"Well, normally your parents or a portrait would teach you."

"Portrait?"

"A moving painting, usually of one of your ancestors."

Justin gave a nervous smile. "I've got lots of paintings of my ancestors. None of them talk though."

Hermione laughed. "Well, you're doing better than me. I don't have any portraits at all. Talking or otherwise, just still photos of my grandparents, who were more likely to offer to play darts with you, than teach you etiquette."

Justin perked up. "So, your parents aren't magical?"

"Oh no. I'm muggleborn, just like you are."

Justin frowned. "Then how do you know all this?"

"When I was eight, a friend of mine happened to realise I was a witch. He's a wizard from one of the older magical families. He taught me a lot of the culture, and brought my family under the protection of one of the Most Ancient and Noble Houses." She tapped the Slytherin coat of arms on her shirt.

Justin squinted at the shield "Umm… isn't that Slytherin?"

She nodded.

"Isn't Slytherin one of the Hogwarts houses?" Justin asked. "Isn't it supposed to be really… err… evil?"

She snorted. "All the houses have a bad reputation. Gryffindor is for foolish headstrong wannabe heroes. Hufflepuff is for hardworking and loyal idiots, Ravenclaw is for antisocial and aloof nerds, and Slytherin is for backstabbing evil bar— er, people."

"Umm… wow. That's quite a summary."

"Thank you."

"… Sorry, did you say you were a vassal of Slytherin House?"
"Yes."

"You don't... we don't all become vassals of the house we join, do we?"

"Oh no, of course not. I'm a special case. My house's vassalage has little to do with the Hogwarts part of Slytherin House."

"Ahh. Good then."

A silence descended upon the pair of them while the assistant witch finished pinning her robes around her.

Justin was just finishing up. He stepped off the stool, and looked like he was about to leave, but turned back just as the assistant witch was handing him his bags. "I don't suppose you could find a way I could learn all those rules could you? I'd hate to think I was embarrassing myself."

Inside, Hermione Granger did a little, private victory jig.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Hermione stepped outside the clothes shop wearing brand new casual robes, the shield of Slytherin house proudly displayed for the entire wizarding world to see. Her school robes and muggle clothes sat neatly shrunk in a side pocket. She rubbed her hands together. Everything was going so well. She'd achieved a quarter of the mission Harry had given her for the Hogwarts express, and she hadn't even set foot on it yet.

Now that clothes were taken care of, it was time for the next most important thing on the list. A wand! And this time, the mission from Harry was meant to be done now.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

The bell rang, and Hermione stepped into the dusty old shop. Boxes were piled everywhere. Thousands of wands, each destined to a single owner, each containing either unicorn hair, a dragon heartstring, or a phoenix feather.

Hermione remembered Harry's words, spoken not too long ago.

"Fifty new students a year on average, Hermione." They'd been sitting opposite each other in her parent's back garden. Harry's conjured chairs overlooked the vegetable patch. "That's for Hogwarts alone. Another fifty go to other, smaller, lesser-known schools in the British Isles." He looked up from where his forehead rested on his knuckles.

She nodded to show she was following.

"Then there are the other wizards and witches that need replacement wands for whatever reason. Call that a doubling of demand — so two hundred wands on average in the UK a year. Then there's the rest of the world... Obviously other wand makers use different combination of wand cores. Gregorovitch has been known to use veela hair, thestral tail hair, and even coral, among others. But many wand makers use Ollivander's three-core system, and that still leaves the underlying problem. Brother wands are rare, Hermione."

"I don't understand. What is a brother wand?" She edged forward on her chair, closer to the new knowledge, closer to Harry.

"A brother wand is a wand that shares a core from the same animal. I had the brother wand to
Voldemort in the second timeline. When brother wands meet in battle they produce a priori incantatem effect that locks the wands together and produces a powerful magical knock-back on the caster that looses the subsequent battle of wills."

She nodded, slowly, trying to see the implications.

"When I was sent to Azkaban, Dumbledore took my wand, and later used it in a battle with Voldemort to stall him while the order achieved a side objective. Voldemort was pretty annoyed about this, and subsequently delved deep into wand lore to understand what went wrong. That's how I was able to make this." He held up his fifteen inch yew and thestral hair wand. "Eventually he discovered the brother wand effect, but he had to go directly to Ollivander to find it. It's not common wand law. You won't find any mention of brother wands in standard duelling rules and regulations, nor will you find it in basic books on wand troubleshooting, nor on wand care and maintenance, nor is it a part of any active government laws and regulations, even in the market for wands, which is one of the most highly regulated markets in the wizarding world. As I said before, brother wands are rare. So, can you see the problem?"

She nodded, slowly. "Where are the tens of thousands of dragons, unicorns and phoenixes needed to ensure the rarity of brother wands?"

Harry smiled, grimly. "Exactly." He leaned back in his chair. "We know how they get the dragon heartstrings. Dragons are farmed. It's not pretty, but dragons grow really quickly. You can have a dragon that's ready to give its heart to a wand in as little as three months. Most dragons never live to see their first winter, and never fly past the mountain they were born on.

Hermione put her hands up to her mouth, her eyes wide in horror. "That's… that's terrible. Oh, those poor creatures."

Harry shrugged, face grim. "It is what it is. The wizarding world uses dragon in many different products. Dragon liver, dragon heartstrings, dragon blood, dragon hide, the list goes on and on. It's the only reason dragons are still around as much as they are. It's quite hard keeping the existence of dragons quiet you know."

She shuddered, before continuing in a whisper. "What about the unicorns?"

Harry brightened. "A bit better news there. Unicorn tail wand cores are made up of many different unicorn hairs, all interwoven together. The different combinations of hairs in each cord ensures that the brother wand effect never becomes an issue."

She sighed in relief. At least there wasn't a battery farm out there raising and slaughtering baby unicorns.

"Phoenixes are where we have a problem. Phoenixes are amazing creatures. They are very intelligent. They can carry extremely heavy loads. Their tears have healing properties, and they can travel by flame, teleporting themselves and others anywhere they wish."

Hermione's eyes widened. "I'd read stories with phoenixes in them, but I wasn't sure if their powers were real or made up. They seem too good to be true."

Harry smiled. "They are. Real that is. And too good to be true. You'd think that with how incredible phoenixes are that everyone would have one. But they don't. Phoenixes are extremely difficult to domesticate. There are only two people in the world who have a phoenix, Albus Dumbledore, and some sports team in New Zealand. Phoenixes are supposedly very picky about whom they bond with, but once that bond is established they are loyal. Loyal until death. Almost
always the human's death. Phoenixes live for immensely long periods of time, owing to their ability to be re-born from their ashes when they die."

Hermione scrunched up her face, and frowned.

Harry continued. "So… we have a bird that is almost impossible to catch, because it can teleport past any wards known to wizard kind, almost impossible to domesticate, with only two currently known cases, almost impossible to hunt as killing one will result in a ball of flame, a pile of ashes, and no feathers, with a lifespan measured in hundreds if not thousands of years, and yet rare enough in numbers that the muggles can't confirm their existence." Harry brought his hands together in front of him and steepled his fingers. His eyes gleamed. "So the question is this. Where the fuck does Ollivander get his phoenix feathers?"

The dust of the shop tickled Hermione's nose and jolted her from her musings.

"Good morning," said a soft voice from right beside her ear.

She jumped, but quickly rallied.

"Good morning. Are you Mister Ollivander?" She didn't curtsey, or handshake, or bow, or introduce herself by title, or anything. Not here. Mister Ollivander might be a senior member of the oldest most ancient British house still alive, but in this context, he was a trader, and there were few formalities with traders. Besides, it would throw off her spiel.

"Yes. And you are here to buy a wand, of course."

"Of course. I'm Hermione Granger, Sir. This is all terribly exciting. Isn't it? I mean, a wand, and magic. How do I decide what wand I'm going to get?"

The man in front of her chuckled while a number of tape measures started wrapping themselves around her. She idly wondered if wand compatibility changed as a wizard grew.

"The wand chooses the wizard, my dear, or witch in your case. I don't recognise the name Granger. I assume your parents are non-magical?"

"Yes, Sir." Her tone conveyed her eagerness to own the ultimate symbol of magic.

"Mmm… I suggest we start you here then." He withdrew a box from the nearest shelf, and handed her a plain looking wand."

She shook it, but nothing happened.

"Ah, guess not. How about this one?"

The wand choosing went on for ages. After an hour, there were open boxes festooning the entire shop, and Mister Ollivander was getting more and more excited.

"Another tricky customer," he muttered under his breath, "This year's batch have been really quite interesting… Mmm… maybe I was wrong about you… maybe you need a little more… yes, let's try this one, cherry and dragon heartstring, ten inches."

The wand maker handed her the wand and a few pure white sparks came out the end. Mister Ollivander's eyes lit up a split second before he snatched it back. "I knew I was getting close. Okay, then…"
And so it went. After another half-hour she started to worry about her parents.

"Annn…" Mister Ollivander seemed uncertain, but eventually opened an ornate and dusty box, within which was a much longer wand. "Here, try this one. Ash and dragon heartstring, fifteen inches."

Hermione reached for the wand and felt the warmth before she'd even touched it. She grinned, and gripped it. A fountain of pure white sparks shot from the end and landed all around her.

Mister Ollivander clapped. "Well done, Miss Granger. Very well done. And such an unusual combination."

"Really?" Despite the long time in the shop she'd managed to maintain her enthusiasm the whole time.

"Oh, yes. Very unusual. Ash, and dragon heartstring. Why I don't think I've ever seen that combination sold before. I made this wand nearly sixty years ago, and didn't think I'd sell it in my lifetime. Complete opposites. Diametrically opposed. A healer's wand, Miss Granger, but a healer's wand with bite, so to speak."

Her eyes widened a tad.

"Really, Sir? I would have thought phoenix feather for a healer's wand."

Mister Ollivander chuckled. "Oh, you'd think so wouldn't you? What with phoenix tears and all. You are a scholar, Miss Granger. But no. The normal core for a healer's wand is unicorn hair. To have dragon heartstring is most unusual. It is the ash that gives it the healing qualities. Diametric opposites, as I said."

"Does this mean I don't have an affinity for phoenixes or unicorns then?"

Mister Ollivander raised a questioning eyebrow

"I mean, to be a healer, having access to phoenix tears or freely given unicorn blood would be helpful wouldn't it?"

"Helpful?" The old man looked thoughtful. "Yes. It would be. Very rare though."

"Sir?" She bounced on her feet and looked around. "It can't be that rare, Sir. I mean, how many phoenix feathers are in this room?"

The old man stilled, and allowed the sounds of the street outside to filter into the silence of the dusty shop. "Sometimes, Miss Granger," he started, the words careful and measured. "Rarity depends on where one stands."

"I don't understand."

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Miss Granger, every single one. I also know the styles of every other wand maker out there. Anyone who is anyone worth knowing."

She tilted her head.

"A dozen moons ago, I was approached with a memory, the memory of a wand, which someone sought to identify. It was a very fine wand — long, yew, ostentatious, but done to a quality and accuracy that I've never seen before. It was certainly not any wand maker that I know. Nor was it a
legacy wand — old wands leave traces that are identifiable to the trained eye."

Her mind whirled. He wasn't talking about Harry's wand was he?

"That wand was a very rare wand. Unique, I would say. And I find myself wondering where the young man that wielded that wand got it from."

She stared blankly at him.

"Something of a mystery that is," he tried.

She shifted to a look of innocent puzzlement.

"Well, in any case. You have yourself a very special wand there, Miss Granger. Healing and combat in one very powerful package. I expect to see great things from you."

"Thank you, Sir." She turned to leave, deciding to get out now before she gave something away.

"Oh, and Miss Granger?"

She stilled at the door

"The next time you go for the innocent, wide-eyed muggleborn routine, I suggest you do so without your Slytherin vassalage crest on your robes."

Hermione felt herself go red, and bolted from the shop.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

An hour later, and a considerable number of galleons lighter, Hermione, Dan, and Emma emerged from Flourish and Blotts. Hermione was still cringing from the wand shop, and had decided to alleviate her embarrassment by drowning herself in books. She'd taken her newfound wand speciality to heart, and bought most of the shop's available books on healing.

Her dad had gone ahead and grabbed every available book on runes, and her mum had done the same for arithmancy. All in all, it was a very productive day for the newly minted Granger Library, and a visit to the trunk shop yielded a brand new library for most of her parent's books to go in.

There was just one more item on Harry's mission list, and she was going to make damn sure she got this one right.

She marched into Eeylops Owl Emporium, and immediately spotted, and then sidled up to, her quarry. The snowy owl eyed her owlishly.

"Hello, girl," she whispered.

"Hoot."

"My lord says I am in need of the most beautiful and cleverest owl I can find — an owl who can find anyone, anywhere, and who is willing to be paid in mountain high stacks of bacon."

"Hooooot!"

— End of Chapter Thirteen —
A/N: Well, here it is. The first bonus chapter of two before the first Hogwarts year starts. These chapters were originally going to go after the Book of Names chapters, but the flow just didn't feel right. This is basically a filler chapter. Yes there are important points that are covered, but ultimately, its admin stuff, and would have slowed the story down in what was supposed to be the build up to the climax. Anyway. I've got about half of the next season plotted out, and I'm really looking forward to it.

*Warning - Trope based rant incoming. This is NOT a drill *

A/N: A note about the Grangers. Of all the fanon tropes that get my goat, one of the biggest for me is the overprotective/always-outraged/culture-shocked Granger parent routine. My Granger parents are far more enthusiastic about the world their daughter has been born into (possibly helped along with a few calming potions). Mostly because I don't find it fun to write characters who are always bitching and moaning. I like characters who get over the drama quickly, and get on with what needs to be done. It also strikes me as odd that in so many fics that feature the Granger parents, that they rarely go full 'Hermione-Granger' on the world their daughter has entered. If I learned that my daughter was part of a secret world that routinely broke the laws of reality, and had a unique and separate culture that went back thousands of years, my first response would be to read EVERY DAMN BOOK I could.

We will be seeing more of the Grangers in future chapters. And they won't be bitching and threatening to pull Hermione from Hogwarts.

Update after reading a few reviews: I fully acknowledge that the typical Granger parent fanfic reaction to Hermione being almost killed by a troll, petrified by a basilisk, etc, is logical and realistic. I'd be horrified too. I'm not saying its unrealistic. I'm saying I'm sick of reading it :) My Granger parents did go through the whole WTF is wrong with the wizarding world thing, I just choose to summarise it in a single paragraph rather than take up several chapters on it.

Likewise, am I sick of reading this:

Harry and Hermione get off the train/enter Diagon Alley/Arrive at Hermione's house

Hermione: Come on! Let me introduce you to my parents. Don't worry! They'll love you!

Harry: *Gulp*

Emma: Well, Hello, you look like such a sweet boy, and omg, you have signs of abuse, and I'm totally picking out wedding dresses in my mind.

Dan: *Grrrrrr* "You better not look at my daughter in any way funny, twelve year old boy who has only saved my daughter's life multiple times, and been her only friend that she's ever had."

Dan and Emma then somehow find out that Harry is like super amazing gazzillionaire
rich/ a lord / the princess Diana of the wizarding world.

Emma: "Don't worry sweetie, this doesn't change anything."

Dan: "Yeah, it doesn't change anything..." *this totally changes everything.*

Then they find out about the dangers of the wizarding world.

Dan: Oh, yeah. We're actually former SAS. Check out ma guns!

OR

Dan: We're moving to Australia!

Spread out over four or five whole Merlin damned chapters.

I'm not sure if it was Robst who invented these tropes, but he sure as hell perfected them, and when done well they can be very entertaining reads. Especially in H/Hr focused fics where the Grangers act as surrogate family to Harry, replacing the Weasleys who are likely being bashed. But, Merlin's balls, its still overused. In my mind, I grant Robst a free pass on this one, and everyone else had better damn well add something unique to the mix or... I... just... GAHHHHH!

*Rant Over - You may now resume your normal reading pleasure*
To Alexandra Patricia Black, the dim shelves of the Black Library were a place of worship. She hefted the satchel slung over her shoulder, and made her way through the stacked shelves. The thin fingers of her free hand kissed the spines of the books to her side as she walked past. This was her legacy, what set her apart.

She wasn't too sure about blood supremacy, it didn't really make sense to her, but she was glad she was pureblood nonetheless. Purebloods, like noble houses, held power in the wizarding world.

She stopped, briefly, and ran a finger down the spine of a fiction book.

No. She paused. That wasn't quite true. Almost half the noble families were pureblood, even those of the Light and the Gray, but many others were half-blood families. She knew this because she'd checked.

She fingered a newly selected dusty book and slid it from its brother's snug embrace. The title read 'The Dark Mountain - A Story of Power and Heroism'. The edges of her lips tugged upwards. She'd read many of these stories now, and the subtitle of this one summed them all up. In every story there was a hero, and it didn't matter if they were a blood supremacist, a protector of muggles, or the dutiful child of an ancient bloodline, they were always a hero. And in every story the hero found some special power, which gave them the ability to win. Sometimes it was special teachings from a mentor, sometimes it was a powerful artefact, and sometimes it was a demonic or necromantic ritual, but whatever it was, without that special power the hero would be just another smear on the wall.

She looked down the aisle of ancient tomes. Her jaw firmed.

This was her special power — her key to being someone. She would never be Lord Black. She was a witch. But with this library that wouldn't matter so much. Many of the books dated back over a thousand years and contained spells and rituals long since forgotten or banned. With this library, she would achieve great things.

She slid the new book into her satchel and continued on her path. The end of the aisle opened to another aisle, halfway down which was an alcove hidden between two bookshelves. She ducked between the two shelves, placed the satchel on the floor, and gently lowered herself into the large, plush armchair.

"Good morning, Alexandra."

On the wall in front of her hung the painting of an older man, large and imposing, with long black hair and a medium length black beard. The words beneath the portrait read 'Orion Arcturus Black'.

"Good morning, Grand Father," she said, lowering her head.

The man smiled. "Rise, child. And sit up straight."

She did so.

"It's been a few weeks since you last visited." His voice was light and amused. "I was beginning to
think you'd forgotten me."

She averted her eyes.

"Ah, come on. None of that. I'm not blaming you. I'm sure you've been busy."

She relaxed slightly. "Yes, I have. Reading mostly."

The man chortled. "I wouldn't be surprised if you get sorted into Ravenclaw at this rate."

Her head jerked. "I will not. I will be in Slytherin."

Orion Black continued his deep, baritone chuckle. "I'm not doubting it. If you want to, you can achieve anything. You are a Black, after all. Black blood flows through your veins."

She nodded.

"On that note, how go your efforts to reach out to Lord Slytherin?"

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Slowly. He appears to be a very private person." She brightened. "But I did get this though." She reached into the satchel by her side and pulled out what looked to be a new, thick tome.

"And that is?"

She held it in front of her to show him. "A dictaquilled copy of *Pathways of the Mind*. It's all about mindscaping."

Her grandfather raised both his eyebrows. "That is a rare one. I remember my father trying to wrangle a copy from the Orsini before the purges after the fall of Grindelwald."

She beamed.

"And in return you traded… what?"

Her grin threatened to strain the sides of her face. "Nothing. It was an early birthday present."

Her grandfather didn't smile back and her smile faulted. "That was Okay? Wasn't it?"

The man stayed silent for a time, seeming to choose his words carefully. "Yes." He eventually said. "It is okay. It is a very rare book, and you've done well to secure a copy where even my father failed."

She managed a small smile before looking down again, waiting for the hammer to drop.

"It is now more obvious then ever that Lord Slytherin wants something from you. And you still aren't sure what it is?"

"Well… he does seem very interested in the Black Library."

"But you said before that he said he was interested in you."

"Yes, but what could he possibly want with me?"

Orion looked down at her, condescension radiating off the canvas. She lowered her head.

"Alexandra, despite the situation with your mother"—she flinched—"you are still heiress of the
Most Ancient and Noble House of Black. We have enumerable treasures and artefacts, one of the most complete libraries in the country, a fortune that places us among the richest of our peers, a reputation that precedes us around the globe, and a seat on the Wizengamot—"

"Which I will never fully control," she interjected, bitterness filling her voice.

"—And as such," he continued, ignoring her interruption, "there are many who will be competing for your hand. It seems to me that he is merely attempting to steal a lead on the competition."

She felt her cheeks heat up. She hadn't considered that he might literally want her.

"I don't even know him," she blurted out. "He never shows his face. And he's already going to marry Greengrass. And I've heard rumours that he's going to be Luna's consort too."

"Well then." The man settled down in his painted seat. "There you have an opening, don't you? If you want to find out more about him, you just need to ask your friend."

"But... but, sharing with two other witches? Isn't that weird?"

The man frowned. "It's unusual certainly. But remember your duty is to ensure the best for the House of Black. If your husband has to split his focus across multiple families, then he would need to rely more on the Lady Black to manage this house's affairs."

"And he's so much older than me."

He shrugged. "You said rumour has it he's in his mid twenties. Fifteen years isn't that big an age gap. We can live to be 150, remember."

She squirmed in the large armchair. "I'm not sure I even want to think about this right now."

"You'll have to think about it eventually." His voice was firm. "The earlier you start, the better a match you can secure for yourself." He wrinkled his nose. "It's highly unlikely you're going to get any help from my son on this, after all."

"I guess…"

"Come now," Orion said, brightening up, "You have done well for the house in securing that book. I don't think I gave your grandmother anything as valuable during our whole courtship."

Alexandra felt a weight lift from her shoulders. She smiled, and felt another rush of blood to her cheeks.

"Why don't you put your prize away, and we can talk about other things?"

She nodded. "Okay."

Her grandfather's painting swung forward to reveal a secret hiding space behind it. On the top shelf were the five books Lord Slytherin had so far loaned or traded her. She slid her precious gift next to her slowly growing private collection, stood back, and regarded her hidden treasures with pride and a little trepidation. It wouldn't do for her father to learn what she was up to, after all.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Later that afternoon, Alexandra stepped into the sitting room of Grimmauld Place to find her father collapsed in one of the high-back chairs, eyes closed, still wearing full auror uniform. On the table next to him sat a glass of half-drunk fire whisky.
She sat in the chair facing him, on the opposite side of the room, and slid herself to the chair's back. She opened the book she'd taken from the library that morning, and continued to read.

Moments passed.

"Ah, hey there, Alex. Didn't see you come in. How was your day?" The voice yanked her from the world she'd just started to fall back into.

She placed a bookmark into the same page she'd taken it from and closed the book, resting both hands on its cover.

"It was fine."

"How are your summer classes coming along?"

"They are also fine."

"I've heard you're still top of class, eh? You must be quite pleased about that."

She paused before answering. "Learning is important for the future."

Silence filled the room for a moment.

Her father gave a small grimace, and reached for the glass beside him. "Lily says if you continue at this rate, you may do better than her when you finally go to Hogwarts."

"Lady Potter is a good teacher. And I do plan to be top of my year at Hogwarts too."

"Ah, shooting for Ravenclaw then?" His voice sounded hopeful.

More silence. Silence as cold and uncomfortable as an iced pond.

"Maybe."

Sirius sighed. Then he suddenly perked up, a large grin forming over his face. "So!" His large hands landed on his knees. He leaned forward. "Who do you want to invite for your birthday next week?"

She opened her mouth to reply, but before she could say a word he continued.

"I've already invited John of course, and Susan, It'll be nice to have some time with James and Amelia"

She groaned.

"I'd have invited Ginny as well, but I'm afraid she's grounded at the moment. Molly isn't happy with her just now. How about Hannah? And Ernie? And maybe—"

"—I thought," she interrupted and then paused for a moment. "I thought, we could invite the Carrow twins."

Her father looked like he'd just swallowed muck.

"Why in Merlin's name would you want to invite those two? You hardly know them."

"That's why I want to invite them. They're both girls, my age. What's the point of inviting only
people you know to a party?"

He shifted in his seat. "Alex, a party is for having fun!"

"Dad, I'm going to Hogwarts in one year. How am I supposed to do my duty if I only know a handful of other wizards."

Sirius shifted again. His eyes refused to meet hers. "Alex… really… you don't need to worry about that. It's not that important. It's more important to have fun."

"Dad, I talk to my classmates, you know. I'm not stupid. Everyone else worries about it." Her voice was starting to rise. "Don't pretend you're not going to spend half the time next week talking with your auror buddies. Talking about who's going to sit where and with whom on the train. About what's best for Potter, and Weasley, and Susan, and everyone to say to whom and when."

"Alex, I just… I just don't want to distract you from your studies."

"Ah, that explains why you just want me to have fun," she snapped.

Her father stiffened. "No Carrow twins, and that's final!"

Her eyes widened slightly before narrowing. She laid aside her book, stood, and gave a small curtsy. "As you wish, my Lord Black."

Sirius winced. "Alex, surely there's someone else you'd like to invite?"

She landed back in the chair. "What about cousin Draco?"

Her father choked on his drink. "Absolutely not!"

"Well then..." she sighed as though in defeat "What about Luna?"

She knew this was a gamble. Two years ago he'd have said yes without hesitation, but things had changed. Luna had switched to a different homeschool group, and they hardly saw each other anymore. Susan said that many saw Lord and Lady Lovegood's defection to the Gray as an unforgivable betrayal.

Sirius paused. He swished his fire whisky around in the glass. He looked up at the ceiling. "I… suppose—"

"Yay! Thanks, Dad!" She leapt off the chair and dashed out of the room.

Behind her, Chief Auror Sirius Black, The Hammer of the Light, stared, then collapsed back in his chair, sighed, and downed the rest of the glass in one large, tired gulp.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Alexandra stood beside her father at the floo, waiting for their guests to arrive. Her dress was purple. At first she'd come down wearing the black dress she'd worn to Lord Slytherin's party, but her father said she looked like someone had died, and ordered her to change. Next she'd come down wearing emerald green. One look from him had her turning on her heels before he could even open his mouth. She would have come down wearing a gray dress if she'd had one, but she didn't. Eventually she'd chosen purple over blue or yellow or, Merlin forbid, pink.

The floo flared green and three people stepped out in quick succession.
"Prongs! Hey Lils."

The couple smiled, and returned Sirius's greeting.

"And how's my favourite godson?"

John Potter grinned. "You mean how's your only godson?"

Sirius hesitated for a fraction of a second.

A sliver of a suspicion edged its way into Alex's head.

"Of course!" her father barked. "You enjoyed your birthday?"

"Yeah! Thanks for the new broomstick."

"So what'cha got there?" Sirius pointed to the box in John's hands.

John looked suspiciously smug. "It's a present."

"Well, Alex?" Sirius looked at her.

She stepped towards the boy she'd recently started to think of as the Harry clone, and took the box wrapped in moving quidditch wrapping paper. "Thank you, Heir Potter." She bobbed a curtsey, still holding the box, but not lowering her head.

John Potter similarly gave a stiff bow, and the two slowly stepped away, green and violet eyes never leaving each other, like two duellists at the tail end of a blood feud. "You're most welcome, Heiress Black."

The adults watched the display with not a small amount of worry.

The floo flared again and two more people stepped out.

"John!" A young witch with shoulder length red hair and a yellow dress stumbled from the fireplace, and greeted the Potter Heir.

"Hey, Susan." John's expression shifted from stiff to warm.

The two hugged before Susan turned to Alex.

"Hey Alex. Happy Birthday!"

"Thanks, Susan." She smiled.

They migrated away from the grown-ups, and formed their own little triangle while the adults mingled among themselves.

"Here," Susan said, thrusting her own box shaped present towards her, this one wrapped in moving butterfly paper. "I really hope you like it."

She took the box, which was much lighter than John's had been. "Thank you. We can open these at lunch." She turned, and walked over to the table where the rest of her presents lay.

Behind her, John's voice said, "By the way, Susan, you're looking very pretty today. That dress really suits you."
She rolled her eyes, and turned back to see Susan blushing. Oh, Merlin.

"Hey, you three." Her father called over to them. "Why don't you head into the playroom for a bit. I think the Lovegoods are going to be a little while."

They looked at each other, nodded, and walked away from the floo. Alex couldn’t help notice that John made sure to walk in front, and when they reached the first door, held it open for both her and Susan. Their eyes met as she walked past, and a single dainty eyebrow raised returned a small boyish grin. What was Potter up to?

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

The playroom of the Blacks huddled in Grimmauld Place like a crypt, a museum to the changing tastes of two hundred years of magical children. Shelves lined the walls, overflowing with dolls and teddy bears, play wands and toy broomsticks. Everything still worked. When a toy of the Black’s broke, it was thrown out. What were left were the high quality survivors of the eternal war with time, little fingers, and accidental magic.

Alex strode into the middle of the playroom, snatched a random book from a nearby shelf, and held it close to like a shield. She watched Susan and Potter file in behind her, and close the door.

"What's up with you, Potter?" The words shot from her mouth like a stunner.

Potter continued to grin. He looked around the room as though admiring a place of outstanding natural beauty. "Nothing. Why would you think something's up with me?"

She caught Susan out of the corner of her eye walk over to a shelf, press her forehead against a music box, mutter "a magic beyond all we do," and stand back while the intro to a fifty-some year old classical song gradually filled the room.

She fixed the boy with her violet stare. "It's like you're suddenly pretending to be all grown-up."

A brief look of annoyance flashed across his face, quickly replaced by a confident smirk. "We all mature at different speeds, Black, you should know that. Maybe I just did grow up."

Susan shuffled back to them, and stood between them to one side.

"Or maybe you're just trying to get more attention." She shot back.

"There's nothing wrong with attention. Fame is an important aspect of political power."

"So you admit it."

"No. I just—"

"John. Alex," Susan cut in, her voice slightly higher than normal. "Let's not fight, okay? We're all here to have fun, right?"

She fought to keep from rolling her eyes. "Sure."

Susan clapped her hands together. "Why don't we have a game of exploding snap?"

They both nodded. Exploding snap wasn't horrible.

Susan and John dug around until they found a pack while she retrieved three toy wands from a locked box. They sat down at a low table, and she presented a toy wand to each of her guests.
Susan took one, but John politely declined. Instead, with a totally straight face, he flicked his wrist, and a real wand appeared in his hand. His eyes never left hers.

Her face reddened. She felt as though she'd just lost something.

"Oooo," said Susan. "What is it?"

A slight tug pulled John's lips upwards. His voice softened. "Acacia and dragon heartstring, twelve inches, firm, and excellent for transfiguration." He tried to make his voice as mysterious as possible. "Just like your father, Mister Potter. Just like your father."

Susan giggled.

She also couldn't help but smirk at the boy's impression. She'd once accompanied her father on an errand to the creepy wand seller.

"What about you, Susan?" she asked.

Susan pouted. "I had to leave mine at home. Auntie said there was no point in carrying it around until Hogwarts started. Hazel and unicorn hair, thirteen inches, good for divination."

John raised an eyebrow. "Divination?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought too. I asked Auntie. Apparently our family does have some seer blood in it. That's why we're called Bones. They used to use bones in divination a long time ago." Susan shuddered.

She dealt the pack into three piles, and they each took turns tapping their wands to their own piles. The sound of slow classical music—flutes and clarinets, moulding into trumpets, trombones, and oboes—settled on the trio, punctuated occasionally by the shouts of "snap!".

Alexandra reflected on the boy in front of her. John Potter may be acting a bit more grown up, but he was still very different from Harry. She still didn't see Harry much. Sneaking out was difficult. But when she did, she got the impression that he was hiding a lot under the surface. He gave the impression of potential, coiled like a spring. You could almost feel it. It was an impression similar to what she got from Lord Slytherin in the two times they'd met—understandable if Harry had lived with him for three years. John Potter now gave off something similar, but less so.

That specific feeling was were the similarities ended.

In their first meeting, she'd proudly shown the estranged Potter the results of the first ritual she'd done. His reaction wasn't awe or fear like she'd expected, merely a detached observation about how it could have been done better. She was certain that if she ever showed John Potter, his reaction would be to immediately tattle to her father about her being dark.

Since then, she and Harry had shared a cautious dialogue about magic, politics, and the future. His dozen odd letters were piled on a shelf above her books behind the portrait of her grandfather.

One thing that Harry was quite reluctant to talk about though was Lord Slytherin. Well, no longer. If her grand father was correct, and she was being courted, then she needed answers, and she was going to get them.

"Snap!"

All three non-wand hands slammed onto the middle pile. Alex's first, then Susan's, then John's. The
outside packs chose that moment to explode, sending cards straight up into the trio's faces, and covering the floor with cardboard debris, ending the game in the only way the magical world knew how.

"Well, this looks like fun." A dreamy voice announced itself from the door.

"Luna!" Susan jumped up, ran to the blonde, and hugged her. "I haven't seen you in forever! How are you? Who's your new teacher? I saw an article in the Quibbler that said you wrote it. Did you really write that?"

Luna smiled. "Hi, Susan. I'm doing well. My new teacher is Lady Davis. I saw that article too. And I also wrote it."

"Wow! Getting published in a national newspaper. That's amazing. Even if your Dad is the editor."

Luna's dreamy voice didn't change. "Yes. He was very proud of me. He gave me a pat on the head. So did my lord. Of course, the cows were annoyed, but my lord's levitation charm is very strong."

Susan choked back a laugh.

So did she, before the implications of Luna's words sunk in.

"So it's true?" she asked.

The blonde girl looked past Susan, and waved at her. "Hi Alex, hi John. 'It' might be true. What is 'it'?"

"That you're contracted to Lord Slytherin." She saw Potter's eyes narrow.

"Oh. Yes. It's true."

Susan gasped. "But, I heard Daphne Greengrass was already betrothed to him."

"Oh. Yes. That's true too."

Susan's eyes widened. "He's going to marry twice? Doesn't that worry you?"

"Oh. No. Not at all." Luna smiled. "I'm getting a new sister. I've always wanted one."

She glanced at John. His gaze could have melted lead it's focus was so intense.

Susan's voice dropped to a stage whisper, which still carried across the room. "Have you seen him? Do you know what he looks like?"

John leaned forward.

"Oh. Yes. He's very handsome."

"Really?"

"Yes. I love masks."

Susan sagged. "I mean, have you seen under his mask?"

"Oh. Yes. He's very handsome under his mask too. Very rugged. Has definitely seen battle. I hope he's handsome under everything else too."
"Luna!" Susan went red, and slapped the blonde's arm.

Alex felt the heat rise on her own cheeks. Luna had certainly changed since they'd last met.

"Luna." John's voice rang out across the room. It sounded firm, almost commanding. "It's actually really important for us to know more about Lord Slytherin. What can you tell us?"

Her eyes widened in shock.

Luna though, didn't seem to care about the blatant and direct fishing attempt, although her voice did change timbre slightly. "I'm sorry, Heir Potter, but you know well that I cannot betray my lord's secrets."

"Surely you can tell us something?"

"I can tell many things. But only to those whom my lord wishes it."

Did Luna just glance at her then?

"But—"

Luna's voice changed back to dreamy. "And I've also been asked to call you all into the living room." Her eyes shone. "I think I saw pudding next to the presents."

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Alex stared.

There was indeed pudding next to the presents. It was pink, in a large bowl, and had whipped cream on top. Some kind of animated marzipan two-legged lizard with massive teeth stomped around the edge of the bowl. A little sign next to it declared it 'Luna's Pudding'. Runes adorned the side of the bowl. It was a monument to the human sweet tooth, and as such taunted her with its mere existence.

Her father hovered nervously nearby. "Lord Lovegood made it clear that this pudding qualified as a politically sensitive issue, and that the Gray would hate to see anything untoward happen to it."

Luna landed in the chair in front of the bowl, and picked up a large spoon.

John watched Luna from the other side of the table, his face hard and calculating.

Susan, Madam Bones, and Lord and Lady Potter looked bemused.

"What are the runes for?" She asked.

Her father glanced at her. "Blood wards." He coughed. "Only a Lovegood as recognised by the Albion Family Magics can reach the pudding."

Luna spooned up a spoonful of pudding, and spooned it into her mouth. She glowed.

John looked up. "But this house is warded, isn't it? You can have exclusionary wards inside another ward scheme?"

Lily Potter looked shocked but delighted by the question.

James Potter beamed. "Now that's an intelligent question, Son. Yes, you can. It's an inherent
weakness of many ward schemes that curse breakers exploit. Doesn't cancel out the outside wards of course, thank Merlin."

They continued to watch Luna demolish the blood ward protected pudding until Lily Potter drew their attention. "Well, why don't we start on the gift giving? Then Alex and her friends can play together until it's time to cut the cake."

That sounded like a good idea. Not that she was all that excited. Her best birthday present was already hiding upstairs in the library. She glanced at the pile beside her. It was a large pile though.

"Okay," she said, and picked up a random present. The tag read 'To Alexandra Black, from: Eloise Midgen'. "Umm… not sure who this person is."

The majority of the pile seemed to be from people she didn't know. Those she did know came from every shade of the magical world — Light, Gray, Dark, they were all there.

"Oh," said Lady Potter, "Why don't you just put those aside, and we'll do them all at once at the end. Let's do just the ones from the people here first."

"That sounds like a good idea."

The first present was from Susan. The red haired girl stood shyly beside her while she ripped off the wrapping paper. Inside was a collection of hair accessories.

"I know you like black, so I tried to get them in darker colours." Susan looked down. "Do… you like them?"

Her eyes gleamed. She plucked a bejewelled black butterfly from the box, and pinned her hair back. The butterfly fluttered its wings.

"Of course I do."

Susan beamed.

The next present came from John. It felt heavy, and she was sure it was a book. She wasn't disappointed. She tore the paper off and stared. She stared some more. Then stared at Potter. Then back at the book.

John Potter looked smug.

"Well, Alex? Show us all."

Confusion welling up in her, she turned the book around to show the gathering.

The title read, 'The Light Side of the Dark Arts'.

Silence descended on the group.

Lord Potter spoke. "That's an interesting choice of present, John."

John inclined his head.

Interesting was the correct word. She couldn't think of a more appropriate present. She knew of this series even if she hadn't read it yet. It was as close to giving her a book on the dark arts as he could get away with without seeming to do so. But at the same time, its political stance was firmly of the Light. He may have matured a bit, but this was something else. The John Potter she knew
would never be capable of this level of subtlety. It was a very good present.

She fixed him with her gaze, but he gave away nothing.

Eventually she broke the silence. "Thank you, Heir Potter."

"You're welcome." He still looked mildly smug, but maybe this time it was warranted…

"My present next!" Luna jumped up and ran around the table. She picked up a large box from the side of the table, and carefully placed it in front of her. "Keep it that way up."

The box blocked her view of Potter. She glanced at the blonde standing beside her. "Why do I have to keep it that way up?"

"You just do."

Amelia Bones leaned forward. "Are those air holes?"

"Maybe."

Behind her she heard a sharp intake of breath from her father. She started to rip the paper off the box.

*Meow*

She halted.

"Did the box just Meow?"

"Maybe."

She never cared for her father's stories from school, but right now, she grinned a marauders grin. The rest of the paper fell away to reveal a carrying case. Her breath hitched. Bright violet eyes stared at her from behind the wire mesh of the door. The same bright violet she saw every time she looked in a mirror, and attached to those eyes was the cutest pure black kitten she'd ever seen.

On her other side, Susan squealed. "Kitteh! Oh Merlin, Alex, her eyes look just like yours!"

She glanced behind her to see all the adults speechless. She giggled, opened the door, and allowed the kitten to climb onto her. Her eyes gleamed pure evil. Her father had never allowed her to get a cat, but she knew he couldn't refuse her this one. To do so would be a massive insult. For a moment, she forgot her mask. "Thank you, Luna, thank you."

Luna smiled. "You're most welcome, Heiress Black.

She smiled back at her.

Present opening halted for ten minutes while everyone held, petted, and fussed over the little fur-ball, which she'd decided to name Amethyst. Her father had been a bit put out, but eventually gave in and even gave the kitten a good sniff as padfoot, before declaring her 'acceptable'.

"Shall we move on?" Madam Bones asked.

Lily Potter looked up from where she was holding Amethyst. "Yes, let's. Alex?"

"Actually, Lady Potter. I do have one more gift to give," said Luna.
"Oh? Two gifts?"

"Well, this one isn't really from me. She held up a more traditionally sized gift. It's from my lord."

Every adult in the room stiffened.

Her head shot up, and stared at the wrapped gift.

"Luna," her father said, slowly, "do you know what it is?"

"Oh yes, it's a book."

Her heart was beating faster. Another book? What was Lord Slytherin playing at? Why give it in front of everyone?

"Luna, we don't want to imply any mistrust or disrespect towards your future lord, but would you mind if we checked it quickly for magic?"

"Of course not, Chief Auror Black."

Luna handed it over to her father who waved his wand over it for a few minutes. John looked on, the same intense expression he'd worn in the playroom back on his face. Eventually, her father declared it clean, and handed it to her, a look of extreme reluctance on his face.

She carefully peeled the paper away to expose the cover. She stared. She snorted. She looked at Luna, picking up her spoon for another helping of pudding, all dreamy face and innocent smiles. She looked back down at the book, then at John Potter, then back down at the book. She closed her eyes. She tried to hold it back, but she couldn't. Her shoulders started to shake.

Her father looked on, concern radiating on his face. "Alex?"

She threw the book on the table, and howled in laughter. Tears leaked from her eyes. Why was she even worried? She still wasn't sure about this courting business, but that didn't change the fact that Lord Slytherin was awesome.

The assembled group stared at the book, eyes radiating shock, concern, puzzlement, and incredulity.

John looked ready to kill.

The title read — *The Light Side of the Dark Arts - Volumes II and III*.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

"How did Slytherin do that?"

Alex marched beside Luna towards the black library. They'd left John and Susan back in the playroom, excusing themselves with a comment about keruffling scribblebugs or some such weirdness.

Luna hummed. "Is it really a good idea for me to be in the Black Library? Won't your father get angry?"

Alex scoffed. "Him? He wouldn't notice a threat to the Black legacy if it challenged him to a duel. It'll be fine." She furrowed her eyebrows. "Just don't touch any of the books on the third rows or above. And you didn't answer my question."
"The sundial beetles told him."

She stared at the blonde, eyes narrowed. They arrived at the library door. "You could just say, 'I can't reveal my lord's secrets,' you know."

"I can't reveal my lord's secrets."

"Better. C'mon, I want to show you something."

She opened the door, and the two began the winding path through the stacked and dusty shelves.

Luna walked with complete ease, and she couldn't help notice the girl didn't seem at all awed by her surrounding. "Is the Lovegood Library like this?"

"Mmm? Oh. Our library isn't quite as big as yours. It's actually only about the size of the playroom."

"Oh."

"But it has a spiral staircase around the side, and I'm not sure how many floors it has."

"What?"

"Me and Daddy went on an expedition to see how high it went, but by the time we'd climbed for four days we decided to turn around."

She gawked at her reacquainted friend. "And all of that was books?"

"Oh, many of the books were copies of books from lower down. That's another reason we decided to turn around. We hadn't come across a new book for a whole day."

She imagined climbing for days in an ever-repeating library. "That sounds like it would have got frustrating."

"It was fun. We both wore hats. And we had packed lunches."

"... And, how many floors did you go up?"

"Fifty."

"Fifty! You climbed for four days, and you only got fifty floors up?"

"We did spend most of the time reading. It is a library."

"..."

They rounded the corner of a long aisle.

"Where is this library?"

"In the basement."

"In the..." Alexandra threw up her hands. "Forget it. I give up."

Luna continued to hum, and they arrived at the alcove. She stepped into the space, and pulled Luna in behind her.
Grandfather.

The sleeping portrait of Orion Black gave a snuffling sort of sound and slowly opened his eyes. "Alexandra." He sounded surprised. "I hadn't expected to see you again so soon." He eyed Luna, and raised an eyebrow. "And this is?"

"Grandfather, this is Luna, the future Lady Lovegood, and consort of Lord Slytherin."

Luna gave an elegant curtsey. "Portrait Orion Black."

"Lovegood, eh? I remember the Lovegoods of my time. Minds so sharp they went past eccentric, and into full on insane. Just about the only noble family I could have a discussion about blood purity with where we disagreed but could still be polite about it." He frowned. "My condolences for your grandparents. It was a real shame when that bastard went full megalomaniac. One of the biggest regrets of my life, supporting him."

Luna's voice quieted. "Thank you, Portrait Black. I never knew them."

"No, I don't suppose you'd have got the chance… and they never had paintings made?"

Luna shook her head.

Orion Black sighed. "Ah, well, enough about sad matters… Congratulations on your future consortship with Lord Slytherin."

Luna brightened. "Thank you, Portrait Black."

"You must be quite nervous about it. Being contracted to someone so important and yet of whom so little is known."

"Not really."

"Oh?"

"I have full confidence in my lord."

"Mmmm…” Orion Black stroked his beard. "Is he a pureblood, your lord?"

"Both of his parents are magical."

Orion Black nodded, slowly.

Alex watched the exchange, fascinated. Grandfather was a lot better at this then she was, that much was obvious. So, Lord Slytherin was a half blood with two magical parents. That would mean that any of his children would qualify as pureblood according to the law. She could almost see the wheels turning in her grandfather's head.

"And what are your lord's intentions towards my granddaughter?"

Her ears and face burned. She sat down and buried her head in her hands. She'd wanted to ask Luna that question herself, but not just yet, and not like that.

Luna tilted her head slightly. "Portrait Black?"

Orion Black narrowed his eyes. "It is considered polite to formally declare your intentions — a note, an in-person proclamation, a piece of courtship jewellery… something.
"Portrait Black, I am but a humble instrument of my lord's will"—Orion scoffed.—"and I couldn't possibly speak for him, but if I were to guess, I would suggest that your son's attitude to parental influence and my lord's political alignment might make him cautious in making any such declaration, less he put your son on the defensive, and further restrict your granddaughter's movements."

Silence. Then her grandfather's voice filtered through to her as a whisper from where she still stared at the wood floorboards.

"...And you're ten years old. Dear Merlin, you put even your grandparents to shame. I wonder if that means you're even more insane then them too..."

She looked up.

Luna beamed. "Why don't you ask Alex? She can tell you."

"She's insane," she said without hesitation.

Luna turned and hugged her. "Thank you."

"Umm... you're welcome?"

Orion Black chortled. "Oh very well. I can't say I fully approve of all this cloak and dagger business your lord is engaging in, but I can see you're going to grow up to be an intelligent lady."

Luna bobbed another shallow curtsey.

"I just have one question."

"Oh?"

"Does your lord support the pureblood cause?"

Luna paused for just a moment. "My lord understands the frustrations many in magical Britain have with the noble house system since the loss of the rituals, and he recognises the dangers posed by first generation magicals to the international statue of secrecy."

Her grandfather seemed to search Luna's face for several seconds. "Damn, he has trained you well."

Luna's face was a picture of serenity. "That's all down to Lord Slytherin's super secret motivational technique."

"Which is?"

"Hugs."

Alexandra face palmed, again.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

The cake was white and had ten candles in it. Alex blew them all out while the assembled wizards sang happy birthday, lead by Lady Potter. She sliced the cake into even pieces, and doled them out onto conjured plates. Luna accepted hers with an enthusiasm normally reserved for global sporting events. Susan politely accepted hers then proceeded to demolish it. John seemed to have gotten over Lord Slytherin's oneupmanship. He accepted politely and ate slowly, chatting with Susan.
The grown-ups all took their own slices, and she directed her attention to her own slice. She sighed. There were many costs associated with magic, and sometimes the cost was high. She took a bite and pretended she was loving it. It tasted like a sponge.

Every ritual has a cost.

Ever since Harry had pointed out that she should have waited for her thirteenth birthday for the best effect for the strength ritual, she'd felt a bit melancholy when eating sweet things.

She was a witch. She would never have all the power that wizards held in the wizarding world, but with the ritual of krazenkart she'd at least been able to narrow that power gap a bit. The ritual gave the witch who cast it both the strength of the man she could have been, and the potential for strength of the man she could have been. The cost was her ability to taste sweetness.

She didn't regret it. Not at all. But if she'd a bit less headstrong, she probably would have waited a few years first.

She caught Luna's eye and the blonde gave her a small encouraging smile. Did she know? Surely Lord Slytherin would know. Would he have told her?

"So, have you heard anything from Macmillan about the Hogwarts express?" Her father's voice washed over her and the other children.

John stopped half way through a joke, and stilled for a fraction of a second before starting to nibble his cake.

Susan looked at him, her face one large question mark.

Luna perked up.

John jerked his head towards the table where to grown-ups sat.

Susan's eyes widened in understanding.

She rolled her eyes, and resisted the urge to jump and shout 'told you so' at her father.

"Yeah. He wants his son to stay out of the main groups, but from the sound of it he was leaning more towards us than the Gray." Lord Potter's voice was a bit louder than her father's.

Luna brought out a set of gobstones, and they began a slow and pointedly silent game.

"So, he's going to have Ernie present himself then?"

There was a slight pause.

"I'm not sure, it's hardly necessary under normal circumstances. Ernie and John have known each other for years, and their compartment is going to be almost all kids they both know from classes."

"Buuttt…" Lily's voice interjected.

James Potter continued. "But there's the Gray to think about, isn't there. Macmillan may well want Ernie to present himself to them, even if he doesn't want him to sit with them. And if he presents to them, then he'll probably present to us too."

"Who would Ernie sit with if not John's group?"
"Not sure… maybe he'll scout for new muggleborns."

There was a sigh. Lily spoke. "At least we don't have to worry about clashes between our children and the children of the Dark. Daphne's going to be a wall between us."

"Yes. The Dark at the front of the train, the Gray in the middle, and the Light at the end…"

Lily spoke. "Wouldn't it make more sense to have the Dark at the end and the Light at the front? I mean, what about all the muggleborns who have to put up with all the bigotry the moment they step on the train?"

"It's a bit late to organise a different seating arrangement now, Lily. Hell, the way we're doing it this year is hardly better than organised chaos."

"Well Prongs, this year is crazy. The first born children of the leaders of the Light, the Dark, and the Gray, all starting Hogwarts, in the same year?"

"Trust me, Padfoot, I know. I've been fielding owls from dozens of parents for weeks now. Every single one is convinced that if their kid screws up, their whole family is going to ostracised for the next decade. It's mental."

Madam Bone's voice joined in for the first time. "I heard something interesting."

"Oh, what?"

"You know the Smiths?"

"Yeah, of course. Sally is going to be in with John."

"Mmmhmm.. And guess who's going to be with Greengrass?"

"… You don't mean?"

"Yep. Zach."

"Wow. So the Smiths are splitting themselves. Just like the Patils. Fine if you have two children in the same year, I guess."

Lily spoke. "At least there aren't any triplets this year."

There was a snort from Sirius. "I'd like to see the family with the balls to try and make nice with all three parties at once."

"A traditionally Gray family might be able to pull it off."

"… I suppose."

"So that brings the total noble houses for the Gray's compartment to three… same as the Dark," said Lord Potter.

"While we're sitting pretty with five. Hah!"

"Sirius…" Lily admonished.

"I know, I know, it's not the most important thing, but still."
Lord Potter spoke. "I've actually heard an interesting rumour about the Gray's next move."

"What?"

Across from her, John's eyes widened in alarm.

"I've been told—"

"DAAAAD!"

All the adult faces turned to their group.

"What?"

John silently made rapid head jerking motions to where Luna sat gazing at the gobstones with a ferocious concentration.

The adult's eyes widened slightly.

Lord Potter coughed. "Ah. Yes. Amelia, would you do the honours?"

A cloud of magic settled over the table, and the grown-ups continued to chat, their voices now muffled to anyone who might listen in.

Luna's gobstone spewed liquid in John's face.

— DP & SW: RiBSR —

Alex and Luna sat on their knees on her four-poster bed. They'd ditched Susan and John again. Amethyst was hunting a sock, which Luna dangled in front of her. The black kitten made a giant leap, misjudged, and tumbled off the bed, landing in a heap of clothes, mewling and clawing.

"So, how do I learn more about Lord Slytherin?"

Luna looked back at her from where she was reaching over the side of the bed. "Lord Slytherin is a very private person, Alex."

"I figured that already."

"He has many secrets that he doesn't give away lightly. He needs to know he can trust those close to him with those secrets absolutely."

"And you're one of those people?"

Luna beamed. "Yes."

"How? I mean what did you do to earn that trust?"

Luna looked up at the ceiling. "I learned what he had to teach."

She huffed. "Well, I haven't been able to learn anything from him because he doesn't want to teach me."

"Lord Slytherin can't teach you until you learn to protect his secrets."

"Protect his… you mean occlumency? I know occlumency already!"
Luna crawled towards her, and placed her hands on her shoulders. Her blonde hair fell in front of her face.

"Umm, Luna?"

Luna flicked her hair back, and fixed her with her silvery gray stare. There was nothing dreamy about it now. "May I?"

Her pupils dilated. "Y-you know legilimency?"

"A bit. May I?"

She hesitated. Then she firmed her resolve and nodded.

Luna leaned forward and rested her forehead on hers. The girl's soft breath tickled her nose. Her heart beat a little quicker and she strengthened her shields, ready for the tell tale tickling that signalled a mind probe. Her whole world seemed to narrow to the silver orbs in front of her.

And then something smashed into her with the ferocity of a mothering nundu. She gasped. She tried to push the presence away, but she might as well have tried to stop a tidal wave. Suddenly Luna was everywhere. Everything was open to her, all her memories, all her emotions, all her fears, hopes, and dreams. She fell forward, and darkness enveloped her.

…

…

…

She was being held. She opened her eyes to see Luna's gray ones gazing down at her with a mixture of resolve and sadness.

"Not nearly good enough, Alex."

She looked away, embarrassed and angry with herself. Her heart raced. She needed to get away. She easily shoved Luna away, and scrambled from the bed. She got two steps before she felt herself being summoned back into Luna's arms. She grabbed the girl's arms from around her waist and plied them off, but still couldn't move. She was stuck. "Let me go!" She wriggled.

"Shhh…Alex, there's nothing to be embarrassed about." Luna's voice was soft and calming. The girl nuzzled the back of her neck. "It's okay, really it is."

She stopped struggling, and trembled. Fear and vulnerability flooded her.

"You found out that you're not as strong as you thought you were. That's fine. No one expects you to be a god."

"Why?" her voice was a whisper. "Why can't I keep you out?"

"Alex, the occlumency lessons given to us before we go to Hogwarts are only supposed to stop stealth and surface intrusion."

"But my tutor did full assaults too!" Her voice started to rise.

"It's quite likely he was holding back. It normally takes a decade of practise before you can keep out a master legilimens, if they're really trying."
Her lip trembled. "But how can you…"

"Lord Slytherin's teaching methods are much better than normal ones, and Harry used those methods when he taught me."

She thought back to when she'd first met Harry. She hung her head. Her grip loosened on Luna's arms, and she felt the girl wrap around her, Luna's chest still pressed to her back.

They stayed like that for whole minutes. Her trembling ceased. She calmed.

Eventually the words slipped from her lips like the single snowflake before the avalanche. "I want to learn."

Luna shifted behind her. "Well, it's a bit late to learn from Harry. He's going to Hogwarts now."

Her voice grew desperate. "Can't I learn from you?"

Luna seemed to consider it. "You could. Although I doubt I'd be nearly as good at teaching as Harry is."

"I don't care! I mean, it's the only way isn't it? Lord Slytherin isn't going to teach me himself is he?"

"No. That's unlikely at the moment."

"Then you'll do it?"

She grasped Luna's wrists, and turned. Luna was once again her dreamy self. A massive smile plastered on her face.

"Of course I will, Alex. I've missed having you as a friend." The girl then shuffled forward and wrapped her in another minute long hug.

Slowly, Alex relaxed into it. It did feel kind of nice.

— End of Chapter Fourteen —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And there we have the final Bonus Chapter before the start of first year. Not sure when it's going to start posting, but I hope reasonably soon. Like, within the next few weeks.

A/N: It was noted by a sharp-eyed reviewer that snowy owls bark, not hoot, to which I say… Umm… that… that all magical owls are also taught HOOT in owl school, because it is the obvious lingua franca of post owls! Yeah… That's right. *Twiddles thumbs and whistles*
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We've all read the Half Blood Prince. To us, using the ring to kill Dumbledore is a no brainer. But Harry hasn't read Half Blood Prince. He doesn't know exactly what would happen if Dumbles encountered it. He doesn't know the stone is the resurrection stone. And he doesn't know that Dumbledore is obsessed with the deathly hallows. In fact, during Half Blood Prince, we see several assassination attempts by Draco, all of which fail. To Harry, the ring would be like those attempts of Draco's — just one of several hundred possible methods to kill Dumbles, all of which suffer from unknown variables. Also, Harry has no real reason to declare war on anyone right now. At the moment, Harry is becoming stronger and stronger while his opponents either stagnate or cede him ground. This is also why Harry didn't destroy Dumble's office while he had the chance. He doesn't want Dumble's attention on Lord Slytherin anymore than necessary.

I would also like to point out that Harry has yet to actually kill anyone at all. I'm not saying he wouldn't or won't. It's just not so obvious that he's desperate to bloody his hands as some readers seem to think.

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BOOK TWO: The Foundations of Power

Welcome to Book Two of Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches.

*Read in deep baritone voice*

Previously…

Harry Potter has come back in time to stop the Dark Lord winning — to remake the wizarding world how he wants it. To help him stay out of Azkaban, Death and Fate gave him a lordship, and Harry became Lord Slytherin. Keeping his time travel secret, Harry used the knowledge and skills he learned from Voldemort to amass a small fortune, smuggling drugs in the muggle world.

As Lord Slytherin, he befriended the Greengrasses, and took the reins of the neutral faction, rebranding them the Gray, and saving them from assimilation by the Dark and the Light.

And as Harry, he started gathering a group of witches to become the core of his many hidden plans. He became betrothed to Daphne Greengrass, who loves exploring and could put Machiavelli to shame. He vassaled Hermione Granger, who applied her viscous intellect to the magical and social side of the wizarding world. He become the future consort of Luna Lovegood, who is as mysterious as she is devoted. He made inroads to befriending Alexandra Black, whose ambitions and frustrations make her prickly to friend and foe alike. And he snatched up Ginny Weasley, who has come to see her former crush as the archetype of everything she loathes.

That crush was Harry's twin brother, John Potter, who was given a chance to come back in time to defeat Voldemort, but really messed it up. Harry's travelling back three years before him changes a lot, and time-traveller John now deals with a world very different to how he remembers it from his original time line.

Now, Harry, Daphne, and Hermione are off to Hogwarts, with their sights firmly set on the legendary artefact that could easily fund a dozen wars. But will all go according to plan?

#

Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches

Book Two: The Foundations of Power

Chapter Fifteen

The First Year's Train Dance

Platform Nine and 3/4 was a marvel of magical space folding. The enchantments surrounding this icon of the British magical world had to hide, not only the platform, but also the rail track, which snaked out of the station and cut its way straight through a city of eight-million muggles. After it left the city, the rail line had to stay hidden for the entire eight-hundred kilometre journey, all the way to Hogsmeade station. A thin slice of magic, indelibly cutting the country in two.

Muggle repelling charms and standard ruin-illusions would do no good here.
Figuring out a way to hide such a conspicuous tract of wizarding world territory was to be one of the greatest engineering feats of the arithmancy revolution — or rather, that's what the 1827 minister of magic, Ottaline Gambol, told her contractor, Lord Woodson Hawking. To which Lord Hawking deadpanned, "You're havin' a jape, Gambol."

Nevertheless, after nearly twenty years of work, the Noble House of Hawking did crack the problem. The solution was in reverse-expansion charms. Instead of creating more space where there was none, Woodson figured out how to create no space where there was some.

All the way up and down the country, whenever anyone crossed the five metre wide slice of land that contained the Hogwarts Express line, they bent through an undetectable, space-contraction ward, none the wiser of what just happened. New muggleborns on the Hogwarts Express would shriek in fear and delight as motorway cars barrelled straight towards the train, only to disappear mere inches from the track and instantly reappear on the opposite side.

This all required one of the largest warding projects of all time, because while it's relatively easy to ward a four square kilometre circle, it's a lot harder to ward a four square kilometre strip that's five metres wide and eight-hundred kilometres long. Thirty-two thousand miniature ward stones were needed. Two every five metres. These stones were housed below the Hogwarts Express line, in an eight-hundred kilometre subterranean passageway called a ward tunnel. Because the failure of even a single stone could endanger the whole line, regular checks were required to ensure the stones were all in order.

Not many people knew this. Also, not many people knew that platform Nine and 3/4 was sealed off anytime there wasn't a train in service. More people knew that Hogsmeade station was not sealed off when there wasn't a train, but few considered it of any huge import. This only goes to show that while the wizarding world may not be as silly as many people would like to believe, it does still tend to overlook small details.

Harry James Potter, current Lord Slytherin, future Consort Lovegood, time-traveller, former Azkaban resident, and most definitely the Boy-Who-Lived, sped down the ward tunnel on his trusty nimbus 1700 broomstick. The walls held no lights. This didn't worry him. In the hand not gripping the broomstick he held his newest toy, a back-mirrored hand of glory. The shrivelled appendage cast a bright light in front of him, illuminating some sixty metres of tunnel. At one-hundred kilometres per hour that gave him about two seconds to react should something block his way.

This also didn't worry him. He'd always been amazing on a broomstick. In fact, he suspected that if the whole parents-dumping-him-at-the-Dursleys thing hadn't happened, he'd probably have been a quidditch player. Yes he could fly without one, but it just wasn't the same.

He passed yet another maintenance floo and checked the time. One o'clock in the morning. He'd been flying for nearly eight hours now. He should be nearly… ah. He slowed down and stopped as the tunnel opened out into a much wider space. The ward stones here were larger, more powerful, and more numerous. He could feel the thrum of magic seeping off them.

Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out his shrunk trunk. A quick rummage produced the Potter invisibility cloak, which he donned. He re-pocketed his trunk, padded over to the stairs, and examined the door at the top of them. The door was warded, just like it had been for Tommy-Boy when he'd explored down here. The underground room was also warded against apparition, but, and this was the important bit, the platform above wasn't. He looked up to the roof, some four metres overhead and slowly floated up to meet it. It also seemed that the warders working on this stretch of the project hadn't been as thorough as they should have been. You couldn't apparate into
the platform when it was sealed, but once you were inside…. He reached the very top and pressed himself flat against the ceiling. He smirked. Destination, determination, deliberation. There was a faint crack and he found himself less than one metre from where he’d started, but this time on the platform.

There sat the Hogwarts Express in all her scarlet metallic glory. He'd ridden her thrice in his life, and seen her ridden fourteen times before that. The platform was empty. Dead. He shivered and apparated straight into the first public compartment.

Unshrinking his trunk again, he withdrew a standard warding kit and a small tuft of burnt-brown human hair. He had an hour. Today was a big day, and he couldn't afford to play on anything less than a full eight hours of sleep. He took off his shoes and socks, gripped his hand of glory between his bigger and smaller toes, picked up the kit's paintbrush, unscrewed a jar of invisible ink, and, resisting the urge to whistle, got down to work.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione Granger stood with her parents in Kings Cross Station. Her heart raced. Her eyes took in every detail of the 19th century building, all red-brick, black-steel, and glass.

People bustled all around them, oblivious to the wonders that lay just beyond the nearby gate. They stared at Hedwig as they dashed by, sitting as she was in her cage on her trunk. Occasionally, a child would point and exclaim.

This was it. This was the day. This was—

She stopped suddenly. She’d been thinking that quite a lot recently. Every day seemed to be the day. She shook her head.

"You ready, Sweetie?"

She took a deep breath. "Yes, Mum."

"Now you are going to owl us aren't you?"

"Yes, Mum."

Hedwig gave an affirmative bark.

"And you're going to ask Harry for help if you need it?"

"Yes, Mum."

"And if a really big problem comes up, what do you do?"

"Owl Lord Slytherin, Mum."

"Very good." The older female Granger had tears in her eyes. "Don't worry dear, we'll all see each other at Christmas."

She nodded. Tears threatened her eyes too.

Her Dad spoke. "You do us proud in there, Hermione. I know his lordship has given you some special tasks. Keep one eye on them, and one eye on your studies, yes?"

She sniffed and blew her nose with a quickly produced handkerchief. "Yes, Dad."
"Right, go for it then." He hugged her.

She hugged him back, and before she could lose herself anymore, she turned and hugged her mother too. She took another deep breath, turned her trunk and raptor ladened trolley, pointed it in the direction of the space between platforms nine and ten, and walked off at a brisk, confident pace. Her heart beat even faster as she neared the barrier, but she didn't slow down. She reached it, closed her eyes, and opened them a moment later to see the magnificent scarlet Hogwarts Express.

She kept on walking and joy filled her heart. Her world. She looked around and suddenly realised that, like in Diagon Alley, she was surrounded by other witches and wizards. Her Slytherin mask slid into place and her pace slowed to a more graceful gait.

To her left, an older wizard complained to an even older witch. "I mean really, all this fuss over one prepubescent kid."

"Now, now, Gilbert. You wouldn't be saying that if you'd been in the country eleven years ago."

Her joy faded a notch. She mentally rolled her eyes.

A little further on, a group of older students bantered among themselves. "Check it out. Mum baked two cakes. I get to present the other to The-Boy-Who-Lived when we're off."

She shook her head.


Humph! She barely held back a scowl. And people were going to call her ignorant. How could they heap such praise and attention on her Harry's brother, and then turn around and treat her best friend like scum scraped off their boots?

Hermione turned her back on the offending news stand, walked a few paces away, and looked around for a place to change. She spotted a dark corner and headed towards it. She picked Hedwig off the top of the trunk, opened the lid, and, much to the surprise of a few nearby wizards, climbed into the trunk, and locked the lid behind her.

Back inside her beloved miniature library, she stripped down to her underwear and pulled on her brand-new, black, acromantula silk Hogwarts robes. The moment she'd finished straightening it, her vassalage crest appeared above her left breast and on her sleeves.

On her right hand, the vassal ring of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin faded into sight, and on her left, the ring of House Granger followed it. Harry's silver lightning bolt ring rested on her pinky, hidden to all but his most trusted. That meant her. She felt warmth run through her at the thought and almost skipped back to the stairs, which led to the trunk's lid. She unlocked the lid, poked her head out, and stared.

This wasn't where she'd left the trunk. Her eyebrows furrowed. She could see over the top of the Express. The floor seemed quite a way away.

Chortles wafted up from below. She looked down. Two red headed boys, a bit older than her and indistinguishable from each other, gazed up at her. They looked to be waiting for a reaction.

"You know its very rude to interfere with a lady when she's changing."

This apparently wasn't the reaction they'd been expecting. They looked at each other, eyebrows
raised, before turning back to her. "Our sincere apologies, my lady," the one on the left said. They gave synchronised, over-exaggerated bows.

"If we'd realised you were changing, we would of course have offered to help."

Her eyes widened. No. Bad Hermione. Slytherin mask, Slytherin mask… "Well, can you at least help me down then?"

"Certainly, my lady." They waved their wands together and chanted, "Wingardium Leviosa."

Her heart skipped a beat as her world jerked and she found herself slowly descending to the ground. The trunk landed with a soft clonk of wood on stone. She carefully finished her journey, stepping out of the trunk, and closing it behind her with an audible clunk.

The red-haired twins stared at her.

"Yes?"

They looked at each other again. Then back at her. "You're… so are you a first year or not? We don't remember ever seeing you before."

"Why would I not be a first year?"

The one on the right pointed at the crest on her chest. "You're already sorted." It sounded almost like an accusation.

"Ah, no. You see where the helmet would normally be? There are two crossed wands instead. That means I am a vassal of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin."

The two looked like she'd just announced the sky was green and the grass was blue. "A vassal? Do they still exist?"

"Yes. I'm one of them."

"Well, we certainly wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of a servant of the forces of evil, now would we, Fred?"

"Certainly not, oh brother of mine."

She wasn't sure what to say to this so she said nothing.

"I'm sure she'll want to be on her way."

"Mnhmmm… to pillage and terrorise, no doubt."

"Yes, to hunt down the innocent and steal all their chocolate frogs."

"To find all the ikle muggleborns and jinx all their electrics."

"Heeey!"

They looked back at her.

Slytherin mask. Slytherin mask… "I would have you know that I am a muggleborn."

Now the twins looked like they'd checked the sky and grass and found she'd been right. They
blinked. Finally one whispered. "The Dark Muggleborn."

She scoffed. "I'm not Dark. I'm Gray."

They frowned. "The Gray Muggleborn doesn't have quite the same punch, does it, George?"

"No it doesn't, Fred."

She hefted her trunk and started to drag it, slowly, towards the carriage. "Shouldn't we be moving? The train must be leaving soon."

As one, they swept by her, grabbed opposite sides of the trunk, and heaved it up. "After you, my lady."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

In the middle of the train, Daphne Greengrass lowered herself into the centre-most compartment seat, and straightened her robes.

Freekey leapt off her shoulder and onto the the table.

She fished in her pocket, produced a large nut and held it to the inquisitive monkey, who grabbed and nibbled at it, turning it constantly in her tiny hands.

She produced a small hand mirror and checked her hair. She adjusted her robes again. She produced a small slip of parchment from a pocket. It held a list of some thirty-odd names. She read over the list, turned over the parchment, and went over each of the names in her head, recalling the basic facts about each person, and counting off when she'd finished. She folded the paper back up, and slipped it back into the pocket. Then, just in case she'd missed something, she checked her hair again.

Harry. She sighed. For the last three years she'd never gone more than a few days without seeing Harry. She'd hugged him goodbye not twenty-four hours ago, and already she missed him. The thought of not being able to talk with him for ages did weird things to her chest. But she was the betrothed of Lord Slytherin, the heiress of the Ancient and Noble House of Greengrass, and the de facto leader of the sons and daughters of the Gray. Someone like her wouldn't give the time of day to a scruffy, uneducated, light-named, non-entity. At least, that was the official reason. The real reason was that the headmaster and current Slytherin head of house would be keeping a close eye on Harry for the first few weeks, and he couldn't afford to attract too much attention. It was all heart-wrenchingly frustrating.

In the solitude of the compartment, she allowed herself a self-indulgent pout.

Someone grabbed the compartment door and the pout vanished from her face.

The door slid open. It was Tracey.

"Daph! Hi, Freekey."

A smile lit her face. "Hi, Trace."

Freekey looked up from the nut and chirped.

The brown haired girl entered the compartment, dragging a trunk behind her. Tracey looked up at the overhead compartments and frowned. "How did you get your trunk all the way up there?"
"My dad put a feather-light charm on my trunk before we left."

Tracey slapped her forehead. "Argh. I should have thought to ask." She frowned again. "But still, even if it's lightened, that's a long way up. You're not that much taller than me and I can't reach up that high."

She flicked her wrist to produce her wand, which she shook back and forth.

"No way." Tracey looked suitably impressed. "When? How?"

"My lord taught me." The pride in her voice slipped into a smirk on her lips, which was fine. She had worked hard for it.

"But how? What about the underage magic laws?"

"Wand tracking doesn't work under fidelius."

"What's fidelius?"

"Look it up."

Tracey pouted. "Fine." The girl sighed. "Wow, you're so lucky, Daph. I wish I had a mysterious betrothed to spoil me rotten. It's so romantic."

She looked at the brunette, incredulous. "Oh, yes, being terrified out of your wits for months because you're going to be married off to a fat old geezer is the best thing ever."

Tracey winced. "But, he saved you, Daph."

She folded her arms. "I know he saved me. That doesn't mean I'm glad I needed saving."

"But. But, you're always talking about him. It's always Lord Slytherin this, or Lord Slytherin that. Aren't you happy about it?"

Her shoulders slumped back in the chair. "Yes. Yes I am happy. I just wish it didn't happen that way. Wishing for what I have is like wishing to win the Daily Prophet grand prize draw, where if you don't win, you get A-kay'd. Many people who enter, don't win." She looked over at her friend.

"How would you react if, after the great feast, tonight, you received an owl from your dad saying he'd signed a contract for you?"

Tracey stilled. "I'd probably freak out."

She nodded. "Anyway." She clapped once and stood up. "Your trunk."

Tracey looked down at it.

"Why not just shove it up against the wall for now? We're going to need space for six more. Hopefully some of the others have lightened there's."

Together they shoved the heavy trunk against the wall and just got comfortable when the door slid open again. They both turned.

It was Granger. But not as she was the last time she'd seen her. The previously bushy hair was now more wavy, and the buck-teeth looked like they'd been shrunk. The witch stood in the doorway as though Merlin had returned to Earth.
The witch's eyes did a lightning circuit of the room — from her face, to her hands, to Tracey's face, to Tracey's hands, and finishing at her face again. Subtle. Granger took a step into the room. "Heiress Greengrass, of the Ancient and Noble House of Greengrass?"

"Yes," she drawled.

"I am Hermione Granger, of the House of Granger, vassal of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin."

There was a audible intake of breath to her right.

She rose from her seat and regarded the witch for a moment.

Granger didn't extend her hand.

She raised a single manicured eyebrow. So, she was Granger's superior, was she? That's not what the witch actually believed though, was it? "Welcome, Miss Granger." She gestured to her side. "This is my good friend, Tracey Davis, Heiress of the Noble House of Davis."

She glanced towards Tracey, who was looking between her and Granger, very confused.

"Ah, pleased to meet you," Tracey said, extending her hand.

Granger took the hand, and smiled. "Pleased to meet you too."

They shook.

"So," started Tracey, grinning like a madwoman, "have you two met before or something? I mean, I know we're being massively pureblood today, and all, and if anyone would have already met I'd have expected, well..."

Granger's eyes flickered to hers, before returning to Tracey. "We've never been formally introduced before, but..."

"...It's safe to say that we've heard plenty about each other through a mutual acquaintance," she finished.

Tracey folded her arms. "Oh, yes? A 'mutual acquaintance' hmmm?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

Her eye twitched. Granger's lips thinned for a moment before flashing back to neutral.

Tracey's grin went full impish. "Should we get comfy then? Five more to go after all."

Granger dragged her trunk in and shoved it under a seat. They all sat down and silence filled the compartment.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

[Meanwhile... at the front of the train...]

A small girl with long, burnt-brown hair adjusted her robes and strode with purpose towards the door to the first compartment. She fought to keep her nerves under control as she neared. Daddy
had spent the last week drilling into her head how important this was. She reached for the door handle and paused.

…

Actually, she should really find and talk to her best friend before she joined Malfoy shouldn't she? Otherwise they wouldn't see each other the whole train ride. Yes. That was a good idea. She turned around and marched away from the compartment, sure of foot, and firm in purpose.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

[Moments later…]

Harry finished brushing his teeth in the tiny train bathroom, slipped his shrunk trunk back into his black silk robes, and poked his head out into the corridor. All clear. His signature 'I'm fine' Slytherin mask lit up his face with a glint of humour and a boatload of confidence. He swept to the first compartment, knocked, and slid back the door.

Four pairs of eyes latched onto his. Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Parkinson. Four pairs of eyes narrowed.

"Bugger off, Potter," sneered Pansy. "This is our end of the train."

Harry grinned. "My sincere apologies, my lady. But I fear your aggression may be misplaced. I'm sure Heir Malfoy would be happy to introduce us?"

Draco's face relaxed back into boredom. "Oh, Harry, it's you."

Pansy's head whirled between him and Draco. "What?" Her voice was wary. "Draco, what's going on?"

Crabbe and Goyle looked between the three, immediate aggression held back only by sudden confusion.

Draco stood. "Heiress Parkinson, may I present Harry Potter, estranged twin of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter. Mister Potter, this is a close friend of my family, Heiress Parkinson, of the Noble House of Parkinson."

The outside sounds of other children laughing and crying seeped into the compartment.

"Whhaaat? Draco, is this a joke?"

Draco sat back down.

He smiled. "I assure you, Heiress Parkinson, this is no joke." He bowed to the slightly flat faced girl. He turned. "And you, gentlemen?"

The Crabbe and Goyle boys fumbled through their formal introductions.

Pansy crossed her arms. "Well, okay, but what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at the back of the train, with your brother?" She sneered the last word.

"I don't get on well with my family. As to why I'm here…I'm shopping."

Pansy's eyes knitted together. "Shopping?"
"Yes." He turned back to Draco. "Heir Malfoy, I believe you will be addressing the compartment soon after leaving. May I request the honour of a seat to listen in?"

Pansy looked incredulous. "Potter, we're full. We've been full for weeks."

He inclined his head. "I'm aware of that. However, I could take a seat until the eighth arrives and then just stand for a few minutes after that."

He looked between Pansy and Draco. The Malfoy heir seemed deep in thought. Eventually the blonde gestured a languid hand. "Very well, Harry. However, once all the real wizards arrive, you'll have to leave."

His warm smile tweaked a quarter-inch wider. "Of course, Heir Malfoy. You have my thanks and gratitude." He sat down and made himself comfortable.

Beside him, Pansy stuck her nose in the air and harrumphed. "Well, at least you have manners."

The door opened and Theodore Nott stuck his head in the compartment. "Hi everyo—" the Nott heir's eyes fell on him "—Whaa?"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

[Halfway between the first and middle compartment]

John Potter marched through the corridors of Hogwarts Express, glancing into the compartments as he passed.

Time was short. He knew he had to find Hermione before they left the station or he wouldn't get the chance. The younger versions of his friends and classmates would be expecting him in the end compartment.

Every other footstep brought with it a new pointed finger, another whisper, a poorly hidden giggle or blush. He responded with nods, smiles, and even the occasional wink, causing said blushes to deepen. The open-seating carriage were the most extreme. All eyes on him, every move and gesture analysed and giggled over. He had to dodge out of the way of more than one pair of fourth or fifth year girl's arms, who thought he was 'utterly adorable'. Frustrating, considering he thought they were much the same.

He'd started at the second to first compartment and was nearly at the middle of the train, and he still hadn't found Hermione. Obviously she wasn't going to be in the first compartment, the compartment of the Dark. He glanced into the compartment just before the middle one, gave a small head shake and moved on, passing said compartment without even a glance. Obviously Hermione wasn't going to be in the Gray's compartment either. He continued looking all the way down the train and, eventually, arrived just outside the last compartment. He bit his lip. Had something happened to Hermione? He'd never known the bushy haired witch to be late for anything, and the train would leave any moment.

He sighed, put on his game face, and slid open the compartment door. The faces of Susan Bones, Ron Weasley, Lavender Brown, Sally Smith, Padma Patil, Neville Longbottom, and Hannah Abbott, greeted him. They were all here. He forced a cheerful smile and sat down.

They exchanged a round of greetings and pleasantries. Susan, Lavender, and Padma were excited. Sally, Neville, and Hannah were nervous. Ron, as was so typical of his red-headed friend, seemed bored.
There was a slight shift and the world outside the window started to move away from them. They were off. As one, all the children turned to him, expectancy alight in their faces.

He took a deep breath and reached into his occlumency. "Friends. Thank you all for sitting with me today. I know that much of this has been arranged by our parents, but I'd like to think that even without their involvement, we'd have come together like this anyway."

A few smiles lit the faces around him. Susan grinned.

"We've all known each other for years. And now, we're about to start Hogwarts together. It's my sincere hope that by the end of these seven years, we'll be closer to each other than we are even now."

More smiles.

"There are, however, those about to start Hogwarts who know no-one. They did not grow up in our world. They do not have a legion of the best people a wizard could ask for to back them up. They are starting out alone."

Frowns.

"They will also be our friends. Our world can seem a difficult and confusing place to muggleborns, and it is our duty to protect them from those who would sooner see them thrown out of our world, rather than befriending them."

Firm nods. Set jaws. Alert eyes.

"A lot changed with the downfall of Voldemort—"

Squeaks, large pupils, flushed faces, awe.

"—And over the last decade, our parents have done a lot to move the wizarding world in the direction it needs to go. The auror force, which was devastated at the end of the last war, has slowly begun to regain its strength,"—He nodded to Susan who beamed.—"the laws around dark artefacts and magic have been strengthened, and laws discriminating against muggleborns have been defeated."

Ron thrust out his chest. Susan grinned again.

"But even as we celebrate these successes we face a newer and perhaps more worrying development than the traditional Dark families."

Tilted heads. Frowns.

"Three years ago, a man claimed the title of Lord Slytherin, and has since persuaded the neutral families to abandon their neutrality and follow him."

Hannah and Sally's frowns deepened.

"This development is worrying, not because the Gray seem to hold the same beliefs as the Dark, but because we do not know what beliefs they do hold. The Light holds the most votes in the Wizengamot, but not by much. The Gray holds even fewer than either the Dark or the Light, but so long as the Dark and the Light do not agree on something, the Gray decides if it becomes law or not. And so far, the Gray has let barely a single contentious law through."
More frowns.

"The progress that our parents made, stopped three years ago."

Ron scowled.

"What does Lord Slytherin really want? We don't know. All we really know is that it isn't what we want and that Lord Slytherin intends to keep his true intentions secret, possibly until it is too late to do anything about it."

Neville squirmed. Lavender bit her lip.

"That is why I'm asking you to stay as alert as possible around the children of the Gray. Look for the true intentions behind the pretty words. Stay friendly, but cautious, and do not allow yourself to be seduced by vague promises and slippery logic."

Slow nods. Faces set to stone.

"We are the children of the Light. We have upheld what is good and just since before the founding of Hogwarts. We protect all, regardless of nobility or house age, and regardless of blood status! We will all soon be in different houses, but that won't change that we are the Light, and that we stand firm against the Darkness."

Clapping. Ron stood and thumped him on the back. Susan hugged him, before backing off and blushing up a storm. The compartment filled with appreciative words and declarations of support.

Inwardly, John smirked. Much better than last time.

—— DP & SW: T FoP ——

The small girl with long burnt-brown hair quick marched back to the first compartment, heart pounding. Her friend had found a nice second year to talk to and the older girl had regaled both of them with stories of the castle. It had been so interesting, she'd forgotten the time. When she'd glanced out of the window and realised the train was moving, she'd been horrified. She reached the first compartment and reached for the door handle.

…

Suddenly, her throat parched. Her tongue felt like sand paper. Thirst clawed at her, nagging and insistent.

…

Okay, she would find a drink first, and then come back. It was only a few minutes after all.

—— DP & SW: T FoP ——

In the middle compartment, the Hogwarts Express started moving.

Daphne sat surrounded by the children of the Gray and a few courtiers. To her right sat Tracey, Granger, and Blaise Zabini. To her left sat Parvati Patil, Zacharias Smith, Terry Boot, and Wayne Hopkins.

They all looked towards her.

"Thank you all for joining us today." She paused. "I'd like you all to look around this compartment.
Look at the faces next to you."

They glanced around.

"In this compartment we have four females and four males; three noble houses and five common ones; five purebloods, two halfbloods, and one muggleborn."

A few eyes widened and Zach stole a suspicious glance towards Hopkins.

"Soon, we may also be Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, and Slytherins, but don't let this fool you… what we really are isn't any one of these."

Zabini leant closer.

"We are wizards, born with the gift of magic. How fast can you cast? How powerful are your spells? How good are you at bending the universe to your will? These are the questions that matter."

Boot and Zach's eyes briefly met, one raised eyebrow between them.

"The Light wishes to tame us, domesticate us, dictate to us what is and isn't safe for us to do. They set up committees to command what charms we're allowed to even experiment with, let alone use. They waste the best years of our brightest minds with the asinine business of expanding the ever-growing lists of muggle toys we're not allowed to play with. They deem to claim the moral high-ground of protecting those with no power while systematically removing said power and centralising it with an ever-growing, all-powerful, draconian ministry."

She looked around the compartment making eye contact with every one of her peers. In most cases, grim determination stared back.

"The Dark, on the other hand, would have us rip our world in three. In their irrational fear of what they don't understand they would reject even the most basic of human decencies to spread contempt and fear throughout our world. They also claim to fight the good fight, to bring needed reform to a world that is stagnating, while protecting our culture and legacies. But their methods would result in our total destruction, not our ascension.

"We do not care about blood, so long as your mind is sharp and your wand is strong. We do not care about nobility, so long as you strive to be the best at whatever it is you do. And we do not care about past mistakes, so long as you look to future with steel and determination."

Granger was actually leaning forward in her seat, eyes gleaming brighter than the Express's scarlet shell. The moment she caught the girl's eye though, the newly wavy-haired witch folded her arms and sat straight again, though the gleam did remain.

"The Light and the Dark are making mistakes, but they are not the people within them. The Light and the Dark are ideas. They are collections of beliefs, and, in many cases, they are loosely collected groups of vested interests. Interests shift. Minds can be changed. And the people who yesterday were our enemies, may tomorrow be our greatest allies.

"We have a golden opportunity before us. We have seven years to learn and grow. Seven years to get to know each other and form alliances and friendships that can weather the storms life will throw at us. But that cannot happen if we allow Hogwarts to divide us. So…"—she paused—"I'd like to suggest we set aside some time every few weeks to get together for dinner. That way at least, we'll not fall foul to the trap of believing that what colour your tie is, somehow dictates who you must like and hate."
Parvati and Tracey scoffed. The dramatic tension broke.

"Sound good?"

She looked around. Most everyone nodded. "What about you, Hopkins?"

Hopkins hesitated, then also nodded.

"Excellent, let's get down to business then."

Granger whipped out a piece of parchment and a quill, and with the faint click clack sound of the train in the background, they started fleshing out details for the next few weeks.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

In the first compartment, muggle London gradually faded into the distance behind them.

Harry certainly was not smirking. No, absolutely not.

"Where is Turpin?" Nott scowled towards the door.

Draco put down his quidditch book, threw a bored glance towards where Nott scowled, and shrugged. "No matter. It's her own fault if she's late. We start without her."

The blonde haired boy shot him a glance before speaking with an aristocratic drawl. "One and half thousand years ago, Merlin created the Albion family magics to rule over this land. He forced the families of the time to work together to better the fate of magicals as a whole. And he left behind a legacy to ensure that those who had proved themselves worthy would have the right to lead our people."

Harry glanced around the compartment. All eight seats were full — Draco, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Parkinson, Bulstrode, and Su Li. All purebloods. All except him.

"My own family arrived on these shores in 1066. We worked hard for the good of all and overtime proved ourselves worthy of the trust Merlin established all those centuries before."

Su Li stared, quiet but intense, as befitting the probably future Ravenclaw.

"But not long after that, the rituals used to ennoble worthy families were lost, hunted down, destroyed, and for five-hundred years we've lived without. For five-hundred years, families have striven and proved themselves worthy, yet gained no recognition. Ennoblement was replaced with 'The Order of Merlin'. " Draco made as though to spit. "A pretty piece of silver and gold to hang on your robes and parade for an hour of glory."

Crabbe and Goyle's fists were clenched. Bulstrode scowled.

"Families like the Goyles, the Crabbes, the Carrows, the Bulstrodes, and the Crouchess, and yes, even families like the Dumbledores, who, five-hundred years ago, would have been granted seats on the Wizengamot, have been denied their earned right to help guide our world, simply because the rituals of Merlin have faded.

"Then, as our world stagnated, those born to muggles started to demand, yes demand, that they be given the right to govern our world. Is that fair? Is it fair that your families have spent centuries proving themselves worthy, and were denied that privilege, only to have these... people who know nothing of our world swoop in and demand what you have spent generations earning?"
The bored aristocratic tone was gone. Though well articulated, Draco's words dripped venom. He was impressed. Such righteous indignation on behalf of a group that he was not technically of — Draco's occlumency was obviously more advanced then he'd expect for a boy of his age.

"For the last one-hundred years, we who are pure of blood, have sought to change the system. To allow any family that has learned the ways of our world some measure of the influence they should have. But that effort has been constantly forced back. For every victory we achieve, we are forced to give up twice as much."

"The rise of the two Dark Lords of our century were the bright points for us. For two brief ten-year stretches, we were starting to win. But both times, our ultimate goals were snatched from us."

Draco eyed him with not a small amount of resentment. He tilted his head in apologetic acknowledgement.

"We were being forced back, but we now have a breathing space. With the Gray blocking all new laws, we can regroup, rearm, and get ready for the next advance. The return of Lord Slytherin is a calm before an almighty storm. And it is a storm that we will win."

Draco paused, took another deep breath and continued. "I believe the Gray are closer to us than they are to the Light. They are lead by Lord Slytherin. Tonight, many of us will be sorted into Slytherin house. As will many of the Gray. They must be made to see the rightness of our cause!"

Draco stood and made a double fist jerk downwards, as though smashing an invisible staff into the floor. "They WILL be made to see the rightness of our cause!"

Clapping, acknowledgements, and hear-hears erupted around him. He joined in too, clapping politely, a faint smile playing around his lips.

Draco sat back down and slipped back on his bored aristocrat Slytherin mask.

"Yeah, Draco! We'll show them!" Pansy shouted.

Su Li bit her lip, her cheeks tinged with red. "Uhh, Heir Malfoy?"

Draco turned to her with a raised eyebrow.

"My family is over five-thousand years old, but we've only been in Britain for fifty years, where do we stand in your vision?"

Draco frowned. "I'm not fully sure… I'd have to ask father, but… I'm pretty sure you wouldn't have been invited to join us here if your family wasn't considered worthy."

Su Li perked up. "Oh, that's okay then."

Nott smirked. "What about Potter's family?" The boy jerked his thumb towards him.

His 'I'm fine' mask became rather fixed.

Draco rolled his eyes. "They were acceptable two generations ago, but blood traitors now, the lot of them. They lost themselves when Lord Potter married that whore of a mudblood."

All eyes shot to him. If they expected him to react with anger about this slight to his mother, they were disappointed. He shrugged.

"I never knew my mother. She might be a whore for all I know."
"Wow, Potter, you really do not give a toss do you?" Nott looked impressed.

Draco picked his quidditch book back up and eyed him with a calculating look. "Potter…you told me before you were going to join the duelling club, didn't you?"

"Well, I didn't actually say that but as it happens, yes."

"So you're not trying out for the quidditch team then?"

"Nope."

Draco nodded and seemed to lose interest again.

Nott on the other hand… "Sorry, Potter, but if you're in Slytherin, our year slot belongs to me."

Nott grinned a toothy grin.

His stony smile cracked into a grin of his own. "We'll see."

Nott glowered. "Might I remind you that you are merely a dirty half—"

A knock at the door silenced Nott.

Draco sat a bit straighter and affected a particularly drawling voice. "Enter."

The door opened to admit a much older, taller, and bulky boy dressed in Hogwarts robes with a yellow tie. He looked to be a sixth or seventh year. He was sweating, his eyes dilated."

"Heir Malfoy of the Noble House of Malfoy?"

"Yes?"

"I…I am Richard Quincy of the House of Quincy. I've been asked by my father to present these to you," he flourished a box of some kind of food, "and to extend both my and my families gratitude to you and your father for awarding us the shipping contract."

After his initial stutter, the older boy said this in one long breath.

Draco waved the boy to deposit the food on the table.

"My father chose your family because it was the best choice, Richard, and your thanks is appreciated. If I have problems with Hufflepuff in the future I know I can come to you for help."

"Y-Yes. Of course." The older Hufflepuff bowed and exited the compartment without turning around.

Pansy looked into the box. "Cauldron cake anyone?"

Nott's eyes gleamed towards him. "I think our resident food taster should try first."

He glanced from Nott's face to the box. He shrugged. The combination of bezoar and noble house ring negated most dangers… but still… he looked thoughtful. "Sure, why not? It would be a shame if the ambassador to the Gray had to miss his appointment because he got poisoned."

Nott stilled. He flourished his wand and carefully, and with great deliberation, cast the tempus spell. "Merlin!" he grabbed his bag and exited the compartment with as much dignity as a jogging pureblood could muster.
He sat down and made a point not to look smug.

Crabbe grabbed a cauldron cake and dug in, Pansy gossiped with Su Li and Millicent about 'you'll-never-guess-what-so-and-so-did', and Draco busied himself with several small slips of folded parchment, occasionally shooting glances at him, as though he were a particularly strange insect that kept flying by his window.

He leaned back and relaxed.

In the middle compartment, Hermione Granger was confused and frustrated. Harry's betrothed made no sense. Daphne was the heiress of an ancient and noble house, and they were in public, so she'd naturally given the heiress the deference wizarding culture expected. But Daphne had rejected this status. So, she'd then decided to treat Daphne like an equal, but this only seemed to annoy the girl. She was sure the heiress didn't want to be treated like someone of lower status, so what did she want?

She silently hoped that Harry's other betrothed made a bit more sense and brought her focus back to the older Gryffindor witch who'd just presented Daphne with a box of muggle Belgian chocolates.

The Gryffindor glanced to her, saw the crest, saw the ring, and paled. "H-Heiress Slytherin? I-I'm sorry but I don't have anything for you, my parents didn't say anything—"

Oh hell. "—Please." She held up a hand and sighed. This was the second person to panic like this. "I am not Lord Slytherin's daughter. I am Lord Slytherin's vassal, and no-one knew I would be joining Hogwarts today as such."

"O-oh. Ah, okay then." The girl didn't look like this was much better, but did manage to finish her social ritual with Daphne and exit the compartment with only minor blushing.

Tracey giggled. "Maybe we should start a pool on how many times someone loses themselves when they see you, Hermione?"

She grumbled.

Blaze smirked. "I'll put a sickle on five times."

She made to look incredulous. "Oh, come on."

"No, really," Tracey continued. "Maybe we could get them to faint by telling them you're a muggleborn too?"

She paused. "Already did that with a pair of red-headed Gryffindor twins."

"The Weasley twins?" Tracey gasped. "No way!"

"Well, they didn't actually faint, but—"

"If we're quite finished," Daphne interrupted, "I'd like to bring it to your attention that the boy from the Dark is late."

She frowned and inspected a piece of parchment in front of her. She didn't strictly need a parchment record, but there were times when having to keep retrieving things from her mind-scape library
was tiresome. "Well if he doesn't get here soon we're going to have to move Cooper up to the next slot and—"

*Knock* *Knock*

"—And never mind," she finished.

The door slid open to reveal a tall boy with slicked over mahogany hair, wearing closed silk robes and an expression of haughty indifference — an expression that was spoiled somewhat by the redness of his cheeks and the shortness of his breath. He wore the crest of the Noble House of Nott on his robes.

"Heiresses Greengrass and Davis and Heir Smith?" he half panted.

"Yes?"

"Yes?"

"Yes?"

The Nott heir straightened his robes, took a deep breath, and bowed. "I am Heir Theodore Nott of the Noble House of Nott. I believe we have met before, Heiress Greengrass. And what is that?" He pointed to Freekey sitting on a pile of books on the small compartment table.

Daphne smiled. "She is Freekey, my familiar. And yes, I remember seeing you at last year's winter festival. Perhaps you would care to take a seat?" She motioned those of her bench to budge up, which they started to do. "You're looking a little winded."

"Ah, it's nothing, Heiress Greengrass." Nott muttered.

"Nonsense, I insist." Daphne's eyes glittered.

He sat.

"Besides, our ambassador to the Light is about to depart now anyway. Isn't that right, Hermione?"

She frowned. No. She wasn't leaving for another five min… oh. She half-sighed, half-smirked. "Yes." She stood and dusted down her very expensive black, silk closed robes so the crest was clearly visible to their guest.

Nott's gaze slid to her as she stood, travelled up her body to her face, studied it for a split-second, then jerked back down to the crest. He stood back up so quickly his feet left the ground. "Heiress Slytherin." He bowed again. "My sincere apologies. I had no idea you would be joining us today."

Tracey giggled.

"Please, Heir Nott," she said.

Nott straightened.

"I am Hermione Granger, of the House of Granger, vassal of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin."

Nott's jaw slackened. "Vassal?"

"Yes." She dipped into a shallow curtsey. "My lord expressed the hope that we might get along
over the next few years, as he is of the fullest confidence that you, like me, will be sorted into his house."

Nott straightened. "Of course, Vassal Granger… er…” he looked uncertain. "Do I call you Vassal Granger or what? I was never taught…”

She suppressed a smile, though the other girls were not bothering to hide their amusement. "Miss Granger is fine if you wish to be formal. Or just Granger or Hermione as you like."

"Very well, Miss Granger."

She nodded, brushed past the boy, and left the compartment.

She walked down the corridor. It was time to meet the fake-boy-who-lived, Harry's brother, and the boy who, in six years of so called 'friendship', hadn't given her one single lesson in wizarding culture.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The small girl with long burnt-brown hair tiptoed up to the door of the first compartment and shook. It was so late now. Could she really face them all after being so late? She teared up. Her breath shuddered. No. She couldn't do it. She was a disgrace, a failure. The girl turned and fled back up the train, locked herself in the toilet, and sobbed.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

In the last compartment, John Potter sat chatting and joking with Ron and Susan. Occasionally, Neville would join in, or Lavender, Sally, Padma, and Hannah would add their share. Every few minutes, like clockwork, another older witch or wizard would arrive to present some gift or other. After sometime of this, the compartment table was starting to spill over, and even Ron was having difficulties keeping up with the flow of food.

Hannah sat up a bit straighter, holding a piece of parchment. "John."

"Mmm?"

"Next is the ambassador from the Gray."

He too sat straighter. "Oh, really? And they are?"

"Umm… the parchment doesn't say."

He sighed. "Always with the freak'n secrecy. Would it kill them to at least tell us that much?"

Neville shrugged.

"Well, whatever. You know the drill. Be friendly, cautious, and try to remember everything you can."

Everyone in the compartment nodded and went back to what they were doing.

He was pouring himself a glass of pumpkin juice from a bottle when a knock sounded and the door slid open. But it wasn't the Gray's ambassador. A massive smile bloomed on his face. It was Hermione, already dressed in her… his smile faulted… in her acromantula silk robes?

Hermione stepped into the compartment with considerably more grace then he remembered his
friend possessing. "Heir Potter?"

Heir Potter? His heart sped up. His eyes trailed along the trimming of the robes, to the crest, and froze. His faltering smile collapsed. No.

"I am Hermione Granger, of the House of Granger, vassal of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin, and the ambassador sent by Heiress Greengrass."

No no no no! NO! He couldn't speak. He couldn't think. He stared at his best female friend in horror. She looked back at him, cold and expressionless. His voice eventually emerged, raspy, like old parchment. "Vassal?"

"Yes," she replied in a clipped tone.

He had no idea how the rest of the compartment was reacting, or if they were reacting at all. He couldn't take his eyes off the abomination in front of him. "How?"

Hermione appeared to not care about the pain in his voice. She continued on as if he'd asked her what they were going to cover in their next transfiguration class. "Well, I know there hasn't been a vassalage done for nearly two-hundred years, the last one was to Lord Ogden in 1812, but all the old laws are still in place, they mostly haven't been used because muggleborn families didn't like the idea of being vassals and purebloods didn't want anything to do with muggleborns, which is ridiculous of course, my lord doesn't care about such distinctions though."

The assembled witches and wizards sat in silence for a moment.

Hermione looked around the compartment. "Heiresses Bones and Abbott, Heir Longbottom." She bobbed a curtsey to the other half of the compartment.

The bob seemed to snap him out of whatever horror induced spell had been cast on him. "Hermione… he's brainwashed you!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Hermione, this isn't you!"

"I'm sorry, Heir Potter, but have we met before?"

He stilled. He glanced around the compartment. The others were looking at him with expressions ranging from worried, to confused, to shocked. "Err… no of course not, I just…" he paused and tried to relax his features. He smiled in what he hoped was an encouraging way. "Hermione, someone like you doesn't need to be doing all this formal bobbing stuff, it's not expected of you."

This apparently was the wrong thing to say.

"Oh! So just because I'm a muggleborn, you expect me to have no manners and run around offending everyone like it's my job. Heaven forbid someone take the opportunity to actually learn about the culture they want to join."

"That's not what I—" but Hermione had already turned and stormed out of the compartment sliding the door behind her with an audible click.

"Oh, very well done!"

He turned to see Susan glaring at him.
"That was friendly and cautious was it? And just what was all that about?"

He shrank in on himself. His world felt like it was falling down around him. That wasn't how he'd imagined his first contact with Hermione to go. His heart felt like it was being squeezed by a giant fist. His voice lowered to a mutter. "I'm...I'm sorry, Susan. I was just shocked that Lord Slytherin had taken a muggleborn family as his vassals."

Susan harrumphed. "I think we're all shocked about that. But that's no reason to lose your head." The girl got up and marched to the door.

"Where are you going?"

Susan wheeled around, face red. "I'm going for a walk. And then, in a few minutes, I'm going to the Gray's compartment to try and fix this mess." Her own voice became a mutter. "That's what ambassadors are supposed to do after all — clear up after their leaders mess up." She opened the door walked through and slid it shut behind her.

He put his face in his hands and grit his teeth.

"Cheer up mate," came Ron's voice. "Chocolate frog?"

— DP & SW: TFiP —

Hermione stormed along the corridor, back towards the middle of the train, and paused to calm herself. She allowed her emotions to pool and swirl inside her, to feel the righteous indignation and fury, before bringing down the occlumency hammer and sliding on her Slytherin mask once more. She took a deep breath. That had gone... almost exactly as Harry had predicted it would. She brightened. And now she could get on with her lord's other mission. She'd spotted Justin a few compartments down when she'd boarded. It wouldn't take a lot of effort to track down the four other muggleborns in her year. She could make contact with them all and get back to her compartment in short order.

Resuming her graceful walk, Hermione swept down the corridor, a head-strong, wavy-haired princess in night-black silk and emerald green trimming.

— DP & SW: TFiP —

Back in the middle compartment, Daphne crossed one leg with the other, and fed Freekey another almond. The adorable primate could never get enough of them, although she did like macadamia even more.

Nott had made himself comfy and was busying himself with a game of exploding snap with Zabini and Smith, being as polite as his blood supremacist bigotry would allow with Tracey, while ignoring Hopkins completely. Hopkins, Parvati, and Boot sat in another threesome, discussing quidditch and duelling and who was doing what.

A knock from the door distracted her. The door slid open to reveal the shoulder length red-hair of the Bones Heiress. "Heiress Bones, what a pleasant surprise."

Bones looked determined. She took a deep breath. "Heiress Greengrass, I must formally present my and my friend's apologies for the unacceptable behaviour of my friend, Heir Potter, upon your ambassador. I hope we can move beyond this." Susan bowed.

She scowled inwardly. Something happened, and she didn't know what. She clenched her teeth. Where the hell was Granger? She couldn't very well ask what the unacceptable behaviour was. She
had no choice but to accept the apologies and miss an opportunity to extract concessions.

Nott stopped playing to listen.

"That's okay, Heiress Bones. Your apology is accepted. Although…" An idea shot through her head. "Although it might be good too if Heir Potter came and presented his apologies directly. Maybe in half an hour? I'm sure we'd all feel better if the aggressor in this matter could apologise directly to the wronged."

Bones seemed to consider this for a moment before nodding. "I can't promise, Heiress Greengrass, but I will do my utmost to drag Heir Potter's butt over here if I have to."

She nodded.

Bones left.

She turned to the stalled exploding snap game. "Heir Nott, your presence here has been very much appreciated and I look forward to more chats in the future. Could we ask for you to excuse us now? I fear we will need to be changing soon."

Nott looked around at the fully-robed witches and wizards sitting around the compartment. "As you wish, Heiress Greengrass." He stood and made his way to the compartment door, but not before the pack exploded again sending cards all over the compartment.

The door closed and she swung to Boot. "Terry, could you find Hermione and drag her back here? Preferably before Potter shows up?"

Boot, as one of her classmates in the pre-Hogwarts homeschool taught by Lady Davis, stood and gave her a thumbs up. "Sure, Daphne. I'm on it." Then he too left.

Tracey shot her an encouraging grin. She glared.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

In the first compartment, Harry stared out of the window, scanning the many trees along the train-line's edge.

Parkinson's high-pitched voice intruded on his survey. "What are you doing, Potter?"

He glanced back into the compartment. No one was paying much attention. Su Li, Millicent, Crabbe and Goyle were talking holidays. Draco was reading. "Bird watching."

"Bird watching?"

"Yep."

Pansy leaned over and tilted her head, causing her bob hair to fall down the sides of her face into her eyes. The girl brushed it back behind her ear. "Why?"

"Can't a boy have a hobby?"

"But are you seriously expecting to be able to see any birds while we're moving in this train?"

"Well, the train does run over a magical lay line, and it radiates magic along the entire line of the country. You never know what interesting birds might decide to make their home here."
She huffed. "You're weird."

He smiled. "Thank you, Heiress Parkinson."

The door slid open and Nott stuck his head in. "Hey! You're never going to guess."

Draco didn't bother to look up from quidditch book. "Then I won't bother trying. What is it?"

Nott stepped into the compartment and looked triumphant. "Lord Slytherin has sent a vassal to Hogwarts!"

This got Draco's attention. "What?"

"There's this witch in our year called Hermione Granger. She's in there with the Gray. She's got a Slytherin vassal crest on her robes and everything. And she's obviously had pureblood training."

He smiled. Well done, Hermione.

Draco frowned. "Granger isn't a pureblood name."

Nott shrugged. "Maybe she's foreign."

"Did she sound foreign?"

"Well… no… so, a half-blood then?"

Draco shifted. "I'm not sure what to think about that."

Nott grinned. "I imagine you'll have no problem with it, after all, you've kept Potter here with you the whole time."

Draco frowned.

He stood up. "Well, I'd better go get changed."

Nott looked nonplussed. "But you're already wearing your robes."

"Yeah, but as much as I like these robes, I now have to go put on the standard robes again."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"It's all part of a super cunning Slytherin plan."

"What plan?" asked Pansy.

"Wouldn't be very Slytherin if I went around telling everyone, would it?" And with that closing comment, he swept to the door and flashed Pansy a single, twinkly eyed smirk.

Behind the closing door he heard a single "Humpf."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Only a few compartments down, Harry heard female crying from within his target bathroom.

He knocked softly. "Hello?"

The crying continued. "Are you okay in there? Do you need me to go get someone?"
"No." Returned a wet voice in between sobs.

He sighed. Always a block in the floo. He sat down with his back to the door. It wasn't as though he was in a huge rush. "So, why don't you tell me about it? I know that always helps me when I'm like this."

The sobbing dissolved into a sniffing. "I'm useless. I was supposed to do something, but I didn't and now it's too late and my Dad is going to be so angry with me."

"What were you supposed to do? Maybe it's not too late?"

Another round of sobbing erupted. "No. It's too late."

He let the crying continue for a while. Eventually he asked again.

"What did you have to do?"

The girl sniffed. "Meet with the people in the first compartment. But I got distracted and now I just can't."

Oh.

"Are you Lisa Turpin?"

The sobbing ebbed. "H-how do you know that?"

"I was just in the first compartment. I can help you Lisa."

The train click clacked. The floor vibrated under him. 

"Lisa? If you come out, I promise I'll be able to help you. All will be okay and you'll be able to report good news to your father. I promise."

The voice from the other side trembled. "How?"

"Just trust me, okay? It will all be alright."

He waited. Then, after a couple of minutes, there was a flush, the door opened, and a tear stained face with blood shot eyes and long, burnt-brown hair stepped out. The eyes widened. "J-John P-Potter?"

He took the girl's hands, still holding several tissues. "Harry Potter actually, I'm his unknown twin brother. Let's get you cleaned up a bit, then we can go to the compartment together. I'll introduce you and give them a good reason why you weren't there for so long."

Lisa shook. "What good reason?"

"How about you being ill? That would work wouldn't it? And with your current state that won't be difficult to pull off."

She trembled, still looking very unsure.

He pulled her into him and hugged the girl. "Ah, c'mon. It will be okay. I promise." Eventually Lisa returned the hug and sunk into him.

Arms still around the girl, he flicked his wrist to bring his wand to hand. He stepped back, arms
still on her shoulders. "It will be okay."

The girl nodded and blew her nose.

"I'm going to cast a spell on you to clean up your face so you look fresh, then I'm going to cast a spell on you to make you look like you've been ill, okay?"

Her eyes widened again, this time in awe. "Y-you can do that?"

"Yes."

He angled his holly and phoenix feather wand towards the girl and cast two spells in quick succession. Immediately the tear stains and blood shot eyes were replaced with yellowing complexion and droopy eyes.

"There we go. We can say you were being taken care of by some friends."

Lisa nodded, he took her hand, and together they made their way back to the front of the train. They reached the first compartment and she started to breathe harder. "H-Harry, I'm not sure I can do this."

He reached his magic into the temporary ward he'd set up.

"It's just too much." Lisa started to struggle in his grip. He held on.

"I…I must go!"

He switched the ward off.

Lisa stopped struggling. He enveloped her in another hug. "Its okay, Lisa. You can do this."

Lisa shook again. She blinked. "Yes. Yes, I can." She looked into his eyes. "Thank you, Harry."

He opened the door and poked his head around the door. "Heirs, heiresses, witches, and wizards — I've found our wayward guest."

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Five minutes later, Harry closed the compartment to the Dark behind him and sauntered off down the corridor. Okay, so he'd lost his spot, but he'd got everything he wanted to accomplish done, and Lisa couldn't stop making doe eyes at him, which was definitely a result.

Maybe now he'd walk up the train and accidentally run into Hermione. She might still be tracking down muggleborns and it would be good to see how that was progressing.

But first…

He slipped into the now empty bathroom, pulled out his shrunk trunk, and started changing into the bog-standard Hogwarts robes.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

John watched the door of his compartment slide open to reveal a much calmer Susan. "How did it go?"

Susan flopped down next to him. "Greengrass said she'd accept the apology on the condition that
you apologise in person."

He groaned.

"None of that. I think she's quite right. You were rude so you should apologise."

"Okay, okay. I'll go." He stood, trudged to the door, slid it open and started making his way down
the train, towards the middle, and towards the Gray. He reached the open seating carriage just a
few compartments from the middle of the train and reached for the door handle.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry waved off yet another confused Boy-Who-Lived worshipper. Damn, he'd forgotten just how
extreme his peer's reactions had been on the train. The first time around, he'd been confused but
hopeful. Everyone had seemed so friendly and curious. Puzzled, yes, but they'd taken the news that
he was a mistaken squib twin of the Boy-Who-Lived with interest and cheer. That good will had
lasted until the sorting, after which, everything went to hell.

He passed the middle compartment, which he knew held Daphne, and continued on. He arrived at
the door to one of the Hogwarts Express's few open seating areas, reached for the door handle,
turned it, entered the space beyond, full of relaxing and joking witches and wizards, glanced
towards the carriage's far exit, and froze.

His nostrils flared, his eyes hardened, and his lip curled, a cacophony of hatred flashed across his
face in a heartbeat, and left just as quickly.

An annoyingly familiar back closed the far side door and started to turn towards him.

His face relaxed, his eyes warmed, and his mouth melted into a smile of summer, log fires, and
good cheer. "Brother!"

All talk halted. Every student's head turned.

Deep in his stomach, unaffected by even the strongest occlumency, bile rose.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John stared. The carriage stretched on to infinity. A full half the eyes were on him. The other half
fixed on the figure standing at the other end of the infinite space.

It was Harry.

His heart beat faster. He started sweating.

But, it wasn't Harry. It wasn't the Harry that he remembered. The Harry he remembered was small
and scrawny — timid — flinching at shadows and jumping at the smallest noises.

This Harry looked to be as tall as he was and his stance was taller still. His face was open and
friendly, and he wasn't wearing glasses, taped or otherwise.

His own face obviously betrayed his confusion.

"Surprised to see me?" Harry's lip quirked into an almost cheeky grin.

"How?"
An uncomfortable feeling of déjà vu flooded him.

"The normal way, I suspect. Didn't Mum and Dad tell you I'd be joining you this year?"

His eye twitched. "What do you know about Mum and Dad?"

All the assembled students watched, wide-eyed, turning back and forth with each volley in the turn-based verbal duel.

"Very little. They did after all, abandon me."

Someone gasped.

"An unusual policy, you must admit, for the supposed lightest family. But even then, you'd think when they realised their mistake that they'd at least take the effort to meet their long lost child before he left for school."

He flinched and shifted his feet on the plush carpet. That certainly didn't look good. But how did Harry know about what was normal for squibs and families of the Light? And how did Harry… he froze. Harry wasn't ignorant. His heart pounded faster. Which meant… He screamed a roar of primal rage. "You bastard!" He drew his wand and fired the dueller's hello without so much as a thought. The fucker dodged them all and flipped up a nearby table as a shield. Books and parchment went everywhere.

Shouts and screams filled the carriage.

He lunged forward. Magic poured from his wand, determined to destroy the threat to his love. "What. Did you. Do. To. GINNY?!" With each furious cry an overpowered spell dented, gouged, and smashed apart the doomed table in a righteous shower of ripped parchment and wood splinters. But when the dust and magic settled, the fucker had vanished.

He snarled.

"Potter!"

He dodged a head-bound expelliarmus on instinct and spun around, adrenaline still pumping, wand still in hand, ready to obliterate his new target.

"Potter! Put your wand down now! That is an order!"

He stared into the trembling but determined face of a younger Penelope Clearwater. Anger drained away. A lump formed in his throat. His wand arm dropped to his side. He shook. He looked around. Every face looked back at him with shock and fear. Several flinched as his gaze fell on them. Dread pooled in his stomach. Oh, that can't have looked good.

Several hours later, it was a red-faced and much scolded John Potter who stepped off the Hogwarts Express.

The crisp air of the Scottish September bit into his hands and face. The children around him chatted and laughed, leaving him alone in the crowd. He deposited himself in a boat with Susan, Ron, and Hannah; and stared at nothing while the others stared at everything. The oohs and aahs of naked awe swirled around his person like mist, while the worries and angst of hidden uncertainty caressed his skin like a cloth-made dementor aura.

He clambered out of the boat and offered Susan an unthinking hand. Together, they trudged up the
embankment, to the greatest magical school in Britain, and to the Hogwarts sorting ceremony.

He listened with half an ear as McGonagall gave them the house as family speech, and he caught a glance of Harry, alone and isolated, but also strong and confident. He clenched his teeth. If things kept going as they were… he was going to have to do something.

— End of Chapter Fifteen —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Holy crap. Twelve-thousand words. If any of the other chapters of this season are as long as this one then… Blugghhhhhhh. Don’t get used to it. This is a one off. I hope. [Edit: 14th January, 2018 — Buahahahaha! Oh, how I look back and laugh... again.]

A/N: Yes, I know that my Hogwarts Express makes the whole flying a car around the Express thing from the second book impossible, but hey ho. When faced with a logical problem as large as the Hogwarts Express there are only so many solutions and, in this case, I’m creating a minor plot hole in canon in exchange for an elegant, workable solution in fanon.

Needless to say, the flying car to Hogwarts thing never happened in this world.

A/N: I’m going to pre-empt about fifty people here and say… No. Lisa will not be part of the official pairing. Strange as it may sound in a Harem fic, I believe it is quite possible for Harry to be friends/allies/working-with a female and NOT be life mating with them.... Although that doesn’t necessarily stop a bit of sexy time on the side...
The Hogwarts great hall was big, and the students, packed together like bristles on a broomstick, were small.

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore frowned. He surveyed the young witches and wizards of the great hall with the air of a similarly great lord surveying his just as great house. There was a feeling of trepidation not normally found before the sorting. John Potter’s entrance to Hogwarts had been on the lips of all for the past week, but this went beyond even that.

He'd heard the phrase 'The Golden Year' more than once. There hadn't been a year so full of heirs in living memory. Ten heirs. A year was usually lucky if it got even one. That three of those heirs were children of the leaders of the Dark, Light, and Gray didn't help.

The side door opened and Professor McGonagall lead the first years into a line facing the rest of the students.

The general hubbub of the hall slowly died.

Leaning over the head table, he could see the general state of the children. Many fidgeted, their eyes darting around the hall as though expecting to be attacked. That was normal. His frown deepened. What wasn't so normal was that a smaller number seemed to sway slightly. Their eyes drooped shut before jerking open again. An occasional yawn escaped. They looked exhausted. He couldn't help notice that this second group all wore custom made robes.

The sorting began.

"Abbott, Hannah."

It wasn't right, forcing these children to sink in their parents political crucibles. They should enjoy their childhood.

"Hufflepuff!"

He forced a smile and clapped for the Abbott girl.

"Bones, Susan."

"Hufflepuff!"

He motioned for Poppy to join him.

"Boot, Terry."

"Ravenclaw!"

Poppy leaned down to his ear. "Yes, Headmaster?"

"Brocklehurst, Mandy."

"I wonder if you might take a quick look at some of our more well known young charges—"
"Ravenclaw!"

"—during the feast? I fear many of them may have been using their occlumency all day."

Poppy huffed.

"Brown, Lavender."

"Really, Albus. I know occlumency doesn't use much magic, but they're still far too young for extended use like that."

"Gryffindor!"

"I know, Poppy."

"Bulsrode, Millicent."

"Slytherin!"

He sighed. "Unfortunately it's not our place to dictate how their houses conduct their affairs."

"Corner, Michael."

"Ravenclaw!"

Poppy grumbled.

"Crabbe, Vincent."

"So long as they don't expect pepper up," she said.

"Slytherin!"

"I'm getting far too many students these days who think—"

"Davis, Tracey."

"—they can push themselves to the magical edge and just fix it with a potion."

"Slytherin!"

"Just don't be surprised if I drag one or two of them up to the hospital wing."

"Dunbar, Fay"

"Gryffindor!"

He pursed his lips.

"Entwhistle, Kevin."

"I hope that won't be necessary, Poppy."

"Hufflepuff!"

He clapped extra enthusiastically for the wizarding world's first newest member.
"Well, of course I also hope it won’t be…"

"Finch-Fletchley, Justin"

"…But, well… look at that boy there." She gestured towards the line of unsorted students."

"Hufflepuff!"

He glanced over to where Poppy had indicated. The Longbottom heir was resting his head on the adjacent girl's shoulders, eyes closed.

"Finnigan, Seamus"

He frowned. If only Tom had chosen the Longbottom child. Low magical power, no brother, and no parents.

"Gryffindor!"

"Yes," he said, slowly.

"Goldstein, Anthony."

"I see the problem."

"Ravenclaw!"

Poppy nodded and left to sit back down.

"Goyle, Gregory."

…

"Slytherin!"

He clapped the new snake in, just as he had for every other child thus far.

"Granger, Hermione"

Whispers and murmurs filled the hall.

A girl with wavy brown hair walked towards the stool.

He furrowed his eyebrows. The muggleborn looked almost as exhausted as the heirs…

Professor McGonagall lowered her parchment. "Quiet, please!"

… And the robes…

The noise lessened.

The girl reached the stool.

…And the way she stood, even when clearly ready to fall asleep…"

Minerva's eyes fell on the girl. He heard the old witch choke. "Miss Granger?"

The girl sat down. "Yes, Professor?"
Minerva glanced around the hall. "Would you care to explain why you are wearing a crest before you are sorted?"

His eyes widened.

"I am a —she stifled a yawn— a… vassal of my lord. Lord Slytherin. That is why I wear his crest."

He tensed.

The whispers and murmurs started again.

How dare that man. His nostrils flared. To shackle a poor muggle family to his will… Slytherin was just like him back in his youth, and he'd seen where that lead. He clenched his jaw. But… at least the man had now showed his true colours — preying on the weak and vulnerable. Truly Dark.

Minerva stood, words forming but not emerging.

The hat, clutched in Minerva's unmoving grip, twisted towards the poor girl and, without moving an inch toward the girl's head, called out, "Slytherin!"

The Slytherin table erupted in a mix of enthusiasm and polite caution.

The girl stood and walked to the Slytherin table without so much as a backwards glance.

He stared at the girl's back, half angry, half sad. As soon as the snake pit learned her heritage, she'd regret ever hearing the name Slytherin.

Minerva seemed to have gotten over her shock.

"Greengrass, Daphne."

Oh. Of course. The Greengrass Heiress and Slytherin's betrothed. Is that why he'd done it? To serve the young Heiress? Is that what muggleborns were to the young lord? Second class citizens, fit only to serve the noble houses?

"Slytherin!"

Greengrass made to sweep to her new table, but in her fatigue it came out more as a shuffle.

He sighed. He'd call the Granger girl into his office tomorrow morning and explain what Slytherin had done. Then they'd meet together with her parents and he'd advise them on how to break the contract, assuming it was even legitimate. With any luck they'd be free by the end of the week and he could offer to have the girl resorted.

The sorting continued to shuffle and stumble forward, until eventually…

"Potter, Harry"

Whispers again filled the hall.

And that was another reason to get the muggleborn out of Slytherin.

He shot off a mind probe as the true boy-who-lived strode to the hat. Worry. Fear. Excitement. Disappointment in his brother on the train. Mixed feelings towards a cute girl who'd helped him. Confusion about why everyone was interested in him. It was an extremely unorganised mind.
Unorganised, but, on the other hand, also quite healthy. He withdrew and suppressed a sad frown.

And the boy looked healthy too. Sending him to be raised by muggles had been a risky move. Tom had been raised by muggles. He'd been almost certain Petunia wasn't going to honour her sister's request. Luckily, it seemed the Potter boy had been spared Tom's hate and fear filled childhood.

Minerva placed the hat on the boy's head.

Silence.

…

…

…

"Slytherin!"

Gasps filled the great hall.

He resisted the urge to nod. This was the outcome he'd have expected if his guess all those years ago had been accurate. Things were slotting into place better than he'd hoped. An isolated, muggle-raised, well-adjusted Harry Potter was the best of both worlds. He'd just have to make sure Severus kept a careful eye on things.

"Potter, John."

This time, the whispers were too loud for Minerva to ignore. "Quiet! If I have to tell you again I'll start giving out detentions!"

Amazingly, the young potter heir didn't seem to be tired at all. Down, yes. A bit sad, yes, but not tired.

John Potter walked to the stool and had the hat placed over his head.

Silence.

Then, "Gryffindor!"

The table on the far left erupted.

John Potter stood up, gave a small, sad little bow, glanced towards the Slytherin table, and walked over to the clapping and cheering throng of Gryffindors.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione huffed. "Honestly, does he have any humility?"

Daphne shrugged and stifled a yawn.

Tracey stared from her to Daphne through half-lidded eyes. Malfoy, Nott, Parkinson, Bulstrode, Crabbe, Goyle, and Harry sat a little further up the table. They looked equally shattered. Well, all except Harry of course, she mentally added.

Minutes dragged by until, eventually…
"Zabini, Blaise."

...

"Slytherin!"

The girls all clapped their dark skinned comrade.

"Finally," Daphne muttered as Blaise sat down next to her.

She acknowledged his arrival with a nod.

The evil headmaster stood up. "Now, I do have a few words for you all, but now is the time to eat, drink, and be merry. Dig in."

The tables in front of them instantly filled with food.

She collected an assortment of potatoes, peas, carrots, onions, and roast beef onto her plate and began processing it.

Around her the sounds of the older year's laughing and joking flowed into the vacuum that was the Slytherin first years.

She speared a slice of beef on her fork and looked across the table just as a matronly witch wearing white robes bustled up to Daphne.

"Miss Greengrass."

Daphne looked around, mouth still full.

"I'm Madam Pomfrey, the school's healer. I'm going to perform a check for magical exhaustion. Okay?"

Daphne swallowed her bite and nodded.

Despite her own tiredness, she couldn't help pause with the beef halfway to her mouth. New magic.

Madam Pomfrey pointed her wand at Daphne and muttered an incantation that she couldn't quite catch. The healer frowned when the tip of her wand lit up dark pink. "You've been using far too much magic today, just like all the rest of your peers, I suspect. Make sure you get a good nights sleep and come see me if you're still tired by lunchtime tomorrow."

Daphne nodded again, turned, and resumed her mechanical eating.

She continued to watch the healer as she moved up the table, stopping at every tired looking student. So, that was the diagnostic charm to test for magical exhaustion was it?

She frowned. Was it a charm though? It didn't affect the properties of the target, after-all. But the book she'd bought said it was a charm. She took a bite of potato. Something to ask the charms professor about, maybe.

She continued to eat and surreptitiously snuck a small piece of beef into the pocket of her robes, in which a tiny snake under Harry's command writhed in appreciation. Eventually the healer made her way around the table to where she sat.

"Miss Granger, is it?"
She turned. "Yes, Healer Pomfrey."

"Just Madam Pomfrey while in school, Miss Granger."

She hesitated. "As you wish, Madam Pomfrey."

Madam Pomfrey nodded and a quick wand brandish produced a light pink light. "Well, Miss Granger, you've definitely been working yourself hard, but I'm glad you seem to be able to show restraint, your toxin levels are far lower than most of your peers."

She felt her cheeks redden and nodded. "Can I ask a question, Madam Pomfrey?"

"Of course, Dear."

"Is that a charm or something else? Because—"

Just then, a loud crash came from the other side of the hall. Madam Pomfrey whirled around. "Oh, please excuse me." and with that she hustled towards the source, an audible, "Oh, I feared that," issuing from her lips.

She pouted and craned her neck to spy a small party of Gryffindors, including John Potter, staring at the collapsed form of the Longbottom Heir. She turned back again to face her new comrades. "I guess it was a bit too much for some of us."

Daphne, Tracey, and Blaise all grunted in unison.

The feast continued.

Warm food and peace filled her up. The food here was good, if a bit slanted towards high calorie fats, carbs, and sweets.

Suddenly she felt something that shouldn't have been. The faint and gentle touch of a mind probe. She yanked on the probe and whipped around to identify the source of the attack. The lightning-fast vision of a bearded old man, fighting to get away from a rampaging dragon, shot through her mindscape, just as she found herself gazing into the shocked blue eyes of the chief warlock.

Her pulse raced. She clenched the fork in her hand, hard. For one moment, the two stared each other into eternity, and then, just as quickly, the moment ended. She released the probe and turned back to her dinner, fork still clenched hard enough to leave an imprint in her palm.

She glared at her food and stabbed an errant carrot.

So, that was the man who would happily throw Harry to the depths of hell. Not on her watch.

The main course gave way to dessert and there were no more attempts on her mind.

After despairing for the lack of low sugar dessert options, she chose a slice of blueberry pie. At least it contained some fruit.

The dessert ended. She placed her fork down, and turned back in her seat to face the front, just as the enemy stood back up.

"Now that you are all fed and watered, I do have some beginning of year announcements. Firstly, the forbidden forest is forbidden. We haven't had a single death in fifty years and it's a record I'd very much like to continue."
She shuddered.

"The quidditch tryouts will be held in the third week of term and the duelling tryouts will be held in the first week of November. If you wish to tryout for your house team, please contact your house team captain."

She nodded. She wasn't doing either, but she would be lying if she said she wasn't looking forward to watching her lord wipe the floor with everyone.

"The forbidden items list is now bigger and better and is available on the office door of our resident caretaker, Mister Filch." The man paused. "And finally, we are currently doing maintenance on the third floor corridor on the right hand side. As such, that area is potentially dangerous and is out of bounds until further notice."

She kept her face totally blank. So, Harry was right.

"And now, the school song!" He waved his hands in the air, allowing his purple robes, embroidered with stars, sequins, and glitter dust, to fall down his arms. The other professors looked like they wanted to be elsewhere.

Words sprang from the tip of the man's wand and the entire school started a chaos filled cacophony of hectic hymns. The majority found a collective voice halfway through. A nice medium pace, leaving only the true mavericks breaking the flow. That included the red headed twins who'd 'helped' her on the train… and Harry.

The song finished.

"And now," the evil man continued, wiping a happy tear from his two-faced face. "bed time — off you trot."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne stood in the Slytherin common room. Granger stood to her right. Blaise and Tracey stood behind them. As soon as they'd entered the room, they'd been shepherded into neat columns and rows along with the rest of Slytherin House.

She wanted to go to bed. It was so close. But she was stuck standing here.

The common room door swung open and a figure swept into the room, past all the waiting students, and to the front of the gathering. Severus Snape. His hair was long and greasy. His robes were black and stained. His nose was crooked, and his whole air screamed deadly assassin. As Slytherin masks went, it was a good one.

"Welcome…" Snape began, "to the Most Ancient… and Noble… House of Slytherin." A voice of silk and daggers.

"This house has a long tradition of cunning and ambition… of elegance, and…breeding."

Beside her, she thought she sensed Granger tense up.

"In Slytherin House… we follow a strict code of unity and discretion. Any political… rivalries… will stay inside the house. Outside these walls we stand as one."

She nodded. Unless her lord said otherwise.
"You will find that being in Slytherin House will grant you many privileges that other houses are not party to. The facilities here are one of the many advantages we hold over other houses. These facilities will remain secret… or else."

Subtle.

"I am Severus Snape. Potions Master and Head of Slytherin House." Snape turned and looked her right in the eyes. "And I am Head of Slytherin House. Regardless of what some of you… might believe."

What?

She stared straight back, refusing to either rise to the bait or submit.

Snape turned away from her. His eyes briefly fell on Granger before travelling back over the assembled students.

"We hold our ancient traditions dear and we do not appreciate those families who might soil our ways with… Light ideals… and who destroy those who fight to uphold those ways."

A quick glance confirmed Snape was looking at Harry now. She ground her teeth. Bastard.

Another quick glance at Granger showed her Slytherin mask was cracking, anger seeping through fissures, like larva through rock.

She nudged the witch and shot her a look. The mask instantly snapped back.

"In Slytherin House… members of those families will quickly find themselves persona non grata."

She stared straight ahead. Focusing all her exhausted will power on a single spot of wall some five metres in front of her.

"You will all maintain the dignity expected of those of your station. If I catch any of you engaging in unseemly behaviour, you will be punished."

Translation — Don't get caught.

"You will all maintain the highest academic performance as is expected from those with your magical advantages."

Translation — Most of you know at least basic occlumency, but that's no reason to slack off.

"And you will all show proper respect to those who have proven themselves your betters."

…

"If you have any questions, go to a prefect. If you have to come to me and a prefect could have handled it, you will no be happy with the result. Don't be late for classes tomorrow. There are no excuses." And with that, Snape swept back out of the common room, pausing only to open and close the door behind him.

Daphne didn't wait a moment longer. Bed was calling.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The next morning, Hermione's eyes snapped open. The bed felt wrong. Oh! She was at Hogwarts!
She scrambled out of the silk sheeted bed and whispered the time spell. Seven o'clock. Breakfast would start any moment. She stripped off her brand new dressing gown and stepped over to the double-shower bathroom.

The beautifully warm water washed over her.

The door opened and she heard someone else enter. Another stream of water fell in the stall next to her's.

The water was so nice and warm.

Minutes passed.

She shut off the water and exited just as an equally wet Daphne Greengrass left her stall. They stared at each other for a moment, wrapped in towels and dripping. The Greengrass Heiress hesitated, then continued on back to the dorm room. She followed.

Ten minutes later, they were both putting the finishing touches on their magically dried hair. She applied straightening charms, while Daphne was doing highlights with her wand.

They still hadn't spoken a word.

Parkinson could be heard in the bathroom, arguing with Tracey and Bulstrode over shower time.

She made a mental note to get up an hour earlier tomorrow.

They finished their hair at the same time and started to put on their robes in unison.

She glanced at Daphne again. The girl seemed totally focused on what she was doing.

Socks were pulled on. Shoes were laced up.

Shouts of indignation still emanated from the bathroom.

They both stood up.

Daphne made as though to say something, but seemed to think twice.

She snapped.

"This is stupid! We need to talk about some things."

Daphne paused on her way to the door and turned back. "Yes, that's true."

"Like, where exactly do we stand with each other? I mean, what was all that on the train yesterday? Do you want me to defer to you in public or what?"

"In public?"

"Yes, you know, where other people can see us." She raised her right hand and wiggled her silver, lightning-bolt, ringed pinky finger.

Daphne's face pinched.

She waited.

Daphne opened her mouth, then closed it again. Then, eventually, opened it again. "In public we
can act as social convention would dictate we act. And in private we can act as social equals.”

“…”

“…”

She smiled. "Excellent. Shall we get breakfast then?"

Daphne stared at her. Then nodded, once.

Together, they left the dorm room, strolled through the common room, and made their way down to breakfast, trying not to look too suspiciously comfortable in the optimal route they took.

Ten minutes later, she sat opposite Daphne at the end of the Slytherin table furthest away from the head table. She inspected the breakfast offering, frowned, grabbed a small slice of bacon, and lowering it into her snake filled pocket. She idly wondered if she could get the house elves to serve fruit muesli.

Harry entered the hall, fresh and bouncy. She had to stop her face from betraying her feelings. She wanted to speak with him so badly. To greet and be greeted. To feel that warm feeling she always got around him.

Harry walked past her and sat in the middle of the table. Students on all sides shuffled away as though he had the pox. He took no notice and reached for the toast.

She bit back a scowl.

"Miss Granger?"

She turned. It was Professor McGonagall.

"Yes, Professor?"

"Headmaster Dumbledore wishes to speak with you in his office. The password is jelly beans."

She adopted a carefully neutral expression.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I have written instructions from my magical guardian that I may only speak with the headmaster in his presence."

McGonagall frowned. "Miss Granger, our records show the Headmaster is your magical guardian."

"Then I can only suppose the records haven't been updated since my parents appointed Lord Slytherin as my magical guardian." She tapped her first Slytherin vassal coat of arms that was still visible above the new, standard Slytherin arms.

The stern professor's eyes flustered from her robes, to her face, to Daphne, and back to her again. "May I see these written instructions?"

"Certainly." She reached into her bag and handed over an official looking parchment.

McGonagall read. "Well," the professor said, dropping the parchment to her side and looking around at nothing. "This is all… very unexpected." McGonagall's speech was breathy. "Do you have any idea why your parents did this, Miss Granger? Have you noticed any strange changes in their behaviour? Perhaps subtle alterations like new interests or new habits. Has there been any—"
"—I hope, Professor," Daphne interrupted, "that you are not accusing my lord of foul play?"

McGonagall's lips thinned. "Miss Greengrass. It is most unusual for a…" the professor hesitated and glanced down the Slytherin table "…for a family in Miss Granger's situation to hand over responsibility of their child to a total stranger. I am only doing what is necessary."

She sighed, stood, turned and gave the now shocked professor a formal curtsey. "Professor, I am thankful for your concern and for the responsibility you are showing for my wellbeing. In this case, I hope I can put your mind at rest by saying that my lord has both mine and my parents full confidence, and that he has been nothing but straight with us in the time we have known him.

"Most of my lord's concern is in leaving those under his care in the lone presence of a political rival who is also the most powerful wizard in the world. Regardless of his reputation for fair dealing, you must see this is a legitimate concern. You will find that Heiress Greengrass has identical written instructions from her parents for the same reasons."

She glanced over at Daphne who nodded.

McGonagall seemed to consider this while fiddling with the bun of her hair. "Very well. If you'll excuse me, I need to inform the headmaster of this development." The transfiguration professor left.

She and Daphne shared a longer than normal look, before busying themselves, once again, with breakfast.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne studied the strange shape hidden by a silk drape on the large desk at the front of the classroom.

"Students!" called the squeaky voice of Professor Flitwick. "You are now beginning your formal education of magic. Over the next seven years you will learn all the basics you need to be a proficient wand wielder."

The shape was twice as tall as the diminutive professor, stood as he was on a stack of books on his own desk.

"In this lesson, we're going to cover the basic magic theory, how magic flows, the units we use to measure it, and how some of the tools we use fit into this system. We'll finish by using our wands to measure your current magical capacity."

Granger was vibrating beside her, a look of total focus on her face.

"Let's start with a simple question. What is magic?"

Granger's hand shot up.

"Yes, Miss Granger."

"Magic is a form of energy, which certain living things can store and use to manipulate reality."

"Excellent. Two points to Slytherin."

Granger beamed.

"Magic is, as Miss Granger said, a form of energy that exists all around us in another plane of
existence, which we call the aether. The aether does not interact with physical things in any way. The only way the aether interacts with us is through a thing which some living things possess, called a core."

Flitwick hopped off the stack of books he'd been standing on, walked over to the shape hidden by the silk drape, and pulled, revealing a strange assortment of four glass spheres connected by tubes. The spheres were arranged like a diamond with a large sphere at the top, two smaller ones in the middle, and one last medium sized sphere at the bottom.

The professor waved his wand, and the windows closed, dimming the room.

"The blue liquid represents raw magic. Now, our core is connected to our bodies, represented by these two spheres." He indicated the middle glass spheres, which were both connected to the top glass sphere, full and glowing.

"When our magic flows from our core into our bodies, our core converts it into a more usable form — what we call ready magic." He tapped the single tube which lead from the glowing sphere to the two empty middle spheres with his wand. Slowly, the glowing blue liquid started to flow from the first sphere into the tube where it split into the two separate spheres. As it passed into one of the spheres the liquid turned green — in the other sphere, it turned red.

Flitwick pointed to the green liquid now sloshing about in its sphere. "This is the ready magic in our body." He pointed to the red liquid in the other sphere. "This is a toxin produced by our core when it turns raw magic into ready magic. Our body processes this toxin and flushes it from our system as quickly as it can."

There was now only one empty sphere. It was connected to the sphere containing the green coloured liquid.

"However, it is very difficult for our bodies to use magic directly. Humans have a very high 'natural reluctance' — Something you'll learn more about in transfiguration class — So, to combat this natural reluctance, we use a wand."

He tapped the final, bottom sphere and glowing green liquid started to flow into it from the middle sphere which held it. Eventually the bottom sphere filled up. "And there you have it!" The professor jumped back onto his pile of books. "The magical system of our bodies. From aether, to core, to body, and finally, to wand. Simple!"

Daphne grinned. She remembered going through a very similar lesson like this with Lady Davis not too long ago, although Tracey's mum didn't use the beautiful glassworks.

Beside her, Granger smirked. Presumably, Harry had taught her something similar.

"Now!" Flitwick called out. "We're going to introduce two new concepts which will help us measure our magical power. You'll want to bring out your parchment and quills for this bit."

A series of groans filled the room, along with the scraping of chairs and rustling of bags and paper as people scrabbled for writing materials.

Flitwick waved his wand at the blackboard, and a stick of chalk lifted itself into the air and started
"The first is how we measure magic. How much magic does it take to cast a spell? How much magic does our core store? Or our wands? We measure this with a unit called the Merlin."

The chalk wrote MERLIN on the board and underlined it twice. Next to that it wrote '— THE MERLIN IS DEFINED AS THE AMOUNT OF MAGIC THAT CAN BE STORED IN 100g OF IRON [M].'

"Do all of you have your wands?" the professor called out. There was a general call of yeses and nods while a few people brandished them, already in hand.

"Good, good. The number of Merlins that can be stored in your wand core is quite a bit higher than what can be stored in iron. Again, you'll learn more about that in transfiguration." He waved his own wand in the air. "Generally, your wand will store between 100 and 165 Merlins, depending on length and wand core."

He looked out around her classmates. "Any questions?"

A girl she didn't recognise raised her hand. "How many Merlins can our body hold?"

"Ah, good question. The number of Merlins our body will hold under normal circumstances is dependent on our lean body mass. One Merlin per kilogram. The larger you are, the more magic your body stores. Does that answer your question?"

The girl nodded.

"Any one else?"

No one moved.

"Okay." He waved his wand towards the black board again. Again, the chalk floated into position. "The second measure we are going to cover today is the Flamel. The Flamel is a measure of how quickly magic flows or is being used." The chalk wrote FLAMEL, underlined it twice, and then wrote '— THE FLAMEL IS DEFINED AS A CONSTANT FLOW OF ONE MERLIN PER SECOND. [1 F = 1 M/s]'

Flitwick then waved his wand and two more glass apparati appeared on the desk. Both had a large glass sphere full of glowing green liquid that lead to an empty cylindrical glass beaker. The tube that linked the first sphere to its beaker looked bigger than the second.

"The system on the left hand side has twice the flow rate of the one on the right." He waved his wand and glowing green liquid started to flow. "See how it fills up the beaker faster than its twin? If these were real wizards, the one on the right would be able to charge and cast spells twice as fast as the one on the left. His 'flamelage' would be twice as high."

Flitwick looked around again. The sounds of quills scribbling on parchment filled the suddenly quietened classroom.

"Any questions?"

The same girl from before raised her hand again.

"Yes, Miss Roper?"
"What determines our flamelage, Sir?"

"Another good question. Take one point for Ravenclaw. We have several points in our body where magic flows, and each point will have a different flamelage. The point where raw magic flows from our core into our body for example. Or the point where ready magic flows from our bodies into our wands. Our core-to-body flamelage changes the most with age. Our wand flamelage, by contrast, is determined by our wand compatibility. There are some other ways flamelage changes but we'll discuss that in a later lesson."

Roper nodded.

"Now! Everyone take out your wands!" People started scrabbling again.

Daphne gave a flick of her wrist and produced her brand new hazel and unicorn hair wand. On either side of her, Granger and Tracey both had their wands in hand. Tracey had a massive grin on her face.

"The first spell we are going to learn is the lumos spell."

A few scoffs were heard. She raised a single eyebrow.

"Now, I know that for some of you, this is very basic stuff. But please remember that some of your peers have never used even a toy wand before. The purpose of this exercise is not to develop casting skill, but to measure magical capacity." He waved his wand at the chalk again. "The lumos spell is very useful for this."

The chalk wrote, 'LUMOS - PRODUCES A VARIABLE LIGHT BASED ON FLAMELAGE'

Flitwick turned back to them, away from the chalkboard. "Or, in other words, the more flamels you can produce, the brighter the light… I need a volunteer."

Granger's hand instantly shot into the air.

She gave the girl a half-lidded look.

Tracey giggled.

"Yes, Miss Granger, please come to the front of the class."

Granger stood up and swept to the front of the classroom.

She spotted John Potter sitting several rows down, looking at Granger the way a just-kicked puppy might look at its owner. She smirked.

Flitwick produced an hourglass from under the desk.

"Now, Miss Granger, what I'm going to ask you to do is to hold your wand out in front of you and close your eyes."

Granger did so.

"We're going to go through a basic visualisation exercise to enable you to cast the spell. Don't worry if you don't get it right the first time. That's very common. Now, imagine it being really dark, so very dark that you can't see anything. You also know there is a monster nearby but you can't see it. You also know that this monster is afraid of the light and that if you can produce light, you'll be able to get away. Can you imagine that?"
Granger nodded.

"It's really dark and you need that light. You need it right now. Now, cast the spell!"

"Lumos!" The dimmed classroom lit up. Illuminated by a single point of strong light.

Flitwick turned the hourglass over. The sand started to fall. "Oh, very well done, Miss Granger, keep it just like that, yes, that's it, just like that."

Granger opened her eyes and stared at the light. A thousand laughs danced in her eyes.

Flitwick tipped his own wand to the tip of Granger's and muttered an incantation of his own. The professor's wand shot out a number, much like a tempus spell shot out the time — 12.07.

The light shone brightly for a little while more, then, suddenly, it dimmed, not going out, but not nearly as strong as before.

Flitwick flipped the hourglass over and tapped his wand on the top. Another number shot out of the wand — 18.42.

"The first number is the flamels Miss Granger is capable of producing. The second is how long she can keep that rate of flow up before the reserves of her wand and body are drained. Multiply the two together and you get what we call the maximum immediate reserves — the maximum number of Merlins that Miss Granger has access to at full power."

The chalk on the board wrote '12.07M/s x 18.42s = 222.33M'.

Once those reserves were used up, Miss Granger only had what little magic flowed directly from her core, which almost always has a much lower flamelage than our wands have. That is why the lumos spell eventually dimmed.

Flitwick glanced at the wand held in Granger's hand. "That is quite a wand, Miss Granger. Dragon heartstring I presume?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Good, good. Well done. Three points to Slytherin. Please sit down."

Granger walked back up towards her and Tracey, looking very pleased with herself.

"What I want you all to do now is practise the lumos spell. Once you're sure you can cast it at full power, I will measure your maximum immediate reserves. If you are waiting or finished, please read and make notes on chapter one of An Introduction to Magical Theory."

Daphne jabbed her wand. "Lumos." A bright light lit the end of her wand. She was pretty sure it wasn't quite as bright as Granger's had been.

—— DP & SW: T FoP ——

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore read the letter again. He wasn't sure what to think. He'd just got back from checking the ministry records and Miss Granger's parents had indeed appointed Lord Slytherin as their child's magical guardian. That wouldn't be easy to reverse. Not without the Grangers willing assistance. Not only that, but Lord Slytherin appeared to have put it into the head of both the girl and her parents that he was dangerous enough that he shouldn't be left alone with a child. Him. The headmaster of a school. Did Slytherin really believe that? Or was it just a ruse to
distance this family from those who might clue them in to the power he now wielded over them?

The door to his office opened. He pocketed the letter.

"Ah, Professor McGonagall. Are we ready?"

Professor McGonagall stood in the doorway, wrapped in her hardworking travelling cloak. "Yes, Albus." She hesitated. "I really don't know where all this came from. They seemed to be a perfectly normal muggle family when I talked to them last year." She coughed. "Although, now I think about it, they might have been a bit more accepting of everything than most muggle families are."

Dumbledore nodded. "Let's hope we can get this all straightened out as soon as possible. I do have an appointment with Gringotts straight after, and I don't need to say how dangerous it is for Miss Granger's family right now." He walked over to the floo and threw a pinch into the fire place. "Crawley."

A few minutes later, they walked towards the house in question from the deputy headmistress's apparition point. He stopped and caught McGonagall with his hand.

"Albus?"

"Something's not right. There's so much magic in the air I can feel it from here." He drew his wand and carefully stepped forward, McGonagall following behind.

He stopped again, and pointed his wand into a spot a few feet off the pathway, towards one of the muggle residences.

"That's the Grangers house, Albus."

He stepped back. "It's warded."

McGonagall gasped. "What does this mean?"

"It means, that there is more going on here then just a pureblood preying on muggle families. These wards are expensive. I recognise many of them."

"Not all?"

He shook his head. "No, my dear professor. Not all."

He stood and looked at the ward line.

"So, what should we do, Albus?"

He turned towards his deputy and gave her his twinkly eyed smile. "I guess we knock and see if anyone's home."

He stuck his wand into the outer ward and pulsed a stream of pure magic into it. Next to him, McGonagall did the same.

He waited, wand still held in the ward. A few moments later he felt an answering pulse shoot up the elder wand into his body. A nod from McGonagall showed that she too had been accepted. They unlatched the gate and stepped onto the property.

Walking up to the front door, he could feel the powerful ward magics sweep over him, probing him, judging him. He never thought he'd feel this kind of magic from a muggle residence. It was
The door swung open just as they reached it. A well-dressed young woman stood in the door.

McGonagall froze. "Mrs. Granger?"

He glanced backward to look questioningly at his deputy.

"Professor McGonagall," said the now identified Mrs. Granger. Her voice was light and cheerful.

He turned back to the young woman.

"And Headmaster Dumbledore too. What a surprise. And to what do we owe this pleasure?"

We? He looked around.

"My husband is in the sitting room. Please follow me." The woman turned and led them away.

McGonagall seemed to unstick herself. "Mrs. Granger, may I ask how you came across those clothes?"

"Twilfitt and Tatting's. Nice, aren't they?"

McGonagall had no time to reply before they entered the sitting room.

A man, presumably Mr. Granger, stood up from the far side of the room. The man's clothes were no less respectable than his wife's, if a bit plain for his tastes.

"Professor McGonagall," Mr. Granger announced in a strong, jovial voice, "Glad to see you again, after almost a whole year. And Headmaster Dumbledore. The chief warlock himself." Mr. Granger motioned them both to sit down in the two armchairs opposite where he'd been sitting. He then sat back down himself, while Mrs. Granger sat on his right. "Fire whisky?" He started pouring a dram.

"No, thank you, Mr. Granger," he said, without thinking. "We're here to ask—"

"—An where did yon get that?"

He looked askance at his deputy, who stared at the bottle held in Mr. Granger's hand.

Mr. Granger looked at the bottle as if he'd only just noticed it. "Oh, Lord Ogden gifted a crate to our lord last Christmas, and he graciously passed on a half dozen bottles to us. Good thing too, this variety is tricky to find, so I'm told."

"Tricky to find?" McGonagall sounded incredulous.

He looked between his deputy and the Grangers.

Mr. Granger held the tiny glass to the strait-laced deputy headmistress.

McGonagall seemed to fight a small war with herself.

"Go on, Professor," said Mr. Granger. "You only live once."

The war ended with the forces of strait-lace routed. McGonagall took the glass and slowly drank as though from the elixir of life.

"Now, Headmaster." Mr. Granger turned to him. "What do we have to discuss? I hope Hermione
isn't in trouble already."

"Well, we hope not, Mr. Granger. We're a bit concerned about your choice of magical guardian."

Mr. Granger frowned. "And how does this concern Hogwarts?"

"Lord Slytherin is a man about whom little is known. No one knows what he wants or what he is doing. He keeps secrets and doesn't tell people what is really going on."

Mr. Granger smiled. "Ah, I understand. Kind of like how Hogwarts didn't mention about us not having even half responsibility for our own daughter?"

He stared.

Beside him, McGonagall choked on her drink.

Mrs. Granger shifted in her seat. "Or about both us and our daughter being subject to a completely separate set of laws from the mundane government, in which we are third-class citizens and have no representation."

He stared some more.

"Or about what inevitably happens to muggleborn children who refuse a magical education?" Mr. Granger's voice was a bit more pointed now.

He flinched and glanced at McGonagall, who'd paled.

"Or about how much discrimination our daughter will face in the future? About how many built-in advantages older families have? Both legal and magical?"

"Or about how only eleven years ago, Magical Britain was in the middle of a civil war, in which people like us and our daughter were hunted down like dogs and slaughtered by a guerrilla organisation, many of the members of which then skipped prison because they were rich and powerful?"

"About how if we became inconvenient for certain people, we could disappear right from our own beds in the middle of the night and nothing we did alone could stop that?"

"Now that's not true." That at least he could defend.

"Oh, really? How many muggleborn families survived the last war with the dark lord?"

His stomach dropped and his shoulders slumped. He looked into Mr. Granger's flinty eyes. When his voice emerged it sounded older than he'd ever heard it. "Okay, I think you've made your point. Perhaps we aren't as open as we would like to be with muggleborn parents. But what would you have us do?" He stretched his hands, palms faced out. "The truth would simultaneously enrage and terrify them, and alienate them from their own children. Many would blame them. Families would be torn apart."

Mrs. Granger reached for the bottle and poured herself a glass. "Some would, yes. But that could be ameliorated by doing what our lord did for us. He protects us. He brought us into his family and granted us what rights and privileges it is within his power to grant."

"Mrs. Granger, with the greatest respect, the wards around your property cost a small fortune and to give them to every muggleborn family would be far beyond the resources of Hogwarts."
She smiled, sweetly. "Well then, I will go to bed tonight happy in the knowledge that we serve a man who has not only the words, but also the powers to keep me, my husband, and my daughter safe."

He snapped. "Doesn't it worry you that you know nothing about this man?"

Mr. Granger smiled and looked him straight in the eyes. "Speak for yourself, Chief Warlock."

His eyes widened in shock for a flash of a moment. Mr. Granger knew something and the man's eyes were fixed on him. They were right there. He reached out his magic between them, there was a flash of white light, and he felt a sad little yank just behind his navel.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daniel Granger stared at the space where, just before, the most powerful wizard in the world had sat. He leaned back in his seat and sighed.

"What happened?" McGonagall jerked up and whipped out her wand.

He clutched the golden head-of-house Granger ring on his hand like a child might clutch a blanket. "The headmaster attempted to use some kind of offensive magic on me — legilimency, I suspect. The wards shielded me, then ejected him. He'll be several miles away in a local park."

McGonagall swung towards the door, wand still in hand.

"Please stop waving that thing around, Professor." Emma reached forward and patted the far side of the small table between them.

McGonagall whirled back around and fixed his wife with a wide eyed stare. He could hear the woman's breathing.

"Why don't you sit down and tell us about how Hermione is doing. And yourself. We haven't seen each other for a whole year after all."

The old witch stared for several more seconds. Eventually she sat down and took a deep breath. "If…If Albus did try to use legilimency, then I apologise on his behalf."

He made a noncommittal gesture. "Maybe we'll have a conversation about that some other time. In the meantime, what about Hermione? How is she fitting in?"

The professor seemed to take a moment to collect her thoughts. "I have not actually had a class with her, yet. But I do have transfiguration with her at one o'clock."

He glanced at the clock and shared a quick, magic-is-awesome glance with Emma.

"She is in Slytherin."

Emma grinned. "Well, of course she is. Ambitious and cunning, sounds like our Hermione."

"Well, yes, but, a muggleborn in Slytherin… it is not going to be easy for her. You wished for honesty, and that is the honest truth."

He smiled a smile of glass and flint. "I think you underestimate our little girl's capabilities. And anyway, she has allies."

"Oh. Yes. The Greengrass heiress."
He maintained a carefully blank face. "Indeed."

Emma poured the professor another dram. "Perhaps we could quickly talk about healer training? It's something Hermione brought up after she got her wand."

McGonagall's face relaxed. "Certainly. Well, the options are…"

---

Dumbledore picked himself up from where he'd fallen on a well manicured grass lawn. He brushed himself down. Damn. He shook himself. That was a mistake. Ugh. He was getting old.

He looked around. It looked like a muggle park.

Wards like that wouldn't have deposited him far, so he must still be in Crawley. Professor McGonagall hadn't joined him, so presumably she was still with the Grangers. That was good. Maybe she could learn something more useful.

He frowned. The Grangers were convinced that Slytherin was a protector. And to be fair, the man certainly had invested a lot of money into giving the Grangers magical protection powerful enough to stop even him. Slytherin had done far more for this muggleborn family than he had ever been able to. Was he mistaken about Lord Slytherin? But then, why did Slytherin seem to distrust him so much? It made no sense. Slytherin still wouldn't speak with him. After all these years.

He sighed. What he really needed was a iron clad reason to speak with the man. One that Slytherin couldn't refuse and still maintain his image with those he led.

He still.

Oh, he was being stupid! He reached into the pocket of his robes and brought out the letter Lord Slytherin had written, baring him from speaking with Miss Granger without her magical guardian's presence. He smiled and let out a held breath. Of course. That's how he could get his meeting with Lord Slytherin. Now he just needed to find a valid academic reason to speak with Miss Granger.

He looked off into the distance. But first, he had an appointment with the goblins to keep. He focused on the nearest apparition point to London and vanished.

---

Hermione sat next to Daphne in the transfiguration classroom. A blank piece of parchment lay in front of her. Her quill was ready inked and lay perfectly parallel to the parchment.

A cat padded down the aisle past her and jumped onto the desk.

She stared at it.

"Professor McGonagall is a cat animagus," Harry had said.

She smirked.

Out of the corner of her eye, Daphne did the same.

A large bell sounded, indicating the start of class. Several minutes after that, two more students hurried into the classroom, looking relieved at dodging their presumed teacher based reprimand. One of them was Dean Thomas.
The cat leapt from the table and resolved itself into the upright and stern visage of Professor McGonagall.

The late student's faces fell.

"Thank you Messrs Thomas and Finnigan. Please take your seats and if you are late again, I shall turn you into a clock."

The professor walked down the aisle.

"Welcome to transfiguration. The magic of transforming objects into alternate forms. You will soon be shocked to discover that in the next five years, you will only learn five actual spells in this class." The old witch paused and walked back up to the front of the lecture room.

A few of her classmates did indeed look surprised. Not her, of course.

"This is because one spell will cover almost all our efforts up until your NEWTs." McGonagall pointed her wand at a goblet on the desk in front her. It turned into a small statue of a knight on horseback. Another wave of her wand turned it back. She then picked up the goblet and pointed her wand at the table itself. The desk turned into a pig.

"I just used the same spell on both the goblet and the desk, the general transfiguration spell." McGonagall said, turning the pig back into a desk again. "This is the spell we shall spend the majority of our time with." You may well be able to cast the spell by the end of this class. But to master it, will take a lifetime."

She diligently wrote down, 'Point 1. General transfiguration spell - lifetime to master.'

"To cast the general transfiguration spell we channel our ready magic through our wands with intent to affect the change."

McGonagall picked up a stick of chalk and wrote — A SPELL IS READY MAGIC WITH INTENT. "This applies to all magic, not just transfiguration. When you cast a charm, or a jinx, you are doing the same thing. Of course, for the spell to work, magic has to also agree with your intent, and that often requires additional actions. Hence, magic words, wand motions, rituals, etc."

She copied this down too. She already knew it, but that was beside the point. Good students wrote things down.

"When we cast the transfiguration spell on an object, we channel the spell into the object. The object will continue to change as the intent channelled into the object changes." The professor wrote — A TRANSFIGURED OBJECT HOLDS THE SPELL WITHIN ITSELF.

"When the magic in the object reaches zero, the object reverts back to its original form."

McGonagall then reached under the desk and brought out two large glass bowls, a block of wood, and an hourglass.

"Class, please watch closely."

She leaned closer to get a better view.

McGonagall placed the block of wood in the first bowl, flipped the hourglass, and pointed her wand at the wood through the bowl's top. The wood turned into water.
"I have just channelled a tiny amount of magic into the wood."

The professor looked down at the bowl and glanced at the hourglass. Several seconds later the wood turned back into water. McGonagall tapped the hourglass — 5.09 seconds.

"This time, the transfiguration lasted five seconds. Now, watch what happens this time."

McGonagall turned the wood back into water, but this time, she poured half the water into the second bowl. The moment the water in the second bowl lost contact with the water in the first, it turned back into wood, a block, just like it had been before, but half the size. The first bowl, though, still contained water. They waited. They waited some more.

The water turned back into wood. McGonagall tapped the recently re-flipped hourglass — 9.65 seconds.

"Can anyone tell me what just happened?"

Her hand could not have moved faster.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Once you poured half the water into the second bowl, it lost contact to the spell, so it turned back into wood. The first half then had only half as much mass to keep transfigured, but the same amount of magic, so it stayed transfigured twice as long."

"Well done, Miss Granger. Two points to Slytherin."

She beamed.

McGonagall wrote on the board — TRANSFIGURED OBJECTS USE UP THE MAGIC IN THEIR SPELL UNTIL THERE IS NO MAGIC LEFT.

The professor transfigured the wood into water again and then held the bowl up high so their attention was focused on it. Her voice was loud and sharp. "If you were to take a sip of this, you would end up with a mouth full of wood or sawdust. If you were able to drink this, all in one go, without the contact being lost between the liquid stream, you would end up with a stomach full of transfigured water. This would be a very bad thing. The water would gradually turn back into wood as individual molecules were absorbed by your stomach. This would cause severe damage to your stomach lining. You should never drink or eat anything that has been transfigured. Ever."

She grimaced. Harry had described some of the more graphic results that could be achieved with transfiguration if you were really trying hard enough. Just thinking about them made her squirm. The class seemed to have the same idea. One Hufflepuff girl in particular didn't look well.

McGonagall put the bowl down on the table. "If we kept this transfiguration active for long enough, we would start to see a thin film forming on the top of the water — wood dust from the water molecules that evaporated from the water and lost their transfiguration."

Under the last blackboard line, McGonagall wrote — IF YOU ARE UNCERTAIN IF SOMETHING YOU ARE ABOUT TO EAT OR DRINK CONTAINS MAGIC, CHECK FIRST!

"After the general transfiguration spell, we will learn the spell that checks an object for the presence of magic. If the object contains magic do not consume it."

A tentative hand was raised towards the front.
"Yes, Miss Roper?"

"What about those chocolate frog things? They contain magic don't they?"

Several rows down, she heard Malfoy mutter, "stupid mudblood."

Her eyes narrowed.

Professor McGonagall paused. "Yes, they contain animation magic. However, they are sealed in special packages to prevent tampering. So long as you have just opened one, it should be safe to eat. But if you are still uncertain, there are more advanced spells to determine the exact nature of the magic an object contains. We will not be learning them until much later though."

She swept from the blackboard to stand in front of the desks.

"Now, I am going to hand each of you an iron nail, and you are going to attempt to turn it into a small wooden spoon, like so." A nail turned into a tiny wooden spoon.

A few minutes later, a tiny wooden spoon lay in front of her. She beamed and fought not to look to Harry for praise. She looked to Daphne instead. Another tiny wooden spoon, identical to hers, lay in front of the blonde witch. She caught Daphne's eye and got a courteous nod in return.

She pouted and looked around the classroom. Except for Harry and his Gryffindor brother, no one else was even close to the two of them. It was amazing to think that, in the second timeline, she'd still been at the top of the class, even without Harry's advanced occlumency training and while hanging around with… with…. She looked over at the red-headed boy next to Harry's brother, who gave his nail an unsuccessful, half-hearted poke and then complained about being bored…. With that.

…

As it was, this felt like child's play.

She let out a short breath through her nose.

"Daphne," she started.

Daphne turned.

"Has our lord ever shown you that trick where he transfigures many different objects, builds something with them, and then times the magic to run out at the exact same time, leaving all the objects still standing?"

Daphne looked between the two spoons on their respective desks. "Yes…"

"Do you think we could do it?"

Daphne snorted. "Holding a transfiguration on 100g takes two milliflamels. These nails weight, what? Maybe 10g?"

"Well, okay, I know we won't get it exactly, but wouldn't it be interesting to try and get close? It's not as though we're doing any else useful at the moment."

Daphne looked around. "What would we use to measure the time? The tempus spell isn't exactly good for this, is it? And we don't have one of those hour glasses."
She paused. It was a good question. She thought for a few moments. "Iron can only hold a certain amount of magic, right?"

"Yes, one Merlin per 100g. We just did that in charms."

"Right, so the longest time for a transfiguration on iron is?" The question hung in the air.

Daphne's eyes sharpened. The witch pulled her parchment towards her and scribbled on it for a few moments.

She glanced over at the parchment and saw arithmetic of the type Harry had practised with her years ago.

"Seven minutes, twenty seconds," the blonde announced.

"So we could use a piece of transfigured iron as our clock, and then practise on something else, something that can hold more magic. We could try to only pump in enough magic to match the iron's transfiguration time.

Daphne nodded slowly. "That sounds… like it would work." The pretty witch frowned. "But isn't waiting over seven minutes a bit long? Wouldn't it be better to use something with a lower maximum capacity?"

"…I guess."

"Miss Greengrass? Miss Granger?"

She looked up. The surprised form of professor McGonagall loomed over them.

"Did you both do these?" McGonagall picked up one of the tiny spoons.

"Yes, Professor," Daphne answered.

McGonagall put the spoon down and took a deep breath. "Very well done, the both of you. Two points to Slytherin each." She glanced down at them. "Please do slow down a bit though. I do want Gryffindor to have some chance at the cup this year."

The corner of her lips tugged upward. It wasn't Harry praise, but it was something.

"Professor?" Daphne interjected. "Could you tell us what the lowest capacity material known is?"

The professor's eyebrows raised. "Why do you want to know, Miss Greengrass?"

"We were thinking of practising precision in the amount of magic we use, but we don't have a measurement device."

McGonagall hesitated. "Oh. I see what you were thinking of doing. There's really no need for that. I'll lend you the hourglass, just let me get it." And with that, the professor left to fetch it.

"Well, that's convenient," she said.

Daphne nodded.

Tracey landed between them. "You two are finally talking!"

— DP & SW: TFoP —
Albus Dumbledore was led into a well appointed goblin office.

"Greetings, Clan Leader Goldtooth."

A large, well dressed goblin wearing a sword by his side, stood up from behind his equally large mahogany desk, and smiled a twenty-four carat smile. The Goldtooths were well named.

"Greetings, Chief Warlock. Please. Sit."

He did so. There were few formalities between those who spoke the underground warrior tongue.

"I assume you are here about the"—the goblin dropped his voice in a show of mock secrecy—"You-know-what in vault 713?"

He smiled. "Indeed. I hope there haven't been any problems?"

Goldtooth grinned again. "None what so ever. A few goblins expressed an interest, but as soon as they learned that the immortal alchemist had provided his own special brand of defence, they didn't even bother to enquire further. And it's not as though Gringotts needs another one."

"Good good." It had taken a lot of work to persuade Nicholas to entrust him his most prized possession. But even then, his mentor and teacher had insisted on adding his own final defence.

The goblin shuffled a stack of papers. "I'm surprised you are picking it up this late."

"Yes, we had to upgrade security. I decided the previous plans were not fit for purpose."

The goblin fidgeted. "You know I've said before that Gringotts security is more than sufficient for holding items like this?"

His eyes twinkled. "Ah, yes, but not for the type of purpose I have in mind, Clan Leader."

Goldtooth sighed. "Very well, Chief Warlock, you know your own business best, I'm sure."

He looked up at the ceiling. "On that note, has there been anything of interest in our efforts to learn about our mysterious, masked wizarding clan leader?"

Goldtooth scowled. "Nothing. The Boneslicer clan are keeping their interests as close as ever. Various clans have lost several of their best fighters in just the last year trying to wrest control of various accounts from them."

He nodded. If Goldtooth was to be believed, the loyalty Lord Slytherin received from the Boneslicer clan seemed almost as much as what he received from the Goldtooths. It was disconcerting. Especially since he knew what he'd done to warrant it.

"If there is nothing else, shall I have you shown to the vault?"

He shook himself from his thoughts. "Yes, Clan Leader."

Some time later, he stood in front of a large ornate looking mirror, staring at the image of his long dead sister, an equally dead Gellert, and his still living brother, all standing around him and smiling happily.

Gellert looked him in the eyes and mouthed words that tore at his heart. "I forgive you, Albus."

He sighed. "Nicholas, you truly are a demon."
He ignored the other four figures, standing far off in the distance behind his destroyed family. He reached into his pocket, pulled out his special shrunk trunk, and enlarged it. The trunk sat as wide and long as he stood tall. A powerful wand-wave levitated the entire mirror, and a second wand-wave hovered it over the open trunk, down into its depths, and onto the expanded space's floor with a light thunk.

He flicked the extra large trunk closed with another wand wave and shrunk it with a single wand poke.

He turned to leave. He wasn't looking forward to setting up his own final addition to Nicholas' work. Not at all.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Several hours later, back in his office, Dumbledore took off his moon shaped glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"John, my boy, you simply cannot act like that in front of everyone."

John Potter sat in the large chair in front of him, eyes defiant and aflame. "You said it yourself, Headmaster. You said he's a danger."

He sighed. "Yes, but that doesn't mean you can openly attack him like that. You shouldn't attack him at all. I never meant for you to be that… antagonistic towards him." He really hadn't. Perhaps telling the other Potter twin about his brother had been a mistake. But how else was he to keep them apart?

"What about Ginny?" the boy half-shouted.

He gave a tiny shake of his ancient beard ladened head. "John, the unknown wizard or witch who's been teaching young Miss Weasley occlumency duelled both of Miss Weasley's older brothers, without a wand, and overpowered the Weasley family wards. Miss Weasley might call this person Harry, but it's not your Harry."

"But… But…"

He frowned. Something seemed off, but he wasn't sure what. "John, is there something you need to tell me?"

The young man stiffened. "No, Headmaster."

That was a very fast response. He studied the boy in front of him. The Potter heir had seemingly matured a lot over the past few months. But in other ways, the boy seemed more unstable than before. More focused? More determined? Certainly more powerful. Half the spells Miss Clearwater reported John using were fourth year spells, and both his rate of casting and duration should have been beyond him. If the wards hadn't reported him as being John Potter, he'd have suspected foul play.

But it was still troubling. Even more so because of Harry. If John was this powerful, It was likely Harry would be too.

He kept his sapphire gaze on the boy. Eventually he looked away. "Forty points from Gryffindor for initiating an unsanctioned duel and one weeks detention with Mister Filch, Mister Potter."

John nodded, stiffly.
"You may go, John. Please be more careful in the future."

John left.

He sunk a bit lower in his massive chair. Sometimes he hated his job.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John Potter slammed the door to the Gryffindor first year dorms behind him.

It was official. He wasn't going to get any help from anyone in power to restore the timeline, or to ensure that the proper outcome came about. Ever since he'd come back in time he'd been floating along, letting most things happen just like they had last time, with just a few changes here and there to improve his position.

But, things hadn't happened like last time, had they? Things weren't the same, and it was looking more and more like he was dealing with events that he just didn't know about.

Seeing Hermione wearing Slytherin green, hanging around the Greengrass heiress, and gliding around as though every day was the yule ball, hurt. Hurt so much. And he didn't want to admit it, but without Hermione, he wasn't as well off as he'd been even last time around. Oh, he had Susan now, who was cool in her own way, and Padma, and maybe a few others, but none of them was a replacement for the formerly bushy-haired, genius muggleborn.

He padded over to the window, drew back the curtain and surveyed the Hogwarts grounds. A faint mist hung over the open grass.

His eyes narrowed.

If he was going to do this, it was going to have to be with his power. He couldn't rely on anyone else. Not any more. Not with all the changes. That meant he didn't have any choice but to be better. He was eleven. But he had the core of a fifteen year old. That meant that when he was fifteen this time around, he'd have the core of twenty year old. And he knew he was beyond the top tier of power for his year to begin with.

Would that be good enough to fight Voldemort? It would have to be.

He clenched the curtain in his fist.

That meant he'd have to train. He'd have to get better. And he was going to start—

His stomach growled.

…right after dinner.

— End of Chapter Sixteen —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Grumble Grumble, chapter length, Grumble Grumble, Part one of two, Grumble
Grumble. But seriously, I guess I'm just really bad at judging chapter lengths before I write them. This season will now contain 18 chapters.

A/N: My thanks goes out to my unofficial Beta, lynxreader. You have the eyes of an eagle.
Daphne sighted down her wand and loosed a bight red stunner on the wooden target dummy.

The Slytherin dungeons were exceptionally well equipped. They had a duelling range, a potions lab, and a small library. Harry had hinted there were other, more secure, places they could use later, but until they could set them up, she planned to make as much use of these facilities as possible.

Next to her, Granger lined up her own wand. "You don't think we're going to need this any time soon do you?" Granger asked, firing off her own stunner towards the dummy.

She frowned. Their first day at Hogwarts had gone well. Nothing too drastic had happened and today looked to be more of the same. But still…

She fingered her wand. "It's better to be prepared than not."

Granger lowered her wand. "You could just say, 'I don't know.'"

She kept her face blank. "'I don't know' was part of my meaning."

Granger tilted her head in a half-acknowledgement, turned, took a deep breath, and let loose a continuous chain of spells.

A few booths away, a group of older Slytherins were also training, making use of the time before breakfast to brush up on their skills, no doubt dulled by summer sloth.

Granger continued to pour magic into her target, muttering almost constantly under her breath, her spell casting fast, precise, and sustained. One stunner, one shield-breaker, one jelly legs jinx, and one more stunner. The standard stunner was medium speed and medium power, the shield-breaker did nothing to a human, but was very effective against a protego, and the jelly legs jinx was a super fast cast time threat meant to throw off an opponent for that crucial split second after their shield dropped. They called the combination the dueller's hello and it contained the three non-shield combat spells Harry had taught her so far. Each of Granger's spells flowed seamlessly into the next, an elegant dance of wand and hand movements, made all the more impressive by the witch's occasional feints and ducks, dodging the pretend counter spells of an imaginary enemy.

She noticed the group of older Slytherins had paused and were eyeing them. The assumed leader detached himself from the group and sauntered over. She didn't recognise the boy but he walked with a manner that screamed pureblood. She nodded at him and received a nod in return. The older boy stood a few paces away and watched Granger for a few more seconds before her casting slowed and stopped.

Granger turned.

"Good casting for a first year," he commented. "I counted nine hellos before you slowed down. I assume you have at least one of them wordless?"

Granger stood a little straighter. "Yes, the stupefy, otherwise I'd never be able to keep that up for as long as that. I considered learning circular breathing but in the end I decided not to bother."
The boy tilted his head. "Circular breathing?"

"It's a technique that allows you to breathe in through your nose while you breath out through your mouth, but I'm not sure how useful it would be when you can just learn to cast wordlessly."

The boy's eyes widened. "Where did you see that? I've never seen that before."

Granger shrugged. "It's not from around these parts."

The boy eyed her Slytherin vassal crest.

Was that suspicion in his eyes?

"Rumours say your lord comes from New Zealand..."

Granger smiled sweetly. "I'm sorry, I can't divulge my lord's secrets."

The boy nodded, as though confirming something to himself.

Daphne's lightening bolt ring vibrated. Her heart leapt — a message from Harry. She instantly buried herself in her occlumency and started decoding.

The boy nodded and extended his hand to Granger. "Romulus Volf, of the Ancient House of Volf."

Granger made to bring her hand to his but before she could grasp it, Volf snapped up her hand, bowed down, and brushed his lips across her knuckles.

She almost missed this, so focused was she on Harry's message.

Granger smiled and raised an eyebrow. "Hermione Granger, of the House of Granger, Vassal of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Granger." Volf straightened up. "I hope that you are planning to join the duelling team? I've already been approached by Heir Nott, but for you I'd happily kick him aside."

'Daphne,' the message started, 'meet me with Hermione around the back of greenhouse one a few minutes before herbology. - Harry.'

"Oh." Granger hesitated. "I don't know about that. I'm sure Nott is good at duelling, and someone better might turn up."

She bit her lip. Harry planned to meet them? Yes, she was happy, but she thought the whole point of the first few weeks was not to meet. Something must be wrong.

Volf snorted. "I reckon with a few weeks training you could take most second years. You have the power for it. If you can save our second year duellist from dealing with his main opponent, we'll be in a much better position. I doubt Nott could pull that off from the small amount I've seen of him so far."

She really missed Harry. She fiddled with the cuff of her robes and stared off into the distance.

"Still, I was planning on working on some other projects..." Hermione mumbled.

"Look, how about you join the club as a temporary member. Then, when trials for the team happen in November, you can see if you still stand up to Nott? If Nott can't improve enough to beat you by
then, then you'll probably be better than him for the tournament in April.

Wait, what? She snapped to attention and glanced between Granger and Volf.

Granger fidgeted and opened her mouth to reply.

"Wait." She held up a hand to stall Granger. "How about she goes ahead and does that, but on the condition that if anyone can beat Hermione in a fair fight on the day of trials that you give them her spot?"

Volf stared at her. His eyes narrowed. "You… I will not tolerate anyone but the strongest being on my team."

Whops.

She held up both her hands. "Of course."

"I will put the person on the team, only if they can beat all the other first year candidates."

"I wouldn't suggest anything else."

"Okay… then we have an understanding." Volf nodded and took a step backwards. "Miss Granger, Heiress Greengrass." He turned and walked back to his group.

She turned to Granger who opened her mouth.

"Not now," she whispered. "Our lord wants us."

The presumed question on Granger's lips died in a half strangled squeal, quickly muffled by the witch's own two hands clamped over her mouth.

"C'mon."

An hour later found them standing in dew-fresh grass around the back of the massive glass structure of greenhouse one. There were no signs of Harry anywhere.

Granger shot her an anxious look.

Suddenly, a small bag fell at her feet. She picked it up. A pair of footsteps trod away from them through the grass, drawing their eyes to a faint outline against the background, shimmering in the soft morning air.

Granger pouted.

She inspected the insides to find a note, scrawled on parchment and wrapped around another package wrapped in brown paper.

D, He. I hope you're doing well. I wrote this note on a transfigured lump of shale. It will revert at 9:00am. In the bag is the IC. I'm having problems investigating our main project for the year. There are gender specific wards around it, like in our dormitories, and I can't get past them. Unlike the wards in the dormitories, they aren't tied to Hogwarts' own wards. 'His' experience suggests they shouldn't be there, but they are. I need you two to get past the first ward line and take readings on the next ward line, if there is one. Be careful not to trip any detection wards. Little boys are made of slugs and snails and puppy-dog tails. Keep an eye out for QM and the EH. Once you are done, buzz me to arrange pick up of the IC. Remember, I'm a single SOS call away. Can't wait to see you both again. - Me
She looked up. Granger finished reading over her shoulder. She looked Granger in the eyes. They both nodded, turned, and quickly head to herbology.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione stared in awe. The inside of greenhouse one was even larger than its outside. Birds chirped in the canopy above, butterflies swirled around her head, and she knew she could hear the distant roar of a waterfall in the distance. Around her, the other Slytherins and Ravenclaws all huddled around the fat and squat head of Hufflepuff house, waiting for their introduction. On the other side of the group she spotted Sophie Roper, fellow muggleborn. She edged towards her.

"Come students, all ears on me!" Professor Sprout called out. The general murmuring died down.

"Now, you should all have your books with you, 1001 Magical Herbs and Fungi. This will be your codex for the next seven years. Herbology may not have the wild wand waving of other subjects, but it is just as critical to your education. Can anyone tell us why?"

Her hand leapt up without seeming to pass through the space in between.

"Yes, Miss Granger."

A few people rolled their eyes. Mmm… maybe she should tone down the answers a bit…. She took a deep breath. "Plants and fungi make up the majority of magical energy brought into our world through the aether. Over ninety-five percent of all magic in the world comes from plants and fungi, most of our permanent wards use plants or fungi as their source of magic, and most potions use plants or fungi for at least one ingredient."

"Excellent, Miss Granger. Two points to Slytherin."

She beamed. Yes, this was how the world should be.

"As Miss Granger said, plants account for most of the magic we experience around us. Wands may make us magical, but plants make the world magical.

"This year, we will be learning the basics of taking care of plants. We will be growing a batch of huntsman's sorrow from seed to harvest. Can anyone tell me what's special about this plant?"

This time, she kept her hand down.

"Anyone?"

On the other side of the group, Daphne raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Greengrass?"

"Huntsman's sorrow is a wizard bred plant that can only germinate with wizarding help. It's used in healing and can amplify the effects of healing spells when applied to a deep wound."

"Well done. Another two points to Slytherin."

Daphne nodded once, Slytherin mask firmly locked in place.

She frowned.

"Now, get into groups of four. Quickly now!"
She started and looked around.

Sophie moved towards a workbench a half dozen metres away. She lunged for it, elbowing Terry Boot out of the way with a quickly mouthed apology.

She reached for one of the wooden chairs.

"Oh Merlin no, not you. This thing is complicated enough already." On the other side of the workbench, Padma Patil of the Light and Lisa Turpin of the Dark reached for the two free chairs. Sophie joined them a moment later, sitting down next to her.

"What's wrong?" asked Sophie. "Oh, hi Hermione, thanks for talking to me on the train."

She smiled, "My pleasure."

Patil glanced at Turpin, who in turn eyed her with weary eyes.

She nodded towards the two cautious witches. "Pleased to meet you Miss Turpin. Miss Patil — I don't think we were formally introduced the last time we saw each other."

Patil frowned and nodded. "No. It was rather hard to do that while you were shouting at the boy who lived."

Turpin's eyes widened. "She really?"

"Oh, yes."

Sophie tilted her head. "Isn't that the hero boy? Did you really shout at him, Hermione?"

She nodded. "I did. And Miss Patil here can tell you why."

"Well, I could… or I could just ask you why you're here."

She made to look confused. "Sophie's here. Why shouldn't I be here?"

Sophie glowed.

Patil frowned. "But are you here as Miss Granger the muggleborn, or are you here as Miss Granger of the House of Granger, Vassal of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin?"

Sophie smile turned to confusion.

Turpin's eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

"Can't I just be here as Hermione?"

"You could," Patil started, "but I don't believe it. I don't trust you."

"Padma!" Sophie cried out. "Why did you say that? Hermione's nice."

"Is she?" Turpin interjected. "What about Harry Potter?" The girl glowered. "Why is all of Slytherin house ignoring him?"

Her eyes widened. "I'm not—"

"—Yes you are! Harry Potter's nice, and all of Slytherin is ignoring him! Why?"
Sophie and Patil leaned back from the ranting burnt-brown haired girl.

She stared at the girl, dumbfounded. She swallowed. What could she do? Explain? The idea was unthinkable.

She suddenly realised the greenhouse was deadly quiet. Professor Sprout was nowhere to be seen. She felt many eyes all fixed on her.

Lisa Turpin's eyes burrowed into hers, flared and angry. "Why?" The repeated accusation stabbed her.

Her heart hammered. Her chest tightened.

"I…I…"

Her eyes started to sting.

A chair scrapped on the stone flagstones. "Thank you, Lisa." Harry's cheerful voice wafted over her. "But it's okay. It's just something I'm working out with my fellow Slytherins." Slytherins scoffed throughout the greenhouse.

Turpin suddenly seemed to realise that everyone was watching her. The witch glanced towards some of the Darker tables, suddenly nervous. "Oh… Okay then," Turpin trailed off.

"I really do appreciate you standing up for me like that, though. They'll all come around eventually, I'm sure." She could hear the grin in his voice.

More disbelieving scoffs filled the glasshouse. The chair scrapped again and the general hubbub slowly started up again.

She looked at the burnt-brown haired witch and saw cheeks tinted with pink.

Sophie gasped. "Hermione, are you crying?"

She looked around wildly. The world was slightly blurry. "No." She clamped down her rising feelings. "No, I'm not."

Sophie reached into the pocket of her robes and passed her a handkerchief. "Here."

She took it and dabbed at her slightly watery eyes. "Thanks, Sophie."

On the other side of the table, Patil and Turpin watched her with wide eyes.

Sophie smiled. "No worries, Hermione. That's what friends are for, right?"

She smiled back. If only Daphne could be more like that.

— DP & SW: TfOP —

Daphne shivered.

The potions lab dripped, cold and dark. For every three torches in the Slytherin common room, the potions lab had only one, and not the warm orange of a campfire. No, these were closed bluebell flames, flickering their dim light across gray, un-plastered stone walls. It felt like being submerged in an underwater cave, still lingering fumes filling her lungs as surely as water might drown the helpless and the trapped.
She watched Professor Snape billow to the front of the classroom, cloak rippling in the eddy of some unseen and unfelt current. No one moved.

Snape turned. "You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion making…"

The speech swept over her like a tide. Pretentiousness crashed on pretentiousness and told her little of their curricula for the next seven years.

"Potter!" Snape whirled on Harry, where she'd seen him sit at the back of the room. "What is the primary purpose of sycamore in potion making?"

"As an agitent, Professor."

Snape paused and seemed to search Harry's eyes for an age.

He whirled on her. "Grengarss, name a potion that uses boomslang skin."

"Polyjuice, Professor."

Snape paused again, but this time only for a moment.

"Granger!" Snape turned a fraction to where Granger sat a few feet from her. "How many turns does a simple boil cure potion require?"

"Seven, Professor — three clockwise and four anticlockwise."

Snape paused… again. "Mmm… Let's try another. Granger, how long must you keep a strengthening solution at boil before adding porcupine quills?"

"Thirty minutes, Thirty-five if the moon is gibbous, Professor."

"What is the catalyst used in the creation of elixir of life?"

"A philosopher's stone, Professor."

"What should you do immediately after adding death-cap to a solution containing activated salamander concentrate?"

"Vanish the solution, shield yourself, or run away if you don't have a wand."

"…"

"…"

"What potion… might you add silver to?"

Hermione hesitated. "…Wolfsbane, Professor?"

Snape pounced. "Why? Silver is toxic to werewolves."

"It… it might act as to interfere with some aspects of the curse. Perhaps there are other potions elements that could counteract the harmful aspects of the toxicity?"

Snape sneered. "You're just guessing."

Daphne frowned. Snape was deliberately trying to get a raise out of Granger. She knew Harry had said the greasy haired professor would have problems with any perceived challenge to his
authority, but this was something else.

Hermione reddened. "Yes, Professor."

"Mmmmm…." Snape leaned forward and gazed deeply into Granger's eyes.

Silence. Then both Snape and Granger snapped back as though they'd been slapped. Granger gasped. Snape clutched his head in one hand, his eyes flashing pure rage.

She sucked in her breath. He didn't, did he?

"Granger!" Snape's normally pale skin was red. "Come with me!"

Snape made to leave the room.

The rest of the class broke out in whispers.

She caught Granger's eyes, furious brown gimlets giving all the confirmation she needed. She shook her head. No way would Harry just let that slide. Granger nodded in understanding.

"Sir?" Granger turned back to where Snape slammed open the door. "Where do you want me to follow you to?"

"Be quiet, girl! And follow me now!"

"No, sir."

"What?" Snape's voice dropped to a deadly whisper, which nevertheless carried across the dungeon.

"You just attacked me. I have written instructions from my magical guardian not to be with the headmaster without his presence because he is concerned about my safety with him. Given that you just tried to attack me, I'm confident that sentiment will now extend to you too."

"Stupid girl! The Headmaster is your magical guardian!"

Oh, Merlin. Daphne's stomach dropped. Not here. Her eyes flew around the classroom, to all the wide, watching eyes.

"No," Granger started.

Daphne tried to make urgent signals with her eyes.

"Lord Slytherin is my magical guardian."

It was like watching a broom crash in slow motion.

Snape paused, his face one large triumphant sneer. "You expect me to believe that a couple of filthy muggles signed over their daughter to an arrogant, cowardly, no name?"

Somewhere in the back of the room, a drop of water made an audible plop noise.

She dared a look towards the Darker Slytherins. Nott, Parkinson, Crabbe and Goyle all looked shocked. Malfoy had already passed shocked and moved onto disgusted fury. On the Gray side, Tracey and Blaise looked between her and Granger. Tracey shot her a what-the-hell-are-you-doing look.
Granger's voice wavered only slightly. "I do not appreciate those words about my parents."

"Enough! You will come with me or I will have you expelled!"

She took a deep breath. So it had come to this, already. She stood. "Professor Snape." Her voice rang through the dungeon like a bell. "Despite your comments to our house yesterday, you are only head of the Hogwarts branch of Slytherin House at the discretion of my lord Slytherin. If my lord wishes it he can take control of the Hogwarts branch back from you."

This was technically true, but did present some inconvenient problems, which they really didn't want to deal with just now. She was sure she could hear Snape's teeth grinding from across the room.

The Gryffindors all watched with bated breath. John Potter looked torn between horror and awe.

Snape drew his cloak around him. "And you think this Lord Slytherin will listen to you?"

"I am his betrothed." She glared at Snape, annoyance seeped through her body even as she felt her magic seeping out of her body. She didn't care. Her whole world focused on the six foot of enemy in front of her.

"And why should I believe that he views you as anything more than a silly little girl to carry his heirs and pretty his arm?"

Gasps filled the dungeon.

Fury and frustration threatened to break through her cool hard mask. She fought it down and glared straight into Snape's eyes. Her magic continued to flow. Her hands numbed.

"Then allow me to make this clear to you, Professor." She sneered the title with all the disdain she could muster. "My lord Slytherin gave me express instructions that if you threatened or attacked me or Hermione, that we should contact him and he would remove you as head of house, and ensure that you could never again step foot inside the Slytherin dungeons — an action for which he has every legal right and total magical capability."

Snape glared.

"Maybe we should get back to the lesson and cease this foolish charade, Professor."

Snape stood at the top of the stairs, stock still and silent.

"Class dismissed!" he snapped, before storming out.

She sat back down and let out a deep, slow breath. Granger's wide eyes met hers and then dropped to her hands. She glanced down. Her hands had been gripping the back of her chair so hard her knuckles were white — white from her skin, white from the pressure, and white from a thin layer of ice crystals, which travelled from the tips of her fingers, up the back of hands, and halfway from the cuffs of her robes to her elbows. Daphne shivered.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Early next morning, Hermione marched down to the Quidditch pitch, mind whirring.

Her and Daphne's confrontation with Snape had spread through the school like fiendfyre. Everywhere she and Daphne went, groups whispered and pointed as they walked by.
Rumours flew faster and thicker than the morning owls, but there were three facts everyone seemed to agree on. That she was muggleborn, that someone had used legilimency on someone, and that Lord Slytherin was considering removing Snape as head of Slytherin House.

Slytherin house had been quiet as the grave. Blaise said everyone was feeling out everyone else for where they stood before doing anything.

Then there was Daphne. She glanced at the pretty blonde strolling a few paces from her. Daphne still confused her. The girl was distant, almost cold. But when Daphne stood up to confront Snape, she was so cold she burned. The coldness went beyond cold and became something almost hot, like pools of liquid nitrogen, bubbling and gassing, less like snow carelessly piled around and more like a blade made from razor-sharp ice. The girl licked like a frozen flame, sucking the heat out of the space only to return the intensity back five-fold.

Had that intensity been focused at her, she wasn't sure how she'd have handled it, but it wasn't, it had been in her defence. She wasn't sure how to feel about that. Did Daphne really feel that way, or was she just doing what Harry asked her?

They arrived at the centre of the quidditch pitch to find most of their classmates form Slytherin and Hufflepuff milling around a long line of mouldy old brooms. She avoided the glares in her direction from the Dark and instead shuffled over to the Hufflepuff boys, who'd formed their own little circle.

"Good morning Wayne, Zach. Hi, Justin. Hey, Kevin." She greeted the two Gray and two muggleborn Hufflepuff boys with a wave and a smile.

Kevin Entwistle stood an inch or two taller than the rest of them. Someone like Malfoy would no doubt laugh at his loose tie and his mousy brown hair had an almost Harry-like just-got-out-of-bed look.

Justin Finch-Fletchley, by contrast, was as immaculately dressed and groomed as he'd been both in Madam Malkin's and later when she'd successfully found him on the train, even if those clothes would be considered fairly common by wizarding standards.

All four returned her greetings and made room for her in the circle.

Zach gave her an imperious nod. "So, what's this we hear about you and Snape? Rumour says he attacked you."

She nodded. Justin and Kevin gasped.

"Yes, he did — Legilimency attack."

Wayne tutted.

Zach sucked his breath in. "I'm going to take my practise a lot more seriously from now on, I think."

She nodded.

Kevin and Justin shared a confused look.

Kevin spoke. "But… if the teacher attacks a student, shouldn't he be thrown out?"

Wayne and Zach shuffled.
"It's not quite as simple as that," Wayne said.

Zach nodded. "Yeah, legilimency isn't considered assault until actual damage is done, and if you can defend yourself no damage will be done.

"And if damage is done," Wayne continued, "it's usually hard to prove."

She jumped in. "Of course, it is considered extremely rude. It's not the sort of thing done in polite company."

Justin frowned. "That doesn't seem right. What is legilimency anyway?"

"It's a form of mind magic. It's not quite mind reading, but it's sort of like that."

Kevin's mouth dropped. "Mind reading?"

She looked around to where the Hufflepuff girls were standing. Heiresses Bones and Abbott, along with Sally Smith, and two other girls she didn't know were talking with the one lone Hufflepuff Light boy, Ernest Macmillan. "More like mind surfing," she said.

Wayne tilted his head. "What's surfing?"

Justin and Kevin shot Wayne incredulous looks.

"It's a muggle sport. Think riding a broom on massive waves of water."

"That sounds kinda cool."

Kevin threw up his arms. "We're getting off the point! What's going to happen to the potions professor? I really don't like him. He was nothing but nasty all class. Leanne almost cried! I right wanted to give him it."

Zach looked at her. "Yes, Miss Granger, Vassal of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin, what is going to happen to Snape?"

She fidgeted with the cuff of her robes. "I'm not sure yet. That depends on my lord."

Kevin's eyes widened. "Your lord? Vassal? So you're right nobby then?"

Justin and Zach rolled their eyes out of Kevin's view.

She opened her mouth to reply.

"Don't worry about it Hermione," Wayne interjected. "Kevin's just having an interesting time adjusting, isn't that right, Kev?" Wayne playfully elbowed the larger boy.

Kevin crossed his thick arms. "Look, the way mum raised me, I'm just not used to all this nobbiness, kay?"

She smiled, "Don't worry. You'll get used to it soon."

"Alright everyone!" A loud female voice interrupted them. "All attention on me and I'll show you how to properly mount your brooms."

— DP & SW: TFoP —
Daphne climbed towards the Hogwarts castle after their first flying lesson, trying to ignore the feeling that she was going to fall over onto the grass. Despite a few tentative flights with Harry, clinging onto his waist for dear life, she'd never really gotten the hang of flying.

Harry made it look easy and the other Slytherins kept shooting him furtive glances, especially Malfoy, whose flying, while good, clearly wasn't as good her lord's.

She was actually glad for the distraction. Malfoy and the rest of them had distanced themselves from her, Granger, Tracey, and Blaise. Slytherin house seemed to be drawing lines, and she wasn't sure exactly what those lines even represented.

She looked around and paused.

Granger made it a few steps in front of her before turning in question. Tracey and Blaise continued on walking for a moment, before they too stopped.

At the edge of the forest, a man with a hard to miss turban disappeared behind a tree trunk, heading deeper into the forbidden forest.

She frowned, carried on climbing, caught up to Granger, and whispered into her ear. "Third floor, now."

Granger's eyes widened slightly before she gave a small nod.

"What's up you two?" Tracey asked.

"Nothing. Hermione and I have a few things to take care of. See you at Lunch?"

Tracey and Blaise looked at each other.

"Sure. See you then," Tracey said.

"Don't get in trouble," Blaise added with a wink.

A minute later she and Granger ducked into an empty bathroom near the third floor. She pulled out the invisibility cloak and cast a muffleato.

"What happened?" Granger asked.

"Just saw Quirrellmort head into the forbidden forest."

Granger nodded in understanding. A few moments later they were shuffling unseen along the passageway to the third floor corridor on the right hand side, dodging students and stealing glances at the many paintings who chatted happily among themselves with far more openness than when they could see students around.

They reached the corner to their target and paused.

"Wands out," she whispered.

"Yes."

She crouched down and stuck her wand under the hem of the cloak.

They edged forward, careful not to expose themselves or trip over each other.
Her breath hitched and her face scrunched up as one of the most foul things she'd ever tasted flooded her senses.

"Is there something?" Granger asked.

"Yes." She desperately wanted to wash her mouth out. "I think it's the gender ward."

"Does it taste like slugs and snails and puppy-dog tails?"

"If you mean, is it both slimy and furry? Yes. And it's horrible."

They edged forward some more.

She let out a breath. "Urgh. The taste is gone, thank Merlin."

"So, is there another ward?"

"Yes. Here you should record it too."

The visible tip of another wand joined hers, two separate inches of wood floating in mid air just above the stone floor.

"Got it?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Okay, let's get out of here."

"Wait!" Granger hissed.

"What?"

"I think I can decode this one now."

"...

"...

"Quickly then." They really mustn't be caught here.

She heard muttering from the empty space beside her. The corridor was still empty. She hoped it would stay that way. The last thing they needed was for Mrs Norris to catch them.

Granger seemed to shuffle around, pulling at the cloak and fiddling with something in her clothes.

"What are you doing?"

"Hang on. I've got just the thing."

She heard the rustle of parchment.

"Is that a book?" she asked, incredulous.

"Yes. I brought it just for this situation."

Said book appeared in view just under the cloak.
Minutes passed. Pages were turned. A few people passed at the end of the corridor, but clearly didn't see anything. Granger continued to mutter to herself.

"Okay," Granger said, eventually. "It's a containment ward."

"Excellent. Now, let's go." If they went quickly they could still grab lunch and get updated on the latest political situation.

"Wait!"

She glared at the empty space beside her, knowing full well Granger couldn't see her. "What?"

"We could go for the next ward line."

"What! No, we can't."

"Why not? The containment ward only keeps things in, and it's not keyed to us."

"We don't know what's in there!" She gestured to the door the ward line was protecting. "It could be anything."

"Yes and we need to find out what that is."

"But we could let Harry handle it."

"How's he going to get past the gender ward?"

"Harry obviously has a plan, but we don't know what that plan is. That's why we shouldn't just rush in."

"

"

"Fine," Granger snapped. "But only because I don't want to accidentally mess up Harry's plan."

She rolled her unseen eyes. "Good, now let's get out of here before luck turns on us."

They shuffled out of the corridor and down to their bathroom, just as Filch chose to make an appearance, heading the way they had just come, muttering about kids and manacles.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore sat in his throne at the head table. Lunch was in full swing and the shouts and laughs of hundreds of young throats warmed his heart, even as his never-off political mind ruthlessly dissected the many school cliques forming and reforming in front of him.

The Slytherin table was the most interesting and disturbing at the moment. Yesterday, there had been two main camps formed around Lucius' son and Jacob's daughter, with the Quidditch team forming a third, smaller circle around young Mister Flint, and the duelling club forming a fourth around Romulus Volf.

Now, however, all the circles were mashed up. Everyone chatted with everyone and there didn't seem to be much to distinguish the groups. Every so often, a student would stand, move to another position and sit down, moments before another student, sitting just a few places away, would repeat the action. It was a slow dance, forming new lines around some new political issue. He
frowned. He was pretty sure he knew what that issue was.

Severus had been unable to hold his tongue.

Not two months ago, he'd seen how protective Lord Slytherin could be when he'd made an unwise comment that the young lord had interpreted as a threat to Miss Greengrass. The resultant magic hadn't been as powerful as his, but it had made him pause. The ability to radiate magic from your body was a trick that required a combination of occlumency practise and strong emotions, and managing it for anything more than a few seconds indicated high core to body flamelage. Lord Slytherin had a high core to body flamelage.

Now Severus would have Lord Slytherin focused on him, and Slytherin had already made it clear through Miss Greengrass what he would do if Severus didn't toe the line. He couldn't afford for Severus to lose that position, especially not now.

Just how far would Lord Slytherin go to protect the muggleborn girl? For surely it would take more than points deductions and detentions to do so. Did Slytherin's protective streak extend that far or was it just an 'in the family' thing?

He cast his eyes over the Slytherin table and noticed that a core group seemed to have solidified around the Slytherin duelling captain. Young Romulus Volf didn't look pleased. In fact he looked apoplectic.

Miss Granger and Miss Greengrass were nowhere to be seen, which was probably just as well.

The hard-core pure-blood-supremacist duelling captain chose that moment to stand and storm off to the Slytherin dungeons, followed closely by several other students.

He watched the boys departure sadly and picked up his goblet. He swirled the orange liquid inside. At least this situation would probably weaken the Gray faction somewhat. The attitudes of some of the parents would mirror that of their children. The Gray had been a roadblock to so much of James and Lily's good work for a long time now.

He stilled. Letting the pumpkin juice in his goblet settle down in his hand.

Would it be good though?

What would happen if the Gray fell?

He looked out over Slytherin table, over Gray and Dark mingling and debating, throwing accusations and counter accusations. How many of those in the Gray would come to the Light if the Gray fell?

He did the math in his head.

He flinched. His stomach turned over.

Oh, Merlin. He slammed his goblet down on the table. He needed them, didn't he? He needed a stable Gray, and, by extension, he needed Lord Slytherin.

Fuck.

— DP & SW: TfOP —

Hermione walked into the defence against the dark arts classroom, muttering under her breath. It
wasn't her fault they'd had to rush lunch. She was just doing what she was sure Harry wanted.

She froze. The smell of garlic hit her like a hammer. Beside her, Daphne blanched. She added tracking down a smell removing charm for clothes to her rapidly growing to do list, shifted mental gears, and scanned the room for her next objective.

She spotted the dark-skinned Dean Thomas sitting at a long bench with Seamus Finnigan and… she groaned… John Potter.

She nodded to Daphne and set off for her target. The long bench allowed her to easily insert herself at the end and scooch up to where Dean sat.

"Hi, Dean."

Dean turned. "Oh, hi, Hermione! How's it going? You're not in trouble are you?"

John Potter leaned around to see what was going on.

"Oh, from potions?" She smiled. "No, not yet."

John frowned. "What about the Slytherins? They're not doing anything bad are they?"

"No, I'm doing quite well, thank you." She replied, tone shifting from joyful to prim.

John didn't seem convinced. "But what about you being—"

"Hi, Brother!"

Harry landed in the bench in front of her.

John recoiled. "What are you doing here?" Venom dripped through shock.

"We have defence together."

"I mean why are you sitting near me."

"What's wrong? Can't I sit near my favourite brother?"

She had to stop herself from laughing.

"We hate each other!"

"Why?"

John seemed dumbfounded. "What?"

"When?"

"Huh?"

"Which? Who? Where?"

"What the hell are you on about?"

"I mean why do we hate each other?"

John struggled for an answer for a moment.
Dean looked between them, obviously confused.

She just focused on keeping her laughter in check.

Eventually John Potter burst out with, "You stole Ginny from me!"

Harry tilted his head. "I assume this Ginny is a witch, yes? How could I even meet her? No one told me I was even a wizard until I received my letter."

Dean furrowed his eyebrows. "How did that happen? You're twins. He's a famous wizard from what I've heard. How could you not know you're a wizard?"

Harry raised a finger. "Why don't you ask—"

At that moment a stronger than normal smell of garlic swept by them and the true purpose of Harry's sitting position quickly became clear.

Professor Quirinus Quirrell took his place at the room's podium and shot her a look of such malice and hatred that she drew back in her chair and unconsciously flicked her wand into her hand under the table.

Sat where he was, Harry was directly in the path between her and the purple turbaned professor, currently hosting the death damned soul of Dark Lord Voldemort.

She turned. Daphne had chosen to sit directly behind her.

She felt a gentle nudging on her occlumency shields and stopped herself from yanking on it just in time. She swatted it away instead. A bead of sweat rolled down her face.

"Welcome to defence against the dark arts."

She raised a worried eyebrow. No stutter? Harry said he'd stutter.

"This class is to prepare you for the threats that you will encounter outside these walls, of which there are many." Quirrell's voice was regular and well paced, neither too loud nor too quiet.

"These threats come in two varieties, magical and mundane. We will spend most of this year focusing on how to defend against mundane threats."

Quirrell looked behind her. "You have a question, Mister Malfoy?"

She turned. Malfoy put his hand down.

"Professor," the blonde haired boy drawled, "why are we wasting our time with such trivial concerns? Muggles pose no threat to us."

Quirrell smiled. "Ah, I'm not surprised that you would say that, but I did not say muggle, did I?"

Malfoy hesitated. "You said…"

"I said mundane. I did not say muggle. I will now demonstrate." Quirrell waved his wand and a conjured vase appeared on the desk. The man walked a dozen paces away so that his back was to the classroom wall. Another wand wave produced what looked like a small rock. One single, strong wand movement sent the rock shooting towards the vase, which smashed into dozens of pieces before vanishing into thin air.
She brought her arms down from where she'd protectively and automatically covered her head.

"Many of the threats you will face from wizards come in the form of non-magical objects enchanted to create physical force. These objects are not spells. They do not shoot at you with pretty lights like in a duel, but they are just as dangerous. A banished rock to the head will take you out just as surely as a stunner. Does that answer your question, Mister Malfoy?"

She looked around again. Malfoy nodded, eyes wide.

"Having said that…" Quirrell smirked, walked over to his desk and reached behind it to grab something. "There are some muggle threats—" her own eyes widened and her heart sped up. "—That you must also—" A hunting rifle came into view "—learn to deal with."

In front of her, harry had his wand pointed forward under his desk, a faint white light alight on its tip.

Quirrell walked forward, turned, conjured another vase, waved his wand once more, sheathed it in his robes, shouldered the gun, pointed it towards his desk with his back to the class, took aim and…

BANG! The vase exploded into a million pieces. What was left wasn't even recognisable as pottery.

Quirrell dropped the rifle to his side. "We won't be focusing on those threats, but do not forget that your studies into mundane defence against wizards also applies to muggles."

She shook. Voldemort knew about guns? Why didn't he use them then? Harry must know. She'd ask him when she next saw him.

"The first spell we will learn is a shield against physical projectiles found on page twelve of your textbook. You will pair off and practise casting the shield while the other lightly throws these buttons at each other." Quirrell held up a small bucket.

The class stared at him.

Quirrell looked around. "Go on! Get to it!"

The class scrabbled.

She turned. "Hey, Dean—"

"—C'mon, Dean." John grabbed Dean's arm and dragged him away.

The dark-skinned, possible muggleborn shot her an apologetic look before being lead away to the far side of the class-room by the fake boy who lived.

Hermione pouted.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne marched towards the common room after dinner, intent on getting the just-handed-out defence essay out of the way. She needed all the brain space she could spare to tap dance around Granger being outed and she didn't need braindead simple academic assignments getting in the way. Beside her, Granger looked equally focused, muttering something about evil twins and what she'd like to do to them.
As they neared the portal to the Slytherin common room, Tracey appeared before them, panting and red-faced.

"Daph. Hermione." Tracey's heaved the words, low and urgent.

They stalled.

"I was just in the common room and there's a bunch of upper-year boys planning to put Hermione in the hospital wing. I just barely got away."

Oh hell.

Granger sucked in her breath.

"Volf put them up to it. He's leading."

"What about Blaise and our other allies?" she asked.

Tracey's eyes were wide and dilated. "Don't know where Blaise is." Tracey wrung her hands. "You know Flint?"

She nodded.

"He said that, 'If the little girl wants to keep a pet, she can take care of it.'"

She glanced at Granger. The witch's eyes had hardened.

Tracey continued. "That was the most extreme one I heard, but the feeling is about right. They're not happy. Most of the Grays who might help are in other houses. I think we're on our own on this one."

Damn. She took a breath and pulsed a few choice pulses into her silver lightning bolt ring. Granger already had her wand in hand, looking ready to storm the fort.

"Okay, I've sent the distress call. We should find a bathroom to hide away in until our lord can get here."

Hope bloomed on Tracey's face.

Granger snapped towards her. "But we can't run away! They'll think we're cowards. That we need protecting."

She flashed Granger an annoyed look. "They don't even know we're here. We can just enter a few moments before our lord and it will all be fine."

Tracey's face fell.

A shrill, nasal voice behind them, coming from the direction of the great hall, caused her to swing around, just as a slight figure raced past them.

"It's them! They're here!" Heiress Parkinson shot towards the portal and leapt through it.

Tracey groaned and double face-palmed. "And now?"

Her stomach dropped. She felt sick. She flicked her wrist and brought her wand to her hand. "Now we hold on as long as we can."
They waited a few moments where they were, staring at nothing in particular.

Then they walked to the portal, every step deliberate and slow. She put her hand on the door.

She waited a few more moments.

That was probably about as long as they could get away with. She looked towards her allies. Determination made its home in Granger's face. Tracey's lip quivered and her hands shook.

She gave a single slight nod, and pushed.

The common room was packed. Slytherins of all years filled the many chairs that furnished the wide and tall space of the dungeon. Many were laughing and joking. As one, all heads turned towards her.

She took several steps into the room, head held high, wand held tight. The portal slammed quietly behind her and two faint human-shaped shadows joined hers, stretching forward from the low-hung wall torches behind her.

Near the fireplace, from the area of the common room unofficially designated Dark territory, three older, stronger boys stood and stepped into the clear floor space between them. Romulus Volf led them. Everything about them made her eleven-year-old brain scream at her to run, hide, and wait to be saved. She focused on the feeling and magically crushed it, occlumency claiming her mind's sovereignty, even as her body flooded her with concentrated fight or flight, with the focus very much on flight.

The assembled crowd continued to laugh and joke. To the side, she thought she saw someone running a betting pool.

Behind her, Tracey whimpered.

She took a few more steps into the room and the shadows followed her. Fifteen metres of invaded personal space shrunk between them and the boys, all three of whom also had their wands out.

She tilted her head and spoke loudly enough for the whole room to hear. "Can I help you, Volf?"

The room quietened. A few chuckles could be heard around the room.

Romulus Volf glared. "Yes. You can step away from the mudblood right now if you know what's good for you, Heiress Greengrass," he said, disdain dripping from the honorific.

She held her chin high. "I know your family Volf — ancient, almost most ancient. Your family has a distinguished history. What do you have to gain from this?"

"That mudblood bitch has no right to be here!" Volf gestured behind her, to Granger. "How dare she pretend to be a pureblood! This is Slytherin House. They are not welcome here."

A few jeers from the crowd filled the space.

"That wasn't answering my question, Romulus of the Ancient House of Volf. What do you have to gain from this action? Do you believe you will gain support and respect — displaying your power by picking on an eleven-year-old girl?" She raised her chin again. "Do you think it is wise to antagonise two noble houses and all the resources at their disposal?"

It was a weak statement. Not least because many of said resources were currently watching and not
doing anything.

Volf sneered. "I don't care about any of that shit! When purebloods are given their proper place, people like me will rule over blood traitors like you!"

One of her eyes twitched.

"But until then, what? You can raise that wand at me and those who serve the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin if you wish, but that will not bring glory and honour to the house of Volf.

Time to play her ace.

"Nor will it grant you favours with Lord Slytherin should he decide to take back control of Hogwarts Slytherin House!"

"I don't believe in Lord Slytherin!"

Her jaw dropped. "Wha?"

"When has this mysterious lord ever shown up to anything? I don't think he's real! He's never even been in the prophet once!"

She stood rooted to the spot. Words failed her.

Volf glowered. "I'll tell you one last time, Heiress Greengrass. Leave now or I will put you in the hospital wing too."

She swallowed and took a single defiant step to the side, overlapping her own shadow with Granger's. Her resolve hardened.

Behind her, a small gasp escaped Granger's lips.

She glared at Volf and his two cronies. "Despite what you may believe, one day, I will be Lady Slytherin!" She brought herself up to her full 4 foot 10 inches. "The Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin does not abandon those who serve it and have sworn loyalty to it! It does not forgive those who seek to harm those it protects! And it most certainly does not bow to cowards with the cunning of a flobberworm and the tact of a troll!

Red shot towards her and she shielded just before it reached her.

Granger's darted to the side, firing a stunner towards Volf.

Volf dodged.

Volf's goons opened fire.

Tracey dived for a nearby table.

She fired off her own spell chain, interrupted only to frantically sidestep one of Volf's bolts.

Granger reached a nearby armchair, just as their occupants scrabbled out of the way. One second and several dodged spells later, she joined Granger, trading hard stone floor for thick carpet.

The torrent of spells continued to rain down on their position, then stopped.
She heard the slap, slap, slap of rapidly approaching footsteps. She shielded.

Volf burst around the side of the chair.

Three shouts rang out.

One jelly legs jinx and a stunner slammed into Volf's pre-cast shield. One shield breaker shattered hers.

More footsteps.

She re-shielded.

Granger re-fired.

Volf quickly backed off and continued firing, dodging every other spell and shielding those he couldn't. His skill and experience shone through, taking on both her and Granger at close range.

Then, suddenly, her rate of fire slowed.

Damn!

She scrambled over the chair just as a blue spell landed where she'd been. She landed on the other side…

"Got ya!"

…And her wand ripped from her hand, straight into the waiting grip of Goon A.

She looked around to see an equally wandless Granger scowling at Volf.

On the other side of the doorway, Tracey lay, roped and gagged.

Her heart thundered.

Stall. Stall now. "I suppose you think you've won!"

Volf looked at her, incredulous.

"Listen, little girl. You could have played nice and just handed over the mudblood."

Volf and Goon A walked forward.

She shared a glance with Granger. She nodded.

"But no, you had to make it difficult."

She could feel her magic flowing back into her, refilling her. Flowing down to the tips of her fingers.

"Now!" She flung up her hand and fired a red bolt towards Goon A. Another bolt joined hers, also firing towards Goon A.

Oh, damn.

Shock flashed across Volf’s face, but only for a moment.
Goon A fell.

"Why you!" Volf roared, whipping his wand up and firing an incarcerous at Granger.

They both scrabbled backwards, her hand and elbows burning on the thick rug.

Granger shielded with the spell they'd just learned in defence, bouncing the ropes off it and onto the floor.

She managed to chain together two whole spells.

Volf shielded and fired and dodged.

She fired one more spell and her reserves were gone again.

Her lungs pumped, fast and laboured.

An stray incarcerous finally hit Granger, immobilising the Slytherin muggleborn.

Cheers filled the room.

"I swear you're going to pay now!" Volf spat.

She scrabbled for one final shield, but the magic just wasn't there.

The tip of Volf's wand glowed.

Desperate, she dropped her occlumency shields and felt a fresh flush of magic, even as terror swept her.

"Diffindo!"

The cutting spell shot towards her.

Her fingers glowed white.

Her shield appeared.

The spell hit it.

Her last shield shattered.

The spell carried on through… and splashed off another shield just behind the first one.

"Diffindo! Diffindo! Diffindo! Diffindo!"

She stared as spell after spell splashed against the shield glowing in front of her with all the effect of silk thrown at stone.

Volf's casting slowed, puzzlement seeping through anger.

Half lying on the ground, she looked up and behind her.

A tall figure dropped its disillusionment and shimmered into sight.

Relief flooded her.
It wore long flowing emerald green robes, trimmed in shining silver. It wore an elegant green mask, trimmed in night black. It stood tall, firm, and very, very angry. It was Lord Slytherin.

Everyone froze.

Anger-saturated ready-magic flooded from Harry and filled the common room with his power, enveloping her like a warm blanket and freezing Volf to the spot. Any festive atmosphere that may have been present dried up in seconds.

She swallowed an errand choke that threatened to become more, slowly brought her occlumency shields back up, stood with as much dignity as possible, still shaking, and joined her lord's side, tugging the still bound Granger with her.

Volf stayed rooted in place, staring at Harry like the lone hyena caught by the bull elephant.

No-one moved. The moment dragged on and on. Gasps echoed all around the room as people realised her mysterious and very real Lord Slytherin had been flaring his magic straight from his body for longer than most of them could cast, and still the magic flowed.

Volf's eyes widened from shock to terror as fifteen seconds became thirty, which then became a full minute.

She spotted a couple of older students edging towards the stairs leading down to the dormitories, but before they could reach them Harry's wand tip glowed white and every common room exit slammed shut and bolted. The would-be escapees winced.

"Oh no you don't." Lord Slytherin's voice filled the room like the growl from an unseen throat in a darkened cave. "You're all staying here."

The whirlwind of magic slowed and stopped.

The room let out a collectively held breath.

"What the fuck!" Harry roared. Flaring his magic so much that the common room fires leapt high and blazed green. The entire room winced and the magic settled down again.

Harry casually jabbed his wand at Granger, releasing her from her bonds. The wavy haired bookworm slowly got to her feet, shooting Volf a wild look of triumph.

Volf overcame his obvious fear enough to scowl.

"Romulus Volf." Harry intoned, snapping the pureblood's attention back to him. "You just attacked both my vassal and my betrothed with the intention to cause grievous bodily harm. I demand satisfaction."

Shocked murmurs filled the room.

Volf goggled. "I wasn't going to kill them! Just put them in the hospital wing for a night!"

"Then I shall do my best not to kill you. You can accept the duel, or try your luck with the law."

Volf swallowed. "I...I think I'll try my luck with the law."

Despite the weight in the room, she caught a few chuckles and heard someone shout, 'Coward!'

"And if I gave myself a handicap? Three on one? Those two friends you have there for example?"
Volf looked incredulous. "Excuse me a moment, Lord Slytherin." Volf hurried away to converse with his cronies. The crowd started moving. Chairs were shoved back. Books and parchment were collected.

Harry shot a finite at Tracey who rubbed her wrists, climbed into a chair, and clutched a throw pillow in a death grip with both arms.

She leaned closer to Harry. "What are you planning to do to them, my lord?"

"Nothing permanent, but it won't be pleasant. Are you sure you want to be here for it?"

Granger leaned in on the other side and whispered, "I'm not running away! They would have done it to us!"

She nodded slowly.

Harry's emerald and black mask nodded back. "Very well."

The trio led by Volf returned and accepted Harry's terms. By this time, the crowd had formed a long space in the middle of the common room free of chairs and other obstacles. Someone was setting up duelling wards with miniature ward stones and older students to channel the magic.

She stepped over to where Tracey sat and joined her, followed by Granger moments later. They would have a good view of the duel from where they sat. She placed a comforting hand on one of Tracey's shaking shoulders.

Tracey smiled weakly back at her, eyes flicking back and forth from her to Lord Slytherin. "So, that's your hero, is it?"

She smiled back. "Yes. He's amazing."

Granger nodded.

"But… three on one? They are all duellists."

Her smile didn't falter. "Just watch, and see the difference between a duellist and a warrior."

An older girl with long curly hair held her wand above her head and spoke loudly so the whole room could hear over the hubbub. "This is a formal honour duel. The combatants have agreed to extended class B rules. I am Miss Anabella Richardson of the House of Richardson and will act as official witness. All combatants have agreed to limit their casts to non-immediately-lethal spells. When my conjured handkerchief lands on the floor, the duel shall begin."

Silence descended.

The three boys tensed.

Anticipation coiled in on her.

The girl made a complicated gesture and a pure white handkerchief shot from the end of her wand.

Her eyes tracked the flimsy piece of cloth on its journey down to the hard stone floor.

It landed.

Four wands raised.
Four spells cast.

The stone floor in front of Harry melted and thrust upwards, forming a solid shield in front of him.

The sounds of spells hitting Harry's wall crashed through her head along with the roar of the crowd. Pieces of stone flew from the wall and bounced off the wards.

Harry flicked his wand.

Nothing visible happened.

She heard loud and rapid footsteps from the other side of the wall.

Harry flicked his wand again.

The two goons leapt around the wall, wands out, tips glowing, followed a split second later by several angry looking stone snakes, as thick as her arm and as long as she was tall. The deadly looking snakes lunged for the boys, still too focused on Harry to notice.

Harry returned their fire, rolling around on the floor and shielding in a whirlwind of body and magic.

A moment later the two boys noticed their stony, scaly problem. Yells and screams filled the air. They wrestled with their attackers for all but a moment before being dropped by a now back-on-his-feet Harry.

Harry jumped with cat-like grace, grabbed the top of the wall and stuck his head above it, only to drop back down a moment later, a purple spell shooting past where his head had been moments before.

She frowned then gaped as Volf rose over the wall, mounted on a broomstick. Extended Class B, indeed.

Harry flicked his wand. The wall melted.

Volf rained spells down on him.

He jumped back.

The former stone wall reformed itself into one large stone serpent, several metres tall with fangs the length of her fore-arm, sticking out from its mouth and up around its head like the teeth of some horrible deep-sea monster.

Volf screamed.

The crowd screamed.

The serpent lunged.

Volf shot backwards so fast he hit the duelling wards, and knocked himself off his broom, leaving him open to counter attack.

Harry leapt onto the snake, seeming to care not for gravity or its laws, and descended on the dazed boy like a god of war.

Volf had just enough time to raise his shaky head before Harry's wand touched the boy's forehead.
"Legimimens."

And Volf let loose a scream of pain and terror the likes of which she'd never heard and never ever wanted to hear again. It went on for ages. On and on. Students covered their ears and scrunched their eyes shut. One girl broke down crying. And still it went on.

Eventually it stopped.

Volf collapsed on the floor, curled into a foetal position, and wept.

"Romulus Volf." Harry's voice echoed around the deadly silent room from where he stood several feet off the ground, balanced on the snakes raised head.

Volf sniffled.

"I did promise to myself to put you in the hospital wing, but honestly, I think that last one was more than enough."

The snake lowered him back to Volf's level.

"Do you feel the inclination to attack any of my family again?"

Volf uncoiled like a spring and prostrated himself before Harry. "No! My lord!"

Harry stepped off the head and kicked him.

Volf grunted.

"I am not your lord! I am only the lord of those who have proven themselves worthy. Hermione has proven herself. You have not."

The crowd turned to glance at her and Granger, who'd been wearing a look total shock on her face ever since Harry had started his attack on Volf, but did flush red at that last comment.

"Nevertheless, honour is satisfied… at least for you…" Harry whirled around. "Mister Marcus Flint!"

The older child of the Gray flinched, but did manage a shaky bow. "Lord Slytherin."

"I shall be speaking with your parents about your interesting choice of behaviour tonight. You and several others." The masked face turned to each of the older students of the Gray. They bowed, curtseied, gulped, and sweated.

"And now, I am leaving. I trust this will be the last time I will have to intervene in my common room in such circumstances. Come, Daphne, Hermione, I'd like a word with you — you too Miss Davis."

Harry swept to the Slytherin common room portal, kicking the still knocked out goons on his way.

The snake turned to snap a last playfully bite at Volf who recoiled before it fell to the ground and melted back into a pile of rubble, exactly mirroring a deep gouge now in the common room stone floor.

She followed Harry departing figure, Granger and Tracey flanking her on either side. She caught both of their eyes, still wide as dinner plates, and smiled. "That, Tracey," she whispered, "is the difference between a duellist and a warrior."
A/N: Well, that was part two of what was originally meant to be one chapter. Next chapter we get back to see what Harry's up to!
Later next day, Dumbledore sat at his large polished oak desk in the headmaster's office and stared at a collection of parchments clutched in his hands. Lord Slytherin, it turned out, would go to great lengths to protect Miss Granger and Miss Greengrass.

Most of the Slytherin students had basic occlumency shields and he hadn't been able to see much of what happened in the Slytherin common room last night, but what he had been able to piece together painted a picture of a man who was unafraid to use fear and pain as a deterrent.

Three points in particular stood out as high emotion moments in the minds of the few students he'd explored. The first was shock when Miss Granger and Miss Greengrass performed wandless magic to stun one of their attackers. That was something to think about. The second was surprise turning slowly to fear and awe when Lord Slytherin flared his magic for over a full minute. He couldn't feel the magic through the memory, but if the looks of the other students were to go by, it was strong. And the third had been sheer terror when Slytherin tortured Romulus Volf with legilimency. That was extremely worrying, both for Slytherin's ruthlessness and for the nature of the method itself.

He'd long ago ruled out the possibility of Lord Slytherin being Lord Voldemort, but that didn't make the situation much more comforting. Slytherin's legilimency attack was exactly the kind of thing Voldemort would have done. Tom was almost certainly the foremost expert on the mind arts in the entire world, and, at least in that respect, Slytherin seemed closely moulded on the Dark Lord.

He couldn't let a dark lord of any kind rise. He mustn't allow it to happen. It was a fair blessing that Harry Potter hadn't been in the common room when the event transpired. At the moment, Harry Potter getting closer to the Gray seemed to be his worst case scenario for the boy. Lord Slytherin was powerful, amoral, ruthless, and protective — the perfect mentor and shield for a young boy, marked as his equal, to be raised into something terrible.

He would have to pay close attention to that danger, especially with Tom in the castle.

In the meantime, he had to speak with Lord Slytherin, at the very least to get a bead on the man and attempt to protect Severus from his attentions.

Dumbledore shuffled the parchments still held in his hands and smiled a grim smile.

Luckily, he'd now received just the thing to bring Slytherin in. If this didn't work, then Slytherin wasn't the man he thought he was.

"Floppy."

A house elf appeared at his side. "Yes, Headmaster Dumblydores?"

"Could you call for two owls, please, Floppy?"

Floppy bowed low to the ground. "Certainly, Headmaster Dumblydores." The elf vanished.

Dumbledore set the parchments down, pulled two blank sheets to him, inked his Phoenix feather
quill, and started writing.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Harry woke up on Friday of the first week of school to find himself drenched in sweat. It was a good kind of sweat though. He smiled and yawned. Ginny's dreamland duelling training kicked ass. Her pendant had been a one of a kind, once in a lifetime find, and snatching it when he did had been a master stroke. He wouldn't get to see her every night, but he looked forward to when he did.

He swung his legs off the bed, slipped on his slippers, and padded over to the bathroom. A few minutes of rinsing off later, he brushed up, left the bathroom, and slipped on his workout clothes.

On the other side of the room, Malfoy snorted in his sleep and turned over.

He wasn't so sure about Malfoy at the moment. The young Heir had such potential for his cause, but it lay hidden under a quarter inch layer of pretension, pomposity, and solid damn presumption.

From the moment Snape gave his "Fuck Harry Potter" speech at the beginning of term, Malfoy's attitude took an immediate and total 180 degree turn from the cautiously accepting attitude Harry had painstakingly cultivated. He'd expected this, but it didn't make it any less annoying.

He'd cornered the young heir the following day on his way back from a bathroom.

"Heir Malfoy," he'd said.

Malfoy had sneered at him. "What is it, Potter? You think I want anything to do with a dirty half-blood, blood-traitor like you?"

Unlike Malfoy's sneer, he'd kept his face friendly and neutral. "Heir Malfoy, I understand that at the moment you are choosing to follow the majority of our house in ostracising me—"

Malfoy had scoffed.

"—However," he'd continued, "I want you to know that there may well come a time when it is politically intelligent to consider an alternative path, and when that time comes you may look upon our time now as a missed opportunity."

Malfoy's eyes had narrowed. "What makes you think that such a time will ever come?"

He'd grinned, held out his hand, palm up, and produced a small ball of hovering, flickering flame, without word or wand.

Malfoy's eyes had widened, shooting from his face to the micro fireball and back.

He'd held it there for a second more. "Just a suspicion, Heir Malfoy." He'd then bowed, turned, waved the fire away, and walked off, leaving a hopefully more uncertain and slightly more cautious Malfoy behind him.

The young heir's behaviour over the next few days suggested he had, in fact, made a slight impression. The open verbal attacks from Malfoy slowed, and only happened when the young heir joined in with someone else.

Harry finished pulling on his trainers, and, with one last glance at the Malfoy heir, left the Slytherin first years dorms.

— DP & SW: T FoP —
After exercising, showering properly, changing, and strolling down to breakfast, Harry sat in the middle of the Slytherin table and ploughed through a large stack of eggs, bacon, potatoes, and assorted vegetables. He finished off his pile of organic fuel and muscle building material with a bowl of mixed oats, fruit, nuts and seeds — something he'd never seen at breakfast before, but which tasted quite nice.

All around him, empty chairs loudly proclaimed his status as an outsider, neither wanted nor needed. The people nearest him occasionally shot dirty looks and glares, to which he smiled back and waved.

At the end of the Slytherin table, nearest the head table, Malfoy held court, surrounded by his small clique of Dark first years.

At the other end of the table, Daphne presided over the collection of students that made up the Gray, Hermione on her right, Tracey on her left. Flint also seemed to be back in fold, sitting five seats away from the end, as were a few other older students of note who he'd singled out the other night.

Suddenly, a flurry of post owls descended on the four tables. One snowy owl immediately caught his attention. Hedwig flew over his head and deposited a thick envelope in front of Hermione. He glanced over to the Gryffindor table and struggled to keep a smirk off his face. The look of hurt and betrayal on John's face, staring at the beautiful bird now being fussed over by Hermione, was as delicious as the breakfast he'd just eaten and even more satisfying.

Harry turned away from the table of the brave and regarded Hedwig and her package again. Hermione didn't normally receive post in the morning. She tended to get mail from her parents in the evening, so what was this about?

He watched Hermione slice open the envelope with a breakfast knife, pull out the package and start to read. Hermione whispered something to Daphne who leaned over and started reading too. Then Hermione let out a muffled squeal and started to whisper furiously with a huge grin on her face.

Daphne whispered back and pointed at something else in the letter.

Hermione's eyes raked back to the parchment. Her face fell, quickly replaced by anger. She flashed a glare behind him towards the head table, before folding the parchment, standing up, and stalking out of the great hall.

Huh. What was that about?

He resisted the temptation to Morse code her through their rings. If it was really important, Hermione would message him. There were many reasons for this period of self inflicted isolation, and one of the lesser ones was to feel out Hermione and Daphne's ability to work together and without him.

Several minutes later, Harry pocketed a last boiled egg for later, rose from his chair, and started making his way towards history of magic, grinning at the few remaining glares of a now almost empty great hall.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

On his way to history of magic, Harry halted in the middle of a long corridor. Something felt off. He looked around but couldn't identify what happened. Then it happened again. A slight pulse of magic, so weak as to be almost unnoticeable, washed over him from just around the next corner.
He narrowed his eyes, and took several steps backwards. His body now stood right next to a large banner hanging down from the top of the arched ceiling to the stone floor. He called out. "Alright! Who's there?"

An almost inaudible curse came from around the corner, followed quickly by, surprise, surprise, Romulus Volf, flanked by his two duelling team goons.

Harry sighed. He didn't have the time for this.

"Potter!" Volf sneered. "I think its time you learned—"

Harry reached for the banner beside him and stepped into an alcove behind it.

"—Hey! Don't run away from us!"

He cast a wordless quietening charm on himself, hissed at a tiny carving of a snake in the far wall, and stepped into the resulting secret passage way. The wall silently closed behind him.

"What the fuck?" Volf's voice shook with indignation and puzzlement from beyond the wall.

Harry continued to walk away.

"Looks like he got away," came the voice of Goon B.

It wasn't that he didn't have business with Volf, but he was tired from training with Ginny all night and almost late for class.

"No shit, Merlin!" Volf's voice faded into nothing.

He'd get around to his business with Volf at some other point. Right now though…. He walked into History of Magic, trod up to the back of the classroom, sat down, acknowledged his presence for the register, cast a notice-me-not on himself, put his head in his arms, closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Later that evening, Harry withdrew the invisibility cloak from his shrunk trunk in an empty Slytherin dormitory and crept through a mostly empty common room.

The clock wall ticked a few minutes before curfew and his mind stirred from his all-day tired drudge. History of magic and astronomy were both certified sleepy times. Charms and transfiguration were a bit more risky to catch a kip in, but he hadn't been caught yet. Potions and herbology, on the other hand, gave no chance whatsoever for nap time. They were both group based. As for defence against the dark arts… well, he'd sooner kiss the headmaster than fall asleep in a room containing Hermione, Daphne, and Dark Lord Voldemort.

He opened the Slytherin common room portal and stepped out into the darkened corridor of a nighttime Hogwarts. The silence whispered through the hallways as he made his way up towards one of the few exits unlocked to students. He climbed the stairs of the astronomy tower, each step as inaudible as he was invisible.

He reached the top of the tower and spotted Professor Sinistra setting up for tonight's astronomy class. Not his of course. And he didn't plan to be back until long after the lesson had finished.

He climbed up onto the parapet and surveyed the area under the half-moon light, before lifting
himself up into the air and out across the school grounds.

Within minutes he arrived at the school perimeter wards. A pulse of his wand set the wards to maintain his presence in the school and off he flew, over the lake, and towards the village of Hogsmeade.

He lightly landed outside a small house on the outskirts of the village, which looked just like all the others. The only difference was that to all but his eyes, this house wasn't even there. He walked though the fidelius charm and the wards, which immediately lit all the lights, started a fire in the floo and welcomed him back with a pulse of magic and a dong of gong.

He shucked the invisibility cloak off and marched up to the little cottage's office.

A small stack of parchments greeted him on his desk along with a similarly sized stack of unopened letters. By the window, perched his owl, a large and majestic sooty owl called Macavity. Macavity's feathers were as gray as the fur of his namesake and his eyes were deep black with a small, Slytherin green iris — not quite his own shade, but close.

He'd been looking for an owl for ages, but just hadn't found what he'd been looking for. Then one day, Luna marched into one of their training sessions with a Macavity-filled cage under one arm and a smile on her face, and that was that. He'd known immediately the guy was perfect for the mysterious Lord Slytherin.

Harry walked over to the preening bird. "Hey there, partner."

Macavity nipped at his fingers and ruffled his feathers.

"You ready to deliver tonight's batch of dastardly dispatches?"

Macavity hooted, bobbed his head, and stretched his wings.

"Right." He pointed at the stack of letters on his desk. "I'll just get through these and then you're off. I've also got a meeting soon, so I'm off soon too."

Macavity hooted again in acknowledgement and took a scoop of water from a bowl by his perch.

Harry sat by the desk, picked up the first letter, sliced it open, and read.

Another invitation to something he couldn't go to. He placed it in-front of a large stack of parchments on the side of his desk.

He sighed and sliced open the next one.

He grimaced. A tear-stained letter begging him for assistance in something he could do nothing about. He placed this one in-front of another, thankfully much smaller, stack of parchments next to the first.

The next letter heralded from Gringotts. He grinned and sliced it open. He read.

Ragnok had identified three potential sites for Slytherin Hall and enclosed details. Brilliant. The girls would love this. He scanned the three sites. One place in Cumbria with a large parcel of land, another in East Anglia with a smaller parcel, and the last one… He goggled. The last one was a small island in the Shetlands.

Huh.
He put them to one side and picked up the next two letters. He smirked. Two sets of identical green inked addresses stared back at him, penned with lots of extraneous curls and flourishes. One penned to Lord Slytherin and the second to Harry Potter.

They were from Alex.

He ripped them open and read.

His smirk grew.

Alex's occasional letters to Lord Slytherin were getting a lot more insightful, and her more frequent letters to Harry Potter were getting a lot more friendly.

He knew Luna had reached out to the Black heiress recently so that could well be the reason. That girl was scarly smart and seemed to preempt his intentions in a way that even Daphne didn't come close to. He looked over to where Macavity now nibbled on owl treats. He'd be quite freaked out if it weren't so damn useful.

He waded through several more inane letters before hitting the last one. He stared at the lone envelope. He recognised that handwriting. He'd seen it before, often in the margins of transfiguration essays in comments like, "Well done, Tom — I hope you keep this focus on your academic work."

It wasn't the first time he'd received an owl from the man. Nevertheless, he waved his wand over the letter for several minutes. The owl office that stored his mail for pickup was supposed to check for undesirable magic, but with someone like the headmaster he took no chances.

He eventually satisfied himself and sliced the letter open. He read.

**Dear Lord Slytherin, Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin,**

*I am writing to inform you of an opportunity regarding a child in your guardianship, Miss Hermione Granger. Miss Granger's parents have expressed an interest in their child receiving healing training, an interest which was first expressed by Miss Granger herself.***

Normally such training is not started until a student has reached their third year when they begin their electives, however, after having spoken with Miss Granger's teachers and inspecting her classwork thus far produced, I feel it could be acceptable to extend the unusual and privileged possibility of fast tracking Miss Granger and allowing her to begin classes with Healer Pomfrey immediately.

These classes are small, containing no more than three or four students across all year groups and can be expected to increase a student's workload by no less than ten hours a week. Such positions also give extra credits and are strong indicators for prefect and head girl positions.

As I've previously hinted, this would be the first time Hogwarts has extended such an offer and there are, therefore, certain issues that I would need to discuss with you personally before I would feel one hundred percent comfortable in fully committing myself to such an offer. I'd like to extend to you an open invitation to meet with me and Miss Granger in my office any time in the next few weeks between the hours of four and six pm.

*I look forward to meeting you,*

*Yours respectfully,*
Harry lowered the letter to his side, stared off into nothing, and bit his lower lip. So, this is what got Hermione worked up this morning. He reread the letter for a second time. He really didn't want to meet with Dumbledore. But on the other hand, getting Hermione any kind of healer training would be very desirable. Once Voldemort had his method of immortality, he'd decided there was little point in learning something like healing.

He put the letter down and rubbed his temples.

He really didn't want to meet Dumbledore.

Hermione knew he really didn't want to. That was why she'd been so annoyed towards the head table this morning.

He folded his hands and tapped his foot.

Once Harry was in that office there was no chance he was getting out without a long talk with the headmaster about all sorts of things. The man would try to wring every last piece of information he could out of him, and then draw many accurate conclusions even from what Harry did not tell him.

But then again… having even a partly trained healer on call would be more than invaluable, and Hermione could be counted on to go over and above the call of duty, so it was quite likely she'd be far better than could be expected in no time at all.

Argh.

He rubbed his face.

Damn that man.

He looked up to find Macavity watching him, head tilted to one side.

His face cracked.

"Don't look at me like that, partner."

Macavity turned his head the other way.

"What?"

Macavity turned his head back to the first side, still nailing him with his unblinking stare.

He broke. "Okay! Okay! I know already, I'll meet with Dumbledore."

Macavity bobbed his head and returned to his water bowl.

Harry stood up and shook his head. He was pretty sure familiar bonds weren't supposed to form this quickly.

Macavity gave him a what-did-you-expect look.

He scowled. "You just want more excuses to cosy up to Hedwig."
Macavity gave an indignant hoot and leapt to the window.

Harry smirked. "Liar."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Lord Jacob Greengrass straightened his robes, pecked Sunny on the cheek, strode out of their soft lit bedroom, down the darkened corridor, out of the warm family quarters, down the grand staircase of the massive and empty Greengrass ballroom, and towards the floo. He pointed his wand at a small statue on the mantle piece and sent a pulse of magic into it.

Immediately, walls rose around him out of the floor. Stone ground on stone, creating a much smaller and cozy room in the formally desert like ballroom.

Two of the Greengrass house elves popped in with several large and comfy chairs taken from the sitting room, a low table already laden with bottles and glasses, and several bookcases, which soon encircled the room, completing the effect of a well lived in drawing room.

He sat down in the nearest chair, poured a small shot of whisky and awaited his guests.

A few minutes later, the floo flared green and a very familiar mask stepped through. He smiled. "Harry."

Harry, magically aged to the mid twenties of his Lord Slytherin persona, walked over to one of the other chairs.

"Jacob." Harry's voice warmed the temporary receiving space from behind his mask as he sat. "How are you?"

"Good." He looked Harry over. "More importantly, how are you? Daphne's owls haven't been able to tell us much."

Harry nodded. "That's not surprising. I'm fine. We'd hoped that Hermione would keep her status a secret for longer than what transpired, but these things happen."

Jacob poured a shot of whisky into a small glass. He'd already seen the memories of the events of the previous night. Copies hadn't exactly been hard to get hold of. "And you're still sure this whole vassalage thing was a good idea?"

"Absolutely."

He stood, walked over to Harry, and handed him the glass. "Well, it's done now."

Harry took the glass with a small nod of thanks. "The Grangers will prove to be a great asset to our cause. Dealing with a small amount of unpleasantness is worth the cost."

Jacob sat back down and regarded Harry for the ten-thousandth time in his life. He still had problems believing the man sat in front of him was a boy of no more than eleven years. It still boggled his mind. Having said that, the one time he'd seen Daphne as a young woman of twenty years had freaked him out much more.

Harry rested his still full glass on the armrest of his armchair. "Who else are we expecting?"

He thought for a moment. "Just Andrew and Lovegood, I think. Slughorn flooed an hour ago to say he had to cancel and Woodcroft has a prior engagement."
Harry nodded.

"Also," Jacob continued. "You might want to check this out. He threw Harry a stack of parchment.

Harry read the first page. "The Muggle Protection Act?"

He nodded. "Weasley's proposal. Standard Light silliness going on."

Harry continued to read. "Yes… I can see that… Oh dear…"

The floo flared green, bathing the room in flickering emerald, and out stepped a man who, only a few years ago, he'd never have expected to be greeting to a high-level late-evening drink of the Gray. Lord Xenophilius Lovegood. He stood. "Xeno," he smiled. "Welcome again to my humble home."

Xeno smiled back, long hair falling over his young but worn face. "Excellent to be back! We alone here?" He waggled his eyes towards Harry.

Harry nodded. "Yep." He put down the parchments in hand in front of him.

"Excellent!" Xeno strode over and slapped Harry on the shoulder before landing on a third chair in a thump of cushion and a splaying of legs. "Always happy to see my mysterious, all powerful, and alter-aged future son-in-law."

Jacob's smile became rather fixed. He'd once been offered a consortship arrangement, but he'd turned it down out of loyalty to Sunny. Of course, he couldn't very well complain, given what he'd almost been forced to do with Daphne and Lord Walter Slughorn.

In the end, the Gray had gotten a powerful ally out of the bargain. Intelligent people might laugh at the Quibbler, but the smart people knew that the less intelligent people took it seriously. And the less intelligent were in the vast majority. The smart themselves, took it selectively serious, depending on just how smart they were.

The Gray now had the Quibbler, the Light had Witch Weekly, and the Dark had the Prophet in all but name. The balance of power was now, thanks largely to Harry, balanced. If that required a son-in-law with more than one father-in-law then so be it.

Harry drummed his fingers on his armchair. "I would hesitate to describe myself as 'all powerful', Xeno."

Xeno settled into an enigmatic smile. "Maybe, but you've got a lot more going on than you let on. I know that."

Harry waggled his head, not committing to anything.

Jacob gave a single nod. That much had been obvious for years.

The floo flared green and disgorged his final guest. A shorter, older wizard stepped out.

Jacob stood again, walked over and shook the man's hand. "Andrew. Good to see you again."

Lord Andrew Ogden beamed around the room. "Good to see you again, old boy. Xeno. Slytherin. I see you've got the whisky out."

Harry and Xeno greeted the older man.
Jacob lead the man over to the last chair and poured him a glass. Andrew had mentored him in the Wizengamot after the death of his father and he'd held the man in high regard ever since.

The four of them shared pleasantries for a moment before Andrew got right down to what he seemed itching to get off his chest. "So, Slytherin. Just saw the memory of you beating the living snot out of Volf's boy. I must say that was terrifying. Almost wet myself, hah!"

Harry picked up his un-drunk glass and brought it to the masks lips. The mask enveloped the glass almost like a real mouth. He took a drink. "Yes." He lowered the glass again. "I've said for years that I have no intention of allowing that kind of behaviour in my name and now that Daphne and Hermione are at Hogwarts, it stops."

Andrew sat back in his chair. "Ah, yes. The muggleborn girl. Impressive casting on that one. Wandless even. You trained her?"

Harry inclined his head. "Indirectly."

"Well, good show, I say." Andrew smacked his lips. "Always thought the muggleborns could do better for themselves. I employ a good number of them, but it's hard getting much out of them with the education most of them receive outside of Hogwarts, and runes can only do so much by themselves."

Jacob nodded. The status of the three much smaller British schools outside of Hogwarts had been a subject of much discussion for their little group over the years.

"I also saw this." Andrew thumped something down on the table. The latest edition of Witch Weekly stared up at him. "Congratulations are in order, I think, Slytherin, eh?"

Jacob raised an eyebrow, picked up the magazine, and flipped to the table of contents. His other eyebrow joined his first in its climb up his forehead. "The 1991 highest incomes list?"

Andrew pointed with his glass. "That's the puppy."

He flipped through to the relevant page, loudly titled 'The Witch Rich List', to find Harry right at the top with a 1990 income of 20,200 Galleons (£1,010,000), beating out Malfoy for first place by a chunky 1,400 Galleons (£70,000). In the column after Harry's name of Lord Slytherin, the table listed the source of Harry's income as 'Slytherin's treasure'.

He flipped the magazine to Xeno who started reading with great interest. He tilted his head. "Slytherin's treasure?"

Harry coughed. "You know I still don't know what we're actually talking about, right?"

Andrew barked a laugh. "You've finally been added to this year's rich list. Seems that even the journalistic gossips at Witch Weekly couldn't figure out what you actually do, so they've just gone with 'Slytherin's treasure' as your source of wealth."

Xeno folded the magazine up and threw it to Harry. "Welcome to the tax paying community, Lord Slytherin."

The assembled wizards chuckled.

Jacob smirked. "You'll probably be receiving a lot more requests now from the unofficial tax collecting departments of the ministry and associated institutions."
Andrew laughed. "You up for upping your donations now, eh? Slytherin?"

Harry chuckled under his mask. "Most of my profits will be going towards the construction of Slytherin Hall for the next few years, but I do plan to set aside an amount for political contributions, maybe 5% raising to 15% over three years."

Xeno nodded. "Well, that would bring you in line with what most of us pay. Pretty sure 15% is what most of the Dark and Light dole out too. Except Malfoy of course. That man likes to throw around money like confetti."

Jacob sat back in his chair and knocked back his drink. Malfoy wasn't going to like being kicked off first place. The man seemed to take an unhealthy obsession in being the richest wizard in Britain. Of course, income wasn't net worth, but the ministry didn't tax wealth, only income, and the rate was so low that people like Malfoy didn't even try dodging Gringotts reporting procedures. They just wanted to be high on the list.

Harry ran his finger down the list. "Slytherin, Malfoy, Potter, Greengrass, Parkinson, Ogden, Westbrook, Yaxley, Lovegood, Flume. That's a pretty damn good mix of factions. Four Gray, three Light, and three Dark in the top ten."

Andrew sniffed. "Yeah, but the top twenty is full of the Light."

Jacob pointed his own finger at the list. "Yes, but most of them have incomes under 8,000 Galleons (£400,000)."

Andrew shrugged. "It adds up."

Harry folded the magazine up and threw it back to Andrew. "It does. But power is often best concentrated at a point for best effect…"

Jacob could hear the smile in Harry's voice.

"…And the wealth of the Gray is nothing if not concentrated."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The next Monday, Harry woke in his Slytherin dorm four poster, threw on his workout gear and trotted down to the grounds for his daily workout.

He wanted to get a better place to train together but the options were limited. The chamber would be the ideal place, but so long as Voldemort was around he wasn't going near the place with a ten foot staff.

The room for hiding things was another option, but that would take a long time to set up, and, again, he didn't want to do it while Voldemort was here, in case the Dark wanker wanted to check on his prized immortality trinket. A prized trinket, which he'd already swiped.

His feet led him out across the grounds, still wet from morning dew, and down to the lake. He started jogging.

Two laps of the lake later he'd built up a good solid sweat. He pulled in at a junction into a clearing in the forest. From here, he could see the lake path, but people would have difficulty seeing him in the trees.

He pulled his wand and conjured an assortment of dumbbells, barbells, hammers and what could
only be described as big ass stones.

Forty minutes later he collapsed on the ground, well and truly done. Sweat covered him like a second skin, pooling and running down his arms and legs, which burned from his efforts.

He vaguely waved his wand towards the conjured equipment, vanishing it back into thin air.

He lay on his back, breathing hard.

Gradually, his breathing slowed, only to be replaced by the panting of another.

He sat up.

The panting came from towards the lake path and seemed to be getting closer.

He disillusioned himself and crept to the edge of the tree line, eyes peeled.

The out of breath form of his brother passed him, wearing a t-shirt and shorts, heading up the lake path towards the loop that would bring him back around to the castle.

Huh. Harry pursed his lips and watched his brother's form grow smaller as it jogged away. *That* was different. Time traveller John never took morning exercise in the second timeline… did he? Of course, he could be mistaken…

He leaned on the tree next to him and tapped on the bark.

…Or perhaps his own actions were affecting the path John was taking. Merlin knew he'd done plenty to stir his brother up. In fact, given all the shit he'd thrown at John, it would be far more shocking if it *didn't* affect him.

He stood for a few moments, lost in thought.

Oh, well. It wasn't as if this was going to change his behaviour towards John. It was highly unlikely that his influencing of Ginny or Hedwig or Hermione would make it *less* likely that John would happily help to throw him back in Azkaban.

Harry turned to his impromptu gym, made sure he'd not forgotten anything, and proceeded to make his way back up to the castle. Breakfast called.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Stop, Potter!"

Harry dived around the next stone corner, whipped out the invisibility cloak and became as nothing.

Volf careened around the corner just behind him, wand out, and stopped dead, staring past him to the empty corridor that lay stretched before him.

Volf shook his head and muttered a curse under his breath.

Harry didn't move.

Eventually, after a few more obscenities about dirty, half-blood blood-traitors, the Slytherin duelling captain turned and made his way back the way he came.
Harry waited for a few moments, then whipped the cloak back off. He sighed. Why did Volf always pick the times he was in a rush for class to ambush him? Didn't the dick have classes of his own?

He made his way onwards to Transfiguration, sat a bench away from Daphne and Hermione, clocked in for attendance, cast his notice-me-not, and put his head in his arms. He yawned. Adrenaline and endorphins from exercise and being chased were slowly replaced by a sleepy full stomach from a hearty breakfast.

"Just thirty minutes," he half mumbled.

... Sometime later, he woke from his power nap to find the class working on practical transfiguration. He cancelled the notice-me-not and conjured an exact copy of the matchbox scattered in front of the classes quicker students who'd already moved on from nails.

After a few minutes, Professor McGonagall stood in front of him. "Mister Potter?"

Harry looked up at the stern visage of Scottish witch. Her face radiated puzzlement.

"Yes, Professor?"

He fought back a yawn.

McGonagall stared for a few more moments before shaking herself. "Please attempt the transfiguration for me, Mister Potter."

He nodded, focused on an almost complete transfiguration form, and let his magic flow through his holly and phoenix feather wand and into his conjured box. The box shifted and became a snuff box—a snuff box made of cardboard.

McGonagall picked it up and inspected it. "A good try, Mister Potter. You just need to work on the feel of aluminium in your mind. But you've got the difficult bit done." She put the cardboard snuffbox back down on the desk. "It shouldn't be too much more effort for you to master this exercise now."

He nodded. "Thank you, Professor."

McGonagall nodded back and moved on.

He yawned. An indignant cry caught his attention. He turned. Hermione glared at Daphne's desk, frustration radiating off her in waves. McGonagall's sand timer sat between the two girls, flashing up a collection of numbers. He couldn't see Daphne's work from where he sat, but her half-smug expression suggested she'd just bested Hermione in some way.

Hermione hit the sand timer and waved her own wand.

Seconds ticked by. Another wand hit and a new number shot from the timer.
Now Daphne looked annoyed and Hermione, smug.

He watched this back and forth for a few more minutes. The wand jabs got more pointed and the looks each girl shot the other got more determined. Glares became scowls, and smug looks were punctuated with crossed arms and fist pumps. They seemed not to notice him watching them. Their world seemed to consist of only their desks and each other.

Eventually, he noticed other students starting to stare.

Right. Time to intervene. He needed to message Hermione anyway. This seemed as good a time as any.

He pulsed magic into his lightning bolt ring.

Both girls froze.

He turned away from the girls to face the front of the classroom.

*You look like you're having fun.*

He glanced back around at them. Both their faces had gone slightly red.

*Hermione,*

*Be ready to meet Lord Slytherin at the main entrance way at five o'clock today. Bring everything you need for a meeting with the Headmaster.*

*Daphne,*

*Not much longer.*

*Harry.*

By the time he'd finished his Morse code message, many of the other students were wrapping up their attempts and putting their books away.

He felt two separate sets of buzzes on his finger, each separated from the other by the magic of the ring.

*Yes, Harry.*

*Yes, Harry.*

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry smiled through the invisibility cloak.

Books rose high on either side of him. The Hogwarts library was the largest in magical Britain. There were more books here than anyone could reasonably read during their seven years of education, let alone master, even *with* advanced occlumency.

Voldemort certainly hadn't. Perfect student though he may have been, he still had limits, especially with all his 'extracurricular activities'. After he'd ascended to power, Voldemort hadn't bothered to learn at the obscene rate he'd done during his Hogwarts time and the twenty odd years that followed. He was a Slytherin, not a Ravenclaw. He viewed learning as a means to an end, not an end in itself.
So did Harry, for that matter. And he now had a very specific end in mind.

The wards surrounding the restricted section whispered to him as he passed. Unlike those on the third floor, these certainly were plugged into the main Hogwarts wards.

He reached for a likely looking title — Seeing the Unseeable. He opened it to the table of contents. It was a divination book. Another of Voldemort's weak spots, but not what he needed right now. He slammed it shut and tried The Wardbreaker's Handbook. Forcing entry… man in the middle attacks… Trojan horses… towering… he slammed it shut too. Nothing he didn't already know, and he didn't want to break the wards… at least not yet. He needed to know what lay behind those wards. Each probably contained a separate defence and now that he knew of the extra gender ward, which hadn't been there in the second timeline, he wasn't taking the chance that all the other defences were the same as last time too.

What he really needed was a way to see past those wards, to see through walls without having to actually send anything in there. Freekey could certainly be useful, but he wasn't putting Daphne's pet on the line without assurances the little monkey would be okay. Especially considering the first obstacle last time had been a freakin' cerberus.

Maybe some kind of charm would do it? Like something to change the opacity of an object…

He grabbed a book titled Advanced Charms for Mass Production and made his way to a sitting area in the back of the restricted section, still under his cloak, sat down, cross legged in a corner, and started to read.

Somewhere close by, stone ground on stone.

He stiffened.

He heard footsteps.

He carefully closed the book on his lap and flicked his wand into his hand. His cloak would keep him hidden but it never paid to be too careful.

Two figures appeared around the stacks of books.

He frowned. It was Ginny's twin brothers. What were they doing in the restricted section? More interestingly, how did they get in?

The two seemed to be consulting something out of his view, possibly a book.

He shifted on the hard wood floor and waited for them to leave.

The two turned.

His breath hitched. They were walking straight towards him. He clutched his wand firmly in his hand.

The two stopped several feet from where he sat. They loomed over him.

"Well hello there, Harry Potter."

Fuck. How?

"We know you're there, little Slytherin."
Shit. Crap. Memory charms.

"We're not going to hurt you—"

"—Much."

"We just want to talk, Harry."

Okay, negotiate first, memory charm second. He needed to find out how they found him. He pulled the cloak off and stared at the two red headed twins. "Okay, I'm impressed. How did you do that?"

"Nuh uh uh." The twin on the left waggled a finger. "We're not giving our secrets away so easily, Harry."

The one on the right stared as he pocketed the cloak.

"Nice cloak, by the way."

Fuck. He grinned. "Isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." Left twin turned to Right twin. "I don't think invisibility cloaks are on the forbidden list, but that's probably only because no one's ever had one before."

Harry's grin widened, while inside his mind whirled at a million miles a minute. "Yes, I'm sure. I'm also pretty sure the same could be said of advanced ward breaking tools."

Both twins froze. Bingo.

"I'm sure we don't know what you're talking about, Harry" Right twin said, leaning on the wall beside him.

"I'm sure you don't."

"And we're sure that you can't prove anything."

"Whoa, whoa" Harry put up his hands, "Who said I'd want to rat you out?"

The two eyed him, warily.

"You want to talk, right? Can I suggest we do it somewhere that isn't here? This isn't exactly the safest place for a chat."

The two looked at each other. Something seemed to pass between them. "Follow us, little Slytherin Harry."

Harry stood and brushed himself off. One quick detour to replace the book and he followed the twins to a stack of books, which looked just like every other book shelf.

"Normally," one twin began, "we'd be reluctant to show someone one of these secret passageways..."

"... But it seems that you've already got a way in."

The first twin poked around under a shelf and the whole thing, complete with wall, ground outwards, revelling a confined stone passageway. Miniature ward stones framed the doorway at each corner.
Harry snatched a glance at the ward work as they left. Pretty sloppy and home-made from what looked like thrown away scrap, but it seemed to do the job — very impressive for almost fourteen year olds.

The doorway ground closed again.

Harry frowned. "What would you do if you opened that door and someone was on the other side?"

The second twin turned from where he walked a few paces in front of him. "Oh, that's not a problem, little Slytherin Harry. Trust us."

So, they had some way to know where people were did they? Is that how they found him? That could be horrifically bad.

He ground his teeth, unseen by the Weasley twins advancing ahead of him. This was quickly looking to be a full legilimency and memory wipe job.

They made their way down the secret passageway and out into an unused classroom. They hopped onto desks facing each other.

"So," Harry began, waving his wand to cast a privacy charm, much to the surprise of the two red heads, "to what do I owe the honour of such an impossibly improbable visit?"

The twins looked at each other. "That, my dear little Slytherin Harry—"

"—Is a story of many parts."

He crossed his arms. "Well, you can start by telling me why you insist on calling me little Slytherin Harry. I'm not that little you know."

"Ah," said Right twin, his smile rather fixed. "But you are a little Slytherin to us."

"And," continued Left twin, "you are, more importantly, and unquestionably, Harry."

Silence.

Ohhh Bugger.

He tilted his head. "Well, that is my name."

The twins continued to stare at him.

Left twin held up his hand, all fingers stretched out. "Let's see shall we?" He dropped one finger with his other hand. "Several years ago, our dear little sister was besotted with one John Potter." He dropped a second finger. "Then, suddenly out of the blue, she starts hating on him as though he's you-know-who reborn." He dropped a third finger. "Then, just a few months ago, our little saviour bursts in out of the blue and accuses said darling sister of being controlled by dark magic. It then turns out that she isn't being controlled, but she has being getting advanced occlumency training from some unknown person and that this unknown person is called Harry."

Right twin took over. "Then, just weeks later, we find out that the much vaunted John Potter, the boy who lived, the vanquisher of you-know-who, has a twin brother—"

"—Imagine how shocked we were—"

"—Indeed, oh brother of mine. Shocked. To find that this boy had been raised by muggles.—"
"—Oh how terrible, we thought—"

"—We shall show him the magic of the magical world, we thought—"

"—And then, on the train, we were sitting in a compartment with our good, good friend Lee Jordan, when who should come by, but John Potter from one side—"

"—And Harry Potter from the other—"

"—And before we know what's happening, the two are at each other's throats."

"—Twin against twin, oh it pains me to see—"

"—Yes, oh twin of mine, such tragedy that two who were meant to be together should be pulled so far apart—"

"I don't hate John."

The twins stared at him.

"Yeah right, Harry—"

"—Pull the other one—"

"—It does have bells on."

Right twin hopped off his desk. "We can tell, Harry. We're brothers in a family of nine. You think we can't spot when someone is being friendly in a stick-a-dagger-in-your-back kind of way?"

Harry didn't say anything.

"So," continued Right twin, "your name is Harry. The person who taught Ginny occlumency is called Harry. You hate John Potter. Ginny started hating John Potter not long after our parents think this all started. Harry gave Ginny a top of the range broomstick. We saw you flying on the field the other day looking like you've lived on a broomstick all your life. You're supposedly raised by muggles and we find you in the first week of school, hidden in the restricted section of the library, reading books on charms that would give us headaches."

"And you have a freakin' invisibility cloak. And you somehow got through the library wards and it wasn't through our secret passage way. We know that."


Harry stared at them. Damn. This would require quite some tap dancing. He kept his face completely blank. "It sounds like this Harry guy is quite an interesting character."

Right twin blinked. "You're still—"

"—Let me finish," he snapped.

Right twin shut his mouth.

He took a moment to collect his thoughts. "Tell me more about this Harry. How do you feel about him?"

The twins shared a glance. "Well, we don't really know him, do we?"
"Mostly we want to make sure he's not a dark wizard preying on our baby sister."

Harry tapped his chin. "This Harry person sounds like he's spent a lot of time with Ginny. I imagine to teach someone something like occlumency would take that."

Right twin nodded, slowly. "Yeah, it took us ages, and we have the twin advantage."

Harry's heart fell. Oh shit. They knew occlumency. Even memory charms weren't totally safe then. And what was the twin advantage? He took a deep breath. "What do you know about what Ginny thinks of this Harry person?"

"We know she trusts him."

"We know she likes him."

"Well then, since you say that Ginny has strong occlumency, shouldn't her word count for a lot? I'm sure you know your sister very well. Is she the kind of person who would hang out with a dark wizard?"

Both twins shook their heads.

"Then shouldn't that be that?"

The twins stared at him for what seemed an age.

Eventually, Left twin spoke. "I guess so." He hopped off the desk to join his twin. "Then we shall be off, but if you ever hurt Ginny…"

"Wait just a moment!"

They stalled, mid turn.

"We still have business. Please sit."

They raised their eyebrows but did sit back down.

"Two points. Point one. You saw me in the restricted section and you saw that I have an invisibility cloak. How do I know that you will keep all my secrets?"

Right twin grinned. "We'd give you our word."

Harry shook his head. "We're going to have to do better than that. We're not leaving this room until I know both of us will keep the other's secrets."

The twins frowned. "Isn't the fact we hold something over the other good enough?"

Harry sighed. "No. Because what you hold over me is massive and what I hold over you is tiny. And there's still the second thing."

The twins looked at him expectantly.

"How did you find me? I need to know."

Left twin shook his head. "Sorry, little Slytherin Harry, that's our great secret."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "I will give you anything it is in my power to give you to find out how you
did it. You know some of my capabilities now. I promise you it isn't a small offer."

Right twin tapped the side of the desk. "Anything?"

"Anything within my means that I deem to be of equal value to the information I'm requesting."

Left twin grinned. "Well, you are a child of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter. How's your pocket money looking?"

His heart leapt. "You want, money? What for?"

"That's our business, little Slytherin Harry."

"I just want to get an idea of how much you need."

The two looked at each other. "We're thinking maybe one galleon every other month."

Oh Merlin help him. He slammed his hands on the desk. "I'm writing you a damned blank check here! You set up a man-in-the-middle-attack in a well hidden secret passageway to break a way into the restricted section of the Hogwarts Library with rubbish most would throw away. What could two people like you possibly be doing of value that can be achieved on two and an eighth sickles a week?"

Right twin opened his mouth to protest.

Harry held up his hand. "Stop. Just stop." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his shrunk trunk, opened it, stepped inside, and closed the lid behind him. He counted out twenty-five galleons and dumped them into a small Gringotts bag.

When he opened the trunk lid and poked his head out, the twins were still sat there, watching him with a strange look on their twin faces.

"What?"

"Nothing, little Slytherin Harry—"

"—Just some massive déjà vu."

"Yeah, well. Here." He climbed out and handed over the bag. "Twenty-five galleons. Come to me when you need more."

The twins looked stunned.

"If you're not back in a month for more, I'm warning you, I will chase you both down, and force it on you."

They nodded, mutely.

"Now. Tell me how you found me!"

Right twin reached into his robes and pulled out a roll of parchment.

Five minutes later, Harry drooled. If Wormtail had ever thought to mention this to Voldemort, the Dark Lord would have turned the castle inside out looking for it.

"Yep," said the twin Harry could now see was Fred, pointing proudly to some of the more
interesting areas. "This baby is a masterpiece. We've already memorised many of the secret passageways on it, but we've still got a ways to go. Why, I remember one time…"

Harry drummed the desk with his fingers. This wouldn't classify as a Potter heirloom, not unless you went by goblin law, but it was technically his birthright. The problem with that was that it was John's too and even Alex's. In fact, Alex had more claim over it than he or John… Hmmmm…

Certainly something to think about, that.

He refocused on the map. He could see the room he and the twins were standing in clearly. Three small dots labelled Fred and George Weasley and Harry Potter. Thank Merlin he'd found out about this now. If he'd ever met the twins as Lord Slytherin while the map showed Harry Potter, it could have been… bad.

It was also clear the map took it's readings from the Hogwarts wards — wards that he could control. He glanced sideways at the twins, still expounding on their story. How trustworthy were they? Was the money enough to keep them with him or did he need more? This map threw up so many questions. Had they seen Hermione and Daphne going about their business on the third floor? Had they spotted him disappearing in one part of the map and reappearing in another? The map didn't show parseltongue only secret passageways. And even now, he could see a dot with a duel label of Quirinus Quirrell and Tom Riddle pacing a far flung study.

And what could he achieve if he had regular access to this thing? The possibilities were incredible.

He needed something to bring these two closer. The money was a good start, especially if they became dependent on it, but he needed something else, something more. He racked his brain while the twins rattled on about all the pranking feats they'd pulled off with this ultimate weapon against the fog of war.

What did he know about them? What did he have that they might want? They were ambitious. They loved pranks. They didn't care much for rules. They seemed to revel in pulling off things that people their age shouldn't be able to. They didn't care much for academic work. And yet, they were diligent in their own projects, if what they said about their independent occlumency practise was true.

"And that's when we bolted around the corner, just as filch comes around the—"

"—Do you want to be animagi?" he blurted out.

They stared at him.

"Well?"

Fred furrowed his eyebrows. "Are you serious?"

Harry gave him a look. "Yes. I'm damn serious. Well, are you interested, yes or no?"

George frowned. "We already looked into being animagi a long time ago."

"Yeah," continued Fred, "decided it wasn't worth it. Takes far too long."

"Suppose I had a shortcut?"

They stared at him again.

"Especially for diligent pranksters who've been working on their occlumency like good little
boys?"

"Oi!" George mock punched him on the shoulder.

Fred looked pensive. "How much of a shortcut?"

"Twenty to one hundred hours of work this year, depending on how good your occlumency actually is, and 150 hours next year."

George whistled. "That's a lot faster than the two thousand hours the books say."

"Yep. Target of full transformation by next Christmas."

Fred gave him a half-lidded look. "How long have you been planning this?"

"Never mind that. Are you in?"

The twins looked at each other.

"We're in."

"We're in."

"Excellent."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry strode back to the Slytherin dungeons to prepare for his meeting with Hermione and Dumbledore.

"Hey!" *gasp* "Potter!" *wheeze*

Romulus Volf stepped out from the next corner, some two dozen metres ahead of him.

Harry stopped and turned his head. Behind him, Goon A blocked his retreat. He turned back to Volf. "Damn. You must have run through a quarter of the whole freakin' castle to pull that off."

"Shut up!" *Huff* *Huff*

"Well, whatever," he said out loud. At least now he had some time to kill.

Volf seemed to get his breath back. His breathing slowed and his back straightened from its bent-over wheeze fest. "It's about time someone showed you your place, Potter!"

He flicked his wand into his hand. The Goon behind him was the most dangerous at the moment and all three of them knew it. Unfortunately for the other two, they didn't know he could sense magic.

He vaguely waved his wand. "Yes, yes. I understand that. But first I'd like to ask to join the duelling team."

Volf's jaw slackened. "You what?"

"I said, I'd like to join the duelling team."

Volf growled. "Why should I let you?"
"Because you want the strongest, don't you? That's what you've always said. 'I will not let anyone on the team unless they are the strongest.' I am the strongest. Ergo, you will let me on the team."

Volf snorted.

"Annnndd... If I beat all the other first years, you'd have a real reason not to include Miss Granger on the team."

Volf stilled. He lowered his wand to his side.

Harry's eyes widened, slightly. The dick was actually considering that.

His first plan had been to offer to duel the entire Slytherin duelling team for the spot, one after the other, with a forfeit of a thousand galleons if he lost, but if this worked first, so much the better.

Volf's eyes narrowed. "Granger didn't even want to be on the team in the first place. She only accepted because Greengrass pushed her into it."

"Do you think she's going to back down now? After all that's happened?"

Volf scowled.

"Accept me as a candidate and I guarantee that I will beat Granger. In fact, I guarantee that I'll win Slytherin the whole tournament."

Volf scoffed. "Now you're just being an arrogant little toe rag."

Harry shook his head. He felt an almost instantaneous build up of magic behind him, whirled around, and swatted aside a tripping hex.

A startled Goon A kept his wand trained on him but made no attempt to cast another spell.

He turned back to Volf who looked equally surprised.

"I am good. And I intend to show you just how good at the November trials. Imagine having a seventh year in the first year slot. That's me. I'm not dicking around here." He strolled forward until he stood beside Volf. "I know that you don't much like me, but with me on the team, Slytherin will win, and that's all there is to it."

He walked off down the corridor and didn't feel a single magical build up behind him the whole way.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry stood in front of his shrunk trunk's full-length mirror, looked down at the line of bottles in front of him one last time, took a deep breath, grabbed the first in the line and downed it.

The super high-dose ageing potion took affect, changing his true eleven year old body into the body of a seventy year old man, complete with beard. Any resemblance to James Potter was extremely difficult to spot.

He grabbed the second bottle in the row and downed that.

The polyjuice potion took affect, changing him into the visage of a random male muggle, this time in his mid twenties. It wasn't the best looking face though.
He grabbed the third and final bottle in the row and downed that too.

The beautification potion took affect, shifting the irregular features of his borrowed face into something more symmetrical… more symmetrical and even less recognisable.

He then took his wand and started transfiguring his face, hair, and vocal cords into his private persona of Lord Slytherin. Fifteen minutes later, he'd finished and stood back to inspect his handy work.

He reached down and picked up the final piece from the desk — Slytherin's mask.

There.

He tapped the mask, now on his face, with his finger tips.

He reached into his left pocket to check his supply of Peruvian instant darkness powder. Check.

He reached into his right pocket to check his mini spray bottle filled with draught of living death. Check.

He took in his complete form in the mirror, decked out in full horntail dragon hide duelling robes, complete with hood, gloves, and boots, brocaded in silver and trimmed in emerald green.

It went without saying, that he intended to take no chances with this meeting.

He exited his trunk, currently inside a parseltongue only secret passage, held up his wand and added the presence of a second Harry Potter to the wards, while instantly changing his original label from Harry Potter to Lord Slytherin.

It wouldn't do for a certain pair of twins to wonder what Harry Potter and Hermione Granger were doing in the Headmaster's office, after all.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione fidgeted and surveyed the Hogwarts grounds from behind a tall glass window in the entrance hall.

"You ready—"

She yelped.

"—Hermione?"

She spun around to see the tall, masked figure of Lord Slytherin. She crashed into him and hugged him as best as she could, given their current height difference.

Harry returned the hug.

"Are we alone?" she whispered.

Harry whispered back. "You know how to test for that."

She nodded and spoke in a loud and clear voice, "Lord Slytherin's secret place is located on Berneray Island in the Outer Hebrides."

Harry gave her a thumbs up.
"Harry!" she hissed, hugging him harder. "I miss you so much. And there's so much I want to talk to you about and so much to tell you. When are we going to meet up properly? There wasn't time for anything the other night."

Harry glanced around again. "Hopefully, soon. I'm hoping this meeting will help us get some idea of how closely Dumbledore is paying attention to things."

She nodded.

"How's the snake in your pocket doing?"

She patted said pocket. "No problems. It seems to really like beef."

Harry nodded.

She stepped back and looked him up and down. She couldn't deny that older Harry cut a dashing figure. "And you're... you're okay with, all this?"

Harry sighed. "Not really, but we're doing it anyway. The opportunity is too good to miss."

"Thank you."

Harry's voice picked up a cheerful beat. "No worries. This is all part of the game."

She nodded.

"Shall we?" He motioned down the corridor.

She turned to Harry's side and slid on her Slytherin mask. "Lead on, my lord."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Albus Dumbledore signed off on another piece of parchment and added it to his out tray. The clock ticked. The many devices around him whirred, clicked, bobbed, and sploshed.

"Ahem, Headmaster."

He looked up. He was being addressed by one of his paintings.

"Yes?"

"It would appear that Miss Granger is being led towards your office by the masked wizard known as Lord Slytherin."

His eyes widened. So soon? He hadn't expected that. "That is most interesting. Thank you."

The painting nodded and went to sleep.

At last.

He swept aside the mass of parchmentwork on his desk with a wave of his wand and conjured two comfortable armchairs in front of him.

After three whole years of back and forth, or rather, after three whole years of only forth and a complete absence of back.

He picked up Miss Granger's parchments and regarded them for a moment.
He'd been right.

He put the parchments in front of him and glanced at the door to his office.

The minutes ticked by. He frowned, suddenly feeling very silly, sitting behind his desk, twiddling his thumbs, like a fresh employee waiting for his new boss to drop by. Slytherin wasn't even supposed to be out of his twenties yet. He slowly shook his aged head. If Slytherin really was a Dark Lord in the making, there would be tells. Obvious tells, like in Riddle, and he'd spot them.

The minutes continued to tick by.

Surely the man should have been here by now.

Another minute went by.

Okay, now he was sure Slytherin was doing it on purpose.

*Knock* *Knock*

He started. Oh, but of course the wards wouldn't alert him. How foolish for him to assume so. He let out a deep breath. "Come in."

The door opened.

"Ah, Lord Slytherin." He beamed towards the heavily dressed man while a million alarm bells rang in his head. "And Miss Granger. Come in. Please. Sit."

The masked man and girl sat down in the chairs in front of him. The girl wore an expression of dignified indifference. The man looked fully ready to enter armed combat against an army.

"Albus Dumbledore," the man said, in a voice as deep as the sea.

"Headmaster." Miss Granger bobbed her head.

"Well." He offered them sweets from a small bowl, which they both refused. "It's good to see you again, finally, after all this time."

He glanced over to Fawkes who completely ignored the visitors. Was that a good thing or a bad thing?

The girl's face remained blank. Slytherin's face, was, obviously, unreadable.

"I'm quite sure we've never met, Headmaster Dumbledore," Slytherin said.

Dumbledore waved vaguely. "Of course, of course." He smiled. "So, how is England treating you?"

"About as well as she always has."

He waited for an elaboration.

It didn't come.

He shifted in his seat, removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Lord Slytherin, may I speak freely?"
"Yes."

"I sense a great deal of mistrust from you towards my person. I don't know why. Maybe I did something to you, accidentally or on purpose, I don't know. Maybe you disapprove of my polices or methods or laws that I've helped passed or stopped from passing. I don't know. What I do know is I'd like us to be able to work together. There are many issues that I know we see eye to eye on."

The mask of Lord Slytherin stared at him. "Issues such as?"

He glanced towards the girl by Lord Slytherin's side. "Your actions and behaviour suggest you are in favour of muggleborns in our world."

The mask tilted slightly. "...I prefer to think I am in favour of brilliant and talented witches and wizards who strive to better themselves."

For a brief moment, a corner of the girl's lips curled upwards before slipping back into her unchildlike blank facade, common among pureblood children, but always disturbing to see.

Dumbledore stroked his beard. "As the headmaster of a school, this is a sentiment I can fully endorse."

Slytherin nodded, once.

"I wonder if you might be interested in seeing this." Dumbledore reached to his side and placed a document he'd recently received in front of Lord Slytherin. It was an advanced copy from Arthur of his proposal for a muggle protection act.

Slytherin picked it up and glanced through the pages. "I've already seen this." He put the parchments back down again.

Dumbledore chuckled. "And?"

"I think it's self serving and short sighted."

He raised an eyebrow. Slytherin certainly didn't mince his words once you got him going did he? "Would you care to elaborate?"

"The vast majority of the proposal deals with increasing the powers of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office, either directly, by allowing them to call auror raids on suspected individuals, or indirectly, by massively increasing the number of items that are classified as muggle in origin, thus necessitating a larger staff and bigger budget. That's understandable, considering the author of the bill is the head of the department."

Dumbledore frowned. "But muggles make new things all the time, surely you see the need to increase the number of items in the classifications?"

"Well, that brings me to the short sighted bit. Hermione?"

Miss Granger snapped her head sideways. "Yes, my lord?"

"What would your opinion be on a policy that advocated the continued banning of the integration of magic with new technologies as they develop? Technologies such as ceramics, plastics, electronics, lasers, chemicals, etc?"

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow and turned his attention to the muggleborn girl.
Miss Granger seemed to think for a few moments. Eventually she spoke. "If magicals ban such integration, they may find, one day, that technology has become superior to magic, or that muggles have independently discovered either the existence of magic or even how to use it."

"Well reasoned, Hermione."

For a moment, Miss Granger beamed.

Dumbledore frowned. Was that likely? Certainly a lot had changed in the muggle world over his lifetime, but how possible was it that they would achieve something as improbable as discovering how to circumvent memory charms, or even use magic themselves. They were muggles. He shook his head. "I really can't see that happening, Lord Slytherin."

Miss Granger frowned.

Slytherin tapped his fingers on the armchair rest. "Then we find ourselves at an impasse, Dumbledore."

"Surely you see it is important to protect the wellbeing of those who live now, rather than sacrifice them for preventing the hypothetical and highly improbable doomsday scenarios of the far future that wizards can deal with, if and when they occur?"

Lord Slytherin stopped tapping his fingers. Eventually, he spoke, and when he did, the words had a hint of steel and a bite that his previous speech lacked. "That's rich coming from you."

Dumbledore's eyebrows both rose. Well, that was certainly a reaction. He raked his eyes over Slytherin wishing he could see the man's face. "I don't understand."

Slytherin lay back in his chair and his voice returned to his previous slow, deep rumble. "No, I don't suppose you do."

The two gazed at each other for an age. Old face staring into blank mask.

He cleared his throat, picked up the papers in front of him and idly shuffled them. "I have here the papers for Miss Granger's admittance to our healing program—"

Miss Granger perked up.

"—however, there is one thing I would like to discuss first."

"Oh?"

"I understand that you've made aspersions as to the suitability of our highly qualified and talented potions master."

"I may have made comments, yes."

"I'd like your assurances that he will be allowed to continue the job for which he is almost uniquely positioned for."

Miss Granger stood, fists clenched at her side. "That man tried to mind rape me! And then as good as threatened to expel me for defending myself!"

"Miss Granger." Dumbledore looked towards Slytherin. The man didn't move, seemingly uninterested in reigning in the irate girl. "Legitimacy is not illegal. And I would remind you that your own Lord Slytherin, 'mind raped', as you put it, young Romulus Volf just the other night, in a
manner far worse than Professor Snape may have attempted on you, if it is even true."

Granger scoffed. "That was different. That was in a duel. And my lord wasn't a professor giving a
class and mind raping his students."

"Be that as it may," he straightened the parchments on the desk. "I would like your assurances,
Lord Slytherin, that Professor Snape will be allowed to continue his job."

Granger sat back down.

Slytherin watched him, silent and unmoving.

Dumbledore started meaningfully tapping the parchments in front of him.

Slytherin leaned forward. "If that bastard tries anything like he tried with Hermione ever again, on
her or anyone else under my protection, I will eject him from the dungeons so fast, he'll be a smear
on the ceiling."

"Noted, Lord Slytherin."

Miss Granger huffed.

Slytherin leaned back. "Go on then. Stamp the damn parchments."

Dumbledore smiled, flipped over the parchments, picked up his phoenix feather quill, and signed.
"Congratulations, Miss Granger, you are now officially the youngest healer trainee in Hogwarts
history."

Miss Granger nodded, stood, took the proffered parchments, and she and Lord Slytherin turned to
leave.

"Oh, one last thing, Lord Slytherin."

The masked man turned back.

"If there are important issues regarding the running of Hogwarts that I feel a Lord of one of the
four houses could provide useful input on, would said lord be interested in giving that input?"

The man stood stock still. Then he topped an imaginary hat. "Owl it all to Daphne. She'll give you
my input."

Then the man turned, and he and the girl left without another backwards glance.

Just as the door closed shut, he felt a strong pulse of magic and the telltale swoosh of a cleaning
charm sweep through his office, wiping out all traces of the man who'd just left.

— End of Chapter Eighteen —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Self insert time!
LeadVonE: Hi, Madam Pomfrey.

Madam Pomfrey: Can I help you?

LeadVonE: I just wanted to ask a quick question.

Madam Pomfrey: Go on then.

LeadVonE: Suppose I didn't drink anything for two days and then went on a long walk in the Cypriot sun, and then, when I was in line at a coffee shop, fainted dead on the floor… do you think that means I should drink more water?

Madam Pomfrey: …. 

LeadVonE: What?

Madam Pomfrey: …. 

LeadVonE: Why are you looking at me like that?

Madam Pomfrey: Miss Granger!

Hermione: Yes?

Madam Pomfrey: De-bone him and tie him to the bed for his own protection!

Hermione: Yes, Healer Pomfrey.

LeadVonE: NOoooo Wait! AGHHHH!

A/N: This late chapter of DP & SW is brought to you courtesy of Kenchi618 and his fic, Shinobi of the High Seas. Go blame him. That and Cypriot sun.
Daphne stirred the cauldron in front of her clockwise, exactly three times. She stopped and started on the opposite turns. The potion bored her with its simplicity and her mind wandered elsewhere. After the whirlwind first week, September had slowed, settling down to a routine of easy classes and even easier homework. The only decent competition came from the witch sat next to her and the not-really-boy-who-lived, sat three rows in front of her, who had somehow managed to crawl his way onto the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

Harry, of course, didn't count.

She stopped turning, set a small timer on her wand, and glanced sideways to see Granger finishing up the sliced marrow, each perfect wafer a thumbed nose to their oily haired professor, who'd had the gall to fail the muggleborn witch two weeks ago for imperfectly sliced ingredients. Granger spent the better part of a Saturday afternoon with a pile of cucumbers and a knife in the Hogwarts kitchens after that, and hadn't stopped until their special brand of Harry occlumency produced the desired skill increases. Snape had yet to find a single fault in Granger's technique since, much to the man's obvious displeasure.

Her wand vibrated. Daphne lifted her spoon from the cauldron, set it aside, and turned down the runic flame.

It was now October and soon she'd be seeing Harry again. One month. It felt like forever.

Granger lifted her cutting board over the cauldron and slid the sliced marrow inside.

After the meeting with Dumbledore, Harry had decided to push back the time for meeting up in person a few weeks.

The last marrow wafer dropped into the cauldron with a small ploop. The potion turned vomit yellow.

Daphne wrinkled her nose and began to stir again. She couldn't wait for when all this hiding from each other business would be over. She sighed. Knowing Harry was so close and not sitting beside him just felt wrong. There was no other way to describe it.

Granger pointed her wand at their cauldron and cast a physical shield.

Daphne frowned. "What—"

*BOOM*

A fine mist of unfinished potion billowed past her, coating her face, hair, robes and work surface in a fine layer of foul smelling dampness.

"Finnigan! Weasley!" Snape swept past her to berate the two shocked looking Gryffindors on the other side of the room, now sat in front of a large mess, more resembling a ringed, molten candle than a proper potions cauldron. "Do you two have anything between your dunderhead ears!"

Daphne let the words wash over her and glanced around. All the other visible potions had just
faded several shades. All except theirs.

Granger smiled a winner's smile.

Daphne felt her cheeks warm up. Damn it. She should have spotted whatever Granger had. She should have been paying more attention. Instead she'd been daydreaming after Harry like a silly little girl with a crush. "Good catch," she whispered.

Granger nodded, still smiling smugly, and turned away to prepare the bottle for their potion sample.

Daphne grimaced and stirred the potion three more times. Next free period couldn't come fast enough.

― DP & SW: TFoP ―

Eleven year old Harry Potter sat cross legged on the hard stone floor of the room of lost things, allowing the dust to swirl about his face with every outward breath he exhaled.

All around him sat the detritus of a thousand years of accumulation. Innumerable treasures to the poor and orphaned scattered among the occasional piece that even the lords of noble houses would spill blood over.

The cathedral-like room murmured, silent but for the shifting air around the many runic torches, flickering their slight light across the walls, casting long, distorted shadows through and up the hundreds of freestanding, solid-oak shelves, each one three men tall and more than a dozen long.

A creek shuddered from the far side of the room.

"—you it would work!" Hermione's excited voice wafted through the deadly silent space.

"Yes, yes, you were right, okay?" followed Daphne's moments later.

Harry shifted and watched the subtle shifting of light and shadow though the many shelves as the two girls made their way through the space.

"Where is he?" said Hermione.

"Maybe he's not here yet?" replied Daphne.

"Tch. He is never late."

"I didn't say he was late." Daphne's voice sounded a little annoyed. "Just that he might not be here yet."

Harry stood up and walked up the rows of shelves. He leaned around the next shelf.

"Well," Hermione started, "when you said—"

"—Hi, girls."

Hermione whipped around. "Harry!"

Daphne's head shot up.

Hermione bounded forward and wrapped him in a bone crushing hug.
He held her for a few moments before letting go of the excited witch and regarded Daphne, stood a few paces away, holding one arm with her other, and biting her lower lip. He grinned. "No hug, Daph?"

Daphne hesitated, then drifted into his arms and enveloped him in the same warm, mildly desperate hug she'd given him before he'd left to infiltrate the Hogwarts Express. "I missed you," she whispered, and broke away, cheeks red, refusing to look him or Hermione in the eyes.

Hermione stared wide-eyed at Daphne. She opened her mouth to say something.

"Hermione," he interrupted, bringing her attention back to him. "Test for company?"

Hermione hesitated, nodded, opened her mouth… and choked.

The happy mood froze. Harry's eyes narrowed. In an instant he had his hand pointed at Daphne, finger tips glowing red. Daphne shoved her wand into the crook of Hermione's neck, and Hermione whipped her wand up to press against his temple.

He flicked his wand into his other hand. Hermione's wand tip glowed red against his head. In one smooth movement, he curved his wand from the floor to above his head. "Homenum Revelio!"

Four outlines appeared in his mind, Him, Hermione, and Daphne, and a fourth off to his side. "Accio humanoid spy!"

A muffled shriek to his side heralded the rapid arrival of their unwanted guest. All three wands instantly refocused on it.

A small, female house elf, dressed in a Hogwarts tea towel, landed at their feet.

An elf. "Stop!"

The elf looked up at him with wide eyes. "Trippy must. Trippy must report."

"Do not leave!" he ordered.

The elf started to tremble. "Why is Trippy obeying Potter boy?"

"Why are you here?"

"Ohhh, Headmaster Dumblydores not be liking this, no not at all, Trippy must report."

"You will stay here!"

The elf seemed to struggle with itself.

"Imperio!"

The feeling of being in two places at once flooded over him. He saw both the elf, and himself, towering over himself, wand pointing at his temporary elfen body. Hermione and Daphne also stood, wand trained on the elf, looks of shock and fear on their faces.

He spoke from his human mouth. "Hermione, privacy charms."

Hermione nodded and started casting.

He took out his shrunk trunk from his human pocket and expanded it. "Daphne, veritaserum, fourth
Daphne nodded and climbed into the trunk.

Moments later, Hermione finished casting and Daphne returned from the trunk carrying a small vial of pure, see-through liquid.

"Three drops on the tongue." He opened his elven mouth and allowed Daphne to drop three drops into it. The dullness of the truth serum flooded his mind, while, at the same time, a small part of him, protected by his noble house ring, fenced off and preserved his free will.

"Hermione, stun her."

Red light shot towards him and the senses from his ensnared target closed.

Now better able to focus, Harry started piling on the compulsion charms. To strengthen the already strong need to obey Lord Slytherin, to not disapparate away, to not call for help, to not attack, or try to find ways around the commands.

"Incarcerous." Ropes shot out of his wand and wrapped themselves tightly around the young female house elf.

"Daphne, test for company."

Daphne nodded. "Lord Slytherin's secret place is located on Berneray Island in the Outer Hebrides."

He nodded. "Hermione, revive her."

Hermione did so.

The elf struggled against the ropes, but her eyes were dull and her efforts halfhearted.

"Stay!"

The elf trembled and spoke in a voice far lower and deader than the usual house elf squeak. "Trippy is obeying Potter boy. This is not right."

"Trippy, why are you here? What were you doing?"

Trippy shook her head, but her voice did emerge. "Trippy was asked by Headmaster Dumblydores to keep an eye on Heiress Icygrass"

He glanced at Daphne whose eye twitched.

"Why?" Daphne asked.

The elf shook her head and kept her mouth clamped shut.

Harry pursed his lips. "Why, Trippy?"

Trippy's mouth forced itself open as though a dozen horses were dragging a massive stone boulder. "Headmaster Dumblydores is wanting to know if Heiress Icygrass was being in troubles, or in dangers."

Harry raised an eyebrow.
"He is also wanting to knows if Heiress Icygrass is being making friends with Potter boy," she said in her dead squeak.

Harry growled. "Are any other elves tasked such?"

"No, Potter boy."

"Are any elves tasked to watch over me or Hermione?"

"Trippy knows of no such elves with any such orders, Potter boy."

"What about John Potter?"

"Headmaster Dumblydores has Lefty looking over the boy-who-lived."

Harry took a step backwards. So, a spy on Daphne and John, but not on him. Of course, he'd been checking for spies on him ever since he'd arrived and he hadn't found any. But why not? Surely it would make sense to sick one of the little buggers on him. He tapped a nearby shelf with his non wand holding fingers.

Daphne and Hermione watched him watching the elf, wands still trained on her.

"Trippy," he continued. "Has Dumbledore said anything in your presence about what is in the third floor corridor?"

"No, Potter boy."

"Do you know what is in the third floor corridor?"

"Trippy only knows there is a chimaera—"

Daphne squeaked.

"—beyond the first door because house elves must be feeding it, Potter boy."

His eyes widened. So did Hermione's.

Daphne stood, wand dropped to her side, a look of utter horror on her face.

Harry felt mildly sick. A chimaera. Holy shit. An actual Merlin damned chimaera. It wasn't quite a nundu, but it might as well be. There weren't many cases of wizards defeating chimaeras. Most weren't stupid enough to try. What the hell was Dumbledore thinking?

"How do you feed the chimaera without being killed?"

"House elves is throwing meat through containment ward at nighttime when all students are being asleep."

Figures.

"What is the chimaera made from?"

"It has the body of a goat, two heads, one from an eagle and one from a tiger, and three tails from a tiger, a snake, and a fox."

Harry frowned. That was quite an unusual mashup. He turned to the girls. "Can you think of any
They shook their heads.

"Okay then." He turned back to Trippy. "Are any of the other elves or any other sentient beings expecting you to be anywhere within the next hour?"

Trippy's struggles became frantic. "N-N-No, Potter boy."

He nodded and fired a bright red stunner at Trippy who collapsed, limp and still bound in the conjured ropes.

"Daphne?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"You'll find draught of living death in the sixth draw down on the right."

Daphne nodded and returned a minute later with the bottle. Harry tipped it down the elf's throat.

"Right."

He levelled the wand at the space between the elf's large, closed, bulbous eyes, and focused on all that needed to be forgotten.

"Obliviate."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry, crouched in the invisibility cloak, Daphne and Hermione pressed tightly against him, halted by a bit of Hogwarts wall with a tiny, barely-visible carved snake at the bottom. "Do both of you have your snakes with you?" he whispered.

"Yes, Harry," came the two synchronised whispers inches from his ear.

"And your sunglasses?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

He nodded, although there was no way for the girls to see him. "Okay, then." He leant down to the snake carving. "$\text{Open}\$."

A tiny hole in the wall expanded into a circular opening large enough for a large man to walk through without bending. He heard an intake of breath from one of the girls. "C'mon." He climbed in and held his hand out to first Daphne and then Hermione, careful to keep them as far under the cloak as possible until the wall closed behind them again.

He whipped the cloak off.

"Lumos." Hermione's face bloomed into being by the light of her charm.

Daphne looked around. "Where are we? It's pretty cramped in here."

The hole they'd climbed into looked like a sphere of metal from the inside. Two small holes sat
perpendicular to the large hole they'd just climbed through.

Harry lit his own wand. "We're in the Hogwarts piping system."

"Ohhhhh." Daphne's eyes went wide.

Hermione frowned. "But how do we go anywhere? We can't fit through that." She gestured to one of the tiny holes.

Harry chuckled. "Just walk towards it."

Hermione looked at him for a moment, turned and took a step towards the hole. The round sphere of the wall retreated as she moved towards it and the roof above her dipped slightly in the space between her and them.

She squealed. "Oh. Oh. I get it. The pipes change size to fit whatever moves through them."

He grinned. "Yep."

Hermione eyes shone. "That's amazing. But what about the outside?"

"Dynamic space expansion."

"Ooooooo."

Daphne tapped her chin. "Let me guess. You've found a way to get to the stone?"

Hermione stopped inspecting the walls to look at him.

He scratched the back of his head. "Not quite."

"No?"

"Well, I've got close. But I still need to set some stuff up. I thought we'd do it together since we haven't had any time together for a while."

Daphne put her hands on her hips. "Well said, Mister Harry."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Mister Harry?"

Daphne reddened. "Umm, I mean…"

Harry smiled and grabbed Daphne's hand.

"Gah!"

He dragged her towards Hermione. "Enough chatting, let's move."

After several hundred metres of pipe, including a few climbs and slippery slides, they found themselves in a section of pipe with a small chalk-like line drawn on the side.

He waved towards the line. "I did that."

Daphne wrinkled her nose. "Do I taste slugs and snails and puppy dogs tails?"

He looked back from where he'd taken a step towards the line. "Wow. You're getting pretty good at this."
Daphne cringed. "It's not a taste I feel I'm going to forget in a hurry."

Hermione giggled.

Harry took out his shrunk trunk and expanded it. "Daphne? You know where the miniature ward stones are. I think we'll need six."

Daphne nodded and a minute later arrived back with a half dozen small ward stones in a sack.

Hermione looked on with great interest as he took out one of the stones and tapped it repeatedly with his wand. "So, we're breaking into the third floor corridor?"

"Yep."

"With those stones?"

"Yep."

"What's to stop someone doing that with Slytherin Manor once we've got it built?"

He smiled. "This only works on perimeter wards. If the security system also has area wards they'll activate the moment someone walks through the hole."

Hermione lips formed an o. "That's why you needed us to check this out first."

"Yep."

Daphne made herself comfortable on the lid of the trunk.

Harry put the first stone down and picked up the second. "Oh, that reminds me. I got the specs for three parcels of land from Gringotts the other week."

Daphne perked up. "Well?"

"One in Cumbria, one in East Anglia, and one on an island in the Orkneys."

Hermione's eyes gleamed. "I like islands."

He finished tapping the second stone and vaguely waved it. "What about your parents?"

Hermione's face fell. "Oh. I don't know."

Daphne tapped the lid of the trunk. "There's a lot more to think about than just how much we like it. It may be important to be physically close to certain places. East Anglia would put us much closer to London."

Hermione pouted. "But can't we get anywhere quickly with magic?"

Harry put down the second stone and picked up the third. "Sure. If we chose the one in Cumbria or the Orkneys we could probably set up a private floo point in an empty apartment in London, or something. He started tapping away. "Might do that anyway, actually."

"Couldn't choosing an island give many interesting benefits?" Hermione asked.

Daphne grimaced. "Yes. Horrible Scottish weather almost all year round. At least East Anglia would be warm and dry in Summer."
Harry glanced at Daphne, then down at the stone in his hands. "Mmmmm… Might give for some interesting warding possibilities…"

Daphne frowned. "Such as?"

"We could build the ward tunnels under the sea bed that surrounds the island. That would make them much harder to attack and would stop any towering attacks."

Hermione inclined her head. "What's a towering attack?"

"It's when someone builds a second ward system right next to the one being attacked. It protects the attackers and lets them gradually encroach onto the target's territory." He put down the third stone and picked up the forth.

"So," Hermione started, "why not do that? The under water thing I mean. It sounds like a good idea."

Daphne shot Hermione a look. "There probably are some good reasons. Harry?"

Harry looked up. "Building the ward tunnels under the sea bed would probably up the cost of the project by quite a bit. My instinct says by too much."

"Oh." Hermione looked disappointed. "So, no island then?"

"Not necessarily. We could still build the ward system on the island itself. It would still make a towering attack much more difficult than normal."

Hermione perked back up.

Daphne swung her legs back and forth. "How much is the warding system going to cost anyway?"

"Gringotts quoted us 15,500 Galleons. That's 775,000 pounds."


He looked up from his tapping away at the fourth stone. "Hermione?"

"I… I mean… Harry, how much is this manor going to cost?"

He looked at her with deadpanned eyes. "6.6 million pounds."

Her mouth dropped.

Daphne snorted. "What part of manor didn't you understand?"

"I… I didn't think…" Hermione fell back into silence. Eventually she spoke in a small quiet voice. "Harry?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"How big is this manor going to be?"

"Twenty-six thousand square feet."

Silence descended again.

Harry put down the forth stone and picked up the fifth.
"I think my parents were planning to build something much smaller on their plot…"

Harry stopped tapping and smiled. "Hermione. What your parents build on their plot is totally up to them. I wouldn't expect them to try to compete with the manor. That's not the point."

Hermione nodded slowly. "So, the wards are costing 15,500 Galleons, and building the rest of the house is costing, what? 120,000 Galleons?"

He sent a particularly strong jolt into the stone he held. "Nah. Construction will be around 3.3 million pounds, about sixty-five thousand Galleons. The ward system will cost 15,500 Galleons, furnishing another sixteen thousand, and the land and improvements to the land will be around nineteen thousand, depending on which parcel of land we eventually choose.

Hermione's face scrunched up in a rictus of concentration. "That still leaves… about 16,500 Galleons."

Harry put down the fifth stone and picked up the sixth and final stone. "House elves."

Hermione choked. "800,000 pounds worth of house elves! How many are we getting?"

"Two."

Hermione stared.

"A house elf costs 400,000 pounds?"

"Around that."

"How?"

Daphne frowned. "Yes, how? I mean, when we talked about this before I just accepted it, but it does seem a lot."

Harry paused in his tapping. "Well, look at it this way. A house elf can do the work of two full adult wizards. A normal adult wizard's salary for menial work of the kind that house elves do is around 15,000 pounds a year, that's about three hundred Galleons. Following?"

Hermione and Daphne nodded.

He continued. "And a house elf can work for upwards of fifty years. That means that when you buy a house elf you're buying around one hundred years of labour in advance."

Hermione frowned. "But wouldn't that mean that a house elf should cost 1.5 million pounds then?"

"No, because the value of one years worth of labour in fifty years is much less than one years worth of labour now."

"But, how do you figure that out?"

Harry smiled. "Remind me to give you a book on basic finance when we get out of here."

Hermione smiled and nodded.

Daphne chuckled. "So, the Dark Lord was interested in business then?"

He frowned. "You know, I have learned things since I returned."
Daphne held up her hands. "Of course, of course."

His frown turned into a sheepish smile. "But... as it turns out, in this instance, Voldy did actually study this."

"Hah!"

"Yeah. When you believe yourself to be immortal, things like compound interest suddenly become super relevant." He held the now adjusted sixth and final ward stone in his hands and turned to the ward line.

Harry placed the stone at the corner of the tunnel and tapped his wand around the stone a few times. He turned around to find the girls watching his every moment with rapt attention. "Sticking charms powered by the ward system," he said, by way of explanation.

They nodded.

Five ward stones later, the pipe-sphere held a hexagon of ward stone points, cutting at a diagonal angle parallel to the gender ward line. Harry stepped through the new hole in the ward and let out a breath. He grinned. "Success!"

The girls cheered. They made their way along the now unblocked tunnel to a bare stretch of pipe wall with a snake carving in it. They'd passed many snake carvings on their way here, but this one lay inside the gender line ward.

Harry held up his hand. "This... looks like where we need to be."

Daphne fiddled with the cuffs of her robes. "It's not going to be the chimaera on the other side of that? Is it?"

Hermione paled.

Harry tapped the wall with his wand. "Probably not."

Daphne grimaced. "Probably not?"

"Well, we haven't gone though any containment wards. If it is the chimaera we should be perfectly safe where we are."

Hermione gulped.

"Hey, you two trust me to protect you don't you?"

The girls looked at each other. Then back at him. They nodded, slowly.

"Okay then." He whirled around. "$Open$.

The pipe wall expanded to form a portal, metal melting outwards like the world's biggest mouth, and facing them through the opened wall space was... nothing.

"Well, that was anticlimactic."

He stood in the pipe and surveyed the room beyond. Two doors faced each other on opposite sides of the room.

Hermione's voice cut through the silence. "That's a TV! And below that is a VCR."
He stared. On the far side of the room, there was indeed a muggle television and a tape recorder.

"What's a TV?" asked Daphne.

Harry frowned. This was unexpected. He was sure they were in the third floor corridor.

Hermione voice washed over him. "It's a muggle device for viewing moving pictures from afar. Kind of like a cross between the wizarding wireless and photographs."

He could feel a ward line in front of him, warning him against entering the room.

"Oh," Daphne replied. "That sounds interesting. What's it doing here?"

"No idea."

He turned to the girls. "I'm going to do a quick test, Okay?"

They nodded.

He un-shrunk his trunk, descended, and brought out a jar of spiders.

Daphne's eye-brows raised. "Oh, I was wondering when they were going to make an appearance. I saw them on your desk."

He nodded, reached in, grabbed one, put the jar down, poked his wand at it and muttered, imperio.

For the second time that day, his world sliced in half between two views, but this time, far stranger, seeing the world through ten pairs of eyes and trying to control ten sets of legs. He jumped off his own hand and carefully dragged himself along the floor towards the ward line. He reached the edge of the pipe tunnel and fell off.

Then, pain. Total burning pain shot through his bodies. He shrieked through his human body and broke the connection.


"Yeah. Yeah. I'm fine." He grimaced. "There's either some kind of animal area ward, or a ward to defend against the imperius curse, or both, or something else. Nasty, whatever it is."

Daphne frowned. "So, what are we going to do?" Can we do anything more from here?"

He shook his head. "Maybe. But not with what I can think up off the top of my head."

Hermione nodded towards the opposite side of the room. "What about the TV?"

"Another time. Right now I want to keep working on figuring out how to identify what's inside the rest of the rooms." He pointed to the doors on opposite sides of the room.

Hermione perked up. "Ooo I could help you with that!"

Daphne's head whipped around. "What? But you're about to start healing training. And you've got that thing going on with the other muggleborns. And you need to get ready to get destroyed by Harry at the duelling club tryouts."

Hermione ducked her head. "Yeah, well, but I could still help."
Harry frowned. "I think Daph does make a reasonable point. Not that I don't think you can do it, but we don't want you spread too thin… I somehow doubt healer training is going to be a walk in the park."

Hermione pouted.

"Daphne, you can help if you like? I assume you were offering to help?"

Daphne smiled. "Yes, I would like that."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore sat on the hard bench of his reserved lane, waiting for his team, and contemplating his duties.

Three weeks ago, he'd finally met with Lord Slytherin. The man had been… polite, if rather closed off.

Dumbledore had started the meeting with every intention of uncovering the telltale cues that marked an ascending dark lord. Anger, hate, fear, loathing, disregard for others, overwhelming superiority complexes. Slytherin seemed to possess none of these. The important word being seemed.

He picked up his favourite muggle bludger, a florescent pick affair, and absently rolled its heavy weight in his hands.

There had been one moment in the meeting when Slytherin had cut loose and showed a flash of what lay hidden beneath the mask. Anger. Anger at him. Anger at him for something he had done in the past. The implication was that he'd caused Slytherin to lose something or someone dear to him, and it was a direct consequence of Dumbledore's willingness to sacrifice others for a greater good.

He grimaced. He hated that phrase. Yes, he'd been forced many times to conduct the cold blooded calculus of necessity, but to try to pretty it up was the first step on the road to falling to the Dark. That was a major difference between good and evil. Evil tried to justify evil in the name of good, while good knew that evil done in the name of good was still evil.

He had no delusions that he was a little bit evil. But it was that knowledge that kept him from falling, that kept him Light.

Did Lord Slytherin appreciate that subtlety?

Clearing the air with the man was crucial, but Slytherin wasn't telling and gave nothing away. For the last three weeks, Dumbledore had racked his brain, going over every tough choice he'd been forced to make over the last few decades. He could think of few people fitting Slytherin's description who'd have good reason for hating him, but he'd systematically investigated and ruled out each one of the them.

Dumbledore took a sip from a plastic cup and popped a muggle sweet from a paper bag into his mouth.

There was one worrying conclusion about Lord Slytherin that he couldn't help himself drawing. The man was power hungry.

Dumbledore had dangled a free power-up out of his window, and Slytherin, after three years of
ignoring his existence, had come running. That was an important point to consider.

That the power-up that brought him in had been healing worried him even more. That suggested the man didn't trust St Mungo's, or that he eventually wanted to place Miss Granger there as an agent, or, worst of all, that he planned to get into situations that needed a healer on call. Situations like battle.

He idly stroked his beard.

Of course, there was also the possibility that he was massively over reading this and Slytherin was just pulling strings for a girl in his care.

He took another sip. The drink fizzed in his mouth.

"Good afternoon, Dumbledore." Minerva sat down on the bench opposite him. He always admired how well his old friend could blend in with muggles. He smiled.

She sniffed.

"Good afternoon, Professor. I trust we can expect the rest of our faculty soon?"

"No doubt." She sniffed again. "And once more, Albus, I must voice my objection to holding our staff meetings, here." She clipped the final word so short it might have been a punctuation mark. "I do not like leaving the castle with so few adults."

One lane over, a heavily built muggle threw his bludger down his lane. It smashed into a neatly arranged set of pins and toppled them over. A barrier crashed down and the words 'FULL STRIKE' flashed up onto the muggle screen above him.

Dumbledore smiled. "I've always felt it important to come together and build friendships as a team." He poked his wand into the air and a bolt of static flashed across every screen in view. "And what better way to do that than with such a delightful muggle pastime?"

Minerva made no attempt to argue the point. She placed her hands on her knees and assiduously ignored the group behind her, now shouting, cheering, and jumping up and down.

More Hogwarts staff trickled in over the next few minutes — Sinistra, Vector, Flitwick, Babbling, Burbage, Sprout, and Kettleburn, in varying states of enthusiasm. Quirrell arrived with a face so blank it might have been vanished.

Dumbledore was just putting the final entry into the machine when Severus turned up. "Ah, Severus." He turned to regard the man, still in full wizards robes, now trying to make room for himself between Sinistra and Babbling. "What would you like your name to be?"

"I've said before, Headmaster…that I will not be participating. Not now…. Not ever."

On the bench opposite, Professor McGonagall sniffed in agreement.

He sighed and turned back to the machine. "Very well, as you wish."

He pressed a button and the screen flashed the message 'GAME TIME'. He picked up his favourite fluorescent pink bludger, stepped towards the lane and rolled it down the track. Several pins fell over. The screen flashed an animation and a number six appeared next to the name 'THE GRAND WARLOCK'
He turned back.

Babbling stood to take her turn.

"So," he started. "We're now through our first month of classes. What do we think of our so called golden year? Professor McGonagall?"

Minerva tapped a rhythm on one skirted knee. "Miss Granger, Miss Greengrass, and Mister John Potter."

There was a susurration of murmuring around the group.

He sat down and popped another muggle sweet. "Oh yes?"

"Yes, Dumbledore. All three of these students are so far beyond their class mates as to be unbelievable. John Potter's homework is clearly fourth year level. Miss Granger's is third year, and Miss Greengrass' is late second at least and I've already seen improvements in just the last four weeks in both of them."

Babbling returned and sat down with a huge grin on her young face. The screen updated a large X next to the name 'I WILL RUNE YOU'.

Flitwick nodded. "Indeed, Minerva—"

Vector stood and made her way to the front.

"—Those three students are quite something else. Miss Greengrass and Miss Granger spend almost their entire class time fine-tuning control of their spells rather than learning them."

Severus grumbled something incoherent.

Minerva nodded.

Dumbledore stroked his beard. "And what do you think, Professor Quirrell?"

"I agree with those assessments. Miss Greengrass and Miss Granger are… unique students. But it is Mister Potter who most catches my interest."

Dumbledore stopped mid beard stroke. "Oh?"

"Mister Harry Potter."

Dumbledore chuckled while inside his heart leapt. "And what is it about our young saviour's brother that interests you?"

Quirrell made a vague hand waving motion. "Oh, this and that. For starters he possesses situational awareness that I rarely see in wizards thrice his age."

Dumbledore frowned. That… was not what he expected to hear. "Situational awareness?"

"He is very good at spotting a dangerous situation and adjusting his behaviour accordingly."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. In many ways, he reminds me of a younger version of myself."
"Hey, Filius, you're up!" Vector arrived back and high-fived the diminutive professor. The screen flashed a seven next to the name 'THE PRIME MINISTER'.

"Really?" Dumbledore watched his pink bludger roll back into the ready rack as though by magic. "Are you perhaps thinking of taking on an apprentice?"

Quirrell made a face. "No, thank you, Headmaster."

Dumbledore nodded and looked away from Tom's vessel. "Well, do keep an eye on him. Its in all our interests to see both Potter boys grow up into strong, powerful young wizards."

Filius zoomed towards the seated witches and wizards on his knees, both hands in the air. "Strike!" He came to a stop between the two rows. The screen flashed, and an X appeared next to the name 'PINT SIZED CHARMER'.

Dumbledore frowned. If Filius won again, it would be his fifth in a row. Damn duelling champion.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione's next free period found her walking towards the Hogwarts infirmary clasping five thick textbooks to her chest. She nudged open the door and stuck her head through the gap. The pristine clean interior reminded her of her parent's practise. The smell of bleach filled her nostrils. "Um… Madam Pomfrey?"

"Ah." Madam Pomfrey bustled around a corner at the far side of the long, bed-filled room. "You're here. Good, good. Come in."

Hermione entered.

"Take a seat." The older witch gestured to a stack of folding chairs. "And, Miss Granger?"

Hermione froze while reaching for a chair. "Yes, Madam Pomfrey?"

Pomfrey put a single hand on her hip. "Now, Miss Granger, you may call me Healer Pomfrey."

Hermione flushed. "Ah, right, yes… er, Healer Pomfrey." She sat down next to a bed and waited.

A few moments later, an older Ravenclaw girl entered.

"Miss Clearwater," Pomfrey gestured to a desk in the back. "Box number eleven. I want a full diagnostics and report. Then I'll approve or disapprove your treatment recommendation."

"Yes, Healer." The girl walked to the back of the room.

Hermione craned her neck to see what the Ravenclaw was up to, but couldn't get line of sight.

A few minutes later, an older Ravenclaw girl entered.

"Miss Clearwater," Pomfrey gestured to a desk in the back. "Box number eleven. I want a full diagnostics and report. Then I'll approve or disapprove your treatment recommendation."

"Yes, Healer." The girl walked to the back of the room.

Hermione craned her neck to see what the Ravenclaw was up to, but couldn't get line of sight.

A few minutes later, what looked like a seventh year Hufflepuff boy entered, and, once again, he was directed to a separate desk towards the back of the room.

Eventually, after several more minutes, during which time she was too anxious to even open one of the many thick books in front of her, Healer Pomfrey returned from whatever task she'd been handling, pulled up a chair, and sat down opposite her.

"Miss Granger, I'll be upfront about this." The healer put a small pile of parchments down on a small table next to her. "I think you're too young for this."
Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but a held-up hand stopped her.

"I think you're too young, but apparently, it's not my business to decide who joins our program." She sniffed. "So, you're just going to have to make up ground as we go. And quickly."

Hermione made small, rapid nods.

"This program is intended to replicate the first eighteen months of St. Mungo's healer training, part time, over five years. Although in your case, who knows. You've got seven years to work with, but I'll be damned if you just waste those extra two years. Clear?"

Again, she nodded.

"Right. The first year of the program is spent on the basics of first aid and dealing with common physical injuries. These include broken bones, flesh wounds, torn ligaments, sprains, and internal bleeding. We'll start with a demonstration and then I'll assess your capabilities to actually do the practise considering your disadvantage."

She nodded.

"Follow me."

Healer Pomfrey stood up and led her around the back of the room, past where the other two were working at hidden desks, to a third desk surrounded by walls that came over her head. On Madam Pomfrey, they didn't reach more than halfway up her chest.

"Sit."

She sat.

The healer reached up to a shelf and pulled down a clear box.

Hermione's eyes widened. Her stomach lurched. Inside the box, a live mouse scurried around, putting its feet up on the see-through walls and sniffing the air.

Healer Pomfrey put on a glove, opened the box, and pointed her wand inside. "Stupefy." A tiny flash of red shot from the wand and hit the tiny rodent. Pomfrey then took out the now stunned mouse and lay it on the desk.

"Tell me what you see."

Hermione looked at the mouse. They weren't really doing this were they? This was a live animal! "Umm… it's a mouse, Healer Pomfrey. A stunned, live mouse."

"Correct, Miss Granger. Can you cast the stupefy spell?"

"Yes, Healer Pomfrey."

The healer looked up in surprise. "You can?"

"Yes."

Pomfrey put the mouse back in the box. "Enervate."

The mouse instantly started moving again.
"Please stun it."

Hermione obediently pointed her wand inside the box and said, "stupefy." A bright light shot out of the wand, hit the mouse, and shattered the box around it.

Healer Pomfrey picked a bit of box out of her hair. "Yes, thank you, Miss Granger. A bit less power next time, I think. Please remember that a mouse is not a fully grown wizard."

Hermione felt her cheeks heat up. "I-I'm sorry, I forgot."

The healer inspected the mouse, seemed to find nothing wrong, and put it back down on the desk. She pulled a pot plant towards herself. "Do you know what this is?"

Hermione started. She instantly recognised the leafy green plant. "Yes, it's huntsman's sorrow. We're growing it in herbology. It has healing properties."

"Good. And this?" Pomfrey pulled a box of brown powder towards herself.

"I don't know, Healer."

"This is dried and powdered huntsman's sorrow. Not as potent as fresh, but much more convenient and quicker to apply. Now, please watch carefully."

Hermione watched, half horrified, as the older witch pointed her wand at the stunned mouse and said, "diffindo." A gash opened in the mouse's thigh and red liquid instantly pooled in it and started trickling out.

Oh, Merlin. She put a hand over her mouth as her breakfast threaten to leave her.

Quick as a flash, Madam Pomfrey pointed her wand at the mouse with her right hand and said, "concrescat sanguinem," while reaching into the box of dried powder with her left. The blood started to instantly dry. She sprinkled a tiny amount of the powder on the wound and prodded it again with her wand in her right hand and intoned, "sano caro." The wound started to close, fresh blood stopped seeping through the quickly clotting blood, and in moments it was impossible to tell the mouse had even been cut.

Hermione let out a long held breath. She felt slightly light headed.

Healer Pomfrey turned to her. "So, how good do you think you are at the cutting charm?"

Hermione clutched the length of her expensive robes in a death grip. "Um. I don't know it, Healer Pomfrey. My lord didn't teach me yet."

Pomfrey raised an eyebrow. "Then I suggest you get practising before your next lesson. Unless you want your patients to wind up like that box." She gestured to the destroyed pieces of see-through box that still littered the desk top.

Hermione took a deep shuddering breath. What had she expected? Healer training without squishiness? Without being responsible for the lives of others? It wasn't that she hadn't been expecting it. She just hadn't been expecting it on her first day! She nodded, once. "Understood, Healer Pomfrey."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne lounged in the second comfy armchair of Harry's shrunk trunk, flipping through pages of a
three hundred year old charms text book. This was their third covert visit to the library's restricted section since their visit to the Hogwarts pipe network. Harry had set up a tiny fidelious area in the reading section, just large enough for the trunk to sit, fully expanded with the lid open.

She sighed, shut the book, and added it to an ever growing pile on the floor next to her.

Next to the rejected books, Trippy the drugged again house elf lay on the floor, dead to the world, again. Knowing she had a spy tracking her every move was disconcerting to say the least. On the other hand, knowing they could ambush the little bugger and wipe her memories whenever they needed made her feel a little better.

Harry's feet appeared from the invisible open trunk lid and descended a few steps, closely followed by his shins, thighs, midriff, torso, arms full of books, and finally head, each body part sliding into view as it left the cloak's invisibility field and entered the subspace of the trunk.

"How's it going?" Harry asked.

She glanced at the pile of books to her side and frowned. "Nothing yet." She grabbed the next book from the yet-to-check pile, opened it and started to make notes on the chapter names.

Harry nodded, carried his load of restricted section books to the small table, dumped them on the side furthest from her, landed in the armchair opposite her, picked up a single thick tome, and started reading.

Time flowed by.

She closed the final page of the book and picked up her wand. "Tempus." She frowned. This one had taken forty minutes to skim through, only to confirm there was nothing of help to them. Although there had been an interesting titbit on the fidelius charm.

Harry gazed at her over his book.

She put the book down on the rejected pile. "Why doesn't Dumbledore just put the stone under fidelius if he's trying to keep it safe?"

Harry yawned. "The Flamels probably do. The Headmaster probably has the stone here as a lure to get me and Voldemort in the same place at the same time. You know, for the prophecy."

She frowned. "But aren't you worried the stone might be a fake then? I mean, why have it here at all?"

Harry shook his head. "Nah. Anyone who knows the Headmaster well could tell you he's just the kind of arrogant sod who'd never believe anyone could actually get past all his defences."

Daphne looked at the thick book still laying in her lap. "Any idea how many books there are that might have what we're looking for them in?"

Harry looked off into the distance for a moment. "Maybe three or four thousand?"

She scowled. "There must be a better way of doing this."

"There is."

She looked at him expectantly.

"Already have them all memorised and then use advanced occlumency to quick search through
them all in your mind."

She threw up her hands. "Well, that's not very useful."

Harry inclined his head.

"And who uses their occlumency all the time while they're reading? You'd be magically exhausted after every single day."

The corner's of Harry lips twitched upwards. "Why do you think Hermione was far less tired after getting off the Hogwarts express than everyone else?"

She stared at Harry, face totally blank. "What?"

"Hermione's been using her occlumency, all day, every day, for almost three years. Her system can probably process magical toxins faster than anyone else in our year."

She gaped.

"Not included myself, of course, but I've a lot more magical power to build up my toxin tolerance with. If I was working with what Hermione had, she'd probably be doing better than me," Harry added.

"That's… insane!"

Harry's eyes gleamed over his book. "That's the point."

Daphne leaned back in her chair and stared at nothing on the floor, shoulders drooping and posture slumped. She knew Granger worked hard. She knew Harry had been teaching the muggleborn for almost as long as she, Daphne, knew him. But she knew what magical exhaustion felt like. It felt like a million angry ants running through your head, dragging you to unconsciousness, whether you were ready for it or not. And the feeling didn't always stop the next day. Waking up feeling like a hippogriff had run you over wasn't fun. To willingly go through that every day for Merlin knew how long it took to build up tolerance… was it any wonder she was struggling to keep up?

She glanced up from her staring match with the floor to see Harry's eyes still gleaming over the book, the edge of his mouth tugged upwards. The gleam slowly turned into a twinkle.

She breathed in sharply. "You bastard! You're enjoying this!"

Harry's face broke into a full on ear to ear grin.

"Stop it!"

Harry's grin widened yet further.

"Argh!" She grabbed the nearest book and hurled it at his stupid grinning face.

The book sailed past his rapidly ducked head. Harry broke into deep laughter.

Daphne scowled and clutched her fists. "Will you shut up! It's not funny!"

Harry slowly stopped laughing, though the grin remained firmly plastered on. "I'm sorry, Daph. I shouldn't be laughing." His grin melted into a fond smile. "I seem to recall you saying a couple months back that it would be your job to 'keep all these girls in line'."
She stiffened. Yes, she had said that, hadn't she? That was before she'd really met Granger. Miss overly-familiar, headstrong, pure-blood-trained, muggleborn-free, youngest-healer-trainee-ever, always-rolls-sixes, push-herself-sick-for-years, magical-powerhouse, Hermione Granger.

In the second timeline, Granger beat her in school studies with no occlumency and while carrying a wizard ton of dead weight. If their roles were reversed, and Granger were the future Lady Slytherin, and she, the muggleborn, would she be doing nearly as well?

Probably not.

Harry was still smiling at her.

Daphne squared her shoulders. "We've always done stuff together, right? Like learning and planning and things."

"We have."

"How intense is what we do, compared to the others, I mean? Compared to Granger, Lovegood, and Weasley?"

Harry put his book down and leaned back. "Ginny's training is pretty intense, but that's because she's become obsessed with beating Luna. Luna's training has always been about the same as ours, but that girl picks stuff up so quickly it's scary and she's already abnormally powerful. And Hermione always pushes herself far beyond what most people would be willing to. Sooo… I guess not that intense."

Daphne bit her lip and gripped the edges of her armchair. "I want that."

Harry tilted his head the other way.

"I want to be pushed hard. Tell me what to do. I'll do anything. I want to be useful to you as more than just the Greengrass Heiress." She glared straight into Harry's deep emerald eyes.

"You know, the political work you're doing now is really important."

"I know. But I can do more. Hermione can. So can I."

She kept looking into his eyes, refusing to look away or even blink.

Harry stared right back. Again, his lip tilted upwards. "I think we can manage that, somehow."

She nodded.

"First things first though, let's figure out how to get our mitts on the ancient artefact that gives unlimited wealth, and immortality, mmm?"

Daphne's gaze swept over the pile of as yet unread books to her right. Her eyes hardened. "Right." She grabbed the top book and slammed it open on her lap. She focused on her occlumency and felt the magic flow into her head. The world became clearer, sharper, and more understandable. She looked down at the pages in front of her and started reading.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John Potter strolled through the door of Professor Flitwick's office. "Professor?"

The short charms master looked up from where he sat at his desk.
"Mister Potter? How can I help you?"

John stepped forward. "I understand you occasionally take on students who show particular aptitude for duelling, Professor."

Professor Flitwick put down the paper he'd been reading. "I have been known to, yes. But I assure you those are rare circumstances. A student usually needs to show me something quite special for that, and I've never before taken on a student before their third year.

John smirked, flicked his wand into his hand and held it high above his head.

"Lumos!"

— End of Chapter Nineteen —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yes, I know Charity Burbage didn't join Hogwarts staff until 1993 in canon. Deal with it.

A/N: A small note on Gringotts and Slytherin House. I'm going with the canon founding date for Gringotts of 1474. Hence no uber awesome secret Slytherin house vault overflowing with riches and whatnot. Also why Harry had to actually open a vault when he first made contact.

A/N: As always, exchange rate between British Pounds and Galleons is 50 to 1. Again, as always, all prices, wages, etc, have been normalised to 1991 values.

A/N: PotterWiki says that Homenum Revelio "Probably only works on humans". I call bull on that. I'm going with it works on any sentient humanoid.
It was Halloween. Hermione shivered. She really needed to learn the warming charm.

"Okay, class!" called out Madam Hooch, sitting atop her Cleansweep Seven. "Three laps of the pitch! In pairs! Keep nice even space between each other and don't go too fast!"

Hermione sidled over to the Hufflepuffs. "Good Morning, Kevin."

The larger Muggleborn gave her a wide grin. "Mornin'. You wanting ta group up?"

She smiled back. "Sure."

The other puffs gave them the thumbs up and the two waited for the teacher's whistle. It blew and they started a careful, slow lap.

Hermione adjusted her grip. "So, how're classes going?"

Kevin kept his eyes forward. "Kay, I guess."

"You guess?"

Kevin shrugged, causing him to dip briefly before he brought himself back to her level. "Getting the spells down is hard. Everyone else always gets them first."

"Ah."

They continued flying for a few more moments.

"You're lucky you're so smart."

Hermione glanced at the boy. "You mean because I learn spells quickly?"

"Yeah! You're always first. Every time."

She shrugged, causing her own little dip. "I have a lot of advantages."

"Oh, yeah? Like?"

"I learnt all the theory when I was younger. So I get more time to practise spells."

"That's unfair!"

Hermione nodded. "Yes."

"I mean… they're all saying that it don't matter that me Mum an' Dad ain't magic, but that's not true then."

She shook her head.

"That sucks."
"It's actually a lot worse then that."

Kevin shot her a look. "Wha'dja mean?"

"I'm a muggleborn too so I understand what you're going through, but I was lucky. I had my best friend to guide me. You remember when we talked about legilimency?"

Kevin looked thoughtful. "Yeah. I think so. That mind reading stuff right?"

"Yes. Well, there's this thing called Occlumency that some people who grew up in the magical world learn, which protects against that. But it also helps you learn faster, gives you a near perfect memory, and helps you control your emotions."

Kevin's jaw dropped. "That's awesome! I want to learn that!"

"—And it takes years to learn and isn't taught at Hogwarts."


Hermione shifted on her broom as they made a slow and shaky curve at the edge of the pitch.

"You know this Occ-lu-mency then?" Kevin asked.

She nodded.

"And everyone else?"

She shook her head. "No, not everyone." She nodded to where Susan and Daphne had paired up for the laps. "Susan will know it. So will Hannah and Zach. Ernie and Wayne might know it, but I'm not sure.

"Well that right sucks."

"You're doing better than many muggleborns, you know."

Kevin looked puzzled. "How? I'm always last."

"We're actually in Hogwarts. Most muggleborns go to one of the smaller schools. If you want to get a good job after school, you stand a chance. Most don't get that chance, or they leave the magical world."

They continued to fly in silence, Kevin deep in thought.

"Of course," she continued, as though she'd just thought of something, "that advantage doesn't mean anything if you appear too muggleborn."

"What'ja mean?"

"You know how some of the Slytherin's are… shall we say, not very nice?"

Kevin scoffed. "Some of them are right dicks. That Malfoy—"

"—Yes, them. Well, they really don't like many non-magical things and many who give good jobs are like that. Going to Hogwarts means a lot, but you also need to know how to behave around them."
Kevin shifted uncomfortably on his broom. "You talking about being all nobby ain't you? That just isn't me, you know?"

"It's not really about being upperclass. It just looks a bit like that. It's really about being a wizard. You're a wizard."

"...I guess..."

They pulled up to the larger group of witches and wizards, hovering around waiting for further instructions. Several others were shouting at each other. Madam Hooch was assisting stragglers on the other side of the pitch.

"Give that back, Malfoy!" Megan Jones darted after the blond Slytherin boy who held a red and brown glass ball. An obliviation detection device?

"Come on, Jones. Your family is supposed to be good at this," Malfoy called back, holding the orb just out of the girl's reach.

"Heir Malfoy!"

Hermione turned to see Susan Bones floating near Daphne.

"If you do not give that back immediately, I shall report it as theft to my Aunt!"

Malfoy looked like he'd bitten on a lemon. "Fine! Catch!" And he hurled it straight between the two Heiresses.

Both Susan and Daphne pulled their wands and aimed at the falling orb.

"Accio Remembrall!"

"Accio Remembrall!"

The glowing orb fell between the two, froze, and shook in midair.

Hermione watched, eyes wide, as a thin beam of silver light formed between the two wands. There was a loud *Crack!*, the onlookers gasped, and both unwilling witches were yanked together with equal cries of surprise and indignation, colliding with a loud crunch and falling from their brooms. They landed on the charm-softened pitch floor in a tangled heap. The remembrall bounced next to them.

Hermione shot over. She was, almost certainly, the most qualified, after all, even with only a few weeks of healer training. "You okay?"

Susan pushed herself into a sitting position. "I'm okay."

"Yeah." Daphne followed the Bones heiress. "Yeah, I'm good too."

Hermione nodded. "Good." She leant closer to Daphne. "What was that?" She whispered. "That wasn't the brother wand effect. It was silver!"

Daphne shook her head. "I'm not sure." The Greengrass heiress looked around for her wand.

"Mister Malfoy!" Madam Hooch bore down on the group. "You come with me now!"

Hermione spotted the two wands lying together on the ground, reached out for them, and hesitated.
"Hermione?" Daphne appeared on her right. "Oh."

Susan appeared on her left. "Oh, wow."

The two dropped wands were identical. Both Hazel, both the same length.

Hermione picked them up. "I don't suppose you both have unicorn hair wands too?"

Susan and Daphne both nodded.

Hermione held one out for Susan. "This one yours?"

The Bones Heiress inspected the wand. "No. Mine has a bevelling on the grip." Susan handed it to Daphne and took the one left in her hands.

"So," Susan began, "What was that?"

Hermione coughed and she and Daphne exchanged knowing glances. "It probably had something to do with the wands being so similar to each other."

A small crowd formed around them of both grounded and air born students.

Susan tapped her chin. "Can we try it again?"

Hermione looked around. She couldn't see Harry anywhere, which probably meant he was under disillusionment, or notice-me-not, or both.

Daphne stepped away. "Sure."

Susan grinned.

"But not the summoning charm, I think."

Susan snorted. "No, I think not."

"Do you know the disarming spell?"

Susan nodded. "My Aunt taught me most of the basic defence spells."

"Right. On three then."

They faced each other.

Hermione studied the scene carefully.

"One, two, three, expelliarmus!"

"One, two, three, expelliarmus!"

A silver light flashed midway between the two witches and a silver thread formed between them.

The crowd gasped again.

Hermione's mind raced. What did this mean? There wasn't a bead forming on the thread, so it wasn't exactly like the brother wand effect, but it was kinda similar.

Daphne and Susan stared into each others faces. The silver thread shook. It vibrated. It snapped.
Both witches stumbled forward, but unlike with the summoning charm, they weren't forced together. Their wands stayed firmly in their hands.

Hermione let out a held breath. Well, that was certainly interesting.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

After lunch, Harry and Daphne entrucked themselves in the library's restricted section. Harry had conjured a few ready carved Halloween pumpkins, giving the trunk a warm glowing feel.

Daphne growled at her half-read book and threw it across the trunk. "Useless!"

Harry looked up. "You know, I'd advise against ever letting Hermione see you do that."

She glared at him. They'd been skimming through books for weeks now for solutions to seeing past the wards and found nothing. To say it was getting on her nerves would be like saying Lord Slughorn was a bit slimy. She crossed her arms and huffed. "It's like we're looking in completely the wrong place. This can't be that rare a problem."

Harry shrugged. "Voldy tended to just power through wards. His approach was very much smash and grab. Especially once he'd clipped the auror's wings in the Wizengamot."

Daphne snorted. "Why'd he even need to worry about them? He could take them out couldn't he?"


Daphne reached over to the side table and picked up the next book. It was titled 'Ancient Mesoamerican Wards — The Snake Eats the Eagle'. She looked back up. "And the death eaters?"

Harry waved a vague hand. "Some of them could go toe-to-toe with an auror, but most wouldn't stand a chance. Bellatrix could. So could Yaxley and the Carrows. Malfoy and the male Lestranges don't have auror stamina, but they do have dark family magic, which makes up for that weakness. Macnair hits like a nundu but lacks the agility required." He smiled. "The thing is that aurors never fight alone. They're trained from day one to fight in pairs and they're deadly because of it." Put two aurors against two death eaters and the aurors will win unless the death eaters get a lucky shot."

Daphne swallowed. "But the Dark Lord could go against two pairs and win?"

Harry nodded. "Did he?"

"Could you?"

Harry tapped his chin and gazed off into space. He looked back. "No. I'm not powerful enough." He sighed. "One pair, yes, but two? No. The only reason Voldemort and Dumbledore can is because…" He stilled.

Daphne head-inched, one hand palm up. "…What? Because of what?"

Harry looked away again. "It… might not be a good idea to say."
Daphne's eyes widened. Holy Merlin. Harry told her *everything*. What could possibly be so bad that he'd hesitate?

"...Harry?"

Harry bit his bottom lip. He made as though to speak, then hesitated. He did so again, and again stopped. Eventually, he spoke. "Daphne... if I tell you this, I'd like both of us to perform an unbreakable vow to never perform the magic I'm about to tell you about."

Daphne gasped. You could only make one unbreakable vow. Apparently, this was a different level of bad. But she still wanted to know. She nodded, slowly. "I promise."

"Okay. We'll bring Hermione in on this later and do it then." Harry took a deep breath. "There is a ritual. I'm not going to tell you what it's called. The ICW is so determined to eradicate this ritual from human knowledge that the name is under taboo. So are the exact words required to perform the ritual." He paused and looked around before continuing. "Let's call it the unforgivable ritual."

The trunk suddenly felt colder. The carved pumpkins lining the walls took on a more sinister look, creepy grins staring down at them from all around. Daphne shivered. "I would have thought that would be... horcruxes."

Harry waved his hand dismissively. "Horcruxes are bad, certainly, but more for what they accomplish than the methods used to create them." He grimaced. "After all, there *are* people in this world who would happily commit murder for a few knuts in someone's back pocket, let alone immortality."

Daphne shivered again.

"And of course, the fact that Death himself takes such an interest in Horcruxes that he personally intervenes to eradicate them."

"But the... unforgivable ritual?"

Harry looked her straight in the eyes. "The 'unforgivable ritual' grants one immense power. It doubles the flow of magic between the core and the body, grants immunity to magical toxins and allows the caster to force the almost total submission of any wand to themselves."

Daphne's eyes widened. Her voice became a whisper. "Merlin."

"Yeah. And Voldemort was already a powerful wizard to start with."

She slumped back in her chair. Everyone knew the Dark Lord was above normal wizards, but by such an amount? She looked back up. "And... the cost?" Every ritual had a cost.

Harry stared back, stony faced. "The cost is two fold. The ritual requires you to swear yourself to a cause, a cause you feel strongly for. If you don't feel strongly about it, the ritual won't work. The first cost is a sliver of your rationality about the cause you swear yourself to. You become a little bit mad about it. A little bit insane."

Daphne's eyes widened. "And the Dark Lord..."

"Swore himself to the eradication of muggle influences in the wizarding world."

She let out a long, deep breath. "That... explains so much."
Harry nodded. "It does, doesn't it?"

"Is that why he never uses muggle guns even though he knows about them?"

Harry made a partial hand movement. "In part, yes. He actually adopted a policy of second strike escalation."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning he wouldn't use muggle weaponry until someone else did. Then it was fair game."

"... Ah." She hesitated. "Is that why you're not going to have us use them either?"

Harry nodded.

Daphne chewed on her bottom lip. "And that was the first cost? ...what's the second?"

Harry sighed. "The second cost is... the life of the one true love... forcibly taken."

Daphne's heart froze. Her breathing stopped. She looked into Harry's eyes, saw the seriousness in them, felt the beating in her chest and the sweat on her hands. Her lip trembled. A twinge of fear pinched her. "I... I see now why the unbreakable vows."

Harry nodded, once. It looked to be a very tired nod.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione dashed past the girl's second floor bathroom, ignoring Moaning Myrtle's wailing cries over some unknown and unspecified tragedy. Probably someone throwing a roll of toilet paper through her. As far as she was concerned, the dead girl could keep it to herself, especially today of all days. She had no intention of joining her as Howling Hermione. Trolls and Dark Lords be damned.

She glanced around to check no one was watching and leapt up the stairs in a decidedly unladylike manner, bolted down another corridor, and lunged for the door to the hospital wing.

"Ah, Miss Granger, just in time." Madam Pomfrey closed the door behind her and waved her towards the back of the wing.

Hermione sat down with barely a moment to catch her breath and regarded her current box with its unfortunate and live test subject scurrying around inside. Thankfully, she'd been able to get control over the diffindo cutting charm quickly enough in that first week not to kill any of the little animals. Putting enough power into that first stupefy to shatter the box had made a big impression. She had a record of one month of healer training and no deaths. Hopefully it would stay that way.

Madam Pomfrey appeared at her side. "Tell me about wand specialism, Miss Granger."

Hermione pushed her magic through her mind scape and found the relevant information. "A wand tends to perform better at certain branches of magic. When a wand channels a spell it is particularly suited to, the flamelage for those spells can up to twice as high, although that speed is rare."

"Correct, Miss Granger. And your wand is ash and dragon heart string. Why is this important?"

"Because the ash makes it a healer's wand."

"Yes, and...?"
"The dragon heartstring stores more magic than other wand cores?"

Madam Pomfrey sighed. "Why is speed important in healing, Dear?"

Hermione flushed. "Oh! Because every second counts."

"Exactly. We can cure almost anything. Cancer, heart attacks, and strokes are all easy. Dark magic and magical diseases are harder, but if we can stabilise the patient, we can work a cure. But one thing that we can not cure is death."

Hermione nodded along.

"Your number one priority when you are faced with a new patient is to keep them alive. Everything else comes second. To do that you have to know what's wrong with them. Then work down a list of spells to counteract the most common and fast acting causes of death."

The older Healer handed her a parchment. Hermione blanched. Tiny writing covered the entire spread detailing dozens upon dozens of spells.

"These are the one-hundred life savers. By the end of your training here you will know them like the back of your hand. Please read out the first one."

Hermione ran her eyes to the top left hand corner. "Vitals diagnosis charm chain."

Pomfrey nodded, stunned the mouse in the box, lifted it out, placed it on the worktop, pointed her wand at it, and cast five spells in quick succession. Her wand movements were fast and precise, giving the impression she was fighting a sword duel with a bottle-sized opponent. Five numbers bloomed over the mouse, each one a different colour.

"The red number is body temperature. The blue is blood pressure, the green is respiratory rate, the yellow is pulse rate, and the black is magical toxicity."

"Your homework will be to describe the function of each spell, what they measure, and to identify what the first spell in your stabilisation chain should be given a high and low number for each of the vitals based on the visual cues on page sixty-three."

Hermione nodded and made a note in her mindscape. They were all just like the spell Healer Pomfrey used at the welcome feast to measure their magical exhaustion, the last, black, one.

"Healer?"

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"I meant to ask you this at the feast, but are these actually charms? I mean, I read that the definition of a charm was a spell that applies a temporary or permanent change to an object without changing its fundamental structure, but these don't do that."

Madam Pomfrey tapped on the table. "Technically, no. But there's a history behind that. We call them charms now because the field the spells originally come from was torn down after the establishment of the international statute of secrecy. The healer swished her wand through the air. "Healing was allowed to keep them because they were considered too useful, and rightly so!"

"—What field?"

Madam Pomfrey looked around distractedly. "What? Oh, divination. That used to mean any spell
that dealt with extracting or processing information. Reduced to fortune telling quackery now, unfortunately. Don't know why we keep teaching it."

Hermione grinned a feral grin.

"Miss Granger?"

"Oh. Nothing Healer Pomfrey. Just thinking about something. Shall we continue?"

Madam Pomfrey kept her gaze for a moment longer. She stepped back and pointed to the mouse still on the table. "Yes. Please follow the following instructions."

Hermione nodded and started following the healer's directions while dancing a jig in her head. Harry was going to be pleased with her.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne bit her lower lip, again. Who knew such horrific magic existed? What kind of person would willingly murder the person that magic deemed them perfect for? At the front of the room, exactly that person shuffled some parchments on his desk and watched as the rest of the class filed into the defence against the dark arts classroom.

Interestingly, Quirrellmort's attitude to her and Hermione had been gradually shifting over the last few weeks. He now seemed more interested than angry.

Hermione lowered herself onto the bench beside her and leant into her ear. "Divination," she whispered, her voice urgent.

"What?"

"Divination. Madam Pomfrey says divination used to deal with any spell that collected or processed information!"

Her eyes widened. "Why doesn't Harry know that?"

"Because Vol—"

She slapped a hand over Hermione's mouth. "Not here," she hissed.

Hermione's eyes widened, flickering towards the front of the class where said possible Dark Lord was now getting to his feet.

The possibly possessed teacher or possible Dark Lord put his hands on the sides of the lectern, glaring at the few stragglers who hastily sat, pulling out quills and ink. "It is Halloween." His voice rang out like a death knell. "The turning of the tides between the light and the dark." So very different to the stuttering imbecile Harry had warned them to expect.

Harry was sat in front of them, as he always did in defence, which was good. Daphne wasn't sure how well she'd handle being in the same room as Voldemort without Harry's ever-reassuring presence.

"As many of you who come from older families know, tonight is the ideal night for many rituals that are considered borderline dark." Quirrellmort grabbed a garlic bulb swinging near his head, gave it a disgusted look and tossed it aside.

"Were you in upper years we would take advantage of that to demonstrate the effects of such solar
events on spells cast, but you are not."

He paused.

"Of course, only some of you would be aware of such things given the rot in our world. Miss Granger!"

Daphne glanced sideways to see Hermione straighten in her chair.

"You supposedly serve a most ancient and noble line — What are your responsibilities as a vassal to your lord?"

Hermione took a slightly shaky breath "As a vassal I have pledged my wand to my lord. To stand by him in times of need and heed his council in times of peace."

Quirrellmort tilted his head. "And as your magical guardian, are you aware that your lord can marry you off to anyone he so chooses?"

Hermione went slightly red. "I…I am aware."

"And you are fine with this?"

Hermione lifted her chin. "I trust my lord with my life."

Quirrellmort made a single fluid hand motion to his side. "Well then, since you are supposed to be a wand of your lord, you will come up here and we shall see how you do against"—he looked around—"…Mister Malfoy."

Daphne turned to see Malfoy start in his chair.

Hermione nodded, rose in her chair and descended to the wide open area at the front of the classroom, joined a moment later by Heir Malfoy.

In front of her, Harry had his wand in hand, casually pointing forwards.

"This will be a standard duel with standard rules." Quirrellmort looked them both over. "I trust you both know them?"

Hermione and Malfoy both nodded.

"Then begin on my three. One. Two. Three."

A flurry of spells erupted from both pre-teen's wands and ten seconds later it was all over.

Hermione stood over Malfoy's stunned form, picked up his wand, and cast a series of spells on him in quick succession. A series of coloured numbers rose from the downed boy. She nodded and turned back.

Quirrellmort raised an eyebrow. "Fascinating. It would seem your lord has trained you well, Miss Granger. I must admit, I did not think it possible…"

Hermione nodded and rapidly retreated.

Tension drained from Daphne's body as Hermione climbed back up the inclined steps to their bench.
"Next will be Miss Greengrass"—She spun her head forward—"and Mister Potter."

She stood.

"Not you, Boy-Who-Lived." Quirrellmort waved John to sit back down. "I mean the other Potter."

A minute later, Daphne found herself facing off against Harry at the front of the classroom. She found it hard not to shake standing so close to that thing.

Focus! She shook herself. Harry looked into her eyes and she could feel the assurance in them. She calmed and thought about what to do next. Should she go full out? Harry surely wouldn't, but then, Harry would easily flatten her if he wanted. She gripped her wand tighter. Best to give it her all and let Harry determine what he wanted to happen.

"On three. One. Two. Three."

She lunged to the side, put up a shield, got two spells into her chain, saw red… and knew no more.

…

The world faded back into view.

"…is how it's done."

A hand appeared in her view. It was Harry's. She grabbed it.

"And notice the quick adaptation to the new shield position."

She allowed herself to be pulled to her feet, felt the sore where she'd landed on her bum, and gave Harry the warmest smile she dared, given the audience.

"That is why Mister Potter here is currently leading this class."

She looked around. Everyone in the packed lecture theatre stared at Her and Harry with interest.

Quirrellmort paused in his monologue to wave the two of them back up the stairs. "Please now turn to page 210."

The rustle of pages filled her ears as she climbed the last few steps. She shot a surreptitious tempus under the desk. Still fifty minutes to go until the start of the Halloween feast. She sighed. Hopefully she could get some food in before whatever was going to happen, inevitably happened.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Far off in the distance, the faint rumble of the Halloween feast arrived in the ears of John Potter, lurking in a shadowy corridor alcove, waiting for telltale thump thump of distant troll feet and the unmistakable stench that announced them.

His training with Flitwick was going well and he was sure he could now take the beast on. Whatever Quirrell said, he knew who was really top of defence against the dark arts. Figures a dark wizard would show favouritism to his dark twin.

He shifted on his feet.

Having said that, no one could deny that Harry could duel. And that was worrying on many levels. Harry shouldn't be that good. Either someone was secretly training him… or… or… he shook his
head. Harry couldn't actually have come back in time too... could he? Even if he had, he should be a total weakling. Future Harry would be an Azkaban wreck with two years of Hogwarts education and two years of will sucking hell.

This Harry wasn't that. And how would the little slime have done it? Maybe, because Harry was his twin...

*klap* *klap*

He gripped his wand tighter. Something was coming. It was faint, but getting louder.

*Klap* *Klap* *Klap* *Klep*

He relaxed slightly. Footsteps — far too light to be a troll, or even an adult human. A figure darted around the corner.

"Oh!"

It was a Ravenclaw girl. "Hi." He waved. Sophie Roper, a muggleborn.

"Um..." The girl drew a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "I don't suppose you could tell me which way the bathroom is could you?"

He blinked. "Yeah sure, it's just up that way, turn right, and you should see the sign."

The girl beamed. "Thanks mister hero!" and off she went.

John watched her turn the corner and stared after her. Something about what just happened didn't feel right. He looked at the wand in his hand. Something about a ...bathroom?

His eyes widened. Oh shit!

"Imperio."

And every concern was swept away.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry crouched by the corner of the third floor corridor, invisible under the Potter's deathly hallow. A half dozen spells hid his other tells. In the distant he could hear the faint murmur of several hundred voices, faint through several floors of solid stone.

*If* events happened like they did last time, Quirrellmort would soon show up to take a swing at the stone. He wanted to see that. Whatever you could say about Voldemort, the man was a planner. Before he struck a target he did all the recon he could, mapped out a line of attack, then ruthlessly executed it. How many times had he been forced to watch ministries and castles fall before the Dark Lord's strikes?

Harry shifted on his feet, feeling the hard stone floor through his cheap but neat muggle shoes.

He wasn't sure what was going on with Quirrellmort and that worried him. Their defence against the dark arts teacher was acting more and more like Voldemort himself did. That hadn't happened last time. But why would the addition of Lord Slytherin into the timeline cause Voldemort take more control of Quirrell? For surely, it could only be that factor which caused the change.

Well, whatever. Without Hermione crying in a bathroom, there would be little need for him to be
elsewhere and he could focus his full attention on this. With any luck, Quirrellmort might even drop some clues for him. He could but hope.

Harry ran his index finger, slowly, along his holly and phoenix feather wand and waited.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Could you pass the sprouts?"

"Twenty inches! I swear she's trying to kill us!"

"Sure thing."

"You wait till your OWLs, you'll be begging for that little."

"They say Potter got a nimbus 2000."

"Wish I'd never taken it."

"Old news!"

"And the chicken."

"Saw it at breakfast weeks back!"

Hermione served herself another potato off the big plate in front of her and looked around. The smells of the feast filled her nostrils with beef, gravy, and roast vegetables. The normal thousand floating candles had been replaced with as about as many floating glowing pumpkins and she couldn't help wonder how they got them to stay up there, given what she knew about how long pumpkins could retain magic.

Flint pointed his fork in the air and twirled it. "We'll win that match, no problem. Potter's a nancy boy and our team is nothing but hard hitters this year."

On her left, Daphne coughed in the middle of a separate conversation.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Is that why you don't have witches on the team? Because they're not hard hitters?"

Flint frowned. "Now, see here, Granger, it's not that I don't want witches on the team, Merlin knows it would liven up the locker room, it's just that none of the few who applied managed to beat the best wizards, see? Most of the families don't like their daughters playing."

"So if a witch did apply and could beat the current hopefuls then you'd let her on?"

"Well," Flint stroked his chin, "There is the cohesion factor to consider. Most of our lot have played together since they were kids. Got really good teamwork together, you know. She'd have to be really something special..."

Hermione shook her head and busied herself with her plate again. She may trust Harry with absolute power over her, but she wouldn't trust most of this lot to sweep the floor.

She caught a snatch of conversation from Tracey.

"—was really surprised by our Potter's performance. He beat you, Daph. Might it not be a good idea to talk to him? I mean, it's not as though you give a damn what Snape thinks."
Daphne moved her food about on her plate. "We shall see." She speared a fine slice of beef, took a dainty bite, chewed, swallowed, laid down her knife and fork, and dabbed her mouth with her napkin. "Potter is an unknown quantity. We don't want to just rush in. I'll grant you that he is starting to look more… interesting, but that is no reason to throw ourselves at him."

Hermione suppressed a snort. If there was a throw-yourself-at-Harry-competition, the Greengrass Heiress would certainly come out tops. She'd never seen her act the way she did with Harry with anyone else.

She glanced around, but of course Harry wasn't there. He would be up at the third floor corridor by now, waiting for the mass panic caused by Quirrell barging into the great hall to check out the stone's defences.

Hermione took another bite of food and glanced at the large entrance door to the great hall. Any moment now…

And then Quirrell entered the hall from the side door and calmly sat down at the staff table.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore watched Quirrell take his seat at the head table, turned back forward, and surveyed his dominion.

Things had quietened down over the last month. He hadn't heard anything from Lord Slytherin, Tom hadn't seemed to make any moves, and Harry Potter was so isolated the boy hadn't even bothered to turn up to the Halloween feast.

On the other hand, such timidity between Tom Riddle and Harry Potter did mean any possible confrontation between the two seemed less and less likely. That wasn't so useful.

Dumbledore picked up his goblet and swirled it.

There was also the fact that Lord Slytherin knew the prophecy from when the man had broken into his office. If Slytherin cared about it at all, it was hard to tell. John had no clue who Slytherin was, apparently, and Slytherin hadn't seemed to make the connection between the prophecy and Harry.

Lily and James also hadn't changed their behaviour towards him, so it was unlikely Slytherin had told them, thank Merlin.

Speaking of John Potter… where was he?

The doors to the great hall slammed open.

"TROLL!"

He stared.

All talk ceased.

John Potter ran down the middle of the hall between the two tables. "On the seventh floor!" He reached halfway between him and the door. "Thought you ought to know." Then fainted.

Silence.

Then someone giggled. Laughter broke out across the entire hall, great heaving belly laughs.

He stood up. "Silence!"
The laughter died instantly.

"Prefects, lead your houses back to your dormitories." Eyes widened around the hall. One girl shrieked but was quickly shushed.

So much for a quiet month.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Did you see that?" Hermione hissed.

"Yes." Replied Daphne.

"It was him."

"Yes."

Hermione closely followed Daphne, leading half the first year Slytherins out of the great hall.

"—Sophie's not back!"

She twitched toward the sound. Padma Patil and Lisa Turpin rushed past. She grabbed Lisa's arm.

"What's going on?"

"Sophie doesn't know about the Troll and we can't find her. She went to the bathroom."

Daphne whirled around.

Hermione's stomach dropped. "The first floor bathroom?"

"Out of order."

"And the second floor has the ghost."

"Hermione!" Daphne jumped in front of her. "You can't seriously be thinking—"

"Third floor bathroom! C'mon!" She dodged around Daphne and charged forward.

Behind her she heard following footsteps.

"Save me from your stupid Gryffindor tendencies!"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry heard the rumble of a half score hundred feet far earlier than the end of the feast should dictate. He tensed. It had started. Soon, Quirrellmort should be here and he could see how far his pray had gotten.

$RIP$ $TEAR$ $KILL$

Blood drained from Harry's face. No.

A dozen metres away down the corridor, a small round hole formed in the wall and rapidly increased in size.

No.
He pressed himself to the wall, still as he could.

'$KILL HUGE BEASITES$ $RIIPPPP$' $KILL HUGE BEASITES$ $RIIPPPP$

Adrenaline flowed through him. So long as he gave no indication he was here he should be okay. Just so long as he didn't move. Not. One. Inch.

A huge body slithered out of the passage and a head as large as he stood tall paused in its advance to the door. Teeth as long as his leg chomped together mere feet from him. Magic's perfect killing machine tilted its head and sniffed the air.

Far off, he heard the faint approaching sound of phoenix song.

The huge snake turned its head and looked straight at where he stood, flat against the wall. Not. One. Inch.

He felt an SOS vibration on his lightening bolt ring.

Fuck.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Sophie finished her business in the strangely normal bathroom stall. Given all the other weird thing's she'd seen in the wizarding world, she still expected to find a toilet that made her sit down on it upside-down, or perhaps one that commented on the colour of her knickers, or something equally outlandish.

She stuck her hands under the running sink taps, rinsed them, and looked for some method of drying, of which there wasn't one.

She sighed and wiped them on her robes, then brightened. She'd met John Potter, if only to ask him directions. That was cool. It wasn't every day you met a real life story book hero.

Sophie hummed a tune, turned around and stilled.

Stench filled her nostrils.

She looked up.

She looked up more.

A horrific face looked down on her.

She frowned. "This is the girl's bathroom!"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John Potter's feet walked up towards the Gryffindor common room. Everything was well with the world. Nothing could possibly concern him.

"And then what happened?" someone said. Ron? Yes, it was Ron.

"I saw the troll. Big and stinky it was," said John Potter's mouth.

"Think the Dark let it in?"
John Potter's feet continued walking.

The Dark? Something about the Dark.

John Potter's mouth opened again, but no words came out.

"You okay mate?"


Ron stumbled. "Mate?"

He started running.

"What! Where are you going?"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Screams emanated from the bathroom ahead of them.

Hermione lunged for the handle and yanked back the door.

A huge figure stood, poised, club raised over a scene of total destruction, and one terrified witch.

"Accio Sophie!"

Sophie shrieked. The club descended right where the girl had been crouching.

Daphne shoved by her. "Stupefy!"

The spell did nothing.

The troll turned to the door.

"Stupefy!"

Lisa also shoved by her and grabbed Sophie's ankle.

The troll raised its club again.

Hermione dived to the side.

"Stupefy!"

Padma leapt into the space where she's just been standing.

The club descended.

Padma opened her mouth to scream.

"Diffindo!" Hermione's spell shattered the club. Bits flew everywhere.

Sophie continued to scream her head off.

The troll looked at the useless stump of its club.
"Stupefy!"
Lisa dragged Sophie towards the door. "Something else! For FUCKS SAKE!"
The troll grabbed Lisa leg and swept her into the air.
"AHHH!"
Hermione started transfiguring a nearby broken pipe into a sword.
Padma dived in between the trolls legs and pointed her wand at its shorts. "Reducio!"
Hermione started a mental countdown.
An expression of acute pain shot across the Troll's face. It roared and dropped Lisa.
Three.
"Ouch!"
Hermione leapt forward and plunged the sword into the beast's leg.
Two.
On her other side, so did Daphne with a shout and a stab.
The troll roared and lashed out, narrowly missing her.
One!
Hermione and Daphne leapt back and the two swords turned back into pipes, ripping pipe sized holes in its thighs.
Padma scrabbled through the troll's legs, avoiding being squashed as it fell to its knees.
"C'mon!" Hermione beckoned to the Ravenclaw, now with a downed troll between her and them, and still very much in grab range.
Padma made to move, but got only a foot before being snatched up, shrieking, by her robes.
Sophie and Lisa continued to scrabble on hands and knees towards the door.
Hermione aimed her wand. "Diffindo!"
Sophie got to her feet and stumbled through the door.
The troll-held-robjes split and Padma fell back on the ground with a loud whumf.
Daphne finished transfiguring another pipe-sword.
The troll grabbed a rock.
"Diffindo!" Hermione's spell hit the rock and did nothing. She ducked a troll fist swing.
Lisa turned back towards the troll.
Daphne leapt forward.
The troll hurled the rock.

"No!"

Lisa whipped her wand forward "Metaprotego!"

The troll-thrown rock froze in mid-air an inch away from Daphne's head.

Daphne ducked it and made to stick the sword in the beast's chest.

*Smack!*

And tumbled back as the troll's other massive hand slapped her away. The sword fell from her grasp.

Padma finished shuffling out of grab range.

Hermione rolled to a groaning Daphne and started to drag the dazed witch away.

The troll grabbed the damaged floor and dragged itself several feet towards them, toward the door, and towards their only exit.

A desperate Padma leapt the remaining few feet, got between the troll and door, and dived through it.

Now clear of witches, Hermione and a still dazed Daphne followed a moment after.

A heartbeat later, so did the troll.

The five witches scrabbled back down the dimly lit corridor, shooting spells and dragging each other with them. Each spell thudded into the trolls face and body. Each blow further slowing the wounded, roaring beast, now trying and mostly failing to move with two water pipes fully healed into the muscles of its probably paralysed legs.

Hermione could feel the victory creeping up. They were moving faster than it! It couldn't get to them. They weren't going to die. She could taste the success.

"Here comes the-boy-who-lived!"

Hermione goggled.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore strode down the seventh floor corridor, Flitwick, McGonagall, and several other teachers trailing behind him.

"Are you sure it's here? Dumbledore?"

He turned to his deputy. "No, Minerva, not at all." He sighed.

A faint pop sounded next to them. A female house elf appeared wearing a Hogwarts tea towel.

"Icygrass and friends is being fighting troll!"

Gasps surrounded him.

Dumbledore swore. "Fawkes!"
He whirled back on the house elf. "Where?"

"Third floor bathroom."

He strode quickly back the way he'd came, followed by his staff. "Fawkes!"

Again, nothing.

Merlin, Damn it!

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Here comes the-boy-who-lived!"

Hermione goggled.

John Potter leapt over where she half lay on the floor and bounded towards the wounded troll.

The troll roared.

She stared in horrified fascination as the boy jumped on its head, ignoring the tree-trunk thick flailing arms, and stuck his wand up its nose. "Bombarda!"

The troll's head exploded. Her lord's twin was thrown towards them and hit his head on the floor, instantly knocking him out, just as the remains of the troll's brains splashed all over her and the other girls.

The corridor was suddenly far too quiet.

The troll slowly fell forward.

The five brain-covered witches stared at the headless troll corpse, to the unconscious boy now laying at their feet, and back again.

Hermione sighed. "That was…"

"The dumbest thing I've ever seen," finished Lisa.

Daphne wiped gunk off her face. "Why do these things always end with me covered in monster guts?"

A sob started. She turned to see Padma gathering her crying fellow muggleborn into a hug.

Hermione absentmindedly jabbed her wand at John, confirming all his vitals were fine, and that he wasn't dying. Although she did see a nasty cut on one exposed shoulder.

"T-T-T-Thank y-y-you." Sophie sobbed into Padma's robes.

Padma rubbed her back. "Hey, we're all here for you. Okay? We said we would be, didn't we?"

Sophie nodded, shakily.

A groan caught all their attentions.

Hermione watched as a groggy John Potter raised himself on his elbows. "What happened?"
Daphne snorted. "What happened is that you jumped onto a slow moving target, which we were happily outrunning, and cast a blasting curse at pointblank range."

Potter shook his dazed head.

"You're lucky you weren't killed," Daphne finished.

Her lord's twin stilled, as though he'd just remembered something, leapt to his feet and turned away, towards the forbidden corridor.

Hermione shot out her arm and grabbed his wrist. "And where do you think you're going?"

John Potter looked into her eyes. "I've got something to take care of."

"What? There's only the out of bounds corridor off that direction."

Potter shook off her arm and marched off.

She called after him. "You're injured!"

Potter ignored her.

Damn. She and Daphne shared a look.

Daphne rose to her feet and made to follow. Hermione turned back towards the group. "You'll be okay, right?"

The two pureblood Ravenclaw witches nodded. Sophie turned her head away from Padma's chest. "I'll be okay, Hermione." she sniffed again, "Thank you, and you too… er…"


Sophie sniffed again. "Thank you, Daphne."

Daphne nodded and the two of them set off after the Gryffindor time traveller.

They arrived at the corner to the out of bounds corridor a few minutes later to find John Potter standing and staring, wand hanging limply at his side, face pale.

"What?"

Hermione shared a fearful glance with Daphne. What happened here? Where was Harry? Was he safe… Or?

Hermione felt a stab of pain shoot through her leg. She winced. The snake Harry always told to
keep in her pocket had started writhing and biting at her leg. She saw Daphne's eyes widen. Panic flying through them.

John took another step forward.

Her own heart started beating faster again. Adrenaline started pumping. Basilisk. Harry could be in danger. He could be badly injured. She had to find him. But…

She glanced towards Daphne and nodded at John's back. Daphne nodded.

Hermione raised her wand.

John took another step.

The tip of her wand glowed red. "Stupefy."

The boy collapsed in a heap on the floor.

She and Daphne reached into their robes and whipped on twin pairs of muggle sunglasses.

Daphne turned. "Right, let's get out of here."

Hermione blanched. "But we have to find Harry!"

"Are you crazy, Granger? It's a Basilisk! A Merlin damned Basilisk! We're just dead weight!"

Hermione ignored her and marched forward.

"For magic's sake!"

She reached the door and stepped through it. She stared. The corpse of a huge animal lay on the floor. It had the body of a goat, the heads of an eagle and a tiger and the tails of a cat a fox and a snake. The snake tail writhed around in the air. The rest of the creature was very definitely dead. The chimaera was dead.

Daphne arrived beside her and gasped.

Hermione's gaze raised from the massive corpse to take in a scene of destruction even more total than the corridor outside. Huge circular holes were smashed in the walls of several rooms beyond, taking whole doors with them, creating a long passageway of huge, ancient, jagged stones, which stretched on far further than the castle's outer walls could realistically contain.

What was this place?

She felt Daphne tremble beside her. "Why would anyone put a chimaera in a school? And why would anyone ever willingly fight one? Even with a Basilisk? What's this all for?"

Hermione shook her head. Something was very wrong here, but she couldn't put her finger on what. Every time she tried it seemed to slip through her mind like water through a sieve.

Daphne pointed. "There! Look."

Hermione stared. A figure stood on the far side of the chimaera's corpse, just hidden from the doorway. She walked forward. Her eyes widened.

It stood perfectly still. It was tall, had a long, billowing cloak, long hair, a hooked nose. It's skin
looked like stone, and it held the smashed remains of a large potions bottle to its face. Glass littered the floor around it.

It was a petrified Severus Snape.

A human head appeared from no where.

Hermione shrieked and clutched her chest. "Harry! Don't do that!"

Harry's head frowned. "ID check?"

Daphne gave the fidelius location.

Harry nodded. His eyes were urgent. "As you can see, I'm fine. Get back to the dorms, fast. The damn snake isn't here just now, but that doesn't mean it won't turn up again."

Hermione pouted. "And you?"

"I'm going to investigate a bit more. I don't know what all this is all for, but I know I want to find out. Anywhere with this much security must be guarding something quite special."

Daphne nodded. "Let's go, Granger."

They left after a few hissed words from Harry to the snakes in their pockets and made their way back to where they'd left John Potter. "Argh!" Hermione stamped her foot. "We forgot we have to take him to the hospital wing."

"We could enervate him and send him there?"

"He'll ignore us and inconvenience Harry."

Daphne sighed. "Yeah. He would."

They heard the approach of many footsteps. She and Daphne shared a panicked look, whipped off their sunglasses and pocked them just as Dumbledore appeared around the corridor corner. "Miss Greengrass! Miss Granger! What is happening here?"

McGonagall and a few others followed a split second later. The old witch gasped. "Is that Mister Potter?"

Hermione stepped forward. "Heir Potter was injured in the fight with the troll and refused medical attention. He left and we followed. I was forced to stun him for his own protection and was about to take him to the hospital wing."

Dumbledore seemed to take in the destruction of the corridor, and in particular the smashed door to the room behind them. And here?

Daphne took over. "We don't know. We just got here."

The headmaster nodded. "Then please take Mister Potter to the hospital wing, immediately. Do not dawdle. Thank you for assisting Miss Patil and Miss Turpin in rescuing Miss Roper. Professor Vector, if you would escort them?"

Vector nodded and the three of them, plus a levitated Potter, left for the hospital wing.

At least they had avoided a detailed grilling from the headmaster. Hopefully Harry would be okay.
Harry followed the trail of destruction down the series of rooms. Everywhere, rubble and debris covered the floor. Rune stones lay smashed on their pillars, marking the former presence of a battery of formidable wards, all now gone.

The first room after the chimaera contained a miniature rainforest. The many rare species of magical plant curled and sniffed the air as he passed, unfelt and unseen.

The second room contained the remains of a small army of charmed warriors. One of the stone soldiers groaned and reached into the air, its bottom half completely shattered.

The third room was empty, bar a complicated looking set of glass pipes and spheres, which twisted and turned in on themselves. The basilisk seemed to have ignored it and just smashed its way straight through to the next room.

The forth room was completely dark, save for the massive hole in the far wall, and the carpet of stars, lighting the high, domed roof by the thousand.

The fifth room, he recognised from his and the girl's exploration of the pipe network. A room empty but for a muggle TV and a VCR. He padded over to the table in front of the TV, waved his wand over the parchment on it, and read.

'To reach the next room, you must program the tape recorder to record East Enders on Sunday at 7:00pm on Channel One.'

Next to the parchment was a remote controller with over a hundred buttons on it.

Harry put down the parchment and frowned. It seemed like a strange kind of lock. And why would anyone go to the trouble? What on earth was so important as to set up such an elaborate defence system while also making said defence system kind of dumb?

He peeked into the sixth room to spy a three metre tall bronze statue of Severus Snape, a set of vials of clear liquid on a table, and nothing else. There was no extra hole in the wall. The snake was nowhere to be seen.

What the hell was going on?

Behind him, he heard approaching voices. Dumbledore.

Shit.

He sidled up to the far wall of the TV room, hissed, and stepped into the pipe network beyond.

Whatever was going on here, in this strange magical obstacle course, he could leave it for another time. Ultimately, it wasn't that important. It wasn't as though it was going to help him find the stone, after all.

— End of Chapter Twenty —

Chapter End Notes
A/N: OMG what happened to Fawkes?

A/N: Notice that in neither this story (so far), nor in canon, do house elves ever join in active defence of the school against threats such as trolls, dark wizards, basilisks, etc, until right at the very end when these "Powerful magic users" physically attack death eater ankle at the battle of Hogwarts.

"Hermione!" said Ron, "we've got to get the house elves to safety!"

"Take me you sexy beast!"

Harry looks on. "… Fuck that! Those guys kick ass, conscript the lot of them!"

A/N: A word on making money.

One of the more popular discussion points in reviews is how Harry could make more money, especially in the muggle world. Over the last twenty odd chapters, readers have come up with a lot of ways, many of which I didn't originally think of, but which I'm sure Harry would have.

This is problematic and reveals an underling weakness in the Harry Potter Canon…

…Making money in the muggle world is far too easy.

More than one reviewer has pointed out that Harry could just apparate into a jewellery shop, possibly wearing a mask or under polyjuice, swipe all the goods, and apparate straight out.

There is nothing to stop him doing this.

The problem is there is nothing to stop anyone else doing this either. For a fully qualified wizard, it should be sickeningly easy to acquire all the wealth you should ever need. (Although this would arguably also lead to massive inflation for those goods and services that have limited supply in the wizarding world.)

Take Bill Weasley for example. He makes his living by breaking into magical tombs. How much easier to break into museums, art galleries, personal safes, muggle manor houses, etc? Easy. Far too easy.

Or Mundungus Fletcher… Here is a man who makes his living pinching stuff and hawking it to anyone he can. He stole the Black silver form Grimmauld Place in canon. Assuming Mundungus can apparate, he should have pinched the British crown jewels before you could say 'Stop Thief'.

A well known principe of micro economics is the idea that if an opportunity can be exploited, it will be — The fabled non-existent dollar lying on the pavement. JKR built in the idea that the muggle and magical worlds are separate and it's this gulf that stops such opportunities being exploited. But the simple truth is that the gulf IS NOT THERE. Wizards can step outside their houses and be in the muggle world. Many do. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of muggleborns and even more half bloods who know the muggle world very well — who grew up there.

The wizarding world should be nothing more or less than the leaders of the organised crime of the world.
Trying to shoehorn in some kind of solution to this problem would deviate my world from JKR's so much that it would practically cease to be the Harry Potter world anymore. Therefore, I'm going to introduce an author approved plothole into this story.

Plothole: Wizards don't take advantage of bonehead obvious ways to acquire wealth using common magical powers.

Therefore, Harry is only allowed to make money in the muggle world in a way that is unique or almost unique to him and his followers. The drug trafficking was possible, in part, because of Harry's almost unique ability to fly without a broom (Plus I didn't really have this rule in place back in chapter three).

That means no apparating into jewellery stores, no using legilimency to score at poker, no confounding people into giving away all their money, no summoning money from bank machines, no selling magical cures for cancer in underground black markets, etc, etc, etc.

If Harry wants massive monies, it has to be something only he can do.
When Harry woke up the next morning, he'd wanted to bash his head in with a rock. He'd been so close. The stone had been right there. Almost all the defences had been down. The basilisk had obliterated the first six rooms. And he'd forgotten where the stone was. He only knew one type of magic that could have that effect — The fidelius charm. And yet, when he woke up, he could once again, remember where it was.

That suggested that, in the few hours between the Basilisk's attack and Harry's going to bed, someone had put up a fidelius charm and then taken it down again. Given that Dumbledore had been behind him and nowhere near the final room, that either meant someone powerful was on permanent guard in the final room, or…

"Or what, Harry?"

"Or,"—he looked into Daphne's ice blue eyes."—more likely, some annoying genius has set up the fidelius charm to activate on a proximity ward and deactivate on a timer."

Hermione's eyes widened.

"And by annoying genius, I mean Dumbledore."

Daphne frowned. "So we can know where the stone is, so long as we don't get too close, and if we do, the whole world forgets?"

"Probably."

The three first-years had ducked into a Parselmouth only secret passageway after breakfast — And after taking the necessary anti surveillance precautions, naturally.

"What's most galling," he continued, "is that I didn't even inspect the second, fourth, fifth, and seventh rooms properly, because I didn't know it was important!"

Hermione and Daphne shared a glance.

Hermione spoke. "Will Dumbledore even set the defences up the same again?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know. Maybe. At least we now have several new avenues of attack to pursue." He pursed his lips. "Anything else interesting turn up?"

Daphne reached into the pocket of her robes. "Yes, These arrived this morning at breakfast." She handed him two separate pieces of unfolded parchment. The first read…

Miss Greengrass,

Please pass the enclosed letter onto your Lord Slytherin as quickly as possible.

Albus Dumbledore.

The second parchment read…
Dear Lord Slytherin, Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin.

Thank you for taking the time in September to meet with me. I hope this might lead us to a more mutually beneficial dialogue regarding issues we both agree on.

As promised, I'm writing to ask your opinion on a matter of some import regarding the school and to request any and all information you may have on another matter.

The first is that last night, tragically, our current head of Slytherin House, Severus Snape was attacked by an unknown force and petrified. Normally this wouldn't represent a problem. However, surprisingly, it would seem that the supply of fresh mandrake has dried up, and thus, until it is available again, or Hogwarts can grow its own, we are short one head of house and a potions professor. I would appreciate your opinion on who might take up the temporary position.

Harry smirked. The trade in fresh mandrake was one of those Daphne's father controlled. Lord Greengrass's business machine could move almost as fast as his Macavity could fly when needed.

He looked up from the letter. "So, Dumbledore wants to know who I'd replace Snape with, if I kicked the bat from the Dungeons."

Daphne nodded. "It seems that way."

He continued reading.

The second matter is one of historical record. I'm not sure if you're aware, but your ancestor was rumoured to have built a secret chamber in the school. With a new Lord Slytherin in the public sphere, I thought it might be interesting to take advantage of any insight you may have to once more bring this possibly priceless piece of history to light. I could imagine that such a project would reflect well on those who undertook it and that the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin as well as Hogwarts herself would be much culturally richer for it.

Yours respectfully,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Order of Merlin (first class), Grand Sorcerer, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards.

Harry folded the letters up and handed them back to Daphne. "I understand that he's worried about the monster, but does Dumbledore really think I'd trade his ear for my house's secrets?"

Daphne pocketed the letters. "Maybe. Or maybe he thinks that you had something to do with what happened last night and he's looking for a reaction."

Harry frowned. "Maybe."

Hermione, who'd been watching the back and forth between them, chewed on her lip. "So, what are we going to reply with?"

Harry smiled. "Unless either of you have a better idea, we'll suggest the Bloody Baron as head of house. He's a logical candidate from our point of view, yet also totally unacceptable, and we won't have to show our actual hand."

Daphne nodded. "And for the chamber?"

"Rephrase whatever you find on it in Hogwarts — a History."
Hermione perked up. "I can do that."

He nodded. "And see if you can find some way to needle him. I'm getting sick of being polite all the time."

The two girls stared at him.

He grinned. "I'm sure you can come up with something amusing if you put your heads together."

Hermione and Daphne exchanged glances before twin gleams appeared in their blue and hazel eyes.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore stared down at the owl he'd just received. His eye twitched.

The parchment he held was pastel green and covered in glitter.

Dear Headmaster,

We suggest the Bloody Baron for the position of Head of Slytherin House. As to the Chamber of Secrets, we know it was supposedly built by Salazar Slytherin and that legend says it contains some kind of beast that is meant to either cleanse the castle of the unworthy or guard the castle from outside forces depending on which version of the myth you believe. This is, unfortunately, all we've found on the subject.

Yours,

Lord Slytherin, Heiress Greengrass, and Miss Granger.

The ink was neon pink and surrounded by sticker stars, rainbows, and smiley faces. Two charmed unicorns in silver ink frolicked with each other at the bottom of the parchment.

Dumbledore chuckled darkly. If Slytherin thought he could get to him by rubbing his face in the fact that he'd delegated correspondence with him to a pair of eleven and twelve year old girls, then he was sorely mistaken.

Not that he wasn't a little annoyed, but he was far more concerned about losing his potions master during a critical time for his project of goading a confrontation between Harry Potter and Voldemort.

That and he hadn't seen Fawkes since the previous night and he was starting to get worried. While phoenixes had a kind of limited immortality, that didn't mean they couldn't be seriously inconvenienced. He knew that better than most.

He looked back down at the parchment in his hands. Well, if Slytherin wanted to play games, he was more than capable of reciprocating. After all, he had his own reputation as an eccentric old man to keep up.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

For Harry, most of the rest of the day had been reasonably normal, but the next morning, he made his way down to the Hogwarts great hall for breakfast, his mind whirring.

Late last night, Daphne had slipped him a message. Apparently, Padma Patil had been asked by her father to send him her memory of the fight with the troll. Mister Patil was so proud of her daughter,
he'd invited all his friends and acquaintances around to show them. Copies of the memory had then spread throughout a good chunk of the more well-off adults of the wizarding world, all apparently equal measures shocked and amazed that four first-year witches had gone toe to toe with a full grown mountain troll before it was finished off by a ridiculously powerful, but equally foolish boy-who-lived.

Although there were no known pensieves among the Hogwarts students, rumours had spread throughout the castle yesterday like fiendfyre, and the four witches were being heralded as Heroines and Troll Slayers. Opinion was split on his brother, with half thinking him a hero for 'saving' the girls and the other half thinking him a rash idiot for jumping into a trolls grabbing range when the beast was already immobilised.

Harry sat down and picked up a discarded copy of the Daily Prophet. Sure enough, there on the front page was a photograph lifted from Padma's memory. It showed a particularly dramatic part of the battle when the troll threw a rock straight at Daphne, who was leaping towards the troll, conjured sword in hand, protected by a shield cast by Lisa Turpin. Hermione was ducking under the other troll's arm swing and Sophie and Padma were diving for the bathroom door.

Other pictures showed Daphne and Hermione plunging their twin swords into the monster's legs, Hermione's diffindo shattering the troll's club and freeing Padma from the troll's grasp, and Padma sliding through the troll's legs, casting a shrinking charm on the brute's shorts as she went.

Finally, one picture showed John Potter jumping on a mostly immobile troll and blasting its head off, sending both troll and boy to the floor.

By the time he'd finished reading the article, the hall had filled and Dumbledore got to his feet. The man cleared his throat and the hall quietened.

"I have a few announcements to make before you all head off to classes." The headmaster's eyes skimmed the four tables. "Firstly, as many of you may have noticed, our resident potions master is not currently with us. He has unfortunately suffered an accident and will not be with us for a while."

A few people clapped and cheered but were quickly shushed.

"Until Professor Snape returns, therefore, I shall be teaching potions classes with the aid of several upper year prefects."

An excited murmuring filled the hall. Harry swore under his breath.

"Next, in a totally unrelated incident to do with a rather large troll, Miss Granger, Miss Greengrass, Miss Padma Patil, Miss Turpin, and Mister John Potter have each earned twenty-five points for their respective houses."

Whispers and cheers spread throughout the hall.

"And finally," Dumbledore continued, in a voice that despite all impossibility seemed to twinkle as much as his eyes, "according to Lord Slytherin's request, I have decided to make the Bloody Baron the temporary head of Slytherin House."

Harry wanted to brain himself on the table. The daft old bugger actually went for it.

The Bloody Baron hovered at the front of the Slytherin table, ghostly blood dripping off him, chains draped across his shoulders and arms, looking simultaneously more anticipatory and more sadistic than Harry thought he'd ever seen the apparition. The other ghosts didn't look happy. The
rest of the hall looked nonplussed.

One Slytherin near him leant closer to another. "Can he do that?"

The other Slytherin shrugged.

Dumbledore waved a final hand. "And now, get to classes. Go on."

The students started to file out in pairs and groups.

Harry followed them. The Bloody Baron as head of house wasn't ideal, but it was certainly better than some of the other options. He could work with it.

"Oi, Potter!"

Harry turned, almost out of the hall, to find Romulus Volf forcing his way over to him.

"Yes?"

Volf stopped next to him. "You know tryouts are soon, right?"

"Yes, the duelling tryouts. Harry nodded. "Yes, two weeks away."

Volf nodded. "You know Granger went against that troll. You still sure you'll win? Nott's been at the club every week and I still don't think he can take the mudblood. You do still have a month to train."

Harry smirked. "I'm sure."

Volf scowled. "Because if you don't…" He made a fist and slammed it into the wall next to him. His scowl flashed into a wince.

Harry raised an eyebrow and looked at the fist, now slightly red. "So, you want some healing on that?"

"No, I don't," Volf grumbled, nursing the hand and not looking Harry in the eyes.

Harry grinned. "Are you sure? I hear Miss Granger is in healer training. You know… you could always…"

"Shut it, Potter!"

Harry snickered, turned and walked off down the corridor. "See you at the tryouts."

Behind him, Volf growled.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Heroine Hermione the troll slayer sat down in her first potions class since Halloween. The number of times she'd been approached to recount the events of that evening was starting to grate on her. She didn't have time for that rubbish. She had healing training, and schoolwork, and duelling practise, and physical training, and she was plugging away at setting up the muggleborn faction in the school. Still, it was at least better than being damsel-in-distress-Hermione the bully victim.

Daphne, by contrast, was in her element. The number of Slytherins the Greengrass Heiress could call acquaintances had risen substantially in the last twenty-four hours, and the dreaded dead space
between the Gray and the Dark at the Slytherin Great Hall table, had slightly shifted towards the Dark.

Temporary evil potions professor Dumbledore strolled to the front of the class, looked around, smiled a smile of friendship and twinkles, tapped his wand on the board and uncovered previously unseen writing.

"Good morning, class. I will be your potions professor for such time until Professor Snape is back with us." Dumbledore motioned to the back of the classroom. "I will be assisted in this by Miss Pebble and Mister Cummerlog, two of our sixth year prefects."

The two prefects waved.

"We will be continuing the syllabus of Professor Snape in upcoming lessons, but since my speciality is alchemy rather than potions, I thought it might be instructive to start out with a special lecture that highlights the similarities and differences between these two subjects."

Hermione sat a bit straighter in her chair. She might despise this evil old man for what he did and wanted to do to Harry, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to try her hardest in class, and she hadn't learnt much about alchemy.

"Now, who can tell me the difference between potions and alchemy?"

Her hand shot up.

"Miss Granger."

"Alchemy is permanent, potions are temporary."

Dumbledore nodded. "Well done. Two points to Slytherin. Yes, indeed. Alchemy is permanent, but can you tell us why it is permanent, Miss Granger?"

She reddened and shook her head. She hadn't learnt that yet.

"No matter, Miss Granger. Alchemy uses magic to enact real changes at the mundane level of things. It is the bridge that links magic to muggle disciplines such as chemistry and physics. Most other forms of magic, including potions and transfiguration, use magic to directly apply an effect over a structure that doesn't change. That is not what Alchemy does."

On the table, the headmaster rested two similar reddish looking rocks. "These stones are called bauxite. Bauxite is a type of rock found in many places throughout the world."

He placed his wand on one of the rocks. "Now using transfiguration, I could easily take this rock and turn it into something more interesting." He jabbed his wand and the rock turned into a metallic-looking model spitfire fighter plane. "This is easy, quick, and efficient, but it has a problem..."

The model airplane turned back into a rock.

"As you know from your transfiguration studies, the magic will eventually run out. However..." He pointed his wand at the other rock and made a complicated waving motion over it. What looked like a fine silver dust rose from the stone and deposited itself in a pile to the stone's side. The stone itself now had a darker colour. He then poked his wand at the pile of silvery dust, which glowed red-hot, liquefied, and flowed upwards, moulding itself into a familiar shape. A moment later, another, smaller model airplane, still red hot, sat on the desk. "This magic is permanent."
The class stared at the little object on the teacher's desk.

Sophie raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Roper?"

Sophie lowered her hand. "That's aluminium, isn't it?"

Dumbledore beamed. "Yes, it is. A metal discovered by alchemists more than a thousand years ago, and independently discovered by muggles more recently. It is light and strong — not as strong as steel, but it has a better weight to strength ratio. Muggles use it in their flying machines. We tend to use it in packaging, toys, and dancing cake tops."

A few Slytherins snorted.

Dumbledore ignored them and continued. "Alchemy doesn't create new things it merely works with what is already there. You cannot permanently create from nothing, but you can permanently change some things to others, if you know how." He adjusted his moon-shaped spectacles. "Mister Harry Potter."

Hermione turned to see her lord, almost hidden at the back of the class, perk up.

"Yes, Professor?"

"There are some spells we teach at Hogwarts that are actually alchemy, rather than the branch they purport to originate from. Can you think of any based on the rule we just discussed?"

Harry seemed to think for moment. "The bubblehead charm?"

Dumbledore looked surprised. "Indeed. And your reasoning?"

"Well, I know it works in normal air as a protection against potion fumes, but it also works underwater, doesn't it? So if it works underwater then it must be turning water into hydrogen and oxygen. It releases the hydrogen and keeps the oxygen in a bubble around the caster's face."

Dumbledore continued to look surprised. "That is a very well reasoned answer. Well done."

For the rest of the class, Hermione secretly pouted. No points. And the headmaster refused to call on Harry again, as well. Bastard.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore shuffled parchments on his desk and regarded the empty classroom as the last of his students filed out.

Just as Severus said, Harry Potter seemed to be well isolated and friendless. But he was also smart and knowledgeable. Maybe the boy's isolation was working against his plans. After all, all that time spent alone was probably spent in the library or such like. The question was, which was more dangerous… a knowledgeable Harry Potter or a connected one?

He didn't even need to think for longer than a moment. Connected. A connected Harry Potter was far worse than a knowledgeable one. So much depended on people either not caring what happened to the younger Potter or being ready to believe the worst of him.

He seemed to be slowly getting the Lord Slytherin situation under control, but Harry Potter was still a danger. He could not allow another Dark Lord to rise. He absolutely — could — not —
allow it.

He shuddered and wrestled control over the obsessive thoughts flying through his mind. Damn ritual.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

For the inner-circle girls of the Gray faction and their secret lordly classmate, the next two weeks flew by in a swirl of classes, studying, training, and politicking. A quick expedition though the pipes, to the third floor corridor, revealed that the defences around the stone had indeed been reset, much to Harry's annoyance.

Hermione *did* succeed in cracking the VCR programming obstacle, but they then immediately ran into the fidelius trip line the moment they stepped into the next room, causing them to completely forget where the stone was. The Headmaster had then almost nabbed them, and they decided from then on not to make another attempt on the stone until they had a solution.

With Hermione's hint from Madam Pomfrey, those solutions now trickled in like the eternal autumn rain that drizzled outside. The library's restricted divination section contained many tantalising hints and descriptions of all kinds of amazing spells, although they'd yet to find an actual how-to guide.

This was in-part hampered by the limited time they had for the search. Daphne was juggling the political boon of being the troll-slaying Slytherin princess with the fallout from the Bloody Baron taking up the head of Slytherin Hogwarts House.

Many of the students seemed to think Lord Slytherin was playing silly buggers with them, although there were others who pointed out that, terrifying though the Baron was, he was still fairer than Snape.

Harry tap-danced through a couple of meetings with his fellow Gray faction leaders and both Hermione and Daphne received owls from their parents questioning the appointment of the Bloody Baron while both lauding and decrying their Daily Prophet front page troll slaying antics.

Even Ginny had grilled Harry when he'd next dream visited her, even though he hadn't even been there, and Alex's next owl to Lord Slytherin had been one long plea to be taught to 'fight like those kick-ass girls'.

Harry had so many things going on, it wasn't until the start of November, the day of the duelling club tryouts, that he even had time to check in on one of his more unexpected and opportunistic projects.

He stood in a secret passageway, holding a note in one hand. He knocked on the lid of a trunk with the other.

The lid opened and a familiar shade of red hair popped out, followed quickly by the hair's head. "Greetings, Harry," said one of the Weasley twins. "I see you got our little note."

Harry nodded and followed the twin into the trunk. "Yeah." He looked around. The trunk wasn't as big as his, and only contained the one compartment, but it looked serviceable. "So this is your HQ? It looks well used."

The twin who'd let him in beamed and waved to his brother. "It is well used. Got a great deal on it from the man who was selling them."
The other twin raised his head from where he'd been working on something at a bench. "Yeah. We've wanted a secret place to do our projects for ages, but all the hidden passageways at Hogwarts are at risk of being discovered by Filch. Not a problem with this baby." He patted a wooden wall fondly. "When we're finished, we just pop it in our pocket."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You funded this on our arrangement? I'm surprised you found something like this for so little."

Twin A beamed. "Like we said, we got a good deal. And it wasn't the only thing." He waved to a wall. A small collection of ingredients and materials lined the wall on a shoulder height shelf.

Harry stepped over to the shelf and ran a thoughtful eye along it. "Nice collection of basic raw material," he commented. "Possible applications in potions, enchanting, crafting, and… alchemy?" He looked towards the twins.

Twin A sat down on a rickety looking wooden stool. "That's what we want to talk to you about."

Harry conjured a plush seat of his own causing a round of widened eyes. He sat down. "Go on then."

The twins looked at each other. "Well," Twin B started, sitting at the bench, "We've been working on a few projects since we started Hogwarts."

"To begin with it was mostly how to get around the castle without being spotted by the powers that be—"

"—But last year, we also started working on ideas for… things."

Harry tilted his head. "Things?"

"Well, pranks mostly. But they have other applications as well. When we leave home at the end of Hogwarts we want to be self-sufficient."

"We love our Mum, but she can be a bit overbearing at times."

"And if she had her way, the two of us fun loving jokesters would go to work having our souls sucked out by a nice clean ministry desk and a nice clean ministry badge."

"We've been saving our pocket money and we figured we could get a good product line of joke stuff together to go against Zonko's by our sixth year."

"But half of what we're thinking of making isn't really joke stuff."

"But we also know that actually mass producing stuff like Flume does takes serious gold."

"And we wouldn't have a clue how to go about selling stuff to big name people like the ministries or the old family businesses—"

"—So, we figured we'd stick to joke stuff."

"Stuff we can sell to our classmates or by owl order."

"But…" Twin A stopped tapping the tips of his fingers together from where he'd been resting his arms on his knees. "…Maybe there are other options now."

They both looked at him, expectantly.
Harry leant forward in his chair. "Exactly what kind of 'stuff' are we talking about here?"

Twin B stood up, walked over to a nearby shelf, withdrew several rolls of parchment, and deposited them in a pile in Harry's lap.

Harry unrolled the first one and whistled. "Magical listening-in devices?"

"Yeah, the idea is that the listening bit, what we call the ear, uses mundane methods to pick up the sound, then a special tube-like rune stone in the middle of the line uses magic to transport the sound to a second ear on the other end of the line."

"That way you can get around certain wards designed to stop eavesdropping—"

"—Because there's no actual magic being used within the ward. It's not even 'eclektic.'"

Harry's eyes flicked over the many scribbles surrounding the parchment's drawings. "And the distance?"

"We think we can get up to ten metres distance. The main limitation is the size of the runes."

Harry nodded. This had potential. Certainly as much more than a prank toy. He unfurled the next roll. "A spray can?"

"Not just any spray can. This will be able to store and deliver any potion in a fine mist to a target up to three metres away."

Harry frowned. "You mean like this?" He reached into his pocket and withdrew his empty spray can of drought of living death.

The twin's faces fell. "It already exists?"

"Yeah."

"Ah, but does it have an inbuilt stasis system to preserve the potion?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. It didn't. That was why he couldn't carry around living death all the time. He shook his head. "No, but the patent is owned already. I'm not sure if a stasis charm would differentiate it enough for the Wizengamot to grant a new one."

Twin B grimaced.

"On the other hand," he continued. "I can think of several individuals who would greatly appreciate that little innovation, and damn the patent laws, so don't chuck that one out just yet."

The twins perked up. "So, you do know how we might sell things other than pranks?"

Harry rolled up the spray potion parchment. "Oh, yes. What are you thinking about? A work contract? A sales contract? A partnership?"

The twins looked at each other. "Well, we really don't want to just continue accepting money from you with nothing in return—"

"—We were thinking of a partnership—"

"—Ten percent in exchange for what you've already said you're giving us."
Harry held up his hands. "Whoa, keep your feet down."

The twins eyed him.

Harry took a deep breath. "How much time are you two planning on putting into this?"

Twin A looked at Twin B before answering. "We put in maybe fifteen hours together a week during term time—"

"—But every hour of the day on holidays."

Harry nodded. "So, you're going to put in…" he conjured a parchment and quill and started scribbling. "Just over five thousand hours over the next four years?"

Twin A's eyes grew wide. "Really? I guess we are then."

Harry continued. "Now, if I'm going to put twenty-five galleons a month into the project, that adds up to 1,200 galleons over the period…"

Twin B nodded.

"…That means that if my stake is ten percent, you're valuing this venture at… twelve thousand galleons (£600,000), and your own labour for every hour you work on this project at four sickles an hour."

The twins sat in silence for a moment. Then, "I don't think Dad makes that much… I know Bill and Charlie don't…"

"…Quite so, oh brother of mine."

Harry nodded. "Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that the project was split thirty-five, sixty-five. That would value the business at a more reasonable 3,400 galleons (£170,000), and your time at two sickles fourteen knuts an hour.

Twin A started chewing his quill.

"Of course, we could always flip those numbers, sixty-five, thirty-five, but have me putting in fifty galleons a month instead of twenty-five…"

Twin B narrowed his eyes. "You have access to that kind of money?"

"For worthwhile projects, yes."

"Your parents—"

"—Have nothing to do with this," he interrupted. "My money does not come from them."

The twins looked at each other again. Then stood up. "Excuse us, Harry, we need to talk about this in private."

"Of course."

They left him alone in the trunk.

Harry stared at the bare wood wall. Huh. So they couldn't actually talk telepathically? Or maybe they just needed to shout at each other a bit. He conjured another piece of parchment and started
A few minutes later they returned and sat back down.

Twin A rested his elbows on his knees and put his hand under his chin. "We'll commit to five thousand hours of work over the next four years valued at three sickles twelve knuts an hour in exchange for 1,440 galleons over the same period and thirty percent of the business (£72,000)."

Harry tapped his chin. "And the valuation?"

"The business would be valued at 4,800 galleons (£240,000)."

Harry shifted in his seat. "That sounds fine, so long as we go with these terms." He passed the parchment he'd been scribbling on to Twin A.

Twin B leaned over to read over Twin A's shoulder. Twin B looked up. "We can work with this."

Harry stood up. "Excellent." He smiled and extended his hand.

The twins mirrored his smile and reached out in turn.

They shook.

Twin A frowned. "I understand we're not signing anything legal until we're of age, but how is that going to work with you? You're still not going to be of age then, you know."

Harry grinned. "You let me worry about that." He walked over to the table and glanced down at the marauder's map. "You focus on making awesome things of ambiguous intent."

The map showed the students who weren't fortunate enough to be on free period all filling out of classrooms for a bathroom break. Technically that included him, but… well… Binns.

One of the twins walked over and stood next to him. "You know, Potter, you are so smart it's actually scary. We'd never thought to think about measuring investment in our projects using time as though its just another form of money. Are you sure you're eleven?"

In an out of the way corridor, a point marked Justin Finch-Fletchley stood alone with another marked Draco Malfoy.

Harry frowned. "Oh, yes. I was definitely born eleven years ago."

The two points circled each other as though in a dance.

"We couldn't persuade you to occasionally put in a few hours of your own, could we? You're already in with us quite deep and you seem to really know your stuff."

Draco and Justin's points seemed to settle down a bit. He chewed his lip. "I probably will. I'll certainly put you in touch with another group I'm working with who are similar in scope if not in spirit."

"Who?" Twin B's voice sounded surprised and shocked.

"Can't say right now. They're staying under the radar. Certain people of a dubious nature don't approve of their existence in our world, if you catch my meaning."
"Ah," Twin A nodded. "Say no more, little Slytherin Harry."

Harry snorted and looked down again. The two points had started moving erratically around each other and a third point now shot from another corridor, heading straight towards the oddly moving pair. The point was labelled Hermione Granger and it was moving fast.

Harry grinned.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

[A few moments previously]

Hermione wasn't sure what had first clued her in to something going on. What she did know is that seconds after she'd passed a particularly ugly painting on the way to the bathroom, she'd found herself turning back, ducking around a corridor corner, and running frantically, wand out, towards a couple of her classmates.

Draco stood, arms folded, face smug, and making no move the defend himself against an irate Justin Finch-Fletchley, who had his wand trained on the Malfoy Heir.

"Justin! Don't!" Hermione stopped a half dozen metres away from the hostile duo, careful not to directly point her wand at either.

Malfoy smirked. "Yes, that's right, 'Filth'-Fletchley. Listen to Slytherin's attack kitten."

Justin glared. "This scum was threatening my parents!"

"Yes, but attacking him is just what he wants." She turned to Malfoy, giving him a dirty look. "And you have no right to goad him like that!"

Malfoy shrugged. "I was just explaining his place in our world. You at least have some understanding of that."

"My place is up to my lord," she ground out. "Just as yours is to yours."

Malfoy's eye twitched.

She turned back to her fellow muggleborn. "Justin, Malfoy can't legally do anything to your parents, but that might change if you attack him."

Justin scowled, wand still pointing at Malfoy.

Malfoy harrumphed. "You know, at the start of the year, I'd hoped the Gray was going to be more understanding. Now I find they're nothing but a bunch of blood-traitors and mudbloods."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "If we agreed with you on everything, then we wouldn't be the Gray, would we? We'd be the Dark. I didn't see the Malfoys complaining when we blocked that bill on forcing families to open their libraries to ministry inspection."

Malfoy grumbled and looked away.

Justin watched the back and forth, wand still trained on Malfoy.

Eventually Malfoy turned back. "Fine! We'll see if you're still feeling so confident after the duelling tryouts tonight. I hear Nott can smash through a second year shield charm now. Should be interesting to see you dragging yourself across the common room floor when he's finished with
you." And with that, he turned around, swishing his long robes behind him and marched off without looking back.

The two of them watched the Malfoy heir until he turned the corridor corner.

Justin slowly took a deep, long breath and lowered his wand.

Hermione eyed it curiously. "What were you planning to do anyway?"

Justin shook his head. "Honestly? I don't know. The only attack spell I know is the tripping hex and it's not like that would have done anything. I was just so angry."

Hermione nodded. "Understandable. What started it?"

"Oh, in history of magic I made a comment to Kevin about how backward some of the wizarding world's customs were. Malfoy heard it." He grimaced and looked down. "I think I may have offended Susan and Hannah as well."

Hermione winced in sympathy. "Possibly, yeah. This is the kind of thing I was talking about when we first met in Madam Malkin's."

Justin looked up, sharply. "That's right! You said you were going to sort out culture lessons! When's that happening?" His voice rang with accusation.

Hermione flushed and took a step backwards. "I'm working on it, Justin, really. I've just been really busy and I wanted to get all the other muggleborns in our year onboard as well — to teach everyone together."

Justin frowned. "How many are in?"

"Just you at the moment."

Justin scowled. "Well, what are we waiting for? C'mon!" He turned and walked off.

Hermione looked after the former Eton-bound muggleborn's back with a panicked expression. She quickly made to follow him. This wasn't in Harry's plans until after Christmas!

— DP & SW: TfoP —

In the library, Hermione and Justin pulled out two chairs and sat down.

"Hey, Kevin."

Kevin Entwistle looked up from his parchment. "Hey, Justin — Hermione. We working together then?"

"Actually," started Justin, "I wanted to talk to you about something."

Kevin put down his quill. "Sure, what's up?"

"I just got out of a sort-of fight with Malfoy—"

Kevin's eyes hardened.

"—He was trying to get me in trouble with wizarding laws and things we don't know about. Hermione says she'll teach us, but she wants all us muggleborns in together. To make sure we don't
give them all excuses to get us in trouble."

Kevin's look turned pensive.

"So, you in?"

Kevin looked towards Hermione. "You can also teach us to make swords like you used on that
troll, yeah? That was way cool."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you. Maybe we'll have some time leftover, although you really shouldn't
be waving swords around unless you know how to use them."

Justin looked sideways at her. "So, you know how to use them?"

"Ah," Hermione blushed slightly, "Well, my lord says that when facing something very large all
you really need to know is 'pointy bit goes forward.'"

Kevin and Justin both snorted with laughter.

Kevin picked his quill back up. "So, when's this happening then?"

Hermione looked towards Justin. "As soon as we get all the other's to say yes, and I get something
to help from my lord."

Justin raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"I don't want to say in case I can't get it. But if I can it will help a lot."

"Oh, okay then." Justin pushed his chair back. "Let's go find Sophie and Dean."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Just a few metres away, Harry, invisible under the Peverell cloak, passed Hermione chatting to
Finch-Fletchley and Entwhistle, entered the library's restricted section, made his way to his fidelius
charmed area, pulled his shrunk trunk out of his pocket, enlarged it, and climbed inside.

Daphne sat in one of the trunk's armchairs, book open in her lap, palms under her chin, fingers
resting on her cheeks, looking utterly fed up. She looked up. "This is hopeless."

Harry moved to sit down in the chair opposite Daphne. "Still no luck?"

Daphne flipped the pages of the book. "Every single reference I've found to anything that might
help leads nowhere. Missing books, erased text, pages torn out… The spells all
sound really helpful, but they just aren't there! Listen to this one! Eye of Kilrogg — Summons a
floating eyeball that allows the caster to see through it and direct its movement. Passes through all
known solid objects… Invisible to unaltered human sight.' That—" She jabbed her finger at the
page "—is just the kind of thing that might not trip the fidelius tripwire around the stone, but the
page with the casting details is gone!"

Harry chewed his cheek. "Looks like they purged the sources quite thoroughly then."

"I'll say."

"Hmm…." Harry leaned back and brought the tips of his fingers together. "Then we'll just have to
extend our search to sources that might have survived the purge."
Daphne paused while idly flipping more pages. "Sources like what?"

"My first thought is the paintings around the school. The ones painted before the statute of secrecy, and therefore before the purging of divination."

Daphne's eyes widened.

"I don't know if there's a seer among them, but if there is we might be able to persuade it to teach us."

Daphne slammed the book shut. "Would you like me to handle that?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, thank you, Daph — and I'll write an owl to Luna. She and Alex sound like they're getting on quite well these days. Who knows? Maybe the Black Library will furnish us with a solution."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione indignantly stared at the eagle-headed bronze knocker guarding the entrance to Ravenclaw tower. "What do you mean you won't let us in? We answered correctly!"

The eagle-headed knocker stared back. "You didn't honestly think that answering a riddle was the only thing you had to do to get in here did you? I can see you're not a Ravenclaw from your crest!"

Hermione huffed. This situation felt annoyingly familiar.

Beside her, Justin snickered.

"Yes, well, laugh it up." She turned to the browny-blond haired muggleborn "I guess we'll be here until someone comes that can take a message."

Justin pointed behind her.

She turned. "Oh."

An older Ravenclaw prefect walked towards them, arms full of books.

They exchanged greetings and the prefect agreed to take their message.

"Just let me do the talking," Hermione said, as they waited for Sophie to arrive.

Soon after, the door opened and Sophie emerged, followed closely by Padma, Lisa, and Terry Boot.

"Hey, Hermione, what's up?" Sophie asked.

"Hi." She glanced at the other three Ravenclaws. Padma and Lisa had been friendly yet cautious to her and Daphne after the troll incident, but she was still hesitant to talk to Sophie about delicate matters in front of them. "I was wondering if we could talk to you about something in private?"

Padma stepped in front of a surprised Sophie. "Anything that needs to be said can be said in front of us."

Sophie looked between Padma and Hermione, confusion showing on her face. "Um… I really don't mind—"
"Sophie," Padma interrupted, "right now it's really not a good idea. She can speak with us all together."

Hermione frowned. "I only wanted to talk about wizarding culture."

Padma and Lisa both narrowed their eyes.

Lisa laid a protective hand on Sophie's shoulder. "Even more reason then, and shouldn't Heiress Greengrass also be here for this?"

Hermione looked between the two hostile witches, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "What reason would Daphne have to be here? This has nothing to do with her."

Behind the four Ravenclaw witches, Terry urgently mouthed something to her, although she couldn't quite make out what.

"Wait," Padma tilted her head. "This isn't about the troll?"

Hermione stood in front of them, nonplussed, feeling like they were all reading from completely different scripts. Then the lightbulb switched on. Her eyes widened. "You thought I was going to call in a life debt!"

Padma and Lisa's face went completely blank, instantly confirming her realisation.

"What's a life debt?" asked Justin and Sophie in unison.

Hermione threw up her hands in exasperation. "This is exactly the kind of thing I'm talking about."

Padma and Lisa took a tiny step back.

Hermione turned to Justin. "A life debt is a magical debt created between two people when one of them puts their own life at risk to save the life of the other with no expectation of future benefit."

She turned back to the Ravenclaws. "I just caught Malfoy trying to goad Justin into attacking him so he could make things difficult for him and his family, but I stopped him. I want to get all the muggleborns together for wizarding culture classes to put a stop to that kind of exploitation going on."

Padma's eyes widened. "That's what you wanted to ask? Why the secrecy then?"

Hermione lowered her eyes for a moment. "Well, you've always said you didn't trust me. I figured you'd think I was trying to pull something."

Padma had the grace to look ashamed.

Lisa tapped a finger on a thoughtful chin. "Culture lessons aren't actually a bad idea. I wonder why no one's done it before."

Padma muttered. "Maybe because certain families would kick up a stink?"

Lisa pouted.

Sophie edged around her friends. "Ah, Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Can they really hurt my Mum and Dad?"
"If you did something sufficiently extreme, yes."

Sophie looked towards Padma and Lisa, the question obvious in her eyes.

They both nodded, awkwardly.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Sophie's voice sounded somewhat hurt.

Padma rubbed her arm. "It's not the kind of thing that's pleasant to talk about so no one really does, and your situation isn't nearly as bad as some of ours." Her voice lowered so only the girls could hear. "At least you don't have to worry about being married off to someone."

Sophie put a horrified hand over her mouth.

Justin stepped into the circle. "So, are you in?"

The girls all looked at him for a few awkward moments.

Then Sophie nodded. "Yes. I suppose I'd better do it."

"And I'd like to sit in on the first lesson, at least," added Padma.

Hermione nodded, slowly.

Lisa shifted uncomfortably. "I'd like to join too, but it's probably not a good idea... all things considered."

Hermione nodded again. The Turpin's attempts to court the Dark were well known.

Terry waved to them from the doorway to the Ravenclaw common room, a large grin firmly attached to his face. "Well, I'm getting back to our potions essay. Take care of Sophie, you two!"

Sophie's cheeks reddened.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne climbed the grand staircase looking for what would hopefully be the next puzzle piece in Harry's plans. She had found and checked out a book from the library on the castle's paintings and quickly identified what she was looking for. Now she just had to find it.

She arrived at the fifth floor corridor, turned down a side passageway, ducked under a tapestry, walked up another corridor, stopped at a particularly large suit of armour, turned around in a circle three times while humming, then walked back the way she came to find a completely different tapestry and a completely different corridor.

Now, if she was right, it should be right around here. She stopped and let out a satisfied breath.

"Good day there, Young Miss." The portrait of an older man sat at a small round table, cluttered with crystal balls, rods, and other divination paraphernalia. "And how might this old wizard help such a pretty young thing as yourself?"

Daphne controlled her combined flush of embarrassment and annoyance. She opened her mouth, but the self proclaimed old wizard beat her to it.

"—I hope you haven't tracked me down just to try to wheedle the lost secrets of divination from me."
Daphne shut her mouth. "You wouldn't be the first, you know. Every decade or so, someone new tries." The portrait eyed the book she carried. "But you're a bit young for that, so maybe you're just an appreciator of fine art, eh?"

Daphne opened her mouth again. "You say they try? Why doesn't it work?"

The portrait sighed. "Because I can't. Yes, I have the knowledge, but I was bound never to speak them — just like every other portrait you'll find. All portraits are connected a little bit, you know — least the ones in Britain are. It's part of the Albion Family Magics."

Daphne's eyes widened. "Someone cast a spell that affected all the portraits in Britain? Who could possibly do something like that?"

The portrait looked back at her. "Why, the Wizengamot, of course."

Daphne groaned. Of course. The Wizengamot did have a small amount of control over the Albion magics.

"Now, was that all you visited me for?" the portrait asked, waggling its eyebrows. "Or did such a pretty witch have something else in mind?"

Daphne blanched, turned, and stalked away without a backwards glance. At least she now knew why this portrait was so well hidden.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

On the other side of the castle, Hermione waited awkwardly outside the portrait of the Fat Lady. This wasn't exactly Slytherin home turf and the looks from passing Gryffindors were decidedly hostile. It was probably only the presence of a yellow and black Hufflepuff tie on Justin's very obviously muggleborn school uniform, looking so different from her own traditional styled robes, that stopped glares turning into something more confrontational.

Eventually, the portrait swung open.

"Hi, Dean."

Dean Thomas looked surprised. "Hey, Hermione, long time no talky. So you're the snake that wants to see me?"

"Well, me and Justin here." She gestured towards the Hufflepuff.

The two boys exchanged introductions.

Dean leaned against the wall. "So, what's up?"

Justin stepped forward. "Malfoy was trying to pull some stunt with me earlier and I nearly fell for it. Me and Hermione are putting together a group to teach all us who are new to this world how it works so we don't get trapped by people like Malfoy."

The dark skinned boy chewed his lip. "Doesn't sound like a bad idea, although I'll need to be careful. No offence, Hermione, but Slytherins aren't exactly liked in Gryffindor."

Hermione waved it away.
Justin nodded. "So you're in."

Dean nodded back. "Sure, just don't tell any of my classmates, especially not John Potter. He leads the Slytherins-aren't-to-be-trusted brigade." He kicked off the wall and turned to Hermione. "I really don't want to know what he'd do if he found out."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John Potter lounged in the middle of the Gryffindor common room's largest sofa, Lily Moon, on one side, Fay Dunbar and Lavender Brown on the other. Across from him sat Ron, Parvati, Neville, and Sally-Anne. John was buried, nose-deep, in an advanced defence against the dark arts book, only occasionally looking up to way-in as the discussion bobbed and flowed from school work to holidays to quidditch and duelling.

The portal opened and Dean stepped back in.

John frowned. It didn't look like there'd been trouble.

The boy passed halfway between the portrait and John's sofa.

"Hey, Dean!" he called out. "Who was the snake, then? Need any help with anything?"

Dean got to the couch and shrugged. "Nah. Yeah there was a snake, but it was mostly about the puff with her. A homework help thing I'd agreed to. You know, gotta help the puffs out, right?" He grinned, exchanged a few more pleasantries, and left, heading for the spiral staircase to the boys first-years dormitory.

John glanced behind him to see Dean vanish from sight. He turned back to his book, eyebrows furrowed. Something about that conversation seemed off, although he couldn't put his finger on what. The last time that happened he'd almost missed the troll and he couldn't afford any more near misses like that. He'd better keep his eyes and ears open. Especially with the first quidditch match this weekend and the Gryffindor duelling tryouts the day after tomorrow.

He put his book back down and stared into space.

Of course, the Slytherin tryouts should be happening today, shouldn't they? Who competed last time? Nott wasn't it? But Harry beat Greengrass in defence, and his draw wasn't bad at all.

His face hardened. If Harry somehow slithered his way onto the duelling team, he'd annihilate the bastard.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The Hogwarts duelling arena stood, proud and firm, a round colosseum of solid oak, far away from the normal hustle and bustle of the school, at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Its complex sets of privacy and safety wards made it ideal for the violent sport held within. The roof could be closed and opened at will, to better accommodate the ever changing and volatile Scottish weather. In three years time it would be used to host the first event of the triwizard tournament, but it wasn't dragons that Hermione Granger, standing as she was in a group of other Slytherins, would be facing today.

No, today she would be facing Harry — her lord, her best friend, the boy who had introduced her to the wizarding world, the most amazing person in the world, and the wizard who she knew would triumph over evil and usher in a bright new age… his age.

Oh, and Nott too.
Romulus Volf walked up to a raised platform and turned to look down at the group. "Alright! Listen up!"

The group stopped talking among itself and gave Volf their attention.

"I only take the best, so just because you made the team last year, doesn't mean you'll make it this year! And don't think that just because you have powerful friends that means you're going to get a free pass!" Volf glared at her.

She blanked her face and stared back.

"The duelling team will be made up of one person from each year. In the tournament, the first years will face off against each other and the winner will then face the other team's second year duellist, and so on, until one side has all seven team members defeated."

The assorted Slytherin's watched, stony eyed.

"Each year's slot will be decided by a straight knockout tournament. We're going to work our way down from the top. Since the seventh and sixth year slots have already been decided, fifth years will be first."

Some of the older boys straightened, fingered wands, and generally gave the impression of chomping at the bit.

"One last thing." Volf's eye's became hard. "Memories of the tryouts are not to be gifted or traded to anyone! Not even your lord or head of house. If I find anyone has done so, they'll be kicked from the team, the club, be in detention for the whole year, and be liable to have an accident."

The group collectively nodded their heads.

"Right, fifth years! Let's go!"

Hermione made her way up the rows of seats that lined the lower arena. A moment later, she was joined by Heir Nott, much to her surprise. Nott hadn't taken the news of her being a muggleborn well. It was hardly surprising, given the games she and Daphne had played with him on the Hogwarts Express.

"Feeling confident, Mudblood?"

She turned her head to look into the boys eyes, then turned back to arena where the first bout was about to start. "That depends on what you mean."

Nott growled. "I mean, do you really think that a faking mudblood like you stands a chance against a real heir of a noble house?"

Hermione didn't look back at him. Instead, the lights and shouts of the combatants below, now fighting for the coveted year slot, held her gaze. "Yes," she answered.

Nott didn't reply for a moment. "If you didn't have Lord Slytherin protecting you, you'd be nothing."

She again slowly turned to Nott and smiled. "But I do, which must mean I am something."

Nott scowled. "So why aren't you all confident then?"

Hermione frowned and let her eyes travel past Nott to where Harry sat a third of the way around the
arena, alone and isolated.

Nott turned to follow her gaze. "Potter?" He sounded incredulous. "What in Merlin's name are you worried about him for? He was raised by muggles! The Potters thought he was a squib! He hasn't been to a single duelling club meet-up!"

She raised an eyebrow.

Nott rolled his eyes. "You're different. Everyone knows you and Heiress Greengrass receive secret training from Lord Slytherin."

"And yet, he beat Daphne in defence."

Nott frowned.

Hermione turned back to the duellists below. "I have my suspicions about Potter. Something about him feels different. Maybe you've missed it, caught up in the drivel that Professor Snape spouted at the start of year."

Nott said no more and turned forward to watch the older duellists, occasionally shooting furtive glances towards Harry.

Eventually, the first years were called down.

Volf motioned to them. "Granger and Nott first. Then Potter versus the winner."

Hermione couldn't fail to notice the look of intense dislike on Volf's face when addressing both her and Harry, although more for her than her lord. She walked back until she and Nott were approximately twenty to thirty metres apart, turned, and waited.

Volf held up a hand. "Standard duelling rules... Begin!"

Hermione moved left.

Nott ran right.

Spell chains flew between the two, flashes of lightly shaded reds, blues, pinks, and greens dancing between the two combatants, combatants who skilfully dodged and shielded to avoid the hostile magic.

Nott tried to quickly close the distance, but Hermione kept running further away, occasionally making use of an arena obstacle to frustrate the Nott heir.

All too quickly, Nott's casting speed slowed, and now Hermione went on the attack. For a full three seconds, Nott was pummelled by an opponent twice as powerful as himself, barely able to hold on, before Hermione too slowed, and the match became a war of attrition, a war that Hermione had the clear advantage in. Not only was there a mild power difference between herself and Nott, it was also clear she was superior, not only in skill, but also in physical endurance.

Less than a half dozen spell chains after she'd exhausted the magic in her wand and body, and started drawing magic straight from her core, Nott fell to the ground, and didn't get up.

Volf raised his hand, scowling. "Winner, Granger."

Hermione let out a breath and turned to the stands to rest up.
"Where do you think you're going, Granger?"

She turned. Volf was grinning, while Nott, now revived, nursed a bruised arm.

Behind Volf, Harry shrugged apologetically.

Oh, so that's how it was.

She turned back and sighed. It wasn't like she had any real chance to win anyway, but it would've been nice to duel Harry on fair terms. Apparently Volf wasn't as confident in Harry as she was.

She retraced her steps to the starting position.

Harry faced her, holly wand at the ready.

Volf raised his hand. "Standard duelling rules. Begin!"

Hermione sprinted towards Harry, throwing spell chains as she went. She knew full well that to beat a more powerful opponent you had to close the distance quickly or be defeated in a drawn out struggle like Nott had with her.

She didn't have very long. Eighteen seconds, exactly. That was how long she could cast at full power for. During that small timeframe, she could go toe to toe with a full adult wizard, and be at no handicap. In fact, given the high attunement she had with her wand, against many, she'd even be at an advantage.

Harry however, didn't retreat like she'd done with Nott. He matched her spell for spell, and when she got within the duelling dead zone, the range at which dodging became nigh-on impossible, Harry flicked his wand at one of her invisible tripping hexes, and swatted it back at her.

She didn't even have time to curse. The hex hit her, she tripped, red filled her view, and she knew no more.

When she came to, Harry offered her his hand. She took it, looking annoyed on the outside, but secretly cheering within. Volf raised his hand, looking very smug. "Winner, Potter!"

Harry nodded.

"—And now!" Volf continued without missing a beat. "I distinctly remember you, Potter, saying you could take on the ENTIRE Slytherin duelling team."

The other Slytherins who'd secured their places ambled over. One idly twirled his wand.

"Time to put your money where your mouth is." Volf turned to the assembled group. "You've heard it people! Potter here thinks he's better than us! He's been boasting for months!"

The group scowled.

"He's going up against the lot of us, extended class B rules, one after the other, no breaks, if he faints, we revive him, if he gives up, he's off the team. We stop only if it looks like he might die!"

Hermione looked to Harry who was smiling. She barely succeed in not smirking herself.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

A little while later, in the Slytherin common room, Daphne sat in the armchair that was the
unofficial throne of the Gray. In front of her, two sofas sat at acute angles to her, producing a long diamond shape with a low table in the middle and her at the tip.

On the other side of the room, Draco Malfoy sat with the Dark in an almost identical set-up. Their armchairs were such that she and Malfoy could see each other with a turn of their heads but weren't looking at each other all the time.

In front of her sat Tracey, Blaise, Flint, and a few other children of the Gray, spread out over all seven year groups. One spot on Tracey and Blaise's sofa was conspicuously empty.

Occasionally, Daphne shot a glance to the Slytherin common room door. No one had come through it for a while now. The duelling trials should have finished by now. Soon, it would begin. Any moment now.

Tracey wrung her hands. "You could at least look a little worried, Daph."

Daphne looked up from her transfiguration homework. "Hermione will be fine. You saw the troll thing in the paper. Nott won't stand a chance."

Tracey looked at her. Her face betrayed a hint of exasperation. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?" "Potter!"

Daphne raised an eyebrow. "What about Potter?"

"Have you seen him all evening?"

"Well, no."

"He could be at the duelling trials! He beat you, Daph. Did you forget that? He might be able to beat Hermione too."

Blaise looked over his charms book. "You know Tracey, you seem to keep quite an eye on Potter. Is there something you want to tell us?"

Tracey folded her arms and huffed. "I just think you're all taking him too lightly. Something's up with him. He acts far too confident considering how the house treats him. He never gets angry or sad, he just smiles as though the whole thing is a damn joke! And he's still from a noble house, even if he's not the heir."

Flint growled. "A Light noble house—no—the Light noble house."

Tracey didn't back down. "And he was sorted into Slytherin, not Gryffindor. When was the last time a Potter was sorted into Slytherin, hmm?"

Flint didn't get time to answer Tracey's question though, because at that moment the Slytherin common room door opened and a large group of Slytherins entered, led by a dazed and white faced Volf. The duelling captain looked like he'd seen a ghost. One you weren't supposed to see that is. His eye was blackened. His robes were shredded, crusted with mud and dirt, and he gripped one arm as though it might fall off.

Daphne's lip curled up slightly before she quickly schooled her features.

The common room went silent as Volf stumbled forward.
The various duelling club members spread out across the room, each one joining their respective year groups, ashen faces collapsing into sofas and chairs, and in the case of a fourth year witch, straight onto the floor by her friend's table, her legs apparently giving out beneath her.

Nott made a beeline for Malfoy's group and started whispering urgently with him. Malfoy's eyes narrowed, then widened in shock.

From the back of the group, Hermione emerged and made her way over, sitting herself down next to Tracey. Her face showed shock with a hint of awe. She stared off into the middle distance, seemingly unaware of their presence.

Daphne frowned. "Granger, what's going on? Why does the duelling club look like they just met the Dark Lord?"

Hermione turned to look her straight in the eyes. "Potter." Her voice sounded dead.

"What?" asked Tracey, without a hint of emotion.

Hermione took a deep breath, leaned forward and hissed, "Potter just took out the entire Slytherin duelling team!"

All heads around the table snapped up. Suddenly the name 'Potter' could be heard circulating the room.

Flint scoffed. "You're bullshitting."

"Does it look like I'm... Bullshitting?!!" Hermione shrieked.

Now the sounds of the common room were morphing into a cacophony of incredulous shouts and curses.

Daphne glanced at the Dark to see the whole group shouting and arguing.

Tracey glared at her. "I told you, Daph! Didn't I tell you!? I told you!"

Blaise sat gobsmacked. "No way. You must be exaggerating. That kind of ability, at eleven? That's just not possible!"

The other Slytherins around the table stared at the growing hubbub, faces slightly white.

Tracey turned to Blaise. "Even if all the duelling club members"—she swept a hand over the melting down common room—"are exaggerating somewhat, it doesn't change the fact that we should have reached out to Potter ages ago! And now it's too late. Everyone's going to be after him!"

Daphne took a deep breath. "Clearly, if this is true—and I don't believe you, Granger—then I agree we might have made a small miscalculation."

Tracey scoffed. "You think?"

Hermione fiddled with the cuffs of her robes, looking very out of place without a book, quill, or wand in her hands. "He wasn't even tired by the end of it. He looked like he could just keep on going forever."

"Oh, Merlin." One of the other Slytherin's hands started shaking.
One mean looking third year a few tables away vomited onto the floor.

Daphne didn't blame him. She'd seen the looks many of the House had been shooting Harry for the last few months and she guessed that those cheerful smiles that Harry'd been shooting back would suddenly take on a far less than innocent meaning.

The arguing, shouts, expletives, and even the occasional wand draw, continued for what seemed an age, but was probably just a few minutes.

No one seemed to want to leave the common room. The entire house was focused on the door.

Tracey looked over to where the Dark sat.

Daphne followed her gaze to see the Dark's arguing had mostly died down. Malfoy poked at a parchment on the table as though it owed him money.

Tracey turned back, suddenly looking deadly serious. "Daph, the moment Potter walks in that door, you're going to invite him to sit with us. Before anyone else does. We cannot afford for someone like that to align himself with the Dark."

Hermione nodded.

All the other Slytherins, sat around the table, looked to her, faces worried and expectant.

She leaned back in her armchair and sighed. "Very well, I can see that events have overtaken us and we must make do the best we can. Thankfully, I don't believe any of us have unduly antagonised him, so we may have an opening there."

Flint suddenly looked uncomfortable.

She nodded towards Hermione, Tracey, and Blaise. "Get ready to make some space if necessary."

They all nodded.

A few more minutes went by.

Then, the door to the common room creaked open.

All noise ceased. All heads turned.

There stood Harry, but not as he'd been for the past few months. While before he'd been happy to wear a similar uniform to that worn by muggleborn students, he now wore what Daphne knew he'd worn on the Hogwarts Express. Traditional robes cut in the finest materials, fit for the young son of an Ancient and Noble House. Harry's public expression had changed too. While before he made his way everywhere with a happy-go-lucky face of carefree abandon, now his face was set, and his eyes were flinty.

She risked a glance towards Malfoy to see the young heir staring at Harry the way one might stare at a complex puzzle in a magical Mayan temple — great riches for success, instead death for failure.

No one in the common room made any move to approach him, or speak.

Harry surveyed the common room and slowly walked towards the middle, the space that was traditionally left wide open for people to walk through, and the area that had now become the unofficial divide between the Dark on the one side, and the Gray on the other. Each footstep
sounded loudly on the hardwood floor and Daphne realised Harry wore iron tipped boots under his 
robes.

He reached the middle of the room, took out his wand—several people drew back—and conjured the exact same overstuffed comfy chair he'd conjured for her when they'd first met, almost three years ago. A few people gasped. Daphne couldn't help but smile.

Then he sat down, took out a book from somewhere, and started to read. Right there, in the middle of the clear, open, floor.

Tracey shot her a significant look.

Her slight smile vanished. Damn. Somehow, when she'd imagined this moment, she'd thought it would be with the majority of the common room chatting among themselves, not focusing with patronus like intensity on what she was about to do.

Carefully, making sure to stay as graceful as possible, she rose from her arm chair.

Immediately, every head swung to her, but she couldn't focus on them. She drew a stray strand of long, blonde hair behind her ear and made her way to the centre of the room.

As she approached, Harry looked up and snapped the book shut. He rose from his chair as slowly as she had from hers.

"Heiress Greengrass." His voice was dry and formal.

"Mister Potter." She stopped a few metres from him. "It would seem you have been holding out on us." She tried to project just the right amount of accusation, curiosity, and pureblood disdain.

Harry smiled. "I believe that you can learn a lot about a person by watching how they treat those who are below them. And it is very easy to watch, when you are believed to be that person."

She raised her nose slightly. "And what have you learned about me, Mister Potter?"

You could cut the air with a diffindo.

Harry waved a vague hand. "Things. Some good, some not so good. Either way, I would not care to speak about them in such a public place." He turned and surveyed the dozens upon dozens of staring faces.

"Oh?" She leapt at the obvious hook. "Then I must insist that you join me and my friends. I'm sure they'd be fascinated to meet you properly."

Harry smiled. "Heiress Greengrass, thank you for your invitation. I might just do that. Although I feel I will sit here for a little while more." He held the book he'd been reading up. "This book really is most interesting."

Daphne nodded, turned, and left.

Harry sat back down, re-opened the book, and continued to read.

As one wizard, the room seemed to turn, slowly and unstoppably, to focus on the other blond, sitting in the other armchair.

Seconds ticked by.
Then, seemingly attempting to match the grace shown previously by Daphne, Draco Malfoy, Heir of the Noble House of Malfoy, rose to his feet, and stepped towards Harry Potter.

"That was AMAZING!" Hermione bounded forward and wrapped Harry in her patented, Hermione Granger, 'Harry is awesome' hug number three.

Daphne wasn't far behind her, eyes shining like beacons, a massive smile plastered on her normally reserved face.

"The way — every — single — group — invited you to sit with them! And Malfoy apologising. He actually apologised! In public! Oh, I could sing!"

"Don't," Daphne said, though she didn't look too far from singing herself.

Harry put Hermione down, also grinning like a loon. "It was quite amusing, yes."

The dusty shelves of the room for hidden things stretched off in each direction. The midnight sky shone beams of moonlight through suspiciously large windows. Trippy the drugged house elf lay stunned and bound in Harry's trunk where she'd been for the past few hours.

The evening had been one long meet and greet, her lord flittering between all the different factions, cliques, and interest groups of Slytherin house. When Harry had sat down with their group, it had taken every power she had not to jump hug him right there and then.

Harry then turned and drew Daphne into a similarly deep hug, the blonde witch happily returning it. "You were amazing too, Daph. That look you gave me up there could've frozen fiendfyre."

Hermione noticed the light red dusting on the Heiress's cheeks, but ignored it for the moment. She bounced up and down on the tips of her feet. "And the best part is they think they've got you pegged now. They have no idea!"

Daphne seemed to reluctantly pull away. "I hate to pour water on the party, but I tried to find a painting for our divination project this afternoon. All the divination knowledge in them has been locked up by a Wizengamot approved alteration to the Albion magics."

Harry snapped his fingers. "Damn. There's another avenue closed." He sighed and then instantly grinned again. "Oh well, we'll see what the Black Library turns up."

"Ooo, Harry." Hermione bounced back in, "That spell flicking thing you did. When you reflected my spell against me. What was that?"

"That, Hermione, was spell swatting. Think of it like parrying with a sword. It uses far less magic than a shield, but requires a lot more skill."

"Can you teach me?"

Harry smiled and shook his head. "Sorry, but it takes a large chunk of time to teach. I am teaching Ginny, but I have whole nights to teach her."

Hermione pouted and made a mental note to judge the worthiness of this 'Ginny.' So far, she only had brief scraps of Harry's memories from the second timeline and what she'd seen hadn't impressed her.
Harry continued, "It's a good thing that I can pull it off. If I couldn't, I wouldn't be nearly as able to take out those duelling members with just my holly wand," he flicked his wrist and held it up. "A good chunk of my capabilities is tied up in my yew wand." He flicked his other wrist to bring the longer, more ornate wand to his other hand, twirled it a few times, and ran his fingers along the intricate carvings along the handle.

Daphne shrugged. "Still, it provides a nice contrast doesn't it? Lord Slytherin is the power and Harry Potter is the skill. I don't remember you ever spell swatting when you fought Volf and his cronies as Lord Slytherin."

Harry grinned. "Well spotted, Daph. That's exactly what I was thinking. Of course, Harry Potter is still abnormally powerful, just not overly so. Making this wand was probably the single best thing I did after I returned… well, after meeting you two, of course."

Hermione stopped bouncing and her breath hitched. A feeling that she'd felt only once before suddenly surged again. She thought she was going to burn up. Why, Oh, Why did Harry have to say something like that, just then?

A glance at Daphne revealed an equally flustered witch, the light dusting on her cheeks now turning a far deeper shade.

Still, Hermione couldn't deny it felt nice to hear. She stared at the floor and muttered a thank you while Daphne muttered something similar that she didn't quite catch.

"..."
"..."
"..."

The silence seemed to stretch for too long. Embarrassment turned to worry. She stopped staring at the floor and looked up.

Harry stood, holly wand hanging by his side, seemingly forgotten. Her best friend and teacher now held the yew wand up to eye level, staring at the beautiful fifteen inch wand as though seeing it for the very first time.

"Harry?" she asked.

Harry continued to stare.

"Harry?" Daphne tried. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Harry looked back at them, a look of wonder on his face. "I've just realised who can help us with our divination problem."

— End of Chapter Twenty-one —

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Thanks to 'A Badgers Champion' for the general setup of the duelling tournament, if not the details.

A/N: A brief discussion on DP&SW clothes

One reviewer asked about Daphne and Hermione's snake storage solution — blouse pocket vs. skirt pocket — The actual answer is neither and although I make a good effort to insinuate certain elements of my AU as much as possible, I understand that sometimes things fall through the cracks. So, here's an explicit statement on how clothes work in this world.

1. The clothes as they are described in the books are generally worn by purebloods, noble houses, and the upwardly mobile. These consist of closed robes that you pull over your head to wear and are the only visible part of clothing worn. Most magicals who adopt this style, don't wear anything under their robes (except for underwear, unless your name is Archie). So no skirt or blouse pockets to drop snakes into.

   However, there is one main difference between book canon clothing and DP&SW AU clothing, in that there is a "Standard Hogwarts Closed Robe" that many pureblood/noble children wear, while people like Malfoy, Daphne, Hermione, John Potter, Susan, Neville, and now Harry (sometimes), wear more expensive, custom robes. These are better fitted, use more expensive materials, and have more enchantments and runes woven into them.

2. The clothes as they are seen in the movies, which are basically British school uniform with modified, longer, Oxbridge style gowns, are worn by muggleborns, newer purebloods, and lower/middle class half-bloods. As I just said, these aren't really robes as much as they are gowns worn over the standard white blouse or shirt, and skirt or trousers. This is what Harry has been wearing for the past few months after his initial meeting with the Dark on the train.

   Also, it's sometimes commented in fics that cannon Harry wears Dudley's throw off rags at Hogwarts under his school gown (if they're going with movie clothes). I'm choosing to believe that in this AU, because purebloods have more power than they do in canon, muggleborns are not allowed to wear anything they like, hence the school uniforms.

3. Duelling robes are split at the front and back below the belt, and are a combination of the closed robes of the books and the gowns of the movies. They are worn with jackets, trousers, and boots, both male and female, often in dragon hide. We'll see a lot more of this once the aurors become a part of this story. Aurors wear fucking kick-ass cloaks that trail along the ground behind them like a fucking boss (charmed untrippable, and auto shortening in combat, naturally).

4. Cloaks are worn over robes, which tend to be quite thin, but not gowns. Generally, gowns combo as cloaks too, although they tend not to do as good a job of keeping the wearer warm/protected as well as a good cloak does.

5. Dress robes for males are just more expensive and well-fitted versions of the pureblood/noble house style robes. They aren't tuxes with long tails. For females, they are more robe-like than portrayed in the movies, but are a LOT more fitted, thinner, more elegant and do lean more towards dress than robe. (ala Mrs. Granger's wardrobe in chapters 13 and 16.)
5. Finally, I know there are plenty of people out there who care a LOT about clothing lore both in fantasy and real life. Please note that this is just how I'm playing it in this AU. I know that some stuff I talk about isn't necessarily how it roles in real life.

A/N: Lumos Spell as test of magical power.

A few people got confused about John Potter's use of the lumos charm with professor Flitwick a few chapters back. Clarification: John was using the charm in the same way it was used in chapter sixteen to measure the power output of a wizard. A test which both Harry and John cheated on to show lower levels than they actually had. What John did was to stop holding back and show that he does in fact have far more power/skill than any eleven year old should have. Hence, Flitwick's willingness to train him.
Invisible, even from the gaze of death himself, Harry ghosted along a country lain of the Welsh village of Llangernyw like a… well, like a ghost. His apparition like movements mirrored his quarry, who floated, transparent and silvery, on the far side of a nearby chest-high dry stone wall. Her dress flowed down her sides like her hair, down over her slightly rounded tummy, rippling in imaginary winds, to hover a few feet above the wet, mossy, early November ground.

Harry's yew wand tingled along his arm, so close to its mother tree. The moon illuminated the graveyard, casting dark shadows among the tombstones, holes of darkness in a garden of twilight.

He'd been lucky to find time so quickly for this visit. His night-time schedule was usually packed weeks in advance and he didn't like the idea of treating Ginny's training as a time bank.

He floated over the low wall and touched down in the centre of the graveyard, right in front of the ancient yew tree, and right in front of Angelystor.

He coughed.

Angelystor perked up and looked around, obviously unable to see him.

He whipped the cloak off himself.

Angelystor widened her ethereal eyes. "Harry!"

He smiled. "Greetings again, my fair lady."

The dead young woman shot to within a foot of him and stopped, dead. "My, you've grown!" She circled him, inspecting every inch. "And, you've filled out too. You were so scrawny when I first saw you."

Harry grinned. "I'm glad to hear it."

"And you came to visit! Oh oh! The wand. Did you make it?"

Harry flicked his yew wand into his hand and held it up for inspection.

She floated around it from different angles like a fish. "...Beautiful."

"It takes one to know one."

Angelystor giggled. "Oh, stop that." She backed up a bit. "Still the charmer, I see. The girls must love you."

Harry lowered the wand and sat down, cross-legged, on the damp, mossy ground. "That would be nice, wouldn't it."

Angelystor giggled again. "In a few years, maybe?"

"Maybe."
"Or maybe you have a sweetheart now?"

Harry smiled. "I am friends with four, sort-of five girls."

"Four, sort-of five?" the transparent young woman did a small loop in the air. "Go on then, Harry. Tell me about them."

"Well,"—Harry made himself more comfortable—"first, there's Daphne. She's very pretty and loves the outdoors. She comes across as quite cold and distant, but she's actually quite friendly once you get to know her. Shy and surprisingly modest too, sometimes." He held up a hand and counted down on his fingers. "Then there's Hermione. She's also pretty, although she has problems believing it — loves to learn and has an intense drive to be the best at whatever she does."

"At Hogwarts? Ravenclaw or Slytherin?"

Harry smirked. "Slytherin, naturally." He counted off another finger. "Next is Ginny. She's…" He hesitated. "You know what? All of them are pretty."

Angelystor giggled, yet again.

"She's also fiery, passionate, and has a thirst to prove herself. I think that comes from having six older brothers."

"Six?" Angelystor goggled.

"Yeah, I know, right?" He shuddered. "Then there's Luna." He paused. How did one begin to describe Luna? "Luna is… pretty," he finished lamely.

Angelystor raised an eyebrow.

"She's really smart. I mean scarily smart. And powerful. And… well, you know how I said that Daphne can be quite modest? Well, Luna isn't. Ever."

"Sounds like an interesting girl."

Harry drew a hand through his hair. "Sometimes, I think Luna might actually have some seer blood in her."

Angelystor perked up. "Really?"

"I don't know. It's just a feeling."

"Mmmm… that was four girls, and the fifth?"

"Alexandra. We're not really close friends yet, but we share owls, and she is…" He trailed off before finding the right words. "She has what I feel I need more of to defeat Voldemort and keep those I care about safe. Boldness, ruthlessness, killer instinct."

The ever-pregnant ghost eyed him for a moment. Then she smiled. "Let me guess, she's pretty?"

Harry dropped his serious face and let out a chuckle. "Yes, yes Alex is pretty. She gets her looks from her father's side of the family rather than her mother's. I'm sure she's quite thankful of that."

"Mmmm…" Angelystor looked thoughtful. "And your quest to defeat Dark Lord Voldemort?"

He settled down. "Yes. That is actually the main reason I'm here."
"Oh?"

"I need to learn divination as you learned it in your time."

Angelystor looked startled. "My time? Is it so different from yours?"

"Yes. Much of the old knowledge of divination has been lost. I'm hoping that your knowledge can be one of my team's key strategic advantages over the Dark Lord and his ideology."

Angelystor frowned and floated back and forth in front of the ancient yew tree.

Harry watched her.

Eventually, she stopped. "Harry,"—she turned to him—"after you left last time, I realised something. You now carry with you the wood of the Llangernyw Yew. The wood of my tree. The tree that I am bound to. Find a way to re-bind me to your wand, take me with you, and I will teach anyone you wish me to."

Harry let out a long breath and bit his lip. Angelystor's request had difficulties, even if he could find the right ritual to make it work. He couldn't very well go around with a ghost following him everywhere he went. It would blow the whole 'Harry Potter is Lord Slytherin' secret wide open for starters. But that didn't make it impossible. And it would free the beautiful ghost from the very thing that he too fled from more than anything else... imprisonment.

Harry slowly got to his feet. "Very well, my lady. I will do it."

The angelic ghost smiled. "Thank you, Harry."

Half an hour later, Harry arrived back in his Hogsmeade apartment to find Macavity on his owl perch and a letter on his desk. He picked it up and read.

Lord Slytherin,

Thank you for your latest gift. Me and Luna went to Michelle McLaggen's Memories in Diagon Alley to watch it. Wow! The photos in the daily prophet are nothing compared to seeing the original memories.

I'm looking forward to meeting Hermione Granger next year. I screamed at the bit where the troll almost smashed the Indian witch and she saved her. I've already met Heiress Greengrass a few times at the winter festival, but it will be good seeing her again too.

Luna said she's sure to be in Slytherin because of her contract with you. Is it possible for you to make sure someone goes to Slytherin? I really want to be in Slytherin with everyone else.

Luna also said you were asking if me and her could look through the Black Library for certain things hard to find anywhere else? Sure. We spend most of our days in there anyway. Luna is such a bookworm! Just let me know what you're interested in.

Yours,

Alexandra Patricia Black — Heiress of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black.

Harry grinned. Perfect timing. He penned a reply, enclosed it in an envelope and threw it up in the air, whereupon Macavity caught it in his talons and soared out the window.

Time to get back to the castle. No doubt the next few days would be busy. He'd now be on
Dumbledore's radar, no doubt, and he had a critical loose end that needed to be tied up.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

A few days later, Dumbledore sat heavily in his large office chair, surrounded by his many gizmos and doodads, read the note he'd been delivered, and sighed. The last few days had been worry, alarm, relief, and unease. It had all started when he'd walked into his potions lesson to find Harry Potter sitting front and centre, in between Miss Greengrass and Granger on one side and Mister Malfoy and Miss Parkinson on the other. Potter still worked alone, but his new seating position—and the apparent acceptance of both the Dark and Gray children of it—had worried him.

Next had come the seating at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. No longer was the younger Potter twin the Slytherin pariah. He still sat in the middle of the Great Hall table, but he now received a steady stream of greeters, commenters, and meal guests.

So, he'd spent an afternoon piecing together what had happened through discreet legilimency on the few known non-occlumens in the snake pit and his worry had ratcheted up several notches. Images of Harry standing in the middle of the common room, conjuring way above OWL level, and receiving dignitaries from anyone who was anyone in the pit, gradually formed. Fear. Awe. Excitement. These were the primary emotions of all who'd witnessed it.

Then there were the stories. They flittered through the scraps of memories he'd seen like a torn up newspaper, no one piece giving him the whole, but together painting a picture that was unbelievable and frightening. He hadn't believed them. Oh, he'd been sure there was some truth in them, but no first year could take out an entire duelling team. Not even a first year Tom would have been able to. Not even he, Albus Dumbledore, could have managed that.

But even if there was only a glimmer of truth to the stories, there was only one place he could think of for such ability to come from — the soul fragment in Harry's head. He'd spent two days making contingency plans for what would happen when and if Tom suddenly burst forth from the innocuous visage of the Potter boy, only to be brought up short yesterday morning by a raving and out-of-breath Professor McGonagall.

She'd observed the Gryffindor duelling tryouts the previous night and the story she told was eerily familiar. John Potter had also defeated all six of his duelling teammates. Oh, the last fight had been more luck than anything else, and the boy'd been near exhaustion, but he'd managed it… just. He'd watched Minerva's memory of the event and it was clear the Gryffindor duelling captain was more skilled than John Potter, but he'd had just enough left in the tank and had pulled out a victory none-the-less.

It was incredible.

It also made it clear the stories about Harry Potter's turn in the duelling arena probably weren't as exaggerated as he'd thought.

Harry and John were twins. Their powers would be similar — their talents, too. Magic worked in strange ways. This wasn't a horcrux thing. This was a Potter twins thing.

That had been yesterday morning and he'd been fully ready to up the surveillance on both boys. Then, yesterday afternoon he'd been doing paperwork for the ICW when Trippy, the house elf he'd assigned to Miss Greengrass, had popped into his office crying hysterically.

She'd been caught.
Worse, she'd been caught while Lord Slytherin had been talking with both Miss
Greengrass and Lord Jacob Greengrass about family business. Even worse, Lord Slytherin had
then ordered the elf to disclose any other spying the elves did and had learned about the elf on
John Potter. He didn't even know Lord Slytherin could command the Hogwarts elves.

Dumbledore now held a note informing him that a delegation from the board of directors would be
meeting him in minutes. And did he have a story less leaky than the leaky cauldron? Did he hell.

The door opened and three men walked in — Jacob, James, and… "Lord Malfoy." He smiled,
while inwardly cursing. "I hope you don't feel this matter affected you. I can assure you it didn't.
Lord Greengrass, Lord Potter."

They all sat.

"Whether it affected my son and family directly is unimportant. I represent the interests of all the
respectable families in our school."

"I hope, Albus," James intoned, "that you have a good explanation for this."

Jacob merely glared.

Dumbledore sighed. "My primary concern was their safety. I'm sure you can see after the incident
with the troll that my concerns were legitimate."

"I'm offended that my son was not deemed important enough for such VIP treatment," Malfoy
drawled.

Lord Greengrass scowled. "And you've had them on our children since the start of term, we know
that. And while we know that safety was indeed a concern, that's not all they were doing. You
have NO right to spy on the children in your care for political reasons."

"And if safety is a problem," continued James Potter, "Measures should be taken for the benefit
of all students, not just a select few, regardless of my family being part of that few."

Dumbledore waved a hand. "James — John is the vanquisher of Voldemort—"

The flinches among the three Lords were far less pronounced than most people's.

"—You understand that he has special circumstances and that it would be impractical to
give every student the same consideration."

James frowned. "Whatever that consideration may be, I want those considerations cleared with me
first in the future."

"And I do NOT give my permission for you to spy on my daughter!" added Lord Greengrass.

"I feel," interjected Lord Malfoy. "That perhaps the headmaster has shown he is not able to keep
his political responsibilities and his custodial duties separate, and that we should move to have him
placed on probation."

Dumbledore looked towards James Potter who suddenly looked very uncomfortable. Jacob
Greengrass shrugged.

"After-all," Malfoy continued, "how can we know that the headmaster will keep his word? It was
only through luck that we found out about what's been going on for the past three months."
Dumbledore opened his mouth to protest but a voice from the doorway beat him to it.  

"Now now, Lord Malfoy, let's not be too hasty."

He blinked. It was Lord Slytherin, standing there in his trademark emerald green and black mask. "Lord Greengrass, Lord Potter, Headmaster." Slytherin pulled up a chair and joined the delegation.

Malfoy frowned. "I was not aware you were on the board, Lord Slytherin."

Slytherin inclined his head. "I'm not... yet. However, as one of the people affected I felt I should drop by after clearing up some business, and it seems it was a good thing too. I'm sure we don't need to go so far as removing the headmaster now do we?"

Albus frowned. Lord Slytherin was defending him?

"Why not?" shot back Lord Malfoy. "He's shown he can't be trusted with the power he has."

"Ah, but that is exactly what I've just been seeing to. Making sure he is less able to abuse his power, that is. I've just come from the kitchens where I've ordered all the Hogwarts house elves that they are not to follow or gather information on any Hogwarts student."

Albus's eyes widened. He sat up straighter, "Now, see here, Lord Slytherin."

"Oh, you object? Headmaster?"

"You can't just—"

"—Can I not? But I am the only one apart from yourself who can, unless the board does indeed remove you. I assume that's not in your interests? And I doubt these gentlemen will see anything wrong with such an order?" Slytherin looked between the three other lords who all shook their heads, in the case of Lord Potter and Lord Malfoy, only grudgingly. "Well then."

Dumbledore saw that Malfoy looked like a brand new toy had just been taken from him. He shook his head. "Very well. But I must implore you to please speak with me first in future before taking such unilateral action."

Lord Slytherin nodded, rose, and left.

Over the next few minutes, the other lords left too, until it was only him and Lord Potter left.

He sighed. "I'm sorry, James."

James Potter grimaced. "Me too, Albus, I assure you I was not part of that little spiel of Malfoy's."

Albus smiled. "Lord Malfoy will use any excuse to try to get me out of here, you know that."

"I know, but you really set yourself up for that one, you know."

Albus nodded. "I know."

They stared at each other across the desk for a moment.

Eventually James spoke again. "So, how is John doing?"

Albus considered his words carefully. "Very well. He's far ahead of his peers, he's well liked among the other Gryffindors, and he just defeated all six of his duelling teammates."
James looked puzzled. "You mean… everyone in his year joined the duelling club?"

A moment’s silence.

"No. I mean he beat all six of his teammates from the other years that are going to compete in the duelling tournament in April, in order, one after the other."

"You're joking."

Albus sighed. "I am not joking."

"But… that's… incredible!" James shouted the last word with a huge grin on his face. "I knew I did something right! Hah!

Albus grimaced.

"What?"

"I haven't seen it for myself, but I understand that Harry did too."

The mood in the room fell faster than a defective bludger.

"He… he did, did he?"

"Yes."

"And is this… expected?" James's eyes darted from him to nowhere and back again. "I mean, is this part of what's supposed to happen? I mean not to go down that path, I mean the other, I mean—" He started to babble.

"—James!" he held up a hand. "All I can say is that we are doing what we need to."

James slumped back in his chair. "Are you sure it's not time for us to hear the prophecy?"

Albus slowly shook his head.

"It's just, what with him in Slytherin and all, it seems like it's all going wrong anyway."

"James, you know I already said that being in Slytherin was expected."

"Yes, but, you know, it's kinda hard not to… not to fear the worst."

Lord Potter continued to fret and it took another five minutes for Dumbledore to allay the young lord's fears and by the time the man left he couldn't shake the feeling of being the world's biggest bastard.

Why oh why couldn't it have been Neville?

— DP & SW: TFiP —

"And here comes the Slytherin team!" Lee Jordan's voice boomed around the Hogwarts quidditch pitch."

Harry enthusiastically cheered the Slytherin team onto the pitch, just one more robe in a sea of green. In the second timeline, quidditch matches had been one of his few water drops of social belonging in a desert of hatred and scorn.
On his right, Hermione joined him in cheering their fellow Slytherins.

On his left, Pansy Parkinson cheered too, although her efforts were more subdued, as though trying not to breathe too much of the same air as him and Hermione.

"The now the Gryffindors! Wood, Spinnet, Bell, Johnson, Weasley, Weasley, aaaannnnndddd… Potter!"

While most of the stadium cheered, all the Slytherins booed and jeered. This time, Pansy didn't feel the need to dampen down her enthusiasm.

"Flint and Wood shake hands, Madam Hooch releases the snitch… the bludgers… and the quaffle… and off they go!"

The keepers retreated to their respective hoops, the beaters shot off to round up the bludgers, and the six chasers and two seekers converged on the quaffle in a mess of bodies and brooms.

"Flint with the quaffle! Passes to Bole! Ooo! Intercepted by Katie Bell! New on the Gryffindor team this year, along with Potter, how will she stand up to the Slytherin muscle?"

Harry punched the air with his fist. "C'mon! That was an easy pass!"

Pansy glanced at him. "Didn't think you'd be a fan of this, Potter!" She had to shout to be heard over the press of snakes around them.

Harry grinned at the cropped-haired heiress. "Why not!"

"You grew up with muggles!"

Hermione leaned around. "So did I!"

Pansy made a face.

"Alicia Spinnet scores! With me, I wish."

"Jordan!"

"Sorry, Professor. And Potter breaks off from the quaffle formation to hunt the snitch! Will the youngest seeker in a century find it before the score equalises?"

Bletchley tossed the quaffle to Flint as though it burned.

Flint pelted up the pitch, but held onto it for a split second too long.

"Ouch! That's gotta hurt. Flint goes over the regulation three second carry time and gets shocked. Drops the quaffle, but picked up by Pucey! Now Tamaron, Flint, Pucey again!"

Harry watched his twin circle the pitch in long easy curves. Now that the Gryffindors were playing three on four for the quaffle it would only be a matter of time before…"

"Slytherin scores! And John Potter abandons the search for the snitch!"

Harry grinned and shouted for the next ten minutes. It was so good just to let go and shout all the abuse and support he wanted.

The teams seemed evenly matched. Whenever Gryffindor would score, John would break off to
hunt the snitch, tipping the balance in the Slytherin's favour — And whenever Slytherin scored, Higgs would do the same.

"Coming up to the one hundred point mark now! Remember, the snitch is worth ten percent of the team's total points, rounded down, so up till now it's been worth nothing! But with the next hoop, it'll be worth ten points! Will that be enough to tip the balance?"

Gryffindor scored next. Harry cursed. Up till now, John hadn't had much time to search for the snitch. Now that the score sat at 100-90 he'd have a larger window.

The game continued and soon Slytherin equalised again. Now Higgs also broke off to search for the snitch, leaving it three on three for the first time in the match.

Then Harry's eyes widened. The snitch! It was by the Slytherin middle hoop! He could see it!

"And there goes John Potter! He's seen the snitch! He's almost on it! NO! Slytherin scores!"

A groan of disappointment erupted from the Gryffindor stands and John backed off, clearly unwilling to end the game in a tie. He intercepted the nearing Higgs and let the snitch vanish into the open space of the quidditch stadium.

That was the closest either team came to a victory for the next hundred points. By the time the score hit two hundred all, it was becoming clear that the Gryffindor team had the advantage over the Slytherin.

Now playing three on three, the Gryffindor chasers could push the lead against the heavier and bulkier Slytherins. Each time the Gryffindors pushed twenty points ahead, the Slytherin seeker was forced to brake off his search for the snitch to assist.

By the time the game reached 300-300, John Potter had to spend almost no time at all helping his team's chasers, and could devote himself full-time to the search for the snitch, much to Harry's annoyance. He knew he was better than John, but Higgs certainly wasn't. He made a mental note to start including broomstick work in Ginny's training. Being able to duel on broomstick was a thing, wasn't it?

Then, it happened.

"Slytherin scores! And… wait, what's up with Potter's broom?"

Harry snapped out of his musings to see John's broom lurching and bucking from side to side, up and down.

Oh.

He scanned the crowd and found Quirrell, gazing up at John, not breaking eye contact.

"That's a dark hex!" Pansy screamed, waving her arms about in excitement.

Hah! Oh, he'd forgotten all about this! It hadn't exactly been a huge event for him, after all.

"What do we do?" Hermione asked, uncertainty vibrating in her voice.

He met her worried gaze with his own relaxed one. "Why do we need to do anything?"

The Weasley twins circled below John trying and failing to get him onto one of their brooms. Flint grabbed the quaffle and scored four times while everyone else's eyes were on his brother.
"I mean..." he continued, ignoring Pansy screaming shrilly in his ear, "I'm sure that Snape will—"

He snapped his mouth shut.

Oh.

"Harry, Snape is the hospital wing."

He was, wasn't he? Harry glanced up at his twin to see the bucking and shaking getting worse. Whatever the teacher's should be doing to stop this clearly wasn't working. He looked around the quidditch pitch and noticed that many of the students had taken their wands out. Some held them uncertainly, some with purpose, and many with furtive glances at those around them, starting to point them towards his hated twin. There was a certain... inevitability in the air and an evil thought flashed through Harry's mind.

Harry grinned and turned to Hermione, a wild gleam in his eye. "Okay, we have to save him!" He turned to Pansy. "Pass the word along, Arresto Momentum when he falls!"

Pansy stared. "Why would we want to save—"

He laughed. "—I know it's a weak spell at this range, but if we ALL cast it, we can do it!"

Pansy looked at him like he was insane. Then realisation seemed to dawn across her face. Her eyes lit up. "Got it!" She turned away.

Harry turned back to Hermione and fingered his holly and phoenix feather wand. "Get ready!"

Hermione firmed her jaw and aimed her wand at John, her face a picture of determined concentration.

John's broom bucked and shook. Moments later, it gave a sad little *putt* sound, and John Potter fell out of the sky.

Two hundred voices shrieked as he hurled to the ground, while the other two hundred, dressed in every Hogwarts house colour, all across the stadium, all pointed their wands at him, and yelled a deafening cacophony of wingardium leviosa, accio Potter, arresto momentum, and mobilicorpus.

The spells raced towards the falling seeker, and John Potter's plummet instantly halted a whole thirty feet above the ground, with all the suddenness and consequences of an owl flying into a wall.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione stood to attention in front of the hospital bed, along side her fellow healer trainees.

On the bed, John Potter lay under a petrificus totalus to stop him moving and damaging the few remaining unbroken bones in his body. That didn't seem to stop him moaning though.

Healer Pomfrey made another jab with her wand and yet another bone made a horrible little cracking and crinkling sound. Yet another moan issued from John Potter's throat.

The older healer tutted. "That one was a major fracture with six hairline fractures along its length."

John Potter moaned, again.

Hermione shook her head. Well, if the boy didn't want this sort of thing to happen to him, then he shouldn't be John Potter should he? He had only himself to blame.
Healer Pomfrey asked Penelope Clearwater to get her a jar of huntsman's sorrow and prepare it for application. She then pointed her wand at John's hand and made a complicated waving motion. A mess of coloured shapes and numbers appeared over it. "This one"—she motioned towards the hand—"is completely beyond the capabilities of our standard bone mending spells — so we need to use something more potent. Miss Clearwater? Any ideas?"

The Ravenclaw straightened with the half opened jar of healing herbs in her hands. "Skele-gro?"

Healer Pomfrey nodded. "Exactly." She turned to another student "Any preparations needed for skele-gro?"

The older Hufflepuff boy thought for a moment. "Vanish the bones?"

"Correct. The spell is 'ossa peribunt', It will not work on certain bones like the skull or the ribcage — such effects would be fatal — but for anything else it is the only way to repair otherwise irreparable damage. It's a simple point and cast spell, needing no more than twelve inches distance."

Healer Pomfrey turned to her. "Luckily, there's not much that can go wrong with a bone vanishing. It either works or it doesn't, so would you like to get some practice, Miss Granger?"

John Potter moaned again.

Hermione smiled the smile of kneazle faced with a downed and helpless werewolf. "Happy to, Healer Pomfrey."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

At about the same time, Daphne stalked down a passageway in the Slytherin dungeons, on the prowl for the Bloody Baron. In her hand, she held a note. Amazingly enough, people seemed to have gotten used to the baron as head of Slytherin house. Much like having a ghost teach history. It was now just one more eccentricity of the wizarding world.

Now, Harry, currently being courted like the last unmarried witch in the world, had given her a task, and she intended to complete it quickly and efficiently.

She'd left the rest of the Gray in the common room, who were all laughing at John Potter catching the snitch in his mouth during his fall and thereby losing Gryffindor the game. They had been forty points behind, after all.

She swept around the next corner and found herself face to back with her frightening quarry. She cleared her throat.

The baron turned to face her. "Yooouuuu." His chains clinked. "Shouldn't you be with the rest of your year mates… celebrating our glorious victory over the Gryffindor Quidditch team?"

Daphne held her chin up. "Soon, I will be. I am here on behalf of my Lord Slytherin."

"Ohhhh?" His slow, low voice rasped like a creaky door. "I had wondered when he would make his presence known to me."

"My lord wishes to speak with you regarding Slytherin House matters. I have a note from him, to you." She held it up. "May I read it?"

The blood soaked ghost nodded.
"Baron Bayler," she started.

"I must first extend my sorrow that I have not been able to reach out to you earlier. Alas, circumstances made it quite impossible, but this is a matter that I now hope to rectify. I also thank you for taking up the post of Head of Slytherin House and the associated troubles that go with it.

"I would like to meet you regarding general policies and procedures of my house that I feel need to be brought into consideration and another matter that only you, in your capacity both as head of Hogwarts Slytherin branch, and Hogwarts Slytherin ghost, can ameliorate.

"Yours, Lord Slytherin — Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin."

She lowered the parchment.

The ghost hovered in front of her for a moment. "If it pleases your lord, have him meet me on the first day of the dying month, Heiress Greengrass."

Daphne nodded, thanked the ghost, turned and walked back to the celebrations. Task accomplished.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry watched Hermione pace back and forth.

Three weeks had passed. For the first three months, Hogwarts had ignored Harry, content to let him skulk in his peer enforced pariahhood. However, in the three weeks after the duelling tryouts and the first quidditch game, the castle jumped and held him with the clinginess of an insecure lover. Everywhere he went, people whispered and pointed.

The Hogwarts rumour mill was almost magic itself, and just like magic, if a wizard was inexperienced, and said F instead of M, they'd find their conjured story landing back on them like a buffalo on their chest, crushing their social life until the hoard moved on to its next piece of titillation.

But it wasn't magic, and it couldn't extract information without a willing source.

The events of the duelling tryouts were on rumour mill lockdown.

Harry knew Volf had threatened retribution on anyone who gave away their strategic advantages, and he was pretty sure the Gryffindor captain had done something similar.

Still, his stunt in the Slytherin common room had made its way to other houses, even if they weren't sure what to believe about it. Coupled with the similar rumours of his twin's performance at his trials, and the rumour mill was happy to make up whatever it felt like.

For the ten years a slave, ten years a prisoner that was Harry Potter, It was both intoxicating and disconcerting.

It became bad enough to persuade Harry to allocate more of his time to scouring the library's restricted section, hoovering up as much of the knowledge that Tom Riddle had missed as possible, hoping to find an elegant solution to Angelystor's request, even as he continued to receive oddly knowledgeable updates from Alexandra and Luna about their own progress on this obscure and arguably dark branch of magic.

Daphne and Hermione, meanwhile, were busy with their own projects.
Daphne was using the extra time from not researching the defences around the stone to improve her duelling, magical toxin resistance, and occlumency.

Hermione, by contrast, refused to let up on anything, and when December rolled around, it was to find his muggleborn friend in a state of near panic over her very first lesson as a teacher, even if only in a supporting role.

"Hermione, it will be fine." Harry leaned on one of the dusty desks of a rarely used, empty classroom.

They'd arrived half an hour early, gone over the curriculum one last time, cleared a blackboard space off to one side, and arranged half a dozen chairs in a semi-circle facing the wall. Then Harry had entered his shrunk trunk and exited again, carrying a large, silk-covered, flat object, which he'd proceeded to stick to the wall, while Hermione started the task which would consume her next fifteen minutes — pacing a hole into the floor.

"But what if I mess up?" The young witch kept stealing glances towards the door. "What if they ask me a question that I don't know? What if I make a fool of myself?"

Harry couldn't help but smile. "There are always casualties in war."

"That's not helping!"

Harry pushed off from the desk, strode over to his frantic friend, put two hands on her shoulders, and gazed into her startled eyes. "You — will — be — fine."

The door creaked.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry grabbed Hermione by her shoulders and looked deep into her eyes. His emerald orbs seemed to wipe all thoughts from her mind.

"You — will — be — fine."

The door creaked.

Hermione whipped her head around just as the door opened halfway.

The pressure on her shoulders vanished and when she looked back, so had Harry.

"Hermione!" Sophie Roper bounded into the room, followed closely by Padma.

She quickly gathered her wits. "Hey Sophie. Padma."

Padma strolled up to the semi-circle of chairs and leaned on one, eyes slightly widened. "Hermione,"—she gestured towards the silk covered object on the wall—"is that what I think it is?"

Sophie landed in a chair and started fishing in her bag.

Hermione smiled. "Probably."

Padma let out a long breath. "Whose?"

"Introductions soon, I promise."
They chatted for a few more minutes and were soon joined by Justin and Kevin.

Dean was last, a few minutes after their agreed time. "Sorry about that, had to shake John Potter."

Padma frowned. "Didn't he want you to come?"

Dean shrugged. "I didn't want to tell him. He hates Slytherins." He indicated Hermione.

Padma looked ready to say something else.

Hermione frowned. Best not to let this get political. She cleared her throat.

Her five classmates turned their attention to her.

"Umm, thank you for coming." She took a breath and continued. "So, in the last year, you all found out you were magical. Except Padma, of course."

Padma nodded.

Hermione continued. "I found out a few years earlier, but this is still all pretty new to me too. I've been doing much of the same education that many of our friends do before they go to Hogwarts, but I still didn't walk down Diagon Alley until I went to buy my wand."

The semi-circle nodded. Sophie had a muggle notebook on her knees.

"This world is very different from the world we come from. We're all given an introduction lecture when we're given our Hogwarts letters, but it leaves out a lot of things — a lot of important things."

She took a breath. "When I was in Diagon Alley, I met Justin here." She nodded at Justin who smiled back. "And we talked briefly about this. He asked if we could set something up to teach the details that the school can't or won't teach. And here we are. Sorry it took so long."

Her audience all made 'it's all right' motions. Kevin grinned.

She smiled sheepishly. "The reason it took so long, is I wanted to arrange something special and usually only available to old families." She indicated the silk covered object on the wall. She grasped the silk. "Allow me to formally introduce you," she pulled off the silk, "to Portrait Elizabeth Greengrass, the former Lady Greengrass, and Heiress Daphne Greengrass's grandmother."

The surrounded muggleborns's eyes widened, while Padma looked both surprised and impressed.

Portrait Elizabeth smiled an elegant smile that revealed the wrinkle lines under her fierce, ice-blue eyes.

"She will make sure I don't miss anything. Any questions?"

Padma raised a hand. "I didn't know you were allowed to bring paintings into the castle."

Hermione shrugged. "It's not common, but it's not against the rules. Some students bring them in to act as tutors and to communicate with their families without using owls. Why do you think we're not allowed to hand in dictaquilled essays?"

"You mean…?"
Portrait Elizabeth took over, her voice oozing quiet nobility. "Yes, Dear. In fact, it was during my time that the rule was introduced. A Hufflepuff was caught handing in essays written by the portrait of his many times great grandfather. I was lead to believe that the fool forgot to adjust for changes in the language."

Sophie was carefully taking notes.

"So," Hermione picked up a piece of chalk and wrote, 'LESSON ONE' on the blackboard. "We'll start with what exactly happened with Justin and Malfoy and go from there. There's a lot of background to cover."

And thus she began to explain, assisted every so often by Portrait Elizabeth Greengrass. She explained about pureblood privilege and how it came into being, and how it was different from noble privilege. She explained why people like Crabbe and Goyle resented muggleborns, and how families like Malfoy, Nott, and Parkinson had long ago boxed themselves into a position where they had to support purebloodism to maintain their business interests, despite themselves already being noble, and how after many generations they'd come to genuinely believe in a cause that at first they'd supported merely out of market pragmatism.

She explained about the discrimination that muggleborns faced in the workplace and gave examples of many of the common tricks that unscrupulous wizards would use to trap muggleborns into less than favourable situations. The blackboard was now covered in chalk.

"This," she said, holding up an ornate looking piece of parchment, covered in silver like markings, "is Gringotts contract parchment. It is charmed with all sorts of protections and safeguards to ensure that the person signing it is signing only what they think they are signing, and nothing more."

In her other hand, she held up another piece of parchment. "This," she continued, "is normal parchment like we use in our school essays. Padma?" She turned to the Indian witch who jumped at the sudden address. "What is the very first thing we learn about family business?"

Padma took a deep breath. "Never ever, ever, ever sign anything that is not written on Gringotts contract parchment." The words sounded like they'd been forced into her brain over four dozen lessons and probably had been.

Hermione nodded. "Exactly." She glared around at her wide-eyed peers. "Anyone could spell this with anything!" She waved the normal parchment in their faces. "You could sign away your life savings! You could sign a confession for a crime! You could even accidentally marry off one of your own, as yet unborn children!"

Kevin stammered. "But, the law—"

She shook her head. "—This isn't like muggle contract law, Kevin, where the courts interpret and enforce. In this world, magic also has a say, and the penalties for breaking a magical contract can be enforced instantly. Often, a fine doesn't even need to be brought to Gringotts — the money just automatically moves from one vault to another. And that's to say nothing of the more… physical… penalties."

Sophie was now taking notes at a furious pace, the back of her notebook flipped over many times, dangling over her knees.

"Now, because we are still minors, there's a limit to what we can accidentally sign, although it can still be nasty. But once you're an adult, there's almost no limit. You can theoretically enslave
"Only theoretically?" Dean asked, looking extremely worried.

Hermione looked towards Portrait Elizabeth, who answered.

"The Wizengamot and ICW made actual slavery of human beings illegal quite some time ago, but magic doesn't recognize those laws. You can still be enslaved by contract, but it is illegal to do so. If it's found out, the courts can order the slave owner to break the contract or face extreme penalties."

"And if it's not found out?" Sophie asked in a quiet voice, looking up from her notebook.

Portrait Elizabeth shrugged. "I daresay there are a few unfortunate souls hidden away out there —- who signed the wrong thing, at the wrong time, to the wrong person."

The assembled young witches and wizards all shuddered.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Harry made his way to the fideliused spot in the library, satisfied that Hermione was handling herself just fine. He dropped into his trunk, and emerged minutes later as Lord Slytherin, ready, aged, and masked.

He met an impeccably dressed Daphne in the entrance hall, and together they made their way down to the dungeons, stared at by every wide-eyed student they met.

As they descended the stairs into Slytherin territory, Harry felt the welcoming magics wash through him. He smiled. "Daphne?"

"Yes, my lord?"

He reached into his robes. "Read this."

Daphne took the parchment, unfolded it and read the first few lines. "From the Black Heiress?"

"Indeed."

Daphne read some more. Her eyes widened. "Necromancy?" she whispered.

"Any magic that affects the dead is necromancy."

"But..." she read some more. "But it sounds like this isn't the first time she's used it."

"The letter does give that impression, doesn't it?"

Daphne folded the parchment up and handed it back. "The Black Library must be incredible."

Harry frowned. "Yes, I really should do something about that... it would be a shame to lose it."

They arrived at a door marked, 'SLYTHERIN HEAD OF HOUSE'. Harry knocked. The door opened. They both entered.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

For the next twenty minutes, Harry sat opposite the Baron, Daphne at his side, while they went
over the half-dozen or so issues he had with the house, everything from punishments for use of certain words, to the layout of the common-room.

All in all, it was a productive session, and Harry was starting to think the long term advantages of the Baron as head of house might outweigh the downsides. The ghost was old fashioned and very big on the idea of feudal loyalty, in a way that their first choice, Lord Slughorn's nephew, Horace Slughorn, was less likely to be.

Once they'd ploughed through the administrative issues, the Baron floated up from the desk. "My lord," he intoned, his chains clanking and chinking as they passed through the woodwork. "Was there anything… else?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, Baron. I have recently been in contact with a young ghost seeking a more populated home. I wish to bring her under my protection and host her in the castle."

The baron went silent for a moment before answering. "That is not my power alone to grant. The ghosts council is separate from the living, and not bound to their will. You would have to plead your case to them."

Harry nodded. "And you could set up a meeting with the council and act as my advocate?"

The baron bowed low, passing slightly through the desk again. "Of course, my lord."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

One week passed and soon Hermione was once more in the empty classroom, this time practically bouncing with energy. Last week's lesson had gone well. Amazingly well in fact. She'd hit every point she'd wanted and Harry had been pleased.

This week's lesson was going to be even better.

She was expecting her students any moment, and now that Padma had satisfied herself that Hermione wasn't going to try and trap her fellow muggleborns in an intricate web of deception and lies, she could bring out the big guns. She'd been looking forward to this lesson for months.

Five minutes later, Sophie, Justin, and Kevin were all in attendance.

"Where is Dean?" asked Justin.

Kevin shrugged. "Dunno."

Just then, Dean barged into the room. "Sorry. Sorry. John is getting more difficult to shake off. I think he suspects something is going on."

Justin shook his head. "I didn't even know you and him were that close."

Dean sighed, exasperated. "We're not! But he treats all of Gryffindor like his own personal fiefdom, and everyone lets him!"

Hermione tapped her wand on the table. "Are we all ready then?"

They all nodded.

"But,"—Sophie looked around—"where's Elizabeth? I liked her."

Hermione took out a small trunk from her pocket and held it up. "She's in here, but we wont be
talking with her much today."

Sophie, Dean, Justin, and Kevin all stared.

"Inside that matchbox?" asked Justin.

Hermione smiled, put the trunk on the ground and tapped it with her wand.

The others gasped as the trunk expanded into its full sized version.

She opened the lid and climbed in eliciting yet more gasps. As her body passed through the opening, she craned her neck behind and upwards to look at the group, now looming over her. "C'mon." She said, her voice excited. "No time to waste."

The trunk wasn't the one Harry had bought for her ninth birthday. This one was cheaper, spartan and empty, but for one familiar portrait on the wall, a cupboard off to a side, and a very special object on a plinth in the centre of the room.

"Wow!" Sophie looked around the space as though it was a palace.

"Magic is insane," whispered Justin.

Kevin and Dean just stared in shock.

"You know," started Portrait Elizabeth from her frame, "The trunk walls are really far less interesting than what's in the trunk's middle."

The four muggleborns turned to eye the object Elizabeth pointed out.

"A porcelain bowl?" asked Justin.

Hermione snorted while waving her wand over the cupboard's door. "That, is a pensieve."

"What's that then?" asked Kevin.

The cupboard door opened and Hermione carefully picked out a selection of tiny bottles filled with silvery liquid. "A pensieve is a magical artefact used to watch another's memories without resorting to high-level legilimency."

She turned and stepped to the pensieve. "What I have here are memories from the Greengrass memory library." She turned to them with a look of awe and reverence on her face. "You've no idea how privileged we are to have been entrusted with these."

"Quite right!" Portrait Elizabeth called from behind her. "Some of those memories are over a thousand years old, and no one not a Greengrass has ever seen them." She sniffed. "Be thankful Lord Slytherin is as convincing as he is."

Hermione lined up all but one of the bottles on a nearby shelf, popped open the remainder, and poured the contents into the pensieve.

Sophie fiddled with the cuff of her robes. "Err… what exactly do we have to do?"

Hermione put the empty bottle down. "Just touch the liquid — even a finger will do — and you'll be pulled into the memory. This one is the oldest. It's nearly 1,500 years old. Ready?"

They all nodded, slowly.
"Then go for it."

Justin, Sophie, Dean, and Kevin all touched the liquid, and moments later vanished from the trunk.

Hermione took a deep breath. Ancient knowledge hidden from the world for millennia, here she came! She reached out and touched the liquid… she felt a jerk around her navel, and her world washed away like water on a fast moving car.

She fell. Further and further. It seemed to go on for ever. And then she wasn't falling.

"Hermione!" Sophie glomped onto her. "That was scary!"

Hermione nodded, still a little shaken, and took stock of her surroundings. They were in a large forest clearing. All around them, wooden bleachers stretched up and back. Wizards filled those benches all wearing white robes and shouting at each other. It gave the impression of an amphitheatre full of rather scruffy druids.

Justin, Kevin, and Dean stood to one side, gazing up at the cacophony with wide eyes.

Justin turned to her. "They can't see us?"

"Of course, not. This is just a memory." She then noticed a row of wizards and witches off to the side. "Ah!" She walked over to them and eagerly motioned her students to follow. "This is what we're looking for."

"Who are they?" asked Dean.

Hermione matched up to the witch at the end of the line. "Recognise her?"

Sophie gasped. "It's Elizabeth!"

Kevin started. "But she's, like, young and all."

"No, it's definitely her!"

"Then..." Justin looked around. "This memory can't be that old! You said it was 1,500 years old! Elizabeth is Daphne's grandmother!"

"She is. And it is. This is Elizabeth's memory of this witch's memory," she pointed to the witch next to Elizabeth—"of this wizard's memory,"—she pointed to the wizard who stood next in line—"and so on, all the way down to the last wizard in the line, who's watching the memory of one of those wizards." She pointed to the assembly of wizards, lining the many benches of the wooden amphitheatre. "This is a copy of a copy of a copy, many times over, of a memory of one of the original wizards who attending this event."

"But, why?" asked Dean.

"Simple," Hermione walked over to the nearest wizard in the assembly who was talking to the wizard next to him. The others followed her. "You try and tell me what he's saying."

Dean leaned towards the man, then leaned back. "Sounds like gibberish to me."

"Exactly. Every hundred odd years, they make a new copy and translate the important bits for the next hundred years."

Sophie grinned. "Genius!"
They walked back over to Elizabeth.

Kevin motioned to the arena-like environment. "So, what's going on then? What is this?"

"This is the Wizengamot in which Merlin, still acting as the first Grand Warlock, unveiled his masterwork to the assembly — the Albion Family Magics."

Kevin perked up. "I've heard of that guy before! Merlin was supposed to be right powerful, wasn't he?"

Sophie spun her head around, scanning the crowd. "Yeah, I knew about him even before I learned I was a witch. So, which one is he?"

Hermione pointed to the large, empty chair in the centre of the benches. "He's not here yet."

"Oh."

They didn't have long to wait though. Soon, a tall man with a long, flowing beard, carrying a long staff, strolled into the clearing and faced the assembled wizards. The hubbub died, and the man began to speak.

As he did, memory Elizabeth spoke too, reading from a pre-prepared parchment, and occasionally checking the parchment of the witch next to her, presumably to make sure she was in the right place.

Hermione and the others all leaned into the older Greengrass to catch the words, watched as Merlin finished up his speech, and then watched with horrified fascination, as the pre-Hogwarts Wizengamot erupted into full-on, caustic meltdown.

Some time later, they all emerged from the pensieve.

Sophie took quick, deep breaths and clutched her chest. "That was intense!"

"Well, don't get comfy." Hermione indicated the shelf, still full of bottles. "We've got plenty more for today."

They then watched the Wizengamot session announcing the founding of Hogwarts, which had been greeted with a combination of amazement that four families were willing to give away their family's private collections of magic. And distrust over whether the founders had ulterior motives for their children.

They watched the Wizengamot session discussing the foundation of the International Statute of Secrecy, and another discussing the curbing of a Light Lord so invasive and uncompromising as to necessitate the founding of a dedicated wizarding combat force, the aurors. And yet another, this one on the Gringotts banking treaty, which gave the goblins a world-wide monopoly on wizarding banking. In total, they watched eight memories, each starting and finishing with a heart pounding bungee dive and yank. By the time they ended for the day, Hermione felt like Miss fucking Frizzle from the Magic School Bus.

"So, Hermione," started Sophie, who was trying and failing to walk in a straight line. "Same time next week?"

Hermione held the now empty shelf next to the pensieve for support. "Yeah, sure, next week. Yes."
Draco Malfoy walked into the confused Slytherin common room and stopped dead. Everything had changed. Nothing was where it should be. Before, his throne had been on the left side of the right-left divide, with the walking space a straight line from common room door to the descending staircases. Now, the walking space curved in an arc, leaving the right side of the room with far more floor space than the left.

He looked around, annoyed, trying to find his throne.

There! Someone had set up a second pathway at a right-angle from the middle of the main path, cutting the now bigger, right-side of the room in two. This new path lead straight to a chair and collection of sofas of similar size to his own, but clearly more expensive.

His own chair sat to the left of this new and obviously dominant position in the familiar diamond shape with his own familiar sofas. Greengrass's chair and sofa court mirrored his own, but sitting on the new throne's right side.

He scowled and marched through the confused throng of milling students, grabbed his chair and tried to move it. He might as well have tried to move the castle.

He drew his wand and cast a finite. That also didn't work.

He looked towards the new dominate throne, eyed the many carved wooden snakes curling their way around it, and observed the way their eyes seemed to follow him, even without moving.

He cast his gaze around the many watching students, all curious as to what he was going to do next.

Draco Malfoy scowled and descended into his chair with as much dignity as he could muster.

A few minutes later, Greengrass, now much closer than she had been before, sat down in her sofa court and turned to him, a slight smile playing around her lips. "Cosy like this isn't it?"

He feigned disinterest. "I'm surprised your lord didn't just put your chair there." He motioned to the new snake throne. "Apparently, he doesn't feel you could handle it."

Greengrass's mildly amused expression didn't change. "I am an instrument of my lord's will. I will handle all and only what he wills me to handle."

Malfoy turned away and felt a shiver go down his spine. That had felt far too much like certain statements made about a certain individual he'd seen in his father's private pensieve lessons.

The table stretched away before Harry, filled with food and drink. He wasn't hungry though. He was, in fact, doing his level best not to hurl. An almost unbearable stench filled his nostrils and his eyes watered in protest. To call the food ripe would be like describing Dumbledore as a bit tricky, and he was quite sure that if Daphne were here, she'd have insisted on burning every article of clothing afterwards, before vanishing the ashes, and bathing for a whole day, preferably in phoenix tears.

"So, Lord Slytherin. Tell us more about the young ghost in question." Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington floated halfway down the table. To his sides and around the table floated ten other ghosts, including the baron, the grey lady, and the fat friar.
Harry fought down his gag reflex and stood straighter. "Angelystor is a muggleborn witch murdered in the 1500's by a local muggle noble whom she was romantically engaged with. She has been bound to a tree in the graveyard she died in for the last five hundred years. She was newly pregnant when she died."

The grey lady bobbed down to the table and floated through a putrid chicken.

"You say she is bound," Sir Nick commented. "How do you propose to move her here? Will you replant the tree?"

"I would prefer not to do that. It is a very old tree, but if necessary it could be done."

"So how do you plan to do otherwise?"

"I know of a ritual that can transfer the bond to a sympathetic object, which I would then bring here."

That caused a murmuring up and down the table.

The fat friar brought a thoughtful hand to his chin. "I don't recall the name Angelystor. What house was she in?"

"She wasn't a Hogwarts student, I believe she went to the Shoe."

Sir Nick scoffed. "Then why bring her here? Why not send her to the Shoe if she's lonely."

"I am her friend. The first one she's had for two hundred years. And despite her not being a student here, she knew of it through song and story and has longed to float the corridors for many centuries. Does one need a good reason to extend the hand of friendship and compassion to one tragically cut down in the prime of their youth?"

He looked towards the grey lady who glared at the bloody baron with cold, dead eyes.

"Well spoken in my opinion," chortled the fat friar. "I say we give the young ghost a chance."

Sir Nick didn't look impressed. "Regardless of the merits of the proposal itself, to which I still remain unconvinced, I can only admit I find it difficult to support a petition brought in by a man who hides behind a mask." He sounded bored. "It goes against everything my house stands for."

Harry frowned, although obviously the ghosts couldn't see that.

The grey lady said nothing and just continued to glare at the baron.

The other ghosts muttered among themselves.

The fat friar rose a little. "A call to vote then! All those in favour."

Five ghostly hands rose.

"All those against?"

Six hands rose, Sir Nicholas's and the grey lady's among them. Harry made a quick list of names and faces and shoved it into his mind scape's library.

"Then the request is denied. Sorry about that, Lord Slytherin. Please try again next century."
Harry stalked out of the ghost’s council chamber and immediately spotted Daphne, waiting patiently by the next large oak door.

"No luck then?"

Harry walked over to her side. "No, not this time. What the hell are you supposed to bribe ghosts with?"

Daphne shrugged. "Then what do we do, now?"

Harry smirked. "Go ahead anyway and make it up as we go along."

Daphne groaned.

The final week of term arrived and snow piled up around the castle, deep enough for enthusiastic students to make their own miniature snow castles, and wage snowball war for the snowy grounds with the surprisingly large canon of snowball magic.

Inside a familiar empty classroom, Hermione stood in front of her sitting semi-circle of students, wearing a thick winter cloak lined with niffler fur. Justin, Sophie, Kevin, and Dean also wore their cloaks, but theirs weren’t charmed and runed like hers. None of them had yet learned warming charms and none of them looked very happy about it.

"S'damn cold." Kevin muttered.

On the wall beside her, Portrait Elizabeth shook her head and smiled.

Hermione conjured a bluebell flame in a jar and handed it to Kevin, getting a thankful look in return.

"How is it that you've learned so many spells already? Where do you find the time?" asked Dean.

Hermione conjured a second bluebell flame jar and handed it to Justin. "Occlumency, mostly."

"What's that?"

Justin snorted. "It's this amazing awesome mind magic that most of our classmates learn before they come to school that lets them memorise everything really fast, learn really quickly, and stops mind readers knowing what colour your underwear is."

Sophie blushed.

Dean's eyes widened. "I need to learn that."

Kevin handed his jar to Sophie and took the next bluebell flame jar Hermione conjured with a thankful nod. "But it takes years to learn and they don't teach it here."

Dean eyed Hermione thoughtfully. "You knew you were a witch since only three years ago, right? It would still be useful to know it by our third year."

Sophie, Dean, Justin, and Kevin all looked at each other. Then they turned to her.
Hermione hesitated. In truth she knew that using Harry's secret teaching method, they could probably catch up to their peers in just two to four months, and be well beyond that in another three to six. But the magic wasn't her's to promise and she didn't know any other teaching method. It might even be Slytherin family magic. She conjured a final bluebell jar and handed it to Dean. "I can't promise anything, but I'll ask and have an answer by the start of next term."

They all nodded.

"So," Sophie kicked her legs back and forth, holding the bluebell flame jar, and warming her hands. "What are we going to learn about today?"

Hermione took a piece of chalk and wrote on the board. 'LESSON THREE — SCHOOLS AND CHRISTMAS IN THE MAGICAL WORLD.' She turned back to the others with a swish of her fur-lined cloak. "We'll talk about the other wizarding schools in Britain, but since this is our last lesson before Christmas I thought we'd also cover some of the traditions wizards follow now and in the past."

They all nodded.

Portrait Elizabeth cleared her throat. "There are three other schools in Magical Britain. I didn't go to any of them, obviously, but I did serve on the board of St. Georges School of Magic in London. That one's the newest, and we call it 'the box' because it's just a large red-brick building, hidden from the muggles, near the docks."

Sophie put her bluebell flame aside and took out her ever present muggle notebook.

"Then there's 'The Cornwall Academy' or 'the windmill'. No prizes for guessing why it's called that."

Sophie put up her hand.

"Yes, Dear?"

"Wouldn't it be hard to fit a boarding school into a windmill?"

Elizabeth smiled. "Magic, Dear."

"Oh." Sophie reddened.

"And finally, there's Madam Goose's Home for the Magically Gifted." Elizabeth sniffed. "We call that one 'the Shoe'."

Kevin tilted his head. "Why's it called that, then?"

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. "I did say no prizes, young man."

Dean's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

Hermione turned away to write the final name on the black board. "To be fair, it is a very large shoe." She finished the final letter with a flourish and turned back to them. "I've seen pictures."

"Anyway," Elizabeth redirected their attention back to herself. "These other schools don't come close to Hogwarts. That's mostly by design. Most of the muggleborns and non-noble half-bloods go to them. You're all very lucky to be invited here. If you had to leave Hogwarts for whatever
reason, you'd probably go to one of those other schools." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Unless you were expelled for breaking the International Statute of Secrecy of course, in which case you'd probably be mind-wiped and sent back to the muggle world with two dozen curses to block and drain your magic."

The four muggleborns nodded, slowly. It was far from the first positively medieval pronouncement they'd heard in the last few weeks.

They continued to discuss the three other schools — how they were founded, what they taught, and how it differed from the Hogwarts curriculum. Half the students in Britain and Ireland went to Hogwarts. The other half were split evenly among the box, the windmill, and the Shoe. Hermione finished by showing them a chart she'd drawn, mapping the upper echelons of the ministry of magic to the schools the officials attended — red for the castle (Hogwarts), blue for the windmill, yellow for the box, and green for the Shoe. The chart was a sea of red.

"And on that cheery note," Hermione said, smiling widely, "let's talk Christmas."

Justin shook his head and took out a blank sheet of parchment.

"First, it shouldn't be surprising that wizards don't actually celebrate Christmas—"

Kevin looked up from his own battered notebook, startled.

"—We celebrate the winter solstice, which happens on the 21st or 22nd of December, and the winter festival, which takes place on the 23rd.

"But," Kevin looked confused. "But, the castle…"

"Oh, many of the traditions are similar. And Dumbledore calls it Christmas for some reason, but away from the castle, it's the winter festival, or just the festival."

"So, what different traditions are there?" asked Sophie.

Hermione smiled and thought back to a few weeks ago when Harry had invited her to the Greengrass's winter festival. "Well, the one I'm most looking forward to seeing is 'the hunt'."

"The hunt?"

Portrait Elizabeth chuckled. "That's such a wizard thing. My husband used to love it. Although apparently young witches are into it these days too." She smiled at Hermione.

Hermione felt embarrassment creeping up the back of her neck. "I just thought it sounded really interesting."

"What is it?" tried Sophie again.

"Oh," Hermione turned away from the smirking portrait. "All the animagi transform into their animal forms and hide in a large forest. Then all the wizards and witches ride horses and hunt them with special short-range stunning spells. It's supposed to be a re-enactment of the wild hunt of the Unseelie Court — Definitely one of the darker traditions — Bragging rights for catching someone or evading capture until nightfall."

Sophie looked thoughtful. "So, sort of like fox hunting?"

"Kind of," Hermione waggled a hand. "Except no-one dies."
Dean grinned. "Does Professor McGonagall take part? I'd pay money to see that tabby cat scampering through the woods."

Hermione hesitated. "I... I don't know." She frowned. "Somehow, I can't imagine her agreeing to it."

Justin chuckled. "Well, that sounds cool. What else?"

"Some families hold Yule Balls during the winter festival week. The most prominent one is held by the Malfoys." She made a face. "So, you can guess I won't be going to that one."

They all nodded in agreement.

"Then there's the winter solstice. One of the bi-yearly Wizengamot mandatory sessions is held on that day. It's the longest night of the year and many rituals are best done on that night."

Sophie tilted her head. "Rituals?"

Hermione looked confused for a moment.

"Oh!" she felt her cheeks redden. "Sorry, I keep forgetting. Rituals are another method of performing magic. Like we use wands, potions, and runes here at Hogwarts — rituals are just another type. They can be very potent and dangerous because they sacrifice something in exchange for something else and are often permanent."

Sophie nodded. "So, winter solstice is 'ritual night'?"

"Well," Hermione cast her mind back. "It can be... mostly... I mean, there are other rituals done over the winter festival. For example, there's this other tradition called Stella Benedictio, which uses a combination of ritual and astrological magics to grant a boon to the participants for the coming year. But no one's done that one for a long long time."

"Why not?"

"People forgot how to do it. There might be some old family that has a record of how to do it somewhere, locked in some large and dusty library, but if there is, they aren't telling." She smiled. By 'large and dusty library', she of course meant 'small and damp', by 'them' she of course meant Harry, and by 'not telling' she naturally meant, 'yet'.

Personally, she couldn't wait to watch the stars rearrange themselves in the vast, empty night sky, like the world's most spectacular fireworks display, even if the whole 'four dancing virgins' thing was more than a little embarrassing.

Justin bit the end of his quill. "Umm... still getting the hang of this whole political factions thing. What do the Potters do?"

That threw her for a loop. Hermione refocused on the brown-blondie haired boy. "Sorry?"

"The Potters are the leading family of the Light, yes? The Greengrasses are the leading family of the Gray and they do a winter festival and 'the hunt'. The Malfoys are the leading family of the Dark and they do the Yule Ball. So, what do the Potters do?"

Hermione blinked. "Oh." She waved a vague hand. "They do a Christmas party."

— DP & SW: TFoP —
It wasn't much later that Harry was walking down the Hogwarts path to the thestral led carriages, accompanied by that day's collection of appointed courtiers — Tracey Davis from the Gray, Millicent Bulstrode from the Dark, and two older students from some other minor interest groups. They climbed aboard the carriages, made small talk down to Hogsmeade station, climbed onto the express, made medium talk while they waited for the train to leave, and started on the big talk soon after they passed Carlisle.

"Look, what is it you want, Potter?" Tracey Davis looked him straight in the eye.

He'd been stalling for over ten minutes now. He smiled. "Many things, Heiress Davis."

"You haven't tried to claim anything all year. You just waltzed into the common room after destroying the ENTIRE duelling team, pulled off some insanely high level magic, then sat down for the rest of the semester, and didn't capitalise on it." She glared at him, her button nose and large eyes pushing her two levels above cute and clear into adorable territory.

He leaned back. "Tracey, life is like a box of chocolates—"

"—Oh, for the love of Merlin!"

He chuckled.

"Will you take this seriously for once!"

"Why?"

"Don't you understand about the Slytherin mask? You have SOO much potential but you're squandering it!"

Milli and the two others watched the back and forth, but didn't seem inclined to jump in.

Harry raised an eyebrow. The click-clack of the train filled up the temporary silence. "I'm surprised at you, Heiress Davis. I would've thought you would understand."

Tracey hesitated. "What?"

"I know you've been keeping a close eye on me, ever since a few weeks into the start of term. You didn't think I didn't notice, did you?"

Tracey seemed to flounder for a moment, uncertainty and mild panic flitting across her features, before an ice like visage instantly clamped over her face. Her body straightened, her legs crossed, and her hands quickly folded themselves on her knees. "I do not know what you are referring to, Mister Potter."

Harry smiled ruefully. That had been an occlumency lockdown and a half. "Don't you?" His smile slowly spread into a grin. He extended a legilimency probe and tickled it against her barriers.

Her eyes widened. "Y-You…S-stop that."

His grin widened. "Why? You won't get the answers you need like that, you know." He tickled some more. "Why don't you come back out again, Tracey?"

She looked away.

He bent the connecting tendril and continued right on.
She gasped. "I… I…"

Milli and the others watched, eyes similarly wide.

"You were the only one, you know? Of all the Slytherins in our year, you were the only one who smelled something fishy. Surely you must have realised, even if only at a subconscious level?"

"I d-don't know what you're talking about."

Harry raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything more. If Tracey couldn't figure out that this was his Slytherin mask then he wasn't about to just tell her. He withdrew his mind tickle magic.

Tracey let out a long breath. Her posture relaxed slightly.

"You are an impressive witch, Tracey. Perhaps not possessing quite as much raw power as Miss Granger and Heiress Greengrass, but you see things that other people don't."

She glared at him.

Harry smiled. "What do you want, Miss Davis?"

This seemed to bring her up short. "What?"

"You want to know what I want. Presumably you want to know so you can do some kind of deal with me. What is it that you want, Miss Davis?"

Tracey shot a look at the other three occupants of the carriage. She stood up. "I want you to stop sitting on the fence and pick a damn side!" She stared into his eyes, which he returned with his own relaxed smile. She hesitated. "Only… only, you don't have to decide right now. And… and I also want to invite you to sit with me and my friends in our compartment further down the train."

Harry grinned and stood up. "You only had to ask."

Tracey left.

He winked at Millicent as he walked past.

A hand shot out and grabbed his arm.

"Yes, Milli?"

"You will join me, Draco, and our other friends afterwards, won't you?"

He tipped an imaginary hat. "Of course, Miss Bulstrode."

He followed Tracey down the train. They stopped at the middle compartment.

The door opened.

There sat Daphne, Hermione, Terry Boot, Zacharias Smith, Wayne Hopkins, and Blaise Zabini, all laughing and smiling, an open pack of exploding snap on the table, while Hedwig and Freekey both picked at a shared bowl of nuts and seeds. Someone, probably Hermione, had transfigured the window curtains into a waterfall of multicoloured tinsel.

Daphne put down her goblet of pumpkin juice and smiled warmly at them. "Why hello there,
Tracey — Oh my, and Mister Potter too. Do come in." She patted the seat next to her. "This is an unexpected pleasure."

— End of Chapter Twenty-two —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Changes to Quidditch

Do I even need to explain why I'm doing this?

Rule changes:

Chasers can only handle the quaffle for three seconds (time goes down in professional play) — otherwise, I see no reason why it ever even needs to be passed.

Seeker can handle the quaffle, but only for one second (time goes down in professional play).

Golden Snitch is worth 10% of total points scored by the team, rounded down.

Keep everything else the same and extrapolate consequences.

A/N: A note on slave contracts.

It's not nearly as bad as has been made out in this chapter. There are severe limits to what this magic does. A legitimate command given under a slave contract isn't nearly as powerful as the imperius curse, and we know that can be thrown by a strong enough will.

There are also a number of other reasons why Voldy hadn't made wide spread use of these, why the government don't use them on prisoners, why Dumbledore hasn't used it on Harry, or anyone else for that matter, etc, etc, etc.

These contracts are not, in any way, all powerful, or a game breaker. This is not one of those fics (You know the ones I'm talking about).

This is a temporary Author Note that will exist until all this is explained in story in more depth.
It was the twenty-third of December. Harry's walking feet made crunching sounds on Greengrass Manor's frosty grass lawn. The morning sun sat low in the sky, pushing a weak light that barely cut through the Cumbrian mist. Birds tweeted in the trees. Everything was still.

Harry pulled his cloak closer, let out a long breath, and watched it swirl away in front of him. Soon, the stillness would be gone, replaced by the shouts and banging of dozens of wizards, feverishly preparing the grounds for hundreds more.

Today was the Winter Festival.

But first, he had business with the girls.

He trekked up to the front door, knocked, and was shown in by one of the Greengrass house elves.

"Miss Daphne is just getting up nows, Lord Slytherin, Sir."

Harry nodded, thanked the elf, and showed himself up to the residential part of the manor.

A sleepy Daphne in a loose hanging nightdress walked out of a door several metres up the corridor before him, wiped her eyes, turned, saw him, squeaked, and darted back in the room she'd just left, slamming the door behind her.

Harry let out a quiet chuckle. Daphne had always been modest, but that reaction was certainly more pronounced than it would have been even one year ago. He had to remind himself that time was marching on, and that neither he nor they would be pre-teens forever.

Despite plotting and working 'Project Harem' for over three years now, it didn't change the fact that, right now, when he looked at a beautiful woman, lust didn't sweep through him like a hurricane. He was still biologically too young, didn't have the correct hormones flooding his system, even when looking at adult females, and the girls were not adults. When he looked at the girls, he felt many things — fondness, friendship, pride, extreme protectiveness — but not lust.

However…

Harry leaned on the wall and watched the closed door.

However, Daphne and Hermione were older than him, weren't they? And girls matured faster than boys, didn't they?

A slight smirk played around his lips. That would suck for them, but no one ever said growing up was easy.

The door opened and Daphne emerged wearing a casual robe, slippers, and a slight blush. "C'mon, then. Breakfast will be served soon." She walked past him, not meeting his gaze, and led the way to the family dining room.

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Harry was just polishing off his breakfast of two sausages, a round of bacon, a small pile of
shredded potato, a bowl of broccoli, a slice of toast, and a glass of milk, when the door opened and Hermione bounded in.

"Morning, Harry! Daphne." The brown haired witch pulled out a chair next to him and sat down.

Daphne nodded a greeting through a mouthful of omelette.

"So, what's on the agenda then? I mean, it's very interesting to see the Winter Festival after all this time, and to even get to participate, but it's still very early, and my parents were all set to show me some of the things they've been working on while we've been at school—"

Daphne swallowed her mouthful.

Harry grinned.

"—it's amazing what can be done even when you don't have magic, and I'm sure you'll find it useful, and—"

"—Hermione!" Daphne interrupted.

Hermione hesitated.

"…Let your lord speak?"

"Oh." Hermione flushed and turned fully to a still grinning Harry. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure I'll appreciate your parents work." Harry reached into his robes and produced a parchment. "Our allies in Gringotts are ready. We're going to inspect the three locations for Slytherin Manor today and hopefully give them our choice."

"Excellent." Daphne smiled. "What about the plans?"

He produced another parchment from his robes. "All here, but I'd like to wait for our final expedition member to get here first."

Hermione looked around as though expecting to see them. "Who?"

"Well…"

"Me!"

They all turned to the Dinning room's large double doors. Dirty blonde hair fell around slim shoulders and light blue robes embroidered with little smiling suns.

Harry stood up. "Hermione, may I introduce you to Heiress Luna Lovegood, of the Ancient and Noble House of Lovegood."

Hermione stood up too, dipped into a curtsey, and let out a startled 'uff' sound when Luna tackle hugged her in four and a half feet of ethereal witch.

"Pleased to meet you, Hermione," Luna said brightly, not letting go.

"Umm… yes. Pleased to meet you."

"I've been so looking forward to today."
"Good."

"Harry talks about you all the time."

"He… he does, does he?"

Harry smiled.

Daphne face-palmed.

"Oh, yes. He says you're his best student."

"That's g-good." Hermione seemed to gently try to extract herself from Luna's embrace. It didn't work.

"Yes. He also says he can't wait till you're older so he can really teach you some stuff."

Harry and Daphne both choked. Hermione went wide eyed.

"Runes, Luna! We were talking about runes!"

Luna finally let go of a blushing Hermione and turned to him. "Of course we were talking about runes, my lord. What else would we be talking about?"

"Right!" Daphne pushed her plate away from her. "Let's talk mansions. Harry?"

Harry brandished the parchment thankfully. "Elves! We need the table clear, please."

The table cleared.

He let out a long breath and unfolded the parchment. He unfolded it some more. And then yet some more. Soon, a huge architectural map had filled one side of the dinning room table from a parchment that looked no bigger than a single page.

They all leaned over it.

Daphne whistled. "It's big."

Harry nodded. "27,000 square feet, not including the basement and attics, spread over three floors."

Hermione closely inspected the parchment from where she could see the first two floors. "So what are all these rooms? What's this one?" She pointed to a huge circle right in the middle of the mansion on both the first and second floors.

"That's the ballroom, or event room. Has enough space for a good 240 people, so easily the top 1% of the wizarding world. It isn't roofed on the first floor so it extends to the second floor too. The second floor has a balcony that extends all round the ballroom, see? So people can look down from it." Harry gestured to the rooms surrounding the huge circular room. "The entire manor is built around the ballroom, you can get anywhere from the corridor that encircles it." He pointed to the bottom left room and curved his finger in an arc. "Workshop, gym, house elf quarters, kitchens, dinning room, sitting room, and smoking room, or, if you prefer, the old wizard's play room."

And so they continued on for another thirty minutes, going through the first and second floor, and discussing how each area of the mansion was to be used. They were briefly joined by Lord and Lady Greengrass and Astoria, who ate breakfast and then left to oversee the festival preparations, or, in Astoria's case, leave for her friend's house. Occasionally, Daphne or Luna would make a
request or Hermione would make a suggestion, and Harry would write it down.

The second floor was to be split into two main sections — the library, which Hermione spent a good while drooling over and making suggestions for, and the office area, a space of about ten rooms, separately warded form the rest of the house, and with its own floo point so any employees working on future Slytherin projects could floo straight into the space without having to, or even being allowed, to walk through the rest of the house.

Daphne folded her arms when she heard that last bit. "Good. I don't want random people wandering around the private parts of the house. It's bad enough when—" she stopped, shot Harry a sideways look and blushed slightly.

Hermione gave Daphne a curious look. "Shall we move on? There's still the third floor."

Harry nodded and folded out the rest of the parchment, revealing the third and final floor. "The third floor is the family floor. Since there's no ballroom on this floor, the main hallway is wider and just cuts straight through the middle of the mansion from the far left to the far right."

Daphne gave him a half-lidded look, leaned over and jabbed a finger at the largest room in the middle, south of the main hallway. "Is that the master bedroom?"

Harry smiled, "No, that's the living room."

Daphne hesitated. "Ah, so which is?"

"This one." Harry pointed to a smaller room north of the living room and on the other side on the hallway."

"Oh."

Hermione was busy counting. "I assume all these smaller rooms are en suite bathrooms?"

Harry nodded.

"So, thirteen bedrooms in total." She whistled. That… that's a lot of bedrooms.

"It is. Restoring Slytherin House isn't going to be a one person effort, that's for certain."

Luna smiled and patted her tummy. "I can hardly wait."

"Luna!" Daphne moaned, putting her hands over her face. "Will you please stop saying things like that!" She looked mortified.

Hermione looked at Luna with wide eyes, which slowly changed to confused. "Wait. But… I thought you had a consortship agreement for the Lovegood line? Or did I misunderstand something?"

Luna smiled widely. "The contract only says the first two males and four in total have to be Lovegoods, after that it's up to me. Of course, if Daphne pops out as many as that then there may be no need."

"I'm not listening!" Daphne shouted in a sing-song voice, hands now over her ears.

Harry stared straight ahead, eyes slightly glassy, and explicitly not catching anyone else's. He made a mental note to be more mindful when dropping mind leading comments around Luna in the future since it seemed the powerful witch didn't just mentally follow such comments, but also
grabbed on to them, yanked with all her might, held them up, and enthusiastically waved them about for everyone to see, all with the air of a first-time magical angler catching their very first plimpy.

By the time Daphne calmed down, Hermione had satiated her curiosity and Luna had stopped being quite so Luna. A nearby wall clock's long hand tipped over the peak and began its slow, thirty-minute fall.

"Time to get moving I think," Harry said. "We are expected."

The foursome packed up their stuff, got their outdoor things (Daphne still needed to change her slippers), marched through the manor, waved goodbye to Lord Greengrass, and stepped out onto the back lawn of the Greengrass gardens, Harry now under a disillusionment.

The sun had risen a whole few degrees and was still failing its impossible quest to melt away the Cumbrian mists, standing about as much chance as an incendio might have to melt away an iceberg.

The gardens were a bustling hive of activity. Witches and wizards everywhere carried wood and flicked wands, erecting booths and stalls and the occasional round picnic table, which grew larger and larger the more hungry work-wizards sat at them.

One half-finished booth declared itself to be a chocolate frog racing stand. 'Seven knuts a go! And you eat the winner!' Another booth proclaimed, 'Best memories of 1991! See them all! One sickle, thirteen knuts!'

As they made their way around the manor and towards the front gardens, Harry couldn't help noticing Hermione rapidly falling, once again, into insatiable curiosity mode. He grabbed her, causing her to squeal at the invisible grip, and dragged her away from a long line of horse boxes, all lined up in the middle of the front lawns, just as the drawling and slightly whiny voice of Draco Malfoy drifted around a box containing a beautiful Arabian horse.

"But father," the voice said, "Nott says his father is letting him bring a pegasus."

"Then he is playing a joke on you, Draco. Magical horse riding is not something that a twelve year old boy can attempt."

Hermione huffed as they made their way away from the preparations and caught back up to Daphne and Luna. They then narrowly avoided being run over by a series of three massive purple lorries with 'Knight Wagon Logistics' written on their sides in large, yellow letters as they slipped through the Greengrass manor gates, and out into the quiet country lane beyond.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry retrieved his shrunk trunk and unshrunk it on the dirt road. "Alright, everyone in."

The girls all clambered in. He closed the lid, shrunk the trunk again, concentrated, and apparated away with a crack of forced magic.

He arrived a moment later near an exposed hilltop, surrounded by little else but exposed hilltops for miles and miles. Up here, the sun had succeeded in reaching the ground, and cast an ethereal light on the still misty valleys below, making them look like lakes of smoke.

"Greetings, Lord Slytherin."
Harry de-disillusioned himself and placed his trunk on the ground. An older man stood in front of him in a grey pinstripe suit. He looked rather like an old style butler, if old style butlers were in the habit of carrying five foot long battle axes.

"Greetings, Ragnok," Harry said, opening the trunk's lid. "Alright! We're here!" he called down.

The girls clambered back out.

Luna pouted as she did so. "Didn't even have time for the in-flight meal. Oh, hi, Ragnok!" She waved enthusiastically.

Daphne and Hermione stared.

"Polyjuice potion," said Ragnok, by way of explanation. "Rather difficult for my kind to do business in the muggle world otherwise."

They then made their way around the crest of the hill. Daphne gasped. Revealing itself as they edged around the long slow hill-top corner, and nestled between the hill they walked on and the next, lay an almost perfect circular lake of absolutely still and crystal-clear water. Not a single ripple marred its surface. Despite being green, the grounds around the lake were completely devoid of tall plant growth, like a never ending carpet of moss as far as the eye could see, although Harry easily spotted it to be an optical illusion, and that the greenness actually came from the short grasses that grew even around the path they walked on. It was beautiful.

"Ten out of ten for aesthetics," Luna said.

"Yes," Hermione added, weakly. "I don't know, do we even have the right to spoil something so… pure?"

"Hardly pure," Ragnok said, waving his axe at the surroundings. "This all used to be forest, until the muggles cut it all down — same with most of the island." He snorted. "That's actually how we'd set up this deal. The cover story would be we're buying it as part of a reforestation effort. Since you'll need a small wood regardless of what you do anyway, that won't even be a lie."

Harry nodded. It was certainly tempting. "What are the known resources?" he asked, mostly for the girl's benefit.

"Well, the soil's rubbish. You'll have to build that from the ground—ahaha—up, but there are known silver deposits in an abandoned mine in the gully there." He pointed to the far side of the lake where the land snaked away around another hillside. "It would take quite an investment to get working again though. More than you have at the moment, if I know anything about it, which I do."

Harry nodded again and Ragnok continued. "The soil as it is can support all the basic wards with a one year transplanted nursery, but it would take a few more years to get them to strength with your other option down in East Anglia, or up north in the Orkneys."

Hermione stopped examining the dry stone wall separating them from the steep drop to the lake. "Why?"

"Their soil can support more plant growth, quicker. You can't just buy in good soil for growing magical plants. You have to build it yourself. More plants means more magic, which means more and stronger wards, faster."

Harry watched Luna, now climbing onto the drystone wall and walking along the top of it, hands
stretched out on either side for balance. "Anything else we should know?"

Ragnok looked thoughtful. "Unicorn herd just a few hills in that direction—" He pointed to the West.

Daphne's gaze followed the goblin's finger with a longing look.

"—And the nearest road for the Knight Wagons is one kilometre that way." He pointed in the other direction. "So we'd be best off to build that first before construction properly starts."

A few minutes of sightseeing and questions later, Harry, once again, pulled out his trunk and had the girls and Ragnok descending into it for the trip to East Anglia. Harry had to actually put an arm around Daphne's shoulder to lead her away from where she'd been staring westwards for the last few minutes, along with a whispered promise that they would come back sometime to see the herd.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

It took a many more than one apparate to arrive at their next location, on the other side of the country in the East Anglian county of Suffolk.

Hermione climbed out of the trunk, looking rather ill, while Luna, Daphne, and Ragnok seemed to fair better.

"Urgh," Hermione groaned, leaning over while facing one of the massive hedge rows, as tall and a half as an adult wizard.

Harry rubbed her back.

"Looks very flat," commented Daphne, still sounding a bit down, and indeed it did. They stood in a large field, the hedge Hermione was still using as a crutch to the West, and forest boxing them in to the North, East, and South. A dilapidated concrete control tower lay on the far side of the field.

After Hermione recovered somewhat, Ragnok led them onto a large concrete road that stretched from one side of the field, all the way to the other. "Used to be a muggle airforce base during Grindelwald's war. Hasn't been used since," he informed them as they made their way through the property.

"You said the soil here was good?" asked Hermione.

"Yes, young vassal. The muggles have been alternating grazing cattle here for the better part of thirty years now. The soil here is alive."

Harry couldn't help thinking that the way the goblin had said 'alive' suggested white sheets, body parts, and lightning storms.

Luna crouched at the edge of the runway and pulled a wriggly thing out of the soil. "You're right. Look."

Hermione made a disgusted face and turned away. "How big is it?"

"As big as my hand."

Hermione whirled back around. "I meant the land!"

Ragnok chuckled. "Fifty acres of field and another fifty of non-magical forest which gives you good sight blocking against the muggles."
Daphne nodded "Any resources?"

"None known, just really good soil."

"Ah."

They spent the next few minutes pottering around, but there wasn't much more to see. The control tower was sort of interesting and Harry suspected they could do something with it, but it would more likely just be levelled along with any other traces of the old airbase.

Eventually, Harry once again pulled out his trunk, beckoned the girls and goblin inside—in Hermione's case, with quite some reluctance—shrunk it down, popped it in his pocket, wrapped himself in the invisibility cloak, and softly rose into the air.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

By the time Harry landed at their final destination, the sun hung almost as high as it was going to get. He stood on an island hilltop, which sloped gently downwards on one side and steeply downwards on the other. The gentle slope led to a long expanse of sheep grazing land, leading further to the ice-blue water's edge, while the steep side angled down to a far more immediate side of sea. The ground was white — the snow, an inch thick. There were no trees.

He put his trunk on the ground and opened the lid.

Immediately, Hermione clambered out of the trunk and threw up on the ground.

Ragnok emerged next, followed moments later by Daphne and Luna.

"Wee. Snow." Luna stepped out from the trunk, kneeled and lay on the gentle hill, and started to awkwardly roll down with another long, "Weeeeeeee".

"It's very pretty," said Daphne.

Harry rubbed Hermione's back again before quickly vanishing all the mess.

Hermione shook herself. "Urk. I hope we can find a better way to travel, because that… really doesn't seem to sit well with me." She looked at Harry with hopeful eyes.

Harry tilted his head. "Well… we are going to have to chain apparate to get back to Greengrass Manor to be in time for the hunt, but if we have more time next time we could just fly."

Hermione nodded, slowly. "I think I would appreciate that." She straightened herself and brushed down her robes before finally taking in their surroundings. "Wow."

Harry had to admit that 'wow' did sum up the view quite well. The snow covered island gave the impression of a misshapen pearl floating in a sea of sapphires.

Ragnok trudged over to where the two of them stood, using his war-axe like a staff to lean on. "Welcome to Gairsay. The ninety-ninth largest island in the Orkney Islands, just off the north-most coast of Scotland. Hogwarts is just over two hundred kilometres that way." He pointed out in the direction of another, larger island near their one. "Six hundred acres, just under one square mile. This hill is the highest point, just one hundred metres above sea level."

Daphne now joined the small circle, leaving only Luna apart who was still enthusiastically rolling down the hill. "Can we get the floo network here?"
Ragnok nodded once. "Of course. We would not have suggested it otherwise."

Daphne pointed. "And that island?" Her finger directed Harry's gaze to a smaller round island that sat very close to Gairsay. "It's very close to this one. Is that included too?"

"Yes, Heiress Greengrass. That is Sweyn Holm. It is roughly fifty acres. There is also a much smaller island out in the island's natural harbour, Millburn Bay." He swept his hand in the general direction in which Luna had now stopped rolling down the hill and was climbing back up to them.

Hermione rubbed her shoulders for warmth. "There aren't any trees here. It doesn't look like there's a tree on any of the islands." Her gaze fell on the much larger island that lay between them and Hogwarts. "Is that a problem?"

Ragnok waved it away. "Not at all. The farmland off the hill is very fertile and the correct trees will grow well."

"Any known resources?"

"The island is made of red sandstone, which is supposed to be an attractive building material, although there is no quarry on the island, so you'd have to arrange for one."

"Only red sandstone?"

"I understand a nearby island has a supply of granite, but anything else would have to be shipped from the mainland."

Harry frowned. "What about that?" He pointed towards the side of the island where a small collection of buildings huddled.

"They're the local muggles. Three of them. We'd give them compensation to move. That would be part of the land cost."

Harry nodded. "Any magicals around?"

Ragnok pointed parallel to the big, Hogwarts blocking island. "You can't see it from here, but up that way there's a colony of merpeople that live around one of the other islands."

Luna joined them, robes and hair covered in snow. "We could visit them with gillyweed and trade with them. Merpeople are excellent fishermen."

Hermione looked at Luna with a surprised expression.

Luna looked back with a warm smile on her face.

Harry stroked his chin. "Not a bad idea."

Daphne nodded.

Ragnok then took them through the deal's remaining details and by the time they were done Harry could certainly see how his plans could work on the island, despite the many difficulties in setting up home nearly nine hundred kilometres from London. Having said that, he could just as easily see those plans flourishing by the mountain lake or the abandoned airfield as well.

He waved the girls and Ragnok back into the trunk. Before he closed it up though, he climbed down himself and sat on the second to last stair. The girls and Ragnok watched him. He took a breath. "Girls, when we get back to Greengrass manor and before I start making any decisions, I'd
like to ask for each of your independent council on the three properties we've just visited."

He looked between Hermione, Daphne, and Luna and got a round of slow head nods in return. "Right then. In that case, I suggest you take the time on the trip back to separately think about it and maybe make some notes."

Another round of slow nodding.

He looked towards Ragnok. "Do you have anywhere else you need to be soon?"

Ragnok barked a laugh. "I can wait another thirty minutes at Greengrass Manor for your decision, if that's what you're angling for, Lord Slytherin."

Harry nodded, thanked the girls, ascended the stairs, closed the trunk, and took one last look over the Scottish island landscape before shrinking the trunk, and turning his attentions back south for the chain apparition trip to Greengrass Manor.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

By the time he arrived back, invisible and soundless, the festival was well under way. Hundreds of witches and wizards of all ages walked around the Greengrass Manor grounds, exploring all the unique and quirky booths that had miraculously sprung up since earlier that morning.

He watched an older wizard playing a bagpipe, competing for attention with a wizard playing a piccolo only a dozen metres away. Both players were hampered though, by the next wizard, who wasn't so much playing a one man band, as watching the one man band play itself, occasionally flicking his wand at it with a look of smug superiority.

Harry floated over them all, invisible and soundless, taking in all the sights and sounds. It would certainly be fun in future years to enjoy the festival as the teenager he would soon be, once he didn't have to hide his familiarity with the wizarding world anymore.

He flew around the back of the manor, touched down at the back door, let Ragnok out from the trunk, and wrapped several times on the door.

The same house elf from this morning opened it. "I is being sorry, sir, but guests are not being allowed—Oh, my apologies, please come in."

Harry nodded, checking over his shoulder to see that no-one had seen, which they hadn't, and quickly darted into the large mansion. The door closed behind him and the sounds from the festival dropped to a quiet background level.

He made his way to the room he still occasionally used as an office. A few minutes later, he was sat in a big plush armchair with Hermione sat opposite him, recovered from her apparition sickness, and vibrating with eagerness, looking fully ready to take an end of year exam.

"Well, Harry," She produced a piece of parchment. "I've written down all the pros and cons, compiled a list of attributes derived from them and given each attribute a weighting for importance. I then judged each of the three properties against these attributes and computed a total score for each. Umm..." she fiddled with a strand of hair. "My analysis says that the abandoned air-field would be the best choice."

He regarded Hermione for a moment before reaching over. "Can I have a look at that, please?"

Hermione handed over the parchment.
Harry read. There were, in fact, a few pros and cons he hadn't yet considered. "You know, I wouldn't necessarily weigh these attributes in exactly the same way you did?"

Hermione quickly nodded. "Of course."

Harry smiled. "Good, good, so long as that's obvious." He returned to studying the parchment. Occasionally, he asked Hermione a few more questions or asked her to expand on a few points. Eventually, he thanked her and she left through the office door.

Harry put the parchment down, walked to the trunk, opened the lid and helped Daphne out. Luna shouted something from within the trunk about being out of biscuits. Harry closed the trunk lid again, and the two sat opposite each other.

"So," Daphne started.

"So," he acknowledged.

"I really like the mountain lake one," she continued. "I mean, the island one is nice too, but I see one really big problem with it."

"Which is?"

"It's too far away. Symbolically it's too far away. It would be like we'd be saying to everyone that we're not really part of magical Britain, that we don't want to be part. If we want to be the dominant power in Britain, that's a problem."

Harry nodded slowly.

"The flat one down south make sense from a short term point of view — it'll be quicker to get set up, with the good soil and nearby road access, — but it doesn't have anything that can hold the imagination of people who visit it. We want people who come to say, 'Wow!'. That abandoned muggle airport won't give us that."

Harry nodded again.

"And it's also in a high muggle density area. Not as dense as the city, but dense enough that the ministry will be all over us for every little thing we might want to do. Want to start our own festival? Ministry approval in triplicate. Want to build a quidditch pitch? Five years planning approval first. If we can prove there isn't that kind of risk, we can make far more of our own decisions."

"An important factor to consider."

Daphne nodded.

They talked for a little while more before they finished up. Daphne left to join Hermione, and Harry opened the trunk once more to fish up Luna.

The witch glided over to the chair opposite Harry and sat down.

Harry opened his mouth, but Luna beat him to it.

"Which place do you want to make our home in, my lord?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "That's what I want to ask you about, Luna."
Luna smiled. "I want what you want, Harry."

"Do you really mean that? Don't you mean, 'I want what's best for you?' In which case, what I want could be different to what you want, because I might make a mistake in my understanding about what's in our best interests."

Luna's smile grew wider. "But you have twenty years of your own experience, plus over seventy years of dark lord memories to draw upon, whereas I have far, far less than that."

Harry couldn't help smiling in turn. "But I have only a finite amount of time per day to consider those decisions, the same total amount as everyone else, and each decision gets less and less consideration the more of them I need to make, and I make lots of decisions every day. For a decision as important as this one, doesn't it make sense to take soundings, even from those who profess total confidence in the decision maker?"

Luna's smile now threatened to split her face in two. "But might my input not dilute the quality of information you consider in your own thoughts?"

"It might, Luna, if I were asking for input only on known variables. But I'm asking for input with the express purpose of exposing variables I may have missed in my initial sweep."

"My lord?"

"Yes, Luna?"

"Can we call our first daughter 'Athena'?"

"Err…" Harry's bullet train thoughts noticed the log on the track far too late and smashed right into it. "I… er… what?"

Luna rose from her chair. "I think you should consider which property already holds the most grand strategic potential, And which property will force you to develop even more grand strategic potential in the future. That's my council, my lord." She then skipped out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Harry stared at the door for an age while his brain rebooted.

Only Luna.

He turned back to stare at the just vacated empty chair.

Grand strategic potential, Mmm? He picked up Hermione's analysis parchment and gave it the once over again. Everything on there was important. Critical even, from a tactical perspective, and no one could argue that tactics weren't mission critical. He put the parchment back down. Daphne made very good points too. The political, symbolic, and experiential aspects couldn't be ignored. They would have to be worked with and around.

He pursed his lips.

Athena… the goddess of strategic warfare. Born of Zeus, king of the gods, and Metis, the goddess of intelligence, craftiness, and deep thought.

He continued staring at the wall for another age before finally standing up, making his way over to the door, and opening it. Hermione, Daphne, and Luna were all sat outside on straight back chairs against the far side corridor wall, looking for all the world like hopefuls for a job interview.
Hermione and Daphne looked up as he closed the door behind him. The sounds of the festival still filtered into the hallway through the thick manor walls.

Harry cleared his throat. "Okay. I've come to a decision."

Hermione looked eager. Daphne looked hopeful. Luna just looked as peaceful as ever.

"We're going to build Slytherin Manor on Gairsay Island."

Daphne's eyes flashed disappointment for a moment before her jaw firmed and her eyes steeled in determination. She nodded.

Hermione looked momentarily surprised before quickly turning enthusiastic.

Luna just continued to look peaceful.

"We're going to have at least one more session with Gringotts to confirm the architectural drawings before Hogwarts starts again. If we think of any more changes, we can add them then."

Daphne stood up. "Would you like me to take our decision to Ragnok? Father came by a little while ago to say he was in the round house drinking them dry."

Harry smiled. "Yes. Thank you, Daphne. And we'll need to also get ready for the hunt." He looked out of the window. The sun was now at its low winter apex. "It will surely be starting soon."

— DP & SW: T FoP —

John Potter walked over the frosty grass of Greengrass Manor wearing the special riding robes his mother had picked up for him last summer, and which she'd put particular effort this morning into making sure he wore properly, despite his half-hearted protestations that he knew how to do it himself.

He made his way over to the long row of horse boxes, now at the back of the manor, facing onto the vast expanse of Greengrass forest, and walked up to the one box bearing the Potter crest.

"You ready, Son?" His dad greeted him at the box gate.

John rolled his eyes. "Yes, Dad, I am ready."

"Because I know how it is when it's your first time, you know."

This wasn't his first time.

James Potter nudged him in the ribs. "And you'll even be chasing your old man."

"Good. I was just thinking my bedroom could use a set of antlers."

James Potter clutched his chest. "Oh! What a shot!" He grinned.

John gave a tight smile. "Just keep an eye out for Malfoy, yes?"

James smiled back. "No one is going to try anything during the hunt, John. They'd be mad to. We don't go around chasing each other, and firing spells willy-nilly, alone in the woods, without precautions."

John nodded.
James wandered off to see to something else.

John unlocked the box, walked over to Sandy, his three year old palomino, put the saddle over her back, and watched all the buckles, straps, and bridle snake their way around and across Sandy's body, neck and head. He shuddered as the serpentine metaphor slithered its way through his brain.

Urgh. Rumours had it that Lord Slytherin was going to be here this year too. Was it any coincidence that Slytherin choose his first hunt to also be his first hunt? Slytherin seemed far to enmeshed in his problems — the man was the first difference he'd spotted in the world when he came back. Everything seemed to always come back to him, even, he suspected, his brother. If he could catch Slytherin alone during the hunt… oooo did he have some questions for that man.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Daphne!" Tracey spluttered.

"Hi, Trace."

"What are you wearing?"

"Riding robes, isn't it obvious?"

"You're going on the hunt?"

Daphne smiled. "Yes."

"Your father is letting you?!"

"Well, it's more that my lord suggested it, and father accepted that since I was already betrothed it wasn't up to him to stage-manage my image."

Tracey cast a look into the dark, thorny, overgrown mass of oppressive plant life that made up Greengrass forest. "Rather you than me, Daph."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Lord Slytherin walked through the crowd of the Greengrass winter festival like a prophet parting a badly dressed sea. Everywhere he went, fingers pointed and voices dropped to a hushed whisper.

It was the first time he'd appeared at a semi-public event rather than the more exclusive 'invite only' gatherings of the past three years, so this wasn't at all surprising.

An enterprising man wearing a quirky hat and a nervous grin held out a hand-full of three small and golden balls as he walked past. "Snitch shooting, milord? Hit three snitches in ten spells and win a prize? Only six knuts?"

The crowd held its breath.

Harry smiled under his mask. The man looked like he enjoyed his breakfasts as much as Uncle Vernon, although the effect on him was more red jolly dwarf than red angry star.

"Sure, why not?"

The crowd let out its collective breath. He handed over the money. The special, short range snitches were released, and Harry picked all three clean out of the air with his first three shots.
Nervous clapping broke out among the watchers — the kind of clapping which believes that the future of its originators could well depend on being seen to be clapping this particular wizard at this particular time.

"Y-y-yes," the jolly man squeaked. "W-well done. Pick a prize?"

Harry nonchalantly picked out a large, fluffy plush-toy snake in green, red, and purple, which proceeded to curl its way up and around his body before resting its head on his shoulder.

"It looks… err… good on you."

Harry tickled the snake under its jaw eliciting a kind of happy hissing sound. He could feel his parsel magics reaching out to the toy, coiling around it, making it more snake-like, more real. A slight femininity seeped into the hiss. He smiled. "I do believe, that this one is a she."

"Umm… Right… yes, milord."

Harry walked away, leaving a staring crowd and one nervous wreck of a stall keeper. He turned the next corner, saw the path running to a dead-end, and was just about to turn back, when a slight, short, and distracted figure, dressed all in black, stalked around another corner and stopped, wide-eyed in front of him.

He smiled. "Ah. Good afternoon, Heiress Black."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Not like that, like this."

"I do know how to do it. I took riding lessons when I was younger."

"Not with magical riding gear, you didn't."

"It looks the same."

"Look, just put your foot here…. No. Here!"

"I don't know… Ack!"

"You see! That's why I said, 'here'!"

"Are you getting up, or not?"

"Yes, just scoot down."

"What? I thought I was going in front."

"No. You're going to concentrate on the spell work."

"Fair enough."

"Watch out."

"Argh! Warn me first next time!"

"I did!"

"A split second before your boot almost took my head off."
"Quit whining and hold on — Eep! — Not there!"

"Then where?"

"The saddle handle!"

"What? You mean this bit that looks like a boy's thing?! I'm not grabbing that!"

"Fine, then! Around the waist, if you must."

Moments later, the stable door opened by magic and a beautiful white horse clopped out carrying a mildly ticked Daphne Greengrass, being held around the waist by a slightly frazzled Hermione Granger.

The pair of witches bumped and rocked their way out of the stables, past the line of portable horse boxes, through the crowded gardens, all the way being cheered and waved at by the festival goers, and down to the edge of the Greengrass forests, where close to forty other witches and wizards — mostly wizards — milled around astride horses of every breed and size.

Daphne cast her gaze across the gathering. There was her father, sitting in the front of the pack and carrying a large horn. There were Lords Malfoy, and Nott, sitting astride Arabian horses of fairest chestnut-gold. There was Lord Lovegood, and Lord Woodcroft, two of the Gray's staunchest allies. And in the middle of the pack, dressed in full dragon hide and still wearing her monocle, was Regent Amelia Bones, head of the DMLE, riding next to one of the few non-nobles present, Lyndsea Morwenna, the founder of Witch Weekly. The two stood out for being the only other witches, apart from herself and Hermione, in a sea of testosterone.

Daphne briefly wondered what the monocled witch thought of their being allowed to use their wands for the event. Regent Bones was well known to be as straight as an arrow and she couldn't imagine a privileged exemption like this sitting well with the incorruptible woman.

She was jolted out of her wonderings by a most unwelcome voice.

"What is she doing here?"

Daphne turned to see Draco Malfoy trotting over, waving his hand towards them, and glaring daggers at Hermione.

"Heir Malfoy," Hermione called out from right behind her, "A pleasure, as always."

Daphne smiled.

Draco wheeled his horse back to the pack, saw no one was objecting, scowled, and turned back. "Well, I hope you can both keep up. This is a wizard's game."

Daphne sniffed. "I'm sure we will do just fine."

"Indeed." Zacharias Smith rode up, also wearing full riding robes, but accentuated in places with what could only be described as actual steel armour. By his side, hung a long, ornate war hammer. He reined in what looked like a Morgan, causing Malfoy's own Friesian to take a startled step to the side. "I'm sure the ladies will more than hold their own."

"Well spoken," said a recognisable male voice from behind her.

Daphne smiled, turned, opened her mouth to reply, saw what she saw, closed her mouth again, and
gawked.

Harry sat astride the older brother of her and Hermione's horse, wearing full riding robes, as expected, and a huge fluffy toy snake, curled all the way around him, which was not. "I was held up," he said. "Ran into an acquaintance." He nodded towards Malfoy and Smith. "Run along boys. I need a few moments with the girls here before the off."

Draco and Zach turned away reluctantly and trotted off in the direction of the other first time riders, where John Potter seemed to be trying to encourage a nervous looking Neville Longbottom.

She turned back. "My lord?"

"Daphne," Harry started, "I know you were disappointed about the thing from before, so when I saw this I couldn't help thinking of you."

Daphne felt herself go red.

"Here you go."

The fluffy snake unwrapped itself from Harry's chest and slid down his arm to her's "I — Ah — Thank you? My lord."

It wrapped itself along her arm, and coiled and hugged itself around her chest.

Harry nodded and trotted off to the front of the pack.

Behind her, Hermione giggled. "So, now you have a fluffy toy snake."

"Quiet."

"I'm sure all the boys will take us seriously now."

"Quiet."

"Well, I'm not complaining — its more comfy than your back."

"I'm sure our lord just won it at a stand and gave it to me to get rid of it."

"Oh, I'm sure."

The two sat in silence for a moment.

"So," Hermione began, "I won't find it in your four poster back at Hogwarts?"

"Quiet."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry brought his horse up to the front of the group and exchanged nods with Xeno and Jacob.

"Alright!" Jacob called out.

The assembled horsemen all turned to him.

"It's getting late, so I won't bother you all with needless babble! You know the rules! These here are our animagi for the hunt!" He gestured behind him to where six people quietly emerged from
narrowed his eyes. James Potter stood among the six. If he could, he wanted to get him alone. This would be his first real opportunity to approach his father in such a way as to not seem engineered. In all his twenty-four years of living, he'd never actually exchanged a single sentence with him.

"They will now all transform!"

James Potter turned into a huge stag, just as the others turned into their respective animals — Lord Black into a grim, Lord Saumual Parkinson and his younger brother, Robert Parkinson, both turning into wild boar, Pandora Lovegood into a flying squirrel, and Rebecca Ogden, the daughter of Lord Ogden and consort of Devlin Whitehorn, into a grey wolf.

"They will now have a ten minute lead — on my horn blow!"

Lord Greengrass raised the horn to his lips and a long, loud and deep rumble sounded across the group.

The animagi scattered.

The hunt was on.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

In a small part of the forest, the mists hung low over the tops of the trees, filtering through the canopies and kissing the lower branches. Dead leaves littered the floor and occasionally rustled in an opportunistic wind. In the far off distance, a second horn blow faded in and out of being like a wolf howl on a silent night.

The leaves rustled again, and any passersby would've felt it in the ground — the tiny vibrations coming up through their limbs. The vibrations grew, causing leaves on the very tips of trees to shake, ever so slightly, like the silk trip lines on a spider's web.

The vibrations grew some more, and now sound filtered through the wood — the distinct rumble of an approaching host, quiet now, but still growing.

Then, suddenly, the rumble seemed to explode, and the thunder of well over a hundred iron shod hooves rocked the forest, pounding the ground and shredding the many low hanging trees as the hoard flew through. Shouts, calls, incantations, wand flashes, the sounds and raw emotions of over three dozen hunters chasing their prey — it all crashed past, on and on, never seeming to stop.

Harry urged his horse on, the branches whipping at his face, thorns tearing his robes. He snapped his wand towards one low hanging branch and blinked as a half dozen other cutting curses joined his own to tear apart the obstruction.

The path twisted and turned, a ditch here, a bush there, now a fork. He glanced behind him to see the hunt splitting in two. The path forked again, and again the hunt split, fanning out into the forest on their own separate trails. Soon, he was alone. "Animagus revelio!" His wand flashed, but nothing happened. The sun was still up, but it was winter. Soon it would be dark, and sunset marked the end of the hunt. He grunted and urged his steed into motion, deeper and deeper into the forest. He had a stag to catch.

— DP & SW: TFoP —
"Animagus Revelio!" Hermione cried out over the thunder and jerking motion of their horse, holding onto Daphne as tightly as she could with just one arm.

"Anything?" Daphne shouted back.

"Nothing!" Hermione craned her head to see behind her. They were alone. "We've lost the others!"

"Good!"

"Good?!"

"More chances for us!"

They crashed on, jumped a stream, and soon found themselves climbing.

The sun overhead had started to fall.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John Potter drove his horse harder and harder. "C'mon Neville!"

"John, I…" Neville dodged a tree branch. "I don't think I can keep this up!"

"Yes, you can!"

On either side of them, seemingly from nowhere, Malfoy and Nott appeared on their black steeds, now matching them stride for stride. John cursed.

"Need a rest, Potter?" called Malfoy.

"Shove it, Malfoy!"

"Longbottom there looks like he needs it!"

"Shut up!"

The four horses matched each other, burst into a clearing, and were immediately joined by one more.

"Thought I'd lost you lot!" shouted Zacharias Smith from the other edge of the clearing, the weak sunlight reflecting off his bits of steel armour.

"Why are you going that way?" shouted Malfoy.

"No reason!"

"Bullshit! Theo!"

"Animagus Revelio!" A bright light glowed from the Nott heir's wand tip. "There's one in his direction!"

John cursed again. "Neville! C'mon!"

The four horses bolted in Zach's direction who wielded his horse around and took off at a fast canter, feet kicking furiously.

Up in the sky, the sun fell another few degrees.
Harry's wand tip glowed, information flooded his brain with a whole lot of nothing. He growled, jumped his horse over a brook and tried again. Again, nothing.

He slowly brought his horse to a stop and took stock. The path branched off in four directions, two led back the way he'd come, one made its way up a steep hill. Harry firmed his jaw and urged his horse along the last path, the one that took him towards the thicker growth of trees and bushes.

He raised his wand again. Again, it glowed. His eyes snapped wider. There! He had one! Heart racing, he followed the path indicated by his magic. It was still only a one-in-six chance, but fate was on his side, after all.

"There! I have one!" Hermione frantically pointed to their right.

Daphne reined in their horse and pointed her in the direction she'd indicated.

"About time!"

Hermione flung her arms around Daphne as they sped up again. "Animagus Revelio!" Her wand flashed again. "Straight on!"

They thundered on through the forest.

"Animagus Revelio!" Another flash. "Go right!"

Daphne craned her neck. "We can't go right!"

"We need to!"

"You want us to jump that?!" Daphne gestured at a large creek to their right.

"Can't we?"

"No!"

"But then, what do we—?"

"Look! It's narrower up there!"

Hermione whipped her head around. "Fine!"

One awkward creek crossing later and the trees were once more flashing past them in a blur.

"Animagus Revelio!"

Light flash.

"Left!"

Daphne steered left.

"Animagus Revelio!"

Light flash.
"Straight on!"
Daphne steered straight on.
"Animagus Revelio!"
Light flash.
"WHAT?!"
Daphne winced. "What?!"
"Back the way we came!"
Daphne looked around, startled. "But that must mean we passed them!"
"Yes!"
They turned around.
"Animagus Revelio!"
Light flash.
Hermione said a bad word. "Stop! Stop! It's back that way again!"
Daphne reined in their horse and took a long, deep breath. "Maybe now would be a good time to stop shouting like madmen."
Hermione flushed. "You're probably right."
A flash of light gray passed her vision up the trees. "There." She whipped her wand upwards and fired the special stunner. It didn't even get half the distance between them and the shape before fading. The shape climbed even higher into the trees.
Daphne's voice dropped to a whisper. "Pandora. It's Lady Lovegood."
Hermione nodded. "On foot from here?"
"For the moment, yes."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Five sets of hooves pounded through another clearing.

John cursed, again. Their prey was as illusive as the wind. He could swear he was catching glimpses of a large dark shape disappearing behind trees and bushes, but whenever he passed them, their quarry wasn't there.

Malfoy was shouting at the top of his lungs. Neville looked ready to pass out, but his family ally had refused to give up. Nott and Smith had settled down into the quiet focus of hunters on the chase.

They thundered through another unfortunate set of bushes and into yet another clearing. John's stomach lurched and all five forcibly reined in their horses, causing them to slip and skid over the frosty ground.
On the other side of the clearing stood a huge black dog — A grim — Uncle Sirius, hackles raised, head low to the ground, and growling a deep, guttural warning of imminent death to all foolish enough to approach. He'd never met him during any of the hunts in the last timeline. It was a very different sight to the lovable dog he'd played with as a toddler.

Malfoy gave a nervous chuckle. "Dog food anyone?"

John shot Malfoy an incredulous look. If that was the blonde's witty quip he must be even more nervous than he looked.

Sirius let out a bone chilling bark that promised a bone crunching future, turned, and leapt into the forest.

John shouted "After him!" at exactly the same time as Malfoy did, and all five of them spurred their horses, once more, into action.

As they crashed through the outer bushes and back into the wood proper, John couldn't help noticing that the ground, faithfully and reliably flat up till now, was getting noticeably and worryingly steeper.

Far above them, the sun had passed the halfway mark, and was settling in for its performance finale.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry charged though the forest, eyes firmly on 'the prize'.

The prize had its eyes firmly ahead, swiftly and expertly dodging every stunner he sent its way.

The powerful and majestic form of Prongs kept level pace with his own horse, both playing a dangerous game of chicken, neither willing to back down, each occasionally drawing level with each other, occasionally falling back, sometimes losing sight of the other, but always finding it again by the next path crossing.

Prongs flowed from tree to tree like rapids flowing through a white water river.

Harry ploughed through the undergrowth like a Ukrainian Ironbelly, banishing whole shrubs unfortunate enough to get in his way. He sliced though yet another low branch, ducked, and watched it whip away behind him.

Prongs drew level with him again and for just a moment, Harry caught his father looking straight at him, deer eyes gazing into blank mask, before veering off to the right and forcing Harry to change path again.

On and on it went. They ran through too many clearings to count. They jumped a small stream and scrambled around enough corners to make Merlin knew how many figure eights.

The sun was getting dangerously low now, sky threatening the landscape with hints of red and orange.

He blasted through one more shrub and his stomach lurched. He watched in slow motion as the stag leapt onto the path right in front of him. No thoughts passed through his brain. Time seemed to slow as he raised his wand at the deer's flank. One red stunner shot from the tip of his wand and flew straight and true. There was a startled 'MWAAA' sound, Prongs collapsed on the floor, and a set of magical fireworks shot up from the downed animagus, signalling his capture and removal.
from the hunt.

Harry reined in his horse and felt his heart beating in his chest like a thunderstorm on a window pane. The adrenaline coursing through his body started to subside to be replaced with a vague uneasiness.

He dismounted, tied the reins to a nearby branch, walked over to where his father lay on the ground, and squatted down next to him.

He let out a long, long breath.

The dementors had long ago driven out the need to belong to this man's family. He had his own family now. His resentment had also dulled over the years, but it was still there. The need to know, however — the need to know still burned as strong as ever. He knew he wasn't going to get the answers he wanted today, but still, even a hint would be nice.

Harry stood up, walked a few feet away, turned back, leaned against a nearby tree, levelled his wand at the stag and cast a finite.

The stag opened its eyes, shook itself, and changed. Moments later, Harry stood face to face with Lord James Potter.

The Lord looked up at him and slowly got to his feet. "Huh. You got me."

Harry nodded.

"I guess I should congratulate you. I've survived until the end for six years straight before this."

"I'll admit the chase was not nearly as easy as I thought it might be," Harry said.

James Potter looked around the bit of wood they found themselves in. "We've never been formally introduced have we? Lord James Potter, Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter." He walked over and extended his hand.

Harry looked at the hand for a few moments before kicking off from the tree and carefully extending his own. "Lord Slytherin, Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin."

They shook.

James Potter tilted his head. "No first name?"

"You know I prefer to go by just my last name."

James Potter raised an eyebrow. "I know very little about you. No one does."

"We all have our little mysteries, Lord Potter. I dare say you have a few of your own."

"Not me." He smirked. "I'm an open book."

"Ah, so you'd be fine for me to make use of the Potter library whenever I have need of it then?"

James Potter sucked his breath in through his teeth. "Argh, that's different. You know that family magic can be quite finicky about who uses it."

"Mmm, quite."
"Something that's always annoyed my wife, that. She's convinced that the whole old families keeping their magic to themselves tradition is unfair to those new to our world." James looked sideways at him. "You support muggleborn rights, don't you? So hard to tell, you see."

"I think there's nothing wrong with families maintaining a legacy to pass on to their heirs. What I do believe is wrong is not allowing those new to our world to build up their own legacies."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know who I think is the number one enemy of muggleborns after the death eaters?"

James shook his head and made a 'go on' motion.

"The approval committee for experimental charms — a committee that your own wife has, in the past, sat on."

James choked. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Our society is based around magic. Magic is used in everything we do. In our businesses, magic replaces technology as one of the key advantages, and yet you need a damn law degree to understand the process for being allowed to even experiment with the magic that might help you create something new to bring to market — to even start the process of building a legacy to pass on to the next generation. How many approvals from that committee are given to muggleborns, or even second generation half-bloods? I doubt anyone would accuse the Lady Potter of blood bigotry. I invite her to crunch the numbers for her own tenure as a committee member and see for herself."

James Potter looked at him in silence for a moment before responding. "You… sound like you've put a lot of thought into this."

Harry waved a vague hand. "I've had a lot of time to think."

James smirked. "Bit of a loner in school were you?"

Harry looked up sharply, still hidden by the mask. "I believe you are close friends with Lord Chief-Auror Sirius Black? I was in a situation sort of similar to what he had with his family."

James sucked in his breath. "Ooo that sucks… I'm sorry."

Harry couldn't help but say nothing, just for a moment, before responding. "…Are you really? …I doubt that."

James frowned and looked away.

An uncomfortable silence descended on the pair.

Eventually James broke the silence. "Shall we be getting back? The sun will be setting soon."

Harry loosened his shoulders. "Yes." He turned away from his father and back towards his horse. "Let's." He untied the reins from the tree, put his foot in the stirrup and allowed the magic to yank him up to the saddle. He turned back and found the man replaced with Prongs, who trotted on ahead, and disappeared into the brush-growth.

Harry watched the empty space for a few moments and frowned. Conversations were sometimes too much like riding a wild animal. You could try to steer them in the direction you wanted to go, but you couldn't force them, and you so often ended up miles away from where you intended to be.
Oh well.

He slowly shook his head, clicked the reins, boot tapped his horse's flanks, and quietly began the slow and peaceful trek back to Greengrass manor — back to his actual family.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Elsewhere in the forest, an epic battle for supremacy was raging.

"Get back here you damn squirrel!"

Pandora Lovegood soared overhead, landed in a tree several dozen metres away, and chittered at them, clinging upside-down to the far up tree trunk.

From atop their horse, Daphne swung her legs in frustration, wishing desperately that she'd brought Freekey along with them. "How are we supposed to do this? It's too far up to use the official stunner, accio isn't working and probably wouldn't count anyway, and neither of us are that good at climbing!"

From on the ground where she'd just completed her umpteenth hundred metre sprint, Hermione took deep, panting breathes. They'd been chasing the rodent for what seemed an age. Pandora was clearly playing with them, coming down low enough for them to reach her before dashing back up when they got too close. "What? *pant* "would our" *pant* "lord do?" *pant*

Daphne grimaced. "Fly up and tag her? Cut down every tree in the forest? Send a horde of snakes up to grab her?"

They looked at each other.

Daphne looked down at her shoulder.

The fluffy toy snake looked back at her.

"Um…" Daphne took a deep breath. "As the future Lady Slytherin, I command you to hunt that squirrel!"

The toy snake tilted its head, but didn't move.

Daphne looked back at Hermione.

Hermione shook her head. "If parseltongue even is family magic, I don't think you get it until you're actually married."

Far on the other side of the clearing, the squirrel taunted them with more chittering.

Daphne sighed. "At least we now know where Luna gets her… her…" She petered off.

"Her what?"

A look of pure evil crept over Daphne's face. She smirked, pointed her wand at her throat and muttered, "Sonorous." She felt the flow of magic going through her into the spell, felt the level, felt the flamelage. She grinned and repeated the spell on Hermione, earning a 'what are you doing' look from her fellow huntress.

"So, Hermione," she jumped down from their horse, tied it up, took Hermione's shoulders and started walking in the opposite direction from the squirrel, her voice booming over the clearing.
"What did you think about that conversation we were having with Luna this morning?"

Hermione looked momentarily perplexed. "Which conversation?"

"Oh you know the one, the one about having children—" she reduced the flow of magic to their voice spells"—with our lord."

On the other side of the clearing, the squirrel's head shot up, suddenly totally focused on tracking their retreating backs.

Hermione's eyes widened slightly. She nodded. "Oh. Oh. Yes," she said, the words coming out slowly and deliberately. "You mean the one where she was asking about when we thought they should start?"

"Yes. That one."

They continued to walk away, out of the clearing, and towards a rocky outcrop. As she went, Daphne continued to reduce the levels on the voice spell. "I mean, we wouldn't want to give her the wrong kind of advice. You know how Luna is once she gets an idea in her head," she continued, bullshitting wildly.

They hid right behind a large rock and Daphne reduced the voice spell to nothing.

They waited.

Suddenly, not two feet away, the squirrel dropped onto the rock.

"Now!"

They whipped their wands up, but before either could get off a spell, the squirrel leaped straight at Hermione, scrabbled for purchase on her robe arm, and bit her hand.

"Oww!"

Daphne tried to adjust, but wasn't quick enough.

"Ouch!"

Both wands hit the ground.

Pandora leaped back onto the rock, turned, and smugly chittered at them in victory for a whole half a second, right before the fluffy snake lunged with the speed of a cobra strike.

There was a startled squeak sound.

Three seconds later it was all over. A firework shot into the sky and Daphne looked down at the now stunned squirrel, currently wrapped up in the tight coils of her plushy toy snake. She nursed her hand.

"Here," Hermione said. She took said hand and waved a spell over it. Moments later, the bite marks were completely gone.

"Thanks."

"No problem." Hermione looked down too. "Shall we?"
"Yes."

Daphne reached down to her toy. "I, um, command you to return to me."

The fluffy snake looked up at her and slowly climbed back up her arm until it was once again snuggly hugging her midriff and chest.

Hermione gave her a curious look. "You know, you are speaking English."

Daphne shrugged. "No idea, then."

Hermione frowned and pointed her wand at the squirrel. "Finite Incantatem."

The squirrel instantly came back to life, shuddered, and changed.

"Well done, girls! Five points to Slytherin." Pandora Lovegood beamed at them.

Hermione frowned morphed to a wide smile. "Thank you, Lady Lovegood."

"A well played trick. I did not expect the toy. That's something a Lovegood would've done."

Daphne rubbed her hand, "Did you have to bite us?"

"Fair play, my future daughter in law. You were hurling some fairly hefty shots yourself."

Daphne felt her cheeks heat up.

Pandora Lovegood's eyes glinted. "So, tell me more about these 'conversations' you've been having."

Daphne squirmed. She felt her cheeks flush. "It wasn't really anything. Not really."

"Nuh uh uh. You don't get away that easily. You're going to tell me everything."

Daphne groaned.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John Potter's reins bit into the palm of his hands like a shopping bag held all afternoon. He felt exhausted from the steep up and down landscape in this part of the forest.

The sun had almost set.

He, Neville, the two junior death eaters, and Zach seemed no closer either to catching Sirius or losing each other.

Neville pulled up along side the dead tree where he and the other four had stopped to get their bearings and bicker at each other. Dead leaves festooned the tree's base like a pebble beach. The Longbottom heir sighed. "I don't think we're going to find him before the sun sets."

John didn't want to admit it, but… "you're probably right. I've just about had it with this forest." Seriously, if he had to keep running after that damn dog, he was gong to scream. He missed enemies who just stood and fought like that troll at Halloween.

Malfoy looked around. "Which way is Greengrass's place anyway?"

John rested his wand on his palm. "Point me." The wand swung to their right. "Well, that way's nor
—" He stopped. The wand swung back the other way, then it spun around rapidly in a circle. The others all stared at it.

"You having problems there, Potter?" snarked Nott.

John growled. "You try it."

"Fine, I will" Nott rested his wand on his palm. "Point me. …Oh." Nott's wand spun even faster than his own. "That's weird."

A wind blew through where they all sat on their horses.

John shivered.

"Err…" Zach looked around nervously. "Is it just me, or did it just get a lot colder?"

Colder? John's mind screeched to a halt. "No. It couldn't be, could it?"

Neville's horse whinnied.

The frost on the ground suddenly started thickening, trailing up around them and all around the tree.

"What couldn't be?" Malfoy asked, eyes darting around the darkening forest.

"Dementors." John whispered, eyes widening.

Nott's head whipped around, his voice low and urgent. "Don't be ridiculous. There's DMLE all round the forest edges, they'd never get in."

"And all DMLE can fight dementors?"

"Well, no, but"

"The DMLE use dementors, for fucks sake!"

Smith looked around wildly. "We're not getting all depressed, it can't be them!"

"Then, what?!"

The wind picked up and blew away the leaves by their horses feet and the blood drained from John's face.

They were all standing inside the edge of a huge triangle painted in blood — a triangle holding a circle of blood, bisected by a line, also painted in blood. The line ran straight through the decaying tree they'd stopped by. Blood runes covered all the lines in intricate patterns.

Nott's voice lowered to a terrified hiss. "Death magic."

Malfoy looked sharply at Nott. "How do you know?"

"It's the deathly hallows — You know — The three brothers? The deal with death?"

"It's a dark ritual, whatever it is," Neville turned his horse away. "We should leave, now."

The wind seemed to pick up.
"No." John said, his voice firm. "We should destroy the ritual triangle." He drew his wand.

"Are you crazy?!" Malfoy shouted.

John aimed his wand at the blood. "Tergeo!"

The moment he felt his spell hit, wind blasted into them with the strength of a hurricane, stronger than anything he'd felt before, raw magic swirled around them, pressing on them, demanding their submission. John's heart pounded in his chest. It was like that one time — that time in the graveyard.

"Shit!"

The sounds of panicking horses filtered through the background roar. John struggled to keep his under control. "What the hell was that?!"

Malfoy struggled over to him and shot him a look of terrified outrage. "You NEVER interfere in a ritual with outside magic! What the hell is wrong with you?!"

Then, suddenly, the wind stopped, not gradually dying down, but instantly halting as though someone had shoved an iron bar into a building-sized magical fan.

The five young wizards looked around at each other in the new silence.

"I think—" John began.

Something cracked.

Zach's head snapped around. "What was that?"

Something creaked.

"We should go," Neville said.

And a thick branch crashed into the ground not one foot in front of John's face.

"Shit!" John found himself flung form his horse as it bolted. He landed on the ground and scrabbled back up, ignoring the shooting pain through his side. What he saw caused him to gape.

"RUN!" Malfoy screamed right as the dead tree in the middle of the ritual triangle uprooted itself from the ground, took a step that was all roots towards the Malfoy heir, and missed him by a country mile with another branch swing.

"Wait!" John aimed his wand at the sylvan monstrosity. It's eyes — yes, it now had eyes — were glowing ice blue. "We can take it!"

Zach had snatched up his war hammer and now blocked a smaller branch aimed at him. "Stupid Gryffindor!" He ran for it, along with Malfoy and Nott.

John ignored them and cast a diffindo. It glanced off the trunk resulting in a small scratch. Meh. He fired a more powerful cutting curse. Again, almost nothing. He tried a blasting curse. A small chunk of bark chipped off.

The dead tree turned to him.

Bah! John could feel his magic flowing from somewhere deep inside him through his body and
down to his arms in an almost continual stream. The words flowed from his mouth just as easily. A cascade of spells, curses, hexes, and jinxes machine gunned their way to the monster in front of him.

"John!" Neville's voice vaguely filtered into his brain. "Get away from it!"

The tree monster took another step towards him.

He could defeat this thing. It was basically just a walking tree, right? Sure, it looked scary, but it wasn't even that fast. It wasn't as though it was Voldemort, right?

"For Merlin's sake!" Neville's own stream of magic opened up to his left.

The thing slowly raised it's largest branch.

He narrowed his eyes and took several easy steps backwards.

The branch descended… and lengthened.

His eyes widened in horror as the branch plummeted towards him.

"Accio Godson!" a voice roared.

He felt a yank, there was a loud thud by his ear, and mud flew in his face.

Sirius leaped in front of him wearing full Auror gear, complete with huge circular iron shield.

"Lord Black!" Neville shouted.

"What the hell was that?" John scrabbled back to his feet again.

Sirius turned to him. "Just stay back!"

John flinched. Sirius looked furious.

The tree raised another branch and brought it down.

Sirius raised his shield and took the blow full on, crouching at impact, slashing his wand and severing the branch in one smooth motion. It fell to the ground with an unremarkable flunk sound.

The tree brought its new stump to its face, looking confused before letting out an ear piercing screech.

Sirius made a motion with his arm, flicked the huge iron shield like a coin toss, caught the rim, and launched it, spinning furiously towards the tree, followed less than a moment later by a finite incantatem. The charm hit the in-flight shield and dispelled all its magics. In the last five metres before the shield hit the tree, a two kilo, unbreakable, unsummonable, shield turned into a mere one-hundred kilo, spinning disc of solid iron travelling at a respectable speed for a world-class amateur discuss throw. It smashed into the tree to the sounds of splintering wood and screeching monstrosity, blasted straight through, and disappeared out the other side.

For a moment, the destroyed trunk balanced on itself before tilting and falling to the ground with an almighty crash.

The ritual triangle flashed a red light and vanished without a trace.
Sirius slowly got back to both feet.

John stared.

Neville, Malfoy, Nott, and Smith stepped out from behind various trees and bushes.

Sirius turned. "Right," he growled, causing John to flinch again. "What the hell was going on here?"

John hastily launched into an explanation, helped occasionally by Neville and Smith. Malfoy and Nott stood to one side looking uncomfortable.

Sirius calmed down once he understood there was no way that any of them could have actually had anything to do with the ritual. He rubbed his chin and looked towards the shattered dead tree with worry. "Well, I don't know who did it, but I do know this — These are among the darkest magics there are." He turned to Malfoy and Nott. "I suspect even your houses would hesitate to dabble in them, but whoever did this tonight has no such compunctions."

John glanced towards Malfoy and Nott and was surprised to see they weren't even objecting.

Sirius clicked his teeth and looked back to the tree. When he next spoke, his voice was lower, more gravely, the voice of a professional who's seen everything, is seeing something right now, and isn't liking it. "Whoever did this," he tapped on the tree and sighed, "is going to be trouble."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Twenty minutes later, John arrived back at Greengrass Manor just in time to hear the results of the hunt.

Greengrass and Hermione had caught Lady Lovegood. Lord Malfoy had caught Robert Parkinson, but Lord Parkinson had gotten away. Rebecca Ogden had also gotten away, despite leading over half the hunt on a wild chase for the better part of an hour. Finally and most annoyingly, Lord Slytherin had caught his Dad.

John tried, in turn, to catch Slytherin while he was chatting to Greengrass for a few moments afterwards, but he looked away for a moment, distracted by Smith waving his damn war hammer far too close for his liking, and when he looked back, Slytherin had vanished.

— End of Chapter Twenty-three —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: No, criminals can't just finite the auror shields causing the aurors to break their own arms under a hundred kilos of iron. There are precautions against that kind of trick. Glad to see people paying attention to ramifications though :)
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

[September 1st 1991]

Ginny waved sadly with one hand, eyes fixed on her identical twin brother's retreating smiling faces and waving arms as the Hogwarts Express chugged out of platform 9 and 3/4 in all its scarlet metallic glory.

Harry was somewhere on that train and it was to him, more than anyone else, that she waved for now. Fred and George were fun. She liked them a lot. Ron had been a prat ever since she'd stopped worshipping John. Percy mostly ignored her, and when he did say anything to her, seemed inordinately focused on how her behaviour would reflect on the family.

Harry though, Harry was her anchor. Harry gave her something to live for, something to look forward to. Before Harry, she'd attached herself to John in the hope that he'd sweep her off to a world of adventure and romance, a hope that she now knew would never have happened. She'd have died. A soulless corpse on the damp floor of the chamber of secrets, briefly mourned, quickly forgotten.

Ginny's eyes hardened slightly.

Harry wouldn't let that happen. Harry had been training her and she was doing the best she could to learn everything he could teach her. She could now do wandless magic. Wandless magic! Bill couldn't do wandless magic. No one she knew who wasn't being taught by Harry could do wandless magic. Okay, the only spells she could use were stunners, the shield charm, the stinging hex, and finite incantatem, but it still made her swell with pride whenever she thought of it.

Harry was her prince charming, knight in shining armour, and wise old wizard, all rolled into one, and right now, said time travelling hero was shooting away from her into the distance, further and further, until, finally, the last scarlet carriage passed a bend on the track and disappeared from view, leaving only the faint cloud of white smoke behind.

Ginny felt a squeeze on her non-waving hand, held in her mum's unwaveringly firm grip.

"C'mon, Ginny, time to go. We'll start on lunch as soon as we get back."

She turned, looked up, and nodded forlornly. "Yes, Mum."

They both made their way over to the station floo where a queue of wizard families waited for the floo.

Eventually, it came their turn. Her mum put three knuts into the floo powder dispenser, and Ginny caught her muttering, "Outrageous pricing," before she was resolutely nudged towards the floo and sent on her way back home, quickly stepping out of the Burrow fireplace with what she hoped Harry would say was agility and sure-footedness.

When her mum joined her moments later, they immediately started preparing lunch, peeling potatoes and cutting up chicken breast for brining.

Ginny knew her mum could do most of this by herself with magic, but she also knew her mum was
intent on keeping her as busy as possible. It really wasn't fair. Just like the broomstick Harry gave her that her mum and dad then confiscated. Ginny knew it was somewhere in the Burrow, but she hadn't dared go look for it. She pouted. Not yet anyway.

She sat down at the table, ate lunch, and listened to her mum talk about Bill and Charlie, articles in Witch Weekly, and "I do hope Fred and George behave themselves this year, for goodness sake."

Ginny laid down her fork and knife on her now clean plate. "Mum, I don't suppose I could visit Luna this afternoon, could I?"

Her mum frowned from across the table. "No, Ginny, please stop asking. You're still grounded and that won't change until you start telling the truth."

Ginny bit down a comment that she'd never lied, just refused to tell.

"The outside walls needs scrubbing. That should keep you until dinner."

Ginny pushed back her chair, hopped off, and made her way outside, grumbling all the way.

The soapy water flowed through her hands from the sponge while she scrubbed the wall as hard as she could — no matter how silly it was assigning her this job when she could barely reach halfway up the wall's window frame.

It wasn't always going to be like this. Harry was on the warpath. Harry was going to push Slytherin House to be the most powerful house in the country, and she was going to help him, and, maybe one day…

Words spoken long ago floated through her head.

'For better or worse, our fates are intertwined, decreed by the powers that be themselves.'

Ginny felt her cheeks heat up. She shook her head. Maybe, one day, yes, but focus now. A few hours later, she finished up her task, dumped the dirty water down the drain, and strolled down to the orchard.

She picked up a stick and thrust it out in front of her.

"Depulso!"

She ducked to the side.

"Impedimenta!"

She dodged an imaginary stunner.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

She pretend stumbled backwards, and pretend fell unconscious, just like she knew she would if she'd actually tried to use such a clunky spell against Luna in a real duel. Seven syllables was far too long, and she'd still never beaten Luna once.

Not that she'd had any chance to train with Luna since John 'I-let-my-girl-friend-get-possessed-by-the-dark-lord-and-die' Potter had ratted her out and she'd been grounded.

She play duelled for a few more minutes before her mum seemed to realise she'd finished and called her in so they could go shopping for dinner.
They walked down to the local muggle shop like they usually did, her mum keeping a careful eye on her at all times. There was a magical food shop, but her mum preferred to shop muggle for food because it, 'saved floo powder'.

They got back home and Ginny was dicing carrots, standing on a step so she could comfortably reach the kitchen counter, when her dad flooed in, leather bag bulging with loose parchments, face looking tired.

"Ah, dinner smells wonderful." He kissed her mum on the cheek before turning to her. "How was your day, Ginny?"

"Fine, Dad."

The three of them sat and ate, her mum and dad trading stories and anecdotes and occasionally asking her opinion.

"So, Ginny,"—her dad put down his glass of butter beer—"are you looking forward to starting school again?"

"Yes, Dad. It'll be nice to get out again."

Her mum stood and started bustling plates and cutlery into the sink. "But you're to be on your best behaviour, understand, young lady?"

She fought not to roll her eyes. "Yes, Mum."

"And no visiting after classes — straight back here, understand?"

She grit her teeth. "Yes, Mum."

"Good. You need to get ready then."

Ginny pushed back her chair and retreated up the stairs.

"And no more giving Lady Potter attitude!"

This time she did roll her eyes.

She quickly found her books and parchments and stuffed them all into her school shoulder bag. She then reached to the hiding place under her bed, retrieved a tattered copy of one of Bill's old school books that she'd found lying around one day, and snuck in an hour of reading before her mum's voice loudly announced through the door that it was time to go to bed.

Ginny extracted herself from her worn and threadbare summer dress, pulled on her slightly less worn night dress, and slipped into bed.

Soon, the whole house was quiet and the moonlight from outside bathed her room in a peaceful glow.

She reached to her neck and grasped the precious necklace that hung there, hidden and protected well enough to avoid the notice of even the most suspicious and nosy mother in the galaxy.

Ginny relaxed and snuggled as much as she could into her flat, thin pillow, and, mind flitting from scarlet trains, to castles, to a certain lightning bolt scared boy with green eyes and black hair, slowly fell asleep…
And then she opened her eyes. She was standing on a beach. A mild breeze whipped her hair. Seagulls cried overhead. Her nightdress had turned into a black Hogwarts robe just like she'd seen all her brothers try on and buy at the second hand robe shop — except these looked new, and felt far smoother. Warm water washed over her naked feet and robes, sinking her feet into the sand, leaving a fine layer of coarse grains on her skin, and a creeping heaviness in her clothes.

"Hello, Ginny."

She whirled around. "Harry!"

Harry caught her as she leapt at him and wrapped him in a hug.

She leaned back, grinning impishly. "Well? How did it go?"

Harry grinned. "Pretty well. We got the same 'Harry Potter is to be left alone' speech as last time, the girls held their own on the train, and John made a bit of a fool of himself by screaming that I stole you from him."

Ginny's eyes widened. "He really?"

"Yeah. He also attacked me with fourth year spells."

She snorted. "Wow. That's real smart. I'm totally not a time traveller! Oh look while I do all this insane stuff!"

Harry smiled. "To be fair, being a long term time traveller is so far outside the range of possibility that it's extremely unlikely anyone, even Dumbledore, will come to that conclusion."

"So, what are we going to do now?"

"We're first going to get you used to training in dream space. Things can work a little differently here. It's almost the same as training in the waking world, but not quite. It's also similar to training in your mindscape, but with one major difference. Do you know what that is?"

Ginny shook her head.

"Here, you don't make the rules, I do. This is important because in your mind scape, it's very difficult to set up a resistance to yourself, which makes it difficult to train anything. If you want something in your mindscape, it just happens. You can't practise duelling there on your own because the moment you 'want' your imaginary opponent defeated, he will be. It's not impossible to work around that, but you're not at that level yet."

Ginny nodded.

"I'd also like you to fight a few more rounds with Luna while looking for things you need to work on. Self analysis is an important part of training."

"Okay. I can try to sneak out tomorrow night."

Harry nodded. "Tomorrow night sounds good. Right!" He stepped away. "Let's get this started then."

A half dozen wizards, all twice as tall as her, and all wearing death eater masks materialised around them.
Ginny's eyes widened in shock.

"Move!"

The cloaked figures raised their wands.

She started to dive to the side.

"Crucio!" shouted from all sides.

A light shock passed through her body. She seized up and ploughed into the sand, unable to lift so much as a finger. She turned her still functioning head, spat out some silty water, and glowered at Harry.

Harry grinned down at her. "Fail!"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Ginny woke up the next morning fully expecting to feel like she'd been run over by the Knight bus, but amazingly, when she patted herself down, she didn't feel a single twinge or soreness. Dream training was amazing.

She kicked off her quilt and made her way downstairs to breakfast, where her mum peppered her with questions, comments, and extracted yet another promise that she would behave herself with Lady Potter.

The next few hours passed in a boring routine of washing dishes, collecting eggs, and helping her mum re-label various jars and bottles, until kitchen clock number two, which actually told the time, announced in a Yorkshire accent that it was almost ten o'clock and that little Ginny needed to be getting to school.

She headed back upstairs, changed into her going out robes, grabbed her book bag, and dashed back down stairs, narrowly avoiding knocking a miniature Egyptian sarcophagus from a shelf that Bill had sent home a few months back.

Molly Weasley brushed an imaginary bit of lint from Ginny's robes, took a pinch of floo powder from the mantle piece, bid her stand in the grate, threw it into the fire, and called out, 'Potter Manor'!

Ginny stepped out into the massive ballroom of the Potter's and quickly made her way to the second floor, only to be met just outside their classroom by Lady Potter, or rather, 'Lady Lily.'

Lady Lily spotted her and gave her a cheerful smile. "Good Morning, Ginny. How are you? Did you enjoy your summer?"

Ginny regarded the woman who'd both ditched Harry with those horrible people and then didn't so much as lift a finger to stop him being thrown in Azkaban with guarded eyes. "Bits of it could have been better, Lady Lily."

"Ah, yes." Lady Lily hesitated. "Well, you know your parents are just worried for you, don't you?"

"Yes. I know."

Lady Lily frowned, concern creasing her brow. "You can always come to me if you're having any problems..."
"Thank you, Lady Lily."

"...Even if you feel you can't talk about them with your parents. You don't have to face things alone."

Ginny felt anger flash through her, but she clamped it down. She bit her tongue and said nothing.

Evidently some of Ginny's emotions showed in her face, because Lady Lily took a step backwards and showed a brief look of sadness, before straightening up and adopting a far more formal air. "Well, Miss Weasley, class is starting soon. You'd better get in." She indicated the open door beside her.

Ginny nodded and ducked inside. She sat by the windows towards the back of the room, which over looked the Potter Manor quidditch pitch. Around twenty other children, aged six to ten, sat around, reading, working on worksheets, or chatting among themselves, showing each other pictures from their summer holidays and comparing souvenirs, accompanied by the occasional loud squeal or shout.

Soon the class got underway and Ginny fell back into her old routine of compartmentalising everything she didn't already know in her occlumency library while thinking of other things and occasionally letting her magic seep out of her fingers to help train her toxin resilience on top of her occlumency.

That was, until Lady Lily brought out a black stick with a ring attached to the end and waved it around.

Ginny perked up.

"Who can tell me what this is?" Lady Lily asked.

A figure on the opposite side of the back row raised its hand.

"Yes, Miss Black?"

"It's a dark magic detection device. My father sometimes gives them to people in his job."

Ginny's hand trailed to her necklace, almost without thinking.

"Excellent, well done." Lady Lily waved the device again. "The DMLE uses these to check muggle places for magical items that have been created with the purpose of causing harm. Now, why would this help with that?"

A boy in the front row raised his hand.

"Yes, Mister Hargreaves?"

"Dark magic is magic cast with the intent to cause harm."

"Exactly. That is what we call the magical definition of dark magic, as opposed to the legal definition. It is the responsibility of everyone in the magical world—that includes all you children—to ensure no bad magical items end up in the hands of muggles."

A girl in middle raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Fawcett?"
"What about normal magical items? Isn't it bad if the muggles find them?"

Lady Lily put down the dark magic detector and treated Miss Fawcett to the smile teachers give students who've just given them a perfect subject transition opportunity. "Yes, and it's important to keep magical items out of the hands of muggles, but most of the time, it isn't crime to let a muggle get a hold of one. Much like the entrances to the magical world, like Platform 9 and 3/4 and the Leaky Cauldron, wizards who make magical items, like chocolate frogs and gob-stones, are required to build in anti-muggle magics into them that only run out when the magic in the product itself does."

She turned and wrote on the board. "THE PLACE OF THE WIZARDING WORLD IN THE GREATER MUGGLE WORLD."

They spent the next half hour discussing how the magical world kept itself secret and how they were expected to help ensure it remained so. The general message was that everything was a-okay and that the magical world was totally on top of everything.

Ginny eyes, though, kept straying back to the dark magic detection device on the table. She just couldn't help it.

Eventually, Lady Lily asked them if they had any questions before mid morning break.

Ginny raised her hand.

Lady Lily looked mildly surprised. "Yes, Miss Weasley?"

"If something was originally charmed with intent to cause harm, but then someone else used the thing with intent to help or cause good, would the thing still read as dark magic?"

Lady Lily bit her lip. "A very good question." She looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure, but I suspect it would depend on where the magic came from. If the magic came from a plant, it probably would. But if it was channelled through the wizards own magic, it probably wouldn't. But, on the other hand…"—She tapped the desk with her chalk—"If the item was parasitic, and used the magic of someone other than the 'user', then I don't know. It would probably change on a case by case basis, depending on…" She paused and seemed to realise she was rambling. "Well, anyway." She put the chalk down and shuffled parchments. "It might. Thank you for the question. See you all after the break in twenty minutes."

The class got up and made its way out of the classroom. Ginny made to follow them too, but not before catching the eye of a certain Black heiress, who quickly averted her eyes and pretended that she hadn't been staring at her.

Ginny arrived back home later that afternoon to another pile of chores courtesy of a small group of cows who'd wandered onto Burrow land. Damn them. She'd just finished forking the resultant harvest into the now steaming compost heap when her mum called her into dinner with orders to wash her hands no more than three times.

Straight after dinner, her mum handed her a shaft of wood with a sweep-bent bunch of twigs at the bottom and the news that today was floor sweeping day.

Ginny fought back a scowl. Was she trying to mock her? What followed was definitely the most boring hour with a broom she'd ever had, and it wasn't only last night's all-night session with Harry that caused her to catch a nap straight after.

Later that night, Ginny lay in bed, staring at her bedroom ceiling, and listening for the tell-tale lack
of sound that would indicate her parents had turned in. When she was sure they'd fallen asleep, she quietly slipped out of bed and got back dressed, pulling on the rag-tag assortment of muggle and wizarding clothes, which she charitably called her duelling outfit. Tonight, she swore, Luna was going down.

She opened her bedroom door without a creak. The landing was silent. Ginny knew all the stairs by heart and her descent was as quiet as her stride. She padded over to the back door, carefully raised the latch, and slipped outside.

The night was black. Clouds blocked the moon from lighting the path and Ginny spent a few moments letting her eyes get used to the darkness.

The path was a mixture of gravel, broken up by the occasional oddly shaped paving stone. Ginny hopped from stone to stone, always careful to keep her feet from making any sounds. She reached the end of the path.

"Lumos!"

Ginny's heart leapt into her throat. She swung around and flinched away from the light that washed over her.

"Ginny! What *are* you doing?!!" her mother's voice shouted, shrill and angry.

Ginny's stomach dropped.

Ooooooooh bugger.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"And then she gave me an earful for over an hour!" Ginny threw her hands up and paced up and down in front of where Harry sat on the bottom steps of a huge Aztec pyramid in the middle of a dreamscape jungle. Everywhere around them, the sounds of a thousand tropical birds squawked, trilled, warbled, and chirped.

Harry grimaced. "Yeah, that didn't sound too good."

"I just don't get how they caught me! I swear I made no noise. They were asleep! I'm sure of it."

Harry looked thoughtful. "They've probably put detection wards around the doors and windows."

Ginny felt her stomach slowly sink. "Bill."

Harry nodded. "Not unlikely."

"Then what do we do now?"

Harry's eyes gleamed. "First, we teach you to feel magic. You ready for that?"

She nodded firmly.

"Right, this will not be easy. Come and sit here." He patted the spot between his legs.

Ginny hesitated for only a moment before nodding, walking over, and plopping herself down with her back to him.

Harry leaned over and took her arms in his.
Something washed through her. She gasped.

"Did you feel that?"

"Merlin, Harry, I'd have to be dead not to feel that."

"That was me flaring my magic. Now, I'm going to do the same thing, but less so."

The same feeling as before washed through her. She let out a long breath and leaned back into him. "I still felt it."

Silence descended for a few moments.

"Did you feel that?" Harry asked.

Ginny's brow furrowed. "No."

"Right. How about this?"

"Still no."

"Close your eyes."

She closed her eyes.

"Go into your occlumency."

She did so.

"Imagine a sea of water flowing around you, through you, feel it on your skin, in your veins."

Silence

"Did you feel that?"

Ginny frowned "No."

"How about that?"

"No."

"Or that?"

"No."

"Well, then, How about…"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"And once you're done with that there's a packet of peanuts to be shelled over there." Molly Weasley left Ginny to her tasks and went off to inspect the chickens.

Ginny frowned over her pile of unpeeled potatoes.

A few feet from her, a large wooden spoon magically mixed bread dough in a large porcelain bowl.

Ginny shot the door a quick look, put down her peeler, and stepped over to the bowl. She closed
her eyes, reached out her hands towards the bowl and tried to feel the magic.

She tried to imagine water flowing over senses, tried to imagine the flow of magic around her like a tide, like a river, like a trickle in a mountain stream.

She scowled.

… Nothing.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Ginny sat in Harry's lap for the sixth time in two weeks, this time at the top of the Aztec pyramid.

"Form a stunner on your finger tips." Harry's firm but gentle voice pierced through the murkiness of her own occlumency induced fuzziness.

She felt the ever familiar magic pour through her body and into her finger tips, but she didn't let the spell escape.

"Draw it back into yourself."

She let the stunner fade away, feeling the extra magic pool and flow around her body, a slight pressure under her skin.

"Do it again."

She felt the stunner build up, felt it flow away. She felt Harry's finger tips press lightly to her own.

"And again."

She built up the stunner, drew the magic back into herself, and gasped when she felt something else, something foreign, flow down her fingers. She snapped her eyes open and saw Harry's own fingertips all red-lit.

"I took your magic inside me?" she whispered.

"This is a dream, Ginny."

"Ah."

"Close your eyes again. This time I'm extending the finger distance."

Ginny nodded and once again closed her eyes.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Ginny sat in class while Lady Lily passed out the different maths and English worksheets for the different age groups.

In her hand, she held her self inking quill. A self inking quill, which was magical. When she was sure no one was looking, she closed her eyes, built up the magic on the tips of her fingers for a shield charm, but didn't let it escape. She withdrew the magic and as the magic retreated back into her, tried to desperately suck in anything else she could from the quill she held.

She opened her eyes and scowled. Nothing.
Ginny crept through the tunnels of the Aztec pyramid, eyes flitting from side to side, trying to spy out anything that looked suspicious in the row upon row of strange bluebell flame illuminated pictures carved into the rock. The bluebell torches cast soft light across the passageway, giving the feeling of being underwater. None of the sounds from outside filtered this far into the monument to Mesoamerican magic. Everything was quiet.

She closed her eyes, imagined magic flowing and streaming around her, sent out a tiny pulse of magic through her fingertips across the wall, and instantly drew back everything she could in its wake.

There. Something tingled down her fingers. The tiniest sense of a presence. Of something, almost beyond her ability to detect it… but not quite.

Ginny grinned, reached into her pack, drew out a wand, pointed it at the wall and shouted, "Paint ball!" A splotch of paint splatted onto the wall.

A faint pop sounded next to her.

"Harry! I did it! I found one!"

Harry grinned back. "Yes, yes, well done. You've activated trap number fourteen."

Ginny stilled. "Trap?"

A huge rumbling approached.

"Have fun." He popped away.

"HARRY!"

Ginny looked around. No one seemed to be paying any attention to her. She stood up, made her way up to Lady Lily's desk, and picked up the dark magic detector that Harry's mother had left there since the first lesson when they'd started on magic-muggle relations almost a month ago. She closed her eyes, pushed her magic into the device, and waved it over her head.

The device did nothing, which was good. She'd hate to think what would happen if anyone ever found out about her necklace. Knowing this thing didn't react to it was good.

She slipped into her occlumency and reached out with her magic like Harry had taught her, trying to feel her own magic reflected back to her through the device.

It trickled back into her.

She felt it…

She. Felt. It.

Ginny's eyes snapped open. She stared at the dark magic detector, eyes dancing in triumph. She'd done it! She'd felt the magic! Hah!

She did it a few more times, revealing in her mastery over something that only the most powerful wizards were supposed to be able to do.
She then spun around and walked back to her seat, unable to keep the huge smile off her face, not even caring that a certain black-haired witch was watching from the other side of the classroom, violet eyes narrowed in obvious suspicion.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Ginny slipped out of bed, wrapped in darkness, already fully clothed, and padded across the room. She opened her bedroom door, closed her eyes, and opened her senses to magic. Heart beating faster than normal, she crouched down and started to run her hands up the door way. There. A line of magic reaching from one side of the door to the other. There. Another one, half way up the door. And there. Yet another one, this time at the top of the door. She felt around the doorway for other clues. Nothing. She stepped back. It wasn't even a perimeter ward. It was like a magical tripwire.

Harry had said it would take another few months until she was up for trying to actually crack even the most basic of magics, rather than just feel them. Dare she try to sneak through now? She frowned. Damn straight, she dared.

Ginny tied her hair in a ponytail and shoved it down the back of her shirt. She wasn't robed, so that wouldn't be a problem.

She took a step forward and reached through the space between the trip lines, ducking her head through them, and carefully bringing first one foot through, then the other. She made her way downstairs, arms thrust out in front of her, carefully feeling for any other trip lines or wards. A drop of sweat ran down her face. Her heart beat wildly against her chest. With every step, she half expected her parent's door to bang open, and for her mother's voice to thunder down, promising domestic serfdom and no dessert until she was eighty.

The backdoor had a similar set up to her bedroom door. After she slipped through the trip lines, she carefully closed the back door behind her, and stood in the backwall's darkness, body coiled, knees bent, waiting for any sign that she'd been caught again.

None came.

After a few minutes, Ginny stood up and let out a sigh. She grinned. She'd done it. A month's hard work had payed off. All those moments caught in between chores — all that time spent before, after, and during class, probably looking like she was napping or slacking off — Harry said learning the basics of feeling magic with her level of occlumency took around two hundred hours, and she was sure she'd put that in, at least.

And now! Her face firmed. Luna was going down!

— DP & SW: TFoP —
Consciousness faded back and Ginny looked up into the smiling face of Luna, who extended a small hand to where she lay on the damp ground around the Lovegood plum bushes.

"Try again, Ginny?"

Ginny bounced up, face determined. "Yes! I swear, I almost had you that time! If I had broken through that last shield I would have won."

Luna smiled a dreamy smile. "I'm sure you would have, Ginny."

The two lined up again.

Ginny crouched, arms bent out in front of her, fingers spread like the claws of a cat.

Luna spun in a circle, tossed her handkerchief into the air, turned back to her, and brought her hands into the pose that Ginny had started to think of as Luna's 'Good girl' fighting stance, hands held together straight down, shoulders back, legs together. Really, all she needed was a parasol and a bonnet.

The handkerchief floated to the ground.

The duel started.

There was a large flash of red light.

Ginny shielded… and blackness took her.

…

Consciousness faded back. Ginny looked up.

"Try again, Ginny?"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The bread was in the oven and Ginny was sweeping the kitchen free of flour.

She stopped.

She looked around.

She opened herself to magic, felt the air around her, looked at the broom in her hands… and frowned. Now, where exactly would her parents keep it?

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The landing beyond her bedroom door was as dark as the night outside her bedroom window.

Ginny sneaked up the hallway to the stairs that led to the upper floors, all the while feeling for any wards or magical trip lines her parents might have put up.

She didn't find any all the way up the stairs. Nor did she find any past her parent's bedroom door. Her dad was snoring loudly, a trait that apparently passed in Weasley males, and which made her very glad she had a room to herself.

The stairs up to the attic was similarly unguarded, until she got to the very top. As she opened the trap door to the Burrow's topmost floor, she heard the telltale sound of the ghoul that lived there. It
Ginny felt her magic respond to her command. A bolt of red light shot towards it and the stillness of the sleeping instantly became the stillness of the stunned.

Ginny looked around and saw a likely trunk in the corner. It was reasonably new and the dust on the floor showed evidence of an occasionally used path leading to and away from it.

She took a step towards it and stilled.

Her magic senses tingled.

She felt the magic wash through her like a stream, just like the flow of water Harry had so many times primed her to feel, right in front of her.

Her hands raised and moved across the face of the magical obstacle.

She narrowed her eyes.

This wasn't like a trip line.

This was like a ward.

Not something she was ready to tackle yet.

She sighed.

Guess she'd have to keep trying to beat Luna instead then.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The moon was full.

Somewhere in a thicket of plum bushes two girls sidestepped and cast, shielded and dove.

A stunner hit Luna's shield. It held.

A stunner hit Ginny's shield. It shattered.

Ginny cursed, and fell.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The moon was a sliver off full.

Luna threw a plum into the air.

Ginny aimed with her fingers spread. The tips of her hand glowed white. A stinging hex fired towards the falling plum. It hit. The plum exploded.

"Again."

Luna threw another plum.

Ginny aimed again and again the plum exploded. She closed her eyes.

"Now."

She snapped open her eyes. Two plums reached the top of their arc. She flung both hands up.
plum exploded. The other failed to connect with her hex and fell to the ground with a sad little splot noise.

They both stared at it. Ginny grimaced. "Not that good yet, I suppose."

Luna smiled. "I guess not."

— DP & SW: T FoP —

The moon was gibbous.

Ginny panted as she faced off against her serenely smiling opponent.

She swore she was getting better. Her stunners felt sharper. Her stingers felt crisper. She felt the magic flowing up and down her blood vessels, nerves, and muscles like a tide. Back and forth. Back and forth. Magic under her command. Magic under her mastery. She flung her hand forward and loosed a stunner.

Luna side stepped.

She snap adjusted her aim and loosed a stinger.

Luna shielded.

Ginny narrowed her eyes. She brought both hands up straight in front of her.

Luna tilted her head.

Stunner, stinger, stunner, stinger, stunner, stinger, stunner, stinger, her hands flashed red, white, red, white, faster and faster, bolts slamming into Luna's shield like a boxer's fist flurry.

Luna stood her ground.

All too soon, Ginny felt her magic drained from her body, now refilling directly from her core, weaker, less potent, and still Luna's shield held.

Ginny said a bad word.

Luna raised her other hand. Her fingers glowed red.

Ginny didn't even try to dodge.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

"I just want to beat her!" Ginny shouted, waving her hands and knowing she looked like a petulant child. She didn't care.

Harry smirked.

"I get so close, then she just throws up that damn shield and I can't get through it!"

Harry continued to smirk.

"Please, Harry!" She skipped to where Harry sat on a broken, massive stone pillar and batted her eyes at him. "You'll help me, won't you?"

Harry's smirk didn't fade.
She scrunched up her face. "Harrrrrryyyy, pleeeeaaaassseeeeee. Show me something. Some awesome trick. Teach me a new spell. Something — anything! I want to beat herrrrrrrr!

Harry jumped down from his pillar. "Okay, okay. Let me have a look first."

She grinned.

Harry moved forward and placed his hands on her shoulders "Look into my eyes and think of your last few duels."

She dropped into her occlumency, looked into Harry's eyes and brought those last frustrating fights to the front of her memory. She felt Harry's legilimency probe and surrendered to it. Images of her fights flashed past her consciousness like an omniocular on fast forward.

Harry dropped his hands and looked thoughtful. "Luna really is getting stronger, isn't she?"

She growled. "Yes! And It's so frustrating."

"Luna took your full spell chain—basic though it is—head on, and outlasted it. That shows a large difference in power."

Her shoulder's dropped. "So, I'm just weak?"

Harry frowned. "No, not at all. It's more that Luna is unusually strong. And if she's like this now, the difference between her and most other wizards will just grow as she matures."

"Are you trying to depress me?"

Harry laughed. "No, no. I'm just revelling in our friend's potential." He smiled. "How do you feel about having Luna at your back in a fight?"

She paused. "I must admit, I'd feel pretty good about that."

"Exactly." Harry hopped back onto the pillar and swung his legs back and forth against the stone. "So, you ready to hear how to beat her?"

Her eyes flashed. "Yes!"

"Right. We're going to be improving two combat attributes. The first is speed. When you're up against someone who outmatches you in terms of power, you can compensate by being faster, by being able to close the distance between you quickly when you're at full power, and being able to run away and let your magics recover when you're depleted. In other words, by controlling the space between the two of you."

Ginny nodded.

"That means lots of sprinting, jumping, changing direction, etc."

"Okay."

"The second attribute, is efficiency." Harry tapped the stone. "Tell, me. What is the most efficient way to protect yourself from a spell?"

"Not be where the spell lands. That was one of the first things you taught me about duelling."

"Yes, well done. What's the most inefficient?"
“Conjuring a physical obstacle?”

“Again, well done. And something in the middle?”

“A magic shield.”

“Yes. Another?”

Ginny drew a blank.

Harry grinned. "Spell swatting. Think of it like parrying with a sword. You use your wand, or in your case, your hand, to bounce a spell away from you. It's more efficient than a shield, but not as efficient as dodging."

She frowned. "That sounds awesome. Why haven't I learned this already?"

"Because it's very hard to do. It requires, what for a normal person, is an obscenely large amount of control over your magic." Harry's grin widened. "Control that I'm sure you now possess." His smile evaporated and his voice firmed. "Ginny, bring a stunner to the tips of your fingers as though you're just about to launch it, and hold it there."

Ginny closed her eyes and let the magic flow through her, she felt the intent, let the intent form into a spell, let the spell pool in her hands and up her finger tips, she held the spell as close to the edges of her finger tips as she could without loosing it.

"Open your eyes."

She opened her eyes and saw the tips of her fingers glowing bright red.

"I'm going to fire a stunner at you, and you're going to hit it away with the tips of your fingers as though you were hitting a bludger away with a beaters bat, understand?"

Ginny slowly nodded, afraid to break the fragile hold she had on the spell.

"On three. One, two, three!"

The stunner flew towards her. She made to hit it away. The spell hit her fingertips, and the world went dark.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Ginny put down the half-full basket of apples she'd been filling up from the apple trees in the orchard for her mum's apple pie, and idly waved away a wasp that buzzed around her head. She looked towards the end of the orchard and bit her lip. It had to be about a hundred metres. Her jaw firmed. She lowered her head, planted her right leg firmly behind her, let her fingers lightly tap the ground, and exploded towards the far tree. Every muscle strained as she bolted as fast as she could, as fast as her body would possibly allow, and in moments, she passed the tree. She slowed while taking huge gulps of air, her lungs insisting she now cash the bank drafts her muscles had written.

A few minutes passed.

Ginny turned back and looked to where she'd left her apple basket, narrowed her eyes, lowered herself, and took off again.

Again and again, she tore up and down the stretch of orchard. Five times, ten times, fifteen.
"Ginny! Are you done yet?"

Crap. "Ahh..." She scrabbled to pick up the few apples that still lay around the path she'd carved out and glanced up into the trees for other easy pickings. "...Yes, Mum! Be right there!"

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Ginny bolted towards Luna, both hands in front of her, both hands flashing red and white, both eyes fixed on her rival, both legs carrying her closer, level, and past.

Luna spun to face her, but Ginny was off again, throwing spells behind her, zigzagging and shielding until she was out of easy hit range.

Ginny ducked behind a tree, breathing heavily.

"Hi!" Luna's face appeared around the tree.

"Gah!" Ginny swung around to get away and they began a frantic game of chase around the large tree trunk. She formed her next stunner and brought it to her finger tips. Suddenly, her foot caught in a tree root. She stumbled backwards, Luna appeared, and a flash of red shot towards her. She made to hit at it, but the stunner slipped straight through her fingers-tips. The last thing she saw before darkness took her was Luna looking at said red-lit fingers, seemingly equal parts surprised and curious.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

"Push the stunner to the very tips of your fingers."

Ginny nodded, eyes closed, Harry's arms on her own, his chest against her back.

"Now, pool your magic again, form a stinging hex, and push it into your hands."

She nodded uncertainly, dipped deep down into her occlumency, split her consciousness between the intent to stun and the intent to sting, and tried to form two different spells at once. The stinger wobbled into existence, unsure of itself, and dribbled through her body, moving with a nudge of her stinger consciousness here and there. The stinger slowly pooled in her hand.

"Well done, Ginny. Now, as carefully as you can, push the stinger up into your fingers."

She tried. Her lip trembled. Her finger tips glowed redder and redder. "H-Harry, I'm going to lose the stunner."

"Shh shh." Harry whispered into her ear. "No, you're not — just a little more."

Ginny's whole body quivered. She could feel the stunner on the very tips of her fingers, no, it was beyond the tips. It was like the magic was both in and out of her body at the same time. It was raw intent given shape in the world. Holding it there was the hardest thing she'd ever tried to do. Every part of her brain screamed at her to cast the damn spell, to make real what she intended.

"Hold it there — Just like that." Harry slid away from her, and she was left alone. He walked in front of her and pointed his wand at her.

"Ready?"

She gave a single slow nod. She didn't trust herself to move any more than that.
"Stupefy."

The bolt shot towards her.

She swung.

The bolt hit the tips of her fingers… and bounced away.

She let out a long breath. She'd done it.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

"Ginny! What are you doing?"

Ginny came to a stop, gave her mum a blank look, and glanced down at the vaguely wand length stick she'd been gripping. She looked back up. "Running around the orchard trees?"

"Why?"

She smiled, innocently. "It's fun?"

Molly Weasley put her hands on her hips. "Well, enough of that then. Come back to the house. We have guests tonight and we need to get started."

Ginny nodded and left her makeshift obstacle course, with its apples for jump points and pine cones for crawl points.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

She was so close. So close. Luna wasn't steam rolling her anymore. Power could only take you so far, and Luna wasn't nearly as fit as she now was. Ginny's eyes flashed and danced. Magic flew between the two girls. She was holding her own!

Every time Ginny's casting slowed, she backed off and evaded her gray eyed, dirty-blonde haired nemesis until she was back to strength.

Whenever Luna slowed, she'd pursue.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

Luna was tiring, but then, so was she.

The two stared at each other across the Lovegood woodland clearing, moon shining down through the opening in the canopy, casting silver light on everything it touched.

Luna's normally dreamy eyes hardened.

Ginny scowled.

Luna straightened. Raised both her hands and let loose.

If Ginny thought before that Luna couldn't match her powerful defence with a powerful attack, she instantly found herself to be sorely mistaken.

Spell after spell shot towards her. She spun away and legged it for the safety of the trees again, dodging as much as she could, shielding everything else, and ducked behind the nearest trunk.
Now.

Magic pooled in her hand. A stunner formed on her fingertips. She pushed it as far as she could. It vibrated, desperate to become real, to fulfil its purpose, but she held it, not letting it escape, unwilling to will her will.

Yes. YES!

She stepped out from behind the tree and instantly swatted away Luna's first stunner. And the second. And the third.

Luna's eyes widened.

Ginny grinned. "That's right, Luna! How do you like this!"

Luna frowned, looking thoughtful, and raised her other hand.

Ginny crouched, eyes gleaming.

Luna shot stunner after stunner towards her and she swatted away every single damn one of them.

Yes yes yes. *This* is how it was *supposed* to go!

Then, suddenly, something unseen slammed into her, she doubled over, lost her stunner swatter, red light filled her vision, and darkness took her.

--- DP & SW: TFoP ---

Harry withdrew his legilimency probe. "It is there. If you watch Luna's hands you can see the whiteness of the stinging hex that she lined up just after one of her stunners."

Ginny pouted. "I didn't think this was going to be *this* difficult."

"If spell swatting was that easy, everyone would do it."

Ginny's shoulders dropped. "Okay. So what's next?"

"Sit down."

Ginny sat down.

Harry sat opposite her, cross-legged on the Aztec pyramid stone floor. He held out one of his hands. It started to glow red. "What is this?"

"It's a stunning spell."

"Is it? How do you know that?"

Ginny hesitated "It's red."

"Lots of spells are red."

"You're forming it in your bare hand. The only wandless spell you know that's red is stupefy."

Harry tilted his head. "Ginny?"

"Yes, Harry?"
"This is a dream."

"Oh." Ginny felt her cheeks warm up. "I forgot."

"Quite." Harry pointed his red glowing hand to his left, loosed the spell, and they both watched as it connected with the sand beyond the stone they sat on and left a streak of glass where it hit.

Ginny stared. "Was that…?"

"An alchemy spell? Yes."

Ginny turned back.

"Now," Harry continued, "close your eyes."

Ginny closed her eyes.

"Reach out with your hand."

She did so.

"Open yourself to magic. Allow yourself to feel the spell like you learned to feel for the wards in the Burrow."

Ginny nodded. She felt a small tingle of magic and breathed in sharply. "I feel it."

"Good. What is it?"

Ginny frowned. "I don't know."

"Open your eyes."

She did so. Harry's hand glowed red.

"That was a stunner. Now, close your eyes again."

She did so. Again she felt the slight tingle of magic, but this time, it felt slightly different. She opened her eyes. Harry's hand glowed white.

"That was a stinging hex. Did you feel the difference?"

Ginny nodded.

"Good."

"But," Ginny frowned. "Am I supposed to learn what every spell feels like so I can swat it away? What if I run into a spell I've never seen before?"

Harry smiled. "Don't worry. The point is not to assemble an encyclopedia of what spells feel like, but rather to discern the intent that spells contain. It's the intent that makes a spell what it is. That's the theory anyway. Like with everything magic, it could all be rubbish. At the end of the day, magic is magic."

Ginny nodded slowly.

"You'll see what I mean in a moment. Close your eyes."
Ginny closed her eyes again.

She waited a moment. Then she gasped. Peace, love, and belonging swept over her. It surrounded and wrapped her and she felt like she could face down the greatest evil and laugh.

"What is the purpose of this spell?" Harry asked.

Ginny didn't even need to think. "Protection — Protection from evil."

"Open your eyes."

Ginny opened her eyes and saw Harry's hand was glowing white, but it wasn't like the white of a stinging hex. This white was misty, pearl-like, silvery.

"This is patronus intent. It's a defence against dark creatures such as lethifolds and dementors."

"It's amazing," Ginny whispered.

"Yes, but notice that you instinctively knew what the spell was for. The intent behind this spell is so pure, so refined, that figuring it out was easy. Close your eyes again."

Ginny closed her eyes.

She waited. Then, a feeling crept into her body and froze her heart. Fear gripped her. Her whole body started to shiver. Something was right in front of her. Something that wanted her destroyed, to be nothing, to rip her soul from her body with no chance of reversal. "H-Harry?"

"What is the purpose of this spell?"

"D-Death."

"Open your eyes."

She did so, and gasped. Harry's hands were bathed in green — emerald green. Little ethereal skulls of green mist orbited his finger tips, chasing each other and snapping their jaws.

Harry's face was grim. "The killing curse."

Ginny shuddered.

Harry waved the spell away. "Those were extreme examples. You now know what we're looking for. We're going to work on two things — Detecting intent and increasing your sensory range. Ready?"

Ginny's jaw firmed. She'd come this far, hadn't she? She nodded.

"Then close your eyes."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Ginny regarded the distance across the Burrow pond. She bit her lip. Her eyes narrowed. She turned, walked back a way, turned back, planted her foot firmly behind her, lowered her self to the ground, exploded towards the pond, hit the edge, jumped, extended both legs below her, hit the edge on the other side, swung her arms wildly, tried to get her balance, failed, and fell backwards, hitting the water with an almighty splash that shattered the otherwise quiet October morning.
She climbed back onto the shore, soaked, dripping, and shivering.

"Ginny! What were you thinking?!"

Ginny groaned.

"What is this?"

"A stunner."

"What is this?"

"A stinger."

"Good." Harry sounded pleased. "Take a few more steps backwards."

Ginny backed up a few steps, still with her eyes closed.

"Now, what is this?"

Ginny strained, tried to feel the light caress of the magic on her skin, buried herself as deep as she could in her occlumency and blocked out any and all distractions. "It's...a...stinger?" She opened her eyes. Harry was grinning, finger tips alight with a bright white spell.

Ginny took a step backwards, leaned forward, and ran, full tilt, towards the long pile of leaves she'd piled up in the orchard. She leapt at the line of twigs on the floor and landed in the leaf pile, scattering a good number of them, and making a huge indent in the pile. She got up, inspected her distance, made an unsatisfied grunt sound, went back to the line of twigs, and moved it back another few inches.

"Stunner!" Harry shot a bolt of red at her.

Ginny pooled a stunner, brought it to her finger tips and swatted the spell away, almost without having to think.

"Stinger!" Harry shot a bolt of almost invisible magic at her.

She pooled a stinger and brought it to her finger tips, instantly switching it with her stunner and letting it flow back through her hand.

"Stunner!"

She swatted it away.

"Stinger!"

She swatted it away.

"Good!" Harry smiled widely. "Now, again, but without me calling out the spell names before hand."
Ginny took a deep, long breath. "Bring it on."

— DP & SW: TfoP —

Ginny leaped over the pond, hit the other side, rolled, jumped up, laughed, pumped the air with her fist, and ran off to get ready for morning classes.

— DP & SW: TfoP —

Ginny felt like her muscles were on fire. They'd been at it for ages.

On the opposite side of the clearing, Luna was panting, doubled over, clearly nearing the end of her tether. Her normally dreamy countenance was shattered. Her eyes were going in and out of focus. Her hair hung down in front of her face, yanked out of her ponytail by the constant whipping this way and that.

Ginny swatted away another stunner-stinger-stunner combo and followed it up by loosing her own stunner and stinger, which fell into Luna's thrice damned seemingly unbreakable shield.

Ginny wasn't thinking. There wasn't room for thinking. There was only room for doing. Swat, dodge, cast, retreat, advance. Over and over and over.

She advanced. She cast another stunner. It hit Luna's shield.

Luna's shield shattered.

Luna made no sign of intending to move, hands planted firmly on her thighs, still panting heavily.

Ginny's heart leaped. Victory crept into her eyes. Her hand glowed red again.

Luna looked up, still panting, met her gaze, and grinned.

Ginny loosed her stunner. It flew straight and true…

…And Luna swatted it away.

…

…

…

Ginny groaned, sank to her knees, and let out a desperate cry of frustration. "That isn't fair!"

— DP & SW: TfoP —

"Luna always was extremely intuitive with her spell casting. She picked up occlumency faster than I've ever seen anyone else, and I still haven't managed to replicate that trick she did with firing a wandless spell with her tongue — not that I've been trying all that hard, but still." Harry sat opposite where she sat with her head in her hands.

Ginny raised her head and met Harry's unruffled gaze. "It's just so frustrating! It seems no matter what I do, Luna's always one step ahead of me."

Harry smiled softly. "You've come an incredibly long way in an amazingly short period of time, Ginny."
"Not far enough."

Harry's smile turned playful. "Well then, how would you like to try something that not even Voldemort managed?"

Not even Voldemort? Ginny frowned. "Um, Harry… if I can't even beat Luna what chance do I have of managing something that even he couldn't?"

Harry shook his head, still smiling. "You underestimate just how far ahead of most people you now are. But let me rephrase that a bit. How would you like to try something that Voldemort considered learning, but never actually decided to, because he could never quite find the time and there were always other things to do?"

"Is it dangerous?"

"In theory, it's no more dangerous than what we're already doing."

"And it will help me beat Luna?"

Harry grinned. "Ginny, if I didn't know what was coming, I'm pretty sure it could beat me."

Ginny stared. "When do we start?"

"Tomorrow night."

The next morning, Ginny walked into class to see a group of her classmates all surrounding something on a desk. Shouts and gasps and cheers filled the room.

She sidled over, peered through a gap in the bodies, and gasped.

HOGWARTS TROLL DEFEATED BY FIRST YEARS!

Picture after picture of several witches, barely older than her, battling a huge mountain troll, three times their size, presented themselves to the excitement and fear of the congregated students.

Her eyes fell on the names in the article and her eyes bugged out even further. That was Daphne Greengrass! She was the other witch betrothed to Harry! And one of the other combatants was one Hermione Granger, 'Vassal' of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin. That was news to her. Harry had never mentioned Slytherin House having vassals.

Ginny watched the Greengrass Heiress lunge for the beast with a transfigured sword, only to be smacked away. Another picture showed another armed lunge, this one together with Hermione Granger, the vassal, plunging both the swords into the troll's thighs and exploding them when the transfiguration ran out.

It was so different to what she was doing with Luna. Duelling with Luna had started to feel like a tightly choreographed dance. They could only use three spells—well, four if you counted finite incantatem—and that created a very predictable form of combat. It was all about speed, power, and energy conservation.

What she was now looking at was pure chaos, with elements of teamwork thrown in here and there.

Someone appeared on her left.
"What the hell is this?" the someone shouted.

She winced and turned to see Alexandra Black staring at the unfolded paper in shock.

Moments later, the violet eyed girl had snatched the paper up, eliciting howls of protest from her peers. She cast her gaze over the paper for all of a few moments before throwing it back to where it lay before and stalking out of the classroom. As the Black heiress left, Ginny swore she heard 'Luna' and 'Slytherin' and 'Harry' among her many mutterings.

Ginny frowned. She almost wanted to chase after the girl and ask if she knew about Harry, but one thing stopped her. Alexandra Black didn't wear a silver lightning bolt ring.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"And then I woke up the next morning with no memories of where the stone was." Harry finished.


"Well, that's most of the story. There are other things, but they're still on a need to know basis, and until you're at Hogwarts, you don't need to know."

Ginny nodded. "Harry, what are you going to do about the basilisk?"

"Nothing. It's a thousand year old magically perfect killing machine. I have no intention to engage it until it's absolutely necessary. So until we have a good way to deal with it, we evade and contain instead."

"Rooster crows?"

Harry shook his head. "Oh, that it were that easy."

"And you being a parselmouth?"

"First come, first serve. Literally."

Ginny sighed. "Well, you said we were going to try something not even V-Voldemort managed, or at least tried. What is it?"

Harry picked up a black pebble and started idly tossing it up and down. "The way I see it. Your major problem is that Luna has just enough extra power to keep you from ploughing through her shield with brute force, but she's also been matching you in terms of efficiency. Luna being able to figure out to spell swat independently, after seeing you do it only a few times, was amazing."

Ginny's shoulders slumped. "Thanks," she said dejectedly.

Harry continued as though he hadn't heard. "The one area you clearly outshine her in is physical fitness and raw speed. So, we should focus on your strengths. We need you to be so fast that Luna doesn't have time to shield."

Ginny laughed bitterly. "Luna can cast a shield as quickly as it takes her to raise her hand. You want me to be faster than that?"

"Yes."

"How?"
Harry tossed the black pebble up one last time, snatched it from the air, did something that Ginny didn't catch, and, suddenly, held instead a white pebble.

Ginny frowned. "What did you just do?"

Harry smiled. Did the thing again, and was once again holding the original black pebble.

Ginny's frown deepened. "I don't get it."

Harry pointed behind her and to the left.

She turned and saw there, on the ground, the white pebble.

The white pebble disappeared, replaced with the black pebble with a tiny clink sound.

Ginny turned back and saw the white pebble back in Harry's hand. "You're switching them."

"Yes. It's called a switching spell. Normally, you learn it in your sixth year at Hogwarts."

"And how does that make me faster? Unless…" Understanding spread through her.

Harry obviously saw it because he said. "Yes, that's right. Unless you switch yourself."

"Yes!" Ginny jumped up. "If I could do that, I could appear anywhere around her! I could switch myself to wherever Luna's shield isn't, and stun her before she had a chance to cast!"

Harry held up his non-stone holding hand. "Easy there, Ginny. You ready to hear the difficulties?"

A sinking feeling crept through Ginny. Obviously it wouldn't be that easy. She sat back down again. "Go on."

"No one has ever succeeded in switching themselves — not that we know of. Voldemort had a theory that casting the spell with a wand does something to the spell when redirected back at the body. His idea was that you can only switch yourself with something else if you do it wandlessly, and obviously, the vast majority of wizards never learn the advanced occlumency required for wandless magic, and then even fewer refine their control like you've been doing, and so are automatically precluded from even trying."

"But…" Ginny began.

"And of those who do know the proper occlumency, they'd still have to put in the two-hundred odd hours it takes to learn what would be a very circumstantial spell that apparition could replicate in many circumstances. And then there is the final killer."

"Which is?"

"Switching spells are classified as transfiguration magic. And transfiguration is not permitted in international standard rules duelling."

Ginny's jaw dropped. "For such a stupid reason?"

Harry nodded. "Quite possibly."

"And aurors?"

"—Carry huge ass iron shields with them that levitate from their arms as a protection against
certain dark spells such as Avada Kedavra. Because they're not touching them, they wouldn't be counted as clothing for the switching spell and would probably be left behind."

Ginny leaned back.

"This is all speculation, of course. We don't know that's why no one's ever done it. Hell, we don't even know its not impossible. It's just Voldemort's theory after all. It could be total rubbish."

Ginny tilted her head. "Do you think it's rubbish?"

Harry cast his gaze into the distance. "I think its worth a shot. The rewards far outweigh the risks. We've got to have you doing something. I don't have the time and I believe this is the best thing to try."

Ginny nodded. "That's good enough for me. Okay. Let's do it."

"Right. The first step is switching two objects like normal without a wand." Harry motioned her to sit herself in front of him, back against his chest, which she did.

"Now, feel this, and take note..."

Ginny stirred the cake batter, bored. Bored, bored, bored. She put the spoon down, looked around furtively, and dropped into her occlumency. She tried to pool intent to switch, but found it tough going. The spell just didn't want to form. She knew this feeling. She'd felt it before when she couldn't get first the stunner, then the shield, and then, the stinger. There was nothing for it, but put in the hours, and keep on slogging away.

"Try again, Ginny?" Luna extended her hand to her.

Ginny looked up into Luna's tired but glowing face. She still couldn't beat Luna, but she prided herself that she now got the blonde witch out of breath. "No, I think we should rest for a bit before we have another go."

Luna hauled her up and bounced up and down a bit. "Okay, Ginny."

They sat down on the ground, fallen leaves all around them, and passed a bottle of pumpkin juice between them.

The sky night was clear of clouds. The stars shone through. Owls hooted. The chilly wind rustled the leaves.

"Luna?"

"Yes, Ginny?"

"Do you talk with Alexandra Black much?"

"Oh, yes. We are quite close friends."

"Really?" Ginny looked at her friend in surprise. "Why didn't you say?"

Luna put one small finger on her chin. "Well, we have only recently started seeing each other
again. She invited me over for her birthday party. I think she wanted to know if Harry was trying to marry her."

Ginny spat out her juice and choked. "W-what?"

"Harry has been courting her as Lord Slytherin. He wants her to join our little group. I think she was somewhat confused."

Ginny stared at the ground, face flaming red. "S-so Harry doesn't want to…"

"Oh, I have no doubt he does. But, you know Harry. He is all about long term plans, with short term goals, which is good. World conquest requires both."

Ginny squirmed. She half-wanted to ask what Harry thought about her, but she had a feeling that if she asked, she would get what could only be described as an 'honest' answer, and she didn't feel she could handle the embarrassment. The phrase 'world conquest' also bounced around in her head like a gob stone in a bludger. "S-so," she said instead, "Does Alexandra know? About Harry being Lord Slytherin and from the future and everything?"

Luna shook her head. "No, she does not. If you are going to talk to her, make sure you refer to Harry as Lord Slytherin, our lord, or, if there are others around, just 'our teacher'. She does know Harry Potter exists, and that he is being taught by Lord Slytherin, but that is all she knows."

"I see."

Luna rose from the ground. "Are you ready for another round, Ginny?"

Ginny nodded. "Sure."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Ginny let the magic flow through her, again. Let the magic pool in her, again. Focused her intent on the desire that the stone in front of her, should be over there, and the stone over there should be here. She pushed it into her hands. The spell died.

Her shoulders slumped.

Harry looked up from where he was doing paperwork at a mahogany desk on the other side of the small, Aztec stone room. 'Ninety percent of paperwork is thinking,' he'd told her months ago when she'd asked about the impossibility of doing paperwork in a dream. "Did you manage to keep your intent intact through the post-middle phases?" he asked.

She nodded.


Ginny perked up and followed Harry out of the pyramid.

The sounds of songbirds hit them as they stepped out into the open air. There in the courtyard, on either side of the several massive buildings that made up the Aztec temple complex that they'd made their dreamland training base for the last few months, were six, hundred-foot-tall quidditch hoops.

"Harry!" Ginny leaped up and hugged Harry.

Harry grinned. "I thought we'd have some fun with mid-air duelling since you're doing so well."
Ginny smirked. "Sure I am, Mister Time-traveller. And it has nothing to do with the fact that today was the first Hogwarts Quidditch match, does it?"

Harry smirked back. "I can't imagine how you could possibly suggest such a thing."

Two Nimbus Two-Thousands appeared in front of them.

Harry swung a leg over one of them. "I'm pretty sure I've got the physics right."

Ginny scrambled to mirror his actions, grinning like a loon all the time. "Only pretty sure?"

"Well, I guess we'll find out!"

And they shot into the sky, laughing and cheering all the way.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Ginny sat with her hands under her chin, listening to Lady Lily drone on and on about muggles, the ministry, how the obliviator squads worked, and how they prevented muggleborn parents from spreading knowledge of the magical world.

So boring.

She slipped into her occlumency and idly started pooling magic in her body, feeling it slosh around and wildly form little eddies and uncontrolled streams. She withdrew her hands from under her chin, reached under the desk, out of sight of the front of the classroom, and started crafting intent to switch. She was getting better at it. She'd put in a good hundred hours over the last two weeks, snatching practise time whenever she could, just like now, and she could start to feel the results.

She pushed the spell through her system, up into her hands and held it there. It felt solid. Not solid enough to let loose, but solid enough for the next phase. She firmed her jaw while Lady Lily turned and wrote a particular point out in large capital letters on the black board. She pushed and felt the tips of her fingers start to tingle.

Yes.

She pushed a bit more.

Yes.

She pushed a bit more and... No! Her heart lurched. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught someone watching her from the other side of the back row.

The spell died, starved of intent.

She glanced to the side and quickly looked away from the narrowed gaze of the Black Heiress who was now staring at her the way a hawk stares at a mouse.

As soon as class ended Ginny bolted for the door, but Alexandra followed her.

"Weasley!"

Damn. Ginny stopped halfway down the Potter Manor stairs. "Yes, Black?"

Alexandra caught up with her and pinned her with her violet stare. "You're being taught by 'him', aren't you?"
Ginny panicked. They were in the middle of Merlin damned Potter Manor and *this* was where the girl wanted to talk?!

"You *are* aren't you?"

"Not here!" Ginny hissed. She grabbed the Black Heiress by the very expensive robes and dragged her down the remaining stairs, out the main doors, out across the garden, and into the small copse where John had sometimes brought her and Ron, and which powered the Potter Manor wards.

She looked around furtively. "Right, what is it?"

"You're being taught by *him*, aren't you." Alex said, as though they'd never stopped their original conversation.

"That depends on who *him* is."

Alexandra lowered her voice to a whisper so low Ginny had to lean in to hear.

"Lord Slytherin."

Ginny leaned back and regarded the Black Heiress. Harry was courting her as Lord Slytherin. He wanted her to join them. She was also Luna's friend and, quite apart from anything else, she was probably going to have to spend the next seven years sharing a dormitory with her.

She slowly nodded.

Alexandra breathed in sharply. "I knew it!" she whispered. "That exercise you were doing in class. You were practising wandless magic, weren't you?"

"Are *you* practising wandless magic?" she asked, eyes still narrowed.

Alex nodded. "Luna's teaching me."

Ginny relaxed somewhat. "Oh. Well, if Luna's teaching you, you must be doing quite well."

Alex shifted her weight, clearly uncomfortable. "Well, I'd like to say I am, but I've never beaten her once."

Ginny scoffed. "You mean in a duel? No kidding. I can't beat Luna and I've been busting my ass trying to."

Alex's eyes started to sparkle. "Duel me, then."

"I'm sorry?"

"Duel me!"

Ginny nervously looked around the woodland clearing. It was *probably* okay… She turned back to the excited witch in front of her. "Well, okay then, but just this once. We can't risk making this a regular thing. Not here."

"Fine." Alex turned and made her way back to the other edge of the clearing, expensive robes fluttering around her ankles in the wind.

Ginny took a deep breath and drew herself into her own mind. Calm. Focus. Magic. Pool it. Wield it. Command it. She closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them again. She looked around
and saw a particularly large oak leaf on the ground. She picked it up and called out to her opponent, "When the leaf lands, we start."

Alex nodded, clearly also bringing herself into focus.

Ginny saw the witch's fingertips start to glow red.

She held the leaf between thumb and forefinger, took a deep breath, and regarded her opponent. Just like a normal duel — Dodge to the sides, pound magic into her shields, break them down, dart away, swat anything that makes it too close, rinse and repeat as many times as needed to win.

She threw the leaf into the air.

Both pairs of eyes followed the leaf's descent.

The leaf hit the ground.

Ginny leaped to the side, shot off her chain, shielded, turned on her heel, not waiting to see the result, and dashed away, all the while straining to feel the first cast, leaped behind a nearby tree, and waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

Eventually, tired of waiting, she poked her head around the tree.

There, laying on the ground, exactly where she'd started the duel, was the unconscious form of Alexandra Black.

Ginny stepped out from behind the tree and cautiously walked towards the Black Heiress. She wiggled her fingers and stared at them in disbelief. Holy Merlin.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"And when I looked back, she was down!" Ginny bounced on her feet in front of where Harry sat, her eyes twin shining beacons.

Harry's smile could only be described as amused.

"Ohh, it just feels so good to be the one laying the smack down instead of being Luna's chew toy! Hah!" She punched the air and spun around on one foot.

Harry slowly got to his feet. "So, you ready to go to the next level on project 'lay the smack down on Luna'?

Ginny grinned. "Yes! I swear I almost had it before Alex interrupted me in class."

"Okay. Go ahead then." Harry motioned to the many stones that lay around them and stepped away.

Ginny's face firmed. Right. She locked her gaze on a nearby pebble, identical to the black one Harry had used before. Focus. Feel the magic pool, form the intent, push it to your finger tips. She cast her gaze around and spotted a similarly identical white pebble a little way off. The spell danced at the edge of her fingers and she knew. The spell surged and she felt the pull in two directions at once, one to the black pebble here, the other to the white pebble there.
She blinked.

The black pebble was there. The white pebble was here.

She'd done it. Her heart soared. She let out a happy sigh.

"Well done, Ginny." Harry smiled and they spent the next hour making fine adjustments to her technique.

Ginny couldn't stop grinning. If she felt good about having wandless magic before, because not even Bill or Charlie could do it, it was nothing to knowing she could now do something that not even Harry could do. Her very own secret weapon. Or, it would be, if she could get the next stage to work. Then she could beat Luna, or perhaps, as Luna might prefer, 'conquer'.

Ginny grin turned bemused. "Harry?"

"Yes, Gin?"

"Do you want to conquer the world?"

Harry briefly stilled where he'd been idly kicking his feet against the stone pillar on which he'd sat, himself before continuing again. "I wasn't planning to," he said, his voice sounding as amused as he looked.

Ginny grinned impishly and hopped up next to Harry. "The other day, Luna said, 'World conquest requires long term plans and short term goals,' and that you do both."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Did she really? That's… interesting." He looked off into the distance. "You know that dominating magical Britain was always the plan. Whether through political, economic, or magical means doesn't matter so much. Vanquishing Voldemort and securing the future of those we care for against the wolves of our world who would seek to subjugate us for their own pathetic ends… that's not something that can be done from a position of weakness." He looked back at her and gave a small smile. "'Conquest' still seems like quite a strong word though."

Ginny smirked. "I thought you also wanted revenge?"

Harry smirked back. "Yes, that too."

"And the world?"

"So long as the world leaves us alone, I don't much care."

"And if it doesn't?"

Harry's eyes hardened. "Then I will burn a path to those who threaten us—who wish us dead or enslaved… and tear them apart so they can never threaten us again."

Ginny shivered, met Harry's gaze and saw ten years of hell. She saw her own death. She saw a world ruled by the dark lord. Of course. That's why she was doing all this. It wasn't as though it had much to do with her dream of playing professional quidditch.

She firmed her jaw and nodded.

Luna rolled happily on the leaf strewn ground after one particularly hard duel.
Ginny watched her. The discrepancy between the witch when she relaxed and when she duelled was disconcerting to say the least. "Luna?"

Luna stopped rolling in the leaves, blew her hair out of her eyes, brushed away a stray leaf, and slowly turned to face her. "Yes, Ginny?"

"Why did you say that Harry wants to conquer the world?"

"I didn't say, 'Harry wants to conquer the world', Ginny."

"Yes, you did!"

"I said it's good that Harry could conquer the world."

Ginny blinked. She wasn't sure where to even begin with that comment. "Why?"

Luna smiled. "Harry might need to. It would be an awful shame if he needed to and couldn't, wouldn't it?"

Ginny hesitated. "I suppose…"

Luna rose from the leaves, brushing herself down as she went. "Come on, Ginny. Enough talk of Harry conquering the world and making you queen of the Amazons. We've still got lots to do. And Mum baked a pie earlier. There's still some left."

Ginny watched Luna walk off.

Huh?

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Ginny felt the magic pour through her.

"Now, this next bit is extremely tricky," Harry said, holding her arms with his own. "The idea is that you shoot only half of the spell while keeping the other half inside yourself, but still realising the spell in its entirety."

Ginny's head swam. Complexity piled on complexity. What she'd struggled with in September now seemed child's play compared to this.

"You know the feeling you get when you swat spells? When the magic feels half in and half out? It should, in theory, feel something like that."

She pushed the switching spell to the very tips of her fingers. She tried to fire it and hold it at the same time, but the spell died and putted out. Damn. She scowled.

Harry squeezed her gently. "Again."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Ginny stared at the stone of the other side of the Burrow's orchard, willing herself to switch places with it, pooling her intent with her magic, and trying to loose it and keep it at the same time.

The crisp November air rustled the few leaves she hadn't yet raked onto the compost heap.

Ginny tried one last time before dinner.
The spell died.
Damn.

Oh, well. Her eyes hardened. Soon. Soon, she'd master it.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Ginny hurled the pebble at the Aztec wall. "This is SOOOOO annoying!"

Harry smirked.

"All month! All freak'n month! And I'm still no closer! ARGHH!"

"No one ever said spell discovery was easy."

Ginny grumbled, picked up a twig and switched it for the pebble she'd just chucked away.

Harry's face firmed. He nodded. "Again."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Ginny, we need a half dozen eggs, the hens were short this morning."

"Yes, Mum," Ginny said, and made her way to the back of the muggle shop, glaring at every cardboard box now that she was out of sight.

She found her quarry, all lined up muggle style on the shelves.

She scowled, generally annoyed at everything that wasn't a successful self-switching spell, which included what sat in front of her. Eggs. Damn eggs sitting there so smug and in boxes.

As she had for seemingly every waking moment she could for the last month, she pooled her magic, and went through the motions,

She mentally picked out an egg.

She threw the spell.

She held the spell.

She both threw the spell and held the spell.

Her eyes widened in shock. Her heart leaped. It worked!

Immediately and without thinking, she actualised the rest of the spell, and realised, to her horror, and a split second too late, that she was about to switch with an egg, on a shelf, in an open cardboard box, in a muggle food shop.

Her viewpoint shifted and she felt a hammer like force smack into the top of her head. The world fell down around her and a massive crash announced the depositing of several shelves of tins, boxes and bags, along with the shelves themselves, onto the floor. She fell with it, hard.

"Ginny!" Molly Weasley appeared as though by magic and immediately started helping her out of the wreckage. "Ginny, what happened? Are you alright?"

Ginny nursed her head and frantically looked around. Several customers were staring, looks of
utter shock on their faces. One whispered to another, "Did I just see that girl teleport?"

"I—" Merlin, this was embarrassing. "I had an accident, mum."

Molly Weasley goggled. "At your age?"

Ginny nodded.

Her mum looked around, business-like, pulled out her wand, and surreptitiously fired off a spell that Ginny knew would alert the obliviator squads.

They left just as a pair of wizards in waistcoats and flatcaps entered, nodding to her mum as they passed, both whistling jaunty tunes.

--- DP & SW: TfoP ---

That night, after being fussed over for several hours, Ginny found herself back at The Rookery, once again, for what seemed the thousandth time, facing off against Luna.

Fire burned in Ginny's eyes.

"Begin!"

The duel started as their duels always did, with Ginny charging forward, closing the distance and swatting away every spell that came her way. Luna countered as she always did, with shields and swatting of her own. The closer they got to each other, the more frantic the swatting got and the more Luna had to rely on her shields. Ginny was just faster like that.

Soon they both started to tire.

Ginny retreated in a hail of stunners and stingers.

Luna chased, but never quite managed to catch up.

They both reset, and they both started at it all again. This would go on and on until one found an opposing. A tiny sliver in their opponent's armour to sneak a spell through, and that one was always Luna.

But not this time. Ginny grinned from behind a tree. This time, that sliver would be a Merlin-damned gaping hole, and Luna wouldn't know what hit her.

Ginny dived out from behind the tree and sprinted towards the other side of the clearing, Luna close on her heels.

She passed a stone on the ground, pooled her magic, formed her intent, and fired the spell, still running at full tilt. The spell connected, Luna passed the stone a few seconds later, and Ginny felt the spell catch. Her hand glowed red. She felt a little yank and Luna's back popped into view in front of her. She loosed the spell and had just enough time to catch the look of utter shock that appeared on Luna's slightly turned head.

The stunner hit. Luna's face blanked, and the witch who'd gone undefeated for the whole damn semester, the witch who'd kept her learning trick after trick and still staying one step ahead of every single one of them, fell, with a quiet thud, onto the leaf padded ground.

Ginny panted. She stared. She bent over double, hands on her knees to support herself. She'd won. She'd won. Ginny sucked in huge gulp of air. She'd damn well won! Ginny straightened her body,
raised her fists to the sky, and let out the loudest, most ferocious, and most triumphant war bellow that her ten-year-old girl's throat would give her.

Then she cast a finite on Luna.

"Wow! Ginny!" Luna bounced up and tackle-hugged her.

Ginny stumbled backwards, just managing to keep her balance.

"That was amazing! What was that?!" All dreaminess had gone from Luna's eyes, replaced with nothing but sharp enthusiasm. "It wasn't apparition. I'd have heard the crack! You didn't silence yourself either! And the Rookery has key-in apparition wards anyway!"

Ginny couldn't help but grin. "If I tell you, will you promise not to suddenly learn it in less than a week?"

Luna pouted. "Fine."

One hour later, Ginny was sorely regretting telling Luna how the self-switching spell worked. "HOW?" she cried, crawling on her hands and knees from where she'd just been awoken from losing yet another duel.

"It's your face, Ginny. And the way your fingers move. I can see when you're going to switch just before you do it."

Ginny groaned.

"Disillusionment," Harry said.

"Disillusionment?" Ginny asked, mischief dancing in her eyes.

"Disillusionment," Harry repeated.

The shrill voice of Molly Weasley sounded through the Burrow. "Ginny! Ginny where are you? We need to get to the Alley before everything closes! They don't open on Sundays and we won't have time before the portkey for Romania leaves on Monday!"

An almost invisible Ginny quietly sniggered and crept back up to her bedroom from where she'd been secretly training in the backyard. She dropped her disillusionment and poked her head out the door. "I'm here, Mum!"

"Oh!" her mum said, looking more than a little flustered. "Good, then."

"HOW?!" Ginny beat her still almost invisible fists on the ground in rage and frustration.

Luna smiled dreamily, brought her hands to her ears, and flicked them back and forth.

"Right," Ginny muttered into the frosty late December ground, "guess it's going to be silencing charms next."
The next night, Ginny lay awake in bed, staring at the ceiling and thinking. She wished she could go to the Winter Festival at Greengrass Manor, but her parents were taking her to Romania to visit Charlie. It wasn't that she wasn't looking forward to seeing her second eldest brother again, she was. But, well, she had seen her mum packing four separate Ginny Weasley sized coats into her old expandable trunk. Cumbria wasn't that cold.

There was also the fact that she still hadn't completely forgiven either Bill or Charlie for ignoring her last summer and pushing Harry so far that he actually suffered a panic attack strong enough to briefly knock out the Burrow's wards.

That Charlie had supported their parent's decision to confiscate the broom Harry had gifted her rankled even more, especially given Charlie's own history with Quidditch. She'd like nothing more than to blow off some steam in the nighttime skies around the Burrow.

Ginny stared at the ceiling some more. She frowned and sat up in bed and stared at an empty patch of bedroom wall. But… now…if she could… Her eyes narrowed. Yes.

She quietly slipped out of bed, opened her door, slipped through the magic trip wires with barely a second thought, moved as silently as she could without magic to the trapdoor to the attic, carefully opened the door, stunned the ghoul, turned and regarded the ward around the trunk that she'd found before.

She closed her eyes, opened herself to magic, and let the intent caress her skin her like a Luna-hurled stunner to be instantly swatted away. It felt like… a key-in perimeter ward? A key-in perimeter ward… and something else… a motion detection area ward… a motion detection ward that worked by…. Ginny tilted and rolled her head as though trying to hear something a long way off. …It worked by 'seeing movement.' The trunk itself… had no magic.

Ginny bit her lip, turned, thought about the distance between here and her bedroom, and the chance that she could make it back without bumping into her parents if something went wrong.

She turned back to the ward. Her jaw firmed. She looked around, picked up a hat from a nearby hatstand, disillusioned it, and, standing right next to her escape route and holding her breath, frisbeed the almost invisible hat past the perimeter ward and into the motion detector ward.

Nothing happened.

She let out her held breath. Stage one was successful.

Ginny walked towards the ward line and allowed herself to also fade into the background.

She focused on the hat… and switched, bringing herself forward a whole few metres closer to the trunk and depositing the hat back where she'd been standing.

Again, nothing happened.

Right. Next step.

Ginny walked forward as carefully and as slowly as she could manage. She wasn't completely invisible after all. She reached the trunk and suddenly realised there was a problem. She couldn't just open the trunk lid without triggering the motion detection ward.

Ginny chewed her tongue.
But, she couldn't just disillusion the trunk either. That would surely also trigger the ward. But...—
She stopped chewing her tongue and started on her cheek—...But maybe she could slowly disillusion the trunk, just a tiny bit at a time.

She reached out, placed her hands on the trunk and slowly, ever so slowly, applied one disillusionment charm after another, each one just a bit stronger than the last, each time waiting a good amount of time before casting again.

Eventually, the trunk was nothing but a mirror of the background, an outline in the air.

Ginny fingered for the lid and opened it just a crack. The disillusionment held, shielding the trunk's contents from the ward without actually carrying over. She opened it a bit more, peeked in and had to stifle the instinct to breathe in sharply and shout in triumph.

She snatched her tiny, limited-edition Nimbus 1700 from the bottom of the trunk, closed the lid, slowly dispelled the charms, worked herself back through the area ward, switched herself to the other side of the key-in perimeter ward, used a disillusioned umbrella to retrieve the hat, tiptoed back down the stairs, into the kitchen, out the back door—slipping through the other set of trip lines as she went—down to the orchard, gave her broom the magical once over, un-shrunk it, mounted up, and shot into the air, grinning like a madman, and letting happiness surge through her body.

Her parents would never know. Oh, they'd find the broomstick gone when they next checked, but they'd have no way of suspecting it was her who had done it. She'd deposit the broom in Harry's fidelius charmed secret passage way when she was done. She sure wasn't stupid enough to hang on to it — she'd learned that lesson well enough. But it was back in her possession again, and that was what mattered.

Ginny did a loop in the air, still under disillusionment, and soared upwards towards the moon.

She'd get cold soon, but right now, she felt she could weather an Arctic snow storm, she was that happy. The last four months had been almost nothing but hard, hard work and soon she'd be back at it, but for these few, precious moments, she was going to enjoy herself, just like Harry surely was at the Winter Festival.

— End of Chapter Twenty-four —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Wow, that was a lot of Ginny. I hope you enjoyed, because we won't see her again until the start of book three (year two).

Next chapter: Alexandra and Luna being very bad girls.

A/N: Gah. This chapter was late — That's annoying. I wasn't able write for the whole of last week because life got in the way, and then, what I thought was going to be a short 7,000-8,000 word chapter, wasn't. As I've said many times before, I suck at estimating word length.
Anyway, it's out now. Yay!

As many of you know, when my schedule messes up, I currently let people know using twitter, but I appreciate that not everyone uses or likes twitter. I'm working on an alternative solution that will both allow me to keep you updated, and also allow me to post relevant content that doesn't currently meet fanfic dot nets publication guidelines.

A/N: Just so everyone knows. I currently do not consider anything in cursed child as canon and stuff that happens in there doesn't happen in this AU. Just putting that out there.
[Warning: This chapter contains strong and potentially offensive language]

[August 5th, 1991 — The day after Alexandra's tenth birthday party]

In a dusty corner of a dusty library, a pair of bright violet eyes were glued to the occasionally turned pages of a colourful book.

And then, the boy who lived swept down on the foul beast and sliced it in two.

"Hah!" the boy who lived shouted. "Your foul magics won't help you this time!"

The black witch of the north cackled. "Oh, you think so, do you? You haven't even seen one-tenth of my true power!"

And then, the black witch of the north drove her staff of supreme evil into the ground, which started to shake terribly.

"What is this?!" The boy who lived was startled. He'd never seen such evil before.

"This! This is my TRUE POWER!" And from the ground emerged a dragon, and the boy who lived could see that it was undead because its skin was yellow and flaky and bony and yet it still moved.

"Do you see, boy who lived?" the black witch of the north cackled. "You cannot possibly hope to defeat such evil! Now, bow before me!"

"Never!" The boy who lived got shakily to his feet. "I can defeat you! Because I have my friends!"

And the friends of the boy who lived all gathered round him.

"Use it now!" shouted Maldeve.

"Yes!" shouted Vivian. "The ancient artefact! It's the key to defeating the black witch of the north!"

And the boy who lived pointed the ancient artefact of Zak'ra'na'fu'isi'ta'dul at the huge undead dragon and the power of friendship rushed through them all, hit the foul dragon, which let out an evil cry of rage, and dissolved into nothing.

"NO!" The black witch of the north cried. "This cannot be! I cannot be defeated by—"

Wham! The book hit the nearest bookcase and dropped to the floor, face down, still open, its colourful front cover showing a boy of no more than six standing on the head of a dragon and holding a sword. A startled Amethyst jumped up and fell from where she'd been sleeping, landed lightly on the floor, righted herself and looked around, dart like, for whatever threat had awoken her.

Alexandra Patricia Black, wearing a long night dress and a frown, folded her arms and glared at the fallen book. That was how the 'boy who lived' took down a seventy foot long undead dragon? What a cop out. He should have been a greasy stain on the castle floor! The black witch of the north should have won! She'd been better prepared, better armed, better manned. She'd had a whole
army of skeletons in book four. Where had they been?

Still grumbling, Alex hopped out of her armchair, snatched the book up, carefully gathered a mewing Amethyst in her arms, made her way out of the library, and down to where breakfast was being served.

"Morning, sleepyhead." Lord Sirius Black hastily buttered a slice of toast while she slid herself into one of the high back chairs and spooned herself a boiled egg from a large silver bowl filled with sand.

"Been up for ages," she muttered, depositing the cute black kitten and tapping the egg with a convenient silver spoon.

"Oh? Doing what?"

She held up the boy who lived adventure book in her other hand. "In the library."

A brief look of concern flashed over her father's face before settling back into its usual jaunty demeanour. "Just so long as you're staying out of those areas."

She mentally rolled her eyes. "Yes, Dad."

Her father swallowed another bite, grabbed two more slices of toast, and stood up. "And you enjoyed your birthday party yesterday?" He moved to the hatstand and started putting on his cloak, both slices of toast now held in his mouth.

"Yes, seeing Luna again was nice. I've missed her."

Her father grunted something that she couldn't quite make out.

"I was thinking of inviting her around again sometime?"

Lord Black looked around, patting his pockets and frowning.

Alex tilted her head and put on her best puppydog face. "It's been kinda lonely over the summer, otherwise."

Her father stopped looking around and briefly focused on her. "Oh. Oh, yeah, yeah, sure, okay then — have you seen my badge anywhere?"

Alex smiled brightly. "Kreacher!"

Lord Black groaned.

"Honoured Bastard Mistress called?"

Alex's smile became rather wooden.

Her father looked resigned.

"Find Lord Black's auror badge."

"Yes, Honoured Bastard Mistress."

A few moments later, her father briskly walked to the floo, auror badge in hand.
Alex spent a few more minutes finishing breakfast before heading back up to the library. She slid the offending boy-who-lived adventure book back between its dozen or so fellows, carefully extracted Volumes I, II, and III of *The Light Side of the Dark Arts* and made her way to the nook that held her Grandfather's portrait.

"So, he got you another gift, mmm?"

Alex shifted uncomfortably, holding the book up for inspection. "He did. And Luna gave me a black kitten."

"Well, make sure you send a couple of owls to thank them both."

Alex nodded.

"And," Portrait Orion Black stroked his beard. "You're now ten years old. That's a very special age for a daughter of the house of Black."

Alex hesitated. "It is?"

"Oh, yes," he continued. "You're off to Hogwarts in a year's time, and now's the time for you to learn about the Black family magic."

Alex's eyes widened. "Really?" Her face broke out in a massive grin.

Orion Black smiled back warmly. "Yes, really." His smile faded. "I advise against you telling my son that I've spoken to you of this though. He never bothered learning when he was younger, despite my and your grandmother's best efforts, unlike your late uncle."

Alex snorted. "Why am I not surprised?"

Orion Black nodded and then told Alex exactly what she needed to do to find the secret section of the Black Library that held the Black family magic. Alex thanked her grandfather and left.

"Kreacher!"

Kreacher popped in front of her, all pointed nose and ears, mean eyes, and yellowed teeth. "Honoured Bastard Mistress called?"

"Yes. Please get me a sharp knife and a healing potion."

Moments later she held a wickedly sharp looking knife and a healing draught.

She nodded and turned back to Kreacher. "You are not to know where I am, or what I'm doing, for the next thirty minutes, understood?"

Kreacher grinned and rubbed his hands together. "Honoured Bastard Mistress is being sneaky again. Kreacher understands, Honoured Bastard Mistress."

Kreacher popped away.

Alex nodded to herself. When she'd been five, she'd taken to asking the elf to pop her just outside her then friends houses. A confused Sirius Black had randomly asked Kreacher where she was and blew a fuse when the elf had been forced to tell him. Since then, she'd always been very careful to make sure the elf didn't know anything that could get her into big trouble. That included rituals, dark magic, and anything to do with Lord Slytherin.
She padded across the library until she faced a bookcase that looked just like every other bookcase, took a deep breath, sliced open a cut on her palm and winced. It hurt. No, it really hurt. Tears forming in her eyes, she smeared the blood across the spine of the book titled *Alchemic Transmutation Volume VIII — Maintaining Purity*. The bookcase shivered, the books leapt from their shelves, woodwork slid and reformed itself, and in moments the bookcase become an archway of books, framing a solid looking door, also made from books.

Alex drank the healing potion and a wave of relief washed through her, pooled in her hand, and within moments, the cut was as though it had never been. Thank Morgana. She grasped the door handle, which looked to be made of two ornate looking book stoppers, and pushed.

 Darkness greeted her. She stepped through in worshipful silence. The room was tiny. There were only two book shelves on either side of her and barely enough space from two people to comfortably move around in.

These books contained the Black family magic. The magic that only Blacks and their immediate families could cast, or that the family wanted only Blacks to be able to cast. It was part shrine, part incubation chamber and clearly hadn't been accessed in many years.

Alex idly wondered how many of the spells on the shelves had become actual Black family magic on her birth. The rule of three said that for a new spell to become family magic it had to pass through three generations of heirs without being used by any not of the family's blood. She was sure that her own father hadn't invented any spells that he hadn't immediately shared with the Lord Potter at least.

When she eventually had children…one day… a long, long time in the future… they wouldn't be getting anything new from their grandfather.

She sniffed bitterly and reached for an interesting looking tome named *The Dendromancer's Doomsday Book*.

Wings flittered.

Alexandra stiffened.

Something had moved just outside her field of vision.

Then, suddenly, something grabbed her long black hair and started yanking it backwards.

She cried out, felt a small bite on her leg through her thin nightdress, heard a cacophony of little angry shouts, stumbled towards the door, grabbed at whatever was yanking on her hair, kicked off the thing on her leg, saw a little blue something fly into the wall, half fell through the door, slammed it shut behind her, flinched as she felt the thing in her hand bite down hard, and smashed it against the nearest bookshelf in retaliation. The thing smushed under force of her ritual empowered attack, sending blue gunk everywhere and all over her hand in particular.

Alex gasped for breath, her heart now beating a million beats a minute. Doxies! She gently cradled her bit hand, felt the bite on her leg rapidly turning enflamed, and glared at the now closed book-like door to the secret chamber of Black family magic. Damn it! She stamped her foot in frustration. Now what was she supposed to do? She needed to get this treated, but she couldn't ask Kreacher. He was under orders to tell her father if she got hurt. She couldn't go to St. Mungo's for the same reason.

But… there was someone who might be able to help. Alex's jaw firmed. She hated this, but there
was nothing else for it. She darted downstairs, zipped to the floo, threw some floo powder into the fireplace, ducted her head into the fire and shouted, 'The Rookery!' 

The living room of the Lovegoods faded into view and a regal and dignified looking man bearing more than a passing resemblance to Lord Malfoy crouched down to her eyesight and asked, "Do you know the meaning of life, young lady?!" in quite a loud voice.

Alex panicked. "I, what?"

The man crouched closer. "Is it more important to rule or to serve?"

Alex sneezed on a bit of wood ash and resisted the urge to back off. "That's like asking if its more important to breathe in or out!"

"Then do you rule a master through servitude, or serve a follower through leadership?"

"Either! It doesn't matter! Do whatever is needed!"

"Good." The man stood back up, suddenly all formality and politeness. "I am Xenophilius Lovegood, Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Lovegood. How may I serve you?"

Alex hesitated. "I—"

"Alex!"

Luna bounded into view and skidded to a halt in front of her. "You're here! Oh, don't mind Daddy, he just gets a kick out of being all mysterious."

Lord Lovegood smiled and stepped back a few paces.

Alex suddenly realised her knees were starting to ache and both her leg and hand were flaming quite magnificently. "Ah, I… Lord Lovegood? Could I maybe speak to Luna in private for a few moments?"

Lord Lovegood nodded and retreated.

"Luna, I got bit by a doxy and I can't go to the hospital. I can't let my Dad find out about this!"

Luna's eyes widened slightly. She nodded slowly. "One moment, Alex, I think I might have just what you need."

Luna left and soon returned with a bright blue potion in a tiny bottle. "Here it is."

"What is it?"

"It is anti-doxy bite potion."

Alex looked at the blonde haired, gray eyed witch, incredulity seeping from every pore on her young face. "You had this just lying around?"

Luna's face remained as dreamy as ever. "It is very important to be prepared for anything that might happen, and me and Daddy do go hunting occasionally."

Alex stared at Luna for another moment before shrugging, opening her mouth wide, and making an 'Ahhhhhh' sound.
Luna tipped the potion in, not letting any liquid fall off her outstretched tongue.

Alex snapped her mouth shut, gulped it down, and immediately started to feel a reduction in soreness in her leg and hand. She let out a sigh. "Thanks, Luna."

"That is quite all right, Alex. Would you like to start occlumency training now?"

Alex's hesitated, briefly thinking back to her as yet unexplored birthday inheritance, and then remembered that, for the time being, she had no way to get to it. Then she thought back to what had happened yesterday, when Luna had blown through her occlumency barriers like they were tissue paper, just because she'd gotten special lessons from Lord Slytherin. Lessons that she could have had, but had thrown away in a fit of childish arrogance. Her eyes firmed. "Yes."

— DP & SW: TfP —

If Alex thought that Lord Slytherin's special lessons would be easier than her previous occlumency lessons, then she was sorely mistaken. She'd never ever done anything so hard. Everyday, for hours and hours, Luna ripped through her head like a hurricane, destroying everything in her path and building it back up as she went. Her brain ached and she went to bed every night exhausted, only to wake up the next morning with a thumping magical toxin hangover — a hangover that she somehow had to hide from her father, every single day.

August came and went and soon enough September the first rolled around.

"How much longer are we going to do this?" Alex groggily asked a faintly smiling Luna. They were sitting opposite each other on Alex's bed.

"A few more months yet. Your body should be getting used to the magic soon and you won't feel so bad in the morning."

"Good." Alex clutched her head. "I feel like... horrible."

"Here, drink more water."

Alex grabbed the offered bottle and gulped it down.

"You know, Alex, you are doing quite well. I think we're ready to start on wandless magic, although we do still have to continue on with the occlumency for a while yet."

Alex raised her head to look at the annoyingly chipper vision in front of her. "Eghhh... do we have to? I still don't see the point of learning wandless magic."

"Oh, Alex." Luna shifted closer and took her unresisting hands in hers. "There's so much to look forward to once you learn wandless magic. It's not just about casting spells without a wand. You'd be missing out on so much."

"Like?"

"Well, there's magic sensing, and all the girls are going to become Animagi the year after next, and it does give you a last line of defence if you lose your wand. I love knowing that if any boy tries anything with me, even without a wand, I can still swat him away like the annoying pest he is."

Alex frowned. That did sound attractive, although the point was fairly moot since she had a boy's strength anyway. She'd never wanted to be an animagus before. It was something her father had done and, therefore, not something she'd wanted to do, but if it was with a whole bunch of other
girls…. 'All the girls'? Alex frowned and opened her mouth.

"And then of course, there's the fact that wandless magic is sort of the badge of honour for those Lord Slytherin trusts."

Alex slowly closed her mouth. Oh. She opened it again. "So, it's like a test?"

"Alex, with Lord Slytherin, everything is a test."

Alex's eyes widened. Oh, damn. It was just like last time, when she'd turned away Harry. Damn damn damn. She shook her head. Her violet eyes firmed."Right. Let's do it then."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Alex sat alone in the Black Library reading a book from one of the sections her dad had forbidden her from entering. Her eyes widened as she skimmed the pages.

And of all the necromantic arts, the most basic, nay, the most elemental, is the raising of a magical being under the binding of the raiser. The raised, known as inferi, will obey the will of the raiser to a certain degree in the large numbers, and to a greater degree in the small numbers. A total control can be attained over a single inferius through a method similar in the practise to that most potente of all dark mind magics, the imperius curse.

Images of mighty undead dragons flew through Alex's mind.

The ritual required to raise inferi requires a moste powerful wizzard and much practise and deliberations. The ritual in the first phase animates the corpse, and reconciles its core with that which has passed on. The ritual in the second phase binds the now animated corpse to the wizzard's will, but only in so much as the wizzard be powerful and the corpse be fresh. If the wizzard fails in this phase, beware, for the beast will run riot across all in sight until the ritual's magics run down and die out. The ritual in the third and final phase opens the now inferius' core to the aether and allows the being to exist apart from the now master's magic.

So you needed a magical core to be an inferius? Didn't that meant that muggles couldn't be inferi? She looked back and forth across the book but couldn't find anything that might confirm or deny her question, although many pages seemed to have conspicuous burn marks all over them, including several passages that dealt with the ritual itself. She re-read the passage again.

'A moste powerful wizzard and much practise and deliberations…'

Alex sighed. If there was one thing that her lessons with Luna had driven home, it was that she was 'behind'. She'd unwittingly rebuffed Lord Slytherin and was now in a position of having to prove herself if she wanted what her friend was already getting. This sounded like just the thing to prove she was more than ready to learn more. She was sure she was powerful, but it wasn't as though she had a horde of people ready for her to… practise… on…

A lightbulb went off in her head. She grinned.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Alex let the magic swirl through her, trying to feel what Luna called the 'intent' of the spell. It was supposed to feel like water running through her, condensing at a point about half way from her navel to her chest. No matter how much she tried she just wasn't getting it, but she swore if it was the last thing she did, she was going to figure this out.
Luna smiled at her from the opposite chair. "You're doing a lot better now that you've collected some kerfuffling scribblebugs."

Alex unclenched her determined fists, un-scrunched her face, and smirked at Luna. "Naturally, now that I've found some annoying pests to swat."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Alexandra watched suspiciously as Ginny Weasley, the chief worshipper of John Potter, the boy who lived, walked up to the front of the classroom, picked up the dark magic detection device that the Lady Potter, who was *not* her god-mother, despite *her* father being *John Potter's* god-father, had left there, and waved it over herself.

Odd.

The red-headed witch then proceeded to just stand there with her back facing the class, holding the ring-topped black rod up to her face. She stood there, unmoving, for a whole minute. Alex timed it on the wall clock.

Weasley then spun around, face aglow with satisfaction and happiness and almost danced back to her seat.

Alex narrowed her eyes. What *was* Weasley up to?

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Your fingers are glowing red, Alex. That's a good sign." Luna's calm voice washed over her.

Alex focused and felt the spell reach the very tips of her fingers. She opened her eyes, looked straight into Luna's, raised her hand, and loosed the stunner.

Luna instantly shielded, serenely smiling.

Alex's heart leapt. "I did it! Hah! Yes! No one can stop me now!" She jumped up, pumped her fists in the air, almost lost her balance, and jerkily spun on one leg to keep it. She reddened. "Err, you didn't see that."

Luna continued to smile. "It's okay, Alex, you don't have to feel embarrassed around me." She stood up and swung wildly on one foot before loosing her balance and falling back over on her bum. She pouted. "Owie."

Alex couldn't help it. She giggled.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Alex approached the Black magic section of the Black Library holding a box. In this box were two dozen unbreakable jars, bought from Diagon alley the other day. This time, she was ready.

She put the box down, placed her hand on the correct book, and waited as the library's magic recognised her as a previously accepted daughter of the house of Black. The bookcase resolved itself in a swirling of books and wood into *the* door. She opened it a crack, brought a stunner to her fingers, and crept over the threshold.

Something angry rocketed out of one of the shelves and towards her in a blur. Without even thinking, she released her stunner, and, by sheer luck, hit the thing before it reached her face. It fell
to the ground and she snatched it up.

Her movement seemed to alert all its fellows. They took to the air to defend their downed comrade in a small swarm of scowling blue wings and bodies.

Alex leapt back through the door, slammed it behind her, dumped the unconscious doxy into one of the jars, and screwed one of the air-hole ready lids on tightly.

There. She nodded, grim faced and sweating. Test subject number one.

Alex brought another stunner to her fingers, opened the door another crack, and caught another bolting doxy clear in the chest with her second stunner. She slammed the door, dumped the second doxy into another jar and again screwed one of the lids on tightly.

Test subject number two.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The sun was bright and the day was young.

Alexandra stepped out of the Diagon alley public floo point, furtively eyed the early morning shoppers, and darted towards the nearest public toilet, careful not to jostle the contents of her shoulder bag.

Once safely ensconced, she pulled a green coloured potion out of her bag.

'Next time, use one of these.' Lord Slytherin had said.

Alex faced the bathroom mirror, popped the bottle's cork, swigged the complete small dose, and watched with awe as her whole body changed. She grew taller, her face matured, her hips widened, and a sudden weight on her chest alerted her to the fact that, well, she now had one.

"Magical Merlin," she whispered, eyes wide, hands lightly tracing the lines of her new grown-up face. She tore her gaze away from her reflection and looked around. Everything suddenly felt smaller. It was disconcerting. Alex reached for the bathroom door, opened it, pulled up the hood on her robes to hide her face, stepped outside, and started walking down the alley.

She shifted uncomfortably as she walked, and it wasn't just her getting used to her new body anatomy. All the grown-ups around her suddenly seemed… less grown-up? It was difficult to put her finger on what had changed, but the change was there. People were looking at her differently, too. No one was paying her any attention. Or rather, people were paying her attention, but the attention felt different. Not so much, 'what are you doing and will I have to do something about it?' so much as 'I see you and acknowledge you, but won't do anything unless you do something first.'

It all felt very different, while at the same time, being very similar. That was, until she passed a tall wizard in his twenties, whose eyes fixed on her half hidden face and didn't leave until she'd passed, and even then she swore she could feel his lingering gaze as she continued on.

Alex self-consciously adjusted her self-adjusting robes and ducked into Flourish and Blotts, where she proceeded to buy a book to be sold only to those of age, and felt a little thrill of forbidden triumph as she left.

It had worked. She grinned. Now she could go buy stuff she needed for her experiments. Experiments that it was critical stayed secret. She was almost certain Lord Slytherin wouldn't mind.
what she was doing, in fact, she hoped he'd be impressed, but she wasn't so sure about Luna. She liked Luna — it was difficult not too, but the girl had been raised in a then light family, and felt… too innocent? Yes, that was it — too innocent — too naive. She could still remember years ago when she and Luna had occasionally played 'light vs dark' with John Potter and Ronald and Ginny Weasley. It had always been a four on one affair. Luna wouldn't understand and Alex really didn't want to lose her as a friend. As for her father, Lord Black, the chief auror, the 'hammer of the light'… she shuddered, the less thought about what he'd think, the better.

Alex made her way to the mouth of a side alley, checked that no one was looking, produced an ornate looking green and black mask, attached it firmly to her face, and started down the dark and forbidding shop fronts of Knockturn Alley. Her gaze trailed down the shop fronts as she walked, one by one, each one like a little mystery to be solved.

One shop window held nothing but a single black, velvet pillow on which rested a single, bone-like wand that looked disturbingly like certain illustrations she'd read— with horrified fascination—in certain ritual books of wizard-only spells. Fighting down a blush, she tried to get the images out of her head and concluded that the shop was probably for wand modifications.

The next shop window held the top half of a stuffed, fully-grown troll holding a battle-axe. A glance inside revealed many other stationary and vaguely humanoid shapes, the horrifying highlight of which, had to be the row of house elf heads on plaques behind the un-attended shop counter. The shop sign proclaimed itself as 'The Helping Hand'.

Alex shook her head, continued down the alley, and detoured around a pair of twenty-something witches loitering outside the next shop front, smoking muggle cigarettes and looking bored. The shop window itself was blacked out and didn't seem to be much of anything. The shop sign featured only what looked to be a nailed-up, dead, dried, and flattened snake skin. She couldn't for the life of her think what might go on in there.

Finally, Alex found herself outside a shop front that held a collection of half skull dribbly candle holders. Now, this looked like what she was looking for. She pushed the door open, causing a little bell to tinkle, and stepped into the far darker room beyond, filled with crates and barrels and open boxes containing what looked to be half a magical zoo.

"Mornin' Madam." A stout little man wearing a black robe with a pointy collar and a goatee emerged from a back door and gave her the once over. "What can I do for you?"

Madam.

Alex mentally smirked, produced a parchment from her robe pocket, and handed it over to the man. "I am looking"—whoa—"for everything on this list. That was how she'd sound when she grew up?

The wizard took the list with a curious look at her masked face and inspected the parchment. He rubbed his goatee and grunted. "Well, this shouldn't be too difficult. We've most of this in stock. I'll need to talk to Steve a few shops down about the chicken blood though." He gave her a sideways look. "Yeh can wait a few minutes, right love?"

Love. Ack. "Yeah—Yes! I mean, that is not a problem."

The wizard gave her a strange look and left the way he came.

Alex mentally smacked herself. Get a grip! It wasn't as though this was anything that different to what she was used to — just grown-ups treating her as an equal instead of as a walking glass statue
with the IQ of a kneazle and the self preservation of a disobedient house elf.

Not long later, the wizard returned. She paid for the goods and left the shop, carrying everything in several large bags, and wishing she had one of those cool shrinking trunks.

Alexandra spent the rest of the day walking around the alley, checking out all those little nooks and shops that had barred her as an almost ten year old, and asking all those questions she was sure would've been frowned on before. In particular, she learned that even with her rather generous allowance, she'd never be able to afford a shrinking trunk any time soon, and, rather embarrassingly, Gringotts were not in any way fooled by her ageing potion.

Eventually, she made her way back to the bathroom she'd started her day in, glad to take the ageing potion antidote, and looking forward to getting home to change into something a bit less constricting. Her chest was really quite sore now. How in Morgana's name did grown-up witches go around with these things rubbing against their robes all day?

Alex left the bathroom and headed for the floo.

…Oh, and she still couldn't get those damn wizard-only rituals out of her head.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

It was one week later.

Her father had left for the day and Alex was sure he wouldn't be back for quite a while.

In other words, it was time to get down to business.

She barricaded herself in one of the many empty rooms of the house, furtively unloaded her many doodads onto the room's only table, and placed the book that contained the inferi ritual next to them, open to the mildly burnt ritual description page.

*Take a pint of chicken blood or as much as needed for the size of the subject to be raised — the larger be the subject, the larger will need be the deathly hallow.*

She pointed to the large jar of red liquid she'd bought earlier in the week. Check.

*Take the dowel and place it at the tip of the deathly hallow, that it be pointing parallel and on the line of the symbol of death.*

She pointed to the simple wooden rod on the table. Check.

*Next, be the stone, to be placed on the leftmost side of the hallow, at the bottom most point.*

She pointed to the pebble that she'd found in the garden and washed earlier this morning. Check.

*And finally, you must place a cloak at the one remaining triangle tip, taking all efforts to ensure that it be not contaminated with residue magics from charms, enchantments, or runes, lest the ritual fail and the results be really very bad.*

Alex tapped the buckle of the cloak around her neck. It was the only item of clothing she had that she knew contained no magic and as such, was the only piece of clothing she now wore. She'd even taken off the black butterfly hair ornament that Susan had given her for her birthday. She suspected that her socks might not be charmed or enchanted with anything, which would be nice as the floor wasn't exactly warm, but she wasn't about to take that sort of risk.
She glanced down at the book again. The next paragraph was kinda burnt, but she was certain it was a warning not to interfere with external magic until the ritual was complete — Something she'd already read many times before. She continued on.

Once all these have been placed you shall take your dead subject and place it in the centre of the hallows. You shall then channel your magics into the blood painted deathly hallow and speak thusly:

'Death who takes all, through the power of wand, stone, and cloak, hear your humble servant.'

You shall then wait for the deathly hallow to glow with the magics of death.

You shall then take your sickle or scythe and plunge it into the corpse of your subject, and channel your magic through the reaper's tool into it, at which point you shall recite the following passage:

'Death who takes all, I offer you back that which the three brothers took. To raise this container of a soul that you now possess. To bind its magic back to the aether, and to your humble servant.'

You shall then step out of the deathly hallow, wait for the magics to finish and begin your efforts to subjugate your newly raised inferius to your will.

Ah, yes. This bit had caused her quite a bit of headache. It had taken all week to track down a book that explained exactly how she was supposed to actually do that last part. Apparently, it was all about overwhelming the target's magic with your own, at least for long enough to cement the bond, which is presumably why the book said the ritual took a 'most powerful wizzard'. In any case, she was glad she'd listened to Luna and learned the basics of wandless magic or this bit would've been impossible without a wand.

Alex pointed to a large tin next to the pebble on the table. Mrs Skower's All Purpose Magical Mess Remover? Check. Scrubbing brush and broom? Check. Hand sickle? Check. And finally — she pointed to the last item on the desk, an unbreakable jar in which a furious doxy pounded the glass with all four arms and made occasional evil finger gestures at her. She narrowed her eyes. One disgustingly obnoxious magical creature? Check.

And now all she had to do was follow the instructions.

Ten minutes later, a completely naked Alex channelled her magic into the macabre blood symbol on the floor, in the middle of which lay one now very dead doxy, and spoke the first words of the ritual.

The hallow started to glow deep red.

Alex's heart leapt. She thrust her sickle into the doxy's still warm body, let out another pulse of magic, chanted the ritual words, stepped back out of the ritual space, and waited.

Moments later, the cloak, dowel, and stone all started to glow as well.

Alex felt her heart beat in her chest.

Finally, the doxy started to glow. Magic swirled around the room, rushing past her and sending tingles all through her body.

A grin spread across her face. She leant forward…

…And the deceased doxy exploded, sending blue gunk all over the room in general and all over
her in particular.

Alex stared. Damn. She frowned. That… wasn't supposed to happen.

She straightened, wiped away as much of the entrails from her person as she could, and chewed her lip. She must have done something wrong.

She cast her gaze to a nearby shelf where several other doxies watched her, furiously chattering and chittering and banging their enraged tiny fists on the walls of their glass prisons.

It looked like there would plenty more library time for her in the near future.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

A few days later, Alex was feeling very silly and very stupid.

Grimmauld place was a magical house. The magics that swirled in the very air were far greater than the paltry enchantments she'd been worried her clothes might contain.

A few years ago, she'd done a ritual to give herself the strength of the male she could have been at the cost of her ability to taste sweetness. That the house hadn't affected that ritual was a minor miracle. She shuddered to think of what could have happened to her if it hadn't gone well, given what happened to the doxy in the ritual she'd just failed to complete.

Her latest trawl through the library yielded the depressingly basic titbit that traditional magic houses usually contained a ritual room — a space built so the inherent magic of the wards were suppressed while still being inaccessible to the outside world. It had been the work of a moment to walk into the Black magic section of the Black Library and find a floor plan of the house, which, lo and behold, showed her where the ritual room was.

Which is how Alex now found herself, naked and shivering, in the basement of Grimmauld place, surrounded by old stone walls covered in complex runic arrays, and standing on a perfectly flat slate floor, ideal for chalk and paint and, well, blood — glowing blood — glowing red like an angry red star.

She stabbed the second dead doxy with her wickedly sharp sickle, sent a pulse of raw intent through the curved blade, chanted the second ancient set of ritual words, stepped back out of the deathly hallow, and watched.

The deathly hallow glowed red.

Alex narrowed her eyes.

The dowel, stone and cloak all glowed.

The doxy glowed… and then exploded.

Alex groaned and wiped more doxy bits off her pale skin. Back to the library again.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

It was the weekend, and Lord Black was at work.

Alex stood in a dark corner of the Black Library, flipping through Ritual Troubleshooting - What to do When it All Goes Wrong, and waiting for Luna to finish lunch at the Rookery so they could do stuff together.
And if you are still experiencing problems, you might consider using a virgin as the ritual performer, as the act of intercourse subtly alters a witch or wizard's magic in ways that can adversely affect some rituals.

Alex felt her cheeks warm up. That… wasn't an issue for her.

Some rituals are affected by the phases of the moon, and can only be done at full, or new moon. The prevalence of this consideration is mostly restricted to fertility and life rituals.

So, again, not relevant.

Make sure to double check and triple check yourself for any and all possible external magic that you may be carrying with you into the ritual. Sometimes there are things that we carry around with us all the time that we forget about. The most common types of magic accidentally brought into rituals are small items of clothing, potions taken earlier in the day, charms still lingering on one's person, and magical jewellery such as hair ornaments, necklaces, and rings.

Rings! Alex's eyes widened. Damn! Damn damn damn! She looked down at her right hand, thought about her noble house ring, and watched it materialise on her index finger in the shape and crest that marked her as the heiress of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black. She was so stupid! That must be it! Just because she kept it invisible and untouchable most of the time, that didn't mean it wasn't there in magic, did it? She hesitated. Or did it? She wasn't actually too sure, but that didn't matter. She just had to take it off and try the ritual again to know.

Alex nodded, replaced the book in the shelf, and headed for the basement. She still had a little while before Luna arrived and she really wanted to get this sorted out.

A few minutes later, she stood again in the ritual room, but now that she was here, she felt a lot less certain.

Taking off her noble house ring felt… wrong. It had protected her ever since her father had shown her how to call it when she'd been just four years old. She fingered the ring and traced the black crest on the front. Her jaw firmed. But if she didn't do this, then she'd never know, and it wasn't as though it would be for all that long. She closed her eyes, willingly accepted the removal of her ring without outside compulsion or persuasion, and slid it off her finger.

She looked at the tiny ring of silver in her palm, placed it carefully on the table top, and shivered. Merlin, she felt so… vulnerable. Without her ring, she might as well be a muggleborn, totally at the mercy of the first idiot to catch her off guard with a confundus charm, love potion, or obliviate.

She gently shook herself, formed up the ritual lines, carefully placed the stone, dowel, and cloak at the triangle’s corners, pulled off her robes and underthings, deposited them in a neat pile by the doorway to the rest of the house, turned away from the door, reached for the shelf nearest her, stunned another of the jar contained doxys, pulled out the horrible little thing, stabbed it through the chest with her sickle, and placed it, still bleeding, in the middle of the ritual space.

She stepped back and waited a few minutes to be certain the multi-armed blue pixie thing was dead, occasionally shivering in the cool basement air, and feeling far more naked this time than she had the last.

Okay, that should be long enough. Alex stepped back into the deathly hallow, put her finger to the blood drawn symbol, and pulsed her magic into it.

She took a deep breath. "Death who takes all, through the power of wand, stone, and cloak, hear
your humble servant."

The deathly hallow started to glow, blood red and angry. The shadows moved across the small room. Her own shadow lengthened, and was joined, moments later, by someone else's.

Alex froze, heart leaping into her throat, dread flooding her body.

She turned her head, sickle shaking in her hand.

In the doorway, stood Luna, as naked as she, and not smiling.

Alex gasped. "Lun—"

Luna moved fast, covering Alex's mouth with a hand and stopping her from finishing whatever shocked words she'd been about to say. The blonde shook her head, eyes sharp, mouth one thin line.

Alex found herself turned around and gently but firmly pushed forward towards the ritual space. She looked behind her again to see naked Luna making a 'get on with it' gesture. She gulped, knelt down, raised the sickle in an unsteady hand, thrust it into the dead doxy on the floor, and pulsed a shot of magic into it. She stood back up on weak legs and took a single, long, shaky breath. "Death who takes all, I offer you back that which the three brothers took. To raise this container of a soul that you now possess. To bind its magic back to the aether, and to your humble servant."

The dowel, stone, and cloak all glowed red. The Doxy started to glow and then, exploded.

The red glows all faded away.

Alex whirled around, now covered in doxy gore. "Luna, I swear, this isn't—Oomph!"

Luna tackle hugged her, forcing Alex to step backwards or lose her balance.

Alex's heart was beating a mile a minute. She stiffened, unsure what to do with her now extended arms, one hand still holding the ritual sickle. "Luna? I don't... Luna?"

Luna body shook against hers. "Stupid, Alex."

"Luna?"

Luna leaned backwards and glared at her. "Stupid, Alex! Why didn't you tell me?"

Alex flinched. "I didn't think you'd like it."

Luna's glare softened "Oh, Alex." It hardened again. "I don't like many things, but the biggest thing I don't like at the moment is that you've taken off your noble house ring!" She pointed to where her ring still lay on the table.

"I..." Alex looked at her feet. "...I thought its magic might be interfering in the ritual."

"Put it back on!"

Alex scrabbled to do so, but found it difficult. Luna refused to let go of her. Soon it was back on her index finger, where she knew it belonged.

"Alex," Luna continued, still firmly hugging her and paying no attention to the doxy remains still
splattered all over her. "the Albion magics don't interfere in rituals. If they did, no one would be able to do any rituals in the entire country."

Oh. She stood in Luna's arms in silence, afraid to say anything more. It seemed impossible that Luna hadn't spotted what kind of ritual she'd been attempting.

"Alex?"

She took a shuddery breath. "Yes, Luna?"

"Why are you doing a necromancy ritual—"

Oh, Merlin.

"—without a central foci?"

…

…

…

Wait, what? "Huh?"

Luna turned and pointed to deathly hallows on the slate floor. "All necromancy rituals that use the deathly hallow as their ritual symbol use a central foci."

The burnt paragraph!

Alex leaned back in shock. "How… how do you know that?"

"I know all about the deathly hallows."

"But, your family is… was… light! The Lovegoods were light for generations."

Luna smiled softly. "Stupid, Alex. We were politically light, not magically. We Lovegoods have been hunting the hallows for hundreds of years. 'The last enemy to be defeated is death?' That's not just the motto of the Peverells, but of necromancers everywhere."

Alex's eyes widened. "You're a…?"

Luna shook her head, causing her little radish earrings to swing wildly about her ears. "I'm not a necromancer. Neither are my parents or my grandparents. I had a great great uncle who was, but he was the odd one out."

Alex sighed. She relaxed slightly, dropped the hand sickle on the table, and wrapped her arms around her friend. "Luna, I'm sorry I didn't tell you about what I've been doing."

Luna's grip on her tightened. "Stupid, Alex. I'm here. I'm your friend. I'm not going to run away because you're practising necromancy. But what you were doing was just so dangerous. Anything could have happened to you. I know you want to prove yourself to my future lord, but, please, Alex, promise me you won't try any more rituals without me?"

Alex's insides clenched. Guilt, which had been starting to settle, reared its ugly head once more. "Yes, okay. I promise."
Luna leaned back, gazed into her face, and smiled, her face returning to something more recognisable as the dreamy, unconcerned witch who worshipped pudding and hunted myths and legends. "Thank you, Alex." She stepped backwards. "Shall we go get washed?" She wrinkled her nose. "You are really icky."

— DP & SW: T FoP —

"So, you think you'll have a copy that doesn't have the burnt bit?" Alex asked.

Two baths and a floo trip later, Alex and Luna descended into the Rookery's basement, where, according to Luna, most of the really Lovegood stuff went on.

"I think we might," Luna answered, now leading the way down a short corridor. "Ah, here it is."

Alex looked up at a huge, curved, mahogany door, carved with all kinds of magical creatures, from dragons to nifflers. It was certainly different.

Luna opened the door and they both stepped in.

Alex looked up again and breathed in sharply. The library was small, round, with a circular stair case, just like Luna had described. And also, just like Luna had described, the book shelves around the edge stretched upwards, all the way to infinity.

Luna smiled at her. "Do you feel like you're going to fall up?"

"Yeauhg."

"When I was six, I tied a letter to a balloon in here and let it go."

Alex tore her gaze away from the disconcerting view. "And?"

"It never did come back down."

Alex bit her lip. She had to know. "What did the letter say?"

"It said, 'Don't jump.'"

Alex blinked.

"Well, I thought that the library might go on forever. But then I thought that maybe it didn't, and maybe there were people who lived at the very top. But then I thought that maybe the people who lived at the very top might think that the library went down forever, when, in fact, it doesn't."

"Ah." Alex looked around, trying not to think too hard about people living in an upside-down rookery in an upside-down world. "So, where would this book be then?"

Luna frowned. "You know, I'm not sure. We did have a bit of a move around a few months ago…"

She turned, leaned out of the door and screamed, "DAD! WHERE ARE THE NECROMANCY BOOKS?"

Alex goggled and a faint voice bellowed back, "Sixth floor! Right hand side! Between the books on demonic summoning and the muggle physics section."

"THANKS!" Luna turned back and beamed.

Alex fought down her urge to throw something as she followed Luna up the stairs.
"Now, let's see." Luna trailed her finger along the books. "Ah, here we are."

The collection wasn't nearly as large as the Black Library's. Alex stared. Whereas the Black Library had a whole row of shelves dedicated to the magic of death, here, there were only a dozen individual books, but those dozen were large tomes, thick and uniform, with expensive leather bindings, and each one had the sign of the deathly hallows imprinted on the spine.

They each pulled out a book and got to work.

It didn't take too long for Alex to find what she was looking for.

*Make sure that your central foci be of high quality and possessing absolutely no cracks. The Inferi are soulless beings that do not live and yet are once again touched by magic. In this respect, they much resemble the victims of those darkest of creatures, the dementor, and, as such, it is fitting that the central foci for the inferi ritual be taken from said creature. Acquire yourself a stake, sharpened from a dementor bone, that it may serve you well for all your future raising, and place it on the point in the deathly hallow where the circle meets the bisecting line most highest.*

Alex thumped her head on the open book, and rolled her forehead around on the pages. She really was an idiot.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The sun was bright and the day was young.

Alexandra and Luna stepped out of the Diagon alley public floo point, furtively eyed the early morning shoppers, and darted towards the nearest public toilet, careful not to jostle the contents of their shoulder bags.

Once inside, they both pulled out green coloured potions from their bags.

"Bottoms up," Luna chirped and swigged the bottle in one long gulp.

Alex downed her own dose and soon found herself, once again, regarding her grown up self in the mirror. Something grabbed her around the chest. "Gah!"

"Will you check out these!"

"Luna!" She grabbed the inquisitive hands and easily pulled them away. "What are you doing!" She turned around to face her assailant.

Luna smiled brightly, looking like a slightly more youthful version of Lady Lovegood. "I'm feeling your boobies, Alex, couldn't you tell?"

"Well, don't!" She reddened. "How would you feel if I grabbed yours?"

"Would you like to?" Luna pressed them together.

Alex yelped. "No! Just, c'mon. We've got stuff to do."

Luna pouted and they soon found themselves walking down Knock-turn Alley, masked (Luna's was blue as opposed to her own black one), hooded, and attracting more than a good bit of attention from the local wildlife, although it mostly backed off when Alex flashed glowing red fingers in their general direction.

"Oh, I was wondering if I'd ever see you again,"—the stout little shop keeper of the ritual supply
shop finished filling a box labelled 'phoenix ash'—"and you've brought company." He nodded at Luna who was inspecting the massive skull of some ancient magical monster.

Alex adjusted her mask. "We need a stake made from a dementor bone."

The shopkeeper sucked his breath in between his teeth. "Not asking for much this time, are you?"

"Can you do it?"

"No."

Alex's shoulders slumped.

"But I might know of someone who might have one and might be persuaded to part with it for… for the right price."

Alex frowned under her mask. Something about the way the man had said that last bit felt wrong, but… "So, who is this wizard?"

"Unfortunately, I can't just give you his name. But I can point you in the right direction and let him know to expect you." He paused. "Who should I say is coming to visit?"

Alex looked towards Luna who gave a small nod. She turned back to the shop keeper. "Blue Mask and Black Mask."

—— DP & SW: TFoP ——

The lighthouse was tall and white and jutted out from the land like… like… like something Luna would undoubtedly have no problem thinking about. Alex shook herself and jogged to catch up with the dreamy blonde who was now standing at the edge of the cliffs, arms outstretched, letting the sea wind blow her hair and silken robes all over the place.

"Are you done?" Alex asked, panting slightly from the effort.

Luna turned back around. "Yes. I was just enjoying the view. It's amazing to think what might be out there."

"What? The sea?"

"Yes. So much gets lost down there."

Alex blinked. "I guess." She shook herself again. "Shall we?"

Luna nodded and they made their way along the coast to where the lighthouse stood hard and firm against the elements, proud and erect. Alex shook herself so hard her mask slipped, forcing her to re-adjust it. Morgana damn this body!

Alex knocked on the front door, which was opened by a tall, bald, middle-aged man in a long black robe with large, pointy, upturned collars.

"Well?" the man asked gruffly.

"We've been told you will be expecting us and that you might have a dementor bone stake for sale."

The man looked her and Luna over. He smiled a smile of sin and vice. "Blue Mask and Black Mask. Heh. Come in."
The moment Alex stepped over the threshold, a much older looking ghost dressed much the same as the man swooped into the room.

"Oh my, those two curvy fuck toys look like they need a good dicking!"

Alex stilled, too shocked to move.

The man turned back. "Ignore my master, he's been like that for years."

Alex's brain started to reboot. "Master?"

Luna had stepped past her and was now inspecting various objects around the chintzy sitting room they found themselves in, busily ignoring the ghost who was now hovering in front of her and making kissy faces.

"Yes," the man drawled, "a dark wizard obsessed with life and death to such a degree that he performed a ritual to ensure he became a ghost when he died. Of course, now he has to deal with an eternity with no body, which, apparently, he misses."

"Damn yes I miss it!" The dark robed ghost carelessly floated through Luna causing her to shudder. "Especially when two hot things like you turn up."

Alex was starting to really hate this place. She turned back to the live one. "The sharpened dementor bone, how much do you want for it?"

The wizard scratched a point on his bald head. "Well, that's tricky. See, I don't really have much need for money, got enough of it already."

Alex hesitated. "Then what?"

The wizard grinned. "Seeing my master go through what he did made me a lot more philosophical about life. You've got to live for the now, grab it while you can, and all that. It may be too late for my master, but it isn't too late for me."

Alex frowned, confused. "What?"

"He's suggesting," and Luna's voice now sounded about as dreamy as a steel bar, "that we have sex with him in exchange for the stake."

Alex flushed indigently. "Hell no! I'm not going to do anything like that!"

"I'm inclined to agree with you."

The man leered. "Well, the way I see this, you can accept my offer, we all have a roaring good time and you get the dementor stake, or..." he flicked a wand into his hand "...I'll take what I want anyway."

Silence.

The world slowed.

Alex's eyes widened. The man raised his wand and fired something purple towards her. She hadn't even moved an inch before something invisible slammed into her from the side.

The world sped back up and she found herself flying straight out of the lighthouse's front door,
The door slammed shut.

Alex tumbled.

Pain.

She slid to a stop.

Her hands, knees, thighs, and shoulders burned. She ignored it and struggled to her knees.

Luna!

Bangs, thuds and cries of pain came from the lighthouse.

She forced herself to her feet.

The lighthouse went quiet.

No!

She stumbled forward for the door, brought a stunner to her fingers, flung open the door, and charged inside. Her eyes widened and the stunner died on her fingers.

"Hello, Black Mask," Luna said dreamily. "That didn't hurt, did it?"

Alex's jaw dropped.

The would-be rapist was tied up in a chair, bound, gagged, and struggling helplessly. The ghost was nowhere to be seen.

"N-No, Blue Mask. I'm fine."

"Excellent." Luna beamed. "Now, then," she turned to the still struggling man in the chair and leaned in close to his face, "let's see if the bad man can be helpful."

The man's eyes fixed with Luna's blue-mask eyeholes. He started convulsing in the chair, moaning into his gag, and Alex couldn't help but remember when Luna had battered down her own occlumency barriers at her birthday party.

A few seconds later, the man conked out and Luna straightened. "The stake is one floor up on the bedroom desk. There are no defences around it."

Alex nodded and made her way upstairs while Luna covered the bald pervert. She opened the door and found the old ghost hovering over the bed.

The ghost sniggered. "Vicious little fuck toys. Damn, I so wanted to watch my apprentice fuck your beautiful, creamy—"

Alex forced down the rising bile, grabbed the bone-made stake on the desk and bolted for the door.

The faster they got out of here, the better.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Alexandra Black, now back in her good-old-young body — a body that didn't have to deal with perverts or rapists or even its own damn mind constantly shoving embarrassing thoughts at her every second of its existence, pulsed raw magic into the ritual hallow and took a deep breath.
"Death who takes all, through the power of wand, stone, and cloak, hear your humble servant."

The deathly hallow painted on the floor in chicken blood started to glow. Alex raised her hand sickle and stuck the blade into yet another dead doxy. On the other side of the room, Luna silently watched.

"Death who takes all, I offer you back that which the three brothers took. To raise this container of a soul that you now possess. To bind its magic back to the aether, and to your humble servant."

Alex stepped out of the hallow's boundaries.

The dowel, cloak, and stone all started to glow.

The doxy started to glow.

The magic swirled through the space, met the dementor bone stake laying towards the centre of the hallow, rushed to the pointed tip, and arced a tiny and silent bolt of lightning towards the doxy.

Alex's eyes narrowed.

The doxy's eyes glowed yellow.

Right. Now, Alex, focus — All your will power.

Alex stepped forward, let her magic flow out of her and over the doxy.

The doxy made to move, but stopped, clutched its head, and let out a silent scream.

Moments later it was all over. She may not even be a Hogwarts student yet, but the tiny doxy was nothing in comparison.

The inferius doxy flittered over to where she stood, and, with a simple mental command, stood to attention on her shoulder.

Alex grinned. It was official. She was a necromancer.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

The Black Witch of the North crossed her legs on her throne and imperiously surveyed her court. On the right hand side, her most fearsome warriors, commanded by General Teddy 'one-eye' Fluff and Wolf Plushy Bark-a-lot, stood assembled and ready to lay waste to her foes. On the left hand side, her most trusted political and magical advisers, Merlin Dolly and the ever faithful Metamorph Dolly, sat ready to give complicated and complex advice on all kinds of important things.

On her lap, lay her loyal and vicious beast, Amethyst the Panther, currently shrunk down to the size of a ten week old kitten and purring under her scratching fingers, but ready to grow to full size and pounce at a moments notice.

And around her, like whelps around a mother dragon, flittered her brand new bodyguard — the doxy trio, the most feared elite combat unit this side of the veil.

The Black Witch of the North leaned back in her throne and laughed. "Muhahaha! Now no one can stop me! Not even that accursed Boy Who Lived!"

Just then, the door to her throne room banged open and a lone witch entered.
"What is this!" she demanded. "Who dares barge into my throne room unannounced?"

The intruder smiled brightly. "I am Gray Witch Radish Rings. I am here to guide you, Black Witch of the North."

"Guide me?! I need no guiding! I am more powerful than you can ever hope to imagine! Did The Boy Who Lived put you up to this?!"

"Oh, I do not serve him. I serve a power far greater and far, far more handsome."

"Enough of this foolishness! General Teddy! Attack!" The Black Witch of the North jumped up from her throne—causing Amethyst to jump down and scamper away—picked up General Teddy and threw him at Radish Rings who stepped to the side and let the General sail past her.

"What?! You defeated my best general!" She scowled. "No matter. General Wolf! Attack!"

General Wolf joined General Teddy on the floor behind Radish Rings.

"You see, Black Witch of the North?" Radish Rings smiled her dreamy smile. "You still have much to learn."

"No! Enough is enough! You will now face my true power!"

The merciless doxy trio flittering around her head zoomed forward towards Radish Rings. The gray witch's fingers all glowed white and all three inferi were banished away and pinned against the wall by an invisible force.

The Black Witch of the North fell to her knees. "No. It's not possible. What power is this? How can you possibly do these things?"

"I have these powers because of the power I serve." Radish Rings released the inferi from her wandless banishing spell and the undead fairies zipped back to their mistress.

"And, what power is that?" The Black Witch of the North got to her feet and stepped towards Gray Witch Radish Rings.

"My lord, of course. The Gray Lord — Lord Slytherin."

"Lord… Slytherin…" The Black Witch of the North tried the words on her tongue for taste. "And this Lord Slytherin wishes to… guide me, does he?"

"Yes!" Radish Rings jumped up onto the throne room bed and bounced up and down. "Prove yourself worthy to my lord and he shall grant you ultimate power!"

The Black Witch of the North's gaze firmed. She turned away and pumped her fists down hard. "Fine! I will prove myself to Lord Slytherin!" She whirled around at Radish Rings again. "But, you're going to help me, Gray Witch!"

"Yay!" Luna jumped off the bed and hugged her. It really did feel kind of nice.

— End of Chapter Twenty-five —
A/N: This is the end of Part One. Part Two will be released on Tuesday, September 20th!

I'm splitting this chapter into two parts because A) It's already 20,000 words, and B) I'm a bit behind, but I don't want to push back the release any more.
Alex woke up and groaned.

Her early morning headaches weren't quite as bad now as before, but they still sucked. October was drawing to a close and she and Luna spent most of every day practising occlumency and wandless magic. She'd just about got the shield charm down and Luna said they'd soon be moving onto the stinging hex.

What Alex really wanted to learn though, was the banishing charm. She'd seen it used three times now — Once when she'd first met Harry and twice when Luna used it on her at the lighthouse and against her inferi doxies, now kept in jars hidden behind the portrait of her grandfather.

She rolled out of bed, still clutching her head, and made her way downstairs for breakfast. Her father had already left for work so she didn't have to worry about him worrying about her.

Fortunately, she was starting to feel a bit better by the time school rolled around, which was just as well, because what greeted her in the classroom blew her mind even more than the toxins did.

"What the hell is this?" she shouted, spotting the front page of the Daily Prophet laid out on the table. She snatched it up and skimmed the article.

HOGWARTS TROLL DEFEATED BY FIRST YEARS!

Unbelievable.

She stormed out of the classroom. If Greengrass and this muggleborn Slytherin vassal witch were already doing stuff like that then just how far behind was she? Damn it! Why oh why hadn't she accepted Harry's offer? Practising with Luna was great and all, but…

She stopped, halfway down the stairs. Wait. She shook her head. She was being silly. Of course Greengrass and the vassal were ahead of her, they were a year older than her! She shouldn't be comparing herself to them. She should be comparing herself to people her own age… people like Luna.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Try again, Alex?"

Alex groaned, accepted Luna's hand, and got shakily to her feet. "I swear I almost had you that time. If I had just gotten through that last shield…"

Luna smiled. "I'm sure you would have, Alex."

Alex narrowed her eyes. "Again then."

Luna nodded and they faced off against each other again.

"Start!"

Alex brought a bright red stunner to her fingers and loosed it at Luna.
Luna cast a shield to block it.

Then, Luna brought her own stunner to her other hand and cast it at her.

Alex just managed to side step it, but it had been a close thing. She'd already half formed her second stunner and decided this would be the perfect time to unleash her surprise weapon. She sent a mental command to her inferi minions to swarm Luna.

Luna's eyes widened slightly, red stunner also half formed on her fingers, as the three undead doxies emerged from their hiding places around the Lovegood orchard and attacked her en mass.

Alex grinned and let loose her stunner. It ran straight into another of Luna's shields and Luna cast her own stunner straight at her, completely ignoring the three doxies that were now pulling the blonde's hair, scrabbling on her robes, and scratching at her legs.

The last thing Alex thought before she fell unconscious was that doxy inferi really kind of sucked.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Alex and Luna sat on twin beanbags that Luna had dragged over from the Rookery to the Black Library, relaxing and reading and taking turns at petting a purring Amethyst.

Alex sighed. "Luna?"

"Yes, Alex?"

"I think I need to practise inferi raising on something bigger."

Luna lay aside her book. "Because your doxies aren't good in combat?"

Alex nodded. 

"But they are good at intelligence gathering and infiltrating hard to get at places."

Alex nodded again, more slowly this time. "Yes, but still." She frowned. "It's not as though I know where to get something bigger to practise on though, so I guess it's useless anyway."

Luna put a finger to her chin. "Maybe not. Dad is the second largest donator to the department of the regulation of control for magical creatures, so we do have certain privileges."

Alex perked up. "You'd do that for me?"

"Well, I'd have to ask Dad first, but of course."

Alex grinned. "Thanks, Luna. You're the best."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Thank you for agreeing to do this, Lord Lovegood." Alex curtseyed in her plain and completely unmagical robes.

Luna and Lord Lovegood, by contrast, were both dressed in identical beige trousers, long sleeved shirts, and matching safari pith helmets.

"Don't worry about that, young lady. It's about time for their culling anyway and it is my license. Just make sure you stay behind me at all times. These critters can be rather tricky if you don't
Alex nodded uncertainly, eyeing the long metal and wood device that Lord Lovegood had casually slung over his shoulder, and which had been introduced to her as his pre-1964 Winchester Model 12 Shotgun.

"Just don't tell anyone about it," Lord Lovegood said with a wink, indicating the weapon.

Alex hurriedly nodded and soon found herself in a small boat, bobbing offshore of a heavily warded Scottish island.

"Hang on!" Lord Lovegood shouted and she felt the squeeze of a side along apparition.

They landed on soft ground and Alex instantly regretted wearing robes, not that she had any clue about what else to wear.

She and Luna kept a few steps behind Luna's father and he soon held up his hand, indicated that they should stop.

He readied his weapon and shouted. "Oi! Ugly! Over here!"

Something large, hairy, and five legged bolted for him from just around the next hill. There was an ear-shattering BANG, and the thing skidded to a dead halt right in front of him.

"Hah! They never learn." Lord Lovegood leaned over the corpse and Alex stepped forward to inspect it.

"Quintapeds are highly magically resistant." Lord Lovegood continued. "And they've never faced anything except wizards since the ministry made the island unplottable and warded it. So they see a wizard on his own or with just a few others and they immediately think he's easy prey. Hah! Not this wizard!"

He nudged the quintaped with his shotgun. "I suggest you get on with your project then, Miss Black. Best not to hang around."

Alex quickly nodded and soon she and Luna had the ritual space prepared around the dead class XXXX beast.

She spoke the words, channelled the magic, thrust in the sickle, spoke the next words, channelled the next bit of magic, stood back and prepared herself.

The quintaped scrambled back to life, eyes glowing a deep purple.

Alex focused her magic and sent it out to engulf the beast.

The quintaped halted it's skittering movements.

Yes.

Alex felt a huge overwhelming pressure all over her body and the connection to her magic snapped.

No!

The undead quintaped turned and bolted towards her in a flurry of legs and a snapping of teeth.

She took a desperate step backwards and tried to bring her magic to her fingers to defend herself
from the rushing onslaught of meat and jaws, but she knew it was already too late.

The beast leapt.

And from behind her, Lord Lovegood's shotgun barrel was thrust forward, impaling the quintaped in its wide open maw, letting out another earsplitting 'BANG!', and exploded the beast's head in a fine mist of gore.

Alex fell backwards and gazed in horror at the spot where what remained of the quintaped now lay. That had been far too close. She felt Lord Lovegood place a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Bit more practise on less dangerous things first, I think, yes?"

Alex gulped and nodded shakily. That hadn't been anything like when she'd subdued the doxy. The doxy had been easy. This hadn't. This had felt like she was trying to push a tendril of her magic against an octopus of magic, tendrils all over the place, chaotic and uncontrollable. "Yeah. Practise. Yes."

— DP & SW: TFiP —

Heiress Black,

I hope this owl finds you well. It's been quite a busy few weeks as you've no doubt seen. If I had my wish, none of the witches involved would have had to face the troll, but the event does highlight one of the reasons I take an interest in the ability of those in my sphere to defend themselves. Our world is not as safe as those in power might wish us to believe and if we do not take responsibility for our own well being, or allow others to take away from us that responsibility, we will be at the mercy of those who are not so complacent.

It's good to hear about your continued practise of occlumency and wandless magic with Luna. I hope you continue.

I've attached something that you might appreciate. Copies of the troll fight are quite easy to come by, but I'm not sure if you were able to. I can't imagine your father would just leave that kind of thing lying about.

Yours,

Lord Slytherin

Alex re read the parchment one last time while she and Luna waited for their appointment slot in Michelle McLaggen's Memories in Diagon Alley. She bounced her knee up and down and tapped the low table next to the settee they sat on. Luna hummed quietly. The space was set up like a waiting room and on the far side of the room, a partition separated the pensieve room from the rest of the shop. A half dozen other customers were also waiting.

"Alright girls," said the middle aged woman behind the counter, addressing them. "Your turn."

Alex and Luna stood up.

"But just the fifteen minutes, mind you. Don't make me come in there and get you."

Alex rolled her eyes and Luna nodded. They walked into the room next door, covered from floor to ceiling in moving pictures of famous moments throughout wizarding history. Alex opened her bottle of silvery liquid, poured it into the plinth bound pensieve in the middle of the room, and they both dived in.
Alex watched in awe as the Vassal, Hermione Granger, a muggleborn(!), dove straight into the bathroom and summoned the screaming girl out of the way of the descending club. She yelled in fright when the troll tried to flatten the Indian girl but was again stopped by Granger, this time by shattering the troll’s weapon.

By the time Granger and the Greengrass Heiress both transfigured random pipes into swords, she was cheering, and when one of the other girls shielded Greengrass from a thrown rock, she was convinced. These were the people she wanted to hang out with.

The memory ended with John Potter being a complete dumbass, although, dumbass or not, Alex couldn't deny that the boy who lived was very powerful. Was Harry also that powerful? They were twins after all.

Luna didn’t say much, but Alex was sure the smiling blonde was just as fascinated as she was enthralled.

They watched the memory three more times before the woman from the counter came to kick them out.

Alex dashed back home. She had another owl to write.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Alex surreptitiously watched Weasley from the other side of the classroom.

The red haired girl was up to something and had been for a while now.

Alex doubted anyone else had spotted it, but they hadn't spent the last few months practising wandless magic with Luna.

Still, Alex hadn't been sure. At least, not until Weasley had unknowingly let her see glowing fingers under the desk.

"Weasley!"

Weasley turned around on the stairs where she’d been trying to get away. "Yes, Black?"

Alex caught up with her. "You're being taught by him, aren't you?"

Weasley seemed to panic and a few minutes later, in the small copse surrounding the Potter Manor, Alex got the truth out of her. Weasley was being taught by Lord Slytherin, or at the least one of his other students.

"Duel me!"

Weasley looked nervous. "Well, okay then, but just this once. We can't risk making this a regular thing. Not here."

Alex nodded. "Fine." She turned around and walked towards the other end of the clearing. She smiled. Here at last was a chance to really test herself. She turned back around and brought her stunner half-way to her fingertips. If Weasley also couldn't beat Luna then she was sure she could beat Weasley.

Alex watched the leaf slowly fall to the ground and smirked. Weasley wasn't even pre-loading her spells.
The leaf hit the ground, she made to cast her stunner, and THREE WHOLE SPELLS shot towards her. She gasped, made to move, got hit, and blacked out, hitting the ground with an un-ceremonial thud.

— DP & SW: TFiP —

Alex barged into Luna's bedroom sat down on the edge of the bed, folded her arms and sulked. "You've been going easy on me."

Luna looked up from where she sat, cross legged, on the bed. "Alex?"

"I just duelled Weasley and she said she can't beat you and then she pounded me into the dirt."

"Alex, I have not been going easy on you."

Her voice rose an octave, anger starting to show. "Then how do you explain—"

"Alex, I have not been going easy on you, I have been teaching you."

That brought her up short.

"Me and Ginny have been duelling each other for over a year. If I just pounded you into the dirt every time we duelled like Ginny did, you would never have time to get better, just like with the quintaped."

Alex slowly deflated again. "A year…" she almost whispered.

"Yes," Luna said, scooting down the bed to sit beside her. "And you will get better like that too, but you have to be patient and listen to me."

She suddenly felt rather small. "I-I'm sorry." She fiddled with the hem of her robes. "It's just so frustrating knowing how behind I am."

Luna smiled softly. "That's okay, Alex. Me and Ginny are probably the only people our age you're behind."

Alex stared at the wall.

The two of them sat in silence for a moment.

"Um, Luna?"

"Yes, Alex?"

"I understand if you don't want to, but…" She hesitated. "But could we learn the banishing charm next instead of the stinging hex? It's just that it was so cool when you and Harry used it and I really want to know it too."

Luna tapped her chin and looked thoughtful. She smiled. "We can do that."

— DP & SW: TFiP —

Heiress Black,

Regarding the memory of the troll fight… You're most welcome. I'm glad you enjoyed watching it.
As for your question about my ability to guarantee places in Slytherin House... The method Hogwarts uses to place students takes into account the wishes of the student in the placement. So long as you choose to go to Slytherin, the sorting will place you there, although it may try to persuade you otherwise if it sees sufficient non Slytherin qualities in you. I personally have no doubt you will end up in my house.

I also have to thank you for your willingness to occasionally look through the Black Library for me. I actually have a project that I'm working on right now that could use such assistance. I am friends with a rather special ghost who is currently bound to a certain tree in Wales. I'm looking for a method to rebind her to something rather more portable, possibly a cutting of the tree, possibly something else entirely.

I've no idea if you can find anything, but if you can it would be most helpful.

Yours,

- Lord Slytherin

Alex re-read the owl again and again. This was it. This was her chance to prove herself to Lord Slytherin.

She dashed from her bedroom down to the library, and immediately headed for the section towards the back — the same section she'd originally found the book with the inferi ritual. She perused the first book on the shelf. No luck. She tried the second. Nada.

Several hours later, Alex felt tired, grumpy, and was no closer to finding anything that could help.

"Why don't you check the Black family magic section?" her grandfather replied when she asked him.

Alex winced. She'd spent so much time in here with Luna, or else practising occlumency and wandless magic, that she'd barely looked through the Black Magic in the several months since her birthday.

The hidden Black family magic section was almost as dusty as when she'd first opened it, although now obviously free of doxies.

Alex read up and down the shelves. Her finger fell on a dusty tome in burgundy leather. Spirit Necromancy — Ghosts, Poltergeists, Shades, and Paintings. Alex grinned.

She was just about to leave when her eyes fell on something else. The Dendromancer's Doomsday Book — the book she'd tried to read before the doxies first attacked her. Curiosity getting the better of her, she carefully slid it out, opened it up, and her eyes went wide. Thousands of tiny entries filled the pages. The book was a magically updating record of all the magical trees in the country. She bit her lip. Oh, magical Merlin, the things her family must have been able to do with something like this!

A lightbulb went off in her head. The things she could do with something like this, now.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The weather outside was getting colder, but Alex and Luna hardly noticed, buried as they currently were in their twin beanbags in the Black Library.

"Luna?"
"Yes, Alex?"

"I was thinking…"

"Gooood."

Alex snorted. "I was thinking, magical trees have magical cores, don't they?"

"They do."

"And trees can't move, can they?"

"Some trees can — like the whomping willow."

Alex struggled out of her beanbag's death-grip to sit upright and look over to where Luna was still buried and staring at the ceiling. "Right, but they can't move across the ground."

"No, they are rooted in place."

"So, what if the inferi ritual worked on magical trees?"

Luna didn't say anything.

"I mean, if it did work, then I could keep trying to subdue it for as long as needed without having to worry about it attacking."

More silence.

"Luna?"

Luna struggled out of her own beanbag, a small smile on her face. "It might work. I've never heard of inferi trees before, but if it does work, it would solve your problem."

Alex nodded happily.

"But, Alex, how are you going to find a dead tree? I don't think that killing a tree for practise is a good idea. Killing trees is bad."

"Oh!" Alex rolled over on her beanbag and stretched out to reach behind it. "That's not a problem. Look at this!" She handed the *The Dendromancer's Doomsday Book* over to Luna.

Luna started reading it and her eyes went wide. "Wow, Alex, this is amazing."

"I know, right?" Alex beamed. "So, can we do it?"

Luna smiled. "Yes, I think we can."

Alex grinned.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

*Lord Slytherin,*

*Success! I spent ages looking through the Necromancy section of the Black Library (I practically know it like the back of my hand now) and I found a ritual that can do what you asked, but the ritual is Black family magic so only I can do it. Is that a problem? I do feel I'm qualified for it. I can sneak out at some point if you need it. My father would never notice.*
Respectfully,

Heiress Alexandra Black,

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Alexandra Black stood in the Black library and shook with rage.

Heiress Black,

That sounds wonderful. I suggest we meet up some time soon to discuss this further.

However, while receiving your news is welcome, something has come up which disturbs me greatly and which directly concerns you. I've received intelligence from a reliable source that your father may be considering purging the Black Library of all books that he considers 'dark'. I don't need to tell you what a loss that would be to our culture and our world's hard earned understanding of magic.

I don't believe he is planning to act immediately, but knowing how much you value your library, this isn't a situation that I could just sit on.

I believe your father still brings you to the Winter Festival at Greengrass Manor? That would be a perfect opportunity for us to meet and to talk about both these matters. I also shouldn't need to say that if I am to help you, as you are currently helping me, then our knowledge of your father's intentions must remain absolutely secret.

Yours,

- Lord Slytherin

She gripped the parchment in front of her so tightly her fists went white. How could he? Her own father! Didn’t he appreciate the fifteen hundred years of history in this room? He was supposed to be Lord Black! He was supposed to protect the family legacy, not tear it apart. If she could be Lord Black, she’d rather die than let someone defile their ancient library!

She reread the owl again. If it was true, and she had no reason to doubt that it was, then this was the last straw. Her eyes narrowed. She wouldn't let her father get away with it. No, not if she could do anything about it and it seemed Lord Slytherin did have an idea about what to do about it.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

"Can you believe it?!!" Alex paced the room in her nightdress while Luna sat crosslegged on the bed, scratching a purring Amethyst behind the ears.

"I mean, how could he?!!"

Luna’s face was completely unreadable.

"Gah! I just want to——"

"—Alex."

Alex paused, mid rant.

"You told my lord you could do something that you've never tried."
"Huh?"

"The ghost binding ritual. Have you ever done it?"

Anger drained out of her. She felt her ears heat up. "Um…"

"You remember what happened to the doxy when you didn't do the inferi ritual correctly? What do you think my lord would think if that happened to his friend?"

Alex paled. "I…I didn't think…" She gulped. "So… we try it, first?"

Luna's expression slowly morphed into a smile. "I think that would be a very good idea."

"But where are we going to find a ghost? And one who won't mind us doing tests on them?"

Luna tilted her head to one side and hummed. "Oh, I doubt we'll find one who'll let us do it willingly."

"Then what are we going to do?"

"Well, obviously, we find a ghost who we don't mind forcing and perhaps accidentally destroying."

Alex frowned. "But who…" Her expression turned into one of sickening horror as realisation dawned. "Oh no! Hell no! I'm not going anywhere near him again!" She shook her head violently causing her long black hair to fly all over the place. "Absolutely not. No. No way. Not a chance."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The rain pattered on Alex's hooded head as she and Luna, already under the effects of ageing potion, crept towards the lighthouse in the dead of night.

"Really, you'd think someone who 'had no need for money' would have some decent wards, wouldn't you?" Alex muttered, trying to ignore the feeling of dampness creeping in through her thick, specially bought, non-enchanted robes.

"Maybe he just saves all his money for other things?" Luna suggested in a voice far too cheerful for the weather.

"What other things?"

Luna put a wet finger on her blue mask where her chin would be. "Maybe on whatever goes on in the shop with the snake skin nailed to the sign?"

Alex looked at her sharply. "And what does go on in the shop with the snake skin nailed to the—"

But Luna had already moved ahead, and by the time Alex caught up with her, they were right up against the lighthouse's door.

"Banishing spells on three?" Alex whispered.

Luna nodded.

"One, two, three."

BOOM! The door flew off its hinges and sailed through the lighthouse's living space taking some of the furniture with it. There was an alarmed shout from the above floors and moments later, the would be dark wizard rapist, wearing only a dressing gown and a floppy nightcap, hastily
descended the steep lighthouse stairs, wand in hand, took one look at her and Luna in their robes and masks, fingers already aglow, made a little squeaking noise, and apparated out with a loud crack.

"Go!" Luna shouted.

Alex made a beeline for the stairs and charged into the bedroom.

"Hi, pervert ghost." She reached into her bag.

"Oooo it's the curvy fuck toys, back again!" The ghost cackled and rubbed his hands together, "and what can I do for the curvy—"

Alex drew out a knife and a silver pendant in the shape of the deathly hallows that Luna's dad had leant them.

The ghost stopped in mid cackle.

Alex slashed a gash in her hand and flung some of the resultant blood at the shocked ghost. "Death who takes all, through the power of the deathly hallows, hear your humble servant."

"What are you doing?!" the ghost shouted. It made as thought to move, but Alex knew it now couldn't — not until she was finished.

"Death who takes all, bind this spirit to your servant's person, that they may serve your—" There was a small explosion from downstairs that shook the room. "—servant as your servant serves you." Heart pounding, she held up the deathly hallows to the still protesting ghost, and channelled her magic straight into the pendant.

The pendant glowed silver and ethereal chains leapt from the pendant, wrapping themselves around the ghost.

Alex's heart leapt. It worked! And through the ageing potion too! She turned and ran back down the stairs, unceremoniously dragging the shouting and cursing ghost behind her.

Luna turned to her from the middle of a small pile of rubble that used to make up a bit of one of the walls. "I have a stone."

"I have a ghost!"

"Then let us be away from here."

And be away from here they did, all the way back down the path to where they'd stashed a pair of broomsticks, up into the air, and across the country side as fast as they could, all the way back to the Rookery, one very unhappy ghost trailing behind them like a small silvery comet.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

"Well, this is all very interesting," said Lord Lovegood, currently wearing a mask as blue as Luna's. "I don't think I've ever interrogated an evil dark wizard before, especially a dead one."

Lady Lovegood nodded from under her equally blue mask. "Indeed, just be sure you two girls don't spend all day in here and come up if you want any of the pie I've baked."

The now inexplicably purple tinted ghost looked up groggily from where it hovered unsteadily in the middle of the Lovegood's ritual room — not that it knew that. "Pie?"
Alex sent another pulse of magic into the deathly hallow painted on the floor and the ghost flinched back.

Luna hummed cheerfully, "Thanks, Mum!"

The two adult Lovegoods nodded and left them.

In the last few weeks, she and Luna had tried binding, rebinding, unbinding, controlling, forcing to speak truthfully, seeing through the ghost’s eyes, making the ghost solid, conjuring ghost like objects for a ghost’s use, forcing it to speak only ancient Greek, changing its colour, and now causing controlled pain. They’d gotten the binding, rebinding, unbinding, and colour change rituals to work, but the other rituals, except for the pain ritual, were missing something.

The old ghost had been unbearable, constantly spewing out stuff that Alex was certain young witches shouldn't be hearing, and some of the stories he told them of his life made her want to hurl.

Luna moved to stand beside her. "I think he's been about as much use as we can expect, Black Mask."

Alex nodded. "Soo… we try the final ritual then, Blue Mask?"

"Yes."

The ghost looked up. "F-Final ritual? Fuck Toys?"

Alex and Luna set the room up the exact same way they would for an inferi ritual, the major difference from the last time being they now wore their specially bought, non magical clothes. No way beyond the veil were they going to strip down in front of this thing.

Alex stepped forward and sent a pulse of magic into the deathly hallow on the floor. "Death who takes all, through the power of wand, stone, and cloak, hear your humble servant."

The deathly hallow started to glow red.

The ghost tried to speak, but all that came out was a strangled choke.

"Death who takes all, I grant you that which has been trapped on the in-between. The soul of a wanderer, held back from your embrace, now to return to the eternal river that lies beyond the veil."

Her magic swirled around her.

The room got noticeably colder.

The ghost opened its mouth in a silent scream — the deathly hallow glowed brighter than Alex had ever seen — and the ghost evaporated in a swirl of ephemeral mist.

The room was quiet.

Luna brushed her hands on her robes. "Thank Merlin. If I had to hear him say, the F-T word one more time…"

Alex turned to face her. "Yes?"

"…Then I’d be forced to hate myself when I finally start saying, 'fuck toy,' and that would be horrible."
"So, let me get this straight." Portrait Orion Black leaned back in his painted high-back chair. "Lord Slytherin has heard word that my son is planning to destroy most of the Black Library?"

Alexandra nodded.

"And he says he has a plan to stop that?"

Alex nodded again.

"And you're going to meet up with him at the Winter Festival to talk about it?"

Another nod. "That, and the ghost Necromancy thing."

"Mmmmm." Her grandfather pursed his lips. "Well, as much as it pains me to say it, that does sound like the kind of thing my son would do and I don't need to say that even were the threat small, we cannot let any threat to the library stand." He stroked his beard. "On the other hand, you must be careful. Slytherin could well be using the opportunity, whether real or made up, for his own ends in such a fashion that might not be in the best interests of House Black. Do not allow yourself to be trapped."

Alex straightened and nodded.

"Having said that," Orion continued, "Slytherin is going far out of his way to get in your good graces—"

"But he still won't teach me," Alex couldn't help butting in.

Orion sighed. "Child, you cannot expect a Lord to just drop everything he's doing to personally teach you."

"He's teaching Weasley," she muttered.

Orion raised an unimpressed eyebrow. "The one who laid you out without even meaning to?"

Alex grumbled under her breath.

"There are only so many hours in the day. Priorities have to be made. If the Weasley girl is more advanced than you, obviously he wants to spend his limited time on her."

"But... but if he is... you know..." She blushed. "Talking to me because of that, then shouldn't he at least meet me in person?"

"He should. But that is not the point here. Regardless of your personal feelings on the matter, Slytherin is doing far more for you than you currently appreciate, and if he can protect the Black library when both yourself or I cannot, then you will be even more in his debt. Do you think your friend, the Lovegood girl, would be able to teach you if she hadn't already been taught by him?"

"I guess not."

Her grandfather leaned forward in his chair. "You should look for some way to balance things out a bit."

Alex opened her mouth.
"I know you're helping him with his ghost friend," he quickly added, "and that is a good start, but you should find something else too, preferably something that benefits both of you."

Alex thought for a few moments, then slowly nodded.

— DP & SW: TFOP —

Alex and Luna leaned over a table in the Black Library, going over the details of their plan one last time. *The Dendromancer's Doomsday Book* was on the table, open to a page that listed all the magical trees and their current states in the county of Cumbria. One line read, 'Whomping Willow, Died — 17th May 1990 — Greengrass Forest Hilltop'

Alex jabbed a finger at a parchment with lots of scribbles on it. "The wards around the manor will always track us, so the Winter Festival is the perfect time. Yes, we'll be there, but so will several hundred other witches and wizards."

Luna nodded.

"Once the main part of the ritual is complete, I can practise subduing the tree until I'm magically exhausted, or at least fifteen minutes."

Luna nodded again.

"And once I fail to bring the tree under control, we'll just blow leaves over it and get the hell out of there. The ritual magics will run down quickly, and so long as no one pumps more magic into the ritual—and who'd be dumb enough to do that—it'll all be fine."

Luna nodded yet again.

"And before you know it, the blood will all be washed away and no one will be any the wiser."

Luna smiled. "That's the plan."

Alex grinned. "And if it goes well, we can make it a regular thing. I'll soon have the knack of it, and you can have some Five-X magical creature duelling partners."

Luna's smile widened. "Just no dragons, Alex, we don't have anywhere to put them."

Alex pouted.

— DP & SW: TFOP —

Alex sneaked around Grimmauld Place, poking her nose into the various storage rooms and having a general good root around.

Something to balance things out. Something that could benefit both her *and* Lord Slytherin…

She reached into one paper lined box and drew out what looked to be a pair of hand mirrors. One of her father's many Hogwarts stories came, unbidden, to mind. She smiled.

— DP & SW: TFOP —

The mist engulfed Greengrass manor and the surrounding forest in a perpetual obscuring charm. Alex stomped her feet in bring some warmth to them and hefted the huge bag she had slung over one shoulder. She'd been waiting for ages. If they didn't get a move on, the hunt would start and they'd never be able to get out of the forest in time.
"Hi, Alex." Luna appeared out of the mists.

"Luna! Where have you been?"

Luna smiled. "Manor shopping with my lord."

"Manor?" Alex said, startled. "He's buying a Manor? Where?"

"The manor is not built yet. My lord says it won't be done until next Winter Festival. It'll be on an island off Scotland. It's beautiful and has this wonderful hill you can roll down."

Alex took in Luna's slightly ruffled appearance. "Yeeesss, I can see that..." She straightened and looked around. "So, are you ready?"

Luna smiled brightly. "Yep! I just finished getting our permits."

Alex stilled. Dread trickling into her stomach. "Permits?" Her voice rose. "Luna, did you tell Greengrass!?"

Luna tilted her head. "Of course I did, Alex. Daphne is my future sister and these are her family's lands."

"But! But!"

"Alex," Luna said in a soothing voice, stepping closer and hugging her. She stiffened. "It's okay, remember? We're all going to help each other and it's all going to be okay. You just have to trust us, okay?"

Alex hesitated before relaxing. "O-okay, then, I guess."

The two of them mounted a pair of broomsticks, donned a pair of masks, swigged a pair of ageing potions, took off into the air, swiftly identified the correct hill, and landed, now as Blue Mask and Black Mask.

Blue Mask patted the trunk of the dead whomping willow. "Big fella, isn't he?"

Black Mask didn't reply as she was already clearing the area around the tree and getting ready to paint the huge deathly hallow needed from her shoulder bag of chicken's blood.

Soon, they were ready. The sacrificial cloak, dowel, and stone were placed at each of the three triangle points and the dementor stake pointed up near the middle.

Alex took a deep breath, stepped into the hallow, shot a pulse of magic into it, and raised her ritual sickle. "Death who takes all through the power of wand, stone, and cloak, hear your humble servant."

The clearing grew noticeably colder, even more so than the already December cold Cumbrian air. She shivered. Thank Merlin they now had special ritual robes. Doing this naked didn't bare thinking about.

The Deathly hallow started to glow red.

She walked all the way into the centre and stabbed the bark with her sickle. It embedded itself in
the thick trunk. "Death who takes all, I offer you back that which the three brothers took. To raise this container of a soul that you now possess. To bind its magic back to the aether, and to your humble servant."

Alex scampered back outside of the deathly hallow to where Luna stood, coiled and tense, well outside the range of the whomping willow's branches.

The dowel, stone, and cloak started to glow, magics rushed through the clearing, the dementor bone arced a bolt of silent lightning, and the tree gave one massive creak. The cloak, wand, and dowel all evaporated.

Alex readied herself, bringing all her magical powers to her command, ready for the dominance battle with the huge tree, a battle she knew she would lose, but not without testing herself to her absolute limit first.

A pair of steaming blue eyes snapped open like two portals into the realm of death.

Alex gulped

A growl like a hellhound crept up her spine and froze her to the spot.

"Black Mask," Luna prompted.

No! She shook herself, thrust out both hands in front of her, and released her magic to intermingle and bind with the whomping willow inferius in front of her. The inferius tree's magic smashed back into her like a battering ram.

She dropped to one knee.

"Black Mask!"

She struggled. So strong. Just so, so strong.

A branch smashed into the ground just in front of where she and Luna stood.

But she would NOT be stopped just like that. This was probably the only chance she'd have to practise this for weeks if not months. She forced herself to her feet and glared at the wall of flailing branches and twigs in front of her.

Their magics continued to fight each other. There was no contest. The whomping willows magics were far too strong, but so long as it couldn't get to her, it made no difference.

She winced as a particularly strong wave of magic pushed against her.

There was a massive rumbling noise.

Alex felt the ground move.

The mass of branches in front of her raised to reveal the trunk again.

One massive root wrenched itself out of the ground.

"Oh, that isn't good," Luna whispered.

The roots continued to dislodge more and more earth and one massive tree like foot steeped out of the ground.
"Yeah, definitely not good!" Alex shouted.

Luna ran.

Alex abandoned her magic dominance battle and dove to the side just as another branch slammed where she'd just been standing. She scrabbled to her feet and made it to the other end of the clearing.

The inferi tree slowly turned to her and took one massive step forward.

"Black Mask! Broomstick! Here!" Luna chucked her her broomstick.

She barely caught it and moments later the two of them zoomed into the sky, leaving a furiously pissed off inferi tree behind them.

The both caught their breath.

The tree bent upwards to look at them in the sky and growled.

"The dementor bone," Alex said.

They both looked down at the deathly hallow painted on the ground, now devoid of cloak, dowel, and stone, but very much still containing the stake.

"I'll distract it, you grab it?" Luna suggested.

Alex nodded. "And the sickle."

"Yes."

One horrible dive later, in which Alex was sure she was either going to crash or end up tree food, she'd snatched back the dementor bone, and the dislodged the sickle from an enraged tree, which could do nothing to reach her, so close was she to the trunk.

She and Luna sped back into the air.

The tree snarled at them, apparently frustrated by the fast moving pests. Eventually, it moved back to where they'd first found it, replanted itself back in the ground, and slowly closed its eyes.

They waited, but it didn't seem inclined to move any more.

Alex gazed at the now dangerous patch of forest with a worried expression. "That really didn't go like we wanted. I barley got twenty seconds of practise."

Luna shrugged. "These things don't always work out," she said, sage like. "The important thing is that no one catches us."

Alex nodded and moments later the two of them had banished a bunch of leaves over the blood and retreated back across the forest canopy, back towards Greengrass Manor.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Alex wasn't in a particularly good mood after the inferius tree failure. She grumbled her way through the festival avoiding every cheerful face and laughing family. The stall keepers were the worst though, always calling out to her in some misplaced attempt to cheer her up from whatever trivial concerns obviously befell ten year old witches, which, even if she wasn't doing
certainly illegal Necromancy experiments, was a stupid assumption to make. Obviously, none of the middle aged wizards calling out to her had ever been a ten year old witch in Magical Britain.

She dodged past one particularly insistent stall keeper who wanted her to, "turn her frown upside-down," while pointing to a sign that read, "THE WINTER FESTIVAL MIRROR OF ERISED — [NOT THE REAL ONE] FOUR KNUTS!" (£0.36). So focused was she in getting away from the man that she wasn't paying attention to where she was going.

She ducked around a corner and, suddenly, there he was.

Her eyes widened.

Tall and dignified, all long black and silver robes, emerald green mask, and…

…And coiled fluffy snake.

"Ah. Good afternoon, Heiress Black," Lord Slytherin said, giving her a respectful nod.

"L-Lord Slytherin." She dipped into a hasty curtsey, but she also just couldn't tear her eyes away from the fluffy snake which was still coiling around Slytherin's chest and hissing.

"Mmm?" He seemed to realise what had her attention. "Oh, take no notice of her. A gift for Daphne. You're going to protect her from all the nasty things that dare try and hurt her, aren't you?"

He sounded highly amused and she realised he was talking to the toy snake. He then hissed something and the snake let out what Alex could only think of a kind of snaky, hissing, laugh.

Alex shivered. Parseltongue. Of course, he was Lord Slytherin after all.

Lord Slytherin turned back to her. "Behind the stables in five minutes you will find a trunk. Knock seven times." He then vanished. Not apparating—there was no crack sound—just becoming a shimmer in the air, which then almost instantly become nothing.

Alex blinked.

Five minutes later, she found herself behind the stables and there was indeed a trunk. She knocked seven times, the trunk lid opened, and she climbed inside what seemed to be a well appointed, if rather small, sitting room. Lord Slytherin sat in the far most high back chair, still wrapped in the fluffy snake.

The lid closed behind her.

"What if someone finds the trunk?" she asked.

"They would have to subdue our mule first and then riffle through her pockets."

Alex sat down in the chair opposite Lord Slytherin. "Mule?"

Slytherin reached behind him and extracted one can of orange juice and one can of something she'd never seen before. "Luna, in this case." He tossed her the unidentified can. "I believe she wanted to, 'win all the chocolate frog racing races', because 'they all deserve to win.' It's a blessing none of the stands offers pudding as a prize or we'd never get her away from it."

Alex snorted despite herself and inspected the can. "Bubbled water?"

"I thought you might appreciate it."
Alex carefully popped the can and took an experimental sip. "Not bad."

"Personally, I can't stand it, but then, I still have my sweet tooth."

Alex felt a pang of loss, but quickly squished it.

Slytherin took a sip of his own and the mask moulded itself around the can in a way that Alex found strangely creepy and awesome at the same time. "So," he began, "I've been hearing snatches of what you've been up to from both yourself and Luna. But Luna also thinks you should be the one to give me the full details because, 'She'll want to tell you in person.'"

Alex hesitated. Then Luna's words from before came back to her and she began to tell Slytherin everything. From the doxies, to their ageing potion adventures, the dementor bone, the successful inferi raising, and the failed quintaped expedition.

"Did you consider tying it up first?"

Alex gaped. She then blushed harder than she'd ever blushed before. That would completely solve her training problem.

"In case you can't tell, I'm smiling right now," Slytherin said, and Alex could hear the smile in his voice.

"Anyway," she mumbled, not meeting his maskly gaze, "We then kidnapped that horrible ghost from before and tried out all the ghost rituals in the book I have on him."

"And they worked?"

Alex straightened a bit. "The one's you need work."

"Excellent. Can you slip out of Grimmauld Place three nights from tonight?"

Alex nodded.

"Great. Harry and Daphne will meet you at the local park and escort you to the graveyard where Angelystor resides."

Alex nodded again. She'd be ready. She hesitated. "Ah, Lord Slytherin?"

"Yes?"

"I… that is, my Grandfather, that is, the House of Black…although also me…” Merlin how could giving someone something be this embarrassing? "We wanted to thank you for your offer to help with protecting the Black Library and give you this." She reached into her bag, took out one of the communication mirrors, and handed it to Slytherin.

"What is it?" Slytherin asked, sounding curious. He turned it over in his hands.

"It's a communication mirror. I have the other one."

Slytherin whistled. "Wow. You know, the last union of family magic that could make these was hundreds of years ago."

She hadn't known that. "I thought you could use it. You know, if you needed it."

Slytherin placed in on the table in between them. "Thank you, Alexandra. If I have need of it, I will
certainly make use of it. Would you mind if I asked a few friends of mine to take a look at it, too? There may well be interesting things to learn from it."

"I guess not."

"Right. Then, shall we move on to our main point of business?"

Alex's eyes hardened. "The Black Library."

Slytherin nodded. "Do you know what the fidelius charm is?"

She nodded back. "Luna told me."

"The easiest way to keep the library safe is to have me cast a fidelius charm around the Black Library and make you the secret keeper."

Alex eyes brightened. "That's brilliant! Then he'd never even be able to find it!"

Slytherin nodded.

Alex's face fell. "But, how would you get into the house? I can't let you in and my father certainly wouldn't allow it, and even if he did and you came back later, the wards would still say that you've been there, and I'm pretty sure using such a charm on someone else's property is illegal."

Slytherin sat back in his chair. "That's where it gets tricky and there's no safe way to do it. There are easy ways, but they're not safe."

Alex leaned forwards. "What are those ways?"

"The easiest way is for you spend a few months memorising every inch of the library with your occlumency, if its good enough. Then I place you under the imperius curse and cast the charm for you."

Alex paled. The words of her Grandfather came back to her — do not allow yourself to be trapped. "I…I don't know if I'm comfortable with that."

"Like I said, the easy, but unsafe way."

"What's the hard way?"

Slytherin shrugged. "Smuggle every single book out of the library over the next few months without your father noticing. But then you have to place the library at risk from outside parties. Probably myself, and I wouldn't recommend you do that."

Alex hesitated. That had been a very honest recommendation.

"Of course, you take a risk with the imperius-fidelius method too. I might make myself the secret keeper rather than you."

Alex shifted in her seat. "Are there any other methods?"

Slytherin started counting off on his fingers. "Use your occlumency to memorise every single book in the next few months and then write them all out again later…"

Alex blanched. Not possible.
"…Persuade your father not to get rid of the books…"

Urgh. If she tried to do that, he'd probably just speed up his plans.

"…Arrange for your father to have an accident…"

She looked at Slytherin in horror.

"…Which obviously isn't an option, but I'm just listing them all off…"

She nodded quickly

"…Arrange for your father to fall in love with someone you control and indirectly control him through her…"

She snorted. That wasn't happening.

"…Have a law passed that somehow makes his course of action against the law, which as head auror he'd be forced to comply with…"

She raised her eyebrows.

"…Not a chance…"

Her shoulder's fell.

"…Infiltrate the ministry department that he'd give the books to, probably the department of mysteries, and have your agents give the books back to you once your father handed them over…"

Magical Merlin, this was getting ridiculous.

"…Find a place in the house that your father doesn't know about or can't get in and move the books there instead…"

The Black Magic room! Oh… but her father did know about it, he just never went there. She scowled. Plus, it was too small.

"…Learn the fidelius charm yourself…"

She perked up. "Could I?"

"Unlikely."

Her shoulders drooped again.

"…Learn to throw the imperius curse, so that you don't feel uncomfortable having it cast on you…"

Her mouth made a small o.

"…Which requires someone to repeatedly cast the imperius curse on you so you can learn to throw it…"

Her mouth snapped shut. Well that was useless.

"…Buy several dozen library trunks, transfer the Black Library to them, and then hide them somewhere, maybe even somewhere as simple as your bedroom…"
"I don't have the gold to do that."

"...I do. But I'm not dumping tens of thousands of galleons just because you're a bit squeamish about the imperius..."

She pouted.

"...I'm not even sure if the family that makes expandable trunks even has that many for sale, or would agree to make that many to order..."

She frowned.

"...We could also full out assault Grimmauld Place, tear down the wards with brute force, and I'll cast the charm in person..."

She shook her head violently.

"...I'm smiling again..."

She scowled. "I know, I can hear it."

Slytherin sighed dramatically "...The other option is to put up some kind of defence that isn't the fidelius charm, but that has exactly the same problem as casting the fidelius does..."

Alex stared at Slytherin's unmoving mask for a few more moments before dropping her head. "So, no other methods then?"

"Well, I did tell you the best... one... first..." Slytherin stalled. "Oh."

"What?"

Slytherin laughed, a deep dark laugh. "Oh, I'm being dumb."

Alex looked up at Slytherin in surprise. "What?"

"Wait just a moment."

They waited.

Then, suddenly, the trunk lid popped open and Luna stuck her head in. "You called, my lord?"

"Luna, do you mind me casting the imperius curse on you?"

Luna beamed. "Nope!"

Slytherin grunted. "Problem solved."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Alex checked she had everything one last time, snuck out of her room, crept down the stairs, tiptoed past her Grandmother's portrait, quietly opened the front door, slipped out into the night, down the street, across the road, and into the small park where she'd first met Harry Potter over a year and a half ago. And sure enough...

"Potter." She nodded to him before turning to his companion. "Heiress Greengrass, I am Heiress Alexandra Black, of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black, I believe we have met before."
Greengrass smiled. "Yes, I remember. And since you already know who I am, and we're all working together, I suggest we drop the formalities for tonight."

Alex hesitated. "Okay. I mean, you're the leader, after all."

Greengrass smirked. "Leader, mm? I like the sound of that." She turned to Potter. "What do you think, Harry? Does 'Leader' sound like a good title for me?"

Potter gave her an amused look. "If you like."

Alex looked back and forth between the two in front of her. Was she missing something here?

Potter then pulled out a trunk from his pocket and expanded it.

Alex eyed it with envy. She could see it had multiple compartments and must have cost a small fortune. She was the heiress of one of the wealthiest families in the country and she didn't have a trunk like that.

"All in," Potter said in a cheerful voice.

Greengrass climbed in without missing a beat and she hesitantly followed a moment later.

Halfway down the stairs, Alex did a double take. It was just like Slytherin's sitting room trunk from the Winter Festival. No, it was Slytherin's sitting room trunk. Huh. Figures it wasn't Potter's. She carefully lowered herself into the chair opposite Greengrass, mindful of the graceful way the blond carried herself.

On the table in-between them sat a small tree cutting in a pot.

The trunk lid closed.

"So, Potter is our mule?"

Greengrass shrugged. "I can't confirm or deny that."

She frowned. "Why not?"

She suddenly felt a terrible squeezing sensation that instantly loosened again.

"That's why."

Alex gaped. "That was apparition, wasn't it? Potter can't apparate! He's only a year older than me!"

They squeezed again and again she was glad she'd had dinner a while ago.

"You are correct, Black. Harry is only a year older than you. That's why suspecting he can apparate makes no sense."

They squeezed again.

"But he's doing it now!"

Greengrass smiled. "I've no idea why you'd think that."

Alex sat and stared at the future Lady Slytherin as they obviously chain apparated across the country.
After a few minutes Alex found her voice again. "You and Potter seem quite close."

"We are. Although that isn't public knowledge and my lord is trusting you not to tell anyone."

Alex quickly nodded. "And Lord Slytherin doesn't… mind? You and Potter being close, I mean."

Greengrass smirked. "My lord often treats Harry as his own flesh and blood."

Alex scrunched up her face. "Wouldn't that mean that Potter is like your son?"

Greengrass's eyes widened and she let out a snort that turned into a choke when something went down the wrong way. "Huack Kuh kuh… Oh, wow, that is wrong on so many levels."

"It is?"

Greengrass waved dismissively. "Never mind."

It was then that the trunk lid opened. "Alright, girls. We're here."

Alex climbed out into a graveyard and in the corner stood a tree that looked older than her own house.

"Easily twice as old," Potter said when she voiced this thought. "And this is my good friend, Angelystor."

They greeted each other, and Alex couldn't help think that this ghost was far nicer than the last one she'd met. Greengrass seemed to think so too, and the two immediately hit it off, happily chatting together while Alex went about setting up the ritual.

Eventually, it was time to add the item they would be rebinding the spirit to. Potter descended into the trunk and reappeared with the tree cutting in the pot. He placed it in the centre of the ritual space and stepped back. "Okay, Alex," he said, drawing himself back to be level with her. "We're all counting on you now."

Alex swallowed and turned back to the ghost, now waiting patiently, if somewhat nervously, in the middle of the bloody deathly hallow. She closed her eyes. She could do this. She had to do this. This wasn't like what she'd done before. This time, people were relying on her. She would show them—show Lord Slytherin—show the world—what she was capable of.

Alexandra Black focused all of herself to the task at hand, raised her hands and, with steady and sure movements, slowly began the ritual.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The next morning, the Auror section of the Department of Magical Law enforcement was just getting down to the day's business.

Chief Auror Lord Sirius Black jerked back an inch in response to a thick document landing on his desk.

"Updates to the search lists, Chief."

Sirius thanked the man and started perusing the parchments. There always seemed to be more and more going on these days. He flipped to the new additions section and stared.

"Blue Mask and Black Mask?" he muttered. "Wanted for questioning by the spirit division of the
Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures in relation to the disappearance of one Edgar Hawthorn, a ghost — twenty years dead."

The disappearance had been reported by a wizard of questionable moral character whose apparent distaste for the ministry was only just overcome by his fear of the two witches who'd twice broken into his lighthouse — although he'd refused to give the memory of the first break in.

He looked at the moving photograph, lifted from the wizard's memories. There was something hauntingly familiar about the two women's figures that Sirius couldn't quite put his finger on, but it made his palms itch and the last time that happened he'd almost ended up dead.

Disappearing ghosts? He idly chewed his quill. …Dead monster trees… He groaned. It looked like they had at least one rogue necromancer on their hands… and they weren't working alone.

— End of Chapter Twenty-six —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: To all those who disliked the last four chapters and who want me to write only Hogwarts chapters, I have only one thing to say — tough.

A/N: To all those who dislike the fact that we are where we are and are counting 220,000 words… My apologies for being slow, but we're not speeding up. This thing is going to be long.

A/N: To all those who post long juicy reviews extolling your likes, dislikes, feelings and opinions on Harry and the girls, on their adventures and misadventures — even if I might disagree with you — who tell me you wait for each new chapter with bated breath, or excitement, or even mere mild contentment in the belief that I am about to bring you a small extra sliver of entertainment — I love you all. To the other 14,000-ish who (might) do the immediate above, but don't post reviews — I really like you too :)
What Goes On In Knockturn Alley

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[October 3rd 1991]

Knockturn Alley.

The very name conjures up images of darkness and shady dealings — of forbidden things hidden away from where common, law-abiding witches and wizards choose to travel.

The shops of Knockturn Alley often didn't advertise their wares. Not because they were necessarily illegal—although they sometimes were—but rather because most people liked to pretend that the wares in question didn't exist.

The sky was dark and cloudy — the crescent moon, barely visible. A light drizzle fell on everything, splattering against cobblestones and pattering off of windows. It fell on the many signs that lined the shops, and on one sign, it ran down a dried and flattened snake skin nailed to the otherwise empty wood.

A robed and cloaked man exited from the snake skin adorned shop front, let out a satisfied breath, and slowly walked off down the wet and dripping alley.

In the upper floors of the shop, in a small and simple room, a slight figure with shoulder length, blonde hair and watery, blue eyes sat on a messy bed, arms wrapped around her knees, knees pressed against her chest, shivering against the cold seeping into her now sweaty body, naked, but for an ominous silver collar around her neck.

Clothes lay strewn over the floor. A torn slip of women's underwear hung on the back of a chair. An empty potions bottle sat on the tiny window desk, next to a small pile of coins.

Suddenly, the girl on the bed started to change. Her hair slowly shifted from blonde to brown, keeping its straightness, but lengthening down to the small of her back. She seemed to gain a few years, maturing from a possible sixteen or seventeen year old to a very definite early twenties. Her form filled out somewhat, from petite to curvy, although her height remained the same. And finally her face changed, becoming softer, rounder, with a button nose, a dainty chin, and two still wet eyes, one staying blue, the other turning hazel.

The girl shivered again and tried to banish the feeling of unwanted hands all over her. Food would be served soon. She should at least get a shower before then.

The girl shuffled to the edge of the bed, stood up shakily, stepped over to the desk, picked up the empty bottle of polyjuice potion, and dropped it into the nearby bin.

She then collected the coins and counted them out. One sickle, eight knuts (£3.80). Not a great tip, but better than a smack around the face, which is what she sometimes got. She moved back to the bed, lifted up the mattress, and added the coins to her secret pile of bronze and silver. No gold of course. She knew galleons existed, but she'd never actually seen them before. Her secret stash was small but growing, and after almost three years, was starting to close in on her target of seven galleons… enough for her very own wand.

She lowered the mattress and looked blankly at the wall.
A knock sounded from the door. She instinctively flinched away and covered her chest.

"Clare?" a voice from the other side of the door called. "Food's ready."

Clare relaxed and lowered her arm. It was just the madam. She called out. "Wait. Can you repair something?" She reached over and snatched the torn pair of knickers from the chair as the door opened.

The madam was a larger, older woman, who'd taken over when the last manager had disappeared in mysterious circumstances. The woman sighed. "Again?"

Clare nodded.

The madam took the ruined knickers, tapped them with her wand, and returned them to her, almost good as new.

"Thank you."

The madam nodded. "Now get a wash, dear. You'll need it."

Clare stilled. "Why?"

"You have another appointment after dinner."

Clare's shoulders slumped.

The madam folded her arms. "None of that. Now, go get ready. Go on."

Clare nodded, resigned, closed the door, threw on a bathrobe, exited her room again, padded down the hall to the shared bathroom, grabbed a quick shower, careful to wash the skin under her silver collar, went back to her room, pulled on her now repaired underwear and plain black robe, and joined the other girls downstairs at the tiny table in a cramped back room of the building.

Jessica, Rachel, and Caroline had all suffered the same fate as her, although she was the only one who wore a collar. She'd been the only one foolish enough to try and break the International Statute of Secrecy.

They chatted and ate for a few minutes, Rachel giving the newer Caroline tips on how to handle older wizards. "They love it when you ask them to show you some magic and then praise their power. They love having their ego stroked."

Clare was just reaching for a second bread roll when the madam stopped her.

"Don't eat too much, dear. I understand your client is bringing food with him."

The other girls looked up.

"Oh, one of those clients." Jessica muttered. "Lucky."

Rachel snorted. "Maybe. The last one who brought me food ate most of it himself."

Just then, the back door opened and an older wizard they all knew, but rarely saw, walked in. The chatter instantly ceased and all the girls averted their eyes down to the ground.

The man moved over to the madam.
Clare stared at the floor boards.

"A word in private, Madam Cakeworth." The voice was calm and cruel and caused Clare to suppress a shudder.

"Yes, my lord," the madam quickly answered and the two left.

"What's he doing here?" Jessica whispered, looking worried.

Rachel shrugged.

Caroline shivered. "I don't like him. He's creepy."

Jessica looked at Caroline sharply. Her voice turned deadly serious. "Don't say that, Carol. Don't even think it. Some of them can read minds, you know."

Clare grimaced. The people who ruled the wizarding world were scary. She'd only ever met two of them, but had no wish to meet any more. They were deceitful, evil, and ruthless.

The back door opened again and the lord walked through again, accompanied by another man. Clare caught a hasty look at the one she didn't know—tall and poised, with long blonde hair, aristocratic features, and holding a silver snake topped cane.

The wizard glanced at her and she instantly averted her eyes.

She heard the door close and looked up. The two men had gone.

The madam bustled back into the room looking flustered. "Clare, in here, please."

"M-me?" She stood up. The other girls gave her weary looks.

"Yes. C'mon now."

Her mind raced as she shuffled into the back room the two wizards had just vacated. Was she in trouble? Surely things couldn't get any worse, could they?

The door closed behind her.

The madam turned to her. "Your next client will be here in thirty minutes. You will have no polyjuice."

She blinked, shocked. No polyjuice? She'd only ever had one client who she didn't use polyjuice with—a regular, much older wizard called Robert Volf. "But," she started, "I thought I wasn't allowed—"

"This client is somewhat different. I don't know the specifics, but he is one of the most powerful wizards in Britain."

Clare's heart sped up. Dread seeped through her.

"You are to do anything he asks of you, understand? Any request at all."

She swallowed and nodded.

"And you're to look your best." The madam looked her over. "I'll go through my wardrobe, find something appropriate, and we'll resize it the best we can."
She nodded again and left to get ready.

Twenty minutes later, Clare sat inspecting herself in front of her room's dresser mirror, adjusting a cloth wrinkle here, brushing back an errant hair there. The robe she now wore was more like a dress than a robe, and if it didn't have a hood, would have certainly passed for one. The madam had attached an emerald pendant to the front of her silver collar, turning it into a kind of jewelled choker.

She tried to keep her mind off the upcoming appointment, but wasn't having much luck. The closest client she'd ever had to a lord before had been Mister Volf, who, as the man constantly told her, was a pureblood from a family dating back over a thousand years. This man, by contrast, would almost certainly be an actual lord — And magical lords were dangerous.

Eventually, there came a knock from the door.

Clare stood up and demurely waited for the man to enter.

The door didn't move.

She frowned.

The knock came again. Clare jumped, heart racing and quickly opened the door herself. "I'm sorry, I didn't—"

She stared up into a black and emerald mask.

"—Realise," her voice slowed. "Most people just… come in."

She hastened to stand back and the masked man took a step forward.

"That's quite alright, Miss Cooper." His voice was deep and rich, much like the clothes he wore. "I try to make it a point to respect the spaces of those who are not my enemies."

Clare took another step backwards, dipped into the lowest curtsey she could and used it to hide the gulp from a suddenly too dry throat.

The man stepped forward and reached out a hand, palm up.

She took it, hesitating only slightly.

The man then silently lead her through her own little room to the window. He drew back the curtains and looked down into the alley beyond. "No watchers that I can see," he murmured. "I was sure they'd have posted someone."

"Sir?"

The man closed the curtain again and turned back to her. "Oh, my apologies, Miss Cooper. Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Lord Slytherin of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin."

So he was a lord. "I-I'm sorry, my lord."

The mask tilted to the side. "That's quite alright, Miss Cooper." He let go of her hand, walked back to the still opened door, closed it, produced a wand—seemingly from nowhere—and waved intricate patterns over the now shut woodwork. "There." He turned back to her. "Now we don't need to worry about being disturbed."
Clare tried to smile as though this was the best news she could have possibly received.

Slytherin stepped into the middle of the room, reached into his pocket, brought something out, and reached down to place it on the ground.

Clare's eyes flickered uneasily to the now closed and presumably locked door, looked back, and did a double take when the thing the lord had taken out of his pocket had turned into a large wooden trunk.

Magic.

"I was told you wouldn't have eaten?"

She shook her head.

"Well then," he walked over and offered her his hand again. "I'd like to invite you to join me for dinner with two close friends of mine."

Her eyes widened slightly. Two other people? "I…" The madam's words came back to her, 'do anything he asks of you.' She swallowed. "I understand, my lord." She took his hand.

He lead her over to the trunk and, to her utter shock, down into the trunk!

Magic.

The trunk held a small room about as big as the room she and the other girls usually ate in. The walls were wood panelled, torches flickered green light across the space, and a small table in the middle of the room already sat two other people. One thing leapt out at her… the room didn't have a bed.

"Miss Clare Cooper," Slytherin intoned, "allow me to present two dear friends of mine, Daniel and Emma Granger."

Emma Granger stood.

Clare was taken aback. The witch was dressed in a blouse and blue jeans. She hadn't seen anyone dressed like that since her last escape attempt almost a year and a half ago.

Mrs Granger extended her a warm hand, which she shook. "Pleased to meet you, Clare, and so is my husband."

Daniel Granger nodded to her, smiling just as warmly, and dressed much the same as his wife in jeans and a button up shirt.

She and Mrs Granger sat down and she looked at the table for the first time. The cutlery was silver. The glasses were crystal.

Clare felt lost. This whole situation was just too different from the script she'd followed for the last three years.

The masked lord behind her cleared his throat. "I'm going to go sort out dinner — should be ready in five or ten minutes — The bar's all yours, Dan." He then left them.

Daniel Granger grinned, stood up, and started pulling bottles off the nearby cabinet.

Emma leaned forward and smiled. "I hope our lord didn't intimidate you too much?"
"Ah, no, not at all," she lied.

"Slytherin can be quite a scary person, but he has a good heart." Emma hesitated. "At least, to those he considers his friends."

Clare nodded and hardly noticed when Daniel Granger poured her a shot of some orange coloured liquid.

"So," Emma continued, "how much do you know of what this is all about?"

Clare blinked. "All this?" she looked around. Clearly something different was going on. "I don't really know anything."

Emma nodded. "Well, I'll leave the details to our lord to tell you when he gets back, but I will say we might have need of a valuable service you can provide, and, if we're a good fit, we might like to make you an offer."

Clare's mind raced. A 'valuable service'? There was only one kind of service she knew she could provide and she didn't really like providing it. On the other hand — she thought of the small pile of silver and bronze under her mattress — if the offer was good enough, she might be able to have enough money to finally buy a wand.

She wrung her hands in her lap under the table. "What kind of offer?"

Emma smiled. "Later. Why don't you tell us a bit more about yourself?"

Clare grimaced. "There isn't really much to tell. I'm a prostitute."

Emma's smile didn't falter. "We know that, but how did you become one? I'm sure our lord knows every single detail, but we don't."

Clare's shoulders dropped.

Daniel Granger finally sat back down after messing with the bottles and glasses at the drinks cabinet.

Clare grabbed the glass of orange liquid beside her, took a sip, and felt a heat pass through her body and up her throat. It wasn't as though she had any dignity left to lose. She put the glass back down. "I'm a muggleborn — never knew about the wizarding world — parents were convinced there was a perfectly rational explanation for all the weirdness that happened around me. Anyway, when I was eleven I received my letter for Hogwarts. I was so happy — it answered all my questions."

She took another sip of the orange liquid.

"But then my parents poured water on that dream — didn't let me go — refused to listen to the witch they sent around — said it was all a lot of silliness and that I was going to go to a normal school and get a real job."

She looked up. Dan and Emma were listening attentively.

"And that's what I did — or tried to do, at least. Did well on my GCSEs and was halfway through my A-levels — I guess you don't know what they are — but I never stopped thinking about the magical world — about the world I could have gone to." She paused. "I was seventeen when it happened," she said with a noticeable hint of bitterness.
Emma's smile had faded by now. "What?"

"It was summer — I'd just reached my birthday and was looking to make some summer pocket money — to help me when I went to uni, you know? — and this man had what looked to be a great part time job offer. I wasn't paying too much attention to the contract, although it wouldn't have helped much even if I had, I guess."

Clare sighed. "I was tricked into signing an immigration contract. The kind of thing a muggle born signs when they want to completely move to the magical world and leave nothing behind in the non-magical world. The moment I signed the contract I was stunned and locked away for a week while the immigration company did their work. When I was let out I found my identity had been completely erased — no records — no papers — no memories. My parents, my friends, my family, anyone who'd ever known me — none of them had any clue who I was."

Both Daniel and Emma Granger were now wearing identical looks of disgust.

"I know, right? And then I learned the worst bit. The price of the service I'd been tricked into purchasing was far over what I could afford to pay. They tricked me, not only in erasing my family's memories, but they made me pay for it! Or they make me pay for it, rather. The repayments are far higher than I can make anywhere with no magical education — The person who set the whole thing up — I still don't know who did it — they sold my debt to this place. The owners now set both my repayments and my wages. That's how I became a prostitute. I have literally no other choice."

Daniel and Emma Granger's faces were grim.

"And the collar?" Emma asked.

Clare deflated from her righteous rant. "That was me making a bad situation even worse. I'd tried running away before — once or twice — but I never got very far. Then, one time, I got all the way to a non magical police station. I tried to tell them everything. Everything about magic, about the situation I'd been forced into, about the people who go around erasing people's memories."

Clare snorted.

"I'm sure they thought I was crazy, but it didn't matter. The moment they made the official report, the obliviate wizards turned up, and I woke up in a ministry holding cell, waiting to be tried for a medium class breach of the International Statute of Secrecy. The wizards who owned my debt turned up at the trial and persuaded the court to release me into their 'care,' which the court agreed to, but only under the condition that I wore this." She tapped the collar. "It's keyed to the wards and I can't leave without permission. This isn't Azkaban, which I'm grateful for, but I'm still a prisoner."

Silence filled the room.

Eventually Emma spoke. "What would you do if you weren't in this situation?"

Clare shuffled her feet under the table. It dawned on her just how much she was telling these virtual strangers. "Buy a wand and go to magic school, but I don't know if that's even possible — They may not take people like me."

Dan and Emma shared a look.

The trunk lid opened and the masked lord climbed back down the stairs.
Clare looked down at the table.

"Wow," Slytherin said, "heavy atmosphere."

A plate of steak and potatoes was placed in front of her and her mouth began to water. She hadn't eaten food like this in over three years.

Slytherin sat down at the one free space and took off his apron, which she realised with a jolt on incongruity said, 'I must break Gamp's law because my food is magic.' She didn't get the joke but it was clearly supposed to be humorous and totally didn't mesh with the ultra intimidating visage of the powerful masked magical lord.

They started eating.

Slytherin glanced at Emma and Dan who both nodded at him.

"So," Slytherin said, causing her to instantly focus on him, "we have a problem—several problems, actually—and we're hoping you'd be able to help us with them."

She paused with a slice of stake halfway to her mouth. "My lord, I'm sure I'd be willing to help in any way I can, but I don't see what you could possibly need my help with." She paused. "Apart from the obvious, I mean."

Slytherin waved a vague hand holding a fork. "Well, you can rest assured, Miss Cooper, that it is not the obvious."

Some part of Clare that she didn't know she'd been holding tense, relaxed slightly.

"Dan and Emma recently sent their daughter off to Hogwarts. Before they did that, I had quite a number of powerful wards installed at their home. Their daughter, Hermione, was charging those wards, but now that she's away, the wards are powered only by a small number of magical plants in the garden — not nearly enough to maintain the wards at the levels we'd appreciate."

"—Wait," Clare said, shocked. She gestured to Dan and Emma. "You're both muggles?"

Dan and Emma nodded, smiling.

Whoa. That was unexpected.

"Dan and Emma are also doing work on several magical projects — runes, enchanting, product development, etc — that do need a magical person to activate, or cast a spell for, and we're hoping you'd be able to perform this role as well."

Clare felt her heart sink. "But, I don't know any magic."

Slytherin bit into a piece of roast potato, the mask moulding itself around the morsel in a strangely hypnotic manner. He swallowed. "Don't worry about that — that's something I'll handle."

Clare took another sip of the orange liquid. "What about..." she hesitated before tapping the collar around her neck.

"Ah, yes. This morning, I purchased an option on your debt for the next two weeks. If we decide we want to go ahead, I'll activate the option and buy your debt. Then we go to the ministry and get the official stamp to move your prison to Dan and Emma's house."

She bit her lip. "And I wouldn't have to have sex with anyone to pay off the debt?"
"No."

Clare looked down at her half finished meal. It sounded too good to be true. But on the other hand, she was really only trading one master for another. At least she knew her current one. She narrowed her eyes. She knew he was a vicious pimp who forced her to have sex to pay off an unfair debt.

She looked up at the masked man across the table from her. Was this man who hid behind a mask likely to be any better? Oh sure, it was all happy promises and rainbows now, but she knew how these people played their games. They made promises for breakfast and broke them for tea… and then fucked you for supper.

Slytherin tilted his head. "Take your time, Miss Cooper. I suggest you think on it. We'll all get together again in a week and you can decide then."

Clare nodded slowly. Yes, she'd think on it.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The next week passed and, apart from one disgusting client who had her polyjuice into his own daughter, nothing special happened. She was booked every night and spent the days asleep or else pondering Lord Slytherin's offer.

The other girls thought she was mad for even considering not taking him up on it. "This is your chance, Clare! You HAVE to do it!"

But Clare still wasn't sure. How could she know she wouldn't be even worse off after she agreed? Wizard lords couldn't be trusted. The only reason she wasn't instinctively turning it down was that Lord Slytherin seemed to be giving her the choice. After all, he could have just bought her debt without even asking her.

Her indecision, however, was about to be given a serious kick in the teeth when Slytherin's promised day of return came. She was in her room, in the middle of the afternoon, entertaining her only non-polyjuice client, Mister Volf, all balding head and potbellied belly, when the man, who looked old enough to be her grandfather, tried to cast a spell of some sort while she was on top of him. A sudden motion from her caused him to jerk back and instead of whatever he'd hoped to happen, an angry stoat popped out of nowhere, bit him on the arm, and caused him to drop his wand, which clattered away across the floor.

"You idiot!"

The stoat disappeared.

She flinched and tried to apologise, but it was no use. He slapped her across the face, pushed her off of him and got dressed, muttering about worthless mudblood whores.

That might have been par for the course, if it hadn't been for the madam calling her in later saying that Volf had demanded compensation for a scratch on his wand and the bite on his arm.

"We'll have to take it from your wages, I'm afraid."

Clare's heart sank. "But what about my repayments?" she asked, desperately, "Will they be lowered?"

The madam looked at her with sorrowful eyes. "No, dear. You'll have to make up the difference from your tips. I know you have a secret stash — all the girls do."
Her heart sank lower. "How much?"

"Three galleons (£150)."

Three whole galleons. That would wipe out everything she'd saved for the last year — over half of everything she had. She trudged back up to her room, shut the door quietly behind her, collapsed into her still messed up bed, put her pillow over her head, and cried tears of frustration into the sheets and all over her plain black robes.

Half an hour later, Clare hadn't moved from where she lay.

A knock came from the door.

She didn't bother to look up or even take the pillow off her head. "Come in!"

She heard the door open.

"Is this—" started a familiar deep and rich voice.

She jerked up.

"—a bad time, Miss Cooper?"

She scrambled off the bed and tried to wipe the tear stains away from her face. "N-no lord, I'm sorry."

Lord Slytherin inclined his mask. "No worries." He reached into his pocket and produced his tiny trunk. "Shall we?"

She nodded, and together they descended into the now unshrunk trunk.

"Clare!" cried Emma Granger from inside the trunk. She rushed over to her and took her hands in hers. "Have you been crying? What happened?"

Dan Granger stood up and shook Slytherin's hand.

Clare tried to wave it off. "It's nothing, don't worry about it, I'm fine."

Emma looked unconvinced, but didn't drill down any further. They all sat around the same table they'd eaten at the previous week.

Clare fiddled with the cuffs of her robe. She looked nervously from the Grangers to Lord Slytherin. Finally, she took a deep breath as thought getting ready to step off a cliff and into a deep an unknown sea. "If I accepted your offer… what would my repayments be?"

Daniel and Emma Granger smiled.

Thirty minutes later, Clare watched, heart racing, as Lord Slytherin put quill to parchment and signed into magic his decision to buy her debt. The parchment glowed white for a moment, then vanished.

It was done.

Lord Slytherin stood up, produced his wand, and tapped her collar. It flashed green. "I've granted you a leave of absence from the containment wards. We have an appointment with the ministry."
She looked up, startled. "So quickly?"

"Yes."

The walk down Knockturn Alley felt surreal. It was the first time she'd been outside since her sentencing.

Dan and Emma walked at her sides and Lord Slytherin strode ahead, parting the crowd like a prophet parting a sea. She couldn't help but notice the mixed looks of nervousness and fascination that Slytherin seemed to garner as they moved from Knockturn Alley and into Diagon. A group of children gaped and pointed and an older witch actually yelped and ducked back into the shop she'd just left when she spotted him. Just what had she gotten herself into?

Soon enough, they'd reached what looked to be a fireplace, complete with chimney in a random wall section of the Alley. After a quick explanation of what a floo network was, Clare found herself tumbling out of a fireplace and into a large indoor space where dozens upon dozens more witches and wizards walked and milled.

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic," Slytherin said, appearing behind her. "I don't suppose you've seen it from this side, have you?"

She shook her head and tried to fight down her unease. The last time she'd been here hadn't been fun. They made their way through the hallway and past a massive statue of a wizard and witch surrounded by a centaur and two very different little knobby creatures.

Slytherin stopped briefly to have his wand checked and they took an elevator down several floors.

Everywhere they went, wizards and witches stared and whispered.

"Lord Slytherin! My dear chap!" A shorter, plump wizard wearing yellow and black stripes bounded over to them. "I've been meaning to ask you for a chat for ages!"

Slytherin managed to extract himself from the man with a promise for a later talk and they soon found themselves in a waiting room. The secretary stood up from behind her desk. "Court room six, my lord."

Clare had to suppress a shudder as she walked into the court room. It was exactly like the room she'd been tried and sentenced in. Small, with a row of benches around the main entrance and a raised table on the far side of the room, in which sat an ancient witch. A court scribe sat in a lower chair. Other than that, they were alone.

"Ah, Lord Slytherin," the ancient witch stated. "I don't suppose it would be too much to ask for you to take off your mask?"

"My deepest apologies, your honour."

The witch sighed. "Very well then, let's get this sorted out shall we?"

Clare was shocked at how easy it was. Slytherin stood there and gave some reasons about why he wanted to move her from her current prison to a new one, managed by his vassals, the House of Granger. The judge, who the court scribe had identified as a Madam Marchbanks, listened and added a few stipulations of her own, which Slytherin agreed to, and they came to an accord.

"One last thing, your honour," Slytherin said.
Madam Marchbanks raised an eyebrow.

"I wish for my debtor to have the opportunity to attend Madam Goose's Home for the Magically Gifted."

Clare's head shot up.

"Obviously, this would require Miss Cooper to be out of the primary containment wards for longer periods of time than stated in the original sentence. I have already spoken with the school's administration and they are willing to key Miss Cooper into a separate set of containment wards at the school on your honour's approval of an alteration to the sentence to permit a secondary confinement location."

Madam Marchbanks rested her chin on her knuckles. "And what does Miss Cooper think about this?"

Clare looked nervously from Lord Slytherin to Madam Marchbanks. She swallowed. "It sounds too good to be true."

Madam Marchbanks smiled.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"And this is the garden." Emma Granger flung open the double doors and stood back, obvious pride in her face.

Clare walked out and gazed around her. Plants grew everywhere. That was about all she could tell. "It's very… green," she commented, feeling rather lame. "What are they all for?"

Emma shrugged. "Most of them, I've no idea. I just know they're magical. Those ones though,"— She pointed to a patch of what looked like cabbage size clover—"They're healing herbs that our Hermione asked us to grow when she heard we were starting a magical garden. She's taking healing training, you know. Youngest healer trainee in magical history." She beamed.

Clare smiled faintly back. She'd already been taken on a quick tour of the house after being keyed into the wards and had felt the difference between her old and new prison instantly. The Granger's home felt like a… well… a home, little different from the home she'd grown up in — Although there were some important differences.

She walked back into the house and glanced at the TV.

"Oh, yes," Daniel Granger had said when she'd picked up the remote and tried to turn it on. "That hasn't worked since we activated the wards a few months ago. After a few weeks, the kitchen appliances failed, and now we can't even get the electric lights to work."

Clare looked around at the numerous candles that lit the otherwise darkened room. That two non-magical parents would go so far to join the world that their daughter had suddenly found herself in… she couldn't help but feel a touch of sadness. How different her life might have been if her parents had done the same.

Emma joined her side again. "It'll be a lot brighter once we get the magical lighting set up."

She gave Emma a wistful smile. "No magical TV? I never saw one before."

Emma sighed. "No, they don't have that. They have magic radio though."
"So, what do you do with your free time then?"

Emma grinned at her. "Reading, mostly. The library's getting quite big now, which is good for you, what with school and all."

Clare's heart skipped a beat. She'd been trying not to think about that. She still didn't want to believe that what Slytherin had talked about to the judge was actually going to happen until she was there. The disappointment would kill her otherwise.

They walked up the stairs again and Emma handed her a slip of parchment on which the words, 'the Granger's secret magic testing room is located next to bathroom on the second floor.' Suddenly, a door appeared where before there had been none. Clare's eyes opened wide.

"The special room for you to use your wand in without getting caught by the ministry. Normally, they wouldn't be able to track you, because you are of age, but this area is almost all muggle, so even if they can't detect what spells are being used they can tell magic is being used. It raises flags. Of age, unqualified wand use is a legal gray area. Best just to pre-empt all possible problems." Emma said, seeming to guess her question.

Clare nodded dumbly.

The last part of the house was the garage, which contained nothing but a massive machine covered in a see-through plastic sheet on a wooden pallet. The huge cardboard box it probably came in sat folded up in a corner.

"And what is that?" she asked.

"Milling machine," Emma answered. "One of Dan's new toys that we bought with the proceeds from selling the dental practise. We're planning to use it to prototype new magical stuff. It's going to be amazing how small we can make the runes with something like that."

"But," she pointed to what was obviously a computer attached to it. "If the TV doesn't work because of the house's magic, surely that won't."

Emma grinned at her. "Yes, funny that."

"What?"

"Well, the wizards we've all talked to say that electricity can't work around magic, because the magic interferes with it, and that we should just give up trying to find a way to make it work because no one's ever found a way."

"Well?"

"Well, I was reading this book on different types of magic and there's this one type called ritual magic that's mostly only used by the ministry and the older families. The description said that, 'Ritual magic is extremely sensitive to outside magics,' and, 'it is critical to perform in a zero or near zero magical environment.'"

Clare watched her expectantly.

"But old families all live in equally old and magical houses, so how do they do their rituals? Turns out they have this thing called a ritual room that mostly insulates the room from the ward's magics."
Clare's eyes widened. "And you think…"

"That all we have to do is have a ritual room built in here, stick all our electronics in it and BAM, electricity inside a magical house!"

Clare looked around the garage and bit her lip. "Can we put a TV in here?"

Later that night, Clare lay awake in her new bed in the Granger's guest room. She was certainly much better off now, but she had no illusions about Lord Slytherin. To Slytherin, she was a magical generator. A thing that protected his investment in the Grangers, nothing more. As soon as Slytherin had no more use of her, or she became inconvenient, she'd be sold on again.

It would be a long time before she finally got to sleep that night, without the familiar scary sounds of the Knockturn Alley only a thin wall away.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

October passed in a whirlwind of activity. The very day after Clare arrived in Crawley, a snooty representative from the muggle liaison office had turned up and, after angrily shouting about illegal wards and all the trouble they were in, had quickly backtracked when she'd checked the Granger's status as Vassals of the House of Slytherin and found that, yes, they did have the legal right to them.

The representative had then got to the point of her visit… asking Dan and Emma how they were settling in to their place on the edge of the Wizarding World, and was promptly catapulted into the nearby park when she'd attempted to use legilimency on Emma.

"They want to make sure muggle-born parents aren't meeting each other and organising, you see," Emma told a shocked Clare after they'd sent Hedwig to the probably irate representative with a note apologising for her unceremonious removal from the property, but that they took a dim view on magical attacks and that she could check all the other muggle-born parent's minds if they wished to ensure they were being good little muggles.

The week after that, a female goblin who turned out to be the daughter of the Granger's bank manager oversaw a small army of tiny aliens called house elves in the building of a ritual room in the garage. Apparently the house elves were owned by a Lord Parkinson who was a not-actually-proven-but-totally-was-a-death-eater.

"Doesn't that worry you?" she'd asked Dan.

Dan had shrugged. "If you make it a policy to have no dealings with ex-death-eaters you'll never get anything done. We know he's untrustworthy, so we don't trust him. That's why we work through the Boneslicer clan."

She'd spent the next week thinking about how a clan of literal bloodthirsty bankers was apparently more trustworthy than yet another member of the wizarding world's aristocracy.

While she worried about this, the Grangers, who she was really starting to warm to, had a floo installed, put up the magical lighting, given her a magic ring, and spent hours and hours getting her to do everything from picking up broomsticks by shouting 'UP!' to opening chocolate frog packets. It was amazing that, even without a wand, there were so many things she could do that Dan and Emma couldn't. When they tried to open a chocolate frog packet, they just got a normal frog shaped chocolate. Apparently, this was because the enchantments and runes in the chocolate packaging drew an almost unnoticeable amount of magic from the wizard as they opened it to power the
animation charm.

Eventually, the day Clare had been waiting for but never dared to believe would come had arrived.

It was Saturday, November the 2nd and on Monday she would be going to magic school for the very first time.

She arrived from her guest-room bedroom for breakfast to find Dan and Emma at the dinning room table, both gazing fiercely at a copy of the Daily Prophet, Emma hanging over Dan's shoulder.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, sitting down.

Dan's head shot up. "Yes. Yes, it is, thank god." He chucked the paper at her. "Look at that!"

She looked. A huge two legged monster widely swung a club around while five young girls fought it to a stand still.

Dan jabbed his finger at one of the figures. "That's our Hermione!"

Clare's eyes widened. "She's alright?"

Emma let out a shaky breath. "Yes, thank heavens. If Harry hadn't been giving her those extra lessons… I don't want to think what might have happened."

"Harry?"

"Her friend from before school. They both go to Hogwarts."

Clare looked at the paper again. "This happened on Halloween and you're only just now finding out about it?"

Emma moved out from behind Dan and sat down opposite her. "Hermione sent us an owl yesterday, but hearing about it in a letter and seeing moving pictures are two totally different things."

Clare nodded and looked at the paper again. This was the sort of thing first years at Hogwarts got up to? That changing pipe into sword spell was amazing, and those shields, and those other spells. She bit her lip. She didn't want to say anything for fear of looking inconsiderate, but suddenly, going to magical school seemed even more amazing than she'd ever imagined, even during all those slow and boring middle and high school years.

The three of them soon finished breakfast and, when the containment wards allowed it, made their way through the floo to Diagon Alley.

"What do you mean, 'I already have a vault'?"

The goblin teller looked at Clare like she was stupid. "I meant what I said, human."

She looked to the Grangers who shrugged. "Ask for a blood confirmation if you're not sure," Dan suggested.

Apparently, there wasn't a mistake and she did in fact already have a vault, although she couldn't begin to imagine how. She carefully deposited her remaining two and a half gallons of silver and bronze and made her way back to the wild cart ride.

Clare's heart flew as they shopped for new robes, and cauldrons, and potion supplies, and all sorts
of other things. Slytherin was paying and she was determined to take maximum opportunity before
she'd inevitably be kicked to the curb.

She happily zipped up and down the rows of books in Flourish and Blotts, picking out her very
own copies of all the books she'd been perusing in the Granger Library over the last month.

Dan and Emma didn't let her monopolise all the enthusiasm either. They left the book shop with
wide smiles and carrying a few choices of their own including, 'The 1991 guide to known family
magic,' and 'Patent law and family magic,' among a small pile of other books.

Finally, Clare found herself in front of the shop that she'd dreamed of for seven years, and
despaired of never seeing for three — The wand shop.

Clare stepped into the dark and dusty shop followed quickly by the Grangers.

"Good morning," came a soft voice from right beside her that made her jump.

"G-good morning," she said, but the old man's eyes had already left her and were scanning Dan and
Emma behind her.

"Ah," the man said, smiling. "You must be Mister and Mrs Granger, of the House of Granger,
Vassals of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin. Am I right?"

Clare turned and saw Dan regard the man with wary eyes.

"We are. And you must be Mister Ollivander, the oldest member of the oldest family in Britain —
the only family that holds the title of Most Most Ancient."

The man chuckled. "Indeed. 402 BC. I wonder if we can hold on for another one hundred some
odd years… maybe the Albion magics will upgrade us again to Most Most Most Ancient. We'd
have to re-order our calling cards again." Mister Ollivander turned away from them and started
pulling boxes out of the many shelves. "And you are, if I may say so, the most surprising muggles
I've ever met. A good fit for an equally surprising daughter." He turned back to them with a pair of
boxes in his hands. "It would seem, that anything to do with Lord Slytherin is automatically
surprising… so maybe I should just stop being surprised, hmmm?"

Dan grunted. "Maybe."

Ollivander turned to Clare again, who, despite the dust in the air, had been watching with slightly
widened eyes.

"My apologies, my dear, I don't believe I know you."

"I'm Clare Cooper. I'm going back to school and need to buy a wand."

"Of course, a wand…" Ollivander looked her over and his gaze fell on the silver collar around her
neck.

She shivered.

"There was a Clare Cooper on the books to go to Hogwarts some ten years ago…"

"That was me."

"Ah." Ollivander's voice saddened. "Such a shame." He then brightened. "Well, no time like the
present, and education is the best investment we can make in ourselves… or something like that.
Let's get you fitted out, shall we?"

Ten minutes later, Clare held a thirteen and a half inch yew and phoenix feather wand in her hand and brought it down in a great flash of emerald green sparks.

Ollivander's gaze slid from the wand to her and back again. "How surprising."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Early next Monday, with butterflies flitting all the way through her stomach and threatening to climb up her gullet, Clare flooed straight into the head office of Madam Goose's Home for the Magically Gifted. An old witch sat behind a desk wearing a pointed white witches hat with stars on it.

"Miss Cooper, I presume?" the witch asked, peering over her glasses.

"Yes, Ma'am," she answered, looking around. The office's walls looked to be made of soft brown leather, while the floor was a massive patchwork quilt.

"Well then," the witch continued, in the same level, even tone. "allow me to welcome you to The Shoe. I hope you have a productive time here."

Clare nodded. "Thank you, Ma'am.

The witch stood up. "I am the current Madam Goose, the Headmistress, and you are a reforming criminal and a whore."

Clare faulted. "I…"

"—You will act in such a manner as is befitting of a young lady of the wizarding world, and if you fail to do so, then not even Lord Slytherin's influence will help you — do you understand?"

Clare straightened. "Yes, Ma'am."

"That's, 'Yes Headmistress.'"

"Sorry, Headmistress. Yes, Headmistress"

Madam Goose stepped over to Clare, drew her wand, and tapped the silver collar around her neck. "You are now keyed into the wards. You will not try to leave until school-out time at three-thirty each day. You will make sure you have left the school by five o'clock. As one of the only students who lives off campus, you may not run errands for any of the other students. If a student asks you to buy something for them, you are to turn them down, understand?"

"Yes, Headmistress."

"Good. Class starts in ten minutes." The office door opened and an older teenager stepped through. "This is Rebecca — one of our seventh year students. She'll help you find your way. I suggest you get yourself to where you need to be."

Clare nodded again, took a last glance at the storybook style decor, and left by the office door.

So much for the warm welcome.

Rebecca turned to her and smiled. "You'll be fine. Headmistress Madam Goose can be a bit scary, but most of the staff aren't like that."
Clare nodded, thanked her, and the two walked off down the equally storybook style hallway.

Clare stopped briefly at the first window they arrived at to look outside.

Rolling hills and lawn stretched out for at least a mile before hitting a sturdy looking wooden fence. Dozens of pre-teens and teenagers lounged around, dressed in typical muggle style school uniforms with flowing open robes. It looked like she was the only one dressed in the more traditional closed robes. One older teen showed off a broomstick in the middle of a large group of his friends. Another group was playing cards — another, hopscotch. It was unmistakably a school. Just like the one she'd left before she'd been dragged into hell.

"Clare?" Rebecca asked.

"Ah, coming."

They carried on walking, eventually finding her classroom.

Clare claimed a desk at the back of the room after thanking Rebecca. She took her wand out of her bag and waited.

Eventually, her much younger class mates all filed into the room, many giving her strange looks. There looked to be around fifteen of them.

The teacher walked to the blackboard. The man didn't acknowledge her. She supposed he just didn't want to disrupt the class.

"Books out," the teacher said. "Please read chapter three in quiet." He couldn't have sounded less enthusiastic.

Clare pulled out her book and stared going over the section that she'd already finished a few weeks back.

After thirty minutes, the teacher announced they would be going through the safety of magic, and from the many groans that sprang up all around, she supposed it wasn't the first time.

Another thirty minutes went by, in which Clare learned such pearls of wisdom as, 'never attempt a new spell without supervision,' and, 'only use ministry approved spells,' and, 'only qualified wizards are allowed to experiment with magic and even then only with ministry approval on a case-by-case basis, which none of you lot are ever going to get.'

She suppressed a yawn. It was like the man was deliberately trying to take all the excitement out of magic. How could you possibly make something like magic, dull?

The teacher then handed out a bunch of nails and told them to, 'get on with it.'

Presumably, they were trying to turn the nail into a wooden spoon — the first exercise listed in the book. She pointed her brand new wand at the nail and got to work.

By the end of the class, some thirty more minutes later, she'd managed to make the nail a bit less blunt, and changed it brown. She was quite pleased with herself. She was doing magic! She even seemed to be ahead of some of her class mates. She frowned as a thought struck here. Sure, they were eleven year olds, but weren't they supposed to have been at this for almost two months now? Surely they should be further ahead then this?

After another 'practical' class and lunch, she had wizarding culture and law class, and if she thought
the practical classes was slow, it was nothing compared to this.

"...And the only circumstance in which you are permitted to use your wand in front of muggles is if your life is in immediate danger or you need to summon the obliviator squads..."

Maybe if she kept her wand under her table she could secretly keep trying to change her pencil into something else?

"...There are currently 114 active seats on the Wizengamot, each one held by a lord of one of the noble families..."

No, probably not a good idea. Getting caught would be horrific.

"...These ancient and noble houses hold a special place in our world and you will treat them with the respect and deference they deserve..."

Clare focused back on the teacher and tried not to snort. Respect? Bullshit. Fear, yes. People like the last lord who owned her debt — people like Mister Volf, who still haunted her nightmares — she could barely keep herself shaking in their presences.

Straight after class, Clare found herself flagged down by Rebecca from that morning, who invited her out onto the grounds to 'hang out' with her friends.

Rebecca's friends were a pretty homogeneous lot. Four girls, one guy — four white, one obviously Hispanic — two muggleborns, three half-bloods. They all sat down around a large tree in the grounds and Clare got her first outside look at the school.

It was called The Shoe, but it more resembled a giant boot. Deep brown leather, tall, with huge laces that hung down to the ground. The double doors they'd exited from were in the heel.

"The dorms are up there," Rebecca said, pointing to the tall bit where the world's biggest giant would put his shins. She turned to her. "So, how come you're only just now going to school?"

Clare shuffled on the ground. Looked like her story hadn't come this far. "I... was a muggleborn whose parents refused to send me."

The girls let out a collective sympathetic groan. "Oh, that sucks," said Rebecca.

"I can not imagine what that must have been like," chimed in one of Rebecca's friends. "But you got in eventually. Good old Shoe."

"I was actually accepted to Hogwarts."

The groan that both the girls and the male friend gave now was quite a bit louder than the first one.

"You got into Hogwarts and your parents refused to send you?!” Rebecca threw her hands up in the air. "That's like saying, 'Oh, no Eton for me please, I'll just go to the local comprehensive!'"

Clare smiled weakly. "Yeah."

"So why are you here then?" asked the male friend.

"Hogwarts doesn't take adult students, not those in my situation, anyway."

The girls all nodded in understanding.
"So, how are you paying for this? I assume your parents still aren't? Part time job?"

Clare shuffled some more. "Something like that."

Rebecca grinned. "Shop assistant?"

"I work for Lord Slytherin."

The group stilled and stared at her.

"No, you don't," said one of the girls.

"Err, yes, yes I do."

"The Lord Slytherin?" asked Rebecca, eyes wide.

"Well, I don't know if he's worthy of having his article italicised, but yes, Lord Slytherin."

"How did you score a sweet gig like that?!"

And so Clare spent the next twenty minutes answering or deflecting question after question. They oooed and ahhed over every little titbit that she felt safe or comfortable to hand them, and when they learned that she'd had dinner with him, twice, the giggling reached ridiculous levels. Rebecca even asked if she could set up a meeting for her with him, blushing cherry red all the while. Of course she couldn't, but that didn't stop the requests.

Really, what was so great about a guy in a damn mask?

— DP & SW: TFoP —

By the time Clare got back to the Grangers she felt thoroughly fed up. She marched up to her new bedroom, dumped her bag on the bed, and marched back downstairs, all the way to the ritual garage, heard a slap and a yelp, opened the door without thinking, and walked in on a sight that made her stop dead.

Lord Slytherin had Emma over his knee with her robes bunched up around her waist and had clearly just finished spanking her.

"Clare!" Slytherin(?) reached for his mask.

"I…I…" she stuttered.

The mask came off and the suddenly revealed Daniel Granger hastily pulled his wife's robes back over her glowing red behind.

Emma got to her feet, blushing madly, and rushed over to her, "Please, Clare," her eyes watered, "Please, please, please, don't tell Slytherin about this."

"Um, yeah, sure, don't worry." Clare got a hold of herself and smiled. "I mean, it's not like I don't understand, right? I've seen the whole range of interests, and this is pretty tame by comparison."

Dan smiled sheepishly at her.

Emma collapsed thankfully into a nearby chair, although not without a gasp and a wince.

Clare took a moment to take in the room. The milling machine was now fully operational and she'd
seen the results of their test runs, although nothing that screamed 'magic!' at her.

"So, when are you going to have something interesting to show from that massive monster of a machine?" She asked.

Emma beamed up from her chair, all embarrassment apparently forgotten. "Now! We'd just finished our first item."

Clare gingerly picked up the mask that had fallen on the floor. While the front had been painted green and black, the back was still shiny aluminium. "Not the very first item, I see."

Emma blushed again.

Soon, up in the secret Fidelius room, Clare watched Dan set up an aluminium tile with a perfectly milled sphere of solid aluminium resting in the centre. Tiny, geometrically perfect runes covered both the tile and the sphere.

"Alright, Clare," Dan said, "Just point your wand at this bit here, and make as though to cast a spell but without actually casting any specific spell."

"Umm.. Okay."

It turned out to be not quite as simple as that and it took her a good two hours before she finally managed it, but when she did, the aluminium sphere lifted up from the tile and hovered, unmoving, about three inches off the ground.

Dan and Emma whopped and clapped.

Clare let out a long shaky breath. "Very cool," she conceded.

Dan grinned. "Isn't it? I'm pretty sure no one in the wizarding world could replicate that little feat the way we just did it. They either use alchemy to mould metal, which requires inhuman levels of occlumency to get perfect visualisation, or else they work metal by charms, which has its own built in limitations. We're pushing the edge here. Disillusionment's next."

"Disillusionment?"

"Imperfect invisibility."

Clare's eyes opened wide. "Now that would be amazing."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

A week went by and Clare was starting to get into the routine of school life again, although she was still waiting for the moment it all came crashing down. She never seemed to see Slytherin these days and the looks the headmistress and the teachers at the Shoe gave her weren't exactly flattering.

Each day she came home and either got to work on homework, practised spells in the secret room, or helped Dan and Emma with some needed magic. Today, however, she came home to find a bright eyed Emma handing her a parchment.

Dear Mysterious Inventor Friends,

Tally ho! Allow us to introduce ourselves. We are the secret tinkerers of the wizarding world. We are they who hide around the corner, ready to pounce with fun and chaos. We are the people who
happily take what the more wasteful carelessly leave behind them. We are the Hogwarts Buccaneers. And we have recently been enabled by our ‘mutual patron’ who suggested that we get into contact with you.

We’ve attached a few drawings of some of our more outlandish ideas with some of the more tricky sticking points. Any thoughts? Ideas? Howling criticisms? (No howlers, please).

Either way, it seemed like a good idea to open a discussion.

Signing out!

- The Hogwarts Buccaneers

Clare looked up at Emma who was looking at her eagerly. "So, what’s the problem?"

"Well, we're going to owl them back, obviously, but we need a name."

Clare eyed Emma with half lided eyes. "A name."

"Yes! They have the 'The Hogwarts Buccaneers' — we need an equally cool name. You're part of the team, so we're asking you."

She looked to Dan who stood nearby, smiling fondly at his wife.

"Any ideas?" he asked.

Clare shrugged. "I don't know — Outcasts? Persona non gratus? Two muggles and a whore?"

Emma frowned. "Clare…" she said, softly.

Clare relented, feeling slightly ashamed. "Okay, okay, maybe that wasn't called for, but you must admit we aren't exactly welcome in this world. Remember what that snooty ministry rep asked? 'How are you settling into life on the edge of the Wizarding World?'"

Emma continued to frown — then her frown morphed slowly into a wide grin. "That's perfect."

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Dear Hogwarts Buccaneers,

Sounds good!

You might like to take a look at 'Journey of an Alchemist', chapter six — the author mentions a partial solution to the problem you’re having with deconstructing the omniocular, although it is an imperfect solution. If intellectual property spells were that easy to circumvent… well… no more need be said.

Also, your extendable ears idea has promise, although the range will be limited, even if you can make the runes that small (We do have a way to make that possible, although it's currently a guarded process. We'd be happy to do part labour, though.)

Welcome to our mutual patron's little club!

Yours,

- The Edge Settlers
Autumn slid into winter and soon enough Christmas holidays came. After hearing what had happened to Clare's muggle family and friends, Rebecca had invited her over for Christmas, but, obviously, she couldn't just casually leave her prison like that.

Dan and Emma had left earlier that afternoon to pick up their daughter from the train station. They should be back soon.

Clare sat alone on the living room sofa, reading through the standard book of spells, grade two, and wishing they were going faster in class.

The door rattled, clicked, and opened to the sound of several voices laughing and talking.

A small figure with wavy-brow-hair appeared in the doorway.

"Clare," came Dan's voice from the hallway. He stepped through.

The wavy-brown-haired figure studied her.

"This is our daughter, Hermione. Hermione, this is Clare, she'll be living with us until further notice."

"Hello," Clare said.

"Hello," Hermione replied, sitting down opposite her. She lowered her head. "Thank you for keeping my parents safe for the past few months."

Dan left the room.

Clare smiled. "That's quite alright. I do my best."

Hermione beamed. "Naturally. Our lord would not have chosen you otherwise."

Whoa. Pretentious, much? Clare wetted her lips. "I'm not sure if he's 'my' lord. He just owns my debt."

Hermione tilted her head. "Really? But you are in almost the same situation as me. A muggleborn witch in the wizarding world. True, you are of age, but you're still a second class citizen. Even more so, considering..." She indicated her collar. "Isn't it wise to claim protection? Especially if he's someone as amazing as our... as my lord."

Clare shifted in her seat. Having this conversation with a girl so much younger than her felt awkward. "How do you know what he's like? You don't know anything about him."

Hermione waved vaguely. "That's not quite true. My dorm mate is my lord's betrothed and I've known him personally for years. Slytherin is amazing, and the longer you know him, the more obvious that becomes."

Clare's mind screeched to a halt. "Wait. Your dorm mate is betrothed to Lord Slytherin? And she's your age?" incredulity permeated her voice.

"Yes," Hermione said, unconcerned. "That's quite normal in the wizarding world. It's not like they're getting married until they're older."

Clare tried to take this in, but couldn't quite manage it. True, her impressions of the wizarding
world up to this point hadn't exactly been from the best perspective, and her clients had often asked for some pretty messed up things, but listening to a twelve-years-old, very clearly British girl calmly talking about arranged marriages with such large age differences like they were nothing unusual felt rather disconcerting.

Hermione tilted her head. "Would you care for some tea and biscuits?"

The Christmas break came and went and Clare tried to reconcile the many rather extreme and unusual views Hermione seemed to hold with the obviously intelligent girl she was. She asked Dan and Emma what they thought about the betrothal thing in particular and they said they, 'try not to think too hard about it.'

_Clare_ on the other hand didn't know what to think.

It was two weeks into the new school term when Slytherin next visited.

She and Emma sat upright on the large sofa in the living room while Dan and Lord Slytherin were sat in opposite arm chairs.

"So," Emma started, "you're trying to get at this thing that someone is protecting but is really using as bait to lure this other guy into a trap and you need an effective way to communicate to get past the defences in a high magical environment?"

"That's about the size of it," Slytherin said.

Clare couldn't help herself. "But, why would anyone actually leave the thing in the trap if it's so important? Why not just say it's there?"

Slytherin nodded to her. "Trust me, anyone who knows anything about the guy in question would tell you he's just the kind of arrogant to believe no one could get past his defences. He'd do it just to feel clever."

Dan turned over the silver hand mirror in his hands.

"So," Slytherin continued, "any possibilities?"

Dan rubbed his chin. "Getting at the runes on the inside without damaging the mirror itself… We were just talking with your buccaneers about that the other month. Yes, there might be a way from the non magical world."

"Really?" Slytherin actually sounded surprised.

"Yes. We _might_ be able to use a CAT scanner… there's no iron in it… we don't need to identify perfect detail, just what the symbols are and in what patterns…"

"How much would a CAT scanner cost?" Slytherin asked.

Dan snorted. "About one to three million pounds."

"Ah."

Dan shook his head. "No, we'd have to rent time on one."

"And you could do that?"
Dan hesitated. "We might get away with saying it's for archaeological research?" He looked towards Emma.

Emma inclined her head.

Dan turned back to Slytherin. "Okay, we'll give it a shot. But what are you going to do about the family magic? Even if you know the rune patterns it'll be useless without the enchantments."

"I'll just have to give them an offer they can't refuse." Slytherin relaxed back in his chair.

Dan, Emma, and Clare all looked at Slytherin with looks of amused concern, although in Clare's case there was less amusement and more concern.

Lord Slytherin looked back and forth between the three of them, all staring at him. "What?"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

January faded into February, and by now Clare had broadly came to terms with her place in Slytherin's little world. She'd come a long way from the feeling of resigned despair at being forced to have sex every night with whoever was willing to pay.

Being able to go to magic school had been her dream for all her teenage years, and she now had it, even if it was rather slow going, but she was still waiting for the moment that Slytherin turned up to tell her it was all off and she was going to go back to being a prostitute again.

Still, Dan and Emma were much nicer jailers than the last lord who owned her, and, occasionally, she even got to go on field trips, although, if she'd known exactly where they were going for this one, she'd probably have asked to be left at home.

"Lot number 95," the man at the front of the room called out. "Seven, large unopened boxes of Doctor Filibuster's No-Heat, Wet-Start, Fireworks, one box slightly damaged. We'll start the bidding at two galleons (£100)."

All around the large open room, wizards and witches raised wands and fired out numbers to show their bids and counter-bids.

Clare sat on her chair, uncomfortably aware that not seven buildings away from this one, stood the polyjuice brothel. A place she'd hoped never to get within a mile of, ever again, or, failing that, just Knockturn Alley.

"Lot number 106," the man called out again. "A silver ring — good condition — dated at circa 1400's Milan — showing the emblem of the Viradini family — we'll start at forty galleons (£2,000)."

Clare couldn't help notice, as the bids quickly picked up pace around the room, that Slytherin—sat a few chairs away from her, along with Dan, Emma, and a Lord and Lady Greengrass—hadn't bid on anything yet.

She leaned over to Emma. "Is there anything in particular he's looking for?"

Emma handed her the brochure. "Lot number 108 — he's just coming up."

He? Clare flicked through the brochure and felt her stomach drop. 'He' was a house elf.

"A house elf?"
"Yes," Emma whispered back. She sounded half apprehensive, half excited. "Our lord says that he needs at least two by this time next year, and they don't come up on the block very often. But he can't really make much use of him before then, so he's going to lend him to us! Isn't that wonderful?"

Oh, yes. Wonderful. Clare felt sick. House elves were magical beings. They had cores. They could power wards. Now that Slytherin was buying one, he'd have little more need for her. They could even channel magic just like wizards could — the one advantage she had over the magical plants in the garden. She swallowed and looked over at Slytherin's ever blank and impersonate mask. If Slytherin got rid of her would she still be able to go to school? Would her new master force her to sleep with him? Would she even be allowed to keep her wand?

The bidding for lot 107 came and went and soon a small and spindly figure stood up on the auction platform. The figure was visibly vibrating with excitement.

The auctioneer cleared his throat. "Lot number 108 — a male house elf — not yet named — five years old and just passed maturity — healthy and with full documentation from both the Ministry and St Mungo's — trained in domestic services and household management — we'll start the bidding at six thousand galleons (£300,000)."

Clare just stopped her eyes from bugging out. Six thousand galleons!

Lord Slytherin immediately raised his wand.

Whispers filled the hall.

Another wizard raised his wand.

Six thousand galleons was like… she did the math in her head… a LOT more than she owed anyone.

Slytherin and the other wizard were shortly joined by a third.

The bidding quickly took on a frantic air. The bids kept creeping higher and higher. 6,100 galleons, 6,200, 6,400, 6,800. Eventually Slytherin rose his wand and shot out a call for 7,600 galleons (£380,000).

"Any other bids? Gentlemen?" The auctioneer called to the last wizard still bidding. The man shook his head looking seriously miffed.

"No? Sure? Sold! To Lord Slytherin."

A faint scattering of applause filled the hall.

Slytherin stood up and made his way to the back room, leaving Clare alone with the Grangers and the Greengrasses. A heavy weight settled in her stomach.

She barely paid any attention to the rest of the auction. Not even when Emma commented on how badly she'd want to get her hands on a pair of vanishing cabinets that eventually went for almost one thousand galleons (£50,000).

Eventually, Emma seemed to pick up on something being off. "What's wrong?"

Clare shrugged her off. "Nothing. It's nothing."
Emma didn't seem convinced but didn't pry further.

Slytherin soon returned from the back room and started to bid for a few more items, so much so, that by the time the auction finished it was late at night. The crowd started to file out of the room.

Clare looked around. "Where did Slytherin go again?"

"I think he went out the back again," Dan replied.

"Well," said the witch who'd introduced herself as Lady Sunny Greengrass, stepping into their little circle. "How did you enjoy your first magical auction?"

"It was interesting," Emma replied. "There were so many things I really wanted, but didn't have a hope of affording. So many of the really good things were quite expensive."

Lady Sunny nodded. "Many heirlooms are like that. They're just not being made any more."

Emma nodded.

Clare knew Emma knew all about the ways family magic gave the old houses a stranglehold on certain types of products.

Eventually they were the last one's left in the room.

Slytherin appeared from the back room again. "My apologies," he intoned, drawing closer to them. "One of the sellers was being a little difficult about something."

Lord Jacob Greengrass slapped him on the back. "You sorted it out?"

"Of course."

"What about the elf?"

Slytherin patted his pocket.

Lord Greengrass laughed. "Sometimes, I wonder why you're even bothering with a manor when you're so attached to your trunk."

Slytherin chuckled. "I think someone would complain quite a bit if I decided to live in my trunk."

Greengrass snorted.

Clare watched the two lords back and forth, still not able to wrench that sickening feeling from her stomach. She didn't say anything, even as everyone else started chatting and laughing. She held herself towards the back of the group, and walked a little bit slower.

The group of six made their way out of the auction house and into the now almost deserted nighttime of Knockturn Alley.

Somewhere nearby, a dog barked.

She breathed out.

Suddenly, a voice from just behind her caused her to swing around wildly, heart leaping into her throat.
"Well, well, look who we have here."

It was Robert Volf, old, balding, pot bellied, but spry and still as unusually light on his feet as ever.

"Volf." She tried to keep the tremble from her voice, backing away and towards the still receding group.

Volf leered. "Now where do you think you're going? I've got an hour to kill — the joint is just up there."

She quickly shook her head. "No, that's not — I don't work there anymore."

He ignored her and made to grab her arm.

"HELP!" She jerked and tried to run away, but just as she turned she barrelled into the tall robed form of Lord Slytherin. She clutched his robes briefly before spinning and ducking behind him.

Volf straightened. "Lord Slytherin. You have something of mine behind you."

Lord Slytherin shook his head. "No, you are mistaken. Her debt is now mine. Go find your entertainment elsewhere."

Volf's face reddened. "You're not the only one the whore owes!"

Silence descended on the group, now backed up behind them.

"What?" Slytherin's voice dropped dangerously.

"What!" Clare cried out, getting over her initial shock. "Yes, he is!"

The elder Volf produced a parchment with a flourish. "See?"

Slytherin took the proffered document and quickly scanned it.

Clare looked desperately between Slytherin and Volf. She didn't owe anyone else anything. She knew she didn't.

"Clare," Slytherin started, "this document says you've sold Robert Volf exclusive rights to your unpolyjuiced 'hospitality' for five years in exchange for four hundred galleons (£20,000)."

Clare recoiled in horror. "I didn't. I swear, my lord, I didn't!"

"The parchment has your signature on it." Slytherin produced his wand, waved it over the parchment and a tendril of magic arced between her, Volf, and the contract. "It is authentic."

"I never received that much money for anything!"

Volf waved another parchment. "Receipt of deposit into the whore's Gringotts account."

Clare gasped. The already opened account. "But there wasn't any money in it! It was empty when we went there!"

Volf shrugged and grinned. "Not my problem, my pretty little mudblood."

Slytherin turned to her. "You don't remember signing this?"

"No!"
He turned back to Volf. "You obliviated her."

Volf grinned again. "'I'? I don't know just what you are accusing me of, Slytherin, but I assure you I did not. Of course, accidents can happen, but if you went through the trouble of healing whatever blocks may be in that worthless mind, I guarantee you will find nothing out of line. All my business with the whore is completely legal and above board."

Slytherin grunted.

Clare looked on, horrified. They'd messed with her memories? She actually had signed that contract?

Volf spread his arms. "I had no problem with her staying at the whore house — made it easy for me — But now that she's out — well… I just might want to make a claim of my own to be her prison guard, mmm?"

No. Clare started to shake. Volf as her prison guard? She couldn't. "My lord, please—"

"—You'd never win that case." Slytherin interrupted, ignoring her.

Volf smirked. "Oh, I know that. Your debt is bigger. Your political clout is bigger. I wouldn't stand a chance — but that wouldn't matter, because while I wouldn't be able to win, I would be able to hold the case up in court for many months…" he trailed off, still smirking.

Behind them all, Lady Greengrass let out a small gasp.

Volf continued. "…And during that time, the law would insist that the debtor be held in a neutral third part location — Somewhere suitable for a criminal convicted of breaking the international statute of secrecy."

Slytherin's voice dropped to a deadly whisper. "Azkaban."

Clare's shaking got worse.

Volf smiled.

Slytherin handed the contract to Lord Greengrass. "What is it you want, Volf?"

"The rest of the whore's debt. I'll buy it. Such a pretty little thing isn't she?"

Clare looked up at Slytherin, who gaze was still fixed on Volf. She reached out and desperately held onto his arm. "Please, my lord. Please don't."

Slytherin looked briefly at her and turned back to Volf. "Bugger off, Volf."

Clare gasped and then let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding.

Another smile from Volf. "But of course you'd say that — very protective, aren't you? One of the few things anyone knows about you. Oh well," He gave a dramatic sigh. "There is one other option — You can duel me for it. Winner takes the other's debt."

Slytherin tilted his head. "You want to duel me for it?"

"Yes!" Volf's voice suddenly became angry. "Just like you duelled my grandson!"

Clare looked between them, still on Slytherin's arm. Grandson? Duel?
Slytherin said nothing.

"Well?!!" shouted Volf. "What was it you said to the boy!? 'You can accept the duel, or try your luck with the law'!"

Slytherin looked at her one more time. "Fine."

Volf smirked.

Clare's head swam.

Minutes later the alley was set up with temporary duelling wards.

Clare stood off to one side looking at the preparations as though watching a play. It all seemed too unreal.

Emma stepped up to her side. "It's going to be okay," she said in a soothing voice. "Lady Greengrass tells me Slytherin is the best duellist she's ever seen."

Clare looked over to the masked figure standing on one side of the impromptu duelling arena, tall and stoic. "I…" She swallowed. "I hope he wins. I don't want to leave again."

Emma hugged her shoulders. "Trust him, Clare. Trust in your lord."

Clare briefly shut her eyes. Her lord. The words sounded oppressive and dangerous, but right then, she desperately wanted to believe in them. She opened them again. "In my lord."

Emma squeezed her shoulders.

The two combatants squared off against each other. Someone had managed to find the auctioneer from the auction house who now stood off to one side holding a handkerchief.

The street was otherwise empty, other than for the Grangers, the Greengrasses, a few hags, some hooded men, and her.

"This is a formal duel between the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin and the Ancient House of Volf over the rights to the debts owed to both houses by one Miss Clare Cooper. The combatants have agreed to extended class B rules. I am Andrew Richardson of the House of Richardson and will act as official witness. All combatants have agreed to limit their casts to non-immediately-lethal spells. When my conjured handkerchief lands on the floor, the duel shall begin." He threw the small strip of cloth into the air with a flourish.

Clare watched the handkerchief fall to the floor, breath held, heart beating wildly in her chest.

It landed.

And chaos started.

Clare's eyes widened trying desperately to understand what was happening. Spells flew everywhere, shields blocked some, others were dodged. Dan and Lord Greengrass shouted encouragement while Sunny and Emma just stared.

Clare gasped when a purple spell seemed to almost hit her lord but was battered away with so quickly that it had looked like he was playing squash.

The duel dragged on and her heart raced, faster and faster. Were they equal? Was her lord losing?
She couldn't tell. She didn't know. What if Volf got a lucky shot? What if—

Then, suddenly, as though from no-where, half the street lunged up, turned into a giant snake, breathed a massive column of flame at a wide-eyed Volf, and crashed down on him with all the power of a landslide.

The ground shook.

The dust cleared.

Robert Volf lay unconscious on the ground, blood everywhere, arms and legs bent out at spine-shivering angles.

A few of the men in hoods darted out of the shadows and started to drag him away.

The contract in Lord Greengrass's hands glowed white for a moment before disappearing in a flash of light and re-appearing in front of Lord Slytherin who snatched it out of the air as quickly as he'd swatted away that one spell.

Clare felt her knees go weak.

Emma grabbed her before she collapsed.

He'd done it.

The air slowly settled and Lord Slytherin walked over to them. "Miss Cooper."

She looked up at him. "My lord?"

He held up contract from Volf.

She lowered her eyes. Of course. Now her lord owned the sex contract."

She heard a ripping noise. She looked up, shocked, bits of parchment floating down around her like confetti.

Slytherin levelled his wand at the papery mess. "I hereby declare the contract originally signed between Miss Clare Cooper and Robert Volf of the Ancient House of Volf and now held by Me, Lord Slytherin, to be paid in full."

The bits of parchment all glowed blue for a moment before vanishing out of existence.

Clare felt something she hadn't known she'd been feeling before lift off of her. She gazed at Slytherin in wonder "You…"

"I am not that kind of man, Miss Cooper. I fully expect you to work hard to pay off your other debt, but I will not hold someone who means me no ill will to such a deplorable agreement."

She nodded quickly, a wide smile forming on her face. "Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord. I will work hard for you, my lord."

Slytherin inclined his head. "I know you will, Clare." He turned to the rest of the assembled group. "Let's go home, shall we? I think we've had enough excitement for one day."

And the group left for the floo, walking down the otherwise deserted Knockturn Alley. Knockturn Alley, where Clare hoped never to return to, but still often seemed to find herself in anyway.
"By the way, Dan, Emma…" Slytherin suddenly turned from where he'd been leading the group. He flicked his wand in a strange motion. "...I don't suppose you could build a submarine could you?"

— DP & SW: TFOP —

Later that evening, in an all white room smelling of disinfectant and All Magical Mess Remover, a tall man with aristocratic features, long blonde hair, and a silver-snake topped cane, slowly walked along the rows of otherwise empty beds to the occupied bed at the very end of the ward.

The old figure in the bed, covered in bandages, splints, and straps, looked up as he approached. "Lord Malfoy," the figure said, in a wheezy, half dead voice.

Lucius Malfoy inclined his head slightly to the bed-bound man. "Robert Volf. I see that, in the end, you did end up duelling him."

Robert Volf nodded and then erupted in an uncontrollable fit of coughing.

Lucius Malfoy waited for the fit to die down before he continued. "So…" he ran his fingers along the metal bed-frame. "...You have it then?"

Robert Volf leered. "Have it? Have it? Of course I have it. And as you can see," he smirked, "he was fighting properly this time." He reached for his wand on the side table with a huge groan, brought the wand to the front of his balding head, and drew a long, silvery memory strand from it.

Malfoy brought out his own wand and conjured a small vial. The memory flowed into it and Malfoy reached out to take it, but Volf snatched it away first.

"Uh uh uh, Lord Malfoy." Volf grinned. "Our deal."

Malfoy sighed and produced a medium sized purse of gold from the pocket of his robes. He chucked it onto the bed with a flourish.

Volf picked it up with a victorious smile on his face.

Malfoy held out his hand for the vial.

Volf handed it over.

With a swish of his cloak, Malfoy turned and marched out of the room. Trust someone as tasteless as the Volf patriarch to make such a show of such a small amount of money. He flooed back to Malfoy Manor and immediately barricaded himself in his office.

He walked over to a cabinet on the far side of the room and carefully opened the doors. Hundreds upon hundreds of vials greeted him on the other side, all carefully labelled and sorted — only the most recent results of many centuries of memory collecting by his ancestors — duelling styles from Europe to Africa and Asia, from wars and bar room brawls to international standard duelling tournaments.

If anyone was anyone in the world of professional fighting, their name was here. It was an indispensable tool for the professional duellist as he had once been in his youth — to be able to freely study and practise a specific opponent's subtle tells and tiny weaknesses. Everyone left traces, everyone left signs, unnoticeable though they might be to the eye of one who hadn't spent all the time he had at the task of studying them. He clutched the conjured vial in his hands tighter. And tonight he was going to find those tells and rip off Slytherin's mask once and for all.
He lifted the first batch of memories, poured them into his office's pensieve, and got to work.

The clock ticked. Minutes became hours. Lady Narcissa came and asked after him. He shooed her away with a peck on the cheek and an assurance that this had to be done.

The hours continued and the vials started to be whittled down. He started pulling more and more outlandish names from the cabinet. His eyes drooped. He swayed as he walked. The darkness beyond the office curtain started to give way to the first light of dawn and still he carried on.

Then, finally, he emerged from the pensieve once more, but now all sleepiness had gone.

His heart was beating faster and faster.

His brow was sweating.

His hands were shaking, clutching two separate empty vials.

No. It wasn't possible. How could it be possible? And yet… and yet Lucius knew he was not wrong.

The implications were too horrible to even consider, but consider them he had to.

He stumbled over to his writing desk, reached for the warded bottom draw and withdrew a nondescript black notebook. He opened the book to the first page, picked up a quill and wrote in an unsteady hand, 'My lord, I have discovered the identity of Lord Slytherin.'

It should not be possible for the written word to convey impatience, but nevertheless, the single word written back managed it.

'Well?' it said.

Lord Malfoy took another long, deep breath before writing the next three words.

'He is you.'

— End of Chapter Twenty-seven —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well, that was the last of the non-Hogwarts chapters for this season. We've got five chapters left (probably) until the end of season two and it's all Hogwarts, all the way from here, so all aboard for the final arc of book two!

A/N: A quick reminder of what Harry has (currently) told who.

Because sometimes, it just slips the mind, and I don't always spell things out in big flashing letters.

The girls:

Daphne, Hermione, Ginny, and Luna, all know Harry is Lord Slytherin, is the boy
who lived, and is from the future. These are the 'three secrets' that Harry spoke of when he first gave Ginny the silver lightning bolt ring.

Alexandra knows none of these three secrets, but she does know that Harry exists, and that he's deeply connected to Lord Slytherin, far more so than anyone else who doesn't know the secrets.

The parents:

The Potters know nothing (obviously).

The Greengrasses know that Harry is Lord Slytherin and the boy who lived, but they don't know he's from the future.

The Grangers know that Harry is deeply connected to Lord Slytherin, but that's all they know.

The Lovegoods know that Harry is the boy who lived and Lord Slytherin.

Harry hasn't told Sirius anything (literally, nothing, they've never spoken.).

The Weasleys know nothing (except the twins, see below).

The others:

Harry hasn't told the Weasley twins much, but he has insinuated that his relationship with his parents isn't very close.

A/N: No, Clare isn't in the pairings.
[The Day after Christmas Day 1991 (Boxing Day Morning)]

Curtis Lawless glared at the silent mobile phone on his desk as his number two filled him in on their current, rather low, drug stock levels. The pounding and throbbing of last night's Christmas drunken revelry, which had echoed up through the Manchester nightclub's walls and floors, had slowly given way to the simple pounding and throbbing of a mild hangover, and it was interfering with his ability to be properly annoyed.

"So you're saying," Curtis started in a grumble, continuing to try and will the mobile phone back to life with just the power of his toxin filled mind, "That because we mis…mis… er… got wrong the amount we needed to have — because of Christmas — that we're now going to run out in just a few weeks?"

"Yes, boss," his number two rumbled, standing like a mountain with his hands in front of him, fingering a large gold ring.

"And now we can do nothing but wait for Mister posh-boy Malfoy to call and hope he's got something for us?"

"Yes, Boss."

Curtis groaned. The drug runner who called himself Malfoy had said Curtis wouldn't be able to get a hold of him using this phone — That he'd be the one to call Curtis, but it still pissed him off when he'd tried to call and got the 'this number is unreachable' response.

His number two made a small grunt. "He's not let us down yet."

"No, he hasn't, but I'm not looking forward to when he does. I've no idea who we can get who'll do us as low as he does."

"Prices are coming down all over the place."

"Not as fast as he is." Curtis continued to glare at the inert mobile phone. Malfoy had said a while back that he'd call some time over Christmas or early in the new year. Hopefully the man would keep his word again. He didn't like being so reliant on one person.

A glass of water thumped down on the table in front of him. He took it in his large fist and fumbled a half swallow.

Suddenly, a massive bang from downstairs caused the glass to shatter in his grip.

"POLICE! GET DOWN!"

Curtis slowly put his face in his hands and groaned.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

[January 6th, 1992]
John Potter confidently strode down the Hogwarts Express, shaking hands with boys and smiling at girls as was his duty as the Heir of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter, Leader of the children of the Light, and, if not the actual boy-who-lived, then the chosen of fate and death, at least.

The Winter Festival had gone well. He'd been the centre of attention at the Potter Christmas Party and he'd impressed all and sundry with his 'advanced' wand work and transfiguration skills. His Dad had pulled him aside not long after and given him the same 'How to charm girls and influence people' lessons that he'd received the first time around. This time, however, he'd been far more receptive, understanding exactly why charming girls mattered, beyond just the intellectual understanding of an eleven year old heir to a noble house, that is. Just why his Dad had thought giving him these lessons at age eleven was a good idea, though, was a mystery to him.

But, that didn't matter now. There were quite a few girls he wanted by his side, and one in particular who he needed to, at the very least, negotiate with, if not win back. He patted the bag that hung at his shoulder. And he had just the thing to do it with.

John walked further down the carriage, shook a few more hands, winked at one particularly cute third year girl, getting a shy smile back, opened the door to the next carriage, saw a flash wavy brown hair, widened his eyes when he saw who Hermione was talking to, and ducked into the carriage's first compartment, only to be met by the wide eyes of several second year girls. He gave them an apologetic smile and pressed his ear up against the door.

"—Don't care about that, Heir Malfoy."

"You should, Granger." Malfoy's voice dripped smugness. "You don't always have Greengrass around to protect you."

"You know what happened to the last person who attacked me."

"Yes, Slytherin duelled them, but only because Volf didn't want to go to court for assault."

John tried to mould himself to the door to hear better.

"Do you want to go to court for assault?" Hermione asked.

"Not particularly."

"Well, there you go then."

Draco's voice lowered and John had to shush the girls behind him who had started to giggle. "I bet you think you're pretty hot stuff, Granger — joining the hunt and catching Lovegood, but you are not one of us. You will never be one of us. You are a jumped up mudblood with ideas above her station. Underneath all your training and manners and princess airs, you have nothing. No ancestry, no family magic, no legacy of contribution to the wizarding world. How many spells has the House of Granger discovered? How many artefacts has it invented? How many books has it published? None."

"Not today, perhaps, but one day it will."

John heard a loud laugh.

"Bwahahaha! Oh Granger, you are too much."

The sounds of laughter travelled down the corridor and eventually faded away.
John carefully opened the door, waved at the girls, stepped though, and closed it behind him with an audible snap.

Granger whirled around causing him to raise his hands in surrender.

"Whoa there."

"Oh, it's you," she said as though a cockroach had just scuttled in front of her.

John pushed away the hurt her voice caused and gave her a winning smile. "Malfoy being an arse?"

"Yes. Not that it's any of your business, Heir Potter."

"C'mon, Hermione. What have I ever done to you to get the ice princess treatment?"

"I could not imagine. Maybe you being a presumptuous arse, Heir Potter."

John leaned on the door. "I just want to be friends. You like making friends, don't you?"

"I like making friends with people who don't strut around like the world owes them just for being born."

Ouch. He didn't think he strut around that much, and a certain amount of strutting was required of someone in his position. He smiled and shrugged. "Well, if not friends, why not acquaintances willing to make mutually beneficial trades?"

Hermione's face shifted from icy glare to caution. "What kind of trades?"

John grinned and pulled out a book from his bag. He handed it to Hermione whose eyes widened in shock.

"This is…"

"That," John said, "is a first edition copy of 'Hogwarts a History' — one of only seven in existence."

Hermione's eyes remained fixed on the book and John was sure her pupils had dilated.

He inwardly smirked. Hermione had always had a near pathological book fetish. "Do you like it?"

Hermione looked up. She couldn't have looked more guarded if she were wearing full plate armour. "What's the trade?"

"Just that you accept this as a declaration of intention gift."

"What!" Hermione squeaked.

"A declaration of intention gift. You do know what they are?"

"Of…Of course I know what they are!" Hermione's voice raised in pitch. "But why are you giving me one!"

John smirked, still leaning against the door. "Why wouldn't I? You're cute, and powerful, and the best student in our year."

"I…" she thrust the book back in his arms. "I'd need to talk to my lord."

John frowned catching the book before it fell to the floor. "Hermione, do you need to ask your lord
about *everything*? It's your decision if you accept such a gift, no one else's."

"I need to… to ask his advice." She turned to go.

"Hermione!" John's voice rose. "Why do you defer to this guy so much? Are you afraid of him! Does he hurt you!"

Hermione stiffened and whirled around. "No! He does not hurt me! How could you even suggest such a thing!"

"Then *why*? What do you even know about him! Have you even seen his face?"

"I…" Hermione froze. Her very being seemed to shift. Tension drained out of her. Anger and embarrassed panic faded away. Slowly and surely, princess Hermione formed again, cool, calm, and collected.

John's stomach dropped.

"I cannot give out my lord's secrets. I'm sorry, Heir Potter."

Damn. So close.

"I will consider your gift and let you know soon." And with that, Hermione turned around again and left the carriage, heading back towards the middle of the train.

John watched her go before heading back to his own compartment, in which waited a girl who definitely hadn't rejected his declaration of intent gift.

Susan smiled somewhat shyly as he entered and played with the citrine and onyx encrusted bracelet around her wrist. "Any luck?"

John shook his head. "She clammed up as soon as I asked."

Susan frowned. "Well, Auntie could only haul her in for veritaserum if Slytherin had actually been convicted of a crime, anyway."

John sat down heavily on the bench opposite the red-haired Bones heiress. "Still, you said she would only do that if Hermione had admitted she knew who Slytherin was."

Susan nodded slowly.

John smiled. "I'm sure I'll have more chances to get her to admit it."

Susan looked down at a small notebook. "What about the polyjuice idea?"

John tapped his knee and looked out of the window. "If we can get a strand of Slytherin's hair, or nail clipping, or *something*, then yes — pop polyjuice, and instantly find out Slytherin's actual identity, but getting that hair…" he looked back at Susan. "…I don't have a clue."

The two sat in silence for a bit.

Susan was the first to break it. "So, Granger actually refused to say? She didn't just say no?"

"Yeah, she refused to say one way or the other."

"Doesn't that mean that she probably *has* seen his face?"
John considered this for a moment. "It might," he finally conceded. "Why?"

"I was just thinking that instead of polyjuicing to be Lord Slytherin, we could polyjuice as
Hermione and talk to Slytherin while he's around. You never know, he might let something slip."

John chewed his cheek and thought. "Risky, but it might work. Certainly less risky than a love potion."

Susan violently shook her head and half brandished her thirteen inch Hazel and unicorn hair wand. "No love potions, John, that's just wrong."

John grinned and raised his hands. "I know, I know, I'd never do that to Hermione."

"Good."

He lowered his hands and looked out of the window again. Still though, too much was going
differently not to dig deeper. Not having Hermione this time round was killing him and she was
looking to be doing even better this time around, too. He spotted Susan staring at him in the
window's reflection. Mmmmm…. He looked back at Susan again, who blushed under his intense
gaze. Maybe…. He took a deep breath. "Say, Susie, how would you like some private duelling
lessons?"

Susan's eyes widened. "Private duelling lessons?"

John nodded.

"With you?"

He nodded again.

"Mister rumoured-to-have-taken-out-his-entire-duelling-team?"

"Yes."

Susan broke out into an ear splitting grin. "Sign me up, Heir boy-who-lived."

— DP & SW: TFoP —


LORD SLYTHERIN BUYS SCOTTISH ISLAND

Yesterday afternoon, a spokesman for the ministry confirmed that Gairsay Island, the ninety-ninth
largest island in the Scottish Orkneys, is now the newest land in Magical Britain, and the largest
such land transfer from muggle to magical in over one-hundred years.

The ever masked and mysterious Lord Slytherin has been making moves towards the building of a
manor for his newly resurrected house for the last six months and, with this purchase, has sent a
clear message to those few who still doubt his seriousness.

In a statement sent to the Prophet, Lord Slytherin said that he, "couldn't be happier with his
choice," and that, "establishing the future seat of Slytherin House so close to the Scottish
Highlands, and to Hogwarts, was deliberate."

But Hogwarts to the South-West isn't the only well known magical institution close to Slytherin's
new land. Azkaban Prison lies to the far North and East off the Shetland Islands, well into the
North Sea, and Gairsay Island is now also the closest magical land to the formidable and forbidding fortress.

Floor plans for Slytherin Manor, filed with the ministry during the land transfer process, and marking the future Slytherin Manor as the largest magical manor in the country, include a two story circular ballroom and entertaining space. Whether 200 km between them and hell on earth will be far enough for future guests remains to be seen, but if there's one thing we know about Lord Slytherin, it's to expect the unexpected.

Just two weeks ago, Slytherin appeared for his first ever public social event, the Greengrass Winter Festival, in which he and his betrothed and vassal—Heiress Daphne Greengrass (12) and Miss Hermione Granger (12)— successfully caught Lord James Potter in his stag animagus form and Lady Pandora Lovegood in her flying squirrel animagus form, in a gruelling two hour hunt through the Greengrass Forest (more details on page 14).

Slytherin Manor is scheduled to begin construction in the next few weeks and to be finished in one year—just in time for the 1992 end of year winter festival and associated social highlights—and is slated to be costing 112,000 Galleons (£5.6 million).

BOY WHO LIVED TO FACE SQUIB TWIN IN DUELLING TOURNAMENT

John Potter, the boy who lived and defeater of He Who Must Not Be Named, is apparently taking his heroic past to heart and stepping up as Gryffindor's first year duelling spot — and he's not there just because of his name either, oh no. An informed source told the Prophet that, "John Potter is a duelling prodigy," and that rumours said he'd "defeated several members of his team, even those older than him." Even wilder rumours circulate about our favourite hero, including such unlikely tales as him defeating his entire duelling team, one after the other, all the way up to the seventh years. When asked about the likelihood of such a claim being true, long time duelling expert Mister Samuel Ratherberk (46), smiled and suggested that, "Some people may have been reading too many boy who lived adventure books."

But perhaps what's most interesting about the upcoming Hogwarts Duelling Tournament, is that John Potter will be facing off against his own twin brother, Harry, who recently returned to the wizarding world after growing up with Lady Lilly Potter's muggle relatives. The little known Harry Potter (11) was long considered a squib, but was lucky enough to receive his Hogwarts letter last July and was subsequently sorted into Slytherin House. When asked about such a match up Mister Ratherberk said, "I'm surprised anyone mistaken for a squib could get onto the Slytherin duelling team, considering the usual fierce competition for the slot and the pride the House takes in its team." What does that say about Harry's chances against his more famous brother? This reporter, for one, will be watching with interest.

The Hogwarts Duelling Tournament takes place on Saturday, April 4th in the Hogwarts Duelling Arena and is watched by many of the students, faculty, parents, interested members of the public, and scouts from the professional duelling circuit.

Dumbledore lowered and folded the paper and watched his many students file into the great hall for the welcome back feast from where he sat at in the middle of the head table.

So, Slytherin was starting to build his own stronghold only a few hundred kilometres from Hogwarts. That was a situation that would require careful observation. Luckily, he knew a few people who could be counted on for that task. His opinions on Slytherin kept yo-yoing back and forth and he just could not seem to pin down what he thought of the man. Sometimes Slytherin seemed to be just another politician, albeit one who refused to show his face, and other times he seemed to be… something else… something much, much worse — and not knowing which was
maddening.

The man tortured those who crossed those he protected, as shown by his treatment of young Volf. He happily used those who were most vulnerable, as shown by his vassaling the Grangers and his buying and enforcing the horribly immoral debt of a muggleborn prostitute. And he was happy to ruthlessly manipulate events for his own benefit, as shown by his (and it was almost certainly his) strangling of the entire British market of a specific medicinal herb, fresh mandrake, just to keep Severus out of commission for whatever unknown machination he was playing. Albus had gone so far as to send an agent of his own out to track down an independent supplier of the herb and smuggle some into the country. Hopefully that would arrive soon.

However, the most troublesome thing Slytherin had done was ban the Hogwarts house elves from spying on students — a masterfully played move, making use of all three top families of the Dark, Gray, and Light, managing, however briefly, to unite them all against him.

Right now, Dumbledore needed information on a certain Harry Potter, and not having the elves available was annoying. The ghosts refused to spy for him, and the paintings were only of limited usefulness. It was ironic that Slytherin had unknowingly deprived him of his best tool to ensure that Harry Potter did not get any closer to the masked Lord in question.

Dumbledore frowned as the final students filed in and he saw the true boy who lived laughing and chatting right in the middle of the Gray faction at the far end of the Slytherin table. He couldn't allow that to continue. It was far too dangerous. He picked up his goblet and swirled the liquid inside. Maybe it was time for him to take a more hands on approach and see what was going on for himself.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Later that night, after the welcome back feast had finished and the students herded back to their common rooms, Daphne Greengrass, the ice princess of the Gray, sat upright against her four poster bed's headboard with her knees to her chest, hugging the massive fluffy snake Harry had given her at the Winter Festival. The rest of the dormitory had long ago turned in, but she was still fully dressed in her expensive school robes.

"Tempus," she whispered, wand held in her off hand.

10:58

She squeezes the toy snake a little tighter.

"Tempus."

10:58

"Tempus."

10:59

After moving Angelystor with the help of the Black Heiress, Harry had gone back to those muggles of his. Daphne hadn't seen him until the train ride back, and while they had talked on the train and during the feast, it had been the polite back and forth of two political agents, each playing carefully choreographed roles, rather than the relaxed peacefulness she liked to enjoy with her future lord and best male friend.

"Tempus."
Daphne's eyes lit up. She quietly untangled herself from her fluffy snake, slipped to the edge of the bed, and drew back the curtains.

Hermione's head poked through the gap between her own curtains and the two exchanged an excited nod, although she thought she also detected a hint of anxiety from her friend.

They tiptoed down to a quiet and empty common room and Daphne gave a little squeak when a hand reached out of nowhere and tugged at her robes. A parting opened in the world and Harry quickly motioned her and Hermione under his invisibility cloak, which they both quickly scuttled under.

Harry held a finger to his lips and motioned them to the common room door, through the castle, across the ground, and up to the whomping willow. Harry cast a quick spell at the tree and it's threatening trembling ceased. He then led them both down into a secret passageway.

Now freed from the cloak, Hermione tapped her on the shoulder, caught her eye, and motioned to ask her if she could move aside so that Hermione, now biting her bottom lip, could get in front of her.

Daphne nodded and moved to let her friend walk just behind Harry.

"Um, Harry?" Hermione sounded hesitant — worried even.

"Yes, Hermione?" Harry continued leading them down the dark corridor.

"This morning, on the train…" She trailed off.

"Yes?"

"… Your brother offered me a declaration of intent gift."

Daphne couldn't stop herself from letting out a small gasp.

"Turn it down." Harry's voice was flat and expressionless and as uncompromising as an iron bar.

Daphne saw Hermione's shoulders visibly relax and her voice, when it next spoke, was more cheerful then she'd heard all day. "Yes, Harry."

They walked in silence for a few more moments.

"Just out of curiosity," Harry started, "what was the gift?"

"A first edition copy of *Hogwarts a History.*"

"Mmmm." Daphne could hear the smile in Harry's voice. "Then I will have make sure your gift is suitably better, won't I?"
"My gift?" Hermione squeaked.

"For your birthday."

"Oh, right." Hermione's voice calmed down again, but Daphne was sure she heard a hint of disappointment laced into the forced nonchalance and relief.

Daphne smirked and shook her head — and Hermione had the temerity to tease her about the fluffy snake.

After several more minutes, Harry stopped them. "We're almost there. Hermione?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Remember this — The Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin's divination classroom is in the top floor of the shrieking shack."

Hermione nodded.

Daphne grinned. She already knew the new fidelius secret from when Harry had set it up just a few weeks ago.

A minute later, they arrived at the shrieking shack's top floor and were met by an incredibly bubbly pregnant ghost.

"Harry! You're here! And you've brought another friend."

Harry smiled and held Hermione's hand as though they were at a formal ball, climbing up the rickety stairs. "Angelystor, may I present Miss Hermione Granger, Vassal of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin and my personal close, close friend."

Hermione smiled and curtseyed, Angelystor clapped happily, and everyone exchanged greetings, happy to be finally getting to where they'd spent so much time and effort working towards.

Angelystor floated over to where Harry had set up some desks and chairs in mock imitation of a classroom. Dust tickled Daphne's nose. By the window, the tiny tree cutting from the Llangernyw yew to which Alexandra Black had bound Angelystor sat in its plant pot.

Daphne took one of the seats and looked at the ghost expectantly. She might not quite have Hermione's thirst for forgotten knowledge — her friend was now practically bouncing in her seat — but she couldn't help feel excited anyway. It wasn't every day you learned secret spells and the Greengrasses didn't give their children access to the Greengrass magic until their thirteenth birthday.

Angelystor gave an exaggerated cough. "I thought I'd start by going over the different types of divination and what I can and can't teach you."

Harry nodded.

"Right then. First there's seership — that's the skill of using the inner eye to see thing far away from you, either in space or in time. That's what most people think of when they think of divination, at least, they did in my time."

"Our time too I think," Daphne said.

Angelystor nodded. "Then there's sensing — that's using magic as a kind of echo location to detect
various types of things."

"Like homenum revelio?" Harry asked.

"Exactly like homenum revelio. That's one of the spells I was going to teach you."

Harry smiled. "Already know that one."

Daphne frowned. "I don't."

"My neither," Hermione added.

"Well, we'll get to them soon enough." Angelystor drifted back and forth as though she were pacing, hand under her chin, elbow resting on her other folded arm. "Thirdly, there's warding, at least those wards used to gather information."

"Detection wards?" Hermione asked.

"They're a good example, yes. And finally, there are associated charms and enchantments which improve your senses directly. For example, 'visus caligno', or the true night vision charm."

"True night vision…" Harry muttered, his eyes gleaming in the moon and ghost light. "…brilliant."

Hermione straightened in her chair. "Umm… Professor?"

Angelystor giggled. "Just Angelystor, or Angel if you want."

"Okay, ah… Angel. What are some of the seership spells you can teach us?"

Daphne saw Harry lean forward eagerly in his chair.

"Assuming you can successfully open your inner eye, I was trained in three spells. The first was the 'Eye of Kilrogg—'"

Daphne perked up. She remembered reading about that spell before in the library. It summoned an invisible eyeball that could float through walls and wards, and which the caster could see through.

"—The second was 'mirror seership', and the third was 'threat seeing.'"

Harry tapped on his desk. "Is it possible to focus on those three first?"

"We can do that, although it's more normal to focus on learning occlumency first."

"We all know advanced occlumency."

Angelystor made a surprised smile. "Really? That's wonderful. Oh, that will make everything so much easier. Mmmmm…" She took a thinking pose. "let's start with threat seeing — that's the easiest to learn and it gives us a good idea of your ability to open your inner eye."

Daphne and Hermione eagerly nodded and soon they and Harry each had a crystal ball in front of them.

"The wand incantation is 'videt immimo,' the wand movement is three jabs diagonally upwards to the right, and a single small left spiral, along with the intention to know the severity of the threat you will face, all passed through your inner eye before being released from the tip of your wand and into the crystal ball at the exact end of the final spiral."
Ten minutes later, Daphne focused again on her crystal ball, finished the final spiral of her wand movement, and released her spell into the sphere. Nothing changed. She frowned. It wasn't the wand movements that were difficult — no, it was the whole 'pass your magic through your inner eye' business. Angelystor said it was a point just beyond where their magic flowed into their bodies from their cores, and that it should feel like trying to force their magic through a pinhole.

Daphne was sure she could feel *something* when she really focused on that point, but it was hard to get her magic to flow through it.

She glanced over at Harry and Hermione who each wore identical expressions of focused concentration and who both had similarly unremarkable results. That even Harry was having problems said a lot about how obscure what they were trying to do must be.

Daphne turned her attention back to her own crystal ball, closed her eyes and felt her magic flow into her body. It swirled through her. She knew she could mould it and direct it as needed, could even form intent strong enough for certain spells—like stupefy and protego—to materialise straight from her fingers without having to pass through her wand. Was that similar to what she had to do now?

She gently shepherded some of her magic back to the point magic flowed from her core and attempted to pool intent to... what? To solidify? To stay where it was? But this wasn't a spell she was trying to create... it was more like an advanced form of manipulating the very magic itself. What she needed was pressure — like when she cast a wandless spell and could feel the pressure of the spell at the tips of her fingers.

She forced the magic down through her self and up again, down and up, trying to find some point for the magic to push against. Again and again. Wait. There! It was tiny and almost impossible to feel, but it was there — a tiny point of pressure, of resistance, and she thought she recognised it from when she focused hard before.

She gathered the smallest amount of magic that she possible could and tried to find that point in her again. There! Okay. Now, pool intent to know threat severity, and push it through that point.

The tiny amount of magic flowed through the point and slowly swirled around the other side.

Okay, now keep it up.

Slowly, ever so slowly, a respectable amount of channelled magic started swirling around her body. Daphne carefully nudged it towards her wand arm, allowed it to flow up through her arm, into her hand, and started the wand movements — three diagonal jabs to the right and a small left spiral. "Videt immino." The spell easily flowed through her wand, seemingly almost pulled through by an enthusiastic hand, and bolted straight into the crystal ball, which shivered, and slowly started giving off a dim blue light.

Angelystor let out a gasp. "Daphne!"

Daphne let out a long breath and beamed.

Harry and Hermione looked up at her, the former with a smile, the latter with familiar competitive intensity.

"You did it! You actually did it!" The pregnant ghost floated over to her. "That's amazing! I didn't think any of you would get that for months, not even Harry! And it only took you a quarter hour!"

Daphne tried to not look too pleased with herself, but it was a loosing battle. Harry's eyes were
sparkling as he stood up and it was doing weird things to her insides. "Good instincts, I guess," she said, trying to wave it off.

Harry had now made his way over to her desk. He picked up the crystal ball and inspected it up close. "Well, there's nothing immediately hunting us down. Blue means no current threat, yes?"

Angelystor nodded. "Yes. And the brightness of the glow indicates how far into the future the threat is. We'd only have to be worried if the ball started glowing red."

Hermione had already doubled back down and was focusing with patronus like intensity over her own ball.

"Any tips you can give, Daphne?" Harry asked.

Daphne's smile grew even wider and that warm feeling from before grew stronger. She couldn't ever remember a time in all the years she'd known him, when she was actually better at something than Harry, and now *Harry* was asking for *her* help. She explained what she'd done with her magic to a listening Harry and a suddenly *fiercely* listening Hermione, who'd been distracted from her ball the moment Daphne started her mini lecture.

Angelystor then put her back to work on, 'opening her inner eye wider' while Harry and Hermione continued to try to open theirs even a bit.

By the end of their session, though, neither Harry nor Hermione had made any progress, and Hermione was in a right huff.

"Not everyone has the ability to open their inner eye, Hermione," Angelystor said, trying to console her friend. "And you've only been trying for a few hours. Maybe you'll get it next time?"

But it was still a grumpy Hermione who climbed into the bed opposite her own in the Slytherin first years girl's dormitory, and it wasn't until next morning that the enthusiastic 'learn *all* the spells' witch returned.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Albus Dumbledore invisibly crept along the passageways of Hogwarts in search of his quarry. He hated that he'd been reduced to this, and indeed, if anyone on the board of directors learned that he'd taken to following an eleven year old boy around while invisible... well... awkward wouldn't begin to describe it.

He soon found said eleven year old boy standing in a circle of his fellow Slytherins consisting of the Greengrass heiress, the Davis heiress, the muggleborn vassal, and Mister Zabini.

"But you *still* hang out with Malfoy and his ilk." The Davis heiress looked ticked off.

Harry Potter smiled. "Sure."

Davis growled. "You can't be *secretly* on our side, Potter. That's not how this works."

"Why not?"

Davis huffed and opened her mouth again.

The Greengrass heiress put a calming hand on Davis' shoulder. "Let it go, Tracey."

"Buuutttt Dappphhhhh," Davis whined.
Potter chuckled. "I'll catch you later. I have some things to sort out." And with that, he waved and left, heading back up the corridor.

Albus followed him and the last words he heard from the children of the Gray were, "I swear, Daph, if we lose him…"

The youngest Potter swung around a corner and marched down another passageway, Albus following closely behind. So, both the Dark and the Gray children were courting Harry, were they? That was troublesome, but at least Harry's unwillingness to publicly pick a side would give him time to manoeuvre.

Harry stopped just outside a seemingly random tapestry and pulled out his wand.

Albus's eyes lit up. If young Harry was in the habit of using his wand in the corridors, issuing him a detention so he could get a full evening with him would be easy.

This thought lasted only as long as it took the boy to jab the brother wand to Tom's and muttered, "homenum revelio."

Dumbledore froze and felt a familiar wave of magic sweep over him, singling him out, even while invisible, rending any form of concealment about as useful as a paper screen in a monsoon.

The boy glanced disinterestedly in his direction, turned, and walked off again, seemingly without a care in the world.

Albus stood there, rooted to the spot. "What the hell had that been?"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

It was the second Monday after the students returned to the castle, and Hermione was tidying up after the first club meeting of the first year muggleborns, in which they'd briefly started occlumency lessons, although not the full on 'Harry Potter Method'.

They didn't have a name for their group yet. Sophie Roper had suggested, "The Newblood Club," as she felt, 'muggleborn,' sounded like you had a mental birth defect. Justin, on the other hand, didn't like the idea of giving the phrase, 'pureblood,' legitimacy by defining themselves in relation to them. He preferred, "The Founder's Club," because, as he said, "we are all the founders of our own houses."

Hermione couldn't help liking that one — ‘Hermione Granger, Founder of the House of Granger’ — It had quite a nice ring to it.

Kevin Entwhistle had shrugged his large shoulders and said it was, "six of one and half a dozen of the other, you know?" to which Hermione had pointed out that if you took six of one and half a dozen of another, then you would still have two identically numbered sets of different things.

Dean Thomas had then jokingly bopped her on the head, resulting in an impromptu duel that she had easily won, hands down.

Hermione now stood in the empty classroom, shrinking and pocketing the trunk that contained the portrait of Daphne's grandmother. She heard the door creak open and idly turned her head, expecting to see Sophie, or maybe one of the others back again. What she wasn't expecting to see was Draco Malfoy, leaning against the door frame and wearing that same smirk he'd worn on the train.
"Heir Malfoy." A heavy feeling slowly formed in her stomach. Her wand softly slid into her hand from her holster.

Malfoy kicked off from the door. "Hello there, Granger. Fancy meeting you here." The door closed behind him with a soft little click. "You know, amazing thing... I was just minding my own business when suddenly, a muddle of mudbloods from all the houses strolls right past me, and I thought, 'well, that's something you don't see everyday — I wonder if I follow the stink they left behind them, if I'll find the mudblood princess,' and here you are."

Hermione stuck her nose up slightly and sniffed. "Can I help you, or are just here to bark?" She couldn't help but noticing Malfoy's own wand sliding into his hand.

Malfoy's smirk grew larger. "Whose to say I'm not here to bite?"

"Oh, please. We already had this conversation on the train."

"No, Granger," he drawled, "we had half a conversation on the train. We never finished it."

"You walked away."

"I saw no reason in having the second half of our conversation were other's would see."

Hermione was getting an uneasy feeling. "Well then?" She eyed the classroom's only exit, depressingly far away with Malfoy still standing between her and it.

"As I said on the train, I have no wish to be charged with assault, even as a minor — such a thing would be unseemly of someone in my position."

Hermione snorted.

"But that's okay, because after consulting with my lawyer"—and he said the word lawyer the way other people might say, 'mansion,' or 'diamonds,' or 'five-star luxury cruise'—"I have found a solution."

Hermione gripped her wand tighter. She really didn't like this.

Draco cleared his throat. "Just one moment, let me get my occlumency up..." His eyes went in and out of focus. "Ah, there we are. Article 67, clause 4A of the magical crimes and violence act, 1778. The ministry shall maintain and make available a list of spells, the offensive use of which is not considered assault, unless leading to grievous bodily harm as defined in Article 48, clause 1A of the act." Malfoy's smirk turned to a full on grin. "The prank clause."

Hermione's mind blanked out. "Prank?" she blinked. "You, Heir Draco Malfoy, of the Noble House of Malfoy, the leading family of the Dark, and the most self important and pretentious person on the planet, are planning to use prank spells?" The last bit was said in utter disbelief.

"The list was quite an eye opener, I must say — Spent a good chunk of the Winter Break reading it through."

Hermione ground her teeth together. "I'm honoured."

Malfoy smirked and produced a slip of paper from the inside of his robe. "Listen to this one — 'foot dangling jinx' — hoists the target up into the air and dangles them helplessly from one foot. Or this one — 'the terrets jinx' — forces the target to intermittently shout out loud expletives for the duration of the jinx." He looked up at her. "Must be quite embarrassing, that one."
Hermione narrowed her eyes.

"And the best bit about all these is that you can only fight back with prank spells of you own, or you're in big trouble, little vassal. How many prank spells does the prim and proper mudblood princess know, I wonder?"

Hermione scowled again. The answer was none and they both knew it.

"Oh, here's a good one," he continued. "Proper place jinx — forces the target to walk on their hands and knees for the duration of the spell. Hah! And this one is my favourite — Maiden's shame jinx, changes the target's hair colour to match their knickers."

Hermione froze, horrified.

Malfoy looked up, and smirked. "Only works on witches, naturally."

And suddenly, a bolt of yellow shot towards her and she only just raised a frantic shield in time. Another bolt of yellow splashed into her shield and she desperately pushed more magic into it. Bolt after bolt slammed into it and Hermione knew that if she didn't get out of there soon, her shields would fail and in the cramped and crowded space of the classroom, she'd be unable to dodge and would be quickly backed into a helpless corner.

Heart hammering in panic, she ran straight at and past Malfoy, lunging for the door and fiddling with the door knob, all while Malfoy laughed and laughed and poured spell after spell into her rapidly weakening shields. She yanked the door open and fled down the corridor, closely followed by a howling with laughter Malfoy, still raining spells on her all the way to empty Slytherin common room, filled with smirking students, before she finally barged it to the sanctuary of the girls dormitory and slammed the door behind her, where she collapsed onto her bed and angrily pummelled her pillow with her fists, eyes watering with humiliation, Malfoy's laughter still ringing in her burning red ears.

Minutes passed and she slowly stopped beating up the pillow and instead hugged it to her chest.

"Hermione?"

Slowly her tear stained face rose up off the sheets and turned to the familiar voice.

Daphne stood in the dormitory doorway looking at her in shock.

Hermione sniffed and soon found herself in a comforting, but rather hesitant hug with the other girl.

"What happened?" Daphne asked, shifting up behind her on the bed.

Hermione told her.

Daphne looked furious. "That bastard! What do you want to do about it?"

Hermione looked down at the floor. "I… I don't know. Maybe we should ask our lord."

Daphne paused then giggled. "No need to do that. We both know exactly what he would do."

Hermione looked up thought about it for a moment. Then her face hardened and she nodded. "Get help, get stronger, get revenge?"

Daphne nodded and smirked. "Close enough."
For the next few days, the Slytherin common room became a tense borderland, complete with buffer zones and trading ports, while Malfoy passed out wizarding photos showing a panicky Hermione fleeing from a gleeful Malfoy. Harry, as someone who flittered from the Gray to the Dark and back again, had discreetly summoned and burned the photos as quickly as they appeared, and then given Hermione a thick large tome titled *The Pranker's Compendium*.

For days afterwards, Daphne wouldn't let Hermione out of her sight, for which Hermione was grateful, and which was just as well, because Daphne had pushed out far ahead of him and Hermione in Divination, much to Hermione's chagrin. Neither he nor Hermione had managed to 'open their inner eye', and Harry was starting to suspect it wasn't worth it, considering they had Daphne who had succeeded, and who was already starting to learn the Eye of Kilrogg spell.

But while Hermione might be annoyed about having to watch her back 24/7, which only stressed her out more, considering she already had homework, healer training, muggleborn teaching, and divination, it was *nothing* to how Harry was feeling right now, as he moved through the school at a casual saunter, occasionally snapping off a homenum revelio, and noticing that his invisible pursuer, who had started occasionally following him a few days ago, and who was almost certainly Dumbledore, was *still* there.

Losing the man was difficult and time consuming and really starting to cramp his style. Not knowing what the man hoped to accomplish with this benny hill style rigmarole was really getting to him as well.

"It's not anything, John!"

Harry stopped dead just before he reached the next corner and flattened himself to the stone work.

"Don't give me that, Dean." His brother's voice filtered around the corner, sounding angry. "All our friends say they've seen you talking with her, a lot. What's up?"

Dean sounded exasperated. "Nothing's *up*. And if anything was *up* it would be none of your business."

Harry snapped off another homenum revelio and revealed the presence of the headmaster behind him and the two boys, Dean and John, around the corner.

"The Slytherins *are* my business — and Hermione is my business even more so." The voices started to get fainter and it was clear they were moving away.

"Well, why don't you talk to her yourself then? Then you can hear it from her that there's nothing *up*." The voices faded away and Harry carried on walking ahead, deciding not to follow the boys, pointedly ignoring the Headmaster behind him, and giving no hint that he cared for anything about that conversation apart from not becoming a part of it. He shrugged. Maybe he’d go to the library and finish his homework for charms. He was sure that standing still in a library watching an eleven year old write essays was exactly what Dumbledore wanted to do with his time.

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Lord Chief Auror Sirius Black leaned back in his office chair and shoved another parchment into the out tray. He reached for his in tray and grabbed the next parchment from the pile. Next to it stood a wizarding photograph of himself holding a happy four-year-old Alexandra in his arms, both
waving up at him. In the corner of the room, a massive magical cactus plant was starting to yellow.

The door burst open.

"Hey, Bolt." Sirius greeted his auror partner without looking up.

"Hey Sirius," Shacklebolt rumbled in his deep baritone. "Thought you should take a look at this — might become hot soon." He threw a document at him.

Sirius now looked up, caught the roll, unfurled it, and started reading. "Muggle smugglers?"

Shacklebolt nodded. "The boys down in the DoM tripped the keyword 'magic' three times in the official police interrogation transcripts. Things like 'he would appear like magic from behind trees,' and 'I don't know how he did it, it was like magic.'

Sirius frowned. " Doesn't seem like the kind of thing we would usually follow up on."

Shacklebolt grinned. "It isn't. But check who the perp fingered as his main supplier of smuggled goods."

Sirius's eyes scanned down the document. His eyes widened and he choked. "Malfoy!"

Shacklebolt laughed, a deep low rumble. "Indeed."

Sirius tapped the office desk and frowned. "As much as I wish it were true, that's just not something I see Lucius Malfoy getting involved in."

Shacklebolt continued to chuckle and shook his head. "No, I agree. But it massively raises the chance that there's a wizard at play, and that, along with the muggle authorities involvement, puts this firmly in our hands as a possible endangerment of the international statute of secrecy."

"Any leads?"

Shacklebolt shrugged. "Not at the moment — it's just a waiting game for us. Nothing might come of us it, but I thought I'd give you the up." He stepped back towards the door. "You need to get out of the office more, anyway. Take little Alex out to a quidditch match, or something."

Sirius looked around distractedly. "Ah, yeah, I should really do that, shouldn't I?" He moved a stack of parchments. "You don't know what happened to the file with the department's new shield maintenance contract do you?"

— DP & SW: TFiP —

Dumbledore invisibly jogged down the first floor corridor, quickly turned the next corner, and arrived in the empty castle entrance hall — the operative word being 'empty'. Damn. He'd lost the little snake... again!

— DP & SW: TFiP —

The moon shone in through the shrieking shack window. Daphne Greengrass focused intensely and tried to push more magic through her inner eye than she had ever pushed before.

She raised her wand and pointed it at the floor, just a few feet in front of her. "Profero oculus Kilrogge!"

Suddenly something really weird happened to her world. She looked both up and down, and saw
herself, looking at herself, and at a horribly ugly floating green eyeball the size of a bludger, all at the same time.

"Daphne! Well done!" Angelystor clapped and whooped.

Hermione let out a resigned sigh and gave her a wistful smile of congratulations. "Yes, well done. I guess we now know who the seer of the team is."

Daphne smiled back at her. "I promise to lend you my new super powers if you ever need them."

Hermione's wistful smile widened a bit.

Harry was hungrily circling the Eye of Kilrogg and Daphne couldn't help feel a little dizzy from following him in two places at once. "Yes," he muttered, "this is going to be just what we need. The range is extremely limited, but that's not a problem. We can work from the pipe network right next to the third floor. It can already pass through most wards…. Can you move it?"

Daphne looked towards Angelystor.

Angelystor coughed. "It's all will and intent. No fancy wand movements or incantations."

Daphne nodded, sat down in her chair and started learning to direct and control her new floating eyeball.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

While Daphne was settling down to practise with the floating eyeball, Harry stepped outside for a breath of fresh air and to get some business sorted. The winter festival had been productive in many ways, and one of those, was getting some fresh goods from Afghanistan. After all, mansions didn't pay for themselves.

Safe in the knowledge that the girls were protected by the fidelius, he wrapped himself in the invisibility cloak, and soared out across the Hogwarts grounds, all the way to his other fidelius property in Hogsmeade.

As he landed, he couldn't help but chuckle. He now had four fidelius charmed locations and he was already planning a fifth — the Black Library. The sheer overpowered nature of that spell boggled his mind. Luckily there were only three people in Magical Britain who could cast it, him being one of them.

He quickly grabbed his mobile phone, gave his loyal sooty owl some owl treats, and made his way back outside, before shooting of again into the mountains where the reception would be horrible, but the magic would be low.

He punched in the phone number and waited.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The phone rang.

PC Woodman, currently serving the graveyard duty for ogling the Inspector's wife longer than was polite, stared at the mobile phone in the evidence rack behind his desk in shock and disbelief.

He quickly picked up his own phone and punched a number in.

"Hey, Robert?"
"Charles! Curtis’ phone — the one to Malfoy — it's ringing!"

There was a sharp intake of breath. "Don't pick it up! Just leave it for the moment. I'll be there in two."

His connection clicked dead, and all the while the phone continued to ring.

PC Woodman stared at the ringing phone in bewilderment. The arrest of Curtis' and a good chuck on Britain's drug dealing elite had been all over the national news and in all the papers. What kind of hole would someone have to live in to not know that?

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry stared at the phone in mild annoyance. Curtis usually picked up pretty sharpish. Hopefully someone hadn't muscled in on his business while he'd been out of it. That would be awkward, but at least he'd have the philosopher's stone project in backup. Despite the great relationship he had with the Boneslicer Clan, he still didn't fancy testing how friendly they'd stay if he stopped paying his debts.

He punched the number into the device and tried again.

Click.

Finally.

"Hey, Malfoy," said the gruff voice Harry easily identified as Curtis Lawless from the other side, "that you?"

"Yes, Mister Lawless, it is me."

"Christ mate, thank god you called. I've had it up to 'ear with this lot. Listen, we need a whole lot of ships from you, understand? You can do it right?"

"Yes, I can do it. I have seventy kilos in my safe house, but I'm going to guess you need, what? Thirty-five?"

"Thirty-five is good — same rates as before."

Harry raised a single, slightly surprised eyebrow. "Sounds good on this end. Same meeting place as usual? 2:00am next Wednesday?"

"Yeah, alright. My boys will see you there."

"Right."

The phone clicked dead. Harry smiled, pocketed the phone, flew back to Hogsmeade, deposited the phone back on his desk, and flew back to the shrieking shack, to be met by a happy and bubbly Daphne who'd just managed to get the floating eyeball to zoom around the room and turn invisible on command.

As he happily waved good night to the girls at the entrance to the Slytherin dormitories, and climbed into his comfortable four poster bed, he couldn't help think that things were going really quite acceptably.

— DP & SW: TFoP —
"Granger."

Draco Malfoy had wondered if the mudblood meeting was a regular event and it turned out he'd been right. He had the mudblood princess boxed into the room again, and this time, he'd made sure to have Crabbe and Goyle on the other side of the door, holding it shut against all attempts to leave. Victory last time had tasted sweet. Victory this time, would be a full course banquet.

"Heir Malfoy," Granger said, looking at him nervously, fiddling with her beautifully crafted trunk before shrinking and pocketing it, and causing a slight tinge of jealousy to pass through him. No. He shook his head. Not jealousy — anger — yes, that's right — anger that someone so unworthy was allowed to possess such valuable artefacts.

He smirked. She looked like a trapped animal, the way her eyes flittered to the exit, the way she stood, the way she breathed. How good would she look in a cage? He chuckled and shook his head.

"Might I ask what's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing," he drawled, raising his wand. "just wondering what colour your hair's going to change." And with that, he let loose the first of his spells.

Granger brought up a shield like expected, and it splashed off it. He fired a second spell and again the spell hit the shield and did nothing. But unlike last time, Granger seemed to be making no frantic bolt to the door. Heh. He casually threw a tourettes jinx. All the easier for him.

Then, suddenly, with a flick of her wrist, Granger sent a bright blue spell directly at him.

Shocked, Draco raised a shield of his own and the spell splashed off of it. "Granger!"

"What?" Granger took a step forward and suddenly Draco noticed that her whole stance had changed. Gone was the nervousness, the darting eyes, the bent stance — instead she stood like a jungle cat getting ready to pounce.

"Y-you can't! You'll get into trouble!"

"Oh, Malfoy." Granger tilted her head to the side. "That was last week."

An orange spell splashed off his shield.

"That was a soprano jinx," Granger said, as though she were answering a question in class. "It raises the tone of your voice to almost a squeak."

A fluorescent pink spell was next. Draco cringed.

"That was a rapunzel jinx — causes your hair to grow a foot a minute until it wears off."

Draco felt his shield weaken as a bright orange spell hit it. Damn how powerful was Granger?

"And that one," Granger said with an almost demented grin, "was the oedipus jinx…"

Draco gave her a look of horror.

"Oh, I see you know what that one does," she said sweetly. "I'm sure the world will love to know how much you think about your Mummy, Heir Malfoy."

And suddenly Draco didn't have time to do anything but shield and try to cast offensive spells wherever he could, which wasn't often.
A soprano spell clipped him through his shield and he gave a little squeaky yelp while barely managing to side step an unknown rainbow beam of magic. He sweated. This was a mistake. A bad mistake.

Granger smirked and his nerve broke. He shielded one more time and dove for the door, grabbing for the handle and twisting madly, only for it to not move a Merlin damned inch. He rattled the doorknob. "Let me out!" he squeaked.

"No way, Granger!" came a muffled shout from the other side.

A spell shattered his shield behind him.

"It's me, you idiots! Draco!"

"It doesn't sound like you."

He rattled the door again, and turned around to shield again.

"It's a spell!"

Granger was now only a dozen feet away, smiling like a demon from the nether world.

"Sure, it is."

He had just enough time to say, "Granger, how about it we—" before sparkly lights flashed towards him and a half dozen hexes hit him, one after the other, and his world become one whirling ball of weirdness.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Later that night, the Slytherin common room was almost perfectly divided. A third were howling with laughter, a third were quietly sniggering, and the final third were doing their best to look outraged while occasionally hiding a snort into a pillow or a giggle behind a raised book.

The wizarding photos this time showed a Draco Malfoy with gorgeous pink tresses so long they dragged on the floor, wearing his fine robes as normal, but lined with lace and frills, with deer antlers on his head, walking on his hands and knees, vomiting up slugs, with pink polka dotted skin, and occasionally shouting something that the lip readers of the room could identify as, "I love my Mummy!"

"You see," Tracey giggled, sitting with the rest of the Gray students to the right of the large empty Slytherin throne in the middle of the common room, "this is why you should declare yourself for us, Potter. Because we're awesome."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

It was the next afternoon, just after lunch, and Harry had to agree with Tracey pronouncement the previous night…. They were awesome.

Harry casually ducked behind a tapestry secret passageway, ran at full tilt up the corridor, turned the next corner, arrived into a tall hallway, disillusioned and silenced himself, wiped his cloak around him, and flew up into the rafters, sitting himself on the huge wood beam and dangling his cloaked feet over the edge.

Seconds later, Dumbledore barged into the hallway, looking around in obvious frustration.
Harry stayed quiet and watched as the man slid his own wand from its holster.

"Homenum Revelo."

Harry smirked.

After a few more moments, a rather confused looking Dumbledore left, and Harry descended back down to the ground.

He made his way towards the library, hoping to squeeze in some restricted section reading before dinner — but as he arrived, he spotted just who was facing off against each other just outside the library door.

"C'mon, Hermione!" His brother's voice wheedled.

"I said no — I'm not interested."

Wow, Hermione was attracting all the trouble these days, wasn't she? First Draco, now John.

John Potter ran his hand through his hair. "But why? Is that what Slytherin told you?"

"That," Hermione said in a frosty tone, "is none of your business."

Harry surreptitiously drew closer, keeping his wand in hand, just in case.

"I just don't understand how you could allow someone so much power over you. It's not like you."

"Again, none of your business."

John Potter looked away, obviously frustrated. "Shouldn't Slytherin want his vassal to pair up with someone like me? I'm the heir to an Ancient and Noble House, one of the wealthiest houses in Britain, with family magic going back over a thousand years. You couldn't ask for a better suitor."

Harry's lip curled. Oh, that whiny look on his brother's face when he wasn't getting his way.

"Have you considered the idea that maybe my lord simply wishes me to wait until I'm older before accepting such gifts? No one else is giving them out yet."

John scoffed. "Puuurlease. Slytherin signed contracts with two witches when they were eight. I don't think he much cares about that."

"Well, if you weren't going to accept my reasoning then you shouldn't have asked for it," Hermione snapped, before turning and starting to walk away.

"You won't be able to run away forever, Hermione!" John called from behind her. "This is part of our culture!"

Harry followed the furious Hermione around the castle until he managed to get her alone.

"Harry," Hermione whispered softly when he finally whipped the cloak off himself and dragged her into an empty classroom. "Did you hear all that?"

"Yeah," Harry smiled. "He didn't look too happy did he?"

Hermione huffed and folded her arms. "Can you believe him! I wanted to hex him to hell and back for that last comment. As though the only reason I couldn't possibly want his stupid gift is because
I'm a stupid muggleborn who doesn't understand the culture. GrrAAh!!!" She threw her hands in
the air. "It makes me so mad!"

Harry chuckled. "Well, at least he won't be able to force anything. Even if he somehow managed to
trap your parents. We made sure of that."

Hermione stopped silently ranting and shivered. "Oh Merlin, you don't think he'd try something
like that, do you?"

"I wouldn't put it past him, but probably not." Harry frowned. "I'd advise checking your food and
drink for love potions from now on anyway, just in case."

Hermione nodded. "Are you sure I can't just Hex him to hell like I did Malfoy?"

Harry grinned. "As tempting as that is, we still want to stay under his radar as much as possible, at
least for the moment. And besides, it may not be illegal, but you might still get detention or
whatnot. Best not to give Dumbledore any good reason to get you in trouble.

Hermione pouted.

Harry smiled "One day, Hermione, I promise. John's time will come."

A few minutes previously, John Potter marched away from the Library in a bad mood. Getting
back with Hermione was his best plan for sniffing out information on Slytherin. If she wasn't
willing to let him near her, as much as that hurt, then he'd have to try other tactics.

He walked up a flight of stairs and down a corridor. Maybe he'd go talk with Susan during History
of Magic. She'd have some ideas. It was just annoying they were in different houses so he couldn't
have her around all the time.

He was just walking by the hospital wing, lost in thought, when the main door to the wing opened
and who should walk out, but junior death eater number one.

John smirked and slowed down as Malfoy turned and spotted him. "Well, hello there."

"Potter," Malfoy spat. "What do you want?"

"Not much." John looked Malfoy over. "What were you doing in there? You don't look ill."

"None of your business."

Did Malfoy just blush?

John grinned. "Heh, bet someone just hexed your annoying arse."

"T-that's…"

"Oh Merlin, they did! HAH! Who was it? I need to thank them."

"They were just lucky!"

"Sure, they were." John smirked. "If they were so lucky, how about you duel me? I could really do
with letting out some frustration."
Malfy gave him a deadpanned look. "I'm not duelling you, Potter. I've heard the rumours of how powerful you are."

John raised an eyebrow. There was the good old Hogwarts rumour mill hard at work again. "And you... believe them?"

Malfy folded his arms. "Yes, I do."

Wow. That was surprising. He smirked. "So, Slytherin is ready submit before the might of Gryffindor?"

Malfy smirked back. "Hardly."

"Hardly?"

"Yes." Malfy turned his back on him and started to walk off. "After all," he glanced back once more before walking off again, "we have our own Potter."

John stared after him with his mouth hanging open. Then he started to laugh — huge belly laughs that erupted from deep within him and echoed away down the large stone hallway. As if his pathetic little Slytherin twin brother could ever win in a duel, against him.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne stood in front of the massive mirror that Harry had hung on the wall of the shrieking shack. Behind her, Harry and Hermione sat at the small divination classroom desks, the former working on paperwork, the latter switching between two different books, the first, 'The healer's Art — Twenty-sixth Edition,' and the second, 'If You Can't Beat Them, Prank Them.'

By Daphne's side, Angelystor gave her an encouraging smile.

Daphne shut her eyes, passed her magic through her inner eye, formed the intent of the spell, made a delicate wand motion towards the mirror, and focused on the three Ds of apparition — destination, determination, and deliberation.

The mirror's surface blurred, and the next moment, was showing her not her own head and body, but Harry's, still bent over his desk.

She grinned.

"Well done, Daphne!" Angelystor clapped.

Daphne let out a deep breath.

"You got it?" Harry had set his quill down and looked up.

Daphne preened. "Yes, I did."

"Excellent. It's all range and control from here on then?"

Angelystor nodded. "Yes, although, because the mirror spell can't pass through wards, even weak ones, we'll have to practise range from outside of the fidelius charm."

Harry frowned. "That's... I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that."

"Oh, Harry." Daphne made doe eyes at him. "I'm sure it will be safe if we do it just outside the
shack. Then, if danger comes we can just duck back inside the charm. I can even keep casting the threat seeing spell on my crystal ball, just to make sure nothing dangerous is going to happen."

"Well, I'm not too comfortable about relying on that threat seeing spell like that. Exactly what it sees as a threat might be suspect… buuuttttt…"

Daphne continued to make doe eyes at him.

"Oh, alright. As soon as we get the mirror set up."

Daphne smiled brilliantly at him. "Thanks, Harry!"

"But not tonight. I've got an appointment soon."

Daphne smiled and turned back to the mirror. That was fine with her. She would get this whole divination thing working perfectly and then she'd finally stop being the team member whose only use was as a Daughter of the Ancient and Noble House of Greengrass.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry left the Shrieking Shack in high spirits. Daphne's divination studies were coming on amazingly well. At this rate, they'd be ready to start exploring all the bits of the third floor corridor in just weeks. Once they knew exactly what they were up against, they could hatch a plan to crack it wide open and swipe the ultimate prize, right under Dumbledore and Voldie's big-fat and non-existent noses.

He chain apparated all the way to his secret cave safe in the Hebrides, grabbed seven-thousand galleons (£350,000) of Afghan white, popped an ageing potion, transfigured his face to his Malfoy-esque smuggler persona, and then chain apparated to a spot not far away from his trade spot.

The night was perfectly still. Clouds moved across the sky, alternatively bathing the land in moonlight, or cloaking it in darkness. The chill air tried to bite though his warming charms, and made visible his long slow breaths.

Slowly letting his body wash away the accumulated toxins from chain apparating up and down the country, Harry walked down the country lane, with its hedgerows on either side, and into the forest, on the other side of which, was his meeting point with Curtis' men.

"Homenum revelio."

Nothing. Not that he was expecting anything, but it always paid to make sure. The last thing he wanted was a gunshot wound to deal with. He always kept his wand in hand over a long sleeve during these exchanges. If they ever did try anything funny, they'd be quite surprised when they found their bullets stopping in mid air between them.

He trudged on a bit further.

"Tempus."

1:57am

Okay, that should be long enough.

He silenced himself, and apparated some five hundred metres south, right behind a random tree around the clearing in the woods.
"Homenum revelio."

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on edge. There were two people standing in the middle of the clearing, like usual, but there was also one person standing behind him, almost outside the range of his detection spell. Almost, but not quite.

What was he doing there? A scout maybe? A watcher? Someone Curtis assigned to make sure the men he sent were doing their jobs? He was too far away to interfere directly with him, and wouldn't be able to see him through all this underbrush, so that didn't make much sense either.

He hefted the heavy bag from his shoulder. Whatever. He'd deal with it.

Harry stepped out from behind the tree and walked towards the two men, making sure to keep his physical shield cast in front of him.

"Malfoy," Goon A greeted him with a grunt.

"You have the money?"

Goon B nodded. "You have the goods?"

He nodded, and flashed the inside of the rucksack.

Suddenly, magic flowed over him, very familiar magic. His eyes widened slightly. An anti apparition ward.

"Malfoy? You okay?"

He looked the man straight in the eyes, watched memories flash across his consciousness, saw the trap, and moved.

Goon A clutched his head, cried out, and stumbled back.

Goon B shouted.

Harry wandlessly banished both of them backwards with a swing of his rucksack holding arm.

And then, seemingly from nowhere, a huge dog leapt from the underbrush straight at him.

Startled, Harry stepped backwards and went for a disillusionment.

The dog transformed into Lord Black complete with Auror shield.

Fuck.

Harry's disillusionment activated.

Lord Black started a stunner chain.

Harry flicked the first stunner away, dodged the second, and swung his cloak around him on the third, watching with wide eyes as the stunner hit the cloak, travelled along the inside of the water-like cloth, and out the other side, barely missing his shoulder, but giving him just enough time to point his wand at the ground, cast the most powerful smell obliterating tergeo spell he could, and fly up into the air, tracing his path back to the tree and casting lessor, silent tergeo spells as he went.
Shouts and cries went up all over the clearing.

Just as he reached the tree, a second wave of magic flowed over him. A containment ward. His heart pounded. Trapped. Trapped! TRAPPED! He shook himself. NO! Not trapped.

Sweating, fighting down the urge to panic. Harry flew at top speed to a random point in the forest, landed, unshrunk his trunk, climbed inside, flinging his cloak over the trunk as he descended, grabbed his miniature ward stones, climbed back out, set up the stones in a one metre square around him, sat crosslegged on the ground under the cloak and started to meditate.

For twenty minutes, the shouts of men and the casting of dozens of different types of detection spells rang out across the clearing and through the woods. Everything from homenum revelio, to water spells, and chalk, Animagus Revelio, and elemental wind, rain, and fog spells.

Harry sat, his heart beating like mad, as one auror, tall, bald, and black, walked past him, not twenty metres away before continuing on.

Eventually, he took a long breath, pointed his wand at the wardstone standing right between his crossed legs in the middle of the square metre space, summoned all his magical powers, and hissed, "Fidelius Occultum."

The fidelius charm activated.

Harry let out a sigh of relief.

Safe.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

It had taken the auror team three whole hours to finally give up — often with Alex's father sniffing around the fidelius charm, making puzzled, doggy whining noises. Needless to say, Daphne, Hermione, and Angelystor were out of their minds with worry when he Morse coded them his situation on his lightning bolt ring, but the desperate hug he'd gotten when he finally stumbled back into the shrieking shack had left him feeling strangely okay about the situation.

"You mean, the money to build the manor, came from drug smuggling?" Hermione sat crossed legged on her chair, nibbling her lip, and looking worried.

Harry nodded. "Safest way I had. It's not like I personally go around doing the stuff that drug dealers do. I just moved things from point A to point B."

"You were nearly caught, Harry."

Harry cringed. "Well, it hardly makes any difference, Curtis seems to be out of the game now. He was fifty percent of the business, and I never could find other buyers with the time I had."

Daphne had sat herself on one of the desks and was idly swinging her legs back and forth. "So, what's our position then?"

"We've got fourteen thousand galleons (£700,000) in stock. Assuming nothing happens to my other buyers, that'll be liquidated in the next twelve months."

"And how long will that last us?"

Harry wrinkled his nose. "Depends on how much we spend — mostly on how much our house
elves end up costing us. But assuming we can't get the philosopher's stone… we'd be in deep trouble by this time next year."

The three pre-teens stood and sat in thoughtful silence for a moment while their pregnant ghost seer hovered nearby.

"What about you, Angel?" Harry asked. "Can you offer any insights for the future?"

Angelystor slowly shook her head. "It doesn't work like that. I'm sorry, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "Oh well." He turned to Daphne and grinned. "So, it's all on you now. No pressure."

Daphne scowled.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

It was all on her.

Daphne sat in defence against the dark arts and stared at Lord Voldemort who was currently demonstrating the correct way to use a tripping jinx to interrupt an enemy incantation.

Hermione sat next to her and she couldn't help notice that her friend was attracting several stares from persons of interest, most notably, Draco Malfoy and John Potter. Both seemed to be trying to bore into Hermione's head with the intensity of their gazes.

Both boys, however, would occasionally switch their gazes to Harry — Malfoy with a look of cold calculation and John Potter with one of scorn and derision.

Harry, sitting in front of her and Hermione as usual, ignored them both and kept his attention on Voldemort, who had just banished away yet another hanging garlic bulb, with a flick of his hand, and a disgusted look on his face.

Daphne couldn't help wondering just how much of quirrell was left, and how much was nothing more than rotting possessed corpse.

She shivered.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

After defence, Harry stepped outside the classroom, nodded to Daphne and Draco in turn, and headed off down the corridor. As soon as he was out of eyesight, he whipped out his wand, as he'd made a constant habit of over the past few weeks.

"Homenum revelio."

An invisible presence faded into his consciousness.

Damn. He casually started making his way towards one of the many maze like sections of the castle, determined to quickly lose his annoying pursuer. Really… didn't Dumbledore have more important things to do?

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione had barely parted ways from Daphne after defence before she turned a corner into a zigzag corridor and the annoying person stepped out from behind the other corner.
"Hello, Granger." John Potter leaned on a stone pillar by his corner with his legs crossed and his arms folded in the universal, 'I'm a dick' position.

She sighed. "What is it this time?"

"I thought I'd give it another go to have you accept my gift."

Hermione folded her own arms. "I thought I told you I'm not interested."


Hermione narrowed her eyes.

John Potter opened it. "Listen to this! Handwritten annotations by the original author themselves. Hidden secrets purged from later editions." His voice dipped to a mysterious drawl. "Think of the knowledge, Hermione. Wouldn't you like to read it?"

"Yes," Hermione said through clenched teeth, "I would. It's very nice. But I'm still not accepting it. All you're doing is pissing me off…"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry ducked into a secret, parseltongue only secret passageway, ascended a steep spiral staircase, walked along a dusty corridor, descended another spiral staircase, came out the other side, and removed his disillusionment, silencing charms, and cloak. Heh. That one had been easy. Dumbles was getting sloppy. He walked up the passageway whistling as he went, until a familiar and most unwelcome voice caught his attention.

"Think of the knowledge, Hermione. Wouldn't you like to read it?"

Carefully, he crept up the passageway until he reached the corner, leant around it, and saw his brother's back, squaring off against Hermione and waving a book around.

"Potter?" A faint voice called from where he'd just come.

He whirled around. It was Tracey. He put a finger to his lips and motioned her over.

"Yes," Hermione said through clenched teeth, "I would. It's very nice. But I'm still not accepting it. All you're doing is pissing me off…"

Tracey sidled up to him, glanced around the corner, ducked back, and gave him a look of confused suspicion.

"Maybe you just need a little bit more… incentive" John Potter flourished another book so he now held one in each hand. "This is a list of all the books in the Potter Library. You could go through it and choose one for yourself."

Harry narrowed his eyes. He wouldn't mind a look through that himself.

Hermione stuck her nose up in the air. "I'm not accepting any gift from you no matter what it is."

"Oh, come on! John waved the new book around in obvious frustration. What's so bad about me that you, Hermione — Jean — Granger, would refuse a pick-any-book-you-want from one of the best magical libraries in Britain. It's not as if you're actually agreeing to a contract or anything!"
Hidden behind John, Harry smirked. Beside him, Tracey shot him another suspicious look.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Draco couldn't believe he'd forgotten his book in the defence classroom. It was exactly that kind of sloppy mistake that he didn't need. His standing had taken enough of a beating after what Granger had done to him the other week, thank you very much.

He marched up the corridor and was nearing a zigzag corner when a hated voice stopped him dead.

"It's not as if you're actually agreeing to a contract or anything!"

He pressed himself up against the wall, edged forward and tilted his head around the corner.

Granger was right there. Standing with her back fully exposed to him while John light-shines-out-of-my-arse Potter, ranted and raved while waving around some old looking books.

"My answer is still no."

"Not even if I do this?" John Potter dropped one of the books, held his wand up to the other and produced a small flame on it's tip."

Granger freaked out. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING!"

John Potter smirked. "Accept the gift."

Granger took a step forward. "STOP IT!"

"Take it, or the book burns." He playfully jabbed the wand closer and closer to the book while grinning smugly.

Draco smirked. Oh, this was just too good to pass up.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Take it, or the book burns." John Potter playfully jabbed the wand closer and closer to the book while grinning smugly.

Harry stared, wide-eyed, as John tried to blackmail Hermione into accepting the declaration of intent gift.

Tracey was slack jawed. "This is so, so dumb," she whispered.

He nodded.

And just then, Harry spotted something out of the corner of his eye. So focused was he on the show down in front of him that he hadn't noticed another figure, standing behind Hermione, almost completely hidden around the corner on the far side of the corridor.

Draco Malfoy.

His eyes narrowed.

Draco Malfoy preparing to take a pot shot at Hermione's back.

"STOP IT!" Hermione yelled almost in hysterics. "OR I'LL STOP YOU!"
"TRY IT!" John happily yelled.

And all hell broke loose.

Hermione cast a bright blue spell straight towards John.

John shielded and cast one of his own back at her.

Malfoy chose that moment to cast a yellow spell that Harry now recognised as 'Maiden's shame' right at Hermione's back, which Harry managed to shield against by lifting a whole floor-stone right out of the floor behind Hermione and straight into the path of the spell, where it cracked and dropped back to the ground with an almighty smash, much to Malfoy's obvious surprise.

"MISTER POTTER!"

Harry froze.

John Potter froze.

Hermione froze.

Malfoy froze.

They all instantly stopped moving, their wands all pointed which way, the ziz-zag corridor already a war zone of broken stone and scorched masonry.

Tracey was standing to the side, trying to look as innocent as possible.

Harry turned his head, and there, halfway down the corridor he and Tracey had just walked up, stood his long time pursuer, Albus Dumbledore. Damn.

"Detention, Mister Potter!"

He lowered his wand. "For John too?"

John scowled, apparently rather shocked by his twin standing right behind him.

"I only saw you, Mister Harry Potter. You will serve detention with me next week on Wednesday."

Harry gave a low bow, "Of course, Headmaster."

— DP & SW: TFOP —

"I still can't believe that man!" A week had passed and Hermione was pacing in the shrieking shack while Daphne watched and Harry levitated the large wall mirror. "You were only protecting me. You were the only one out of us four who wasn't attacking anyone, and he still singled you out! Gah!"

Daphne smirked. It was amazing just how much righteous indignation Hermione could hold onto about anything relating to Harry.

"Don't worry about it, Hermione." Harry walked with the mirror out of the shack, followed by the two girls, and hung it on the wall facing towards the forbidden forest and away from Hogsmeade. "I'll be fine. Focus more on the next task."

Hermione took a deep breath and nodded.
Daphne sat down on a chair she'd carried from the shack, and placed her crystal ball on the ground. She'd spent almost all of last week since Dumbledore had given Harry detention on the Eye of Kilrogg spell, and she was now starting to practise with the mirror seeing spell. But while the Eye of Kilrogg could pass through most wards, the mirror spell could be blocked by even the smallest and weakest magical barriers. The benefit was that while the Eye of Kilrogg had a very short range, the mirror seeing spell could extend as far as the seer's magic let it, rather like apparition.

The problem with this was that she could only practise the spell outside of the fidelius charm — something Harry had only reluctantly agreed to, especially when he wasn't there, like now when he had his detention with Dumbledore.

Harry stepped back from the mirror and turned to her and Hermione. "Right. Now, what are the rules?"

Hermione raised her hand, which made Daphne stifle a giggle.

"Yes, Hermione?"

"Always keep the cloak nearby, duck into the shack at the first sign of danger, and message you with our lightning bolt rings if we get in trouble."

"Right." Harry handed the invisibility cloak to Hermione. "I'll see you back in the common room.

Hermione settled herself down cross-legged on the ground to read.

Daphne turned back to the mirror, raised her wand, and began to practise.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore waited in the empty classroom. He'd chosen it specifically for tonight. It was large and gave the feeling of isolation to a student on their own. Also, the dais was raised and allowed the lecturer to look down on the students in the first few rows. It was the classroom he'd once held transfiguration in when he'd been a full time teacher.

There were many questions he hoped he'd get answered tonight.

The door opened and a lone figure walked in.

He waited until his current focus of interest was a good two-thirds of the way down the seating steps before raising his head. "Good evening, Mister Potter."

"Headmaster." The boy's tone was neutral and respectful. His gaze giving neither challenge nor submission.

Dumbledore smiled — a smile he'd spent a lot of time over the years getting just right. He knew it was welcoming and warm, while at the same time firm, with a hint of steel. "I suppose you might be wondering why I decided to oversee your detention personally rather than give it to your head of house?"

The boy finished sitting himself down, and Albus couldn't help notice that the spot he choose was exactly the same one that Riddle had sat in for his seven years of Hogwarts. "I assumed it was because he's a ghost?"
"Not at all, my boy. The Baron is just as much a head of house as Professors McGonagall, Sprout, or Fliwick. No, the reason is that I wished to talk to you personally, and felt that this would be a good opportunity to do so. I had been planning to speak with you soon anyway, but your, ahem, *actions*—and here he looked over his moon shaped glasses down at the boy—"caused me to alter my plans somewhat."

Harry Potter tilted his head.

"You'll be working on your transfiguration. I've heard rumours of your abilities, and I'd like to see what you're capable of. I was something of a prodigy myself in my younger years, you know." He floated over a brick to Harry Potter's table. "Now, why don't you show me what you can do?"

Harry Potter shrugged, picked up his wand, and started to shape the brick into many wondrous things, many far more advanced then any first year should possibly be able to do, but none quite as good as conjuring an armchair right in the middle of the Slytherin common room.

Mmmm…

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne smirked. She didn't know the forbidden forest, and, like with apparition, you couldn't use a mirror to see a place you had never seen yourself. But that didn't stop her. Just like a chain apparating wizard could hop from one visible location to another across the land or sea, so she could jump from spot to spot using the mirror, so long as the mirror could see the next spot she wanted to jump to.

She was currently viewing a beautiful little creek, in which water ran over a tiny waterfall. It was just a shame that the mirror couldn't pick up sound, or this would be quite relaxing.

A small beeping noise distracted her.

Hermione looked up from her book and shook her beeping wand. "Time for the threat assessment."

Daphne nodded, focused her magic through her inner eye, and tapped the crystal ball in front of her. It lit up a dim pink.

The two girls stared at it.

Hermione bit her lip. "Maybe we should head back inside?"

Daphne shook her head. "It's still fine. What ever it is isn't going to happen for a while. We've got time."

Hermione nodded uncertainly, but did return to her book.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"And are you making many friends?"


Albus frowned. "You might want to be careful, Harry. Young Draco's family in particular are not known for their fondness of people in your situation."

Harry Potter frowned. "But, they all seem so friendly — especially when I showed them some of
my better tricks."

Albus mentally winced. While Harry going to Slytherin had been expected, Harry being powerful enough to overcome the natural leeriness his peers would have to a muggle raised, squib-mistaken, half-blood, Potter, twin brother of the boy-who-lived, had not.

"Harry," he took off his glasses and rubbed his face. "It gives me no pleasure in saying this, but there are many who will try to be friendly with you, just to use you. And the moment you are no longer useful, they will abandon you."

Harry's expression darkened. "Like my parents, Sir?"

And there it was. Albus suspected it would be there, but he hoped it wouldn't. Resentment. He sighed. "Harry, your parents did what they did for a very good reason."

Harry Potter leaned forward. "What reason?"

"Alas, I cannot say. Not now — wait," he said, seeing Harry was about to interrupt, "when you are older, no, when you are ready, you will know."

Albus settled back and regarded the boy in front of him, still watching him with those darkened eyes. Had he made a mistake by asking Lily to have Petunia to treat Harry as her own? He figured a well brought up child would be less risky than one who followed Tom's path too closely, but now… he wasn't so sure.

Whatever the case, it was clear the youngest Potter was still holding secrets. He could smell them all over him. So did John, for that matter — and that, was perhaps more worrying than anything else.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne gasped. There, in the mirror, she could clearly see the beautiful and majestic form of a unicorn limping through the forest. The almost glowing white of its hair flowed across its back and sides until it hit a horrible gash in the animal's back leg, from where silvery blood dribbled out and fell on the floor as the purest thing Daphne had ever seen whinnied and tossed its head in pain. Even without sound, it tore at her heart.

"Hermione," she whispered.

Hermione didn't move.

"Hermione," she said a little louder.

"Huh?" Hermione looked up and gasped. "Oh no. Poor thing."

Daphne stood up, heart hammering in her chest. "It's not far. You can help it right?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "But, we can't! Harry said we mustn't leave."

"No, he said ring him if there was trouble."

"And! …Go back inside!"

"Only if it was dangerous," she wheedled.

Hermione pointed wildly at the mirror, eyes panicked. "Have you forgotten what's hunting it!"
Daphne bit her lip. "But… but…"

"Do the threat check spell!"

Daphne cast the spell on the crystal ball, all the while looking back at the mirror. The crystal ball glowed an angry bright red.

"You see!"

Daphne couldn't help it. Tears started to form around her eyes. "But, if we don't do anything, the unicorn is going to DIE!"

Hermione's lip trembled. Her shoulders slumped.

Daphne plunged on. "Look, we'll have the cloak. We can message Harry. It's not far. We can go out, heal it, and get back to the fidelius charm if we run into him. Nothing can see through the cloak — not even him."

Hermione's started pacing frantically.

In the mirror, the unicorn gave a silent cry of pain and collapsed in a lush green clearing, in a slowly expanding pool of silver blood.

Hermione stopped pacing, took a deep breath, and clutched her fists together. She closed her eyes. "How far is it?"

"Five minutes, maybe."

Hermione groaned, her eyes snapping open. "Okay, fine! Get under this thing and let's go. And be sure to message, Harry."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Albus Dumbledore was getting more and more agitated the more he considered the boy in front of him. It wasn't any one thing, it was all the little things that added together to create a disturbing whole. Like the way he flicked his wand his at the end of a transfiguration and then gave it a little jab downwards. The jab down wasn't necessary, it was a mannerism. One he'd seen before. That and a few other tells had alarm bells ringing in his head.

If only he could get Harry and John performing together in an equal test of magic… that would give him the needed results to know just how much of what was going on was a result of Harry being a Potter twin, and how much of it was that fragment of soul in his forehead.

Of course, there was the duelling tournament.

Harry Potter was currently working on the transfiguration essay that Minerva had assigned earlier that week.

Albus stroked his beard. Maybe…

Suddenly Albus twitched in his seat. Something was happening. Almost impossible to feel for someone not as sensitive to magic as himself, but something was happening. A tiny amount of magic was flowing into and out of young Harry.

Albus stared.
Harry's expression slowly changed — almost beyond his ability to detect, but the change was there. A tiny hint of concern, of worry. And a tiny leak in the boy's mind.

Albus continued to watch and the magic continued to flow into the boy. Then, the magic started flowing out of the boy, in the same minute amounts.

What was going on?

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne and Hermione crept through the undergrowth of the forbidden forest, careful to always stay under the cloak as they made their way to their target.

They rounded the next tree trunk and Daphne's heart broke.

The unicorn lay there on its side, silver blood everywhere, its chest rising and falling in time with its sad little whines.

"Gogogo," Hermione whispered.

They quickly made their way over to the animal, wading their way through the long greenery of the clearing, still hidden under the cloak.

When they arrived, Hermione groaned. "It's so deep — and unicorns are highly magical creatures already. I don't know if I have enough magic to make this work."

"Please, just try."

Hermione pointed her ash and dragon heartstring wand at the animal from under the cloak. "Concrescat sanguinem!"

Slowly, the silvery blood started to dry around the wound, but the longer Hermione held the spell on the animal, the quicker the blood flowed out. Suddenly, the clot gave way, and the wound opened up again. Hermione eyes watered. "It's too much. I can't do it."

The unicorn gave a loud whinny.

Daphne looked around frantically for anything that might help them, and then stopped and saw what they were sitting knee deep in. She shook Hermione's arm. "Hermione. Look around you!"

Hermione tore her tear-filled eyes from the dying unicorn and gasped. Daphne grabbed one of the nearest plants and started to shred it with her wand. They were sitting in a Merlin damned field of huntsman's sorrow the size of one of the Hogwart's greenhouses.

Hermione quickly joined her and moments later they were packing the shredded herb into the wound on the animal's side. Hermione pointed her wand at the wound again. "Sano caro!"

Slowly, painfully slowly, the wound started to knit itself together, the wound closed, and the blood flow slowed, slowed, and stopped.

Hermione let out a deep breath, and flicked a diagnostic charm over the animal.

"All good?" Daphne asked.

Hermione turned to her, tears leaking out the sides of her eyes. "No, Daphne. It wasn't enough. She's still dying. She lost too much blood and I don't know what else to do. We don't have any
blood replenishers."

"I…" Daphne felt a lump form in her throat. "There must be something we can do!"

Hermione let out a small sob. "I don't know!"

Daphne frantically looked around again. There had to be something, but there was only the huntsman's sorrow, the unicorn, them, the cloak, and the pools of silvery blood still soaking the ground, and trailing away into the forest.

She looked down where the unicorn blood had already started to soak in the silk of her robes where she had knelt down on the ground.

That… that couldn't work… could it?

"Hermione!"

Hermione looked up at her.

"The unicorn blood! Give it to her!"

Hermione looked confused for a moment before her eyes widened. "Will that work?"

"I don't know, but what else is there to lose?"

Hermione wiped her nose on her sleeve, and nodded.

Daphne transfigured a small trough from surrounding dirt and soil.

"Accio unicorn blood!"

Unicorn blood soared through the air at them, and they managed to catch, at least some of it in the trough, while being very careful not to accidentally drink any themselves.

Daphne put the trough down in front of the unicorn, which looked up at her with pain filled eyes. "C'mon," she said, stroking the animal's nose, "I know you wouldn't normally do this, but this is your only chance. Please. Don't die."

The unicorn looked up at her again, and with Daphne and Hermione's help, managed to raise its head and, lowing it back into the trough, started to drink. And as it drank, the animal started to glow silver white.

Hermione flicked another diagnostic charm over the glowing animal, let out a massive smile, and gave Daphne the thumbs up.

Daphne's heart soared. They'd done it.

And it was at exactly that moment when a darkened figure, face hidden by a long black hooded cloak, descended from the sky not a dozen metres from where they sat, slowly clapping.

Terror gripped Daphne's soul. She didn't wait to see what the corpse possessing Dark Lord was going to do. She shielded, leapt for Hermione, grabbed the cloak from her, covered them both in it, grabbed her friend, and stumbled to where she'd just been, moments before a dozen spells splashed at and around where they'd just been standing, only seconds earlier.

Hermione shrieked.
Obviously alerted by her friend's cry, Quirrellmort threw more spells in their direction.

Daphne shielded, managing to stop one whole spell before the shield shattered and three different spells hit the cloak, flowing around them and out the other side, but not before one hit Hermione, opening up a huge cut in her shoulder, and causing her to cry out again.

Suddenly, the still glowing unicorn was on its feet and charging.

Voldemort shot up into the air to evade and the unicorn pivoted around, stopping right in front of them.

Without needing to think, Daphne hoisted herself up onto its back, grabbing a still whimpering Hermione with the help of one almighty Accio.

The unicorn bolted away, the girls desperately clinging on as hard as they could, curses and spells raining down around it them.

She sent a series of frantic pulses of magic into her lightning bolt ring. 'LV'.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore was still trying to work out what going on when suddenly a small eruption of magic came from the boy. Not the subtle mystery from before, but a simple flare of determination.

Harry Potter stood up quickly. "My apologies, Headmaster, I need to use the bathroom, if I may be excused." He turned to go.

Albus twitched. "No, I think not, Mister Potter. Please sit back down and continue."

Potter ignored him.

Albus sighed and flicked his wrist, causing the large double doors to the classroom to slam shut and bolt themselves.

Harry Potter froze.

Albus got to his feet and walked up the other passageway to the main doors. Reaching them, he turned back to look at the boy, whose facial expression was now so blank that Albus couldn't detect a single emotion on it. It was as though Harry had completely closed himself off from anything and everything in the world.

"Please go back to your seat, Mister Potter."

Harry Potter didn't move. "I need to leave."


The blank facial expression lasted all of a few more moments before being replaced by a flash-flood of raw, uncontrolled magic, and one simple overriding emotion. Terror.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Ploughing through the forbidden forest on the back of a glowing unicorn, Daphne risked a glance behind her and gave a whimper of her own. The Dark Lord flew around them just like Harry could, just as agile as any broomstick, managing to keep pace despite the many forest obstacles.
The unicorn flowed through the woods like water.

Daphne couldn't help thinking that riding bareback at this speed should be far more uncomfortable than it actually was. Time seemed to slow down and moments stretched to eternity. She wasn't sure how long the chase lasted, but it felt like forever. In the darkness of the deep woods, every spell flash felt like a supernova in the back of her eyeballs.

Then, after what seemed an age, they danced around another bush, into a clearing and what Daphne saw ahead made her heart stop. Six centaurs, tall and powerful, stood in a semi-circle, their bows drawn and pointing right at them.

Not seeming to care, their pure-light mount continued straight on, dashed past the taut row of bristling death, and screeched to a stop behind the line.

Voldemort zoomed into the clearing, and, without even seeming to hesitate, made a large upwards curve, straight up into the sky, as six arrow heads zipped straight through where his borrowed body had been, only moments earlier.

And then the clearing was silent.

From behind her, Hermione mumbled, "concrescat sanguinem."

The centaurs all turned to them.

"Umm… hi?"

"Mister Potter, control yourself!" Albus roared through the whirlwind of wild magic pouring off the young sorcerer. Chairs and tables lay smashed all around him. He flicked his wand again, shielding against yet another flying desk.

Harry Potter stood in the middle of an almost completely destroyed classroom. His posture was like a caged animal, eyes white with mindless terror, magic totally out of control, and Albus knew the boy was going into full scale magical meltdown — the pathway to his core had snapped open and his body was desperately trying—and failing—to contain the totality of his magic, every single Merlin being unloaded from his core, all at once.

Albus cursed and tried to shoot a stunner at the boy, which had about as much effect as hitting a steel door with a feather. He transfigured the stone in the floor to form a solid egg around the boy, only for it to be torn through like paper.

The magical build-up was ridiculous.

"Albus!" Minerva's voice shouted from the other side of the bolted door. "What's going on!"

"Minerva!" he shouted. "Clear the area! Get all students away! Now!"

"Thank you for saving us." Daphne said.

The centaurs all looked between each other before what seemed to be leader stepped forward. "It is not we who saved you, young seer, but the stars."

Daphne's eyes widened. They knew she was practising divination. That was supposed to be, like,
super top secret knowledge. "Umm…"

The centaurs all looked to the sky, but didn’t say anything more.

Under her, the unicorn let out a little snuffling noise.

Hermione was still tending to her shoulder.

"Jupiter shines brightly tonight."

Daphne frowned. Angelystor hadn’t taught her anything about astrology and their astronomy classes were of questionable helpfulness. "Is that good?"

The leader, large and chestnut coloured, looked down at her.

"The last time around, it was Pluto, and the time before that, was Mars."

"The last time?"

"The stars carry messages of their changes, young seer — changes in space — changes in time."

The words crashed into Daphne like a hammer. "Y-y-you know?" she squeaked.

"Around and around you go, will you ever get it right? I hope for our sakes, that you will."

"W-we intend to."

"I’m sure you do." The leader looked around at his fellows again before turning back. He sighed. "Well, I understand that your kind set great store by trades. This thing for that thing. I would trade with you, Lady Slytherin."

Daphne was suddenly on guard. "Trade?"

"For saving your lives, young fillies, we simple ask that you remember that, for us, the forest is our home, and always will be."

"You want me to remember that?"

"Yes."

Daphne thought for a moment. "Very well. I, as Lady Slytherin, will remember that the forest is your home and always will be."

The centaur bowed. "That is all we ask."

Suddenly, from far in the distance, there was an almighty BOOM that shook the ground under them, and caused leaves to fall from trees.

"What was that?" Daphne asked, alarmed.

"That, was your lord."

Daphne and Hermione stilled, wide eyed. Harry!

"I daresay, he is in need of your help, young ones."

And with an adrenaline fuelled jolt, the unicorn surged into motion again, Daphne and Hermione
Dumbledore stood up from where he'd been crouching in a protective bubble of almost pure magic, reinforced by transfigured stonework, and conjured titanium. The room was a mess. Another large beam crashed down to the ground in a heap of flaming wreckage.

He quickly made his way over to the boy, now laying unconscious in a crumpled heap. That reaction had been the most extreme thing he'd ever seen, and he'd seen a lot. Magical meltdowns weren't unknown, but they rarely happened to people who had such apparently large cores.

He pointed his wand at the young boy's head. "Legilimens." His probe hit something as solid as steel and bounced straight off. He stumbled back, shocked. What in Merlin's name?

"Albus!" Minerva appeared by his side, stepping over rubble to do so. "What happened?" She caught sight of Harry. "Oh, my goodness!"

"He needs medical help, Minerva. Can you take him up to the hospital wing?"

Minerva McGonagall nodded, "Certainly."

Albus Dumbledore watched his number two levitate the unconscious boy and leave the room.

Mmmm… now what to do?

Hermione and Daphne charged up to the school, pausing only for cleaning charms to get rid of as much unicorn blood as possible and turning their robes inside out to hide the rest. They ran past an incensed Filch, was screamed at them about it being almost curfew, and ran down to the Slytherin common room, only to find Harry wasn't there. They then ran to the one other place they though he might be… the hospital wing.

"Harry!" Hermione and Daphne cried in unison upon entering the wing.

"Miss Granger! Miss Greengrass!" The matron stormed over to them. "Keep your voices down. You, Miss Granger, I expect you to know better."

Hermione wasn't listening though. "What happened to Harry?"

"Some kind of magical overloading." Madam Pomfrey made an unamused cluck sound with her tongue. "Blew up one of the classrooms on the fourth floor."

Daphne took up position on Harry's right side. "Is he going to be okay?"

"Yes, with time and rest. It's very difficult to tell, of course, but he'll probably be up and about by as soon as tomorrow morning, as insane as that may be."

Daphne sagged with relief. She saw Hermione do the same. She could remember the last time something like this had happened—when Harry had been trapped at the Weasley's—but it hadn't been this bad then.

They both took one of his hands in theirs and sat down to wait for as long as they could, before Madam Pomfrey eventually kicked them out.
In a corner of the hospital wing, disillusioned and silenced, Albus Dumbledore watched the two young ladies eventually leave with mixed feelings. Such shows of loyalty and friendship were admirable, and in any other circumstance, he'd be beside himself with joy. But right now, it could not be happening at a worse time.

He'd spent the last few hours thinking about what had happened and had come to the conclusion that Harry had not only shown himself to be powerful, charismatic, and likeable, but he was also keeping secrets, and had occlumency barriers far stronger than anything he'd ever seen before. Not only that, but all those normal memories and feelings that Albus had been plucking from the boy's mind up to now were obviously fake. An extra layer of shielding against legilimency attacks that only the very, very best occlumens could pull off.

That combined with the boy's apparent instability, as made clear by tonight's events, lead him to one painful conclusion. The lad was dangerous. Far too dangerous for the status quo to be allowed to stand. But what was he to do? Lily and James would never allow him to be pulled from Hogwarts, not without an obvious event that showed something had gone wrong. That would go counter to everything he'd told them.

But he needed Harry to be somewhere safer. Somewhere he could keep an eye on him, where Harry couldn't just run away, where he couldn't build up influence the way Tom had. And where Dumbledore could grab the boy when he was needed to square up against Tom again, after the experiment with the stone had run its course.

He stared at the blank wall of the hospital wing.

And then it came to him.

He let out a long, depressed sigh. Of course, that was where he could maneuver for young Harry to be placed, as horrific as it would be… Azkaban.

— End of Chapter Twenty-eight —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm back! This chapter damn well nearly did me in. I swear. I'm going to try and make future chapters a bit tighter, as well as not jump PoVs so much, but damn. They just grow and grow and growwwwwwwwwwwww :O

A/N: Some points to discuss about last chapter.

Quite a few people want to know what happened with the four hundred galleons Volf was supposed to deposit into Clare's Gringotts account. I'm in two minds about whether to just tell you in the author comments or wait for a good opportunity to explore it in story. Obviously, I know what happened, but it might be quite a while before the gang find out, and isn't really all that mind blowing. I'll probably wait until I'm sure it doesn't become story critical and tell you all sometime in the future. I will say this though — When Harry declared the contract paid in full, magic accepted the
declaration. It wouldn't have done that if Harry hadn't fulfilled his side of the agreement (originally Volf's side).

A/N: "But LeadVonE! The centaurs wouldn't be able to see Pluto, and it was only discovered in 1930, anyway, AND it's not really a planet!"

Oh, go away ^^. It's magic, okay?

A/N: Happy one year birthday of Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches! Can't believe it's been a year already. And the popularity of this story continues to blow my mind.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Goblins. Why did it always have to be goblins?

Stan Shunpike, currently on secondment from the bus division of Knight Logistics, drove his knight wagon along the Scottish coastline, occasionally shooting glances at his much shorter driving companion. The huge purple lorry zoomed up the mostly deserted road, occasionally bending past a car or motorcycle, or even jumping straight over, if two blocked the road at once.

The goblin sitting next to him hadn't said much, despite Stan's best cheerful efforts to make conversation.

"So, you reckon his lordship gonna be puttin' on all kinds of fancy parties and whatnot, when you lot are all done with it all?"

The goblin grunted and continued to stare out the lorry's side window.

"I just reckoned I could fit in well at one o' those dos, don'tcha think?" He fiddled with his bowtie and swerved to avoid a man riding on horse back, causing his green companion to clutch at the side door and curse in his harsh tongue. "My ma always said I had a touch of the nobby in me, she did."

The goblin glared at him. "Just keep your eyes on the road, human."

Stan shrugged and turned forward again. Could never get a good word out of a goblin. Wouldn't it do the vicious little buggers just to lighten up a bit?

They continued to zip across the country, keeping up with the knight wagon in front and making sure not to get too far ahead of the knight wagon behind them. The whole convoy eventually made it to a small strip of land jutting out onto the water in the middle of a sleepy village. The deep purple lorries clashed against everything around them, from the white washed stone walls of the houses, to the brown woods of the jetty, and the faint blue of the water and sky — and yet, not one of the hundred or so residents of the village looked askance at the colour mad insanity that had just invaded their home, or even noticed it.

Stan tapped the side of his wagon, waiting for the boat they were to unload the cargo onto, and trying to ignore the goblin, who had taken what looked to be a cooked rat out of a paper bag and was now messily devouring it.

The wait continued. Stan frowned. Shouldn't be taking this long, should it? He turned off the engine, opened the door, and stepped down onto the worn tarmac road. Some posh bloke was talking to his mate, Richie, over at the leading Knight Wagon. An argument looked in the offing. He wandered over. "Oi, Richie, what's going on?"

Richie scowled and nodded towards the other man who, in Stan's mind, screamed, 'Ministry'.

"Mister Shunpike?" The man said in a snooty voice. "I am Geoffrey Perkins, an inspector with the department of magical trade — and I've been assigned the task of overseeing all materials and artefacts used in the construction of Slytherin Manor."
"Oi. You can't do that, can he, Rich?"

"I assure you, Mister Shunpike, that the ministry has authorised it."

"This is Goblin business, human." Stan's goblin companion appeared from nowhere to stand beside him. "The cargo is our responsibility and you have no right to inspect a goblin cargo under treaty."

The ministry inspector's lip curled up. "Thankfully, that will not be an issue, as I will not be inspecting any goblin cargos."

"What?"

Suddenly, another goblin appeared, standing next to Perkins and grinning evilly.

"YOU!" Stan's goblin shouted.

"Me." Perkins' goblin replied.

"What business does the Goldtooth Clan have with the House of Slytherin?"

"None what so ever, merely a profitable contract with the ministry to assist in the overseeing of wizarding business."

"YOU TRAITOR!" Stan's goblin produced a battle axe from no where.

"You call us traitors?" Perkins' goblin spat, producing a two handed sword. "You, the Boneslicer clan, call us traitors! YOU POWER GRABBING DESPOTS!"

They charged.

Stan, Richie, and Perkins all ran for it, determined to avoid losing any limbs as the two goblins settled what all three humans quickly agreed was an internal goblin matter, and absolutely nothing to do with any of them.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione landed, looked around her, and shuddered. The room she found herself in was dark — so dark that she couldn't see anything. Moments later, Daphne joined her, dropping out of the air as though from a cloud.

The two shared an apprehensive look, themselves being the only things visible.

Hermione's lip quivered.

Harry was disappointed with her.

A heavy door opened, light flooded in, and both Hermione and Daphne gasped.

In the doorway, stood Dark Lord Voldemort, tall, bald, white skinned, red-eyed, noseless, terrible — a visage to frighten not only little children, but also parents, teachers, soldiers, and heroes.

Now visible on the wall opposite, hung an older Hermione, chained to the ceiling by her wrists, feet not touching the floor, robes torn, hair messy, face bloody, skin dirty, figure so skinny they could see her bones.

Older Hermione raised her head and the look of despair and hopelessness on her face made
younger Hermione flinch.

The Dark Lord didn't say anything — just stepped forward and raised his wand.

"P-please," older Hermione managed to choke out before a purple spell shot from Voldemort's wand, hitting older Hermione right in the chest, and ripping a scream from the helpless witch, writhing and jerking in mid air, hands fisting and grasping thin air from where the manacles cut into her wrists.

Younger Hermione tightly clung to Daphne, Daphne doing the same back to her, both desperately wanting—but not daring—to look away as older Hermione screamed and kicked and occasionally begged in between great heaving spasms.

Finally Voldemort seemed to have had enough. He lowered his wand, opened his mouth as though to say something, seemed to change his mind, and, with an almost bored wave of his wand, fired a red spell at Older Hermione.

Younger Hermione and Daphne screamed.

Older Hermione's head exploded, painting the blank stone walls red. The chains holding the now headless corpse gave way and the dead older Hermione fell to the ground.

Voldemort left the room and a massive snake slithered in. The last thing Hermione and Daphne saw was the beast working its jaws over the corpse's feet, massive teeth puncturing skin, powerful muscles slowing dragging the body across the floor.

Hermione felt sick.

The scene shifted and now Hermione was following the Dark Lord into a small cottage whose door had been blown off. Screams came from inside.

"No!" A man was kneeling on the floor begging as a screaming and flailing young woman was being dragged away by masked figures. "Please! Don't!" the man begged. "Please! She's done nothing wrong!"

Voldemort stepped in front of the man, who looked up at him in terror. "She is a mudblood — and you have disgraced yourself by marrying such filth. Crucio."

The man screamed, filling Hermione's head with its intensity. She clutched Daphne ever tighter, tears starting to cloud her vision.

The scene shifted again. This time they were in a huge, closed room, packed with hundreds of witches and wizards of all ages. Every face looked tired, dirty, and scared.

A door opened and Voldemort walked in, along with several dozen death eaters. "Witches and Wizards," Voldemort said in a soft voice that still carried all the way across the suddenly quiet room. "You have all resisted when you were told to surrender. The punishment for resisting Lord Voldemort is death."

The death eaters then started systematically murdering every person in the room — men, women, children, the old, even babies still clutched in their mother's arms, paying no heed to the screams, the begging, and the always brief howls of anguish.

Voldemort stood, watched, and smiled.
Scene after scene, on and on it went. Hermione's face ran with tears. Her body trembled and shook. Daphne clung to her so tightly that ice started to form on Hermione's skin.

Eventually, it was done. Hermione felt herself pulled up and up, and she exited the pensieve, landing in an inelegant heap of sniffling witch.

In front of them, next to one of the trunk walls, Harry sat on a simple wooden chair, watching them impassively.

Hermione and Daphne got to their feet, eyes downcast.

"And what lesson have we learned?" Harry asked.

Hermione sniffled. "D-Don't go against your orders, Harry."

Next to her, she felt Daphne tense.

"No, Hermione." Harry's voice was firm. "That is not the lesson. You know I've always told you that orders can sometimes be disobeyed, under the right circumstances."

Daphne raised a shaky hand.

"Yes, Daphne."

"Don't put our lives at risk for..." she looked down again, "for things that aren't that important."

Harry took a deep breath. "You got half of it right. Yes, you take into account how important the thing is, but you also take into account how much you're risking your lives. You'll notice I didn't say anything when you two went after the troll on Halloween, despite my orders then not to. Why not? Hermione?"

Hermione's lower lip trembled. "Because the risk was lower and the thing we were fighting for was more important?"

"Exactly!"

The sudden shout caused both her and Daphne to jump.

"Okay, Sophie Roper wasn't on our side at the time, but there's a better than good chance she might be one day, and she's human. Two good reasons. Unicorns, on the other hand, while being light creatures, pure and good, and all that, are not people — they are animals — intelligent animals, no doubt, but still animals. Daphne, I know you have a thing for unicorns, but you are more precious than any unicorn."

Daphne shook.

Harry took another long breath. "And to compare threats — one the one side you have a mountain troll, which, while dangerous, you were able to handle, proving you'd made a good risk judgement, and on the other hand, you have Voldemort — a weakened Voldemort, yes, but still Voldemort — the freak'n Dark Lord! Has five months being taught by him in a classroom perhaps reduced your respect for him?"

Hermione stood with her head down, not saying anything, fighting back tears of shame, images of Voldemort's murderous rampage still fresh and sharp in her mind. She'd never felt like she'd let Harry down so badly before.
Harry stood up. "Was this enough of a reminder of what we're fighting for and the type of person we're fighting against?"

Hermione and Daphne both nodded.

"Do you need another spin in the pensieve?"

Hermione and Daphne both shook their heads.

"Hermione, what is our overall mission?"

She looked up. "The defeat of Voldemort and the control of Magical Britain."

"Daphne, how do I expect you to behave differently in the future?"

"Don't do dangerous things that don't help with our overall mission, and even then, only if the danger is less than our ability to cope with it."

Harry let out a deep breath. "Alright." His face softened and he spread his arms. "Come here then."

Hermione collapsed into him, sobbing freely, letting the tension drain out of her, joined moments later by Daphne.

Harry wrapped his arms around them and held them.

They stood like that for an age before finally disengaging.

Hermione drew back and blew her nose with a Harry-conjured handkerchief.

"Right." Harry conjured two extra chairs for the two of them and they all sat down. "Now, as much as we might like to move on to other things, we do need to discuss consequences. Let's start with the most obvious thing. Dumbledore."

Hermione stiffened.

Harry continued. "Dumbledore now knows that something is up." Harry shifted uncomfortably. "My… reaction… last night will likely bring up some red flags for him—yes, Hermione?"

Hermione had raised a hesitant hand. "I actually did some research on that this morning." She meekly reached into her bag and brought out a book.

Harry nodded. "In a moment, sure." He tapped on his chair. "I heard Madam Pomfrey talking to Dumbledore. He now also knows that I'm much closer with you two then just casual acquaintances. He may well do something to try and split us apart and we need to be ready for that. You, Hermione, need to be even more careful, since you don't wear a noble house ring, and while with your level of occlumency, an obliviate wouldn't be horrific, just annoying, some potions on the other hand, would be quite bad."

Hermione nodded. She was already checking everything she ate and drank because of John Potter.

"Dumbledore may well also try to do something to remove me from the school or even put me in Azkaban. He did it last time, although then he had an actual student death on his hands. I don't know whether he'd go so far as to manufacture a whole crime, just to get me put away, but we can't rule it out."

Beside her, Daphne nodded firmly.
"And finally, we have Quirrellmort." Harry frowned. "He now believes you have an invisibility cloak, even if he doesn't know it's the invisibility cloak. We'll need to check the remaining defences in the third floor corridor and make sure there aren't any that could be defeated with such an artefact, or you've suddenly got a large target on your backs."

Hermione shivered.

"We'll also need to guard against him in general, so I don't want you splitting up from each other if you can help it, unless its for one of our projects that requires it."

Hermione and Daphne nodded.

"And until Voldemort is out of the castle, no more mirror training."

Daphne's face fell, before she reluctantly nodded.

"Right." Harry slapped his hands on his knees. "Hermione, you said you did some research?"

Hermione nodded quickly and held up the book again. The moment she and Daphne had left the hospital wing the night before, they'd had a long talk about the last time Harry had had such a strong reaction — Daphne filling her in on the Weasley incident when Harry had almost blown up the Burrow. They'd bounced ideas back and forth, but it was Hermione's muggle background and mountain of healing books, both magical and muggle, that had eventually produced their current theory. She handed Harry the book, titled *American Directory of Psychological Disorders*. "We think you may have cleithrophobia, Harry."

Harry frowned. "What's that?" He started scanning the page she'd opened for him.

"It's the irrational fear of being trapped. Probably from your time in Azkaban. At first we thought you might have claustrophobia, but then we realised that wouldn't make any sense because…"

"...Because I'm fine with being in confined spaces." Harry nodded while he read. "Yes, this sounds... eerily accurate... 'patients report experiencing panic attacks when in rooms locked from the outside, when in cars trapped in traffic jams, even sometimes by merely being in a room with someone blocking an open door.' Wow. Okay, I'm not that bad. It only happens to me when..." He looked to be thinking for a moment. "When I believe that I can't get out. Even with all my magic and powers, when I feel I've been backed into a corner." He took a deep, long breath. "And obviously, because we're magical, a high level panic attack for some reason, in my case, materialises as going boom."

Hermione wordlessly passed him another open book, this time magical, and open to a page describing the phenomenon of magical meltdown.

Harry smiled. "Yeah, I checked that out at least after the last episode. I see now that I should have put you on this case ages ago, Hermione."

Hermione blushed. At least Harry had stopped giving her the disappointed look.

Harry sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Okay, so I have cleithrophobia. What can I do about it? I don't need to say that freaking out like that just because Dumbledore stands in front of a door and tells me I can't leave, isn't great from a strategic point of view."

Daphne nodded.

Hermione handed Harry a third book. "There was only one reference that I could find to fighting
phobias in the magical healing books. The muggle books have lots of treatments, but they are…."
She hesitated. "Problematic, if you're going to, 'go boom,' every time it happens."

Harry took the open book and read down the page. He looked up from the book. "Special occlumency?"

Hermione nodded. "The book says it can take decades to eliminate a phobia entirely though."

Harry smiled. "Maybe — but occlumency does happen to be something I'm very, very good at."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne sat cross-legged on the magically expanded water pipe's cool, rounded, metallic floor, just outside the third-floor corridor room containing the muggle pensieve thing, and slowed her breathing.

Occlumency was amazing magic. Under occlumency your thoughts were clearer, your memory better, and your skills developed with the ease of the mythical naturally gifted — but that didn't mean it was without its drawbacks.

Opposite her, sat Harry, also cross-legged, studying her carefully. Hermione stood to one side, alert, watchful, wand in hand, snake in pocket.

Daphne reached inside and sunk into her own mind.

Occlumency allowed her great control over her day to day emotions — anger, jealousy, resentment, fear — all the things she didn't like feeling — but the problem with that was that it did allow her to somewhat control them. Sometimes, paralysing fear was a good thing. Occlumency also brought an understanding of the world far beyond her years, but that understanding could be both a blessing and a curse, for while she was able to make decisions with the clarity of an adult, it also made her mistakes all the more painfully obvious, once she'd made them.

In short, she'd never felt more of a little twelve-year-old girl, as she had when Harry had been telling her off, not half an hour ago. The shame and guilt still stung. Harry had never told her off before. Harry had never needed to tell her off.

"Profero oculus Kilrogg," Daphne whispered, pointing her wand at the space in between her and Harry. Her world split in two and a large floating eyeball appeared, visible only to herself in sight, and to Harry in magic. She'd sworn to never let him down again.

Harry nodded and raised his wand to point at her head. "Legilimens."

Daphne opened her mental defences and surrendered to him, letting him sink deep into her now vulnerable mind, to feel her feelings, explore her senses.

Harry pushed himself to her sense of sight, and there he settled, sitting snug behind all three of her eyes.

"Ready when you are, Daphne. I suggest we start with the first room."

"Okay." Daphne moved the eyeball into the room beyond, feeling Harry's own mind watching through her's as the eye passed easily through metal and wards alike. She quickly moved it through the various rooms, spotting statues and glasswork and what looked like a small forest, before finding her disembodied self in a completely empty room.
"This was the chimaera room." Harry commented.

"There's nothing here." She angled the eyeball to take in the whole room.

"It looks like that, doesn't it?"

"I for one am glad we don't have to face another chimaera." Hermione's voice said.

"Next room, Daph."

Daphne nodded, turned the eye around, and moved through the solid door into the next room, to be met again, with what looked like tropical rain forest.

"This room didn't present much of a threat when I last walked through it, although I was under the cloak. I'm guessing the plants are here to power all of this."

"Why?" Hermione's voice asked, "Why not just use the magic of Hogwarts?"

"Probably because the Hogwarts magic is channelled through the wards."

A lumos went off in Daphne's head. "Wards that you in part control."

"Exactly — and Dumbledore knows that. Clearly he doesn't want Lord Slytherin to casually saunter down here."

"What is that?" Daphne asked, spotting a large vine like thing wrapped around a tree with spikes on it the size of daggers. Many of the spines were embedded in the tree, occasionally pulsating.

"That is a Brazilian strangle vine. It attacks and feeds off the magic of other plants. It moves kind of like devil's snare that we did in herbology."

"It's a parasite?"

"Yep."

"What's it doing here then? Wouldn't Dumbledore want the most magic available?"

"He should. I don't know why it's here — it's a dark plant. Voldemort even used it as a symbol of hatred."

"Why?" Hermione's voice asked.

"One of the more extreme pureblood propaganda pieces is that muggleborns steal magic from other witches and wizards."

"And this plant steals magic from other plants." Hermione's voice said, laced with understanding.

"Indeed. Maybe Quirrellmort found his way into here and scattered some strangle vine seeds… actually that would make a lot of sense. If he could drain away some of the magic, breaking through the wards could be a bit simpler."

With little else to see in the room, apart from some venomous tentacular, and a young whomping willow, Daphne moved the floating eyeball into the next room.

A small army of statues lined the two side walls of the room, all armed with battle axes, swords, and crossbows. There had to be at least a hundred of them on each side, forming a wide corridor to
the door on the far side of the room.

Daphne swallowed. "I guess if you enter this room, they attack?"

"Or pass a certain point," Harry agreed. "The basilisk made short work of them last time."

"Why put a defence back in place, if Voldemort has already shown he has a way to get past it?" Hermione's voice asked.

Harry shrugged. "Probably because Dumbledore doesn't actually consider this to be the true defence, just a bunch of ways to slow Vol'die down, or somehow make a confrontation between me and him more likely."

"Could you handle them, Harry?" Hermione's voice asked.

Daphne looked critically around at the hundreds of armed stone warriors.

"Yes, but it would take quite a bit out of me. Don't think there's much more to inspect here. Daphne?"

Daphne moved the eyeball into the next room.

Complex glasswork lined one side of the room. Hundreds of twisty and curved pipes and tubes joined dozens of glass beakers and spheres. The large sphere nearest them, contained what looked to be a large sphere of dull metal.

"Parchment on the desk in the centre, Daphne."

Daphne spotted what Harry pointed out and moved the eyeball over to inspect it.

_Dear visitors,_

_To open the door, please move the sphere of iron from one side of the glass maze to the other without breaking any of the glass. If any glass is broken, chipped, melted, or in any way damaged, moved from the bench, or transfigured, the locks on both doors will activate and an alarm will sound._

_Good luck._

"Magical Merlin," Harry breathed. "This one is actually damn tough. Could you take us to the start of the maze, Daph?"

Daphne did so.

"A maze?" Hermione's voice asked.

"A maze made of glass tubes and spheres," Harry said, presumably inspecting the sphere of iron held in the large glass sphere. "Like they use in our classes to demonstrate magical theory. You have to get a ball of iron from one side of the maze to the other without breaking or interfering in any way with the glass. Problem is, the iron ball is much larger than most of the tubes and even some of the glass spheres on the way."

"Transfiguration?" Hermione's voice asked.

Harry shook his head. "Can't get the transfiguration spell to the ball with the glass in the way — no — there's only one thing I can think of that could do this job... alchemy, but even with my skill, it
would be damn difficult. You'd have to melt the ball and move molten iron through the maze in a tiny stream, quickly enough not to melt any of the nearby glass and making sure not to touch any of the glass walls. There's no way any first year could manage it, that's for certain. In fact, I doubt there's a single normal student in the whole school that could."

Daphne slowly nodded. "I guess it's a good thing we don't actually have to do it then?"

Harry grinned. "Quite."

The next room would have been pitch dark, if it weren't for the thousands of stars that lighted up the roof, just like midnight great hall on a clear night. Daphne looked around. "I can't see anything."

"Keep looking."

Daphne kept looking, but it wasn't until she'd lapped the room several times that she finally found a parchment on a desk. "Wish Angelystor had already taught us the night vision charm," she muttered as she leaned into the parchment, just making out the writing in the almost total darkness.

To continue, move the stars and planets to the positions they held on your birthday.

"That's it?" Daphne asked. "How do you do that?"

"Is there a control panel? Maybe something like Professor Sinistra's astrolabe?"

Daphne spent another few minutes searching around the room before finally finding it. "Here!"

"Mmmm…" Harry said.

"What is it?" Hermione's voice asked.

"Birthday ID check combined with astronomy knowledge. I don't know how it's supposed to know what your birthday is to make sure you're telling the truth, so, unless this whole thing is completely pointless, there must be a list of acceptable birthdays."

"So, you could enter the position of the stars and planets on Dumbledore's birthday and it would let you through?"

"Maybe — or maybe just professor Sinistra's? Either way, let's move on."

Daphne moved the eyeball through the far doorway, and into the room with the muggle pensieve in it.

"Careful now." Harry said as she neared the next doorway to the next room. "We should be fine here, but there's always a risk that the tripwire will still trip, even for the eyeball."

She nodded and pressed ahead. The eyeball slipped through the door, into the next room, and into its middle… and she still knew why they were here. She smiled.

"Excellent." Harry sounded delighted. "Well, that's one problem cracked."

Daphne now took the time to look around the room, mostly dominated by a huge stone statue of their currently, and rather ironically, petrified potions professor and former head of house, Severus Snape. A small table sat in front of the statue, on which stood a single tiny glass of perfectly clear liquid… and a parchment.
Daphne moved the eyeball over to it and read.

*Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,*

*So drink the potion and answer my questions truthfully, because I'm not in the mood to write another damn poem!*

"Veritaserum." Harry said, "And neither Voldemort nor Quirrell are noble, so they have no defence against it" He snorted. "How very cunning. So this one is probably a straight up lie detector test with certain preprogrammed answers granting access to the next room." He paused for a moment. "Or just poison, of course."

"Two of us are noble." Daphne supplied.

"Yeah, I'm going to have to think about that. Obviously whichever of us goes in front of this thing will be under the cloak with a modified voice. It would be rather embarrassing if the statue could tell Dumbledore that one of us was granted access to the next room."

"That would be bad." Hermione's voice said.

Harry nodded. "Next room, I think, Daphne."

Daphne moved the eyeball through the door next to the massive statue, into the next room, and a dozen doors suddenly appeared before her, but something wasn't quite right. It took a confusing moment to understand what it was she was seeing. "Mirrors?"

"Mirrors." Harry said.

The room was filled with hundreds of mirrors, all ornate, old looking, and angled just so to reflect a billion reflections from all the other mirrors, creating a confusing maze of images that stretched her large green eyeball out and into infinity. Every mirror had the same plaque at the bottom. "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi."

"Oh Merlin," Harry whispered. "This must have taken Dumbledore *ages* to set up. Does the man not have *anything* better to do with his time?"

"Harry?" Daphne asked. "What are they?"

"I think they're supposed to be copies of the Mirror of Erised, although exactly *how* closely they resemble the original, we'll only be able to tell once we're actually in here. But there was only *one* last time."

"This is the last room," Daphne said, looking around. "Is the stone in here?"

"The stone's hidden in the real mirror… probably. Last time around, John was able to somehow extract the stone from it. Voldemort later theorised that the mirror screens for intent, so only someone who wanted to find the stone, but not use it, would be able to retrieve it."

"Won't that be a problem?" Hermione's voice asked.

"Hopefully not," Harry said, smiling, "I have a plan. Daphne? Can you check the room's edges?"

Daphne moved the eyeball where Harry asked and immediately saw something she recognised.

Harry started laughing.
Daphne stared. Rune stones. The exact same miniature rune stones Harry always used for his makeshift fidelius charms.

Harry grinned. "Mmmm… that should give us some possibilities."

"What?" Hermione's voice asked eagerly. "What are we going to do?"

Harry shook his head. "Just… just give me some time to think first, okay?"

Daphne could hear Hermione pout. "Yes, Harry."

— DP & SW: TFOP —

The next few days had Hermione on high alert. Dumbledore didn't seem to make any moves, although Harry had caught the man studying him during dinner more than once. Unsurprisingly with the amount of damage caused, news of the incident had spread around the castle, no one quite knowing what to believe, but the general understanding being that Harry Potter had done a particularly destructive piece of accidental magic and had spent the night in the hospital wing to recover.

Many Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors were treating Harry like a bomb that might go off at any moment. Most Ravenclaws were more interested in understanding what had happened to trigger the event. Slytherins, by contrast, tended to thump her friend on the back and congratulate him, usually while making comments like, 'Give em' hell at the duelling tournament, Potter.'

It was in this context that Hermione found herself in the tail end of an interesting discussion about the culture surrounding accidental magic with the members of the newly named, 'Founders Club', just before the start of their next meeting, and for which she had a special surprise for the members.

Sophie idly swung her legs back and forth while sitting on a desk. "But why is it so important? If they can test for magic just by having the child open a chocolate frog package…"

Hermione shrugged. "It's not so much a, 'does our child have magic,' thing as it is a, 'how powerful might our child be,' thing. The old families especially are always watching out for powerful bouts of magic or unique talents emerging, like metamorphism, or seership."

"I guess that makes sense."

Kevin Entwhistle and Justin Finch-Fletchley nodded.

The door opened and Dean Thomas walked in. "Am I late?"

"No." Hermione stood up and pulled her shrunk trunk out of her pocket. "You are right on time." She put the trunk on the floor and un-shrunk it. "But before we start today, there's something I need to bring up."

Dean Thomas crossed the room and sat down.

Hermione took a deep breath. "You know we've been starting to study occlumency?"

The four members of the Founder's Club nodded.

"Well, my lord would like to have a word with you about that."

The four all looked startled.
"You mean, Lord Slytherin?" Justin asked.

"Yes."

"He's coming here?" Dean asked incredulously.

Sophie gulped.

"He is here."

The assembled muggleborns exchanged nervous glances. Justin was already staring at the trunk.

Hermione knocked five times on the trunk lid, the trunk opened and Harry slowly climbed out. He towered over the nervous first years, none of whom took their eyes off him as he turned, conjured a plush armchair in the middle of the room, and sat down. "Good afternoon, children."

Driven by several months of wizarding culture training, the four hastily got to their feet, scraping chairs and desks as they went, and executed bows and curtseys with varying degrees of success. Even Kevin didn't do too badly.

Hermione couldn't help but smile.

"Good afternoon, Lord Slytherin." They said in almost unison.

Harry's mask nodded once and turned to her. "Very well behaved group you have here, Hermione."

Hermione's smile widened.

Sophie blushed.

Harry turned back. "Please, sit."

They did.

"So," Harry began, talking into the silence of five first years dutifully watching an adult. "I've been hearing quite a bit about what's been going on here. To say our world isn't the best when it comes to transitioning new peoples to our society would be a massive understatement. That is something that I intend to help change — and it's projects like this," he made a sweeping hand gesture, "that will help to make that change. I understand you've recently begun to work on equalising one of the many advantages that old families have on new ones."

They looked at him blankly.

"Occlumency," Harry clarified.

They all made 'oh' noises and nodded quickly.

"Normally, learning occlumency takes years, and that's primarily why children start learning at an early age, often as young as six, however, I have a Slytherin family method to rapidly speed up that teaching time."

Four pairs of eyes widened. Kevin and Justin glanced at each other with raised eyebrows.

"Normally, this method is restricted to those of Slytherin House, however, I'm experimenting with a slightly altered method, which, while not quite as effective as the original, should still be a lot faster than the traditional method, and, if you're up for it, I'd like to try out that method with you
four. Thoughts?"

Sophie raised a nervous hand.

"Yes, Miss Roper?"

"We're currently doing meditation exercises, how is this new method different?"

"Questioned like a true Ravenclaw."

Sophie made a nervous smile.

Harry reached into the pocket of his robe and produced a small stack of parchments. "Do you know what these are?"

All four nodded.

"Those are Gringotts contract parchments." Justin said.

"Yes," Harry said, "and on them are confidentiality contracts. If you wish to go ahead and join this program, you'll have to sign one of these first."

All four looked at the parchments warily.

Hermione grinned.

"Good." Harry said. "You are cautious. That's a trait that should keep you out of a lot of trouble in the future. The contracts are quite simple. Please feel free to read them over." He handed the stack to Sophie who took one for herself before passing it on. "They say, in short, that you will not speak of or in any way communicate the new occlumency method to anyone, without my written permission, for the next ten years, after which you will be free to do so as you wish."

"And if we do?" asked Dean.

Harry's tone remained casual. "Then your name will turn up on my original contract and I will take you to court for theft of noble family secrets."

Dean grimaced.

"What if we slip up by accident?" Sophie asked meekly.

"The contract contains a compulsion clause. It is possible to break if you really try, but it will stop you from accidentally blurting out the secrets."

Justin raised his hand again. "How much quicker do you expect this new method to be?"

"I expect you to reach the level of someone like Draco Malfoy in three months… rather than three years."

Justin's eyes widened.

Kevin looked between the contract and Harry. "What about Hermione?"

Lord Slytherin's voice grinned. "Hermione is a demon who has been using the original Slytherin method, continuously, for three years. You will never catch her."
Hermione felt herself blushing.

Silence settled on the group for a moment.

Justin held up a clenched fist. "Well, I for one, have no desire to be left behind. I'll join."

"Me too," Kevin said.

Sophie hesitated for just a moment before adding. "I'm in too."

The group turned to look at Dean, who was still looking at the contract with wary eyes. "You know, I'll probably be skinned alive if my house mates ever find out about this."

Kevin grinned and thumped him on the back. "Then you're lucky the contract stops you telling, yeah?"

"The method really works best with equal numbers, Mister Thomas," Lord Slytherin broke in. "You'd be doing your friends a service, if nothing else."

Dean looked down at the contract in his hands again. He looked back up. "Oh, alright, I'm in."

Sophie, Justin, and Kevin cheered and clapped.

Lord Slytherin sat in his chair, only a slight nod showing his feelings.

Hermione just beamed. Phase two, complete.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

A week later, Harry, dressed as Lord Slytherin, appeared outside a beautiful Tudor house in the Suffolk countryside, white walled, wood beamed, clay roofed. It certainly didn't look like the house of an old dark, pureblood family — if anything, it suggested a more light attitude with the dozens of flowerbeds of every colour leading from the front gate to the door.

Harry pushed his wand into the wards around the building, and magically knocked. It was time to get the first of two charms needed for the Granger's new toy.

The wards granted him entrance. He walked up to the front door, idly fingering the pair of devices in his pocket. His vassals had really done a wonderful job. He'd tried on one of the ear pieces before leaving and it fitted like a glove. Its range would be short, what with the tiny mirror and similarly tiny runes, but to get around the patent laws and to persuade the two families to grant him their magic... it was worth it. Certainly until Alex arrived next year with the other half of the original.

The door opened and he was greeted by a curtsying dark-skinned lady wearing what were obviously her very best robes. "Lord Slytherin, we welcome you to our humble home."

"Mrs. Harper," Harry offered his hand, took hers in his, and knelt down slightly to it, "A pleasure."

Mrs Harper smiled brightly. "Please come this way. My husband is in the drawing room."

Upon arriving at their destination, Harry was pretty sure that the 'drawing room' was actually a small dining room. Four indents in the carpet suggested a large table, hastily removed.

"Lord Slytherin." Mister Peregrine Harper rose from the small sofa and the two men shook hands. "I understand you're interested in a certain spell of ours?"
They sat, Mrs Harper settling herself beside her husband.

"Yes," Harry said. "The mirror hearing spell, and, if possible, I'd like to set up a contract for it."

Peregrine Harper smiled. "We do have a few contracts open on that spell. Talking mirrors are still quite popular, Merlin himself only knows why though."

"I'm sure I could make it worth your while."

"I'm sure you could. Might I ask why you're interested in the spell though?"

"Something one of my people is working on for an internal project."

Peregrine flashed a grin. "No, then. No worries. It's not as though you'd be able to make communication mirrors or anything — what with Lestrange holding the patent rights and rune clusters."

"Well, quite."

"And Bell would rather go bankrupt than help a chap out."

Harry titled his head slightly. "They're still angry about the whole house thing then?"

Peregrine smirked. "I swear, you repossess one little house and you don't hear the end of it for the next three hundred years."

Harry looked around. "It's a nice house."

Mrs. Harper beamed.

"So," Harry continued, "what are your other spell contracts paying for an application?"

"Ah," Peregrine leaned back slightly, "Straight to price hmm? You know, sometimes I wonder if gold is really the answer to all our world's problems."

Behind his mask, Harry raised a single eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Yes, man of my age, getting on in life and all that, young Hobby will be off to Hogwarts next year. Have you seen a picture of our son?"

Harry shook his head and Mrs Harper handed him a wizarding photo of a vaguely familiar dark-skinned boy with hair so short he was almost bald, trying to look as stoic and dignified as he could while holding a nimbus 2000 broomstick.

Harry had a suspicion he knew where this was going. Everything about the Harpers screamed, 'social climbers,' even for a Dark non-noble family. "I'm going to guess the most important thing in life is the future of your family?"

"Exactly, Lord Slytherin. Exactly." Peregrine made a pointed jabbing motion with his fingers.

"And how can I help with that?"

"You are betrothed to Lord Greengrass' girl — the troll slaying princess." Peregrine smiled. "A word from you to Lord Greengrass on behalf of our Hobby…" the man trailed off.

Ah. So this was about Astoria. "The most I can do, in regards to that, is to write you a letter of
introduction when Lord Greengrass starts accepting proposals, which I gather won't be for quite a long time. Until then, it would be up to your boy to not incite my future sister in law's dislike, because I can guarantee you, the surest way to kill any possibility on that front would be for Astoria to not want it."

"A letter of introduction would be welcome."

"And of course, Lord Greengrass would be more likely to entertain proposals from houses who are more closely aligned with him, politically."

Harry let that hang in the air for a moment.

Peregrine Harper eyed Harry thoughtfully. "Why did you decide to vassal a muggleborn?"

Behind the privacy of his mask, Harry flashed a grin.

— DP & SW: TFOP —

Unlike the Harpers, the Bells lived in a tumbledown stone house with a slate roof in the former industrial town of Cokeworth and were famed for resenting their former business partners for it.

Unlike the Harpers, the Bell's wards were applied directly to the walls of the house, allowing Harry, with two shiny new enchanted earpieces in pocket, to walk right up to the door to knock. He'd sent an owl ahead of him, so they knew he was coming, although, unlike the Harpers, he hadn't received a reply back.

A suspicious eye poked around the door. "Yes?"

"Mrs Bell? Lord Slytherin. I—"

The door slammed in his face. The wards bristled with ill intent.

Harry stared at the blank door blankly for a full thirty seconds.

Friendly. He frowned. Maybe more extreme persuasion methods, then? Mister Bell worked as a production line manager for Honeydukes and Mrs Bell worked part time at Witch Co. A word to Jacob to lean on his buyers to lean on the Bells…?

He smirked.

Or… maybe…

— DP & SW: TFOP —

Katie Bell left the great hall after dinner, determined to get some practise in before curfew. It sucked that she couldn't afford a better broom, so she just had to make every practise hour count.

"Miss Bell," a voice called.

Katie Bell started. She was being addressed by none other than the ice-princess of the Gray, Daphne Greengrass. She composed herself. "Heiress Greengrass — can I help you?"

Daphne Greengrass smiled. "Yes, actually. How would you like to earn some extra pocket money?"

Katie's ears pricked up, thoughts of replacing her old comet flashing through her mind. "I'm
Harry climbed into his trunk happily inspecting his two, brand new, miniaturised communication mirrors in earpiece form. Between the miniature Granger milled runes, the charms, the enchantments, and the alchemy, they'd managed to put together a device that allowed two people to talk to each other over distances of up to five-hundred metres. They hadn't tripped any intellectual property spells and, so long as they kept Katie sweet, they had all the contacts needed to manufacture en masse if needed. Thank Merlin for cash strapped teenage girls.

He landed in his large comfy armchair opposite Hermione and Daphne with a satisfied smile. "We have everything we need."

The two girls exchanged a glance.

"So," Daphne started, "how are we going to get past the fidelius around the stone?"

Harry started drawing a diagram in the air between them with his wand. "Here's a diagram of the location. We have the pipe, which we use to enter the corridor next to the muggle studies defence, leading straight into the potions defence and the fidelius trip wire. Straight after that, we have the final mirror room, which also contains the fidelius charm and the rune stones that maintain it."

The girls nodded.

"What we need to do is disable those rune stones and plant a set of rune stones of our own, which I will then use to cast my own fidelius charm, thus locking Dumbledore and Voldemort out from the room, and giving us as long as we like to work on cracking the final defence."

Hermione looked puzzled. "But wouldn't we forget everything to do with the stone and the room the moment we enter the ward in the potions room?"

"Yes." Harry nodded. "And getting around that little problem won't be easy. But because of the way Dumbledore set this up, not impossible. Because this isn't an 'always active' fidelius charm, we can study the layout of the room before hand using Daphne's Eye of Kilrogg, and then create written instructions that we follow exactly to disable the stones once the fidelius is tripped."

Daphne frowned. "But, we wouldn't have any reason to follow the orders."

"The fidelius only works to cause you to forget things directly relating to the thing it protects. We should be able to train ourselves to follow written instructions from ourselves or me that we don't remember writing or being told about and not have that skill overwritten by the charm."

Hermione sucked in her breath. "That sounds really dangerous. wouldn't that leave us vulnerable to someone impersonating us and ordering us to do things by simply leaving us a message in our writing?"

"Yes. Which is why we secure each message with a fidelius ID check. You know how we use the fidelius to scan the local area for listeners, by having a non-secret keeper attempt to speak the secret out loud?"

The girls nodded.

"Well, only a secret keeper can write down the secret they hold, so if each of us is made the secret keeper for a separate fidelius charm, we can use it to authenticate any written message from any of..."
us by writing down the secret at the end of the message."

Hermione nodded slowly. "So, we train ourselves to unquestionably obey messages with a certain code like, 'step-by-step order,' or something, along with an authenticated ID.

Daphne tapped on her chair. "Isn't there a chance the stone fidelius would block knowledge of the code from us?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, there is a chance — that's why we experiment with it first, and if it is the case, then instead of using a normal code, we use a separate additional fidelius code, instead."

Daphne's eyes started to glaze over.

"I suspect the fidelius can't remove knowledge secured by other fidelius charms. I could be wrong, we'd need to check, but I don't think it will be necessary."

"What about that confused feeling you get when you're inside a fidelius area? It's like your eyes can't make sense of what you're seeing."

"I blindfold myself so I'm receiving no information about what I'm doing, and, to make sure there is as little fidelius interference as possible, Hermione will obliviate me first."

"What!" Hermione yelped.

Daphne's eyes widened.

"One of the theorised weaknesses of the fidelius charm is that the more you know about the area under fidelius, the stronger its power is. Thus, if I want to stand any chance of being able to function while in the area protected by the charm, I need to have as few memories as possible of where I am, and what I'm there for."

"B-b-but I've never done obliviation before!"

"You'll need to learn. Don't worry, I can push the needed memories to the front of my mind to make it as easy as possible for a beginner, and with your level of occlumency you should be able to get the basic skill in a few weeks."

"Harry," Daphne started, "what about your noble house ring?"

"I'll need to take it off for the duration of the mission."

"Ugh, I don't like that."

"Me neither, but it's not for long."

"How do you follow written instructions if you've blindfolded yourself?" Hermione asked.

"That's what these are for." Harry brought out the ear pieces. "Daphne will relay written instructions to me from outside the room."

Hermione still looked worried. "Doesn't it take you like, twenty minutes to cast the fidelius charm for a very basic space? Dumbledore was there in less than a few minutes last time we tripped the charm."

Harry nodded. "Before we initiate the fidelius cracking part of the mission, we'll set up a temporary fidelius of our own in the muggle studies defence room."
Daphne smirked. "That way Dumbledore can remember where the stone room is, but he can't remember where the room en route to the stone room is. I like that." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "We could also do it on a day when Dumbledore has a Wizengamot session to slow him down even more?"

Harry grimaced. "Best not. We've done that once already and he thinks he knows that was Lord Slytherin."

Hermione slumped back in her chair. "This plan is insane."

Harry half nodded. "Well, the fidelius charm is an insane defence. The only reason we stand even a chance is all down to Dumbledore being just a bit too clever for his own good."

"Can we get an overview of this plan then?" Daphne asked.

Harry nodded and started waving his wand over the floating glowing diagram between them. "Step one will be to cast a fidelius in the pipe outside the muggle studies defence room. This will be our HQ for the mission and will contain the papers and things we need for the plan."

"Step two will be Hermione cracking the muggle studies defence room — that muggle VCR challenge — and opening the door to the next room."

"Step three is to fidelius the muggle studies room. Step four is Hermione obliviating me of all knowledge of what we're doing, and blindfolding me. In step five me and Daphne will enter the potions room under polyjuice, trip the fidelius charm, and Daphne, who will still have on her noble house ring, and who will be guiding me by hand and receiving instructions by Hermione with the ear piece, will answer Statue Snape's questions under veritaserum, which obviously won't work on her, but not before she's checked the liquid for authenticity."

Harry took a breath and glanced at Daphne. "I'll be sure to teach you that spell." He continued waving his wand and the diagram continued to update itself. "In step five, Daphne will fit me with the ear piece and return to the pipe to meet up with Hermione, who together will use their written instructions to guide me into the area actually protected by the fidelius charm, through the mirror room, and to each of the rune stones in turn, where I will set up my own rune stones from a bag I'll be carrying. Then I will redirect the rune stone's magic to my own rune stones, and, when it is safe, deactivate the fidelius charm. Then Hermione will run to me and help me restore my memories. We'll use liquid memories siphoned off before hand to help speed up the process. Then I'll spend the next thirty-ish minutes casting my own fidelius charm — and boom — one secured mirror room. We then get out of there and be back to our dormitories right in time for dinner, or whatever."

Silence descended on the trio.

Daphne took a deep breath. "We'd better have some really good safeguards in place for if this all goes badly wrong, which it sound like it might, even with practise and training before hand."

Harry nodded. "I agree. The chance of this actually working, aren't great. A lot of things could go wrong. We'll make sure we have emergency outs, but this is our best, and possibly only, chance of grabbing the single most powerful artefact our world knows of."

Daphne and Hermione's faces firmed in twin expressions of determination.

Harry clapped his hands. "Right. Let's get down to some practise and testing."
Lord Slytherin,

You will be pleased to hear that construction of Slytherin Manor is progressing smoothly and is on schedule. The construction jetty has been completed, our contractors are currently unloading the phase one stone, and the top of Gairsay island has been levelled and the earth redistributed.

Our agents are currently sourcing ideal magical plants and are on schedule to be ready to start planting and transplanting with the first leaf of spring.

However, a situation has arisen which I believe you would appreciate being made aware of. The department of magical trade, possibly influenced by external parties, has authorised a 24/7 manned goods inspection post for all goods bound for Gairsay island. Much to my shame, this inspection post is manned not only by humans, but also by Goblins. We have attempted to make inquiries as to where this post is, so as to better foster communication between the ministry representatives and our project managers, but we have been unsuccessful in doing so. I believe the inspection post has been concealed with a fidelius charm, hence my suspicions about external influence.

Because of this development, I am required to remind you that any goods bound for Gairsay island that would not pass ministry inspection should not be included in any shipments. This includes: Cursed items, illegal rune stones, inappropriately charmed muggle items, muggle items not on the cleared list for magical possession, regulated magical creatures, restricted items for which you do not hold the appropriate licences, banned books, sufficiently large quantities of do-not-stockpile items, items for which another house has been granted a use monopoly or, indeed, anything that you would not be happy to become part of official ministry documentation.

May your gold flow and your enemies suffer,

Ragnok Boneslicer, Account Manager, Chief of the Boneslicer Clan.

It was night. Harry was sitting crosslegged on the floor of his Hogsmeade apartment. He put down the letter and frowned.

So, Dumbledore had decided to spy on his manor construction, mmm? That was annoying. The Headmaster hadn't yet made a move on Harry Potter, but Lord Slytherin, apparently, was fair game. It didn't feel good having the fidelius charm used against him so much.

He didn't have anything at the moment that would cause the inspectors issue, apart from personal items like his cloak, but… when the Grangers were to move over to the island, which he wanted them to do as soon as the wards were up…. Well, the Grangers had enough muggle equipment and runed trinkets to keep the departments of trade and muggle affairs busy for months — not to mention that so much of it was explicitly being used to circumvent intellectual property spells — and a lot of the Granger's stuff wouldn't react well to having magic used on it directly. He'd have to have a chat with them about it — come up with some way to smuggle their stuff onto the island when the time came.

Harry turned the letter over on the floor and focused back on the occlumency exercises from the book Hermione had tracked down for him. Never again, he'd vowed. He never again wanted to
be *that* helpless in the face of being trapped. Once was already one time too many. He'd figured his first freak out was because he'd almost been caught. Simple solution to that — don't get put in those positions. But that had turned out not to be the case. That overwhelming feeling of panic could be triggered by other, far more innocuous things, and *that* was not acceptable.

He turned in on himself and started to split his consciousness in two, the first step of the treatment.

Hermione was busy learning the basics of obliviation.

Daphne was busy learning to work from instructions under the influence of fidelius magic.

They were on schedule to make an attempt on the mirror room on March 28, exactly one week before the duelling tournament.

The main question still rattling around in Harry's mind, even as it sunk deeper and deeper into his occlumency induced trance, was, 'would Dumbledore try anything *before* then?'

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore watched the Slytherin breakfast table from his large throne at the front of the great hall. Specifically, he watched the fourth goblet from the end, currently in front of one Harry James Potter. As necessary a solution as Azkaban was, it was far less likely to work if one of his rival factions swooped in to support the boy. Framing someone for a crime they didn't commit was tricky business. After all, the whole point of the law courts was to find out the truth.

For his plan to work, he first had to isolate Harry Potter from the Gray and the Dark — and watching the way Heiress Greengrass had fawned over the boy in the hospital wing, had hopefully given him the key.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The great hall started to fill for breakfast. Harry ate next to Hermione, enjoying the mindless chatter of his sort-of innocent peers, interspersed with the occasional political barb or well veiled insult. This was the Slytherin table, after all. The current topic of conversation was the Slytherin-Hufflepuff quidditch match, which Slytherin had won, but which still put them eighty points behind Gryffindor for the Quidditch Cup.

Despite John's loss at the Gryffindor-Slytherin match, his twin brother's performance against the Ravenclaws had *more* than made up for it, and it was looking less and less likely that Slytherin would win when all was said and done. That would all change next year of course, when Harry's red headed spitfire took to the skies around Hogwarts. He'd make sure of that, even if he had to beat Flint into the ground and set Alex on the Bloody Baron.

Harry took a sip of his pumpkin juice and froze with the goblet still to his lips. The scent of fresh grass and snow filled his nostrils. Mmmm… so nice. His invisible Head of Slytherin House ring heated up on his finger, ancient magics doing battle with a far inferior foe. He put the goblet down and adopted a good natured look of mild concussion. The trick, of course, was not to act in any way like he *knew* what he'd just drunk.

Harry's mind raced. Payoffs and prices. Causes and consequences. Pull, and then, when they're least expecting it, push.

He pulsed a series of magical signals into his lightning bolt ring and watched momentary looks of concern and worry flash across both Hermione and Daphne's faces before they returned back to their normal and icy public personas.
Harry put his chin in his hands. And didn't Daphne look utterly enchanting this morning? The way her silky blonde hair flowed down her shoulders, the way her cute nose twitched slightly when she gave a disapproving sniff, the way her ice-blue eyes sharpened, lance-like, when casually dismissing some sycophantic comment. He let out an exaggerated and very visible sigh. That was young love, after all.

It was such a shame he couldn't kiss her. Lord Slytherin would get ever so pissed if he did that, wouldn't he? Oh, yes. Heh. Yes, he certainly would.

— DP & SW: TFeP —

"Harry?" The twins looked up from their workbench in surprise.

"Hi there," Harry half descended the stairs of the Twin's work trunk. "I'm going to need to exercise the map clause of our agreement for the next few hours."

The twin's looked at each other. Twin A grabbed the marauder's map and tossed it to Harry. Harry elegantly snatched it out of the air. "Thanks. You'll have it back soon."

"Sure thing." The Twin's bent back over their work bench.

Harry paused at the trunk's lid. "Oh, and thanks for helping the settlers out with that bit of alchemy. It was really helpful."

"So long as they can continue doing rune jobs for us." Without looking around, Twin B idly waved a small sphere of aluminium on which hundreds of tiny runes were engraved. "These things are INSANE!"

— DP & SW: TFeP —

From inside Harry's trunk, safe in the fidelius in the Hogwarts library, Hermione gazed at the marauder's map. Some two hundred metres away, Harry and Daphne were walking in a loop around the second floor — well within their ear mirror's range.

"Status?" came Daphne's voice through the tiny mirror in her ear.

"DD is still circling the third floor on the left hand side. I think… yes — DD has started moving towards the second floor,"

Hermione saw Harry and Daphne stop where they were, half way down their current corridor.

"DD is coming down the stairs. He will turn the corner behind you in ten—good luck—seven, six, five, four—"

"Cutting magic."

"—three, two, one."

— DP & SW: TFeP —

Harry glanced up the corridor just as Daphne quickly shoved the miniature ear communication mirror into the pocket of her robes.

There was no one there.
"H-Harry," Daphne bit her lip, standing far too close to him for what would be considered appropriate. "We shouldn't be doing this."

"Why not?" Harry gave her an adoring look and pulled her unresisting arm into a nearby empty classroom. "You are just so, so perfect."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore couldn't believe his luck. Invisible, he carefully walked up to the open classroom door.

"H-Harry." A breathy voice sounded from inside.

He moved into the classroom and the scene that greeted his eyes could not have been better if he'd planned it, which, in a way, he had.

The Greengrass heiress was sitting on a table, allowing an obviously aggressive Harry Potter to kiss her on the lips. The kisses were hardly more than pecks, sweet and innocent, but the closeness of the two, and the way they had their hands intertwined, made it clear that this was the pre-teen equivalent of what, at an older age, would certainly require certain cautionary potions and charms.

He faded into sight. "Mister Potter! Miss Greengrass!"

The Greengrass Heiress jerked backwards and stared at him in horror. "Headmaster!" She ducked away from the boy, jumped off the table, and straightened her robes.

Harry Potter glared at him.

"What are you doing, Miss Greengrass?"

The look of horror quickly faded to be replaced by that familiar indifferent countenance of the trained occlumens. She cleared her throat. "Ah, Headmaster Dumbledore, I trust I can count on your discretion on what you've seen here?"

Harry Potter had sidled back to the Greengrass heiress, trying to put his hand in hers, which she was subtly trying to swat away.

Dumbledore shook a disappointed head. "Miss Greengrass? Surely you must understand the seriousness of what you were doing? You are under contract. As a responsibly adult, I have no choice but to bring this to your father and betrothed."

The icy look of indifference cracked and a look of fear seeped through. The girl started to breathe harder again. "Please, sir. Please don't. It was just kissing! My contract doesn't say anything about that! There isn't anything—"

Dumbledore continued to shake his head.

"—wrong with it!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Greengrass. If there truly isn't anything wrong then you won't be in trouble, but it is expected of me." He turned to leave. "And you, Mister Potter, I suggest you distance yourself from Miss Greengrass for the foreseeable future."

Harry glared at him. "I love Daphne!"

Greengrass winced.
"I won't let anyone have her! No matter what any stupid contract says!"

The Greengrass heiress now looked mortified.

Perfect.

He frowned in disapproval one last time before leading the two out of the room and escorting them back to their common room, after which he immediately locked himself in his office, pulled a silvery strand of memory from his temple, corked it into a vial, and began to write.

— DP & SW: TfoP —

Later that day, Hermione, now under the effects of half a dozen potions and transfigurations, marched through Hogwarts like she owned the place, trying to give off just the right amount of righteous anger and rage, occasionally adjusting the mask on her face, and fighting not to blush to high heaven at the thought of what was now weirdly situated between her legs.

She approached the great hall’s huge double doors, almost completely closed except for the small door at the bottom that allowed students in and out for mealtimes, which it now was. Dinner, in fact.

Hermione pulsed a pre-arranged message into her lightning bolt ring and continued to stride forward as though there wasn't several tonnes of solid oak in her way. Now, boy thoughts. No, male thoughts. Man thoughts! Rage. Rage and fury. Someone was kissing my girl! Rawr!

— DP & SW: TfoP —

Harry, sitting two chairs down from Daphne at the Slytherin table, felt a pulse on his lightning bolt ring. He reached into the wards and carefully manipulated the magics on the great hall doors.

The huge doors swung open with a loud whoosh of colder castle air, every head turned, and 'Lord Slytherin' strode into the hall like an angry god.

— DP & SW: TfoP —

John startled the moment Lord Slytherin walked into the great hall. He was here. He was here right now. This was his chance. He stood up, making some excuse to his year mates.

"Daphne! Come with me." Slytherin's voice boomed around the hall.

John caught Susan's eye as he left by the side exit, giving her what he hoped was a meaningful look.

— DP & SW: TfoP —

Dumbledore tried not to smile from the head table.

"My lord?" The Greengrass Heiress said meekly.

"Now!"

Daphne Greengrass rose from her seat.

Lord Slytherin shoved his wand under a trembling Harry Potter's chin and snarled, "You better not be sitting here when I get back, you little shit," before sweeping out of the hall with Daphne in tow.
Tracey Davis looked on in horror as Daphne walked out of the hall with as much dignity as she could muster and Harry Potter got up and moved back to the middle of the table. Everyone started whispering to each other. What the hell just happened?

"Are you sure about this?" Susan looked worried. The muffled dressing down Greengrass was receiving for whatever it was she'd done could just about be heard through the classroom wall.

John Potter smiled. "Susie, don't worry about it. I got this."

"You do know how bad it will be if you're caught?"

"We need to know!"

Susan bit her lip. "Well then, I hope you really are as good at this as you say you are."

John flashed her a bright smile. He wouldn't mess up. He had fate on his side.

Hermione stalked out of the classroom, leaving a visibly distraught Daphne behind her. She felt really bad about all that shouting. She'd been practically cringing herself at the sound her lord's angry voice and it had been her doing the shouting. She'd have to do something to make it up to her friend later, but not before she extracted every tiny detail from her on what those kisses with Harry had been like. For purely academic reasons of course. For research.

She turned a corner and a much smaller body crashed into hers. Anger flared through her. "You!"

John Potter looked up at her. "Lord Slytherin?"

"Ah." Damn. Had Harry ever met John as Lord Slytherin? "John Potter." Her voice immediately took on that cool, calm vibration she'd so often heard her lord use. "For a moment, I thought you were someone else." Nice save.

John Potter nodded, bowed, and walked off.

Hermione watched him go, frowning. Why did she get the feeling she'd just missed something?

John ducked back into his own empty classroom, a massive grin plastered on his face.

"It worked?" Susan asked with obvious excitement.

John held up several hairs. "Wordless, 'accio loose hairs,' with wand up my sleeve. He never felt a thing."

Susan's eyed the hairs in awe. "I can't believe it worked!"

He smirked. "Ready?"

"Wait." Susan held up her hand. "You're going to be stuck like that for an hour. We should do it somewhere safe."

"Ready?" Susan asked with obvious excitement.

John held up several hairs. "Wordless, 'accio loose hairs,' with wand up my sleeve. He never felt a thing."

"Wait." Susan held up her hand. "You're going to be stuck like that for an hour. We should do it somewhere safe."
Yeah, that was a good point, wasn't it? See, this is why he had Susan with him. "Down by the lake then? Where we can hide in the trees?"

Susan nodded.

Twenty minutes later, they were in the rapidly failing sunlight hiding behind a thick clump of bushes.

"Well," John flourished the now colour changed potion containing a single black hair. "Bottoms up." He drank.

Suddenly everything started to change, but the changes were not what he expected. His hair lengthened, his arms and legs thinned, a faint feeling of something pressed against the inside of his shirt, he even shrank slightly, and, most worryingly of all, everything down there, re-arranged itself, leaving him feeling strangely… missing. Missing and empty.

Susan had her hand over her mouth.

"What happened?" he said and his voice had changed too. It sounded like…

"You turned into Granger, John."

"What!" He ran out of the tree line to the lake's edge to gaze into its reflective surface. A brown wavy haired head of hair crowning an angelic face stared back at him. "I am Hermione!" He clutched at his new features. Oh Merlin, this was so weird, but…" His mind caught up with what had happened. "Hermione is Lord Slytherin!"

A sharp sting hit him on the back of the head. "Ow." He turned to see Susan looking at him with an unamused expression, her wand clutched in her hand. "Stop pissing about, John, and be serious."

He rubbed the back of his head where the stinging hex had hit and grumbled.

Susan tapped her foot on the slightly damp ground. "Obviously you just picked up Granger's hair."

John frowned. "But Hermione has brown hair, the hairs I picked up were black."

Susan held out her hand and he passed over the small glass bottle in which he'd stored the precious hairs. "They look brown to me."

"What?" He snatched the jar back and looked again. The hairs did indeed look brown. "That's weird, I could've sworn…"

"Slytherin obviously has a defence against people accioing his hair from his clothes, and the only hairs your spell picked up were Granger's."

"But why would Slytherin have Hermione's hair on his clothes?"

Susan blushed.

"What?"

She looked away. "Nothing."

John shrugged. "So, that didn't work out so well then."

Susan nodded, still not meeting his gaze.
A thought struck him. "But we do now have some of Hermione's hair. We could always go with plan B if we get the chance."

Susan finally looked back. "Yes," she said, slowly, "we could." She grinned. "Are you going to do that too? You seem to make a good witch — although first, I think I'd need to teach you to curtsey, and how to sit like a lady, and…"

John violently shook his head, causing his long hair to whip him in the face.

Susan giggled.

John grimaced. This was going to be a long hour.

— End of Chapter Twenty-nine —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Early chapter! Catching up from my previous late ones.

A/N: Harry's Potter-noble-house-ring. Harry has yet to summon/claim his House Potter noble ring. Obviously, being muggle raised, he should have never learned how to, which is the only reason why Dumbles even tries the trick with amortentia.

A/N: Next chapter: Attempt on the Mirror Room and the Tournament. Only three chapters left till the end of season two! After that we'll be taking a six month break while I work on other things. The upload schedule for the final three chapters is up in the air. I want to post the next two chapters on the next back-to-back Sundays with the final chapter having the usual two week period, but we'll see.
Securing the Area...

Hogwarts castle holds many secrets. Some secrets are open to all who care to listen, told to first year students the moment they walk through the doors. Other secrets are hidden by layer upon layer of enchantment, illusion, and age old runes, buried so deep in the very stone work that none but the most learned or lucky ever find them. But by far the largest number of secrets are protected only by the will of the minds that hold them — secrets of forbidden trysts in broom cupboards, of broken promises and unspoken favour swapping — a web of lies and deceit expertly woven in the playpen of future magical leaders, cunning, byzantine, and always totally innocent of all charges, no really, it wasn't me professor, it was him.

Compared to the actual leaders of the magical world though…

Albus Dumbledore crept through a row of books, soundless and invisible. His target sat alone and soon he would have what he needed. Framing someone for a crime they didn't commit wasn't easy, unless, of course, you controlled the defence — then it was no more difficult than a hair, a polyjuice, and a well placed illegal dark curse.

Harry Potter was reading in a library chair, taking about as much notice of the world around him as a nail in a block of wood.

Dumbledore raised his wand and thought, 'accio loose hairs.' Nothing happened. No loose hairs zoomed towards him. He frowned.

Harry Potter carelessly scratched his nose and shifted so his legs hung over the chair's armrest, the book now held high over his face.

Dumbledore turned and headed back the way he came. Well, okay then, maybe not quite as easy as that.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Dumbles just tried to sweep me for hairs." Harry climbed into his trunk and shut the lid behind him.

Daphne and Hermione looked up from their own books on their couch and frowned.

"He didn't get any did he?" Daphne asked.

"No, of course not."

"Good." Hermione carefully put a bookmark in where she'd been reading and placed the book on the table in front of her. "I hate to think what he'd try if he had."

Harry landed in the armchair opposite the girls. "I have thought about it."

"And?" Daphne asked, copying Hermione and giving Harry her full attention.

"Could be for a love potion, possibly on one of the non-noble Dark witches keyed to me — you know — try the same trick that he thinks worked with you, Daph, to make sure the Dark also
distance themselves from me like he thinks the Gray have."

Daphne nodded.

"Could also be a straight up frame attempt with polyjuice."

Daphne frowned. "But framing someone with polyjuice is almost impossible. That's what the polyjuice defence is for."

"Yes, but it's easy if you control the defence."

"I'm sorry." Hermione raised her hand. "What is the polyjuice defence?"

"Oh." Harry turned to her. "It's a legal defence. Because polyjuice isn't illegal and is readily accessible for the right price, it's impossible to convict someone of a crime with eye-witness testimony alone, unless you can catch the person red handed and then hold them under surveillance for an hour to make sure they're not under polyjuice."

"Because otherwise the person who committed the crime could just have been pretending to be the defendant using polyjuice." Hermione nodded in understanding.

"Exactly."

"But what was that about Dumbledore controlling the defence?"

"Last time around, when they convicted me of Ginny's murder, guess who was my defence lawyer?"

Hermione's jaw dropped. "No way! Dumbledore?"

"Yep."

"That's hardly fair."

Daphne shrugged. "The defence of a minor would have been appointed by the minor's lord if he was noble. We don't know Lord Potter's motivation, but apparently he saw no problem with it."

Hermione folded her arms. "Well, Dumbledore didn't get any of your hairs, so it shouldn't matter, right?"

Harry chuckled. "Oh, if only. This shows that there's a good chance he may be plotting something similar to the end of the second year in the second timeline."

Hermione's frown turned worried. "So what do we do?"

"We let him overextend himself. He thinks the Gray has distanced itself from Harry Potter when it hasn't. This could be a perfect opportunity to strike a powerful blow. After all, we'll have no more use for him here once we have the stone."

"You mean let him frame you?" Hermione worried her lip. "But Harry, what about… you know…" she looked towards the book on mind healing open on Harry's desk.

Harry let out a long sigh. "I'll just have to focus all my free effort on getting that under control as quickly as possible. I can't let that continue to be an issue."

Daphne drummed her fingers on the chair rest. "Even then, it's not like we should be happily
running around clueless. It will massively help our cause if we know what he's planning to frame you for, if he even is."

"Yes, it's a shame we can't use Eye of Kilrogg on him, or anyone with magic sensing for that matter. We'll just have to keep our normal eyes and ears open."

The girls nodded.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Malfoy Manor, currently the largest and newest manor of the three powers of Magical Britain, could never be said to be understated. White and pillared, it looked more like Versailles than Kensington Palace. Once a year, it played host to the Malfoy Yule Ball, the premier event of the social calendar, even for those who didn't buy into the Malfoy's more divisive political views. Light, Gray, or Dark, they would all be greeted graciously by Lord and Lady Malfoy, although sometimes the smiles guests received were rather fixed. It was, after all, rather embarrassing to be hosting as guests, people who you'd been doing your level best to murder when you were younger.

Fixed didn't even begin to describe the rictuses now on Lord and Lady Malfoy's faces as Lord Slytherin glided up the steps to the front door, which was interesting. Harry had brief dealings with Malfoy in the past three years, but never before had, 'barely contained dread,' ever entered his mind to describe a Malfoy smile.

The Lord and Lady greeted him and led him to the drawing room, all the while throwing him occasional hasty glances and reassuring smiles, although who they thought they were reassuring was anyone's guess.

"Drink, Lord Slytherin?" Lord Malfoy asked when they arrived.

"Ogden's 59, if you have it."

"O-Of course." Lord Malfoy picked up the bottle and Harry couldn't help noticing the man's knuckles whitening around the bottle. "So," he started once he'd poured Harry a glass and sat down beside his wife, "what can this humble wizard do for you?"

"I'm planning on taking my place on the Hogwarts board soon and I wanted to discuss some key issues I intend to bring up."

"And you would talk with me? Rather than your Lord Greengrass?"

"One of those issues requires a… shall we say, more united front, than the usual trivialities of whether to upgrade the school brooms."

Malfoy hesitated with his glass halfway to his lips. "Oh?"

"Dumbledore."

Narcissa breathed in sharply. "Y-You intend to go after Dumbledore?"

"I feel that the time may be coming where he could better utilise his many talents somewhere else."

Lucius and Narcissa shared a meaningful look.

"And how do you plan to accomplish this?" Lord Malfoy asked. "Dumbledore's supporters hold the
power on the board — not even the Dark and your Gray together would be able to remove him."

Harry made a nonchalant hand gesture. "Dumbledore might soon be having some problems."

"Really?" Interest pierced through Malfoy's otherwise cautious eyes. "I haven't heard any issues coming up."

"That's because they don't exist yet." Harry took a sip from his glass. "Mm, on that note, there is one thing I'd appreciate your assistance with."

Malfoy slightly inclined his head.

"Harry Potter."

Narcissa sucked in her breath through her teeth. "The little boy who couldn't keep his hands to himself?"

"The very same. I'd like him isolated for the next month."

"Just isolated? Just the next month? Seems rather lenient."

"Ah, well, I believe Dumbledore,"—he spat the name—"would say that the greatest power in the world is love."

Silence.

Then Narcissa gasped. "Love potion? But, he is noble."

"And was never taught how to call his ring."

"Then why the isolation?"

Malfoy's eyes sharpened. "This has something to do with Dumbledore's problems."

Harry idly swirled his drink in his glass and smiled behind his mask. "Perhaps. Either way, I hope I can count on your support on this?"

Lucius and Narcissa exchanged another look. Then they both turned back and nodded.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Ten minutes later, Harry walked to the edge of the Malfoy wards, crossed over, and chain apparated back to his Hogsmeade apartment. The meeting with Lord Malfoy had gone well — amazingly well, in fact. Harry had been expecting to fight with the man on an upcoming Dark focused Wizengamot bill or two, maybe make some well chosen concessions in return for Harry's requests, but no, Malfoy had practically rolled over like a dog before his master. The way Malfoy reacted when Harry had asked for that particular Ogden's vintage was telling. It had been Tommy boy's favourite, after all. If Malfoy had gotten it into his head that Lord Slytherin was Voldemort… well, it would certainly make his life easier in the next few weeks.

He conjured his favourite armchair and sat down. Right now however, he had an empty time slot available to deal with something that had been demanding his attention for the last few days.

"Elf!"

A young naked house elf popped into the space in front of Harry, vibrating with enthusiasm,
bowing so low his long nose touched the floor. "Master, your elf is at your service."

"Good. I've thought long about what you will be called and have decided. From now on, your name shall be Plato."

The elf looked up from the floor with eyes as large as bright as lightbulbs. "Oh, thank you, Master. Plato will do his best to serve his Master, Master."

Harry nodded. "Let's set down some rules, okay?"

The newly named Plato nodded his head up and down, still bowed to the floor.

"Rule one — you need only bow to me once upon being called, then you will stand at rest."

Plato instantly straightened.

"Rule two — when I am wearing this mask, you must call me either, 'Master,' or, 'Lord Slytherin,' never anything else, understand?"

Plato nodded. "Understood, Master Lord Slytherin."

"Rule three," Harry took off his mask, drank an ageing potion antidote, and un-transfigured his face. "When I am like this you must call me either, 'Harry Potter,' or, 'Mister Potter,' never anything else, understood?"

Plato regarded him with wide-eyes. "Master is young Master."

"Do you understand, Plato?" Harry demanded, his voice turning firmer.

Plato quickly nodded. "Plato understands, Mister Potter"

"Good." Harry put the mask back on. "Shall we move on?"

"As Master Lord Slytherin wishes, Master Lord Slytherin."

"Rule four — as a member of the Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin, you must always comport yourself with the dignity and bearing of the house. Do you understand?"

Plato stood a bit taller, completely unashamed by his nakedness. "Plato understands, Master."

"Rule five — you are never to speak the secrets of the Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin to anyone who is not of the House, under threat of clothes, understood?"

A twinge of fear entered Plato's eyes. "Plato understands, Master."

"Rule six builds on rule four — you will attire yourself as I expect — and what I expect is plain emerald green robes with the crest of Slytherin House on the arms, do you understand?"

Plato's eyes widened. "Master, house elves is not to be wearing—"

"—You are not just any house elf, Plato, you are my house elf. When people see you, they will be seeing me — my house — my family, do you wish to shame me by showing people a member of Slytherin House wearing rags?"

Plato's lip trembled.
Harry shook his head. "The robes you wear will remain the property of Slytherin House. You will not own them, merely take care of them, keep them clean and well maintained, is that a fair compromise?"

Plato's lip stopped trembling. He seemed to think for a moment. Then he nodded. "Plato understands, Master. Plato will wear Master's clothes and keep them in perfect condition."

"Excellent. Raise your right hand."

Plato raised his right hand, and Harry waved his wand over it. A ring appeared on Plato's finger. Plato stared at it in awe.

"This is a servant ring. It grants you limited access to the Slytherin Gringotts vault and acts as identification when doing business on my behalf. I will be spending most of my time in Hogwarts, where, unfortunately, you will not be able to directly serve me, at least not for the moment."

Plato's awe quickly vanished. His head drooped and his ears sank down flat against his face.

"It's something I'm working on it. While I'm there, you will stay with my vassals, the House of Granger, but let's go over what else we need to do."

Plato shook away his disappointment and stood back to attention. "Yes, Master Lord Slytherin. Plato will always serve you, Master. Even when Master is away."

Harry smiled. Merlin, house elves were awesome.

― DP & SW: TFoP ―

Draco sat at breakfast and read his owl from home.

Dear Draco,

We hope this owl finds you well and that you are proceeding satisfactorily with your studies. I look forward to seeing your outstanding results at the end of the school year.

Draco looked uneasily over at where Greengrass and Granger sat at the opposite end of the table. He'd be feeling a lot more comfortable if Anthony Goldstein from Ravenclaw, a friend of the family, hadn't told him that he currently sat in twelfth place overall in the year, according to the Ravenclaw academic tables in the Ravenclaw common room. He cast his eyes back down to the owl.

A matter has come up which requires your action. For the good of the Dark and the Noble House of Malfoy, Harry Potter must be isolated from us and all our allies for the next four weeks. I trust you will be able to accomplish this. It is very important.

Love,

Father and Mother

Draco's eyes widened. Really? But it was almost the duelling tournament. This was the moment when being seen to have Potter on their side would be most beneficial. He'd actually quite enjoyed having the super powerful boy in his circle for the last week, but… He traced the signature at the end of the owl with his finger. …If father demanded it, then it had to be done.

― DP & SW: TFoP ―
Good help is hard to find. Sometimes though, good help isn't what a wizard is looking for.

Dumbledore sat in the small throne behind his desk in the Headmaster's office. His many trinkets biped and bobbed and occasionally one would let out a little hiss of steam or plop of dripping water.

The door opened and a seventh-year Hufflepuff witch stepped through. She looked nervous. Her hair was short and bubblegum pink.

"Ah, Miss Tonks," Dumbledore smiled a grandfatherly smile. "Please sit down and don't mind the mess."

"Ah, thank you, Headmaster." Tonks sat down in the chair offered. Her eyes quickly darted around the room before focusing on the Headmaster again. "I'm not in trouble, am I? This isn't about the duelling club, is it? Because I swear I didn't mean to hex Catherine quite that badly during practise."

Dumbledore waved his hand jovially. "No, not at all Miss Tonks. Not at all. I actually wanted to talk about your immediate plans after your NEWTS. I understand you plan to join the auror training program after graduation."

Tonks nodded.

"Are you aware that in the last war, I led a… shall we say, resistance force, against Voldemort?"

Tonks flinched before answering. "It was always rumoured, sir, but no one knew for sure."

"You know why I formed that organisation?"

"To fight you-know-who."

"Yes, but why did I need to? Why weren't the aurors able to?"

"Uh." Tonks hesitated. "Because of the Dark in the Wizengamot?"

Dumbledore slightly inclined his head. "I need to ask you a question, Miss Tonks. If another war happened like the last one, terrible though that would be, would you stay to your command in the aurors, doing nothing to protect the people who cannot defend themselves, or would you do the hard and dangerous thing, and work behind the backs of your superiors and colleagues, knowing that if you're caught it could mean your job at best and your life at worst?"

Tonks swallowed. "I…I like to think I would, yes."

"Even if it meant breaking the law?"

Tonks hesitated again, before straightening. Her eyes firm. "If the law no longer protects the innocent then it is no law at all."

Dumbledore leaned in closer and looked at Tonks' over his moon shaped glasses. "What if you had to do things that were not only illegal, but were also immoral? What if the only way to save many innocents was to cause the death of one innocent?"

Tonks' hair shifted from pink to white. "I don't know. Surely there would be some way to save them all."

Dumbledore slowly shook his head. "War does not always allow us that luxury, I'm afraid. That is
the terrible responsibility that is placed on those who fight the darkness."

Tonks sat in her chair. She stared at the window in thought for a long while. Her hair shifted from white, to yellow, to red, and back to pink again. "No, sir."

Dumbledore raised a single bushy eyebrow.

"Miss Tonks?"

"I don't accept that, sir. I suppose there might be situations where things go wrong, but I believe you should always fight to do the right thing for everyone equally."

Dumbledore regarded the stone faced young metamorph in front of him for a few long seconds before smiling widely and letting out a laugh belly laugh. "Well spoken, Miss Tonks."

Tonks' stern face became confused. "Sir?"

"That is exactly the attitude of a fine auror — one that Magical Britain can be proud to have defending its citizens." He leaned over the table. "Remember that attitude, Miss Tonks. And never forget it."

Tonks' confused look broke into a wide smile. "Ah, yes, Headmaster."

Dumbledore settled himself back in his chair. "Mmm… as it happens, a friend of mine is looking to get into auror prep after retiring from the department. If you feel ready, I could forward your name to him to work with you over the summer break to help prepare you. Auror training is not for the faint of heart and you will need every advantage you can get."

Tonks' eye's lit up. "Yes, I'd very much like that, thank you."

"Now, I'll let you get back to what you were doing. I'm sure you'll help bring Hufflepuff the duelling cup this year."

Tonks grinned. "I plan to!" She stood up, turned around, and exited, leaving the Headmaster alone in the room.

Dumbledore stared at the now closed door.

…Damn.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

It was during one of the mission preparation sessions that Harry and the girls now spent every free moment of their time in, that it happened.

Every single foot placement, every hand movement, every spell — Harry, Hermione, and Daphne had mapped out and written down every step needed to deactivate the fidelius once they’d tripped it.

On the outskirts of the forbidden forest, they'd set up fidelius charm after fidelius charm, always with Daphne as the secret keeper, continually experimenting with how Harry and Hermione reacted to different instructions, both inside and outside the charms.

Harry had spent days learning how to measure his footsteps and hand movements, all to a set of standard measurements, even while blindfolded.
Hermione had learned both how to overcome the weirdness of suddenly being faced by a list of instructions with no memory of how it came to be, and to quickly persuade a similarly confused Harry to follow her instructions.

But despite their best efforts, they still found guiding Harry, footstep by footstep, through a test maze they couldn't remember, and which Harry couldn't see, to be hard going.

That was when Daphne had the idea that since Harry could sense magic, he could follow a trail left behind by her invisible Eye of Kilrogg. That way Daphne could be the one to follow the pre-written instructions, and since moving the eye only required magical intent, rather than physical limb placement, it would be much easier to control to exact location of the eye.

Of course, this now meant that Daphne too had to learn to follow pre-written instruction under the influence of fidelius. So, she'd summoned her eye of Kilrogg, placed it in the middle of the area to be placed under fidelius, and waited for Harry to finish the charm and place the role of secret keeper with Hermione.

Harry did so.

And Daphne could still remember.

Hermione frowned as she turned to her.

"Hermione."

Hermione didn't say anything, just continued to observe her behaviour.

"I remember."

"What?"

"I remember. The fidelius didn't work on me."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock.

Harry was still busy reading his parchment, looking confused and weary, just as he always did when the fidelius had just wiped his memory of where he was standing.

Hermione looked around frantically. Her voice dropped to a fierce whisper. "That's impossible!"

"It happened. I think it was my Eye of Kilrogg. It was in the area before the fidelius activated."

Hermione quickly told Harry the fidelius secret and together she and Daphne told Harry what had happened.

Daphne thought Harry couldn't decide whether to be excited or alarmed. Eventually he drew his wand and pointed it at the sky. "This doesn't leave us," he firmly stated. "We have accidentally discovered a weakness in the fidelius charm. We use that charm for so many things. If anyone found out that it was possible to negate the charm if you can somehow get an Eye of Kilrogg into the charm space, we'd lose so much of our tactical advantage it isn't even funny. From this moment on, I declare this to be a Slytherin family secret."

Hermione and Daphne nodded, slightly wide eyed, feeling the compulsion magic slowly settle on them like a flurry of light snow.

Harry lowered his wand. "Having said that, if Daphne can get into the charm space while the
fidelius is active, and still keep her head, then the chances of this ridiculous plan actually working just shot up massively." Harry grinned.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore sat, once more, behind his office desk. Getting the metamorph on his side would have been perfect for his plans, but it seemed it wasn't to be. No matter. He had a feeling his backup plan would be far more willing.

The door opened.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John walked into the Headmaster's office and sat down in the chair opposite the wise old man. "You asked for me, Headmaster?"

"Yes, John." Dumbledore sighed. "I feel I owe you an apology."

An apology? John's eyebrows rose and clearly his surprise showed on his face.

"Yes, an apology — for not listening to your counsel at the start of the year. It would seem that in my old age, I've become far too sure of myself."

"Counsel?" John racked his brains but the only time he could think of talking with the old man had been….

"When you advised me about your brother's behaviour. Recent events have forced me to reconsider my original stance. You no doubt heard about the explosion on the second floor? It was caused by your brother. He is, in fact, far more dangerous than I had originally feared, and his raw power unquestionably matches your own unusually high levels. He is just like you — twins in every way, it would seem."

John's eyes widened. How was that possible? Yes, he'd heard rumours of his brother doing powerful magic, and there had been that bragging from Malfoy, but Malfoy was always bragging, wasn't he? But if Harry really did match him in power…. He was only that powerful because he'd come from the future… which meant… John's heart started to race.

"Although we've no way to prove it, I also believe that the explosion at the Burrow last year was indeed Harry. The similarity to the incident on the second floor are just too many."

He knew it! Ginny. His Ginny. John clenched his fists together.

"I'm sorry, John."

"Headmaster." John steeled himself and stared straight into Dumbledore's eyes. "We have to do something!"

"Mmmmm…." Dumbledore stroked his beard. "I fear your parents would not listen to me though, nor to you. What would you suggest?"

John hesitated. What would he suggest? He'd wait till next year, let the chamber of secrets open, and put his brother back where he belonged, back in Azkaban. Suddenly, images of Ginny cuddling into Harry's arms flashed across his mind. His eye twitched. But if he waited then Harry could corrupt Ginny even more. He might lose Ginny forever, and, even worse, the timeline could become changed beyond recognition. If Harry was from the future, he might try to stop the
chamber incident from happening to keep himself from being put in Azkaban. Harry could even realise what the diary was and take it away from Ginny!

John took a cautious breath. "Azkaban?" For a moment, John thought he saw a look of triumph shoot through the Headmaster's eyes, but a split second later he was sure he'd imagined it.

Dumbledore frowned sadly, looking every year his old age. "John. Azkaban is a very serious recourse."

"Yes, but…" John scrabbled in his mind for good reasons. "But, if Harry is as dangerous as you say, isn't it critical that he's somewhere he can't become another Voldemort?"

The headmaster slowly nodded, as though thinking it over. "Yes. It is. And it might not be impossible." The headmaster looked over his desk at him. "But it would require your help, a lot of planning, and total secrecy."

John eagerly nodded. Anything to sort out this mess. He'd get Harry back in Azkaban and everything would be back to how it was supposed to be. His eyes sharpened. But not before forcing the truth out of his evil twin, right after he got out of here.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry felt a respectable aura of rage moving towards him. He looked up from the book he was reading in the library, and raised an eyebrow.

John was storming towards him, a look of intense anger on his face.

This should be interesting.

"You!" John shouted, the moment he got in range, causing several dozen students to look up sharply from their books.

"Mister Potter!" Madam Pince shrieked. "Volume! Get out! Now!"

John ignored her and made to grab Harry's arm, which he shoved off.

John glared at him. "We need to talk, now!"

Harry looked up at the wide eyed crowd watching. He shrugged, packed up his books, and followed his fuming twin out of the library, Madam Pince admonishing them both all the way. As soon as they were alone in an empty classroom John turned around and glared at him, again. "You came back with me!"

"What?"

"You came back with me! Don't try to deny it. At the end of the tournament, something happened and you came back!"

Harry's eyes widened in disbelief. Not even a privacy charm. His eyes darted around the classroom. Now, the question was did he cast a privacy charm himself, go along with his brother's accusation, and finally drop the chummy brother act, which would have certainly happened after John got his ass handed to him at the duelling tournament anyway, or did he just continue to deny everything for the time being?

"How did you time trav—"
Okay, the first option. Harry shoved his hand over John's mouth, whipped out his wand and cast a privacy charm while John shoved his hand away and flicked a wand into his face, which Harry then smacked away, leaving them both a few feet apart from each other, and not currently pointing any wands.

John looked at Harry's wand in shock. "What was that?"

Harry glared at him. "A privacy charm, idiot. You do realise that long term time travel is illegal, right? Like, lock-you-up-and-dissect-you-in-the-department-of-mysteries illegal? It's not the sort of thing you just go around talking about in empty classrooms! Please tell me you haven't told anyone else."

John ignored him and glared right back. "How did you come back?"

"I don't know," Harry snarled. "One day I was happily minding my own business, letting demons from hell rip all good feelings from my head — you know, the usual — and next I'm sitting back in the cupboard under the fucking stairs!"

"What cupboard?"

Harry ignored him in turn. "And then I was like, 'oh wow, I'm back in time. Maybe this time I can make it through second year without being framed for letting a bloody great snake out on the school.' He glared at John.

John glared back. 'Ginny is mine.'"

"I think you'll find, that Ginny is hers. Time-travel."

John's glare became momentarily confused. "What?"

Harry smiled a smile of zero warmth. "Just a bit of insurance. I know memories can't be used as evidence in criminal cases, but you can't be too careful. Considering the penalties we'd incur if what happened to us became public, I'm pretty sure neither of us want this conversation shared with anyone else, mmm?"

John didn't say anything for a few moments.

"Nothing else?"

"Who is Lord Slytherin?"

Harry frowned. "The hell if I know."

"You don't?"

"Of course, I don't! Why would I? You think I'm chummy with him, do you? When he's in the habit of sticking his wand under my chin and threatening me in front of the whole school?"

"But... but something must have happened to change the timeline. He wasn't here last time around."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You'll understand it if I don't have a great memory for the ins and outs of the wizarding world's social circles from last time around. Maybe someone else came back with us too?"

John groaned.
"How did you come back anyway?" Harry asked. "Whatever it was must have pulled me along as well."

John stiffened. "I'm not telling you." He sneered and waved his wand in Harry's general direction. "You won't get away with this."

Oh, he did not just say that. Harry looked at John with half-lidded eyes. "And what exactly am I supposed to be getting away with? Not being sent to Azkaban for a crime I didn't commit?"

"You're changing the timeline!"

"And that's bad, how?"

"Huh?"

"I said, 'why is that a bad thing?'"

John narrowed his eyes. "I'm not telling you anything. You'd probably help him."

Harry shrugged. "Well, until you've got something more useful to talk with me about, I suggest you keep yourself to yourself."

John walked his way towards the door, but before he opened it, he turned back, fixing Harry with a nasty smile. "You'll see. I'll do what needs to be done and show everyone that they were right about me — and that you don't deserve anything." John opened the door, steeped through it, and slammed it behind him.

Harry stared at the door for a moment. Wow. Then he cast a tempus and grinned. Oops, almost time for him to take his place on the Hogwarts Board — that was a something more than anything, wasn't it?

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Thirty minutes later, Lord Slytherin walked into the Hogwarts grand meeting room and surveyed the inhabitants.

There was Lord Malfoy and Lord Parkinson who made up the small Dark faction on the board. There was Lord Woodcroft—the man who owned his Hogsmeade apartment—talking to Lord Jacob Greengrass, the two of them together making up the Gray contingent. And finally, the Light — Lords Hawking, Smith, Blott, Fowley, Black, and Potter, along with the only non noble present, Ambrosius Flume, who acted as chairman. Despite being allowed to sit as a silent witness, Dumbledore was surprisingly not present.

The inhabitants turned from their own private conversations, some standing, some sitting, and briefly regarded him with varying degrees of wariness. Jacob waved and grinned.

Ambrosius Flume cleared his throat. "Well, now that we are all here, perhaps we should get down to business?"

Harry took a seat in between Jacob and Woodcroft, directly opposite his father who was staring at him with a look of deep suspicion.

"Right," Flume started, "minutes of the previous meeting—"

"Ah, one moment, Mister Chairman," Lord Potter put a finger up. "A point of protocol. I think we'd
all be interested to hear our newest member's opinion on the proper protocol for board members to be on school grounds when a meeting is not in session."


"Shoving your wand in my son's face is your house matter, how?"

"The boy was attacking my betrothed. I was merely administering a verbal warning."

"You come to me if you wish to communicate a warning. Harry is my son, not yours."

Harry couldn't help a note of annoyance slip into his voice. "Oh, really? And when was the last time you communicated with the little squib exactly? Ten years ago?"

James Potter opened his mouth angrily to retort, but was cut off by Flume.

"—I think that this has moved far enough from a mere point of protocol now, thank you, my lords." Flume's voice was firm and both Harry and Lord Potter quietened. "Now, as I was saying, minutes of the previous meeting…"

—— DP & SW: TFoP ——

John was still angry half an hour after confronting his brother, but that anger quickly left when he eventually ran into Susan who was practically vibrating with purpose.

"John, Granger is in Healer training."

John hesitated. "So?"

"I saw Greengrass out near the lake with Davis, but then Davis left and now it's just Greengrass."

John suddenly realised what Susan was getting at. "You think we should do it now?" They'd been waiting for an opportunity to talk with Greengrass disguised as Hermione for days.

"Yes!" Susan whispered, eyes bright. "It's perfect! Do you have the hairs on you?"

"Sure, they're here." John took out the small jar from his pocket.

"Right. Give me a few moments." Susan took the jar and started fiddling with it. "Can you transfigure the crest on my robes into the Slytherin one?"

John frowned. "I thought I was going to do this?"

Susan gave him what he thought to be an unneeded patronising look, all the more irksome because of the cuteness of the face on which it was displayed. "John, you didn't really think that you'd be able to pass for a Slytherin Princess, did you?"

John hesitated. That sounded like the kind of question that had no winning answer.


—— DP & SW: TFoP ——

Harry gazed around the room, his brain doing political calculus while Flume brought up the fascinating question of whether Charity Burbage should have her request for an updating of the
muggle studies curriculum approved or, as was more likely, rejected. Over half the board members might be light, but they were still a mostly old and stodgy lot.

With the addition of Lord Slytherin there were now three Gray members, two Dark, and six Light, making eleven members, not including the chairman, who acted as casting vote in the event of any ties.

If Harry wanted to have any chance of swinging the board to his favour he needed to get at least one of the light members to switch sides on the eventual matter of Dumbledore.

His father was, of course, totally out. Lord Black, who looked bored out of his mind, was about as likely to split off from Dumbledore as Alexandra was to declare herself a lover of frilly pink dresses.

Lord Fowley was one-half of Wizarding Britain's ministry enforced oligopoly on food trade with the muggle world, which might have been promising, if the other half hadn't been the Greengrasses, making Lord Fowley entering a political alliance with the Gray highly unlikely — unless the man wanted the department of magical trade investigating them both for possible charges of breaking their charters.

Lord Blott was a possibility, but would have to have a very good reason to vote anti-dumbledore. The Noble House of Blott was one of the largest winners in the ministry's long term effort to control the supply of information on magic spells and practises. There was a good reason why everyone bought their books at Flourish and Blotts, after all.

Lord Hawking was the undisputed king of space charms. His house had a stranglehold on the supply of trunks, tents, and all kinds of space expanded items, from pouches to ministry cars. If you wanted something to be bigger on the inside than on the outside, you had to go to a Hawking, something that wizards of other countries tended to resent. The Hawkings had been the subject of more foreign familicide attempts than any other in Wizarding Britain.

Finally, if you didn't count Flume, there was Lord Smith, who sat in his chair like a retired warhorse, massive and armoured, with a moustache to rival Uncle Vernon's. The armour was steel and concealed under his robes in a way that somehow drew even more attention to it. A large war hammer was propped up on the wall behind him. Lord Smith had three children, all married, one daughter and two sons. The sons had children of their own, two of whom were in Harry's year — Zacharias Smith, and Sally Smith, both in Hufflepuff.

It was Lord Smith that Harry had his eye on as the man to sway. The Lord's oldest son had already given his allegiance to the Gray, which must make for some interesting family gatherings. Lord Smith himself was known to be a heavily pragmatic man, and the Light were squeaking that he was going to be the next to jump ship, something the younger son, who was a fierce Dumbledore supporter, was supposedly desperate to prevent.

"All those in favour of Professor Burbage's proposal for a reworked muggle studies curriculum?" Flume asked.

Harry raised his hand. So did Lords Black, Greengrass, Woodcroft, and Potter. All the Gray and two of the Light. His father raised an eyebrow at him. Harry nodded his head slightly. Hey, only one off… not bad.

— DP & SW: TFoP —
think like Granger, trying to copy that same purposeful yet graceful movement Granger had, as though the ground were made of the upturned faces of those she barely tolerated.

Susan sort-of glided out towards the lake and saw her quarry levitating blobs of water. She'd been watching how Granger and Greengrass interacted when they thought no one was watching, and she thought she'd be able to imitate the style quite well.

She moved towards her. "Daphne."

Greengrass raised her head from where she'd been concentrating. "Hermione? I thought you had Healer lessons?"

"Madam Pomfrey cancelled them, something about an emergency at St Mungo's."

"Oh. Well, I'm going to continue draining myself for a little while more. Want to join in for a bit?"

"Ah," Susan hesitated, but it didn't look too hard. "Sure."

Greengrass nodded. "Our lord should be done soon, I think he wants a word with us after the board meeting."

Susan suppressed a swallow. Meeting Lord Slytherin while polyjuiced as Hermione was not in her immediate plans. "Oh? Any idea what about?" She started to levitate a blob of water about the same size as the Greengrass heiress.'

Daphne looked around briefly and opened her mouth as though to say something, but no words came out. Instead she choked.

Susan had just enough time to raise a concerned eyebrow before Greengrass' water blob fell into the lake with a splosh and the next thing she knew, Greengrass had her wand pointed straight at her.

Susan's eyes widened, still with her wand pointed at the lake, her water blob still floating.

"Who are you?" Greengrass demanded.

A bead of sweat formed on Susan's brow. How had Greengrass found out? "I'm Hermione, of course."

Greengrass' eyes narrowed. "Sure, you—"

Susan's blob of water fell.

"—Are."

Susan shielded and dived backwards just as Greengrass's first spell hit. Easy. Another spell splashed off the shield and she dodged a third. Despite her heart thumping a drum beat in her chest, she wasn't panicking. Another spell whizzed by. She wasn't first seed on the Hufflepuff duelling team for nothing and she didn't even need to beat Greengrass, just get away with her identity safe.

She dodged another spell, this one much closer. Adrenaline surged. Hah! Her eyes danced. Her heart raced. This is what she loved about duelling! That game of mere inches, where every split second counted, but this was no mere practise duel — no, this was the real thing and the stakes were much higher. Adrenaline coursed through her blood. Her eyes widened, taking in every bit of light they could.
Greengrass started yet another basic chain, her own eyes two ice-blue furious slits.

Susan instinctively countered it, months of practise making every motion automatic. Greengrass and her were about equal in terms of raw power, so they'd both be slowing down soon and at about the same time. That would give her the opportunity to get away. Her feet dug into the soft grass making indents in the soil.

Then, suddenly, two jelly-leg jinxes collided in mid air and Susan watched in horror as a long silver thread formed between hers and Greengrass' wands. Greengrass' free hand started to glow red, the silver threat strengthened, thickened with raw power, and before Susan could think another thought, she'd been yanked forward as though from the world's largest reverse portkey. Greengrass flew towards her, connected by that silver thread, a bolt of red filled her vision, and she knew no more.

...

...

...

Susan awoke, bound in ropes and wandless, to the sight of Greengrass standing over her, smiling, her own wand pointed down at her.

"Well hello there, Susan Bones, Heiress of the Ancient and Noble House of Bones."

Susan winced, Granger's brown wavy hair falling down over her face. This was bad. "Look, I can explain."

"Oh, do, please. You were this close to stealing House secrets."

Susan grimaced and pushed Granger's hair out of her face. "I wasn't trying to — that was by accident."

"Then what were you trying to do?"

"Look, Greengrass, Daphne," Susan tried desperately. "Everyone's worried, okay? No one knows what's going on and it's putting people on edge. The last time there was a mysterious wizard running around who didn't want anyone to know his identity, it turned out to be you-know-who, you see that, right?"

"My lord is not the Dark Lord," Greengrass said, her tone flat.

"I'm not saying he is, but you know, if we just knew a bit more about him it would put so many people's minds at rest."

"That is for my lord to decide when he is ready to release more information about himself, which I know he will do, but only when the time is right."

Susan looked down at the ground.

"But about this situation…"

Susan looked back up.

"...I think three minor favours owed to the House of Slytherin by the House of Bones will suffice, don't you agree?"
Susan quickly nodded her head. Three minor favours was the best possible outcome right now.

Greengrass smiled and released her ropes.

Susan collapsed backwards on the soft grass.

"Here." Greengrass handed her back her wand.

"Thanks," Susan muttered. She looked at her wand for a moment. "That was a wandless stunner back then."

Daphne nodded.

Susan's eyes widened. "Wow."

"My lord is a good teacher."

Susan let out a single laugh. "I'm jealous."

"You should be."

Susan grinned. "Mind you, John is a pretty good teacher too."

A strange look crossed Greengrass' face. "Oh really?"

"Yep! Me and him have been practising duelling for a few months now." She looked back at her wand. "I guess it's a good thing you're not on the Slytherin duelling team. Fighting each other with these would be tricky."

"I wouldn't count your blessings until you've finished fighting who is on our team."

"Oh, yes, Harry Potter. John really doesn't like him."

"Shocking."

Susan looked down at her wand again. "Not that I'm complaining, but I do feel like I was kind of cheated on the wand front."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, divination wands, right?" Susan laid her wand alongside Greengrass' identical foci. Fat lot of good that is in a duel, or anytime, really."

Greengrass looked down at her own wand as though seeing it for the first time. "Oh, yes," she said, idly picking it up and turning it through her fingers. "How useless."

—— DP & SW: TFoP ——

"Profero oculus Kilrogg."

It was the Saturday before the Duelling tournament and in a temporary fidelius charm, in the Hogwarts pipe network, just outside the muggle studies defence room, in the third floor corridor, Daphne sat, 'useless' divination wand pointed at a spot just a few feet in front of her.

Harry and Hermione watched her as a large green eyeball appeared in the spot.

Daphne's world shifted. Her third eye opened.
In the last few weeks, they'd practised and practised for this moment — gone over everything that could go wrong and made fall backs, back up plans, and plan Bs, all sprinkled with a dash of contingency, not the least of which was the addition of setting up an additional magical shield around the mirror room once they'd entered, to stop anyone trying to blast their way in from the outside, if that was even possible.

All their other plans had taken a back seat while they focused on the one thing that mattered right now — securing the mirror room.

Harry didn't say anything. There was no need for words between them at this stage.

Daphne moved the eye into the space Dumbledore's fidelius charm would appear once they tripped the ward. She gave Harry the thumbs up.

Harry nodded back, turned to the pipe's wall and whispered, "$Open$.

The pipe opened a round, human sized hole, and the three stepped into the room beyond.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore sat in his office chair, sipping on a perfectly made cup of tea — perfectly made, with five lumps of sugar, three slices of lemon, and two tea bags, both of which were currently bobbing up and down against the cup's fine china walls, humming a song about sailors.

At first he'd been worried about John's extreme aggressive attitude towards Harry, but it looked like it would turn out useful in the end. Perhaps after Harry had been placed in the safety of Azkaban, he should take a personal interest in John's education — power like that needed to be carefully managed.

He took another sip of tea.

Unfortunately, Harry being sent to Azkaban would render the third floor corridor project worthless. That was a disappointment. He'd been so sure that keeping Voldemort and Harry in the castle for almost a year together would have triggered some kind of confrontation, especially given Harry's seeming instability, but apparently not. He'd have to deconstruct the defences and send the stone back to Nicholas…

He took another sip.

Or maybe he should see to it that the stone had an 'accident'. Such a powerful artefact might be better off not existing — far too much of a temptation.

On the other side of the room, the empty perch that normally hosted Fawkes, was still empty.

Dumbledore looked at the familiar trinket on his desk that reflected Fawkes' current life cycle phase. It was stuck on, 'chick,' and had been since Halloween. He sighed. Wherever Fawkes was, he doubted immortality was doing him much good at the moment.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione pressed the final required button on the VCR's remote control and watched in satisfaction as a small flash of light filled the room and the door to the next room slowly ground open.

Harry gave her a proud nod, which made her visibly swell.
She and Daphne then spent the next thirty minutes twiddling their thumbs and going over their various plans one more time while Harry placed rune stones around the room and cast his own fidelius on the room.

Once Harry gave her the secret, Hermione glanced at the marauder's map, on loan again from the Weasley Twins, and saw that Dumbledore was still in his office.

Harry stepped in front of her, took off his noble house ring, watched it vanish into thin air, and looked deep into her eyes.

Hermione took a deep breath, pointed her wand right between his eyes and said, "Obliviate."

Images and memories from Harry's mental library shot through her mind, all fuzzy and indistinct, all but impossible for her to understand, but all related to her own current focus and all chosen by Harry before hand, everything about the philosopher's stone, about the third floor corridor, about their current mission. One by one, those memories were blocked and locked, enforced by Harry's own magic, like an autoimmune disease, a magical contract, or a particularly dark magical curse. There were two types of obliviate, memory locking and memory destruction. Memory destruction only worked on the most vulnerable — muggles, or those without intermediate level occlumency or noble house rings. This wasn't that.

Hermione finished the spell and lowered her wand.

Harry looked at her in mild confusion. "Hermione?"

She passed Harry the first of the pre-written instructions, secured by Harry's own fidelius signature.

Harry read the parchment, raised his eyebrows, and turned to Daphne. "Then lead on, my lady."

Daphne tied a blindfold around Harry's eyes, put on one half of the mirror ear piece pair and watched Hermione put on the other half.

Hermione turned and headed back to the pipe network where she would stay until the end of the mission.

Her last sight of Harry and Daphne was Daphne leading Harry over to the now open door, hand clutched firmly in his, eyes aflame and determined.

Hermione climbed back into the still open pipe and into their first fidelius charm. Dumbledore was still in his office. She sat herself down right in front of her first set of fidelius instructions and waited.

A minute went by and then… something tripped.

...

Huh? Hermione looked around, puzzled. Why was she here? Wait. What's this? She picked up a piece of parchment that had been laying right in front of her and started to read.

*Hermione Granger, this is Hermione Granger — code: step-by-step — signature: The second bookshelf in Harry's trunk is located next to the first bookshelf.*

Hermione's eyes narrowed. So it was that, mmm? She took her wand, cut off the top of the parchment containing the code and fidelius signature, and burned it with a small incendio. She then started reading what was left.
Instruction one: Speak the following words — "Daphne, this is Hermione, I have found the step by step instructions."

Hermione took a breath. "Daphne, this is Hermione, I have found the step by step instructions."

A voice came back through her ear. "Good. This is Daphne. Fidelius ID: The first bookshelf in Harry's trunk is located next to the second bookshelf."

Hermione nodded to herself and read the second instruction.

Instruction two: Keep looking at Dumbledore's position on the Marauder's Map for the next hour or until Daphne says the words, 'F Down — all clear'.

If Dumbledore's position ever reaches the room left of the muggle studies defence room, speak the following words out loud, 'Dumbledore has reached the Snape room. Cloak and evacuate.'

Hermione scanned the Marauder's Map and saw that Dumbledore had left his office and was rapidly approaching the grand stairway. She scanned the rest of the parchment. Nothing more for her to do at the moment. She went back to watching Dumbledore.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

[Moments earlier]

Dumbledore's eyes widened behind his moon shaped glasses. A warning light had flashed on his left lens. Someone, probably Tom, had tripped the fidelius charm again on the third floor. He stood up, put his tea cup down with a clink, and made for the door. He had to commend the man's persistence if nothing else, even in the face of a perfect defence, for there was no way around a fidelius charm once it was in place. No way at all.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne gazed around the centre of the mirror room with her eye of Kilrogg while also gazing up at the massive stone statue of Severus Snape with her normal eyes. She kept her hand on Harry's and led him over to the bench, both of them under the invisibility cloak. Thank Merlin they'd found this little trick. Doing this while she was also affected by the fidelius would have been ridiculous.

A voice came through her ear. "Daphne, this is Hermione, I have found the step by step instructions."

Daphne nodded to herself. "Good. This is Daphne. Fidelius ID: The first bookshelf in Harry's trunk is located next to the second bookshelf."

She looked down at the parchment on the desk and at the small vial of colourless liquid sitting next to it. "Veritas affirmatio." The vial momentarily glowed a faint green colour. It was authentic. She picked it up along with the dropper next to it and administered three drops onto her tongue, before corks the vial back up and pocketing it. Hey, it was hard to get hold of this stuff.

Daphne felt her noble house ring heat up as the ancient magics negated the Veritaserum.

The statue moved and Snape's acerbic voice slimed its way through the room. "Speak, visitor. What is your name?"

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."
"For what reason do you seek the philosopher's stone?"

"To protect it from Voldemort and return it to the Flamels."

"What item does this fidelius protect?"

The secret flared in Daphne's head. "The Mirror of Erised."

"Correct." Snape's voice sounded almost disappointed. "Proceed." The final door swung open and Daphne led Harry over to it.

Dumbledore batted away an errand tentacle from the devil's snare in the Herbology room, barged into the charms room, and stopped, and stared. All the stone warriors were still lined up on both his sides. There was no rubble. It looked like no one had been through here. And yet, the fidelius was definitely active, so someone had tripped it. He frowned. Someone had found a way to pass through this room without first defeating it. That was worrying — and more than a little annoying for him.

Oh well. Dumbledore raised the elder wand in front of him, narrowed his eyes and leapt across the activation ward and magical shield, immediately transfiguring the floor into a liquid stone shield, which wrapped around him and stopped several dozen cross bow bolts from turning him into a human pin cushion.

The stone warriors slammed into his defence and started to smash away at his stone egg.

Dumbledore summoned a stronger, pure magic shield closer to him, and banished the egg away in all directions, sending several tones of stone rubble colliding into the many warriors, utterly destroying some of them, and sending those who remained to the ground.

One warrior wielding an eight foot long Goedendag got to its feet quicker than its fellows and smashed its heavy weapon into the magical shield, only a few inches from Dumbledore's face. Albus flicked his wand, smacking the warrior away and catching the Goedendag in mid-air with a levitation charm.

Several dozen more crossbow bolts ricocheted off his shield.

The other warriors had finished picking themselves up.

Dumbledore smirked, eyes twinkling, and flicked his wand again. The Goedendag rapidly spun itself in the air. The floor around him started melting. Oh, he'd missed this.

Blindfolded and helpless, Harry followed Daphne's lead, keeping a firm grip on her hand and trusting her not to let him walk into something. He had no idea what was going on, but whatever it was, was probably important.

Occasionally he heard her gasp, or exclaim, or curse, or even emit a little chocked sob.

Whatever was going on out there must be quite dangerous. Some kind of mental trial perhaps? No! He shook himself. He shouldn't be trying to think about what ever it might be. That was the point of the step-by-step protocol.
"Harry," Daphne's voice said.

"Yes?"

"I have placed all the rune stones in the correct positions around the area. You now need to cast a magical shield charm and tie it into the stones, using the magical power that comes from a nearby Herbology project, not the castle's wards, understand?"

That sounded doable. "Yes, I understand."

He felt Daphne's hand close around his wand hand and guide it forward until he felt his wand push against something hard. "That's the first ward stone, Harry. Good luck."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore strode out of the rubble of stone warriors, some of which were little more than melted piles of newly formed igneous rock, and into the next room.

The long bench against the wall next to him was loaded with glassware.

Oh, yes. This was McGonagall's room. Trust his number two to come up with something like this when asked to, 'really put some effort into it.'

He walked over to the first glass jar and saw that, indeed, the small iron ball was still there. Someone had bypassed this trial too. He smiled grimly, levelled his wand at the iron ball, watched it slowly melt, and started the delicate and tricky alchemy puzzle.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry tapped the final ward stone and muttered the final incantation. He felt the magic catch and stabilise into the new ward system, protecting wherever they were from magical attack from the outside of wherever they were.

"Right, Harry, now we're going to set up a second set of ward stones to drain a set of ward stones that are already here, understand?"

Harry nodded. He understood that.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore eventually made his way into the next room, bathed in almost total darkness, having successfully navigated the iron ball through the glassware puzzle.

"Lumos."

He walked straight over to the control panel and punched in positions of the stars and planets on his date of birth. The stars and planets on the roof started moving, and, moments later, stopped. A white light flashed and the darkness of the room vanished.

Right, next room…

…

He hesitated.

Wait.
He blinked.
He…
He frowned. Then his eyes opened in shock. He couldn't remember where the next room was!

"That was the last one, Harry."

Harry stepped away from the last rune stone they'd placed on the floor of wherever they were.

"Now, Harry, you need to start an incantation to deactivate a three kiloflamel ward system and drain the charm into the rune stone system we just set up."

Harry frowned. Three kiloflamels. Damn. Whatever they were doing was serious business. This definitely wasn't practise.

Dumbledore desperately legged it around yet another corridor corner and down into a secret passageway that he was sure only he knew about. He barrelled down the secret passageway, and emerged out into another corridor, this one so dusty that the dust pilled up in the corners almost like snow.

Hogwarts had some strange geometry, but it did usually follow some common sense rules — rules like, if a room has a wall, then somewhere, there has to be another side to that wall. And the other side of the mirror room outer wall should be right about… here.

Harry focused every ounce of his will on making sure the magic drained out of the old ward system without causing what could be charitably described as a problem. When problems happened with this much magic you were lucky to get out of it staying the same shape. Mere explosions were easy to deal with compared to something as powerful as a collapsing defence system trying to turn you into a polka dotted frog with nine legs and a taste for only kangaroo.

Suddenly he felt something smack into the magical shield ward he'd just set up. "Daphne."

"Yes, Harry?"

"Something just tried to attack the magic defence ward system."

Harry heard Daphne's intake of breath and subsequent rapid question. "Hermione, where is Dumbledore?"

He heard a tiny, tinny voice say, "He's not on the map."

Daphne cursed. "Harry, will this force be able to get through?"

Harry shook his blindfolded head. "It does feel strong enough to be Dumbledore or Voldemort, but they'll never be able to get through alone, the ward system's too powerful."

Harry heard Daphne let out a sigh of relief. "How close is the ward to being drained?"
"Close."

Harry continued to supervise the draining, while feeling what Daphne seemed to think was Dumbledore fruitlessly pounding on the magical shield surrounding the room. Eventually the pounder gave up.

The final few Merlins drained into the new ward system.

"Daphne, it's done."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione's head shot up from where she'd been staring at the Marauder's Map. She remembered! Harry had done it! "Daphne!"

"Yeah, Hermione, it's done! Get in here, now!"

Hermione jumped up and dashed though the still open hole in the pipe and into the muggle studies defence room.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore almost dropped his wand in shock. The fidelius was down! He stopped staring at the wall in front of him and dashed back the way he'd come. This was bad. Really, really, bad.

"Expecto patronum!" A silver phoenix appeared in front of him. "Minerva! The third floor defences have failed. I'm putting the castle into lockdown. Get the students to their common rooms."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione skidded into the centre of the mirror maze, trying desperately not to look at any of the reflections. Many of them prominently featured Older Hermione hanging from a prison ceiling without a head. "Harry!"

Harry turned to her, just as Daphne untied Harry's blindfold. "Hermione?"

Hermione reached into her bag and brought out several flasks of memories. "Take these."

Harry dutifully accepted the memory vials and started transferring the silvery strands back into his head.

Hermione pointed her wand between Harry's eyes. "Memoria salutem."

Harry's eyes flicked for a few moments. Then he staggered. "Whoa." He shook his head and looked around. "It worked!"

"Yes, but we now need—"

"—Fidelius charm, got it." Harry sat down on the floor in front of the small rune stone in front of him and closed his eyes.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore reached his office at a dead run. He lunged for one of his devices prominently displayed in an alcove behind his chair, well away from preying little fingers, and slammed his
hand down on it. "Castle lockdown!"

Magic swirled through the room.

His windows slammed shut.

There.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Sophie Roper looked up from her book in alarm as every one of the windows at the top of the tall library walls slammed shut one after the other. "What's going on?"

Her fellow Ravenclaws, Lisa Turpin and Padma Patil, shrugged.

"Students!" Madam Pince strode into the normally quiet study area. "Back to your dormitories immediately! Quickly now! Go!"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John halted Susan in the middle of their duel and watched with wide eyes as every window and door to the duelling arena slammed shut and bolted itself. Powerful magic rushed through the space, causing the hairs on the back of his neck to stand on edge. What the hell?

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Chief Auror Sirius Black snatched his shield up from where it lay on by the door and bolted outside, almost colliding with Shacklebolt who'd rushed out of his office at the exact same moment.

A blaring siren was sounding, almost deafening him with its wail. The department's normally soft lighting was pulsing pure red.

They both tap-danced down the department stairs to find the two dozen aurors of the main office already dressed and ready — game faces on, helmets, shields, the full nine yards.

Sirius strode into the middle of them. "Hogwarts is on lockdown! The moment we get a request for help, we leave."

All twenty-two aurors nodded.

The floo flared green. Dumbledore's face popped out. "Sirius?"

"Yes, Albus?"

"If I needed your help, do you think you could keep it quiet?"

Sirius goggled at his former Headmaster while the sirens of the department of magical law enforcement loudly blared around him. "If you need our help, you need our help!"

Dumbledore's head seemed to concede this point. "Okay, I need help."

Amelia Bones slammed though the department's front door. "Situation!?"

— DP & SW: TFoP —
Tracey ran back to the Slytherin common room, trying not to panic, and failing miserably. The school was on lockdown! That hadn't happened since the last goblin rebellion! Not even in the last war had the school gone on lockdown!

She quickly climbed into the room and scanned the room. Daphne and Hermione weren't here! "Blaise!"

Blaise spotted her and walked over from where a bunch of older students were milling around with anxious looks on their faces. "Where're Daph and Hermione?"

Blaise shrugged.

Tracey cursed.

Hermione watched the Marauder's Map for signs of trouble, occasionally glancing up to see Daphne still watching the still figure of Harry, who was sitting peacefully with his eyes closed in the middle of the mirror room. Everything was going well, but that was no reason to let down their guard.

Quirrellmort had left his office not long after Harry had taken down the fidelius and was currently heading towards the girl's second floor bathroom. That was worrying. Dumbledore seemed to be glued to his floo, which was also troubling. Was he calling for help?

Suddenly, Hermione's heart leapt into her throat. Name after name popped out of Dumbledore's floo. Black, Shacklebolt, Robards, Scrimgeour, Knight, Dawlish, Proudfoot, and Savage. Eight in total.

"Daphne?" she called, a note of alarm seeping into her voice.

"Yes?"

The names followed Dumbledore down the stairs from his office until they reached the first corridor, where upon they quickly formed themselves into a column, two names wide and four names long.

"Oh," Daphne said.

They both looked at Harry, still sitting with his eyes closed.

The names marched along corridor after corridor until they turned into what seemed to be a wall and disappeared off the map.

Sirius felt up the snow-drift-dusty wall and grunted. "Knight!"

Robert Knight, the team warder, stepped forward.

"What can you do about this?"

Knight stuck his wand into the space near the wall. "A standard magical shield ward. Yes, we can take it down, but it will take time."

"How much time?"
"Thirty minutes, maybe?"

Dumbledore's beard twitched.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The magical shield protecting them was weakening.

Hermione wasn't panicking, but she really hoped Harry would finish soon. It wasn't as thought they didn't have an exit — the door leading back through the third floor corridor was right there after all, and beyond that were two up and ready fidelius charms — fidelius charms which could easily protect them from the small army currently battering at their shields, should push come to shove, but she really hoped push wouldn't come to shove. They'd spent so much time and effort to get this far. To be forced to abandon it all, after getting here, with just the mirrors themselves left to defend the stone… Ugh.

She and Daphne were taking in turns to pour as much of their own magic into the shield wards as they could, anything to buy them just a bit more time, but it felt like trying to feed a furnace with matchsticks. They could feel it wasn't close to failing yet, but it wouldn't last forever and every minute that past felt like an hour. The room was oppressively silent — silent but for the occasional footstep from her or Daphne and the barely audible thrum of eight adult aurors plus Dumbledore on the other side of the wall, ripping through the wards. Hermione fancied she could even hear Daphne's breathing. She could certainly hear her own.

Hermione gazed at Harry, still sitting with his eyes closed, looking as peaceful as a quiet spring morning, which was the opposite of how she felt.

Daphne kicked a pebble across the room.

It made a clirck, click, dite noise.

Then, suddenly, Harry's eyes snapped open, and he grinned.

Hermione's heart leapt.

Harry stood up, drew his wand, pointed it at the stone in front of him and said in a firm, confident voice, "Fidelius Occultum!"

And all knowledge of where she was and what she was doing was swept from her mind like smoke by a gust of fresh, cleansing wind.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Knight looked up from where he was focusing the efforts of eight other wizards on… "Wait."

The combined auror task force looked around, confused.

Knight looked at his wand. "What were we just doing?"

Dumbledore groaned.

— End of Chapter Thirty —
Chapter End Notes

A/N: As you can see, I've decided to split what I thought was going to be one chapter into two. So, we still have three chapters left until the end of season and book two. Yay! Next chapter — The Tournament.

A/N: As you can also see, I'm trying to get one chapter out a week at the moment. Hopefully I'll be able to do this for the next two chapters, although I suspect that the season finale will be the usual two week deal.
Dumbledore felt inordinately smug.

You'd think, what with the mirror room now under a hostile fidelius, that he'd be down one defence professor and facing the prospect of immediate war with a resurrected dark lord, but no — Tom had yet to leave his teaching post and, far from being the endless fount of dry, dark humour that would indicate a good mood, seemed more annoyed than ever. Clearly, Nicholas's devilish mirror and his own additions were doing their job.

There was one thing that puzzled Dumbledore though and it was with this puzzle in mind that he gently knocked on the door to the defence professor's office.

"Enter."

Dumbledore opened the door and stepped through.

"Ah, Headmaster." Quirrell's body looked up and Tom directed him to an empty chair. His manner was impassive, if a bit surly. "How can I help you?"

"Quirinus,"—Dumbledore took the seat offered—"I was wondering if you could help me with a little mystery."

Tom tilted Quirrell's head. "You know I will give you any help I can, Headmaster. I understand you are extremely busy at the moment."

Dumbledore's beard twitched. He'd spent most of yesterday afternoon and evening dealing with the fallout from calling eight aurors out and locking down the castle for reasons that neither he, nor the aurors, could fully remember — and those bits he could remember, he had no desire to tell. "It is about my being busy that I wish to ask. You remember yesterday that I put the castle into lockdown?"

Quirrell's left eye twitched. "I would find it incredibly difficult to forget something like that."

"Well, during that time, the wards recorded you as leaving the castle, despite the fact that such a thing should be impossible during a lockdown."

"How interesting."

"And what's more, I can understand the fact that you were not in the castle. That is to say, my brain allows me to process that information."

Tom's surely expression momentarily shifted. His eyes flickered with dark amusement. "Ah, the fidelius charm. Such a useful piece of magic."

Dumbledore tensed.

Tom laughed. "I really wish I could help you, Headmaster, but unfortunately, I cannot… remember."

Dumbledore's eyes widened in shock.
Tom's face became surely again. "Yes, annoying, isn't it?"

"But…" Albus tried to comprehend what he was hearing. "Who?"

Tom's lip curled upwards, eyes instantly shifting back to dark amusement. "I'd say, 'you-know-who,' but clearly that isn't true."

Dumbledore fixed Tom with the same severe look he used to give him in transfiguration.

"Oh, come now, my dear Dumbledore. I'm sure that I, a mere former muggle studies professor, doesn't need to spell out what to you should be obvious — that the binary game is no longer."

And then Dumbledore suddenly realised what Tom was suggesting. He, Albus, was the Light Lord and Tom was the Dark Lord, that much was obvious — but that there might be a third — his eyes widened — and that Tom seemed to believe that third was worthy of being classed as their equal.


— DP & SW: TFoP —

After an evening assuring Tracey that they were fine and just training down by the lake, Daphne Greengrass stood, once again, in the fideliused mirror room, in front of a mirror that was certainly not the mirror of Erised, although exactly what it was, was up for debate.

In the mirror, Daphne's reflection kissed a giggling Hermione on the cheek, before enthusiastically waving a red stone at her, ducking out of the mirror's frame, and into the mirror next to her. Behind mirror Hermione, a million reflections from a hundred other mirrors in the mirror maze did what ever it was they did in their mirrors, sometimes to or with each other. Red stones featured prominently.

The mirror next to her contained an older Daphne sitting on a throne made of ice, eyes glowing blue, face stern, regal, and cruel. The red stone holding Daphne from the other mirror proceeded to have an argument with ice throne Daphne — an argument which ended when a smaller Daphne reflection from another mirror jumped in between them and summoned an older Harry reflection, who made a grab for red stone Daphne, but missed. Reflection Harry then proceeded to jump ice throne Daphne and started doing things that made real Daphne blush.

Red stone Daphne, meanwhile, had flittered away to yet another mirror, although which one, she couldn't tell. There were just so many of them.

Daphne tried to ignore the mirror next to her and instead ran her fingers along the mirror in front of her, attempting to feel the magics that wove it together, like Harry suggested she do. It was tough going, especially with reflection Hermione constantly giggling at her.

"This one," said Harry's voice from across the room, "this one is not the Mirror of Erised."

Daphne abandoned her experiments with magic sensing and joined Harry at one of the many hundreds of other mirrors, followed moments later by Hermione.

"I should hope not," said Hermione in a disgusted voice.

Daphne felt sick. In the mirror, Lord Walter Slughorn—fat, ugly, and without a hint of compassion —did unspeakable things with her terrified seven-year-old self. She didn't know what Harry or Hermione were seeing but if it was anything like her's then she didn't want to know.
Harry pointed his wand at it. "There doesn't seem to be any trip lines or traps." He conjured a large rock in midair. "Stand back please."

Daphne and Hermione scurried backwards.

**SMASH!**

The mirror fell over backwards and what remained of its cracked surface exploded upwards, a million little shards falling out of their frame.

Hermione snickered. "Seven years bad luck."

Daphne winced. "Oh, Merlin, don't say that."

"Yes, well." Harry stepped over the wreckage, crunching a stray bit of glass under foot. "There will be a lot of broken mirrors before we're done here."

It took hours.

Harry carefully analysed each mirror, occasionally showing Hermione and her an interesting point or two about what he was doing. After he'd confirmed that the mirror wasn't the one they were after, he smashed it with the now traditional floating rock, and then she and Hermione swept up the remains into an ever growing pile in a corner of the room.

Eventually, they were left with just one mirror — The Mirror of Erised.

Daphne looked into the mirror.

Her parents were there. So were Astoria and Tracey. So was Hermione. So was Harry. And Harry was tall. All of them were older, and standing in some exotic location, if the many tropical trees and grasses were any indication. Harry looked so happy. In his left hand he held a blood red stone, and with his right, he proudly ruffled Reflection-Daphne's hair. Reflection-Daphne looked embarrassed but also deeply happy with flushed red cheeks, downcast eyes, and a huge smile.

"Any luck?" Harry asked.

Daphne tore her eyes away from the image, shaking her head.

Hermione's voice was quiet when she spoke. "I see... I see you with the stone, Harry. I see a lot of other things too, but the important bit is that you've got the stone. You're not doing anything with it, though, just holding it."

"Mine's like that too," Daphne added.

Harry nodded. "Same, although in my case, the stone isn't in my hands, but rather on top of a Midas-worthy pile of gold in the reflection's background. I guess that's the mirror's way of saying that I don't meet the requirements to retrieve the stone."

Daphne took a step back. She was finding it difficult not to keep staring at the mirror. "So, what do we do now then?"

"Hermione is going to retrieve the stone."

Hermione started. "M-Me?"

"Yep. Or, more specifically, I'm going to use various mind magics on you to temporarily alter your
Hermione bit her lip, but did nod her head.

"I'll need you to completely drop your occlumency."

Hermione nodded again and closed her eyes for a few minutes before opening them again. "Done."

Harry nodded and levelled his wand between Hermione's eyes. "Confundus."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione shook herself. That felt weird. Err… what were they doing? Oh yes, she had to find the stone. She had to find the stone and this mirror was the key.

She gazed into the mirror. The reflection showed a huge library, massive, ancient, and overflowing. Her older reflection sat reading on a sofa with an older Harry sitting next to her, arm wrapped comfortably around her shoulders, holding the stone in his free hand, occasionally giving her blushing reflection a light kiss on top of the head.

Hermione frowned. This wasn't her deepest desire. She needed to find the stone!

Reflection Harry caught her eye, smiled, and shook his head while idly tossing the stone up and down.

Something felt wrong here. A tiny voice in the back of her mind was getting louder and louder. Something about Harry. Something about wanting….

"Confundus."

Hermione shook herself. That felt weird. Err… what were they doing? Oh yes, she had to find whatever it was that this mirror was protecting.

She gazed into the mirror. Sofa bound Harry lightly kissed a delighted reflection Hermione on the cheek, gave real Hermione a playful wink and wagged a single admonishing finger at her through the glass.

Hermione frowned. This wasn't her deepest desire.

"Confundus."

Hermione shook herself. That felt weird. Err… what were they doing? Oh yes, she had to stop Voldemort getting the stone. That was critical!

Reflection Harry rolled his eyes at her.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daily Prophet Front Page [29 th March, 1992]

HOGWARTS ON LOCKDOWN!

Yesterday, at two o'clock in the afternoon, the students and staff at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry experienced something that has not happened since the last goblin rebellion. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, Order of Merlin - first class, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot,
and Supreme Mugwump of the ICW, placed Hogwarts castle on lockdown and summoned a task force of eight aurors to the school. In a statement released to the Prophet, Headmaster Dumbledore said that, 'The situation is under control and our children are in no danger.'

Despite these assurances, the school remains in lockdown, and we at the Prophet have to wonder what kind of situation would cause the Headmaster to take such an action. Neither he nor the DMLE is currently willing to disclose details.

What does lockdown mean? The lockdown status of Hogwarts castle is a warding protocol that prevents anyone or anything from leaving or entering the school grounds through any normal entrance or exit other than a single point controlled by the Headmaster. Lockdown is the second highest level of security the school can assume and because of the large drain of magic, can only be maintained for a week. Continuing his earlier statement, Headmaster Dumbledore said that, "The annual Hogwarts duelling competition will take place as normal and the lockdown will be lifted before the event. As it stands, the lockdown is only in place as a precautionary measure."

This begs the question, 'what is going on at Hogwarts School?'. Readers will recall that in September of last year, a fully grown mountain troll breached the school's defences and roamed the school unchecked until defeated by a group of first year students. Some might say it is reassuring that the Headmaster is now taking threats to our children's safety more seriously, while others would question the headmaster's right to keep such a security concern secret.

At the time of going to print, a related twenty-four hour block on all owl communication with the castle has been lifted.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore sat invisibly in the empty stands of the duelling arena, watching the Slytherin duelling practises with a calculating gaze.

For his age, Harry Potter really was a genius — definitely at the level he and Tom were at when eleven, if not better. Indeed, the young boy was more teaching than practising, even with the seventh years, something his older peers seemed to accept, if barely.

The tournament would be the perfect opportunity. It was violent, public, and who knew the lengths a young boy would go through to win against his famous brother. Jealousy was such a terrible thing.

In the ring below, Mister Potter let off a particularly well coordinated spell chain. A long distance smoke illusion, followed by a zero friction charm aimed at the floor, and finished up with a low powered area of effect stunner, the kind of thing that could reach around a hastily cast shield, if the target wasn't paying attention — an interesting combination — and one the young Potter seemed quite fond of.

White — Pink — Brown

White — Pink — Brown

Hmm… that area of effect stunner spell at the end looked rather similar to a certain dark high-powered blasting curse, didn't it?

White — Pink — Brown

White — Pink — Brown
Dumbledore watched for a few more minutes before nodded to himself, getting up, and leaving. He had what he needed.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

By Thursday, Harry felt he was running out of immediately useful ideas. The mental manipulation on Hermione was a dud. The Mirror of Erised was obviously more sophisticated than that. He sat alone, crosslegged in front of the mirror, probing the artefact with his magic and looking for any loopholes in its design.

In the mirror, an adult Harry sat in the middle of what could only be described as an ocean of family. All the girls were there, all grown up with dozens of children playing around them in the grounds of a proud and unbreakable Slytherin Manor, in front of which, was a mountain of gold, on top of which sat a single red stone, taunting him with its closeness.

By Harry's feet, the book on mind healing lay open to the page on how to fight a phobia using occlumency.

He'd had an idea.

The first step in curing a phobia with occlumency was learning to create a second personality that would live in his mind — a split personality. This personality would serve multiple purposes, the first and most immediate being to wrestle control of the body while the main personality suffered from the phobia induced panic attack.

This was a less than ideal solution, but it provided the set up for the second step of the treatment — using a split consciousness controlled mind-scape to simulate the conditions of the phobia and gradually desensitise the main consciousness to it. He needed a second consciousness, because, as Harry told Ginny all those months ago during their dreamland training, if you want something in your dreamworld, you have it, which makes it impossible to recreate the conditions of a phobia since, the moment you don't want that massive spider to be crawling all over you, it will disappear.

Harry found it deliciously ironic that the most important step in curing his phobia of being trapped was to learn to create and use another, even more serious mental condition.

He'd been practising in every free moment that he wasn't ether dealing with Lord Slytherin business, training with the girls, or dealing with those Harry Potter obligations he couldn't hand wave away. In that practise time, he thought he'd managed to get the first step working.

Harry looked away from the mirror, reached deep into his occlumency, putting everything that he was into a neat little package, and split it as though it were a mitosis intended microbe.

Something sparked into being inside him.

Well, hello there, Harry.

Harry mentally grinned. He had an alternate consciousness.

Just call me Alt.

That sounded fair. Were they ready to give it a go?

Yes, we are.

Harry steeled himself and looked back up into the mirror.
In the ocean of family, two identical Harry Potters stood looking very confused at each other. All around them, their children squealed and giggled, pointing and tugging at their mother's sleeves, who looked rather bemused by the sudden appearance of an extra husband in their midst.

Harry looked down. He was going to bring them back together.

*I'm quite okay with that.*

Harry slowly moulded his two consciousnesses back together.

The little spark inside him went out.

Right. Now he had to create the same split, but this time with a slight change in his alt. He needed his alt to only want the stone, not to use it or give it to him or anything like that, just to get it.

Harry formed that neat little package again, but while it split he reached across the slowly forming divide between them and dove into the newly forming consciousness, erasing just those few small motivations. It was all he could manage before the split finalised, he leapt back across the divide, and that special something sparked back into being.

*Well, hello there, Harry.*

Harry mentally nodded. Hopefully this would work.

*Ah, there might be a slight problem there.*

Harry frowned in real life. A problem?

*Yes, I suggest you look into the mirror.*

Harry looked. The two Harrys were now having an argument. One furious Harry had his hand pointed towards the gold-swimming stone while the other had his arms crossed, stubbornly shaking his head.

What?

*I want to find the stone, but I don't want you to have it, Harry. Nor do I want you to use it. I'm sorry, but I won't retrieve it for you.*

Harry leaned forward and hit his head on the open book.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

In Dumbledore's office, John fingered the rune dense duelling robe in his lap with not a small amount of trepidation. "How much will this hurt? You know, on a scale of one to the cruciatus?"

Dumbledore gave him a look over his moon shaped glasses. "I fear that wouldn't be a useful scale for you, John."

"One to ten, then?"

"Quite low. The blast will knock you unconscious almost immediately. The real pain will come during recovery."

John nodded. "I'm quite used to pain during recovery."
Dumbledore smiled slightly. "Ah, yes. I doubt that will be as bad as what you went through after the broom incident."

"Fine then."

Dumbledore fixed him with his over the glasses firm stare again. "Now, I don't need to remind you about the consequences of what will happen if what we're doing becomes known?"

John mentally rolled his eyes. "Yes, Headmaster, I understand." And he did. The headmaster had tied himself to John, and if either of them went down, they'd take the other with them. John knew the headmaster did things in the name of fighting evil that would be heavily frowned on if they came to light, and Dumbledore knew that he, John Potter, wasn't the true boy-who-lived, something he wanted never to come out. He might not be a Slytherin, but this kind of mutually assured destruction arrangement was brain dead obvious even to him.

"Why don't you try it on?" Dumbledore asked.

John dutifully stood up and slipped on the duelling robes. It fit perfectly. No surprises there — they were the ones his father had bought him for his birthday, slightly altered by the headmaster. Runes covered the inside lining, embroidered in the lining's own colour, making them very difficult to see, and at regular intervals, thin strips of similarly coloured enchanted parchment had been sown. "What're the parchment strips for?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Ah, one of my more clever little ideas, if I do say so myself. Have you ever signed a notification contract?"

John shook his head.

"If you perform a certain action that's against what's written in a notification contract, your name appears on another piece of parchment, letting the other party know of your transgression. Quite useful to make sure people are sticking to their agreements."

"So," John held the open robes open, making the parchment strips a little more obvious. "Why?"

"I managed to alter the way the contract spell works so that instead of writing my name, it writes something else, in this case, it will write runes. The parchment strips sown into your robes are spaced so that when the runes appear, the parchment runes will line up with the runes already sown into the robe's lining, triggering the blast."

"So, you're going to trigger it?"

"Indeed." Dumbledore brought out a Gringotts contract parchment. "I just need you to counter sign here and everything will be set."

John picked up a quill. "And there's absolutely no chance that I might accidentally die from this?"

"John, if there was such a chance, I would not have even suggested it."

John nodded and placed the quill on the signature spot, quickly reading the basic contract.

*Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore agrees not to eat red Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans during the Hogwarts Duelling Tournament on April fourth, 1992.*

*Signed: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore*
"Red beans, huh?"

Dumbledore smiled.

John signed.

The day of the tournament dawned and for the first time in a week, the oppressive lock-down magics filling Hogwarts lifted. Harry walked alone down to breakfast as though today were just another day. He still hadn't had any luck with the mirror. If this kept up, he'd have to start considering more extreme measures.

The duelling teams of all four hoses sat together, all dressed in formidable looking duelling robes, even his fellow first years. He caught sight of Su Li at Ravenclaw table, staring down at her food as though she expected it to start flinging spells at her if she looked away.

Harry settled himself at the edge of the rest of the Slytherin duelling team.

Romulus Volf frowned. "Where're your robes, Potter?"

Harry glanced down at his standard plain black Hogwarts robes. He'd cut a slit from the waist down at the both the front and back so they sort-of imitated the duelling robes of those worn around him — but even then, they still looked pretty scrappy, especially with the muggle jeans under them, well fitting that they might be. "I'm wearing them."

Volf scowled. "Stop dicking around, Potter. I know you have better."

"Yes, I do, but I will wear these for the moment."

"Why?"

"Its all part of cunning Slytherin plan." Harry shrugged. "Besides, I thought you were complaining you weren't going to get to actually duel in the main event?"

Volf grumbled a bit but didn't object any more.

At the far end of the table, Daphne held court with Hermione around the other Gray students, both doing a good job of not showing the anxiety Harry knew they felt. He'd warned them to be on high alert during the tournament. If something was going to happen, the tournament could be a perfect time for it.

Breakfast came and went. The team rose from the table, receiving a round of cheering and applause from their fellow Slytherins as they left the great hall. Harry might currently be isolated, but that wouldn't stop the house supporting their team.

The stroll down to the duelling arena was relaxing and Harry couldn't help reflect on this moment in the second timeline. He'd been in the stands, watching his brother—who'd had the advantage of time-travelling from the first time-line—plough through the first five members of Ravenclaw before finally succumbing. James and Lily Potter had been in the stands on the other side of the arena and Harry had so desperately wanted to go and talk to them, but was too afraid. They'd looked so proud of his brother. That memory had been a hard one to stop caring about, but constant exposure over ten years of hell had done it.
Before he knew it, Harry was ensconced in the Slytherin holding area under the large, currently open-air, duelling arena.

From outside he heard a magic enhanced voice bellow, "Welcome, My Lords and Ladies, wizards and witches, to the annual Hogwarts Duelling Tournament!" An approving roar from two thousand throats filtered through the ceiling and walls to them.

Harry gripped his holly and phoenix feather wand and grinned. They wanted a show? He'd give them a show.

— DP & SW: TFiP —

Dumbledore made his way along the rows of seats while the commentator's voice sounded around him.

"The Hogwarts Duelling Tournament is an international Class A standard rules tournament — that means no transfiguration, weapons other than a wand, and no curses — just hexes, jinxes, and other charms!"

He saw what he was looking for. "Good morning, Madam Pomfrey." Dumbledore settled himself next to the healer in the front row where he'd have a good view of the arena.

Madam Pomfrey looked pleasantly surprised to see him. "Oh, Good morning, Headmaster." She turned back to the arena. "I do hope they don't do anything too stupid this time."

"Youth needs to learn its lessons." He drew a paper bag out of his pocket. "Care for an every flavour bean?"

Madam Pomfrey eyed the bag warily. "I think I'll give it a skip, if it's all the same to you, Headmaster."

Albus shrugged, eyes twinkling, and popped a yellow bean into his mouth. Mmm… lemon.

— DP & SW: TFiP —

"The duellists will face each of their opponents in turn, starting with the youngest, until they lose! Then their next oldest team member will step forward to attempt to vindicate them! Once all seven members of their opposing team has been defeated, they will go through to the final round!"

By the entrance to the arena, a large floating board showed the scores and the current lineup.

Round 1: Gryffindor — 0 vs. 0 — Ravenclaw

Round 2: Hufflepuff — 0 vs. 0 — Slytherin

Semi Final: ? — 0 vs. 0 — ?

Final: ? — 0 vs. 0 — ?

"Well, Lovegood?" Lord Smith sat down heavily on the wooden bench beside the eccentric young lord, causing a slight shockwave to travel through it. "What's this all about then?"

Xenophilius Lovegood smiled and nodded his head towards the arena. "I suspect we might well see something both instructive and entertaining."

Lord Smith snorted. "Children fighting with pretty lights — not a hint of good steel anywhere —
not even my own children — nor yours for that matter."

"Hi!"

Lord Smith started, but only a little bit.

A small whisp of dreamy witch had seemingly materialised in front of him, dipping down into a shallow curtsy before rising again.

He ruffled his moustache.

Lovegood chuckled. "Lord Smith, I don't believe you've met my daughter, Luna?"

"I haven't." He smiled at her. "And how old are you, young lady?"

Luna smiled brightly. "Eleven. I'm going to Hogwarts next year."

From somewhere in the arena, bagpipes started playing.

Smith laughed. "Well, why don't you sit down again and watch a bit of what you'll be learning next year?"

Luna grinned. "Okay!"

Unseen by Smith, Xeno's smile flittered into an amused smirk before instantly reforming back into his usual look of good natured knowing.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Just do your best and stay safe, you hear me, Susan?"

"Yes, Auntie." Susan nodded into the Bones House magic mirror.

"Good — and no matter how it turns out, I'm incredibly proud of you."

Susan smiled and wiped a tear from her eye. "Thanks, Auntie."

"Right, you'd better be off then."

Susan nodded again. "Bye — Mirror off."

Her Aunt's image in the mirror vanished, replaced by her own. She looked into her reflection's eyes and steeled them. If Harry Potter was anything like John, then she'd need every advantage possible to stand even a hope of losing well. The rest of the Hufflepuff duelling team seemed to think the rumours about John were just that — rumours. Even Hannah and Sally thought she was exaggerating John's abilities. She knew better.

"Right!" Team captain Tonks clapped her hands together. "Let's kick some arse! Badger power!"

Everyone shouted, "Badger power!" Susan joining in.

She placed the precious mirror into the specially charmed section of her bag, slung the bag over her shoulders, and followed the rest of her determined team out into the arena.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The crowd roared.
Daphne watched the Hufflepuff team walk into the arena and take their seats in one of the four quarter seated areas for the duelling teams, painted in Hufflepuff yellow and black.

"And finally here is the Slytherin Team!"

The crowd roared again, although Daphne couldn't help notice that a small chunk wearing scarlet and gold were booing.

"There's Harry!" Hermione waved, pointing to last figure in the team.

Tracey looked glumly at her other best friend. "I don't know what you're so chipper about. We're not his friends, are we?"

Daphne smirked. "I guess now might as well be as good a time as any to tell you."

Tracey's eyes sharped. "Tell me what?"

"Harry is Gray."

Tracey's mouth dropped.

"He's been Gray for ages, but it's still a secret, so don't tell anyone, okay?"

Tracey's eyes narrowed. "You're calling him 'Harry' — and how long is, 'ages'?"

Daphne shrugged, but her eyes shined. "A while."

"Before the thing with Lord Slytherin?"

"Way before then."

"But…" Tracey seemed to be trying to wrap her mind around something. Her voice dropped to a fierce whisper. "But, you were kissing him!"

"I was."

"And you have a contract!"

"I do."

"With Lord Slytherin!"

"Yes."

"The leader of the Gray!"

"He is."

"And you're saying Potter is Gray!"

"I am."

Tracey collapsed back in her chair and stared at the sky before turning back to Daphne and narrowing her eyes again. "I thought it was out of character for you to suddenly start kissing some random boy."

Daphne smiled.
"What really happened?"

"You were right to be so obsessed with bringing Harry to our side, but you were far from the only one to notice."

Tracey watched her closely, clearly expecting her to continue.

Daphne smiled sweetly. "I promise to tell you all about it before next term starts."

Tracey groaned. "Daaaappppphhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh."  

— DP & SW: T FoP —

"Our first duel will be Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw!"

John stopped scanning the crowds in a seemingly futile attempt to find his parents. They didn't seem to be here. He stood up from where he sat among his fellow duellists, all giving him thumps on the back and encouraging shouts as he passed them.

"Heir John Potter of Gryffindor, the boy-who-lived, will be matching up against Ravenclaw Su Li of the Chinese House of Li — by the standards of Britain, an Ancient House at least, going back over three thousand years!"

He thought they would have. It kind-of hurt that they hadn't. He descended the couple of steps to the dirt of the arena, moved towards the centre and looked around. The arena was a wide open circle littered with various obstacles — a huge log, a clump of boulders, even a small pond.

"How will the defeater of you-know-who fare in his first ever duelling match? That's what we all want to know, and something I'm sure Miss Su Li is raring to find out too!"

Opposite him, Su Li narrowed her eyes, bowed, and adopted an oriental duelling pose. Her duelling robes looked to have more acromantula silk than dragon hide and were inked in bright patterns of white and blue.

John bowed in return, planted his legs firmly in the dust, and thrust out his wand in front of him as if it were a sword.

"Quiet please!"

The crowds slowly quietened.

Silence.

A bagpipe sounded a note.

Su Li charged. "Rictumsempra!"

John smirked, "Protego!" Li's tickling charm harmlessly splashed against his shield.

"Tarantallegra!"

John jabbed his wand at the rapidly closing Asian girl. "Ceciditque!"

Li's dancing legs jinx splashed off his shield again, her eyes widened in shock, and a split second later she lost her footing as John's spell smashed into her. She crashed into the ground and John was on her, snatching the wand from her unresisting hand.
A man at the side of the arena raised a wand and shot out white sparks.

"Winner, John Potter!"

The crowd clapped and cheered.

John grinned at Li as she staggered to her feet.

She groaned and gave John an appraising gaze. "That was my most powerful jinx and your shield absorbed it and my first spell."

John shrugged. "Never underestimate your opponent — I suggest you go tell your second year seed that."

Su Li nodded tersely and walked off in the opposite direction.

The commentator's voice boomed around the arena. "Well, how about that? John Potter takes the first win for Gryffindor!"

The board flashed.

Gryffindor — 1 vs. 0 — Ravenclaw

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry watched his brother walk out of the arena with predatory eyes. It looked like John had decided to ease into the tournament — not show anything too flashy at first. He smirked. That was fine with him.

"A simple combination of hexes, jinxes, and shields leading to an outright win for the boy-who-lived in record time! Miss Su Li obviously wasn't expecting Heir Potter's shield to hold up, but it did!"

Harry watched the Bones Heiress stand and start to make her way past the rest of the Hufflepuff duelling team on the other side of the arena.

Volf thumped him on the shoulder. "Go get 'er, Potter!"

Harry stood.

"And now! We have the first Hufflepuff versus Slytherin match — and another first match for another Potter! Yes, that's right, the younger twin of John Potter, I give you, Harry Potter!"

The crowd cheered and clapped, if only politely.

Harry made his way into the centre of the arena.

"And facing him, we have the Heiress of the Ancient and Noble House of Bones! The niece of the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, hoping to make her aunt proud, Heiress Susan Bones!"

The cheering this time was rather more enthusiastic.

Heiress Bones gazed at him with eyes alight with fire. "I warn you, I'm not like Su Li — I won't underestimate a Potter."
Harry felt a strange kind of déjà vu. For a moment, he could've sworn the words were almost Ginny's, spoken in one of their many dreamland training sessions. He inclined his head. "Then I shall do my best not to underestimate a Bones, Heiress Bones."

They both jumped into duelling stance.

"Quiet please!"

The rumble of the crowd died.

A bagpipe sounded.

Harry shouted, "Protego!" and was rewarded a split second later when a tripping hex splashing against it.

Susan dashed forward. "Ictus!" But unlike Su Li, Susan didn't rashly charge into the duelling dead-zone, where dodging became all but impossible. "Colovaria!" Instead, she flitted at its edge, throwing hex and hex, jinx after jinx, playing the back and forth long game of assault and retreat that all duellists played with more powerful opponents. "Slugulus Eructo!" Not a bad strategy. It certainly let her last longer when her opponent was only throwing first year spells.

"Locomotor Wibbly!"

"Tussis!"

"Protego!"

"Crescere unguem!"

And she wasn't bad for a first year, was she?

"Wingardium leviosa!" A rock levitated and hovered protectively in front of Susan.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Ictus!"

Susan ducked behind the rock. "Petrificus totalus!"

Harry re-shielded and returned fire. Susan ducked behind the rock again, using the time to get off two hexes in a row, both of which splashed against his shield.

Harry smirked. A desperate strategy that. He continued to trade jinxes and hexes, waiting for an opening in his casting lineup. There! "Wingardium leviosa!" Rocks from all around Harry's feet rose up and spun around him like moons orbiting a planet.

The crowd let out a small gasp.

Susan's eyes widened. A sudden torrent of hexes and jinxes flew towards her. She dodged and shielded as best she could, but with Harry now not bothering to shield, was soon overwhelmed.

"Petrificus totalus!"

The full body bind clipped her side, her whole body seized up, and she collapsed backwards into the anti-impact charmed ground of the arena.

A man set off a stream of white sparks.
"Winner, Harry Potter!"

The crowd roared.

"Did you see that! Mister Potter countered his opponent's expert use of levitation shielding with an even more impressive display of his own! That had to be second year level, at least!"

The board flashed.

Hufflepuff — 0 vs. 1 — Slytherin

Harry cast a finite on the Bones Heiress and helped her to her feet. "You fought well."

Susan grimaced. "Not well enough."

Harry shook his head. "No, but I'm sure that if this were any other year apart from this one, you would have been the best of the first years, without doubt. That levitation shielding skill is tricky to make work." He paused as though to think. "…Although there are safer options in a real fight."

Susan nodded. "That's what my aunt said, but I figured since I didn't have the skill or power for them yet…"

"Oh, certainly." He smiled at her. "I suggest you get back now. If I stay here talking to you any longer, I fear my brother will bust a blood vessel." And indeed, John was glaring at them from all the way across the arena.

— DP & SW: TLoP —

In the stands above the Hufflepuff team, Miss Sally Smith, daughter of the Light branch of the Noble House of Smith and Heiress Hannah Abbott of the Noble House of Abbott, watched their close friend trudge back to her team.

"I can't believe Susan lost," Sally said, absentmindedly fiddling with a tiny ornate hammer hanging on a chain around her neck.

Hannah eyed the tiny hammer with a longstanding twinge of envy. Her friend sometimes carried the full sized version at formal gatherings — something she'd always wanted to do ever since she'd first seen Sally with it at her fifth birthday party, dragging it along the floor the way other girls would drag a favourite doll. Some noble houses got all the fun toys. She drew her eyes back to the arena. "I can't believe Slytherin Potter managed that trick with the rocks."

The two girls looked at each other.

"You don't think…" Sally started.

"…that Susan wasn't exaggerating about the Potters?" Hannah finished.

They shrugged and turned back to the arena.

— DP & SW: TLoP —

John's second opponent had swaggered into the centre of the arena, confident in his ability to take care of the lucky first year. Oh, little Su Li might have gone on and on about how he shouldn't underestimate him, but really, he'd been training like a madman all year. He doubted the boy-who-lived could even pull off a stunner or a disarming charm.
The bagpipes sounded, the duel began, and the second year Ravenclaw soon realised something horrifying. The boy-who-lived *could* do stunners, *could* do disarming charms, and seemed fucking possessed, seemingly not even fighting against *him*, but against his own *brother*, if the kid’s determination to float enough rocks around him to damn a moderately sized stream was anything to go by.

A stray disarming charm slammed into him and launched him backwards with enough force to roll him across the ground like a rag-doll. Ouch.

The board flashed.

Gryffindor — 2 vs. 0 — Ravenclaw

The crowd roared.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry shot his brother an amused look as he strolled to the centre of the ring for his next duel. "Trying to prove something?" he called to John’s retreating back.

John turned and gave him a self satisfied smirk before continuing to walk away.

Heh.

The second year Hufflepuff regarded him with determined, yet wary, eyes.

Harry gave him an encouraging smile. "Just do your best."

The bagpipes sounded and they started. It soon turned out that the second-year-Hufflepuff’s best wasn’t even on par with the Bones Heiress’. Harry mentally sighed as he revived the stunned boy from the ground, conscious of the now far more enthusiastic roar of the crowd.

"Lords and Ladies! Witches and Wizards! Both John Potter *and* Harry Potter have defeated two of the opposing teams and will go on to face the *third* years! An amazing performance!"

The board flashed.

Hufflepuff — 0 vs. 2 — Slytherin

— DP & SW: TFoP —

In a front row seat, Dumbledore reached into his paper bag, withdrew an orange bean, and ate it. Tangerine.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Of course, all winning streaks have to come to an end, and our John Potter is going to find the going tough against his next challenger. With two whole years on him, has luck run out for the boy-who-lived?"

John Potter smirked up at the commentator box and made a dismissive gesture towards it.

"Oh! He seems confident! That’s what we like to see!"

The boy opposite him watched him with eyes as hard as beads.
John took his stance and waited.

The bagpipes sounded and a column of enchanted fire scorched itself straight towards him. Oh yes, third year — elemental charms. He flicked his wand and bellowed, "Ventus divinum!" (Divine Wind)

A gust of magical wind surrounded him in a whirlwind of power, bending the flames away and giving him the opening he needed. He ducked under the moving flame column, rolled into the clear, jumped up, deflected another column of fire, and ran straight at his shocked beyond belief opponent. "Stupefy!"

The fire stopped.

The thud of a human hitting the ground sounded all around the arena, louder than a blasting curse in the total silence.

A man at the edge raised his wand and shot out white sparks.

The commentator seemed to hesitate. "I…I didn't just see that, did I?"

The board flashed.

Gryffindor — 3 vs. 0 — Ravenclaw

Silence.

Then the cheering started.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Can you believe that?!" Ron Weasley jumped up and down, pointing and screaming at the top of his lungs. "I never knew John could do all that! Why didn't he tell me!"

Beside him, Seamus Finnigan and Neville Longbottom looked equally flabbergasted.

"Those were third year spells," Neville almost whispered, but still loudly enough to be heard. "Third year."

"And mighty impressive ones, as well." Seamus added.

"Do you think he'd be willing to teach us?" Neville asked.

Ron shot him an incredulous look. "You want extra lessons? You're mad, mate."

"What I want, is not to be bottom in year." Neville said quietly. "Even the muggleborns do better than me."

Seamus shot him a look. "Nev, Granger is beating everyone in the rankings — least that's what I heard from one of the claws."

Neville smiled weakly. "She doesn't count. She's pureblood in all but blood."

"Guys!" Ron shouted at them, "Focus! John is kicking Ravenclaw arse!"

— DP & SW: TFoP —
Harry walked out into the arena for round three without fuss.

Suddenly everything had gone very quiet. He could feel the anticipation, the expectation, the wonder of two thousand people gazing down at him — would this Potter also be able to match a third year?

His opponent stood opposite him wearing long strawberry blonde hair tied back in a ponytail and eyes that warily said, 'don't even think about it because that CANNOT happen to me.'

"If I might suggest," Harry began, "a strategy of taking me down as quickly as possible with as little time messing about as possible."

The Hufflepuff witch's right eye twitched.

They took their stances.

The bagpipe sounded, and both Harry and the girl shouted, "Ventus divinum!" (Divine Wind)

Minor gale force winds smashed into each other, each wrestling for advantage, spinning tiny tornadoes off around the arena, kicking up dirt and dust, obscuring the crowd's view and bringing a worried expression to the girl's face.

Somewhere out there, the commentator shouted, "Magical Merlin!"

Now slightly hidden from both the crowd and his opponent, Harry smirked and pumped rather more than a third year's power into the spell. The storm quickly intensified and Harry suddenly sensed a panicky intent-to-stay-still ripped from its footing and helplessly dragged around the arena. "Stupefy!"

The magical intent vanished.

He cut his own elemental charm.

The dust storm slowly started to settle.

An unconscious third year lay on the far side of the arena.

The man at the edge of the arena shot white sparks into the air.

As with his brother, the crowd stayed silent for far longer than normal before sporadic clapping chained into uproarious applause.

"Lords and Ladies! Mister Potter! Mister Potter will go onto his fourth year opponent! Gryffindor and Slytherin are steamrolling the competition!"

The board flashed.

Hufflepuff — 0 vs. 3 — Slytherin

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John Potter eyed his brother leaving. Those were third year charms. Harry shouldn't know third year charms. Harry had been a second year when he'd been sent to Azkaban…. Unless of course, his twin had spent the last year practising forward, just like he himself had. Yes, that would be it.

"Oi, kid."
John shook himself and looked around to see his next opponent. The height difference was now extremely noticeable. Oh, yeah. He had a fourth year to beat. Better start taking it a bit more seriously.

The bagpipes sounded.

He flung an over-powered banishing charm straight at his opponent who, predictably, threw up a shield, clearly thinking that enough for whatever John could throw at him. The banisher smashed straight through the shield and John's follow up stunner sailed right on-through, completely uncontested, straight into the fourth year's stomach.

John might only theoretically be a year older than the boy, but he knew his power was now closer to that of a seventh year. He had been chosen in a fair comparison by the goblet of fire, after all, despite himself being only a fourth year at the time.

His fourth year opponent hit the ground with a thud.

At the edges of the arena, the Gryffindor and Slytherin teams sat in unsurprised resignation, while the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff teams goggled.

"I…I…" The commentator seemed lost for words. "John Potter defeats his fourth year opponent and goes on to his fifth year challenger."

Instead of breaking into applause, the crowd just stared.

Somewhere outside the arena, a cricket chirped.

John Potter rolled his eyes. "Come on!" he bellowed into the silence, pumping a fist into the air. "Don't tell me that wasn't worth a round of applause!"

More silence.

Then, it started, slowly and hesitantly, as though unsure if others were going to join in, before picking up speed and crashing around the arena in a thunderous round of applause.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

At the still empty healing station, Madam Pomfrey clapped politely. "Milking it, isn't he?"

Dumbledore watched John Potter jump around the arena encouraging the audience to ever greater and greater roars of approval. "Genius such as that often comes with a large ego — so long as it's controlled I dear say it's fine to let children have their moments of triumph."

Pomfrey chuckled. "Indeed — and it's good he's only used stunners to finish off his opponents so far. I greatly dislike it when they start chucking around elemental magic — fire and lightning especially."

Dumbledore nodded and reached into his paper bag for another Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Bean, absentmindedly withdrawing a red one.

Madam Pomfrey eyed it suspiciously. "Do be careful with those, Headmaster. I once had one just like that — turned out to be cayenne pepper — really blew up in my face."

Dumbledore looked at the bean with slightly wide eyes. "Oh, dear me." He put it back in the bag. "Yes, pepper — wouldn't want that." He withdrew a green one and popped it in his mouth instead.
He chewed thoughtfully before making a face. "Envy."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Can Harry Potter match his brother's performance! Next to try and take down the seemingly unstable twin forces of Gryffindor and Slytherin is Hufflepuff fourth year, Cedric Diggory!"

Harry walked into the centre of the arena, controlled and stoic, an obvious contrast to the exuberant and loud attitude of his twin.

Diggory smiled at him. "We should have listened to Susan. I guess that's what you get for not taking seriously the words of someone on your side — most un-Hufflepuff of us."

Harry bowed. "How would you like this? Quick and painless or long and drawn out?"

Cedric's eyes sharpened. "John Potter won because his opponent made the mistake of thinking a first year banishing spell could never breach a fourth year shield. I now know better."

Harry nodded. "And yet, there may still be things you do not know. Just like your second year seed thought he'd learned all he needed to know from watching my fight with Heiress Bones."

Cedric smiled again and made a gracious arm sweep. "That, I cannot deny."

"Quiet please!"

The crowd quietened.

Harry's eyes narrowed. This guy seemed a decent sort. Long and drawn out it was then — complete with opportunity to impress.

The bagpipes sounded, both Harry and Diggory shielded, and Diggory made an immediate dash for the pond, his long legs carrying him faster than Harry's shorter ones could. "Aqua anima!" (Water animation)

A large blob of water rose from the pond's surface and formed itself into a vaguely human shape.

The crowd made appreciative 'Ooooooo' noises.

"Oh! A fourth year using water animation!"

Harry caught up and started trading hexes and jinxes.

"It seems it's not only our twin Potter phenoms who can cast above their weight!"

The water golem covered the distance between the pond and Harry, made a wild swing at him, and found it's fist connecting not with him, but with a large boulder levitated straight up off the ground. Its fist splashed into unformed water.

Harry ran at Diggory and continued to push him back.

The water golem reformed and made the short trip across the arena to where Harry was now playing with his tiring opponent.

Harry dodged a particularly close hex and shouted, "Ventus divinum!" (Divine wind!)

Diggory seemed barely able to stand on his feet and was clearly running straight from his core. He
desperately flicked his wand and directed his water golem to deform, acting as a shield against the savage wind.

Harry's eyes lit up. Opportunity. He cast a powerful banishing spell at the water shield, watched it splash into the fourth year puff, and shouted, "Fulgur Stupefy!" (Lightning stunner)

Crack!

In an instant, a thin bolt of magical lightning arced onto a patch of wet ground and travelled up onto the now soaking boy.

There was a moment of silence, the remaining water collapsed onto the ground, and Diggory followed moments later.

The board flashed.

Hufflepuff — 0 vs. 4 — Slytherin

The crowd erupted.

Sophie Roper hung over the railing, trying to get a better look at what was going on from the other side of the arena. "That's the boy that beat Hermione in the Slytherin tryouts!? No wonder Hermione lost! I mean, look at him go!"

Lisa Turpin laughed and whooped. "I told you! I told you Harry wasn't just some loser! I bet Slytherin House is quaking in their boots!"

Padma Patil watched with a worried expression. "This isn't normal. John and Harry Potter — they shouldn't be able to do things like this. It's too much. It's like something out of an Arthurian legend."

Lisa shook her shoulder. "Come on! Stop being a worry wart. Granger can do amazing things well above year, can't she?"

Padma gave her a look. "Yes, but she still couldn't go toe to toe with someone of those years. There's a difference between having the skill to cast spells, and having the power needed to fight with them."

Sophie leaned over the railings to stare at them. "Will you stop it, Padma! Look at Hermione!"

They looked over to where Granger was cheering and shouting her lungs out with the other Slytherins.

"If Hermione isn't worried, there's probably nothing to worry about."

Lisa gave Sophie a half-lidded look. "Not that I don't want to agree with you, but I sometimes think you put too much faith in Granger."

Sophie giggled. "Lies!"

Another water golem lumbered towards John Potter, slightly larger than the one Harry fought against, Diggory's magical power not being quite on the level of his now fifth year opponent.
John jabbed his wand at the ground. "Terra golem!" (Earth Golem)

The dirt slowly rose up and formed itself into a vaguely humanoid shape, slightly larger even than the water golem.

The crowd gasped again.

The two golem's crashed together, water pressed against dirt, the resultant mud occasionally breaking away from the animation charms, and splatting down onto the ground.

John ducked around the wrestling golems and sprinted towards his wide eyed opponent.

The resultant jinx and elemental duel wasn't as easy as the ones before, but the result was the same.

The fifth year Ravenclaw thudded into the ground and the water golem fell like a dropped bucket, the liquid forming a small wave and quickly spreading out into a giant puddle.

John bent over and leaned on his thighs for a moment, breathing hard before standing up and pumping his fist in the air.

The board flashed.

Gryffindor — 5 vs. 0 — Ravenclaw

The crowd went wild.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Pansy shouted and screeched "Draco! This is nuts!"

Draco Malfoy could only agree. Hearing about John and Harry Potter defeating their entire Duelling teams was one thing — seeing it actually play out in front of him was something else. Terrifying was the word that sprung to mind. Suddenly, he couldn't help feeling that he'd been missing something important since coming to Hogwarts. The way Harry Potter walked, maybe? The way he spoke? Something anyway.

Why oh why had father insisted he distance himself from Potter?

"Well, Draco?" Theo gave him a sideways glance before returning his eyes to the Gryffindor first year basking in glory in the middle of the arena.

Draco frowned. He didn't know what to do. Every political instinct in his body, drilled into him since he was old enough to speak, was screaming at him to get Potter back on their side, immediately — but on the other hand, father said Potter was to be isolated. "I..." He swallowed. "I'm not sure."

Theo and Pansy gaped at him.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry dodged a stunner hex chain, shielded against a stray banishing charm, and continued to casually side step his way towards the massive log on the far side of the arena.

His opponent's earth golem caught up with him and raised its fist over him like the hammer of Thor.
"Wingardium Leviosa!"

The golem lifted off the ground, its fist connecting with nothing but air, and proceeded to flail uselessly in mid air.

The crowd gasped.

Harry reached the log, shielded another jinx chain, flicked his wand, and in-between dodging and shielding, yelled, "Diffindo! Diffindo! Diffindo! Diffindo! Ligna Golem!" (Wood Golem)

The log sliced apart into twelve pieces. A large wooden golem formed itself and stood up, its joints nothing but air, and roared.

The commentator stammered. "Oh, now he's just taking the piss! I… I mean…"

With the earth golem still floating helplessly in the air, the wood golem charged at the fifth year Ravenclaw wizard who shouted, "Depulso!" (Banishing charm), watched his spell bounce off the rapidly approaching wooden monster, squeaked, threw his wand away, and put his hands up, rapidly backing away and yelling, "I GIVE UP!"

Harry lowered his wand.

The board flashed.

"Hufflepuff — 0 vs. 5 — Slytherin"

"That was incredible! Lords and Ladies, wizards and witches! Surely, the kind of performance we'd expect from a talented seventh year! Just how much are the Potter twins holding back on us?!"

Harry resisted the urge to duck his head like a sheepish boy caught in the sweetie jar. Perhaps he had overdone that one just a little.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"YES! YES! YES!" Hermione jumped up and down screaming and shouting, paying no attention to the nearby Slytherin's giving her odd looks. "GO HARRY! GO HARRY! GO HARRY!"

Daphne gave her friend an amused look, barely containing a massive grin of her own. "How much of this is an act and how much is you genuinely unable to control yourself while watching Harry pound random people into the ground?"

Hermione grinned at her in return before adopting a fake look of snooty indifference. "Heiress Greengrass, as a prominent member of Slytherin house, it is your duty to support its champions in their struggles to win us glory."

Daphne's badly contained grin broke into a full on ear to ear affair. "I guess you are correct, vassal, it is only right and proper." She leaned over the railings and screamed, "GO HARRY!"

Tracey goggled.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John was sweating. Things were getting a lot more difficult now and his opponent not having to speak her spells made everything that much tougher. He'd been practising like crazy all year, but he still only had half his repertoire down silent so far.
Hexes and jinxes flew all over the arena.

His opponent was using every advantage she could.

John could feel he was still more powerful, if barely, but the athletic witch opposite him had clearly been training physically for years. While he was starting to tire, she still danced around his spells as though she'd only just started. Blue, green, red, pink, white — lights of every colour flashed between them.

John barely managed to shield a stray stunner while banishing away a trio of tiny dirt golems, circling around him like sharks waiting for the chance to strike. Right. He scowled. Enough was enough.

He pointed his wand, made a complicated wand movement, summoned every thought and feeling of righteousness he could muster, and shouted the spell his father had taught him to deal with the dragon in the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. "Rectus Patronum!" (Knight Patronus)

Silvery mist shot out of his wand and swiftly formed itself into a seven foot tall knight in armour, complete with sword and shield.

The crowd made appreciative gasps and OOooos.

"Wow! Look at that!"

The misty knight darted in front of John and deflected away a hex with its shield.

"The famous knight patronus of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter!"

John used the space in his casting line up to start pushing his determined opponent back.

"One of the most famous Potter family spells! Not seen in public since the last war!"

More and more spells bounced off the misty knight's shield.

"Are these two ever going to stop surprising us!"

John found an opening in the girl's guard.

A stunner landed.

She fell.

The crowd exploded.

"I guess not! John Potter wins!"

The board flashed.

Gryffindor — 6 vs. 0 — Ravenclaw

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry watched his brother leave the arena with a thoughtful expression. Potter family magic. Just what kind of other goodies did his brother have access to in the Potter library? He sure didn't know. Maybe that would be his next project once they got the stone?
"Quiet please!"

Harry snapped back to the present. Where were they?

The boy opposite him scowled.

Oh, yes. Year six. Silent casting.

The bagpipes sounded.

They both raised their wands and began a formidable duel of hexes, jinxes, charms, elemental magic, and animation magic, all in total silence.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Lord Smith watched with wide eyes as this little Harry Potter — and that James and Lily had a second son who was also Jonathan's twin was news, wasn't it? — He watched as this little Harry Potter, with his handmade duelling robes and muggle clothes, wiped the floor with the much larger sixth year Hufflepuff boy using sixth year spells that even his brother seemed to be having problems with.

"You know," Lord Smith said, turning to the young Lord Lovegood as the crowd erupted into hysterics again, "If you're trying to win me over to the Gray, you're not really selling it very well. The way I see it, the future is with the Light."

Lovegood smiled. "Harry is Gray."

Lord Smith's eyebrow rose in surprise.

"James and Lily Potter dumped him with magic hating muggle relatives and the boy has little love for them. Combine that with the fact that neither his father nor mother have said or written him a single word since he returned to the wizarding world and… well… I think you see the picture."

Lord Smith frowned. "That seems… rather out of character."

Lord Lovegood shrugged.

Lord Smith returned his gaze to the arena. "Hmmmm."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"And here we are! This has been a first round for the record books! We are watching history here! No doubt about it! But can the Potter twins complete their unprecedented win streak and beat ALL SEVEN of their opponents without their team mates having to even lift their wands?"

John Potter scowled.

"We're about to find out!"

Harry wasn't supposed to be this good. Yes, they should be equally powerful, but he had a full two years on Harry. This was supposed to be his moment of glory.

"Quiet please!"

He focused onto his opponent. He'd just have to beat this guy and stomp Harry into pieces in the finals before sending him where he belonged.
The crowd quietened.

The seventh year Ravenclaw didn't scowl. He didn't growl or make any threatening movements. His entire being seemed focused on the fight about to start.

Bagpipes sounded.

The Ravenclaw immediately hit himself on the head with his wand and shimmered into the background, all but invisible.

"Homenum Revelio!" "Ventus divinum!" (Divine Wind)

The duel started in earnest. John used his detection spells every few seconds, keeping his opponents location pinned as well as he could while using area of effect spells to flush him out, relying on his elemental wind charm to hinder the claw's movements.

Seeing that his strategy wasn't working, the claw gave it up, quickly reverting to a more standard duel.

"Rectus Patronum!" (Knight Patronus)

"And there it is again!"

Back and forth they went. John would tire and his opponent would take advantage, only to be fended off by a still bright, but slowly dimming misty knight. Then his opponent would tire and the tables would turn, only for his opponent to make use of his longer legs and put enough space between him and John to rest up and return again.

John panted. His lungs felt like they were going to collapse. This wasn't good. If it hadn't been for his family magic, he'd have lost already.

Water swirled out of the pond and formed itself into a medium sized golem.

John's heart leapt. That he could use! He desperately ran straight into his opponent's dead-zone, abandoning his misty knight, shielding against every spell flung against him, feeling his magic rapidly depleting, urging his burning limbs forward, casting one overpowered banishing charm at the water golem, and then, just like he'd seen Harry do, put the last remains of his magic into his wand and bellowed, "Fulgur Stupefy!" (Lightning stunner).

There was a massive crack, the Ravenclaw captain stilled, limbs limp in the air and underneath, and then he fell, forward, hitting the ground like a sack of coal.

Silence.

The board flashed.

Gryffindor — 7 vs. 0 — Ravenclaw

John gave a weak smile, vaguely aware of people shouting and cheering, before collapsing forward in an exhausted heap.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry watched John and the seventh year Ravenclaw being carried off to the healing station. It looked like John wouldn't be watching his final duel. Shame. Just so long as he was up and about for his arse whopping when Slytherin came to duel Gryffindor.
In front of him stood a witch with short pink hair and a look of mild awe on her face. Something about her was ringing bells in his head. He gave a little bow. "Looking forward to this, Miss…?"

The girl shook herself and grinned. "Tonks, just Tonks — and hell yeah I am!"

Tonks… Tonks…Harry's eyes widened. The metamorph auror! He smiled. "Same — hey, is that colour natural?"

"What, this?" Tonks pointed at her hair, mischief shining in her eyes. The hair shifted to lime green. "You prefer?"

"Can you do emerald green with silver streaks?"

Tonks stuck out her tongue at him. "No, but I can do this." Her hair shifted to yellow with black streaks.

"Fitting."

"Sure is!" Tonks looked around quickly. She turned back to him. "Just between the two of us, kid — Holy crap, you kick ass."

Harry couldn't help but grin. Oh, he liked this one. "I'm sure you, 'kick ass', too."

Tonks winked at him. "Might have a few tricks up my sleeve."

"Quiet please!"

Ahh. Time. He took up his position and watched Tonks do the same.

The bagpipes sounded and Tonks immediately jumped into four copies.

Whoa. High level illusions.

The two started trading silent jinxes and hexes, Harry simply ignoring every spell thrown by one of the illusions, grinning all the while.

Tonks cursed. "What the hell!"

Harry couldn't help laughing. He spun his wand and jumped into four copies of his own. "Have fun!"

Tonks' eyes widened. She immediately summoned what seemed to be half a rockery and banished them towards the illusions.

Harry let them go straight through them, only bothering to shield himself.

"Hah!" Tonks disillusioned herself.

Harry cancelled his illusions and disillusioned himself. "Hah, right back at you!"

Then he sensed Tonks forming intent to stun from only a few feet away. He shielded, stepped forward, tripped her up, and cast a finite on her, watching her shimmer incredulously back into view.

He danced away, cancelling his own charm, smiling widely, and giving her time to get up.

Now, This was just like his times with Ginny.
The announcer voice cut through his fun. "Well, will you look at that! Young Mister Potter giving his opponent time to get up! No doubt he could have had her then!"

Tonks now stood and watched Harry, eyes shining. "Morgana's saggy tits! Fighting you is like fighting the wind!"

Harry flicked his wand in the air. "Oh, it is, is it?"

A wind stirred.

"Crap!"

Harry laughed and gave it a good amount of umpf — good for what he could do with this wand, anyway.

Tonks fought for her footing, not casting anything of her own, just letting the storm rush past her, shielding her face from the dirt and dust with her forearms.

Eventually, seeing she wasn't going to take the bait, Harry let the storm die down. "Not going for it?"

Tonks smirked. "I've seen you do that trick before. It's nothing new."

"Oh, you want to see new stuff, do you?"

"Sure — and don't think you've seen all I can offer either."

The crowd listened with baited breath. The commentator stayed silent.

"Well," Harry swept his arm to the stands. "We are here to put on a show." He turned back to Tonks, raised his wand, grinned, and immediately spat out three spells at Tonks, one white, one pink, one brown. White — Pink — Brown. Instantly, a large smoke cloud filled the space where Tonks stood, there was a loud umpf sound, the kind of sound someone might make when the fall on their bum, and a loud crack sounded around the arena.

Silence.

Harry tilted his head and quickly shielded as a torrent of hexes and jinxes spat themselves out of the cloud illusion.

The illusion faded to reveal what looked like Tonks stepping over his zero friction charm on animated stepping stones made of animated dirt, continuing to hail down spells on him all the way. Harry could tell it was just another illusion though.

He stayed still and continued to shield against the incoming fake spells, all the while keeping track of the real Tonks, who'd disillusioned herself, slipped out of the back of the cloud illusion, and was now making her way around Harry's flank.

Harry smirked, shield still facing forward. He then felt intent to stun from the real Tonks and a stunner flew straight at him from a seemingly empty patch of air.

And for his final trick…

He turned and swatted the stunner away, dispelling the shield and letting illusion Tonks' spells pass harmlessly through him.
Tonks shimmered back into sight. "Oh, Come ON!" Clearly frustrated, she fired another stunner at
him.

He swatted it away.

She tried again.

He swatted it away again.

It quickly devolved from there. Tonks walked slowly towards him like an inferi, eyes narrowed,
casting spell after spell and making no effort to defend herself against anything.

Harry just stood there, swatting away everything. Eventually she stood just six feet away, and not a
single spell had landed on him. He could see the incredulity in her eyes, the utter disbelief of what
was going on in front of her. Time to end this. "Tonks?"

Tonks continued to chain spells as fast as her core would let her. "Yeah?"

"Good fight." And from only six feet away, he spat a mild stunner straight at her, hitting her in the
chest and crumpling her on the ground.

Silence.

Not even the shoot-white-sparks-man moved.

Harry didn't shout like his brother. He didn't scream and pump his fist in the air — instead, he
stood there in his plain, homemade duelling robes, turned to each of the four quarters of the
duelling arena in turn, and bowed.

Then the applause started — and it was deafening.

The board flashed.

Hufflepuff — 0 vs. 7 — Slytherin

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry Potter could spell swat. Dumbledore sat amid the clapping and cheering crowd. How had he
missed that before? Had the boy been hiding it, or had he just not being paying attention? As soon
as Harry had started letting Miss Tonks' illusion spells pass straight through him, the fact that the
boy could sense magic was obvious. Suddenly, a lot of little mysteries about the boy seemed to
make a lot more sense. For starters, that he could disillusion himself solved the mystery of how the
boy was so effectively able to evade him. Also, it was now clear that Harry's occlumency wasn't
just an enclosed steel wall as thick as a mountain — no, it was far more sophisticated than that.

Dumbledore popped a brown bean from his paper bag and chewed. Blurgh... dirt.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

From way up in the back of the arena stands, a certain purple turban wearing individual politely
clapped, a slight smirk playing around his cold dark face.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

All around the arena, frantic whispers and excited shouts fought with each other for attention.
Students ran all the way up the grounds to the castle, to all four common rooms, to shout the message to all those who'd not bothered to show to the tournament. John Potter and Harry Potter had both defeated all seven of the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff team members and would be facing off against each other in the next match in less than an hour! Those students who were lazing around in the common rooms frantically shoved parchments and books into bags and stampeded for the arena. Those who didn't immediately follow, first rushed to their dormitories to grab friends and dorm-mates before joining the mad scramble.

They squeezed into the arena anyway they could, plopping themselves down wherever they could find a seat. Those unlucky enough to arrive too late, lined the entrances and walkways, making the already filled to capacity arena, standing room only.

— DP & SW: TToP —

John frowned. After waking up and frantically checking that all his special clothing was still in place, only to find Dumbledore had surreptitiously cast a bunch of notice me nots all over it, he watched the gathering crowd with mixed feelings. Harry had also managed to beat his seventh year opponent. He hadn't seen the fight, but apparently it had been pretty good. His teammates wouldn't shut up about it. They all seemed worried. Well, they didn't needn't be.

Hufflepuff faced off against Ravenclaw. Ravenclaw put up a good fight, but in the end, Hufflepuff carried the day with Tonks knocking out her Ravenclaw counterpart with an expertly executed illusion ambush.

The twenty minute break came and went and he felt ready again.

"Lords and Ladies! Witches and Wizards! We will now begin the finals!"

The crowd roared.

— DP & SW: TToP —

"We will now begin the finals!"

The crowd roared.

Harry stood up from his seat among his fellow Slytherins.

Volf eyed him warily. "Oi. Take him out good and hard, you hear?"

Harry nodded and made his way down the steps.

"For Slytherin — Mister Harry Potter!"

The crowd roared again.

— DP & SW: TToP —

From where he watched in the stands, Dumbledore reached into his paper bag and picked out a red bean.

— DP & SW: TToP —

"And for Gryffindor — Heir John Potter!"

John quickly made his way down the steps and out into the arena, crowd screaming in his ears.
In the centre of the arena, he met Harry's steady gaze with a glare of his own. "Ready to lose?"

Harry smirked. "Ready for anything, but I don't anticipate losing today."

"Quiet please!"

John jumped into his duelling stance and watched Harry do the same.

Silence

Then, a bagpipe sounded.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

For anyone watching, it quickly became obvious who had the upper hand. Harry ducked and dove and weaved and swatted with the elegance of a dancer. John pulled out everything he had, but everything he had wasn't good enough. Even his trump card, his highly effective family spell, the patronus knight, which Harry, for some reason, didn't also use, barely slowed Harry's onslaught.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

What the hell! John Potter barley dodged another carelessly flung stunner from his brother. He can't be better than me! He can't be! His patronus knight winked out of existence, magic exhausted. I'm Fate's chosen! NOT HIM!

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore rolled the red bean in his fingers, carefully watching the duel in front of him, straining his magic senses to their very limits for that telltale first sign.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry grinned, happily enjoying totally obliterating his brother so thoroughly that everyone watching could have no doubt who was playing with who. The look on John's face. That totally out of control panic and denial, and Harry wasn't even using all the tricks he'd used against Tonks! He carelessly swatted away a stray jinx that John had managed to slip out of his otherwise full on defensive fight.

Heh, well, let's see how he fares against this! Fumi umbra! (Smoke illusion) A white light shot out towards John's feet.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore's eyes sharpened. There! He brought the red bean to his mouth.

— DP & SW: TFoP —


— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore popped the red bean into his mouth.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Magnus Stupefy! (Area of effect stunner) A brown light followed it.
Dumbledore bit down, hard.

The brown light shot towards the obscured John Potter and flew straight into the cloud illusion. And a split second later, an explosion blasted out from the illusion, big enough to shake the ground and cause every spectator to instinctively duck their heads.

The cheering immediately stopped.

Harry froze. What the hell? He instantly dispelled his smoke illusion.

The crumpled body of John Potter lay on the floor of the arena, half naked, clothes shredded, and in a rapidly expanding puddle of his own blood.

His expression hardened. "Healer!"

Hermione knew instantly that something was wrong. "Daphne!"

"I know!" Daphne had already slung her bag over her shoulder.

"What?" Tracey asked.

Hermione could see Dumbledore starting to make his way towards Harry. She turned to Daphne. "Good luck!"

Daphne nodded back before darting off along the stands.

"What's going on!" Tracey shouted.

Hermione dashed to the edge of their row of seats. "Just stay here!" Then, without looking back, she leaped down the steps, over the railing, into the arena, and sped towards Harry, only one thought in mind, 'protect my lord.'

She arrived only a few seconds before Dumbledore got in casting range.

"We need John's clothes," Harry hissed while handing her his wand—making it very obvious to everyone watching what he was doing—and slipped his shrunk trunk into her pocket, making that far less obvious.

A red bolt of light shot towards Harry.

Hermione jumped in front of him and shielded. The spell shattered her shield but did deflect it enough to miss its target.

"Miss Granger!" shouted Dumbledore, "Step away from Mister Potter!"

The crowd whispered and muttered while Daphne made her way through the them as quickly as possible towards her target. "Heiress Bones!"
The Bones Heiress looked up at her from where she sat among the rest of the Hufflepuff duelling team, looking rather distressed.

"Heiress Greengrass?"

"As the betrothed of Lord Slytherin, I'm calling in one of the three minor favours the House of Bones owes the House of Slytherin. We need your Aunt here, now!"

Susan started, but quickly nodded, reached into her bag and drawing out a mirror. "Amelia Bones."

--- DP & SW: TFoP ---

"Miss Granger, step away from Mister Potter and surrender that wand!"

Hermione glared at the old man. "Not a chance!"

"Miss Granger, Mister Potter just tried to commit murder!"

"Harry would never do that! And you have no right to remove Harry's wand from me now that it is in my possession."

Another red light shot towards them, brighter this time. Hermione felt Harry's hand on her forearm and a rush of magic flowed through her.

The stunner bounced off her shield.

Hermione scowled. "Cease your attacks on my person immediately, Headmaster!"

"You are aiding Mister Potter's resistance of detainment!"

"You have no right to detain Harry!"

"I am the chief warlock of the wizengamot!"

"And you still have no right to detain Harry!"

"I have the right to contain what I believe to be threats to the school and its students!"

"And I have Harry's wand! Ergo he is not currently a threat!"

"A wand that you are required to surrender to me!"

"I am required to do no such thing! I am only required to surrender it to an on duty member of the department of magical law enforcement, which I shall do once they arrive!"

"You are interfering with evidence!"

"No, I am merely holding it. There are two thousand people here who can see this." Hermione glanced to her side and saw that Madam Pomfrey had long since reached John and was waving her wand over him. She ground her teeth together. C'mon Daphne.

--- DP & SW: TFoP ---

Daphne rushed back down to the arena from the nearest floo point, Susan and Madam Bones in tow. She barged through a group of milling spectators to see what was going on down in the arena. "There!" she called to the Bones Regent.
Harry and Hermione were in the middle of a tense stand off with Dumbledore and looked like they had been for quite some time. John Potter was lying in the healing station, looking half dead with half a dozen healer trainees bustling around him and Madam Pomfrey.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Miss Granger, your lord would not approve of your actions!"

"It is not your place to speak for my lord, Headmaster! You are not my lord!"

Harry glanced around to see Daphne bearing down on him with the Bones Heiress and Regent Bones behind her. He leaned into her as she arrived. "We need to get those clothes from John into evidence."

Hermione held up Harry's wand as Regent Bones stepped into speaking range. "One piece of evidence, Director Bones."

Daphne stepped over to Susan.

Regent Bones neatly plucked the wand from Hermione's hand. "Thank you."

"Amelia!" Dumbledore called. "A word, if you please?"

"Susan," Daphne whispered. "I'm calling in the second minor favour. We need what's left of John Potter's clothing requested as evidence."

Susan nodded and went to speak with her Aunt who was engaged in a quiet discussion of her own with Dumbledore.

Regent Bones nodded to her and sent her off towards John, much to Dumbledore's seeming puzzlement.

"Mister Potter." Regent Bones turned to them, voice crisp and professional. "You are under arrest under suspicion of attempted murder and attempted heir usurpation."

In Harry's mind, a second personality immediately leaped onto his dominant one, wrestling it into submission and forcing the rapidly panicking Harry into a space where his out of control intent could be contained.

He took a deep long breath, eyes closed, his arms and shoulders seeming to shudder, and held up his wrists.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"So, was this part of the sales pitch you had planned?" Lord Smith quipped to his younger companion, watching the Potter boy being led away in magical handcuffs.

Lord Xenophilius Lovegood tilted his head. "Let's call it, one part of a longer campaign. In any case, I invite you to join me for the trial. If my suspicions are correct, I think you will find it just as interesting as the tournament."

Lord Smith chuckled as Lovegood stood up.

"And now, if you'll please excuse me, I think I have a few urgent and important matters to attend to."
"Of course, of course."

As Lord Lovegood left, his daughter followed him, pausing only to turn and give him a cheerful parting wave.

Luna Lovegood, wasn't it?

— End of Chapter Thirty-one —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Next chapter — Hearing in the DMLE.

A/N: In case anyone cares, Albus's first experiments (that we know of) into parchment rune activation of larger rune systems resulted in the fidelius tripwire system that Harry voiced his admiration/annoyance for back in chapter twenty-one.
Justice in the wizarding world is a recipe gladly served but rarely enjoyed — one part truth to two parts power, add a dash of misdirection and a sprinkling of judicial procedure and bingo, a three star verdict with zero repeat customers. There are few trials by jury. The only wizards privileged to be tried by their peers are peers — and lords tend to stick together. Many minor crimes in the nobility are judged by the accused's own lord — fine when a lord's fief contained hundreds or thousands of people, most of them muggles, but less than great when many lords these days ruled over only the members of their own houses.

Attempted murder and heir usurpation, however, were not minor crimes, and thus it was that Albus Dumbledore strode towards the Slytherin common rooms trailed by several DMLE security wizards to secure Harry's dormitory space before the department of mysteries turned up.

The Slytherin common room opened to the Headmaster's presence and the little party marched down to the first-year boy's dormitory. "Topsy!"

A Hogwarts house elf popped in front of the headmaster. "Yes, Headmaster, Sir?"

"Which one of these beds is Mister Potter's?"

The elf pointed to the far-most bed and before the DMLE security wizards could start setting up the wards around it, Dumbledore performed a quick, unseen switching spell on a candle stick by the bed, replacing it with a special, recently bought and rather dark book hidden in the folds of his robes.

"Thank you, Headmaster," said one of the security wizards, "we can take it from here."

Dumbledore smiled a grandfatherly smile. "Of course. Please do let me know if you need anything else, won't you?"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione, Daphne, and Tracey arrived in the Slytherin first-year girl's dormitory in a swirl of combat ready determination. Well, Hermione and Daphne did, anyway — Tracey just trailed after them, confused and out of breath.

Daphne whipped Harry's trunk out of her pocket. "C'mon, we don't have much time." She put it on the floor and expanded it.

"Time for what?" Tracey's eyes widened at all the locks on the trunk's front. "Dear Merlin, Daph. When did you get that!"

Daphne opened the lid. "It's Harry's"

Hermione started climbing in.

"It's Potter's!"

Daphne started climbing in after Hermione.
"But I thought his parents had like, all but officially disowned him? That thing must cost a fortune!"

Daphne's hand appeared over the edge of the trunk and waved at her. "Are you coming?" she called.

Tracey shook herself, climbed into the trunk, and down the first few steps. What she saw next made her eyes widen further. She stood in a small sitting room, complete with comfy looking chairs, bookshelves filled with books, and a writing desk — all old wood, silver fixtures, and emerald green upholstery. Her voice came out as a whisper. "Damn…"

Daphne and Hermione ignored her, already starting to pile up books on the desk and move things about.

She finished the short journey into the room. "I think I'm starting to appreciate Potter's taste."

"Here." Daphne ignored her and chucked Hermione two leather bags.

Hermione angled around Tracey and made a beeline up the stairs again and out of the trunk.

Tracey sat down on the small sofa. "So, what's going on?"

Daphne briefly paused from where she was thumbing through one of the many books. "We are getting ready to take our leave."

Tracey blinked. "What?"

"Take our leave. Split. Get out of dodge. Evacuate."

"You're leaving! Why?"

Hermione quick-stepped back down the steps — Freekey clutching at her shoulder — and dropped the two leather bags on the floor, now full of assorted clothes, books, and associated detritus.

"Officially, we're about to be disciplined for being bad little girls."

Hermione flashed a smirk. "Our lord really isn't happy with us." Her face slipped back into stony faced determination before withdrawing a trunk of her own and expanding it on the floor.

Tracey could only stare as Hermione carefully dropped one of the clothes filled leather bags into it. The little monkey jumped down from Hermione's shoulder, across the trunk, and up onto Daphne's.

"But that was less than twenty minutes ago — and I still can't believe you faced down Albus Bloody Dumbledore!"

Daphne looked up from where she stood with the book, idly scratching a chirping Freekey. "Word travels fast." She snapped the book shut, moved over to Hermione's trunk and stuck her head inside. "Grandmother, is Father on the way yet?"

An older and distinguished female voice said, "Yes, Daphne, Dear. He left some while ago."

"Thank you."

Daphne's head become visible again. "He's on the way."

Tracey eyed Hermione's trunk with suspicion, mind racing. "So... what's the unofficial reason
you're leaving?"

Daphne and Hermione shared a glance.

"Sorry, Trace," Daphne said, "we can't tell you, but we'll probably be gone for a while, maybe a few weeks, maybe longer. Hopefully we'll be back to take the exams."

Hermione shivered.

Tracey frowned. "You're going to miss so much."

Daphne opened her mouth to respond, but a ghostly voice interrupted them. "Miss Greengrass? Miss Granger?" The see-through face of the bloody baron appeared at the trunk's entrance. "Your head of houses are in the entrance hall to remove you from the school until further notice."

Daphne turned back to Tracey and handed her the book she'd been inspecting. "Here."

Tracey looked at the book in confusion.

"Records of all my political doings in the house. Until I'm back, you're the new leader of the Gray."

Tracey now looked at the book in sheer panic.

Daphne smirked. "Good luck."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore sighed while sitting in the Potter Manor sitting room. Opposite him sat the distraught Lord James and Lady Lily Potter. He'd done his best to calm them and, importantly for the moment, persuaded them not to grab John and run off to the hall of prophecies. The longer he could put off that phase of the game, the better.

But perhaps most importantly, he'd gotten what he really needed — appointment by Lord Potter to be Harry Potter's defence council.

Lady Lily conjured another handkerchief and blew her nose again before dropping it on the slowly forming mountain of multicoloured cloth beside her.

He stood up to leave.

Lady Lily sniffed. "Just make sure you do what's best for our sons, okay?"

Dumbledore smiled a sad smile. "Of course, Lily."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Early next morning, Daphne and Hermione, dressed in grey silk robes with large, face-concealing hoods, walked up a side alley in Hogsmeade village and turned into a street lined on each side by small cottages.

"Number six…" Hermione muttered under her breath, "Number eight. Here it is."

Daphne stepped over both the fidelius and ward lines and felt the magics welcome her into the house. She walked to the door, opened it, and stepped inside. "Right."

Hermione joined her, lowering her hood.
They both gazed around the small and simply furnished living room.

"First order of business, let's get an owl sent off to Dumbledore, if we can."

Hermione nodded and the two girls quickly found the study. One of the bookshelves contained shelf upon shelf of ornate looking envelopes, thick with parchment, already sealed with the Slytherin head of house ring, and organised alphabetically by intended recipient. Attached to each of the envelopes with a sticking charm, was a second parchment.

Hermione found the Ds, picked up the topmost envelope, and read the attached parchment.

*Headmaster Dumbledore,*

*I must apologise for not being able to accept your invitation. Unfortunately, I have a prior engagement.*

*Yours with the best of will,*

*Lord Slytherin, Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin*

Nope. She grabbed the next one.

On the other side of the room, Daphne had found the owl treats and was treating Macavity to an early morning snack.

*Chief Warlock,*

*I do not tolerate interference in my affairs.*

*Lord Slytherin*

Nope. She tried the next one. It wasn't until some half-way through the row that she found what she was looking for.

*Headmaster Dumbledore,*

*I apologise for Daphne and Hermione's behaviour. They will be disciplined.*

*Lord Slytherin, Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin*

"There." She handed the sealed envelope to Daphne. "That should hold him until your Dad can meet him."

Daphne read it and nodded. "Yes, that should do it."

"Lord Greengrass?" Dumbledore raised a surprised eyebrow. "I was expecting to meet Lord Slytherin."

Lord Greengrass sat himself in the chair in front of the headmaster's desk. "Unfortunately, my good friend is in the middle of a rather delicate project — one that requires his utmost attention, and he asked if I could be here in his stead."

Dumbledore's mind flashed. The mirror — it had to be. Frustrating though it was, there was literally *nothing* he could do about it. He tugged at his beard. "Well, I hope he's remembering to
Lord Greengrass gently nodded his head before leaning forward. "Let's get straight to the nub of the matter, shall we, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"Both myself and Lord Slytherin are extremely concerned with the Potter boy's behaviour and, in particular, the influence he seems to hold over my daughter. While it may not have been any of our houses he attacked, it does show what he is capable of. We are worried of what he might become, especially with how powerful he seems to be."

Dumbledore smiled grimly. "I fully understand such a concern, Lord Greengrass. Although I speak as his defence, I do see that the evidence is overwhelmingly against him."

"The committee has appointed Crinolow Ogden, Lord Ogden's daughter in law, for the prosecution, and we intend to push for the harshest sentence possible."

Albus Dumbledore nodded along.

"The veil."

Dumbledore froze. His eyes widened. "Lord Greengrass? You cannot be serious!"

"We are serious, Headmaster."

Dumbledore slumped back in his chair. Harry Potter could not be allowed to go through the veil. No one truly knew what was on the other side. What if the horcrux remained intact? It was unthinkable. "Jacob, the boy is just a child."

"Best time to do it. I dread to think how difficult it would be to restrain him once he is older."

Dumbledore rubbed his temples. "Couldn't you be persuaded to at least push only for life in Azkaban? It means the same thing and Harry Potter would still no longer be a threat to your daughter. Not even the worst of our death eaters got the veil, and if you try to push such a sentence on a boy only nearing twelve, the judges may well balk."

Lord Greengrass sniffed. "What are you going to be pushing for?"

Dumbledore steepled his fingers. "I believe a sentence of three years in Azkaban would serve the child."

"Three years! You want to release him back into my daughter's company as a fifteen year old? Absolutely not!"

"Lord Greengrass, I find it highly unlikely that Harry would still hold the same sway over your daughter after three years apart for her and three years of dementor exposure for him."

"Maybe, but it is not something I intend to find out. No deals. We're pushing for the veil."

When Lord Greengrass eventually left, Dumbledore stared hard at the closed door. Wonderful. Now he had to make sure, not only that Harry was found guilty, but also that the boy wasn't executed. How did Slytherin manage to be so frustrating even when they were momentarily on the same side?
The sitting room of Greengrass Manor had rapidly become mission control. Several extra desks had been found from the various spare studies and now formed an outer ring with the various sofas and low tables in the large room's middle. The defence lawyer, Mrs Crinolow Ogden, much to her bemusement, found herself working aside Daphne and Hermione, who themselves shared a desk next to Luna.

Xeno and Pandora Lovegood also had desks of their own next to Luna's, although they made use of them far less than their daughter.

Jacob and Sunny Greengrass kept most of their work upstairs, but when working on, 'The Harry Situation,' they tended to sit in one of the middle arm chairs, their parchments strewn across one of the low tables in front of them.

The Greengrass house elves kept up a constant stream of tea and biscuits for the many guests who dropped by — some summoned, others merely curious, but all sworn to secrecy by their respective heads of houses.

And finally, sitting alone on Mrs Ogden's other side, sat a lonely, empty desk with a small plaque reading, 'Lord Slytherin.' It focused the minds of those in the know far better than any pepper up potion could.

Pandora Lovegood scampered into the room, jumped up on one of the middle low tables, bushy tail twitching furiously, and transformed back into a human, fist held up in the air, face scrunched up in a scowl. "I have news."

Mrs Ogden looked up from her parchments. "Go on."

Daphne, Hermione, and Luna all also stopped what they were doing.

"The department of mysteries has a piece of evidence relating to Harry's case that we didn't know about. They found a dark arts book by Harry's bed that contains the curse that Harry allegedly used."

"That's ridiculous!" Hermione slammed her hands on the desk in front of her, and stood up, chair shooting backwards. "Harry would never keep something like that by his bed!"

Mrs Ogden whistled. "Must have been planted before hand."

"That goat bastard!"

Pandora hopped down from the table and handed Mrs Ogden and the girls copies of the DoM analysis.

Daphne took the parchments and started to read, biting her lip in worry. It had already been a week. One week for Harry alone and confined in a lower grade version of his own personal hell. She hoped and prayed he was doing okay.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The cell was not uncomfortable — certainly a lot better than Azkaban. There weren't any soul sucking demons here, which was a plus. On the other hand, in Azkaban he'd never felt like half of him was struggling to rip the other half apart. He sat on his little cot, hands trembling, heart alternating between calm and pounding, trying not to focus on anything in the room — the walls, the door, the bars, anything that would remind him he couldn't get out. Instead, he practising wandless conjuration the way other prisoners might make paper cranes.
It wasn't the most productive use of his time, but every second focused on trying, and mostly failing, to form magic into solid objects was an extra second his out-of-control self, currently curled up and whimpering deep in his head, wouldn't have control of his body.

So far, he'd managed to conjure a tiny glass bead. He played with it in-between trembling fingers, before they lost their tenuous grip and the bead bounced away across the cell, towards the door.

Fuck.

And then he heard footsteps coming from outside. He straightened on his cot.

A white-bearded head with moon-shaped spectacles appeared briefly behind the door's window bars. There was a clank noise, the door opened, and a purple booted foot carelessly crushed the glass bead lying on the floor. "Good morning, Mister Potter."

Harry summoned the kind of will power that could just about fend off a legilimency attack from an older Voldemort after five sodding years of steadily escalating, dementor fuelled, mental arms race, and said, "Good morning, Headmaster."

Dumbledore conjured himself an arm chair. "While I'm shocked and greatly disappointed in your actions, I'm pleased to be able to tell you that your parents have appointed me to be your defence council."

"Yay."

Dumbledore ignored his flippancy, took off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. "Unfortunately, Harry, the evidence speaks for itself and it's almost certain that you're going to be found guilty."

Harry stared blankly at the old man in front of him. Best to struggle at least a bit. "Veritaserum?"

"Veritaserum may not be used on members of noble houses in court."

"But why not now? At least then you could learn that I am innocent."

"Even then, the law says that I cannot."

"I thought my father could authorise it as the head of a noble house with the ministry?"

"No, only pureblood houses — Potter is not a pureblood house."

Harry's lip curled. "What about my wand?"

"Unfortunately, someone made a mistake, and I won't be able to submit that as evidence."

"How convenient."

"The prosecution is going so far as to push for the veil — so I'm going to focus my efforts on ensuring that you get the most lenient sentence possible."

"What is the veil?"

Dumbledore hesitated. "It's an archway in the department of mysteries — no one knows where it goes, but the legends says it links the land of the living with the land of the dead."

Harry said nothing.
"So, if you'd just sign this, I can focus on making sure that doesn't happen."

Dumbledore handed him a parchment and Harry read it. It was a full confession. He made to hand it back with shaky hands. "No."

Dumbledore frowned, not accepting the parchment. "Harry?"

"I'm innocent. I'm not signing anything that says otherwise."

"Mister Potter, I'm not sure you understand the severity of your situation. You have attempted to murder the heir to one of the most powerful houses in magical Britain — your own brother. Even if you don't get sent through the veil, you could easily be looking at life in Azkaban, unless I am able to convince the court otherwise."

Harry carefully tore up the parchment as though solving a complex problem and threw it in Dumbledore's face.

Dumbledore sighed, silently stood, and left, closing the door behind him with another loud clank.

Later that night, Harry lay down in his cot, exhausted, closed his eyes, and thought of the one thing keeping him sane. His world shifted, there was a feeling of movement, and he opened his eyes again. He stood in front of a Mesoamerican pyramid. The world was dark. Lightning and thunder crashed in the sky. Rain whipped around him. Trees bowed and rose like terrified subjects before an evil king. And way above him, a cage containing his other self swung in the air, magic swirling around it like wind around the eye of a tornado.

"Harry!"

Harry turned, shaking, even here, but managed to let his face relax into a smile, just before a red-headed witch collided with him, warm arms wrapping around him, bringing new strength and determination to his otherwise tired mind. "Ginny."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Your ten o'clock is here, Director."

"Thank you, please send them in." Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Regent Amelia Bones leaned back in her chair and waited.

The door opened and a much shorter than expected witch stepped through.

"Miss Greengrass?"

Heiress Greengrass smiled. "Regent Bones." And made herself comfortable in the chair opposite her.

"What can I do for you?"

"I wish to call on the third and final minor favour owed by the House of Bones to the House of Slytherin."

Amelia raised an eyebrow. She loved her niece like her own daughter, but sometimes the trouble she got herself into…. Although, arguably, making those kinds of mistakes was exactly what Hogwarts was for. Make them and learn from them where they didn't matter so much. She observed the young witch in front of her. "Well?"
"You will soon be one of the magistrates sitting in judgement in the case of Harry Potter."

Amelia frowned. She didn't like the sound of where this was going. "Yes…?"

"We wish to use our third minor favour to have you ensure a completely fair trial."

Amelia blinked. That hadn't been what she'd expected. "You do realise this is something I will do anyway?"

"Nevertheless."

Amelia frowned again. "In fact, you've used every single one of your minor favours to ensure I do things that it is my job to do anyway."

Miss Greengrass shrugged. "Then you will have no problems ensuring that the trial is fair?"

Amelia sat in silence for a moment. It seemed a reasonable use of a minor favour, but was there anyway this could backfire on her? Wait… "Miss Greengrass,"—she took a deep breath—"are you asking me to break the law?"

Miss Greengrass quickly shook her head. "No, I would never ask you to break the law — I merely ask that you see your way possible to bend it."

Amelia narrowed her eyes. "Bend it how?"

"However you see appropriate to ensure a fair trial."

"However I see appropriate?"

"However you see appropriate."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Sirius Black made his way down to the holding cells of the DMLE. He'd never meant it to turn out like this, but things had just happened, mostly Alex. Alex had happened, and continued to happen on a fairly regular basis.

He checked in with the on-duty guard. "Anything I should know?"

The security wizard shrugged. "He's pretty quiet most of the time. Tries to put on a strong face, but we can all tell he's barely holding it in. He shakes all the time and cries out in his sleep."

Sirius nodded grimly and made his way down the lines of cell doors until he arrived at one towards the end. He knocked on the solid iron and rune covered door. "Knock, knock."

An eleven year old voice on the other side said, "Come in."

Sirius opened the door, stepped inside, and couldn't help the faint in-draw of breath. Merlin, he was identical to John.

The boy on the cot looked up.

Sirius took another step and felt something crunch under his foot.

The boy managed a smile. "Sorry about that."
Sirius looked down. Hundreds of what looked to be small glass beads littered the floor. Before he could stop himself his inner auror said, "Where did you get these?"

The boy held up a shaky hand, concentrated, and produced a small glass bead in a bright white glow.

Sirius' eyes widened. "Wow, Harry."

Harry looked up sharply.

Sirius hesitated. "Ugh, I guess I should tell you who I am, huh?"

Harry slowly shrugged. "You are Lord Sirius Black of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black — Chief Auror of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Ah, yeah, yeah I am." He took a deep breath. "Do you… do you mind if I take a seat?"

Harry shook his head, so Sirius went back outside and grabbed a chair from one of the many that lined the wall down the hall. Once sitting down back inside the cell he looked Harry in the eyes.

Harry seemed to be in no rush to ask about his sudden appearance, just stared at him as though trying to solve a complex puzzle.

Sirius rubbed the back of his head. He had to admit that he wasn't sure what he had expected. If the boy sitting in front of him were John, he'd be asking questions faster than Sirius could answer them.

The silence dragged on. Eventually Sirius opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, Harry finally decided to instead.

"Are you my godfather?"

Sirius shifted on his seat. He suddenly found it difficult to look into the kid's eyes. "Kinda."

"I had wondered. I knew that you are my brother's"

"Yeah."

Harry let out a shuddery breath. "So, why the visit? You choose the most interesting time to become reacquainted."

Damn, those eyes. Like Lily's, like John's, but so old. The kid's hands still shook. "Are you okay, Harry?"

"No. I'm not okay. I'm soon to be tried for attempted murder and heir usurpation — I'm in a cell I can't get out of — and I have cleithrophobia."

"Cleithrophobia?"

"The irrational fear of being trapped. It's what caused me to blow up one of the Hogwarts classrooms. Right now, I'm using advanced occlumency to stop myself going full Atlantis, but there's a part of me, deep inside my mind, that's constantly whimpering in terror."

Sirius widened his eyes. "What are you doing in here?"

"I'm a prisoner. What am I supposed to do? Tell the guards I'm afraid of being in a cell? Ask if the
Harry stilled before staring at him for an age. He tilted his head slightly to one side. "Do go on."

Sirius shifted uncomfortably. That hadn't been the reaction he'd expected. "I read the report the DoM filed on your wand — just a basic spell chain, it said." He couldn't help let out a slight laugh. "Or rather, a really **advanced** spell chain — Also saw the memories of you and John in the tournament — Couldn't believe it — Had to get some friends in the DoM to tell me it was all real."

Harry continued to stare at him.

"So, anyway, it'll be fine, and you'll be out of here in no time. Dumbledore will see to that."

Harry smiled, although Sirius couldn't help thinking it looked somewhat forced.

Sirius cleared his throat. "So, Harry, I was wondering… once Dumbledore gets you off—"

Harry made a disgusted face.

"—Sorry. I mean, once Dumbledore gets you **acquitted**, if you'd like to spend some time over the summer with me?"

"Yes, I'd like that." Harry made a thoughtful face. "Why?"

"Well, it would be a chance for you to spend some time with John, and—"

"—You *do* know that we hate each other's guts, right?"

"Maybe you just need some quality time together?"

Harry gave him a half-lidded look. "You've **seen** what we're capable of. How do you imagine that **quality time** would go?"

Sirius ignored his new found godson whose dry speech and blank expressions were so different to John's. "It would also give you a chance to get to know your godfather better — and you could get to know my daughter, Alexandra. She's going to Hogwarts next year — and you could…" he hesitated, "…watch out for her — you know — if she winds up…" he trailed off lamely.

Harry smirked. The first sign of mirth Sirius had seen on the kid's face. "In the evil dark snake pit?"

Sirius nodded.

"Sure."

Sirius let out a small sigh of relief. As much as he dreaded thinking about it, he couldn't help coming to the conclusion that Alex *was* going to be sorted into Slytherin House. He'd recently found his daughter sitting cross-legged in the sitting room, clipping articles about Lord Slytherin from the Daily Prophet and Witch Weekly for a moving, magical collage. More than a little disturbing. Hopefully Harry — prodigy, Slytherin, duelling-master Harry — would be able to at least distract her a bit.

— DP & SW: TFoP —
In the following weeks, Daphne and Hermione could think of little else but Harry — all alone and suffering in the dark, willing to endure his own private hell just to manoeuvre the enemy where they needed him.

To keep from going insane, they busied themselves with delving into every little aspect of the case, plotting out every possible point, how to counter it, and how the headmaster might counter their counters. Whenever they weren't working on the case they kept up with classwork or else practised duelling with Luna, only to find, much to their dismay, just how far behind the shorter blonde witch they were, even when she didn't have a wand.

Their determination and work ethic did not go unnoticed. "Are you two planning to go into law when you graduate?" Mrs. Ogden asked one day, pouring herself a cup of tea while the girls argued with each other about the finer points of countering a claim of wandless magic.

Jacob was then halfway through telling Mrs. Ogden about Hermione's healer training when a steely eyed Xenophilius Lovegood walked in.

"No luck," the Lovegood lord said.

Everyone groaned. Ever since they'd gotten the DoM report back on John's duelling robes, they'd been trying to pin down exactly how Dumbledore had pulled off that explosion exactly when it needed to happen.

Mrs Ogden set her tea-cup down with a decisive clink. "We'll just have to do the best we can with what we have then."

Everyone nodded.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

[May 20, 1992 — The day of the trial — 10:00am]

Albus Dumbledore stepped into the court room, old tome and stack of parchments under one arm, looked around, and raised an eyebrow. He supposed he shouldn't be surprised. The visitor's gallery held rather more than one would expect for a trial of this type, although, admittedly, few trials had the boy who lived in the witness box as the subject of an attempted murder.

He'd tried several more times to get Harry Potter to confess, even going so far as to stall the trial to give the boy longer to stew down in the cells. His contacts told him the boy didn't seem to react well to such an environment and he'd hoped that would sway him, but it was all to no avail. The boy had stubbornly refused to sign anything.

At the front of the room, Regent Bones, Madam Marchbanks, and Regent Longbottom sat in the judges' chairs.

Dumbledore walked to his lectern on the left side of the room, opened the book in front of him, and shuffled his parchments. He looked around at the visitor's gallery again. Even Lord Malfoy was here... he hadn't expected that.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Lucius Malfoy carefully watched Albus Dumbledore watching him, painfully aware that he was the only member of the Dark in the room. The other watchers were either members of the press, the Light or the Gray.
He held his wand-concealing cane slightly tighter in his hands.

Over a month ago, Draco had sent him the memory of Harry Potter duelling in the tournament. Impossible he'd thought. No mere eleven year old could be that good. Then he'd analysed the boy's fighting style and came to the same blood chilling conclusion he'd come to with Lord Slytherin—a conclusion that nevertheless explained just how Harry Potter could be so much better, even than his own twin brother. Harry Potter was also Dark Lord Voldemort. He was another memory, just like the diary. When he'd told the diary what he'd found, Riddle had immediately ordered him to cease their current plan—planting the diary on an unsuspecting first year to unleash the beast within the chamber of secrets. They needed more information, he'd said. They needed to find out just what his other selves where up to.

The quiet babble of conversation washed around him from the other gathered spectators.

It was a question that terrified him. Why had Voldemort changed his identity to Lord Slytherin? How had he? And why had he gone to the trouble of forming an entirely new faction out of the former neutrals? Did Voldemort believe him and all those who evaded Azkaban to be traitors? Did the Dark Lord believe them all to be failures who'd one day need to be hunted down just like he'd once upon a time hunted down mudbloods and blood traitors? Or had he just formed the Gray with the intention of integrating it into the Dark at a later date? But if so, then why not tell him? Lucius shivered.

Hopefully this trial, and subsequent cooperation with Slytherin—and presumably, Potter—would shine some light on these questions in his favour.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Took them long enough," Lord Smith said to his companion with the air of someone settling down to watch a good quidditch match.

Lord Lovegood, who'd just arrived, politely inclined his head. "I believe the defence has been stalling for time. No idea why though."

"You seem very confident your boy will come out of this with nothing to worry about."

"I am."

"And if they find him guilty?"

Lord Lovegood smiled. "Then I suspect my daughter will level Azkaban."

Lord Smith chuckled.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John Potter hated this. His parents had been fussing over him from the moment he'd woken up and hadn't let up since.

"Now, straighten your robes."

"Yes, Mum."

"And remember to say nothing but the truth when they call you."

"Yes, Mum."
His mum looked around the court room, distracted, nervous, and seemingly near tears.

His dad put a comforting hand around her shoulders. "It's okay, Lily. Albus won't let him go through the veil."

"He should." John blurted out.

"John Potter!" his mum hissed at him so as not to be heard over the background hum of conversation. "You will not speak about your brother like that!"

"I just don't understand why you two aren't angry at him!" John bit back, scowling and sticking his hands in his robe pockets. "He tried to kill me!"

His dad looked at him sternly. "But you are not dead, and he's going to get plenty of time to think about what he did wrong — and by the time he's out, things may well have changed, and we might even be able to spend time with him again."

John had to keep himself from gagging. Didn't they understand just how dangerous Harry was?

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry conjured another glass bead. Conjuration was a lot more difficult than transfiguration and required more magic, but the results lasted longer. While transfiguration was limited by the material the magic flowed through, conjured items were magic.

Thousands of glass beads littered the floor of the ministry cell. Spaced out among them sat the occasional more ambitious piece — here, a tiny glass apple, there, a tiny glass snitch, and right in front of where he sat, a tiny glass ice-cream cone, complete with three scoops of ice-cream, the culmination of over a month of practise.

The door clanged and opened. "Mister Potter?" said one of the guards. "It's time."

Harry took a deep breath and stood up, crunching glass beads as he left. The guard attached himself to him with a chain, and together they walked through the hallways of the ministry in relative peace — although the occasional worker did give them a second glance.

The doors to the courtroom swung open and all heads turned to him.

He was led into the middle of the courtroom and deposited into a horribly familiar chair. Instantly, magical chains leaped up and curled themselves around his wrists and ankles. His hands started to shake again.

In front of him, and on the left side, stood the defence — Dumbledore — and on the right side, stood the prosecution — a woman he recognised as Mrs. Crinolow Ogden. Directly ahead of him sat three woman he had no problems remembering — Regent Bones, Regent Longbottom, and Madam Marchbanks — the same three judges who'd sentenced him last time around.

A good start, that.

Regent Bones raised her wand and a small canon blast came out of it. "We are now hearing the case of The Ancient and Noble House of Potter versus The Ministry of Magic. Harry James Potter, you are accused of attempted murder and attempted heir usurpation, how do you plead?"

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "My client pleads…"
Harry almost thought he heard Dumbledore sigh.

"...Not guilty."

Regent Bones nodded. "Very well. We'll first have the defence and prosecution read their opening statements — Albus, if you would?"

"Your honours, while the evidence, unfortunately, speaks for itself, I intend to show that Mister Potter should not be held to the same standards of punishment that might usually be meted out for such a crime. Since Mister Potter has entered our world, he has shown himself to be a talented and resourceful student who, unfortunately, has allowed envy to fester into magical mental instability and dark arts experimentation, and then to make the terrible misjudgement we are here today to judge on."

Harry glared at him. Oh, how he'd like to light that stupid beard on fire.

"I would further go on to make the case that Mister Potter can, and should, serve only minimum sentence before being placed in long term mental care in St Mungo's."

Amelia eyed Dumbledore for slightly longer than one might expect before turning to Mrs. Ogden. "Prosecution, please."

"Your honours..." Mrs Ogden glanced at Dumbledore. "...Given the clear and cut nature of the evidence available, we find it very difficult to push for even a paucity sentence..."

Harry glanced at Dumbledore's face as Mrs Ogden carried on. Shock, confusion, slowly forming anger. Heh.

"...Thus we intent to show how what the evidence we do have seems to suggest..."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

What the hell? Dumbledore stared as Mrs Ogden went on and on. Red mist descended as he realised what was going on. He was being set up. All those conversations with Greengrass had just been diversions! The Gray had no intention of sending Harry through the veil. But why! The Gray shouldn't want anything to do with Harry — he'd made sure of that. A bead of sweat ran down his neck. Unless Harry's performance at the duelling tournament had convinced Lord Slytherin to recruit the boy, even despite the business with Miss Greengrass. Ugh. This wasn't good.

"...With a full exoneration." Mrs. Ogden wrapped up her opening statement.

Dumbledore's beard twitched. On the other hand, Amelia did not look happy with the prosecution, did she?

All around the court room, a faint muttering could be heard.

Amelia glared between him and Mrs. Ogden. She looked to her two other judges who nodded back before sounding another blast with her wand. "Okay, stop. I want to know right now why the defence is playing prosecution and the prosecution is playing defence."

Albus jabbed a finger towards Mrs. Ogden. "Your honour, the prosecution assured me they would be pushing for the veil—"

Gasps sounded around the court room.
"—And I prepared my defence based on avoiding that. This is hugely irregular!"

Mrs. Ogden glared. "And how regular is it, may I ask, for the defence of a client to be handled by someone who admits in their opening statement that all the evidence points towards their client being guilty?" She looked towards Regent Bones. "How is someone supposed to get a fair trial when their own defence believes them to be guilty and is pushing for that result despite their own client's plea of not-guilty — even when there is plenty of evidence clearly showing them to be, in fact, not guilty."

Dumbledore's nose flared. They were going to use the wand as evidence, weren't they? Damn it. He needed to think of someway around that. He needed—

"Dumbledore?" Amelia's voice cut through his thinking. "Is there evidence that shows Mister Potter to be innocent?"

He grit his teeth. "Your honour, the interpretation of the evidence might, in certain circumstance, lead one to cast a doubt over Mister Potter's guilt, but the unfortunate reality of the situation—"

Bang! Amelia gave yet another blast on her wand, cutting him off. She leaned forward and rubbed her temples with the tips of her fingers before straightening. "I can't believe I'm doing this." She sent a mild glare towards Lord Greengrass who watched intently from the visitor's gallery, before speaking again. "Mister Dumbledore, Mrs. Ogden, please step away from your lecterns."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry watched from the middle of the room, still chained to the chair, as Amelia Bones ordered Dumbledore and Mrs. Ogden to step away from their lecterns. What was she planning to do? Hopefully not rule a miss-trial. That would suck.

A visibly agitated Dumbledore snapped his book shut with such force it snapped a clump of his beard too, causing the headmaster to flinch and Harry to smirk.

"Now, please walk forward and don't stop walking until I tell you to."

Dumbledore and Mrs. Ogden walked forward in total silence. No one in the court seemed to be even breathing.

"Stop."

They stopped.

"Now please turn around and walk to your new lecterns."

They did so, Dumbledore looking both annoyed and uncertain. He put the book down, still closed, on the lectern and Harry's eyes sharpened with the unrealised and unknown talent of a snitch seeking prodigy. Several hairs from the headmaster's long, white beard were trapped in the book's pages, just visible against the black leather of the book's cover.

"Now." Amelia smiled primly. "Prosecution," she turned to Dumbledore, "if you would please start submitting evidence."

Harry tore his eyes away from the hairs and back towards Amelia Bones, a small smirk playing across his lips.

Dumbledore breathed out sharply in exasperation. "Your honour, you can not be serious. I am
not prepared to act as prosecution, regardless of what they”—he motioned towards Mrs. Ogden —"might have you believe."

"This is our court room, Albus, I am totally serious. You were going to try and prove that Mister Potter here—an eleven year old child—should be given several years in Azkaban. I'm sure some would say that if you came here ready to push that, then you came here ready to be prosecution."

"I was appointed by Lord Potter—"

"—We will not have our courtroom become a circus! Nothing has changed except where you stand, and what I'm calling you." Regent Bones glanced towards Harry's parents who he noticed with interest looked extremely confused. "Now, please get on with it."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John watched with mounting unease as Dumbledore quickly had a word with a court assistant who scuttled off on some unknown errand, before submitting a dark arts book as evidence, followed by Ogden submitting both Harry's wand and the tattered duelling robes John had worn during tournament. This wasn't good. Dumbledore's whole plan was based around the fact that the wand would never see the inside of a courtroom. And as for the clothes… cold sweat started to form on his neck. Ogden hadn't figured anything out, had she? If she had… if the new defence could prove it… he swallowed. In the quiet courtroom, it sounded very loud.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Fine, we accept Lady Blott's position as a magical expert." Amelia blasted her wand. "Dumbledore, if you could please present the case for the prosecution."

Dumbledore took a deep breath. This wasn't going to be easy, but in the time he'd had while submitting evidence, he had remembered an important little detail that could hopefully cast doubt on the validity of using the wand as evidence, but for that to work best, he'd need a witness he hadn't counted on needing, and that court assistant hadn't arrived back with him yet. Hopefully, they would, and soon. "I'd like to call Mr Flourish as my first magical expert."

An old man with short brown hair stood up and made his way to the high chair next to his lectern. After swearing an oath that was in no way magical and signing a contract that did little but confirm he was who he was, Dumbledore started his questioning.

"Mr Flourish, where were you on April 4 at around eleven a.m.?"

"I was watching the Hogwarts duelling tournament."

"And what happened during the match between Mister Potter and Heir Potter?"

"Mister Potter seemed to be winning, then he cast a brown spell into a smoke illusion that caused an explosion."

"The court has already heard your qualifications in the realms of books and spell identification, Mr Flourish, could you please identify the spell Mister Potter used."

"Well, based on the spell's colour, speed, shape, etc, it could have been one of half a dozen, but given the effects on Heir Potter, we know it to be a dark blasting curse, specifically the creptus curse."

"Could you please inspect this book and tell us if you recognise it."
Mr Flourish took the book in gloved hands and inspected it. "Yes, I do, Joseph Krinkelheit's *Compendium of Prussian Dark Arts. Fortieth Edition*, it looks like."

"Does this book contain the creptus curse?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, this was the first book that published it back in the 1700s."

"Thank you, Mr Flourish." Dumbledore stood aside.

Amelia shot a questioning look at Mrs Ogden who nodded, walked to the high seat, and asked a few questions of her own.

"Mr Flourish, you said before that you saw Mister Potter cast a brown spell that caused an explosion?"

"Yes."

"What was the spell Mister Potter cast immediately proceeding that spell?"

"It was a zero friction spell."

"And before that?"

"It was a smoke illusion spell."

"So, the area around Heir Potter was concealed?"

"Well, yes."

"So, you didn't actually see the brown spell cause the explosion?"

"I saw the spell enter the smoke illusion and then an explosion happened."

"But you didn't see the spell cause the explosion?"

"No, I didn't directly see the spell cause the explosion."

"Thank you."

Dumbledore watched Mr Flourish walk away with a slight frown. Almost perfect, but he could have done without him casting doubt on the spell’s effect at the end there. He glanced towards the door. And the court assistant still wasn't back yet. He needed that other witness.

"Dumbledore?" Amelia looked down at where he stood. "Are you ready for your next witness?"

He nodded. "My next witness is Mr Cecil Chuffney."

A thin and extremely nervous looking young man from the department of mysteries stood up and made his way to the high chair.

"Mr Chuffney, could you tell the court where you were at 11:30 a.m. on the day of the incident?"

Cecil Chuffney licked his lips. "I'd been called out to Hogwarts to collect evidence from Mister Potter's dormitory."

"And what did you find there?"
"Not much. Boy didn't seem to live off of anything, really — a few spare sets of robes in the closet, socks, underwear, a few school books, and the dark arts book."

"You are referring to the book Mr Flourish just identified to us?"

"Yeah."

"And where did you find it?"

"On the bedside table."

"On Mister Potter's bedside table?"

"Yeah."

"Thank you, Mr Chuffney."

Amelia looked towards Mrs Ogden who shook her head.

Mister Chuffney hopped off the chair and scuttled away. That went about as well as it could.

Just then, the court assistant stepped back through the door to the court room, trailed by another figure and Dumbledore smiled. Just in time. "My next witness will be Lord Sirius Orion Black."

Sirius looked around briefly, face hurried, and after swearing the oath and having his lords ring authenticated in lieu of an identification contract, sat down in the high chair.

"Lord Black," Dumbledore said, "could you tell the court what first transpired when you visited Mister Potter in his ministry cell on May 2?"

Sirius nodded. "I knocked on the door, unlocked it, let myself in, and found the floor covered in glass beads. I asked Harry where the beads came from and he showed me that he'd learned to conjure them without needing his wand."

A few gasps were heard around the room.

"Then we talked for a while about personal matters and a few things pertaining to this case, and I left."

"So, Harry has the ability to conjure items wandlessly?"

"I only saw the glass beads — and a few other glass shapes — there was also a tiny glass peach, I seem to recall."

"Impressive ability for an eleven year old."

Sirius beamed. "Indeed."

"Thank you, Lord Black, that will be all."

Amelia turned to Mrs Ogden. "Do you wish to ask Lord Black any questions?"

Mrs Ogden shook her head.

Sirius hopped off the chair and made his way over to the Potters.

"My next witness will be..."
"Hey, Prongs," Sirius whispered when he got to the nearest bench. "What's going on?"

James turned to him, confused and agitated. "I don't know. It started off as we expected and then everything went weird."

Dumbledore turned to face the court. "My next witness will be Harry James Potter."

Sirius frowned. "Weird? Like how?"

"Like the prosecution seems to want to let Harry go."

"Well, that's good isn't it?"

"I don't know. Dumbledore believes Harry is guilty."

"But… but that's nonsense. Harry isn't guilty. I saw the evidence."

James looked sharply at him.

Sirius glanced towards where Dumbledore stood in the middle of the court. "Least, I thought I did."

Harry's chair had floated up and made its way to occupy the space where the witness high chair was situated.

James' frown deepened. "Anyway, now Dumbledore is acting like the prosecution and the prosecution is acting like the defence."

Sirius stared blankly. "Wait… you mean… I just testified against Harry?"

James nodded slowly.

"Whoops."

Harry slowed his breathing as the chair he sat in levitated up from the ground and floated into the spot the other witnesses had sat in. The chains bit into his wrists. He felt every set of eyes on him.

"Mister Potter," Dumbledore started, "we've heard of your abilities to perform wandless magic, perhaps you can tell the court what other spells you can cast wandlessly?"

Harry sniffed and caught the eye of Mrs Ogden who gave him an encouraging nod. Oh, well. All in. "I can cast the stunning charm, the incendio charm, the summoning charm, the shield charm, and the banishing charm wandlessly."

"What about conjuring?"

"Yes, I can also conjure small glass objects, such as those Lord Black saw, and you stepped on."

A few chuckles sounded around the room.

"Could you demonstrate for the court some of your wandless abilities?"

Harry's eyes flickered briefly to where Dumbledore's book still lay on the lectern. He smiled. "Yes, but I am rather constrained at the moment."
Dumbledore looked to Regent Bones who nodded towards two on duty security wizards. The two wizards approached the chair and pointed their wands at Harry, who suddenly felt the chains around his wrists loosen. He flicked his hand up with a grin and caused Dumbledore's book to sail across the room, generating a susurration of murmuring around the room.

Dumbledore nodded. "Well done, Mister Potter, if we were in class I'd award points."

Harry carefully took the book in both hands, smiling all the while, closed two of his fingers around the stray white hair still trapped between the pages, and offered the book back to Dumbledore with a flourish. As the headmaster accepted the book back with a frown, Harry felt the tiny pluck as the white hair between his fingers snapped in two. His hand fell to his lap and casually slid into his pocket.

"Now, Mister Potter, I notice that the creptus curse wasn't included in that impressive list of spells you can cast wandlessly. Are you saying you can't cast that spell without a wand?"

"That is what I'm saying."

"So you deny being able to cast that curse."

"Without a wand? Yes."

"Without a wand? So you could cast it with a wand?"

"I dare-say I could if I tried. I never have though."

"Do you deny learning dark spells?"

"No, I don't deny that. Most of the hexes and jinxes used by duellists are dark by the magical definition."

"Have you ever performed a dark ritual on yourself?"

"No." He mentally smirked. Not yet.

"Thank you, Mister Potter, no further questions."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore nodded to himself as Harry's chair floated back to the middle of the room, chains and shackles once again snaking themselves around his wrists and ankles.

"I call my next witness, Professor Minerva McGonagall."

McGonagall sat in the high chair.

"Professor, could you tell us the events that led up to the incident with Mister Potter on January 28 in Hogwarts classroom 219?"

"Well, I was in my office marking papers, when I suddenly felt a large build up of magic coming from somewhere off in the castle. I made haste to investigate, and found the door to classroom 219 bolted shut and I heard you shouting to get the students away from the area."

"And after the magical build up had died down?"

"I entered the classroom to find it completely destroyed, you standing in the middle of it, and
Mister Potter unconscious on the floor. I then levitated him to the hospital wing."

"Thank you, Professor, that will be all."

His next witness was Healer Pomfrey who explained about what had transpired in the room, about Harry's magical meltdown, what magical meltdown was, and how Harry's control over his core had snapped.

After her, Dumbledore called another healer from St Mungo's, who explained some of the causes of magical meltdown.

Dumbledore glanced towards Harry. "So, if someone had experienced magical meltdown, how likely would it be that it was the result of a dark ritual?"

"Quite likely."

"Why?"

"Well, we don't get many cases of it, but most that we do get are the result of experimenting with dangerous magics."

"Thank you, Healer, no further questions."

Mrs Ogden then took the floor. "Healer Uptown, you said that one of the ways that magical meltdown could happen was as the result of trauma?"

"Yes."

"If you learned that a patient had a phobia and was exposed to the conditions of that phobia, would you consider that to be a likely explanation for a case of magical meltdown?"

"Yes, yes I would."

"Thank you, healer, no further questions."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"We'll now take a short break before the defence presents their case." Amelia Bones fired a blast from her wand and the three judges took their leave through a back door.

Dumbledore hurried out of the courtroom, hoping to get away before,

"Albus!"

He sighed. No luck. He turned, beheld a confused and agitated Lord and Lady Potter, and quickly hurried them into a waiting room.

"Albus," said James Potter once the door was closed. "What was all that about?"

"James, the prosecution assured me they were planning to push Harry for the veil."

"Yes, but what about after that?"

"I don't know what they're playing at, but Harry is guilty, all the evidence that I've seen supports it."
"What about the wand? Sirius just told me the report said it didn't have the curse on it."

"James, you've seen his wandless capabilities, you've seen what he's capable of. It would be the easiest thing in the world for him to learn that spell and cast it as though from his wand, but not actually passing through it — and he clearly had access to the spell to learn it."

James and Lily stood in silence for a moment. Lily in particular didn't look happy.

"Okay, we'll see what the new defence's case is," James said eventually. "You assured us all the evidence supported Harry's guilt. I'll wait to see what they have to say before saying anything more on this."

Dumbledore nodded and watched the Potters turn to leave, but before they did, Lily turned back to face him, eyes narrowed. "Even if Harry is guilty, Headmaster, I still hold you responsible for allowing him to get his hands on such a dangerous book. You're supposed to be keeping a closer eye on him than that." And with that, she stepped through the door and shut it behind her.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Is anything normal around that boy?" asked Lord Smith chuckling and shaking his head.

Lord Lovegood smiled and led him towards a familiar object. "Harry tends to have a lot of interesting experiences."

"I'll say. Okay, I see you've got the pensieve set up. What is it you want to show me?"

"An extended version of the events of Halloween."

"You don't mean the troll that got into Hogwarts do you?"

"I do — although I'm more interested to show you what happened after that."

"Righto, show away."

Lovegood nodded. "We have cut out some bits to preserve family secrets, though."

"Understandable." Lord Smith touched the silvery liquid and felt the familiar jerking sensation, pulling him down into the memory."

John Potter jumped on the troll and blasted its head off.

Lord Smith chuckled. "You can see the power already, can't you?"

John Potter dashed off and, after saying good bye to the other girls, the Greengrass heiress and the muggleborn followed him.

He soon found himself standing in a destroyed corridor. "Fwhoa, what a mess — did the troll do this, too?"

Lovegood shrugged in a half gesture that committed to nothing.

The Greengrass heiress walked around the corner and the memory faded a new section of castle into view, spotlighting a rather large corpse on the ground.

Lord Smith stared.
Five minutes later, he exited the pensive, unable to see anything but rage. By his side, his trusty war hammer started glowing metallic red. "A chimaera! A Merlin damned chimaera! In a school with my grandchildren! What was he thinking!"

Lord Lovegood watched him from the side.

Lord Smith turned on him. "Why haven't you said anything about this before!"

"We checked the files — all the correct paperwork was filed, albeit in a place no one would look unless they were really trying hard to find it — there wasn't anything Dumbledore did that was actually illegal — the threat had been dealt with and there was no chance of removing Dumbledore from his position as Headmaster by a simple vote of no confidence."

Lord Smith scowled. "You don't think a public enquiry into this wouldn't have worked? Illegal or not, the parents would have gone Atlantis on his arse."

"Maybe, maybe not… but there is an opportunity to remove the headmaster at the end of the school year by simply deciding not to renew his contract. That merely requires a simple majority."

"But an enquiry—"

"—Lord Slytherin is not particularly enthusiastic about becoming subject to a public enquiry — and he certainly could be asked to testify if one came about. Many things could come out — things the Gray would rather not — at least not right now."

Lord Smith frowned. "If I voted against Dumbledore in such a matter without a good public reason, I might as well shout that the Smiths are now unashamedly Gray at the top of my lungs in the middle of the damn Wizengamot. I do still have business with other Lords of the Light, you know."

"I believe that the general result of this trial will cast enough public doubt on the headmaster to function as a valid reason for your sudden change of heart, although, of course, we'd still welcome your support in the Gray on a more ongoing basis."

Lord Smith narrowed his eyes. "I want to know who Lord Slytherin is."

"That is a matter of extreme trust."

"Then I at least want to meet him. I sure as hell do not plan on joining without some guarantees."

"After the trial, that can be arranged."

— DP & SW: TFOp —

Mrs Ogden motioned to the full-again court room. "Mr Chuffney, was it you who performed the analysis on the dark book found in Mister Potter's dormitory?"

The young man shifted nervously. "Yes, it was."

"And what were your findings?"

"We could find no fingerprints and no polyjuice evidence to link the book to the boy. In fact, there were neither fingerprints nor polyjuice evidence at all."

Mrs Ogden handed the man a parchment. "Could you read the court this passage from your report please?"
"The book appears to be in near mint condition and contains the publishing number is 0087620-12031992-02-0202."

"What did you mean by that?"

"I meant that it looked barely used — and that it had that publishing number."

"Thank you, Mr Chuffney."

Mr Chuffney scooted back off to his seat among the many rows of the courtroom.

"I call my next witness, Mr Reginald Quickspell."

Mr Quickspell sat down in the high chair. "Mr Quickspell, you are here as an expert on learning magic outside of the formal education system, and on wandless magic in particular — could you please tell the court how long it takes to learn to cast a spell wandlessly?"

"Around 200 to 250 hours is a good time, not counting the normal time."

"What does, 'good time,' and, 'normal time,' mean?"

"Well, everyone is different. Some people learn faster, some slower. The best students I've seen take a little over two hundred hours — that's the good time. The normal time is how long it would take you to learn the same spell if you had a wand — add the two together and you get the total time it takes to learn a wandless spell."

"And how many hours a day can a student practise?"

Mr Quickspell pursed his lips. "Five hours is the most that's realistic, any more than that and you get burnout."

"So, what would be the shortest time period, measured in days for a student to learn a new wandless spell?"

"Forty to fifty days."

In the middle of the room, Harry had to keep himself from smirking. Ginny had mastered a completely unknown wandless spell much faster than that.

"Could a student learn a wandless spell in twenty days?"

Mr Quickspell scoffed. "Absolutely not."

"Thank you, no further questions."

Next in the high chair was Madam Pince, although how Jacob had roped her into this, Harry had no idea.

"Madam Pince, could you please explain to the court how publishing numbers work?"

"A book's publishing number contains four separate numbers that identify the book's international ID, date of crafting, the family that crafted it, and the wizard or witch either of the family or employed by the family who crafted it, in that order."

"So, you could tell me exactly when a book with this publishing number was crafted?" Mrs Ogden handed Madam Pince the DoM report on the dark arts book.
"Yes."

"Please do so."

"This book was crafted on March 12, 1992."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore's eyes widened for a fraction of a second before quickly returning to normal. Only twenty days before the tournament… Oh, bugger.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Could you now please demonstrate the priori incantatem effect for this wand?"

The DoM worker responsible for the analysis on Harry's wand held the wand up and said, "Priori incantatem." Several shadows drifted out of the wand's end.

"And could you identify these spells, please?"

"Well, like I said in the report, the last spells used by this wand were an area stunner, then a frictionless charm, then a smoke illusion, in reverse order."

"So, not a dark blasting curse?"

"Not a dark blasting curse."

"Is there anyway this wand could have been interfered with or tampered with after these spells were cast?"

"Only if you wish to accuse one of the DMLE or DoM wizards of tampering with evidence."

"What about the girl who touched the wand after Mister Potter used it?"

"She was in clear view of two thousand people. We've analysed memories and there was no chance of her casting any of those spells before she handed it to Director Bones." The DoM worker glanced towards Regent Bones who nodded back at him.

"Thank you, no further questions."

With no word from Dumbledore to cross-examine, the DoM worker left and Lady Dorothy Abbott took the high seat.

Mrs Ogden held a tray containing the tattered remains of John's duelling robes up for the court to see. "Lady Abbott, you are here as an expert on clothing and the use of runes in clothing. You have had a chance to inspect the remains of the duelling robes worn by Heir Potter. What can you tell us about what you found?"

"There were many runes embroidered on the inside of the remains. Many of them were extremely difficult to make out, owing to having been almost burnt clean off, but many others are still recognisable."

"What function do you believe these runes would have served?"

Lady Abbott sniffed. "I have no idea. I've never seen runes like them in those combinations and patterns anywhere near anything that is designed to be worn."
"So, they are not standard clothing runes?"

"No, they most certainly are not."

"Thank you."

And minutes later, John Potter sat in the high chair.

"Did you know your robes had these runes embroidered on the inside?"

John shakily shook his head. "No, I didn't. They were the robes Dad bought me."

"Did these robes ever leave your sight after you received them?"

"Yeah — of course — all the time. I barely used them. They were duelling robes, not wear all the time robes."

And minutes after that, an expert on runes of all kinds.

"Were you able to identify any possible function that these runes might play?"

"Yes. One of the runic arrays that we found around the back contains a three part runic cluster found specific application."

"What application?"

"Defensive wards. Dark defensive wards. Defensive wards that would be happy to leave you going home in a match box, if you know what I mean."

Mrs Ogden let out a sigh. "Could you spell it out for the court, please?"

The runic expert smirked. "Explosions."

A loud muttering filled the court room.

Bang! "Quiet please!" Amelia Bones shot off a small cannon blast from her wand.

Lord Malfoy surveyed the room, eyes narrowed in calculation. Potter was going to be let off — it was clear. The evidence was far too cut and dry and Regent Bones was hardly the kind of witch to bend in the face of obvious evidence.

Dumbledore had tried to pull some kind of stunt here and failed. Lord Slytherin had out manoeuvred him, and he'd done it with expert witnesses, all oh whom were Light — and now all of Magical Britain would know it. He could almost feel the subtle shift in power rippling out from the room, even as he sat there. It didn't look like much, but even now, various Light lords were giving Dumbledore funny looks. The Potters in particular did not look happy.

"And so," Mrs Ogden finished, "we can clearly see that Mister Potter has been the victim of an attempt to frame him for the attempted murder of Heir Potter, and although we have been unable to identify the exact mechanism used to trigger the runic array in Heir Potter's clothing, it is clear that the robes were what caused the explosion, not any spell cast by Mister Potter."
Amelia Bones and the two other judges rose from their seats. "Thank you, Mrs Ogden — Dumbledore. We will now take a short recess to deliberate before reaching a final verdict." They filed out.

Harry sat there while the voices of the court washed over him. The minutes ticked by. People got up and moved around, stretching their legs after several hour of sitting. Harry of course, didn't have that luxury.

Mrs Ogden walked up to him. "I wouldn't worry about it, Mister Potter. I'm certain you'll be let off."

Harry mouth firmed. "I certainly hope so and thank you very much for your help in all this. I will not forget it."

The door to the back room opened again. The three judges filed back in and took their seats. Regent Bones shot a small canon blast from her wand. "We will now give our verdict."

The room silenced.

"After careful deliberation, we hereby pronounce the defendant not guilty of all charges."

The court room broke into a loud round of babbling.

Bang! "In addition!"

The room quietened again.

"In addition, we feel that this case could have been a whole lot simpler than it turned out to be. We're not sure what you were trying to pull, Albus, but your role as defendant should have been rather obvious. Be assured that you and I will be having a little chat later on."

Dumbledore nodded meekly.

"Thank you all. Court closed." Bang!

The chains holding Harry's wrists and ankles instantly slid off. He stood up and stretched, feeling lighter than he had in a month. Then, without pausing to even look around, he made a beeline for the door — to the outside world, and to freedom.

— DP & SW: TFiP —

Lily Potter made for the door Harry had just left by. "I'm going to go talk to Harry."

"Wait!" James desperately grabbed at her wrist.

She tried to shake him off. "Let me go! I don't like the way Dumbledore was acting. It didn't feel right."

"Lily!" he hissed so no one else could hear, "We still don't know the prophecy! We might mess everything up!"

Lily stiffened, then slumped against a nearby pillar.

James let go of her wrist.

"Okay, fine," she said. "But the moment John gets off the Hogwarts Express, we're taking him
down to the Hall of Prophecies, regardless of what Dumbledore says."

James reluctantly nodded and looked around. Dumbledore, it seemed, had quietly slipped out of the court room. He frowned. He hated not trusting his leader and old Headmaster, but the man had been acting very strangely, even if you took into account an unknown prophecy in play. James couldn't imagine what kind of prophecy would have the headmaster acting the way he was. It was about time they found out — and Merlin damn the consequences.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Back in Greengrass Manor, after being dog-piled by three relieved and crying witches, Harry managed, finally, to stand up.

"Harry, here." Jacob tossed Harry a green and black mask.

Harry caught it with a smirk.

"You've got a lot work to catch up on."

Harry grinned and thought of the single split white hair still nestled safely in his pocket. "Yes, I do. So do we all. We've got press releases to send out, a whole lot of lords to court, and a brand spanking new politically advantageous situation to exploit." He looked around at Daphne, Hermione, and Luna. "But first, we've got a final project to finish up on back at Hogwarts."

Daphne smirked. "I wonder how Tracey's been doing without us? It has been almost seven weeks."

Hermione's eyes suddenly widened and she let out a small 'Eep' sound. "Oh no!" She put both her hands over her mouth in horror. "Exams!"

— End of Chapter Thirty-two —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Only one more chapter to go before the end of the season, the end of Hogwarts year one, and the wrapping up of the Philosopher's stone story arc! This one won't be published this Sunday. I hope it'll be published the Sunday after, but it may well turn out to be the Wednesday after next… I'll keep you updated on my twitter account as normal.

A/N: This was the first court scene I've ever done. I'm not an expert on the little intricacies on how these things work — never even watched court room dramas — so I've probably made all sorts of mistakes in how things work, but, on the other hand, this is the freak'n magical world, so I hope I'll be allowed a bit of leeway by those who truly are familiar with the profession (Joe Lawyer, I'm thinking of you especially, you amazing reviewer).

A/N: For everyone asking or wishing to ask if I’m going to ‘redeem’ the Potters (which I should have realised was going to happen), I ask you not to think in such terms. This story is a tad more complex than that.
"Mister Potter!" Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall glared down at Harry in front of the main Hogwarts gates. Her lips were one thin line. "Where have you been? Do you have any idea the worry you caused when you just disappeared after the trial like that?"

Harry's face took on the look of the mildly curious. "No, I do not. Perhaps you could enlighten me?"

McGonagall's nostrils flared. "Your parents were greatly concerned when no one could say where you'd gone."

Harry snorted.

"So?" McGonagall asked, looming over Harry as only a middle school teacher can. "Where have you been?"

"I was in Diagon Alley."

"What for?"

"Shopping."

"Shopping for what?"

"A new set of robes so I can appear in your classroom like the tidy and responsible young wizard I am. It seems the ministry won't be returning the ones the DoM took as evidence until it passes through three sets of departments and gets stamped in triplicate."

Professor McGonagall's eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to be cheeky, Mister Potter?"

Harry's voice became so dry it could soak up an ocean. "No, Professor. I'm sure I'd do a better job of it if I actually tried."

"Detention, Mister Potter."

"Yes, Professor."

"Get along to your common room."

"Yes, Professor."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"—And then Bole tried to bully me into siding with him against Keendle, but Keendle had already told Richardson that I'd told him about the business with Parkinson, and then Gibbons and Carthile started threatening to blow the whole thing open if I didn't side with them against Keendle, but they still refused to have anything to do with Bole because of that time before Christmas!" Tracey was slouched in one of the armchairs near the Slytherin throne in the Slytherin common room, half on and half off, glass of pumpkin juice in one hand, hand over tired eyes with the other.
Daphne and Hermione listened attentively, sitting opposite their friend in the unofficial student throne of the Gray and a small sofa respectively. The general hubbub of the common room washed around the small Gray grouping.

Tracey swigged back her drink in a most un-lady like fashion before reaching for the ceiling with both hands. "I mean, come on!"

Daphne smiled to herself. Oh, the joys of leadership. One thing she hadn't missed much during their seven week evacuation. She leaned forward. "But you did solve it."

"Oh, I solved it, sure, but it took so much stupid stuff."

"Welcome to the world of politics."

Tracey eyed her like a drowning man eyes another, more buoyant looking, drowning man. "Well, you can keep it, Daph — it's all yours again."

"As you wish, Miss future Lady Davis."

Tracey groaned. "Please don't remind me. I don't know how you and Hermione find the energy to do all the stuff you do on top of all the political stuff we have to worry about." She straightened on her chair. "Now, are you going to tell me what the hell happened at the trial? And why isn't Potter back yet if he got off?"

Daphne gave a small wry smile. "We'd have told you earlier, if you hadn't immediately decided to unload on us."

"Well, I'm sorry!"

Suddenly, the door creaked open and all attention seemed to draw, inexplicably, towards it.

Harry stepped through the common room door, as though he'd just got back from lunch. He looked around, walked past their court, giving her a small nod as he passed, and sat down several chairs away where the Dark had their little court going.

"Why," Tracey whispered, "is Potter sitting with the Dark? If he's Gray, I mean."

Hermione leaned forward and whispered, "Recruitment."

"Recruit— Hermione, you can't seriously believe that he'll be able to bring any of them over to our side, do you?"

Hermione smiled.

Daphne smirked.

"Possibly." Hermione looked over to where Harry sat.

Daphne followed her eyes. Harry sat among the Dark as though he belonged there. Moments later, he stood up and made his way over to them. He sat himself down with a grin. "Just saying hi to our friends over the way."

Tracey looked incredulously at him.

"What?" said Harry, a small twinkle in his eye. "No welcome back? — no, I'm glad you were exonerated? — not even a, 'Why the hell didn't you tell me you were Gray before so I might not
have looked so silly for several months?"

Tracey snorted. "I'm insulted you think I might not have worked that last one out on my own."

Daphne reached into her pocket and handed over the tiny trunk Harry had entrusted Hermione with from before.

Harry took it with a smile. "So, what's been going on while I was away?"

Daphne and Hermione winced.

Tracey took a sharp intake of breath. "Oh! let me tell you…"

— DP & SW: TFiP —

Harry sat down in one of the three chairs in his trunk. "Wow, that girl knows how to weave a story. It's a pity we don't still have bards as a tradition. I'm sure she'd make a fine one."

Daphne smiled apologetically as she and Hermione mirrored him and the three made themselves comfortable. "Tracey's always been like that — ever since we first met — must have been when we were three or something like that."

"I'm not knocking it," Harry said. "It's a useful skill. But now let's talk about other things."

Hermione perked up. "The stone."

Harry nodded. "The stone, indeed."

"What are we going to do about it?" Daphne asked.

Harry tapped his fingers idly on the low table between them. "We've only got a few weeks until the end of the year and exams—"

Hermione nodded fiercely.

"—And it's important that both of you score top in them."

Hermione started. "What about you?"

"I mean top apart from me."

Hermione relaxed and nodded.

Harry continued. "You will, however, have to beat out John."

Hermione scoffed.

Harry grinned. "Which I know you'll be able to do, but do remember that he does have four years on both of you, and the last time I checked, you, Hermione, were only just starting fourth year spells, and you, Daphne, were only just starting year three."

Daphne glanced to her side and caught Hermione's eye. They'd both solidified into twin burning embers. She turned back. "And the stone?"

Harry sat in silence for a moment before speaking. "Dumbledore will be getting more and more suspicious. I think, we'll need to wait until he can do little to no harm and then use an already
proven method."

Daphne frowned. "What proven method?"

Harry reached into his pocket, drew out a small bottle containing a single white hair and set it down on the table. "The boy who lived, of course."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Lord Smith sat in the large armchair that was the seat of the Noble House of Smith. The seat of the Noble House of Smith sat in a corner of a sitting room, which was itself situated on the second floor of a three story monstrosity of pure granite, carved into the side of Ben Nevis, and hidden from muggles by an ancient set of wards mostly untouched since they'd been set up over seven hundred years ago.

The seat now creaked as Lord Smith shifted his considerable weight, most of it muscle, despite his age, and made only heavier by the steel armour he wore. He wasn't nervous. No, he damn well was not nervous! He'd survived everything that life had thrown at him. Even He-whom-it-was-unwise-to-name. Not something many of his peers could say — certainly not where they were now. So what reason did he have to be nervous of some little upstart lord who wore a mask? None at all!

The chair creaked again.

He rose irritably from the ancient oak seat like a building taking flight and started pacing.

A ping shot through the wards.

He stopped pacing.

A house elf popped into being by the sitting room's front door. "Master, Lord Slytherings has arrived."

Lord Smith's moustache twitched. "Good. Show him up please."

A minute later, the door opened and Lord Smith found himself gazing into the now famous green and black mask. "Ah, Lord Slytherin, come in, come in, please sit down, why don'cha?"

The masked lord swept into the room behind him. "Thank you, Lord Smith."

The two sat themselves down.

Smith smacked a goblet filled with red wine down in front of Slytherin. "I dare say you know why I requested this meeting?"

Lord Slytherin inclined his head. "I dare say you know why I accepted."

Smith barked a laugh. "I've got some questions to ask before I'll sign my family into your alliance."

"Fire away."

"Who are you?"

"I am Lord Slytherin."

"You trust Lord Greengrass with your identity."
"Jacob is family."

Smith smirked. "I'm not signing Sally over to you just to see your face."

"I wouldn't ask you to. I have quite enough on my plate to be getting on with."

"Smith snorted. "Rather you than me. I love Margaret, but I wouldn't be able to handle two of her — not a chance."

Slytherin said nothing.

Smith turned serious. "Okay, you don't want others to see your face, I get that. But there is one thing I insist on knowing before joining."

"Go on."

"What is all this for?"

"All this?"

"The secrecy. The Wizengamot blockade. What's it all in aid of? Several years ago the Gray didn't even exist, it was just a bunch of families who didn't want to get too involved doing what little they could do to stop the more extreme policies of the Dark and Light becoming law. Now it's this rising third power. But rising for what?"

Slytherin swirled his goblet idly before taking a sip.

Smith watched the way the mask's lips moulded themselves around the goblet, forming a small mouth as it went. It was an impressive piece of magic.

Eventually, Slytherin spoke. "I don't agree with the way the Light does things. I don't agree with the way the Dark does things either. They are both on the path to bring our world to ruin. And both are led by overly powerful wizards capable of speeding up that ruin if they are not neutered first."

"Dumbledore? I wouldn't have believed it a month ago, but now…. He seems to be trying to keep as low a profile as possible after the debacle at your boy's trial — couldn't even arrange a meeting of my own with him, and I know plenty of the other heads of houses have tried and failed too — never a good sign, that."

Slytherin nodded. "Dumbledore is one of them."

"And the other is?"

"A wizard believed by many to be dead, but who, unfortunately, has a bad habit of not quite making it all the way across the river Styx."

Smith frowned. "Who?"

"The Dark Lord."

Smith's heart clenched in his chest. His breathing felt shallower. "He's alive?"

"Unfortunately."

Smith's hand gripped the goblet hard enough to leave marks in his palm. So that's why Slytherin didn't want his identity known. The room suddenly felt a lot colder than before. Suddenly
everything made a lot more sense. The man was preparing for a war against someone who would quickly have him killed if his identity was known. "How is the he not dead?"

"Dark magic."

Figures. "Why not go public with this? The Light would surely fight against the Dark."

"You forget I'm not only fighting against the Dark. There are forces within the Light who would also be happy to see my personal destruction if they could wrangle it."

Okay, now that was interesting.

The two sat in silence for a moment.

Smith took a gulp of wine. "Fine." He put down the goblet with a thump. "Got any other explosion curses to land on me?"

Slytherin reached into his pocket. "Take a look at this." The young lord chucked him something round and metallic.

Smith snatched it out of the air on instinct. His eyes widened as his mind caught up with what his eyes were seeing. It was a small sphere of aluminium, perfectly round and engraved with hundreds of what looked like tiny geometrically perfect runes. He looked up at Slytherin with incredulity. "There's no way these are accurate to the necessary precision."

"I assure you, they are."

Lord Smith felt a slight sweat form on the back of his neck. The implications of something like this… "How? Who?"

"A family secret. Friends of mine." The metal ball flew back into Slytherin's gloved hand with a small smack sound.


"Okay, now you've got my attention." He gave Slytherin a small wry smile. "Still sure you wouldn't consider taking another consort?"

Slytherin chuckled. "No, Lord Smith. I'm quite happy, thank you very much. But I'm sure our houses can work together in the future."

—— DP & SW: TFoP ——

Inside the mirror room at the end of the third floor corridor, Harry pointed his wand at yet another broken mirror. "Diffindo." The mirror started to separate until the top half of it's tall bronze frame was completely separated from its bottom half. He took another angle and once more started another cut. The metal cleaved itself under his wand and soon the broken mirror was in four — much smaller pieces than before, but still not small enough. He looked around.

Across the room, Daphne levitated the remains of her forth or fifth mirror into his trunk before collapsing on the ground, panting heavily.

Hermione, it seemed, had given the magic a break for the moment. She carried her latest piece of bronze mirror frame to the trunk, chucking it in with a loud crashing noise. She turned around and wiped her brow before suddenly frowning, as though struck by a confusing thought. "Harry?"
"Yeah?"

"Why do we even have to do this? Why can't we just bring the Mirror of Erised to your brother, rather than bringing your brother here?"

Harry smiled and ambled over towards the girls, happy for the chance to let his magic rest a bit. His own pile of scrap bronze already dwarfed Hermione and Daphne's. "An excellent question. You tell me."

Hermione bit her lip and descended into deep thought.

Daphne looked between him and Hermione before getting up off the floor and brushing herself down. She paused. "Is it something to do with the fidelius?"

Harry nodded. "Well done."

Hermione looked at Daphne, mildly annoyed.

Daphne continued. "It's the secret, right? I remember when I came through here when we first took down the original fidelius and put up the new one. The secret said that the Mirror of Erised was hidden in this room."

Hermione's face lit up in understanding. "Oh! I see! So, if we took the mirror out of the room, the fidelius would fail?"

"Yes," Harry said, "and only I could do that anyway — as it would constitute as, 'telling the secret,' to the whole world — although breaking the mirror would have the same effect."

Hermione nodded before looking around and then into the trunk. "So, what are we going to do with all this bronze?"

Daphne smiled wryly. "How about a life-sized statue of Lord Slytherin on the front lawn of Slytherin Manor?"

Harry made a disgusted face. "I'd go through the veil before letting that happen."

Hermione giggled. "So, that's a 'yes' then?"

"It's just an expression."

"What about one of Harry Potter?"

"No."

"Perhaps in an overly heroic position, like holding a sword straight up in the air?"

"No."

"While Daphne lays at your feet, clutching one of your legs?"

"N—"

"—Or" Daphne cut in, eyes narrowed. "The girl could be you, kneeling before your lord swearing life long fealty."

"Um," said Harry.
"I wouldn't mind that," Hermione said, slightly smug.

"What about before your Lord and Lady?"

"Oh, that is—!"

Harry let out a brief flare of magic, cutting both of the slightly startled girls off in mid flow. He smirked. "How about a statue of you two and the others in mid-fight against that troll at Halloween?"

Hermione and Daphne looked at each other before turning back and nodding. "Okay." / "I'm good with that." Then they both giggled.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione stood next to the pensieve in her trunk, watching as the members of The Founders Club emerged from the courtroom memory one after the other.

Justin Finch-Fletchley looked at her with a worried expression. "And he's our magical guardian?"

Hermione nodded.

Sophie Roper dusted herself down after almost falling over. "It was almost like he wanted Harry to go to prison."

"No almost about it," Justin said.

Kevin Entwhistle stood in the middle of the room, the only one seemingly unaffected by the spinning pensieve trip. "You'd have to be blind not to see Harry was all right. What's his game?"

The three looked questioningly towards Hermione, just as Dean finally emerged from the memory bowl. "Okay, what the hell was all that about?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "Dumbledore has built up a picture in the wizarding world as being this great good wizard who fights for justice and equality." She looked into each of her fellow muggleborn's eyes, each pair fixed unmovingly on her, before continuing. "The reality, however, is quite different…"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

And before long, the exams were on them. Harry took great pleasure in watching the memories of Hermione and Daphne utterly obliterate every practical exam they took. He'd spent several years working with them by now and it was amazing to see just what several years of prep work with Tom Riddle developed occlumency could accomplish. He found it deliciously ironic that he, Harry, had built his power base in part with the techniques that Voldemort had been the most unwilling to share with anyone else.

Professor McGonagall had them all turn a mouse into a snuffbox. Harry decorated his snuffbox with gold filigree and tiny opals, depicting a scene of a Nemean lion and a runespore teaming up to battle a chimaera — a chimaera with the head of a goat and the body of a wolf. She'd given him a level gaze, a congratulations on an excellent transfiguration, and a mild warning to respect all his professors.

Professor Flitwick had almost fainted with excitement when Harry had made his pineapple not only tap-dance, but then also perform as far as Odette's first revelation in Swan Lake before needing to
stop for the next examinee. "Most well done, Mister Potter. Not even your brother managed something quite as wonderful."

Potions had been a surprise. Instead of the Headmaster, they'd walked into the potions lab on the day of the exams to find an un-petrified and extremely short tempered Professor Snape. He swooped around the classroom glaring at Harry's yearmates and occasionally shooting him a calculating look. No doubt someone had shown him memories from the tournament or similar.

History had been boring and easy. So had astronomy.

For defence against the dark arts, Harry had hid under the Potter invisibility cloak and followed Hermione and Daphne into the classroom when they had their practicals. He wouldn't put it behind Tom to try to pull something this close to the end of the year, but he needn't have worried. Quirrellmort seemed to be on his best behaviour for some reason. The man did look extremely sick though. Far worse than this time in the last timeline. Even his skin seemed to be sluffing off.

Then came Harry's own turn at defence.

"Why don't you try and impress me, Potter?"

"What would you like me to do, Professor?"

"Why don't we start out with spell swatting?" Quirrell fired a rapid chain of spells at him, which he swatted out of the way — every single one.

"Good." Quirrell made a motion for him to go.

Harry eyed him warily. "That's all, Professor?"

"Yes, Potter. You are an advanced spell swatter. There are likely no more than two dozen people in the country that are at your level and a good number of them are aurors who've been working on it for years with access to restricted books from the department of mysteries. Only the top professional duellists can pull it off perfectly, and that's not for lack of wide-eyed hopefuls who'd like to be able to. Giving you anything less than an O with full marks would be an insult. Now go. I'm sure you've got more productive things you could be doing."

Harry nodded, thanked the rapidly deteriorating dark lord, and left.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"I have learned that Dumbledore is scheduled to address the ICW conference on international magical crime in two days."

Across the table from Harry, Hermione and Daphne exchanged glances.

Hermione raised a hand. "I thought we didn't want to use that strategy because Dumbledore would link it to Lord Slytherin?"

Harry nodded. "We haven't, but less than twelve hours after he leaves, the board will meet to discuss his contract renewal. Once that meeting is concluded, and we're all back on the train less than forty-eight hours after that, the headmaster will no longer be headmaster."

Daphne pursed her lips. "So, in other words, we don't care."

"Exactly."
Harry sneaked through the corridors of Hogwarts as quiet as a ghost — or at least, as quiet as the ghosts who weren't talking, shouting at each other, or rattling chains up the astronomy tower.

He made his way to the gargoyle guarding the headmaster's office and carefully let himself in, checking all the while for hidden runes and concealed trip-lines. He found none — at least until he got to the very top of the stairs and opened the door. His magical sensing drew his attention to a minute amount of magic swirling through the doormat, sat innocently on the floor in front of him, emblazoned with the words, 'Home Sweetie Home'.

He knelt down and felt for intent. There was none. He frowned. That was odd. There was certainly magic there, but no spell. He lay down on the floor, withdrew a folded piece of parchment from his pocket, folded it twice more, and carefully slid his make-shift spatula under the mat.

Nothing.

He started to lift it.

Suddenly, a spell started to form.

He quickly dropped the mat.

The spell died.

Interesting. He glanced around the office. What would happen if he turned it? He tried. The mat refused to turn. Mmmm. He stepped over the mat, constantly checking for other possible traps, and crouched down facing the mat again. He then slowly started to transfigure the floor around the mat to a transparent glass and what he saw increased his grudging respect for the old man another notch.

The mat was attached to two thin, flat, and rectangular metal plates, each one covered in runes, and slid into two slots in the floor. The very floor below the mat was likewise covered in runes, and as the plates lowered or rose as someone either stood on it, or tried to pull it away, the runes would align in different patterns forming different spells and using the minute amounts of magic pulled from the wizard who stood atop it. Ingenious.

Harry let out a silent sigh. As much as he'd like to spend hours examining the mat, he did need to sweep the rest of the room, and Dumbledore was asleep not fifteen metres away. It certainly wouldn't do to be caught in here.

The morning of the truth dawned. Harry woke up, climbed out of bed, put on his muggle exercise clothes, disillusioned himself, and went for a jog around the lake, making sure to stand out of the way as he passed his brother going the other way. He arrived back at his dorm room to catch his year mates in various states of readiness for the day.

Nott looked up as he walked back in. "Merlin, Potter, you do know we're finished for the year, right? You should be relaxing!"

Harry smiled. The reactions of the Dark children since he'd returned had been one of cautious friendliness with attempted hidden undertones of awe. "You can relax if you like, I've got stuff to do."
Draco also looked around from where he sat in front of his mirror, wandng down his hair. "Let him be, Theo. Potter can do whatever he wants."

"Indeed," Harry said.

On his bed on the other side of the room, Goyle was reading a comic book titled, 'The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle.'

Crabbe still hadn't woken up.

Just then, Blaise Zabini walked in from the dorm bathroom, naked from the waist up and wrapped in towel. "Oh, hey, Harry. Tag you're in."

"Thanks." Harry walked into the bathroom.

"Hey!" Goyle called from behind him. "I was next!"

Twenty minutes later, Harry and Blaise had dressed and made their way down to breakfast. Harry sat himself down in the medley of Gray students at the near-end of the Slytherin table and helped himself to a slice of toast. Everyone happily made space for him. "Morning all. Where's Tracey?"

A few people said morning in reply and Hermione shrugged. "Don't know. We think she went off to do something."

"Well, could you let her know that I've got something to discuss with her if you do see her will you?"

Hermione nodded.

On the other side of the table, Daphne was deep in conversation with Flint about quidditch. Slytherin had squashed Ravenclaw in the final match, but Gryffindor had still been ahead on points and so had taken the cup, much to Harry's annoyance. Flint also wasn't happy.

Romulus Volf, on the other hand, sitting all the way at the other end of the table with the Dark students, was happy. After Harry had been led away in handcuffs by Regent Bones, the Slytherin duelling team had gone on to dominate their Gryffindor opponents, with many of their seeds taking their upper year opponents and the Slytherin sixth year successfully defeating the Gryffindor seventh year.

The entire castle had that end of year feel. Everyone was relaxing and enjoying themselves — even the fifth and seventh years, who'd finished their OWLS and NEWTS just days earlier.

All around the table, plans for summer were being drawn up. Trips to people's houses were being negotiated and even the occasional group holiday came up in the flow.

"You should really drop by some time," Blaise said to him. "I'm sure my mother would love to meet you."

"I'm sure she would." Harry said, making sure to leave even the tiniest hint of drollness out of his voice. Mrs Zabini had what could only be described as a 'reputation' — five dead husbands, all of them rich. Lord Slytherin would no doubt be considered the ultimate prize for the black widow. "I'll see what I can do — no promises though — there's a good chance I might be tied up this summer with other projects."

Blaise nodded and returned to his breakfast.
Harry didn't say what those projects were, but he certainly knew what he hoped they would be.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Deep in a trunk, hidden in the fidelius charmed spot in the Hogwarts Library, three children gathered around a small vial of muddy looking liquid.

"You ready?" Hermione asked.

Harry nodded.

"Good luck." Daphne added.

Harry took a small white hair out of another glass jar and let it settle into the vial of polyjuice. The potion bubbled. He drank.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

John sat by the side of the lake, lounging in the middle of his fellow Gryffindors, enjoying the warm summer sun and cooling lake breeze. Since his brother's supposed murder attempt, Lily Moon, Fay Dunbar, Lavender Brown and Sally-Anne Perks seemed to have formed a pact of some description to keep a protective eye on him, which was kind of cute if not really needed. Ron, Neville, and Seamus on the other hand, were in awe of him. Only Dean seemed to not be fully onboard team Gryffindor. He frowned.

Just then, a paper bird fluttered over and alighted on the ground in front of him. He stared at it.

Then, suddenly, the bird chirped once and a voice that he instantly recognised as the headmaster's started to speak from it. "John, could you please meet me in my office? It's urgent. I am rather fond of cockroach clusters."

The others all looked up. "The headmaster wants to see you?" asked Fay with wide eyes. "Are you in trouble?"

"Oh, no it's fine." He waved the concern away while getting up. "We often talk about stuff. Comes with the territory."

"I'll come with you." Lily Moon started to stand up too.

"No, it's okay."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah." And with that, he left the rather anxious group of girls behind him and walked back up to the school.

"Cockroach Clusters," he said to the gargoyle at the bottom of the rotating staircase. The stone statue leaped aside and he made his way up the stairs. The door opened.

"Good Morning, John. Please mind the floor."

John looked down. The floor had been covered by rough floorboards floating a few inches above it.

"I had a bit of an accident with a little project of mine and the floor now turns anyone who stands on it into a rabbit." He smiled twinkle eyed at him.
John laughed. "You wanted to see me?"

Dumbledore turned serious. "Yes. I have a meeting with the ICW that I have no choice but to attend, but I have discovered something grave in the meantime. You remember the third floor corridor that I told students to leave alone at the start of the year?"

John's heart lurched. This was about the stone. He'd completely forgotten about that! How had he completely forgotten about that? "Yes?" he said.

"I've been using it as a kind of safe to house an extremely valuable magical artefact. Last night, I learned of a threat to the artefact and decided the best course of action would be to remove it from the safe. Unfortunately, when I went down to claim it, I found that my final defence was just a bit too clever for my own good. It is a test that only the pure of intent can bypass and, it seems that I, much to my shame, am not pure enough." Dumbledore suddenly looked extremely tired. "I would never ask you to do this under normal circumstances, but time, unfortunately does not allow me any alternative. I must leave now, but I need you, John, to succeed where I have failed."

John's mind raced. Dumbledore needed him to retrieve the stone. Had quirrell attempted to go after it again and failed? Had Flamel decided to take it back? One thing was clear to him, he could not fail.

"You are looking for a red stone, about the size of your fist." He handed over a piece of paper. "Please read this."

John read the paper. It read, 'The Mirror of Erised is located at the end of the third floor corridor.' Suddenly, memories flooded back into his mind.

"Now you should be able to navigate your way to the room the stone is hidden in. Please make haste. I fear that if the artefact should fall into the wrong hands, the consequences will be dire."

Quirrell. No, Voldemort! John handed the paper back to the headmaster. "Yes, Sir. I won't let you down." He turned and dashed down the way he came.

"Please by careful, John!" called the Headmaster from behind him. "The defences are not to be taken lightly!"

John thought furiously. This was his time to prove himself. Yes. He'd find the stone and prove to the world he was the true chosen of Fate, not Harry.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry tugged Dumbledore's beard and watched John go. All around the room, the portraits snoozed, all charmed asleep. He reached into his pocket, took out the Dan and Emma Granger rune enabled magical earpiece, and slipped it into his ear. "He bought it."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione watched on the marauder's map as John Potter hurried away from the headmaster's office and away from the little dot marked 'Harry Potter'. Dumbledore's voice spoke into her ear. "He bought it."

"Excellent, now we don't have to kidnap him."

On the other side of the small table, Daphne raised her eyebrow. "Harry said that if we tried to force him the mirror might not have given him the stone."
Hermione covered the ear mic with her hand and mouthed, 'I know,' to her friend.

But Daphne wasn't watching her. She was watching the map with narrowed eyes. "It would appear that our cat's paw is not going to the third floor."

Hermione snapped her head down and spoke into the ear piece. "Cat's Paw has veered away from the corridor that leads to the third floor and is heading towards…"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John descended the stone steps that led to the dungeons, paused outside of a stack of barrels, and waited. He didn't have long to wait. A message given to an older Hufflepuff later and Susan emerged from the Hufflepuff common room. "John? What's going on?"

He motioned her to follow him. "Dumbledore gave me something important to do and I need your help."

"Really?" Susan started to walk behind him. "Do I need anything?"

John shook his head. Last time, it had been Hermione who had solved Snape's riddle and he wasn't taking any chances. "Just your mind."

They marched up past the third floor and headed towards Ravenclaw tower. Eventually, the tower door opened in response to another student carried message and Padma, Turpin, and Roper exited. "Hi Padma, we need your help for something."

Padma looked curious. "What?"

"It's err…" he glanced towards Turpin. "It's Light related."

"Ah. Do I need anything?"

He smiled "Just your amazing singing voice."

Padma blushed.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry, still polyjuiced as Dumbledore, stood at the pathway just outside the third-floor corridor under a disillusionment charm. "Where is he now?"

Hermione's voice spoke into his ear. "Now he's heading towards Gryffindor tower."

Harry made a cluck sound with his tongue and continued to wait.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Ron! The Light needs your chess skills!"

Ron Weasley looked up and grinned. "Sure thing, John. Be with you in a moment."

"Now!"

"Oh okay, okay"

Five minutes later, they stood outside the door to the third-floor corridor.
"Okay, John," Susan said, hands on her hips, "are you going to explain what Dumbledore asked you to do now?"

"We need to get something that he's been protecting because he can't do it himself."

"What?"

John opened his mouth to say, but choked instead. "C-can't say." He grimaced. "Protected. By magic."

Susan, Padma, and Ron all made oh faces.

Padma pointed to the walls and ceiling. "Whatever it is, it's protected quite well — look at those."

John and the others looked up.

Rune stones lined the walls and ceiling.

John nodded. "Yeah, okay, but that's not the only defence. The first defence that we need to get past is a large animal that can be put to sleep with music, so you, Padma, will need to sing it to sleep."

Padma bit her lip. "Sing what?"

"I don't know — anything should work. You ready?"

They all nodded.

"Okay, let's do this." He reached for the door.

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Professor McGonagall walked down the Hogwarts main staircase with a stack of parchments under her arm. She reached the third floor and idly glanced along the corridor. Something about that corridor felt wrong, but whenever she tried to think about it, the thoughts just wouldn't stick. Something inside her brain slid away. She gave her head a little shake. Err…What had she just been thinking? Wait! She suddenly caught sight of a group of first years led by a very familiar figure milling around outside the third-floor corridor with their backs to her. Up to no good by the looks of it. She turned and took a step towards them.

"Confundus."

Something unseen hit the transfiguration professor. She blinked. Err…what was she doing? Oh yes, she needed to get these exams to the ministry for filling in the records — and after that maybe she'd go down to the three broomsticks for a dram. She turned back and started walking down the stairs again, paying no attention to the four first years who'd just slipped through the third-floor corridor door.

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Harry lowered his wand as he watched McGonagall leave and nodded to himself. Close one, that.

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Hermione whispered into her ear peace. "Cat's Paw and friends have passed through the gender ward and are now in the first room." She and Daphne had abandoned their trunk and now sat under
the invisibility cloak in the muggle-studies defence room. Now they just needed to wait for their unwitting helpers to pass through.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John looked in puzzlement around the room. There was nothing here.

"John?" Padma asked, sounding nervous, "Where's the huge beast?"

John frowned. "It's not here. That's odd. It's supposed to be here." He shrugged. "Oh, well. On to the next room." He walked over to the door on the far side and opened it. They stepped into a room filled with plants. It was like a miniature rainforest inside the school.

"Should have brought Neville," Ron commented as they made their way through the brush, he would have loved—AGHHHH!

Something had grabbed onto Ron's leg and hauled him into the air. The girl's squealed and John watched as a tentacle started to wrap itself around Ron's waist.

"Hold on, Ron!" John brandished his wand and shouted, "elementa ignis! (elemental fire)" A column of fire burst from his wand and engulfed the aggressive devil's snare. The magical plant let out a pained cry and dropped Ron, withdrawing its many tentacles that had been sneaking around him and the girls, and retreated into a corner of the room.

Slightly shaken, Ron and the two girls followed him to the door. "What's in the next room, John?"

Susan asked.

"Well, this room was the devil's snare, so the next room should be the flying keys."

He opened the door. It wasn't flying keys. Instead, a flat open room greeted them, and at the end of the room, stood a lone stone warrior, holding a massive halberd.

Padma bit her lip. "This doesn't look like flying keys."

John frowned. "No, it doesn't." What was going on here? Had all this changed too?

"What do you suppose the statue does?" Padma asked. "Will it attack us if we get too close?"

John shrugged. "Only one way to find out." He stepped forward.

Suddenly, the statue leapt into life and rushed him, halberd raised, it's intent clear.

John only just managed to get a shield up before the heavy weapon smashed into it.

Padma and Ron screamed.

Susan pointed her wand at the statue and shouted, "Ictus!" (Stinging Hex), which had about as much effect as a tickling charm.

The statue turned towards her and raised its weapon.

"Bombarda!" John's blasting curse smashed into the statue and flung a pile of rubble away from them and across the room.

Silence.
Eventually, Ron said, "Merlin that freaked me out."

Padma nodded voice shaking. "It's a good thing John is so powerful. That thing would have killed us otherwise."

John smiled. "Don't worry, guys. Dumbledore would never have sent me against something I couldn't handle. You're safe with me."

Susan smiled back at him.

"We ready to continue?" he asked.

They all nodded.

The next room seemed to be nothing but a stone passageway. John frowned. "This was supposed to be a massive chess set."

Ron grinned. "For me?"

"Yeah."

"Why do you suppose it isn't what you thought it was supposed to be?" Susan asked. "Did Dumbledore tell you what the defences were?"

"No…" he said slowly, "Not exactly."

"Then how—"

There was a click noise, and the door at the far end of the corridor swung open.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione whispered into her earpiece. "Cat's Paw and friends have passed through our tunnel in the transfiguration room. They're now in the astronomy room."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"It's dark in here," Ron's voice said.

Stars shone over head.

"Try and find a light?" John asked.

Susan's voice spoke in an exasperated tone. "Try and find a— John! You are a wizard!"

Padma giggled.

"Oh, right. Lumos!" A bright light—far brighter than any other first year, saving Harry who didn't count, could produce—filled the room.

"Ooooo," said the girls.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Tch. Show off."

John smirked. "Let's try and find what we're supposed to do here. This room was supposed to be a troll."
Padma made a little squeak. "T-troll?"

John turned to her. "Yeah, you shouldn't have any problem with that? You did take one down after all."

"Yeah!" she half shrieked, "And I still have nightmares about that!"

Susan stepped beside Padma and put a calming hand on her shoulder. "Well there's obviously no troll here so let's find out what there is, okay?"

A few minute later they found the star controller, along with written instructions.

Susan read the parchment aloud. "Using the books provided, move the stars to the position they should be in on June 30, 1881." Next to the parchment on the table, stood a row of books.

"Oooo!" Padma said, clapping her hands together, "I can do this one! I'm really good at astronomy."

John nodded, "I'm glad one of us is then."

Ten minutes later, they were through.

The next room held little more than what looked like a muggle television and a plastic box of some kind below it.

John read the instructions. "To pass through to the next room, set the muggle VCR to record a television show between the time of 7:00pm and 7:45pm on Sunday on Channel One. Please use the instruction manual provided." He looked up at his friends. "Ron, your dad is big into muggle stuff, right? So this should be a piece of cake for you."

"Umm..." Ron picked up the controller looking extremely uncertain. "I don't know about that, but I'll give it a go."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"This is painful," groaned Hermione to Daphne under her breath, watching from the far side of the room under the invisibility cloak.

The three Light purebloods and single Light halfblood had now spent the better part of thirty minutes trying and failing to set the VCR.

"I thought that book your parents sent you told you how to do it?" whispered Daphne.

"It does! ...sort of."

Harry's voice—still disguised as Dumbledore's—growled into Hermione's ear. "We don't have time for this. I'm going to intervene. Get ready to give me instructions."

By the open door to the astronomy defence, a patch of background crept across the room towards the arguing Light students, moving about as quickly as a sloth on dreamless sleep.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Look! Just give it to mee!" Padma made to snatch the controller out of Ron's hand.

Ron held it out of the shorter girl's reach. "I can do it! I just—" He stumbled as though hit by
"Just what?"

"Wait! I've got it!" Ron hit a button on the controller and then looked around as though confused.

"Well?" John asked.

Susan stood off to the side tapping her foot.

Ron looked down at the controller and then tapped another button. Something on the muggle television changed. Then he tapped another button, and then another, before too long, there was a click sound and the door to the next room swung open.

John thumped him on the back. "Well done, mate! Knew you had it in you."

Ron smiled uncertainly. Yeah, he'd done it, hadn't he.

John stood in the empty next room and shrugged. So much for Snape's potion riddle. The open door beckoned him. "I'm going to head on ahead now."

Susan, Padma, and Ron looked at him in confusion. "Go where?"

"Ahead."

Ron tilted his head. "You're not making any sense, mate."

John rolled his eyes. Of course, they hadn't been given the secret had they? He opened his mouth to explain, but choked again. "Ah, sorry, Susan, Padma, Ron, it seems like the magic will let only me finish the rest of the task Dumbledore gave me."

They looked at him with worried eyes.

"Just, stay here until I get back, okay?"

"Back from where?!" shouted Susan as he walked away.

And then he was gone.

Hermione heard Harry's disguised voice speak into her ear. "Girls, head back to the trunk, you've done all you can here. Ring only communication from here on."

Hermione nodded though she knew Harry couldn't see her. "Understood." She turned to where she could feel Daphne standing beside her. "We've been ordered back to the trunk."

"Then let's move," Daphne's voice said.

And John Potter stood in front of the Mirror of Erised.

In the reflection, a slightly older John stood on top of a slain dragon's head at the end of the first tri-wizard tournament task. In his hand he held a sword, which he pointed up to the sky in a pose of
triumphant heroism. All around him, witches and wizards from all over the world applauded his latest heroic deed.

Ginny hung off one of his arms, looking up at him with adoration while Hermione hung off the other. Susan, Padma, Hannah, Fey, Lavender, and many others all crowded around him, all congratulating him for saving the day yet again. Even the other two Hogwarts champions—Alexandra Black and Cedric Diggory—looked mildly impressed, standing off to the side, holding swords of their own, and clapping, if only grudgingly in Alex's case.

Then, the sword wielding John looked at him, withdrew a red stone from his pocket, winked, and put it back in — and John felt the stone's weight drop into his real pocket. He reached into his pocket, withdrew the philosopher's stone, and smiled.

— DP & SW: TFOP —

Hidden by the door, Harry pointed his wand at John from near the entrance to the mirror room and cast a summoning spell at the stone now held in his brother's hand. Nothing. It didn't budge. The stone was non-summonable — probably non levitateable too — and he certainly didn't intend to find out how breakable it was. Rats. He frowned. Oh, well. Plan B it was, then.

— DP & SW: TFOP —

John heard clapping from behind him. He whirled around, heart hammering and let out the breath of relief when he saw it was Dumbledore. "Merlin, Headmaster, you nearly gave me a heart attack."

Dumbledore smiled. "I do apologise, John, but it does my old heart good to see youth triumph where the aged have failed."

John looked at the stone in his hands. "Yeah." He frowned. "I thought you had a ICW meeting?"

Dumbledore frowned. "So did I — and I rushed off in a bit of a hurry, didn't I? But when I arrived it suddenly occurred to me that the place I should really be was the place I had just left."

John turned back to the mirror.

Mirror John enthusiastically waved his sword.

"Headmaster, what are we gong to do about my brother?"

There was a pause from behind him before Dumbledore replied, "We continue as we have been."

John frowned and tore his gaze away from the mirror.

Dumbledore had moved to stand almost right in front of him, holding out his hand for the stone.

"We cannot continue on like this!" John shouted.

Dumbledore dropped his hand. He sighed. "I understand, John. You are frustrated, but our position demands patience." He offered his hand out again. "Together we will ensure your brother is no longer a threat."

John hesitated, stone still clutched in his hand. Something about this didn't feel right. Something about this felt very, very wrong. "H-headmaster?"

"Yes?"
"Do you remember that explosion last summer at the Burrow?"

Dumbledore tugged his beard in thought. "I do."

"I think that… I think that Harry might have caused it."

"…What makes you think that?"

John's heart skipped a beat.

What happened next seemed to slow down time itself. John's eyes finished widening. He stumbled backwards and hastily brought his wand hand up, casting a shield at the exact moment that the imposter Dumbledore narrowed his eyes, rose his empty hand and shot a wandless bright red stunner at him.

John's shield held and the stunner bounced off. He stumbled back another step and hit the mirror, which rocked threateningly.

Imposter Dumbledore cast a shield of his own with his other empty hand and stepped forward.

John strengthened his shield and got his balance, just in time to absorb another two stunners. He dodged around the mirror, clutching the side of the heavy bronze to counterbalance his weight, stone still clutched in a white knuckled grip, and successfully put the massive artefact between him and the unknown imposter.

"Accio John Potter!"

And a huge magical pull tugged him straight towards the mirror, toppling it over, shattering it on the ground with an earsplitting crash, and skidding him across a painful plane of broken glass and bronze.

Imposter Dumbledore swept down on him and gabbled the stone with one hand.

John desperately shoved his wand at Imposter Dumbledore and shouted, 'Stupefy!' only to watch in horror as the spell was intercepted as though by divine intervention by the imposter's free hand—all five fingers glowing red—bouncing off and harmlessly flying away.

The imposter pressed his free hand firmly to John's chest.

There was a flash of red.

And John's world went dark.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"This kind of aggressive action cannot be tolerated!" The Prussian delegate to the International Confederation of Wizards banged his fist on the table. "Prussia will not stand by and allow ourselves to be bullied by these kinds of…"

Albus Dumbledore relaxed in his high back chair and let the words of the conference on international magical crime wash over him. At least here, no one was sniping or sniggering or asking awkward questions — Especially about the damn mirror room on the third… floor… corridor…

His eyes widened. He could remember! The fidelius was down! He stood up and made towards the exit, muttering an excuse as he went. International crime could wait — inner school crime was a
much more pressing issue.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Back in the chest in the library, Hermione gazed down at the Marauder's Map.

Daphne watched from the other side of the table. "I do wish he'd hurry up."

Hermione couldn't help agreeing. Having Harry off-map was driving her mental.

Suddenly a point of interest started moving. She jabbed her finger at it "Look!" Quirrell was exiting his office at a dead run.

"Forget that, look at this!" Daphne jabbed her own finger down at the third floor corridor. Harry and John's dot had reappeared on the map. The mirror room was visible again. She glanced back towards where Quirrell's dot was running.

The dot stopped by a nameless stretch of wall, and vanished.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Headmaster?"

Harry turned and saw Susan Bone's head poking uncertainly around the door.

"What's going on? Where's John?" She suddenly caught view of John, lying unconscious on the floor badly cut by the glass spread all around. She gasped.

Harry spoke quickly. The polyjuice didn't have much longer to run. "Miss Bones, Mister Potter needs to be taken the hospital wing, immediately."

She nodded and moments later was joined by Padma Patil of Ravenclaw and Ronald Weasley of Gryffindor.

"What happened?" Susan asked.

Suddenly, Harry felt his lightning bolt ring start to vibrate.

'LV.'

"John was helping me to extract an important artefact, which I was keeping here for safety,"

'INC.'

Harry's mind raced. Voldemort was coming. Getting his classmates out of the way was now even more important. "Unfortunately, John failed to listen to one of my more explicit instructions and was injured."

"What!" Susan shouted.

Padma leaned over John and started cleaning him up.

"He needs medical attention, Miss Bones. Use your levitation charm to take him to the medical wing, now."

Susan hesitated. "Wouldn't you be able to do it better?"
"I have another matter to attend to — one which is extremely urgent. For Mister Potter's sake, go now!"

Susan flinched back, but between them, the three first years did manage to get John moving out of the room. Harry followed with them until they left the muggle studies defence room. He then turned to the secret parseltongue passageway, hissed, "$open$", and scrambled inside.

He'd only got a few metres when the blood red stone, still clutched firmly in his free hand, started talking to him.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione watched Harry disappear off the map. "He's out of there."

"Yes," said Daphne, a mild note of panic in her voice, "but we don't know where the Dark Lord is."

Then, another dot appeared in the Headmaster's office. Dumbledore had just re-entered the castle.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry stilled.

"Hello there," said a congenial voice, speaking from the stone as though through a brick wall. "This is Nicholas Flamel. You have just removed my stone from the vicinity of my mirror. How clever of you."

Harry's heart lurched. He stopped and stared at the stone as though suddenly holding a bomb.

"This is just a recording, of course, but I thought it might be a good idea for you to know a few things. If this is you, Albus, then I am extremely disappointed in you. You asked for my stone for a project of yours on the condition that you would not need to touch it, inspect it, or in any way interact with it. That you have gone to the effort to try to bypass my mirror and have succeeded in doing so, shows that I have misplaced my trust in you."

Harry bit his lip.

"If this is you, Tom Riddle, then I give you nothing but my highest scorn and disdain. I have lived over six hundred years and you are nothing but a worm to be squashed. That I have not done so is merely because I see it as the job of younger men than me to fight for the Wizarding World."

Harry gazed at the stone, nonplussed, but the stone wasn't done yet.

"There is, of course, a third person that might have removed the stone, but I currently consider that to be a remote possibility. Nevertheless, if this is you, Lord Slytherin, then congratulations — I shall keep my eye on you far closer in future."

Harry cursed.

"Whichever of you succeeded though, matters not. Albus may believe in priming a trap with live bait, but I do not, and I did not live six hundred years by being stupid. The stone is fake. Sorry about that."

Harry let the stone fall to his side and stared at the pipe wall.

"Toodles!"
The voice cut off.

Harry groaned. Damn. Damn, damn, damn. He took a deep breath, counter plans quickly forming and reforming in his head. He still had enough money to last him until next Winter Festival. And he had all of summer to track down a new source of income.

As Harry planned, he started to feel the polyjuice run out. His beard receded, his body shortened, his hair turned back to black.

He also still had one half of his drugs business and that would hopefully keep him solvent for another few months, but he would have to hold off on buying that second house elf, which would suck, but it would free up twelve thousand galleons (£600,000), and he could hire out house elves for the Slytherin Manor finishing party next Winter Festival and persuade Jacob to lend him a few more for the kitchens…. He let out another breath. Yes, it wouldn't be easy, but he could probably keep Slytherin House afloat. He just needed to hustle like he'd never hustled before.

He took a step up the pipe, turned the corner, and stopped dead.

"Hello, Mister Potter," said Quirrell, eyes glowing red, skin flaking off his body, wand held casually off to his side.

Harry mentally shrugged, shielded, and turned to escape.

"Or should I say, Lord Slytherin?"

— DP & SW: TFiP —

Dumbledore marched swiftly down a hallway towards the third floor corridor, wand out and ready. He turned a corner and almost walked straight into a panting Susan Bones and Padma Patil, both of whom were levitating a prone John Potter, physically assisted by the youngest male Weasley.

"Headmaster?!" Miss Bones looked over her shoulder before looking back at him. "But, we just left you!"

"You left me, Miss Bones?" Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. "You mean you just met another me?"

"Yes."

"Where!"

"Down in the third floor corridor."

"Was I holding a red stone?" He asked urgently.

Susan hesitated, wand still pointing at a floating John. "Y-yes, I think so."

Dumbledore cursed and hurried past them. If he was lucky, he'd be able to cut whoever it was off, Tom or Slytherin, or someone else, or both.

— DP & SW: TFiP —

Back in the trunk, Hermione paced frantically, occasionally shooting worried glances at the map, which showed Dumbledore advancing towards the third floor corridor, but still no sign of Harry or Voldemort. "Should we ask him what's going on?"

Daphne shook her head. "No. We shouldn't distract him. If he needs our help, he'll ask."
"What about your Eye of Kilrogg?" Hermione asked. "If we got close enough to the pipework near the third floor corridor—"

"—No." Daphne cut her off. "We shouldn't put ourselves at any more risk than we need to. It won't help Harry. Remember the unicorn. Remember what Harry said."

Hermione slowed down and took a deep breath. "Yes, you're right. The overall mission. Weigh risks and rewards. Don't take unnecessary risks. I remember."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Or should I say, Lord Slytherin?" Voldemort sneered. 

Harry froze. He hadn't just heard that had he? He flexed his wand hand, ready to swat away any hostile magic the moment he felt the build-up behind him. "Professor?"

"Don't play me for a fool, Potter — you will regret it. You know well who I truly am."

Harry turned around slowly, wand now pointed at the fake stone, his threat very obvious. "Okay, so give me one good reason why I shouldn't destroy your obviously weakened possessed corpse."

Voldemort smirked. "Because I currently hold the life of one of your witches in my hand and can snuff it out faster than you could raise your wand."

Harry heart lurched. What! He looked around, seeing nothing. How?

Voldemort smirked. "Oh yes, very protective, aren't you?"

Hermione and Daphne were in his trunk in the library. Ginny and Luna weren't even at Hogwarts, and although he'd still hesitate to think of Alexandra and one of 'his witches,' she was also nowhere near the castle. "You're bluffing."

"I assure you, 'Lord Slytherin,' I am not."

Harry's eyes narrowed, body coiled, wand still pointing at the stone. And how did Voldemort even know that?

Voldemort still had his wand pointed off to his side, although for some reason, Harry had difficulty understanding exactly what the Dark Lord was pointing at.

"You, Potter, are going to hand me that stone." Voldemort said, tone calm and level.

"Go on."

"Or, else, this pretty young thing dies."

Harry's eyes darted around the pipe. What was he talking about?

Voldemort laughed. A high pitched laugh that echoed around the metalwork. "Oh, I do beg your pardon. My manners, 'My Lord,'" he said, mockingly. "Lord Voldemort's secret pipe section is located fifty metres North-West of the mirror room at the end of the third-floor corridor."

Suddenly half of the pipe seemed to invert itself from out of the metal work and a girl appeared, wrapped tightly in ropes, propped up against the wall and gagged, terrified eyes flittering back and forth between him and the decaying body of the defence professor, Voldemort's wand pointing straight at her. To the girl's side sat a currently expanded and open shrinkable multi-compartment
trunk. It was Tracey.

Shit.

Voldemort chuckled. "Oh, dear. Not who you were expecting, mm? Who did you think I would
target? Miss Granger? Miss Greengrass? Perhaps your Miss Lovegood? Because, 'Lord
Voldemort always targets only those closest to his targets? Correct?"

Harry's head snapped away from Tracey and back to Voldemort. What?

"Yes, I know, Potter. I've known for most of the year. Did you honestly think that I, a genius,
wouldn't figure it out?"

Harry kept his wand trained on the stone. "Figure what out?"

Voldemort looked at him, almost disappointed. "I invented that form of occlumency, Potter. I
created it to catch up to my peers after I leaned just how they were doing so damn well in classes
— after I learned how they'd spent years practising it, years that I didn't have. You know that. You
know, everything. You took that accidental horcrux lodged in your forehead, somehow, and
wringed it for everything it had."

Voldemort thought Harry'd got his knowledge from the horcrux in his forehead.

Harry scowled. "The occlumency doesn't leave that kind of trace. It doesn't leave any trace at all. You know that."

Tracey was still looking between the two of them, wide eyed and fearful.

"Indeed and had it not been for all the other little things, I wouldn't have suspected anything."

Other little things? Harry's mind raced. He had to keep Riddle talking. Keep him not killing. He
couldn't let Tracey die. She was worth a lot more than a stupid fake stone. The lone heiress of one
his houses dying on his watch would be a disaster — not to mention she'd proven herself capable in
her own right. He needed her. So, what other little things?

"You can't think?" Voldemort moved over to where Tracey leaned against the wall and gripped her
arm in his free hand. "Such a pity, I do hope you aren't just my memories. That would be such a
shame. In any case, you'll have plenty of time to think, because you are going to give me the stone,
yes, but there's something else you're going to give me too."

Harry said nothing.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed in anger and Harry felt Voldemort's fury brush through the link they
shared for the first time in almost four years. The man's eyes glowed darker as he spat, "You are
going to go to wherever you've hidden them, and give me back my diadem, my ring, and my
locket!"

Fuck.

"Yes, I found the diadem missing. Yes, I went and checked the others too. You are the only person
who could have done this, and if you don't start moving, this little lady is going to start losing
bits!"

Tracey closed her eyes and whimpered.
Harry gritted his teeth. "They're not in the castle."

"Then have your servants go get them!"

"They don't have the secret," he bluffed, trying to buy time.

"Then summon them here and tell them it! I know you can, I've felt the magic come from you and to them more than once before."

Harry cursed in his head. This had suddenly got a lot worse. Of course if Riddle figured out he was Lord Slytherin he'd link it to the diadem Harry had swiped at the start of the year. Tracey's value in this equation had just dipped way off the other side. He needed to stall for more time. Needed to figure out a way to get the girl out of this without losing the soul jars to Voldemort. Could he have Daphne call for backup? No. Could he have them lay a trap? No. Could he lead Voldemort into a trap? No obvious opportunities came to mind.

"Any time you're ready, Potter," Riddle said impatiently.

Harry glanced at Tracey once more and, thinking furiously, started pulsing magic into his lightning bolt ring.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione straightened. Vibrations were coming through her ring. Harry was alright! She could tell by the way Daphne started at her without seeming to see that she too, was receiving Harry's message, and was concentrating on decoding it.

Gradually, the feeling of elation faded, giving way to worry and dread.

"Tracey," Daphne whispered.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"I've sent them the message," Harry said. "They should be leaving the school soon."

"Good." Voldemort now had his wand under Tracey's neck. His voice had lost its schizophrenic anger, returning back to the normal calm drawl. "Had any more thoughts, Potter?"

Harry scowled.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Dumbledore burst into the mirror room to find it empty, minus one destroyed mirror. "Homenum revelio!"

Nothing.

He cursed, turned, and ran back the way he came. Charging halfway across Hogwarts, he reached his office and lunged, for the second time in as many months, at the lockdown trinket. The windows slammed shut. Magic pulsed out around him. There.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne and Hermione, carrying two broomsticks, awkwardly crept along the sun baked grounds of Hogwarts, past any number of students lounging by the lake, and down the path to the closed Hogwarts gates. They ducked behind the first tree they found, whipped the cloak off, mounted the
broomsticks, and flew up and over the gate, careful not to be seen by anyone, and out across the Scottish highlands.

The moment they crossed the ward line, they felt a huge surge of magic pulse just behind them.

"What was that?" Hermione called out.

Daphne cursed. "I hope it wasn't lockdown. We're locked out, otherwise."

The two witches looked at each other, but there wasn't anything else to do. They had their orders.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry desperately continued to try and think of a way out of this situation — preferably one that didn't involve Tracey dying. He was sure he could take the weakened Dark Lord in a fair fight — which was obviously why he'd taken a hostage — but he was also certain that if he attacked Voldemort, the first thing that would happen was Tracey taking a killing curse to the chest.

A wave of magic washed over them.

Voldemort glanced around. "It would seem that Dumbledore has cottoned on to your fidelius failure, Potter."

Harry glanced around the pipe. Suddenly, a possible answer came to him. "Dust."

Voldemort raised an eyebrow. "Do go on, student."

"I've been using the parseltongue only passageways. You can use them too. I must have left a trail of some description behind me, despite being very careful not to."

Voldemort smiled nastily. "That was the first thing, yes. But it wasn't so much what you did leave behind as what you didn't."

Harry paused, then sniffed in realisation, disgusted at himself. "Cleaning charms."

"Indeed. Your trail was your lack of trail. And get moving. With the castle on lockdown we need to go to where we can still leave."

Harry nodded. Of course, the chamber of secrets

Voldemort pushed Tracey and she stumbled forward.

Harry started backing away slowly, keeping the two of them at the same distance while keeping his wand trained on the fake stone.

"And that was it?" Harry asked. Keep him talking. Keep him distracted. "You knew there was a parselmouth in the school, therefore you knew it was me? Seems pretty far fetched."

Voldemort snarled. "Of course there was more than that, fool. Dumbledore practically told me you were special — stupid old codger that he is."

"Dumbledore doesn't know that I'm Lord Slytherin."

"No." Voldemort conceded. "Most amusing it was too, watching him floundering about. I actually had to straight out tell him that Lord Slytherin was after the stone, can you believe that?"
"Strangely enough, I can."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne flew over yet another Scottish mountaintop at top speed, warming charms doing their best against the nippy windchill from this high up. They'd been flying for what felt like ages.

"I can't tell you how glad I am for flying lessons now," Hermione shouted from a few metres away.

Daphne nodded back and focused forward. Harry's island vault shouldn't be far now.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry paused at the end of the pipe tunnel. A huge hole sunk into the floor behind him.

"The first time I came here," Voldemort said, back to his casual tone of voice, "I didn't know how to fly. But then, that's the point isn't it? Only those of Slytherin magic are allowed to enter, so only those who can fly should be granted easy passage."

Harry rose up into the air.

Voldemort mirrored him, clutching a terrified Tracey firmly to his chest around the waist. Together, they descended down into the pipe, down and down, until they exited the pipe and into a space containing the exits of over half a dozen such pipes.

"You should feel honoured, Miss Davis," Voldemort said. "Very few ever get the chance to see this place. Do you know where we are?"

Tracey frantically shook her head.

"This is the chamber of secrets."

Tracey let out another small whimper.

The three of them floated over the sea of bones until they arrived at the portal to the chamber proper.

Voldemort gestured with his wand hand. "Well, as the resident Lord Slytherin, perhaps you should have the honours, Potter?"

Harry turned slightly to the portal, making sure to keep Riddle in view, and hissed,"$Open$".

The stone snakes slithered over and over each other to unlock the door and the portal creaked open.

"Have you had any more thoughts, Potter?"

Harry frowned. He had. "You knew? Or rather, you suspected? You suspected, so you investigated and only then did you know."

Voldemort's lip tugged upwards. "Getting close, Potter — figuratively and literally."

Literally… Harry looked around. All around him, carvings of snakes filled the hall. "Snakes."

"Go on."

"Parselmagic? Parseltongue? Magic that affects snakes, or things that are snake like — makes a
snake intelligent so it can better serve the master."

Voldemort raised an approving eyebrow.

Harry continued to think out loud. "You know that I know about you, or rather, you suspect that I know. Because of… Because of how I act in class?"

"Sitting in front of the same two girls, one of whom is betrothed to Lord Slytherin and the other whom is Slytherin's vassal, pointing your wand constantly at me under the desk, aren't the most subtle set of actions you can take, Potter."

"Snakes are only intelligent after they've been affected by parselmagic."

"Yes."

"So, before they've been affected by parselmagic, they can…" The realisation hit him. "They can be in range of a non secret keeper speaking a secret and not trip the fidelius charm."

"Well done, Potter. If I didn't have my wand at your little friend's throat, I'd clap."

Harry frowned. "That wasn't a weakness you knew."

Riddle gave him a look of deep disdain. "Obviously, as soon as I suspected there was someone out there who had all my knowledge, I started developing new methods. What kind of fool would try to use only tricks the enemy already knows?" He gestured to Tracey. "What kind of fool would behave as he knows the enemy believes he will behave in? You believed I would only attack Granger or Greengrass."

"So that's how you found me out?"

Riddle scoffed. "No. Oh, I did hear a conversation between you and Miss Granger where she called you, 'my lord,' but that was the extent of it, and by then, it was just another confirmation of what I already knew. Keeping random snakes invisible and under confundus around the school in the hope that they might happen to hear something is actually a pretty stupid technique. It was a wonder I heard even that."

"So, how?"

Riddle made an exasperated noise. "Potter! Do you not understand? Have you not yet heard enough? There was no smoking wand! There was no aha moment. There was no one thing that made me draw the conclusion that you are Lord Slytherin and the baby I attempted and failed to murder. You were suspiciously placed away from your parents, with muggles, yet you come to Hogwarts with large amounts of knowledge of the wizarding world. You display all the signs of being a trained occlumens, yet your occlumency shields would have me believe that they don't even exist, something only my occlumency can accomplish. Your mind pretends to be innocent while your actions belie a cunning and ruthlessness that is the hallmark of Slytherin house. You display fierce protectiveness of those connected with Lord Slytherin while around me and only me. All three of my horcruxes that are readily accessible to an outsider are gone. The parseltongue passages in the school are under use. Someone else besides me and Dumbledore is making active use of the fidelius charm. Both you and your brother are vastly over powered for your age, yet you go beyond even that. John Potter is mostly just power — extremely talented power for a first year, yes, but nothing compared to your ability. The moment you leave the school, both Miss Greengrass and Miss Granger are pulled by their heads of houses and Lord Slytherin isn't seen from again, rare though his appearances are, granted, until you are released from custody. Do I need to go on?
Harry shook his head.

Daphne opened the lead box lined with acromantula silk at the back of the cave and, occlumency at full strength, and noble house ring confidently on finger, carefully withdrew the three items held within.

"So pretty," Hermione sighed, reaching out for the diadem.

One stinging hex and an embarrassed pout later and the two girls were off and over the sea, black dragon roaring in territorial rage behind them, heading back to Hogwarts, and praying Harry had some way to come out of this without giving the Dark Lord back his soul anchors.

Deep inside the chamber of secrets, standing in front of the massive statue of Salazar Slytherin, Harry continued to rack his brain for someway out of this without giving Voldemort back his soul anchors. He still couldn't think of anything — anything apart from the painful obvious way, of course. He glanced at Tracey, still held shaking in Voldemort's grip.

"You know, Harry," Voldemort said, conversationally, "despite having a leg up from my soul fragment, you are still a remarkable young boy. You have managed to forge a completely new political faction out of what used to be little but a bunch of pathetic fence sitters — and you started when you were just eight. Truly an achievement to be proud of. One I myself can certainly appreciate."

Harry gave Voldemort a tired but knowing look.

Voldemort laughed. "Yes, Harry Potter, you certainly do know me well, don't you? This is the bit where I offer you a place in my most trusted inner circle. And why would you not accept it? You and I are very alike."

Harry clucked his tongue. "You know that's not true."

Voldemort glanced down at Tracey. He tilted his head. "I suppose not, at a certain level. After all, I would have not hesitated to kill my opponent and let the girl die."

Tracey's eyes met Harry's, desperate and imploring.

"But in other ways," Riddle continued, "we are similar. It's obvious what your end game is… domination of Magical Britain."

"You want to exterminate all muggleborns."

"And yet, you, Harry, might have shown me a better way. You know that I have vowed to eradicate all muggle influences from the wizarding world."

"Yes."

"Now look at your Miss Granger. Born to muggles yet completely understanding of her place in our world. You did that. Truly fascinating. Join me, and together we will easily sweep aside all those who stand in our way and make a world we know to be better."

"I brought Hermione to my side by mixing in generosity and friendship with my blatant
manipulations — generosity and friendship, rather than cruelty and fear."

Voldemort scoffed. "So you believe that the ends don't justify the means, is that it?"

"The ends are the means, especially for you. You seek immortality. For someone with no end, there are only means." He shrugged. "Besides, my way works better — and it's not like I don't understand the value of making my enemies fear me."

Voldemort smiled. "We shall see. I may be weakened today, but if you cannot attack me just because I have one witch's life in my hands, then what chance do you have of 'vanquishing' me when I hold the entire country to ransom?"

Harry frowned. "You misunderstand me."

Voldemort waited.

Harry didn't elaborate.

Eventually Voldemort scowled. "Well? How do I misunderstand you?"

"I do not plan to tell you — that would be foolish."

Voldemort sniffed.

Suddenly, Harry's ring vibrated. Dammit.

Voldemort gave him an expectant look.

Harry nodded. "They have them." Dammit, he needed more time. "They are outside the castle. They can't get back in because of the lockdown."

Voldemort made a gesture to a nearby snake portal, carved into the very stone of the chamber. "Then let's go out and meet them. Then you can have your reasonably precious Miss Davis back and I can have what is mine."

"I should tell you right now, that one of them is fake."

"What!" Riddle hissed.

"The locket. It was fake when I found it. It had a note from an RB in it — I assume that was Regulus Black."

Voldemort eyed him through narrow calculating eyes. "If you are lying…"

"I am not."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Here it is." Daphne touched down in a clearing on the outskirts of the forbidden forest.

"Right." Hermione alighted beside her. "Now, let's put the bag in the middle of the clearing and hide. Maybe we'll get a good opportunity to take him down from the side or something."

"Just don't do anything stupid. Don't forget Voldemort can sense magic like Harry can."

They placed the bag on the dirt ground, whipped the cloak around themselves, retreated to the edge
of the clearing, and lay in wait.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry kept his eye on Voldemort as the man kept his eye on him, all the way up through the pipe, out of the overgrown secret entrance, and through to the forest clearing.

He still couldn't think of anything! If this kept up, he might have no choice but to let Tracey die. Even if he still didn't know where the locket was, Voldemort not having the opportunity to hide another two Horcruxes was better than the alternative — even if Voldemort could just make another one if he wanted. Even if it wouldn't make any difference if they couldn't find the locket.

They soon found the clearing with the bag in the centre and before Harry knew what was happening, Voldemort darted forward in the air, Tracey's muffled screams trailing after him. The Dark Lord snatched up the bag and shot twenty metres into the sky.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Hermione gripped her wand, huddled next to Daphne under the cloak and watched Voldemort floating far above her, Tracey hanging precariously off his arm. Dammit! That had happened so quickly, she hadn't even had a chance to consider attacking.

Beside her, Daphne whispered a bad word.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry scowled up at Voldemort who floated in the bright blue sky, cloak fluttering, eyes triumphant, reaching into the bag and withdrawing a couple of priceless artefacts—imbued with dark lord soul—and a worthless trinket, which held naught but a mocking note from a dead death eater.

"Do come up and join me, Mister Potter!"

Harry readied his wand and rose up to meet him. He needed to attack now. Tracey's life was not worth it. He needed to be ruthless. He needed to—

"When we get high enough, I'll toss you the witch. You toss me the stone."

They continued to rise up, higher and higher, until the trees below weren't even recognisable as trees.

Harry shivered from the cold, holding the stone tightly in his hand. His breathing sped up. His pupils dilated.

Voldemort smiled. "Catch!" He dropped Tracey.

Harry screamed a curse of rage and frustration, chucked the fake stone, and dove — dove straight for the ground and the muffled screaming of the rapidly descending Tracey. Choice irrevocably made, he snatched her up with easily enough room to decelerate before landing on the ground and looked up, Tracey now crying and clinging desperately to the front of his robes.

He felt a short wave of triumph and exhilaration wash against his occlumency barriers before being quickly snuffed out in the manner of the master occlumens.

Voldemort had gone.
"Nicholas." Dumbledore gazed out of the floo into the dinning room of the ancient alchemist.

"Wulfric?" A man who looked to be in his late forties looked up from the dinning table. "What is it? Perenelle and I have business this afternoon."

"Ah, yes." Dumbledore shifted uncomfortably in the floo. His knees were really hurting on the stone of his office floor. "It's about your stone."

"Stolen — yes, I know."

Dumbledore started. "You know?"

"Yes, I know. I received an alert the moment it was removed from my mirror."

Dumbledore's heart raced. "Then, do you know where it is? Can you track it? Can we save it?"

"Relax Wulfric. That will not be necessary."

"But, if Voldemort or Lord Slytherin—"

"—Wulfric!"

Dumbledore hesitated.

"Sometimes, you can be really stupid. Now, please tell me how you're being really stupid in this particular instance."

Dumbledore swallowed. His old master had slipped into teaching mode. There was nothing to be done when he was in teaching mode except be silent and play along. "Well..."

Tracey clung to Daphne weakly as the four made their way back up the secret passageway to the Chamber of Secrets. Her skin was soaked with sweat, her underclothes were wet and clingy. She felt like she'd taken a bath fully clothed in a lake of nectar. She was cold, sticky, shivering, and coming down from an adrenaline overdose the like of which she'd never felt before.

Potter was Lord Slytherin. Potter was the boy who lived. H-H-He who must not be named was alive. The Dark Lord had taken her hostage. She wasn't dead. Potter had saved her. Potter had traded something very valuable, from the sounds of it, for her life. The revelations and implications came hard and fast. And still she couldn't stop herself from shaking.

Suddenly, every thing about the boy seemed larger than life. How had she not seen it before, he practically radiated power.

Potter—or was that Lord Slytherin?—walked up ahead, muttering to himself, but still loudly enough for Daphne and Hermione to hear and occasionally add a comment to the rapid, mostly monologue. "We'll have to start on tracking down all his old haunts as quickly as possible, but that won't work, because he'll know that I know about them. No, we'll have to find some way to track them directly, possibly using one them as a catalysts for a ritual or something. Our libraries will hopefully provide, but only the ones that he doesn't already know about, or at least ones he hasn't already read through."

Then, suddenly, the impossible child lord staggered, fell against the stone wall, clamped his hand
to his scar, suddenly glowing red, and scrunched up his eyes in pain.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"FAAKKKKKKEEEE!"

One long cry pounded against Harry's mile thick occlumency shields, not standing a chance of getting through after five years of strengthening, but making a damn good effort.

"ALL! FAKE!"

Visions of Quirrellmort screaming in rage and frustration floated in front of Harry's mind, eyes red, skin peeling, muscle and bone starting to show and even rip away. He didn't try to stop them, painful though they were. He let them come. The Dark Lord was furious. Anger led to weakness — led to an opening in the mind — led to a loss of critical information — information that Harry needed.

Voldemort threw the red stone against a tree where it shattered into a hundred spiky shards. He ripped the locket apart and slammed it on the ground. And then, to Harry's utter shock, the Dark Lord pointed his wand at the ring and the diadem, snarled, "Malus ignis totalus diabolus!" and watched, panting and raging, as black flames of three headed serpents tore into the supposedly priceless artefacts and melted them down into nothing.

What the fuck?

Then, seemingly unable to stand the sudden magical surge and ensuing emotional tirade, Quirrell's body finally gave up the ghost, ripping itself apart and collapsing into dust, leaving only the fractured soul of Dark Lord Voldemort, who whirled around the random wooded clearing and faded away on a sudden gust of wind.

Harry carefully pushed Voldemort's visions away from his mind and found the feeling in his body again.

"Harry! Harry!" A voice pierced through the fog. "Are you alright?"

Harry opened his eyes. Hermione's face hovered a few inches in front of his. Off to the side, Daphne and Tracey watched him with wide eyes.

"Hermione?" He frowned and grasped at the only logical explanation he could think of. "You managed to create a fake diadem and ring good enough to fool me and Voldemort in just a few hours?"

Hermione looked around to Daphne with a confused look.

Daphne shook her head.

Hermione turned back. "No, we didn't. We did just as you said. We went to the place and got the things and came back and put them in the clearing. That was right, wasn't it?"

Harry was speechless.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The aftermath of the second lockdown was nothing like as drastic as the first. People were used to it now. The foursome made their way through the empty school to the Slytherin common room,
and, without knowing the password that was supposed to let them in, Harry opened it himself, causing one or two raised eyebrows from those within but otherwise no comment.

Plenty of rumours circulated, but none came close to the truth.

Daphne took up her position again in the court of the Gray, flanked by Hermione and Tracey, the later, trying her hardest to give the impression that she hadn't just had her world shaken to its very core, and soon enough, it was time for bed. Harry separated from the girls, made his way to his dorm room, climbed into bed, closed his curtains, and fell asleep almost at once.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

In the first year girl's dormitory, three girls sat on one bed, crosslegged or sitting back on their knees, with the curtains closed and every anti-eavesdropping charm they knew carefully cast.

"So," Tracey gave a weak smile. "Your hero is in fact, Harry."

Daphne nodded.

"Suddenly, so many things make a lot more sense."

Daphne and Hermione both nodded.

"Although certain other things make even less sense than before. Do you parents know?"

Daphne nodded. "Mine do."

Hermione shook her head. "Mine don't."

"Still." Tracey laughed quietly. "The great, mysterious Lord Slytherin is none other than the equally mysterious, Harry Potter. No wonder no one's figured out who he is."

Hermione leaned forward, voice deadly serious. "Tracey, you can not tell anyone."

Tracey frowned. "You know that if my lord asks, I'll have to tell him."

"But only if he asks."

"True."

"And you know that Harry is going to want to make sure that what happened today can never happen again."

"How?"

"I don't know, but Harry will think of something. He always does." Hermione smiled. "Sometimes, we help too."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The next morning, Harry woke early and snuck out of the school, paying absolutely no heed to the lockdown still in place and making sure to put a dummy ward presence like always before he left. He apparated all the way to his cave vault in the Hebrides, walked inside, strode straight over to the lead box lined with silk in the corner, opened he box… and found the diadem and the ring, still there and all intact, as if Daphne and Hermione had never been.
He lifted the diadem out of the box and studied it carefully. Yes. This was definitely the real thing. What in Merlin's name had happened?

Last night, after he'd heard Hermione and Daphne's story, he'd asked to see their memories. It had certainly looked like they'd lifted the genuine articles from the box. Only the three of them knew the secret.

What the hell? Had someone found yet another weakness with the fidelius charm? Like the one Harry and the girls had discovered with the Eye of Kilrogg? This so called 'absolute protection' was starting to accumulate more holes than Dumbledore's character. But even if someone had found it, why give him back Voldemort's Horcruxes? It made no sense. Whatever the case, he certainly couldn't keep them here any more, not when he knew the defence had somehow been penetrated. But where to keep them now?

Harry frowned and caught the sound of a dragon roaring off in the distance.

It seemed he had yet another project for the summer.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

And then Lord Slytherin was walking into the board of directors meeting to discuss the renewal of Dumbledore's contract. Dumbledore wasn't present. Apparently he was dealing with the fallout from his latest lock-down of the school.

Harry walked out of the meeting an hour later with a stack of signed parchments under his arm and a slight smile playing around his mouth, hidden, as always, under his ever-present green and black mask.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

And then they were on the train, heading back to London after a year at Hogwarts that, all things considered, had gone far better than Harry's first. The Gray all sat around them in the compartment, laughing and joking and swapping plans for the holidays. Tracey kept shooting him appraising glances, which he happily returned with interest.

And then, the train arrived at the station, everyone got out, said their final farewells, and Harry started making his way over to the Muggle side of the platform, pausing to give Hermione and Daphne one final hug.

"Stay safe, Harry," Hermione said.

Daphne nodded too. "We'll miss you."

Harry smiled back. "I know. I'll make sure to keep in contact when I can, but I am going to be really busy." He looked around quickly before continuing. "Because — let's face it — I've got some serious pocket money to make this summer."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

John Potter stared.

The hall was dimly lit. Shelves reached up the sides to touch the very ceiling, which seemed high enough, and vast enough, to play quidditch under. On every shelf, glass orbs sat by the thousand, each one containing swirly mist.
"Don't touch anything, John," his mum said, marching him along the shelves. At his side, his father looked similarly grim.

He licked his lips nervously. This certainly hadn't happened in the last timeline. "Mum? Where are we?"

"Never you mind."

John continued to follow his parents. The moment he'd gotten off the Hogwarts Express, both of them had fretted over him as normal after one of his brushes with trouble, and then immediately brought him here. He had no idea where here was or what they were doing. All he knew was that they were somewhere in the ministry.

They stopped by a shelf that looked just like any other.

His mum peered at the labels under the glass orbs. "This is the one, but... Oh, for pity's sake!"

His dad leaned over and read it too. "Oh."

John just had time to glance at the sign and read:

_S.P.T to A.P.W.B.D_

_Dark Lord_

_Jonathan Sirius Potter_

_Harry James Potter_

_Lady Lily Potter_

_Lord James Potter_

And before he could ask again what this was all about, his father's hand clutched the sphere and plucked it clean off the shelf. "Right," he said, "let's get out of here — sorry, Son — looks like we didn't need your help, after all."

As they left, John looked over his shoulder at the massive room with the glass orbs. Well, _that_ had been odd.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Ready?" Lord James Potter held the prophecy orb with slightly clammy hands.

Opposite him, on the other side of his private office's small table, his wife sat with a determined look on her face, "Do it."

James Potter took his wand and prodded a tiny amount of magic into the prophecy orb. Suddenly, a voice that wouldn't sound out of place in the St Mungo's long term mind healing ward echoed all around the office.

_The one with the power to vanquish the dark lord approaches,_

_Born to those who have thrice defied him,_

_Born as the seventh month dies,
Born as one half of a greater whole,
Born as the brother to the one who was not chosen,
And the one who was not chosen will know not those who thrice defied him…
— Will grow up separate and singled out by all —
— Barring the weight of his fate alone —
…Or the one who was not chosen will fall to darkness and know not the joy of life,
But if those who thrice defied him learn these of words spoken,
Then the one who was not chosen shall vanquish the vanquisher of the dark lord,
And the world be stripped of magic,
Only those who thrice defied him can control the one who was not chosen,
And save the world of magic from a fate most grim.

James Potter felt numb as the last words finished.
Opposite him, his normally warm faced Lily was shock white. "But if those who thrice defied him
learn of these words spoken…"

James Potter felt sick. He put his head in his hands and let the orb roll across the table to his wife.
"I think we just massively fucked up."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

In his Hogwarts office, Dumbledore smiled a grim smile, staring hard at a misty glass orb in his
hand. His contact at the department of prophecies had just told him that the Potter's had been and
left with a prophecy orb. There was only one possible orb they could have picked up — the more
convenient orb he'd left there in place of the real prophecy — the real prophecy, which he currently
held.

The floo flared green and he quickly pocketed the true prophecy.
"Headmaster?" James Potter's worried face pocked out of the floo.
He adopted his best grandfatherly expression. "Yes, James?"

"I, er… I think we owe you a bit of an apology for our behaviour. I think we might have just made
a huge mistake."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Lily Potter knocked on the front door of Privet Drive.

Behind her stood James and Dumbledore.

The door opened and Petunia stuck her head out. "You!" She made to slam the door, but Lily stuck
her foot in it.

"Tuney, please. We just need to talk to Harry."
"He's not here."

She frowned. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. Out for the day."

Behind her, Dumbledore coughed. "Lily, I'm afraid she's lying."

James made a small intake of breath.

Lily narrowed her eyes, still with her foot in the door. "Where — is — he?"

"I told you, I don't know."

Dumbledore stepped up to her side. "Lily? If I may?"

She hesitated, but then nodded.

The door easily swung open and Dumbledore marched in and stared deeply into Petunia's startled eyes.

Lily watched the old man's face whiten. "Dear, Merlin."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Images flew through Dumbledore's mind.

*Harry smiled up at him/Petunia. "Should be okay now, Auntie. I'll be back at the end of Summer."

The scene shifted.

*He/Petunia looked down at a one year younger Harry Potter. 'Business...? What does a little freak like you have that could interest us?'

"Maybe I should come in and we can talk about it, rather than right here on your doorstep where I'm sure all the neighbours will be very interested."

The scene shifted.

"Fifteen-thousand, Uncle." Harry reached into a bag and slapped down a pile of muggle money. "And another fifteen-thousand over the next seven years, or until I reach my majority as recognised by my fellow freaks, whichever comes first."

Vernon's face twisted into a greedy smile.

*Harry summoned the pile back from his uncle's hand.

*He/Petunia gasped.

"But," Harry continued, "only if I've lived here for the last ten years."

The scene shifted again.

Vernon leaned away from him/Petunia. "Okay, okay." He turned back to Harry. "So, this money comes from your freakish parents?"

"Good god, no. It's them I don't want knowing where I've been. They'd probably throw a fit and do
a whole bunch of freakish things to you and your house."

Vernon's eyes bulged.

Harry continued. "Let's just say the money comes from a wealthy patron who has been taking care of me, and who doesn't wish his name floated around all over the place."

The scene shifted again.

"Please, Uncle Vernon!" A much younger Harry cried while getting whipped with a belt.

"We will not tolerate your freakishness!" Vernon bellowed.

The scene shifted again.

He/Petunia shoved the young Harry into a cupboard and locked the door. "And don't think you're coming out of there till Monday!"

Scene after scene after scene. Dumbledore stumbled backwards. Oh no. Shock reeled through him. It was like Tom Riddle all over again — it was Tom Riddle, but even worse. Harry hadn't lived here for four years!

"Headmaster?"

He vaguely heard someone calling to him, but he couldn't think of anything else right now. Revelation after revelation piled up in his head. Harry had a 'wealthy patron' who didn't want his name to be known. Given everything that had happened there was only one contender for that position. Lord Slytherin. Harry had known Lord Slytherin for almost four years.

Another realisation hit him like a hundred banishing charms. Lord Slytherin had heard the real prophecy. But if he'd known Harry for three years before he came to Hogwarts... had he realised that Harry was the true subject of the prophecy? Dumbledore started to sweat. Everything had been a setup. This entire year. Nothing had been real. Harry's isolation, his gradual winning of friends and respect, his argument with Lord Slytherin over Miss Greengrass, the trial, it was ALL fake!

"Dumbledore!"

He started, looking around at Lily and James who were now both in the house, wands out and alert. Off to the side, Petunia had sat down in a chair, shaking with fear, anger, and impotence.

"Dumbledore, what is it?"

"James, Lily," his voice shook. "I would seem that Harry has been abducted—"

"WHAT!"

"—possibly of his own free will, and probably by Lord Slytherin."

James and Lily's faces had both gone white.

"Amelia!" James declared, turning to the door. "And Sirius!"

"James, wait!" Dumbledore reached out his hands imploringly. "Just think for a moment first. We have no evidence. Yes, we will find him, but it does us no good to rush off without thinking first."

"So, what do we do? Now that we know about the P word, we have to get him back!"
"Well, Harry will need to come back to Hogwarts, so if the worst happens we'll know where he is then. There will be ample opportunities for you to 'get control' of him. And until then we have eight weeks to try and uncover—"

Dumbledore was suddenly interrupted when an owl swooped into the room and dropped an envelope on his head. Sighing with the accumulated events of the week, he opened the letter, and read.

_Dear Mister Albus Dumbledore,_

_We regret to inform you that we have considered your position as Headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and have decided not to renew your contract. We're sure that your many years of service…_

The words rambled on and on, but Dumbledore didn't see them.

Slytherin had somehow gotten a majority vote from the board to oust him — on a board he thought he had rock-solid control of — and just when he most needed not to be away from the school. Attack piling on attack, deception piling on deception. Was there nothing that man wasn't capable of?

He collapsed into the chintzy arm chair of the muggle sitting room and put his face in his hands, feeling the weight of total defeat settle on his shoulders, heavier than the chains he'd tried and failed to leash Harry Potter with. What was he going to do now?

—End of Chapter Thirty-three —

— End of Book Two —

Chapter End Notes

_A/N: And here we come to the end of chapter thirty-three, the end of season two, and the end of book two. I hope you enjoyed the ride — I know I certainly have. My current plan is to post chapter thirty-four on Sunday, July 9th, 2017 (unless I do some bonus chapters — see below)._

_A/N: Next, I have some announcements to make._

_Firstly,_

_Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches now has an audio version! Read by Soren Childs and available on Youtube — The first episode is up. Go check it out, like, subscribe and comment. He deserves it. You can find it either through my profile page, or…_

_Secondly,_

_…Through my brand-spanking new website, which I've created to act as a backup host for Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches, and as a platform for me to explore other projects. I've also set up a mailing list, so those who would like semi-regular updates on everything DP&SW — including schedule changes, sneak peaks, and the_
occasional bonus one-shot or exclusive missing scene — can get it sent straight to their inbox.

I'll also let you be the first to know about whether I plan to upload bonus chapters during my six month break — like I did between season one and season two — and keep you updated on how Soren is doing with his audio version project. This is the best way to know that I am not dead.

[www * LeadVonE * com]
For thousands of years, magicals traditionally considered technology the way a stern parent might consider a child's finger painting — endearing at best, a waste of time at worst. It had been rather a shock then, when the European renaissance gave way to the enlightenment, and the finger paintings suddenly flashed into technical drawings for iron foundries, guns, star charts, and more. The wizards watched with growing uncertainty as their non-magical brethren enthusiastically unravelled the non-magical components of alchemy, and published journal after journal, dreaming of ever greater and greater feats.

In the end, one wizard was all it took. One wizard barging into the ICW main conference hall, waving a just-published copy of Sir Isaac Newton's Principia Mathematica, the ramifications of which were clear to every present disciple of the magical art of arithmancy. For two whole years, the world balanced on a seesaw. A tiny force either way could have pushed the balance. But it just so happened that the wizarding world was fresh off the challenge of obliterating divination magics from the world, and thus had no shortage of memory altering expertise at the ready for the greatest mind control project the world would ever know — the enacting of the international statute of secrecy.

Such a draconically enforced cultural divide was not without it's consequences. While the muggle world lost much of the knowledge of the magical world, surviving only in myth and story, so too did the magical world lose touch with the technological forces that had originally driven a wedge between the two worlds.

But so long as muggleborns were removed from the muggle world at the age of eleven, and their parents subtly persuaded not to get involved, none of this mattered — not until a time travelling someone decided to interfere, that is.

Daphne Greengrass stepped out from the floo at the rookery, grasping a copy of the Daily Prophet in one dainty clenched fist. A tiny wooden witch danced out of a clock on the wall and struck a bell with a tiny mallet.

"Midnight," the wooden witch announced. "It is now June 23, 1992. Please enjoy another day of your life." It then shifted into an even smaller kneazle and scampered back into the clock.

Daphne stalked out of the sitting room, past the many magical creature heads mounted on the walls, and up the spiral staircase that led to the bedrooms. She reached her intended destination and knocked on the door.

"Nargles!"

Daphne opened the door, took one step into the room beyond, and stopped dead. A thousand moving pictures filled her vision, waving, fighting, clapping, talking, dancing. Every surface of the room had been plastered with cutouts from hundreds of wizard newspapers — the walls, the ceiling, the furniture, the frame of the slightly open window, even parts of the floor. In the middle of the room, laying on her tummy and wearing a nightdress, was Luna, spoon in one hand, pudding in the other, bright smile all across her face.

"Hi, Daph."
Daphne cast a final glance around the room, decided to ask later, and took another step into the room. "Luna, have you seen this?" She dropped the newspaper in front of her tentative friend and future sister wife, and sat down in the room's only chair, careful not to disturb the intricate collection of newspaper cutouts pilled up and around the desk.

Luna stuffed the pudding filled spoon into her mouth and held up the newspaper to read. "Tomowwos, Daily Pwofet?" she asked around the spoon still in her mouth. "Hawwy Potter Missing," she read. "Duellwing phenom, Hawwy Potter has been weported missing by Ward Potter." Luna swallowed and removed the spoon. "This isn't surprising, is it? We've known they knew he was gone for two weeks now."

Daphne shook her head. "Keep reading."

Luna's eyes skimmed over the article. "Oh, you mean the bit where it says there is 'no evidence' that our lord did it?"

Daphne snarled. "Yes."

Luna nodded. "I'll make sure Daddy prints the lack of evidence of the Potters being involved in the rotfang conspiracy."

"Right." Daphne looked around the room again. "Now, what's up with the newspapers?"

Luna pointed around the room in quick succession. "Britain, Europe, Africa, South America, North America, Middle East, East Asia, South-East Asia, Australasia,"—she pointed to an empty patch of wall—"Antarctica."

Daphne gave Luna a half-lidded look. "Antarctica?"

Luna nodded. "Just in case."

"Why?"

"It's important to know what's going on in the world." Luna stuffed the once-again pudding-full spoon back in her face. "Did you know there's a mwassive pwuffapod shortage in Mwagical Gweece?"

"I did not know that."

Luna swallowed. "The Greek ministry banned their import because the Greek minister of magic's granddaughter ate a bad puffapod and developed an acute case of magical animal magnetism."

Daphne decided she didn't want to know. The way Luna's mind worked, it was bound to be something sexual. "You didn't hear anything from Ginny, did you? Isn't she supposed to be here by now?"

Luna nodded. "Yes." She frowned. "I hope she didn't run over anyone."

They sat in quiet for a few moments, Daphne reading the rest of the paper while Luna snipped out the front page and magically stuck it to the British section of wall.

Then, suddenly, Luna perked up.

"Luna?"

Luna frantically waved her quiet and focused on the open window. A moment later, a small,
innocent-looking stone flew threw it.

Displaying an impressive turn of speed, Luna dived, snatched the stone out of the air, jumped back on the bed, springing up and deftly placing the stone on the top of a ceiling mounted mobile of plushy magical creatures.

There was a shift in the air and forty kilograms of startled red-headed witch appeared where the stone had been, flailed around desperately and grabbed a nundu plushy, which, unable to hold her weight, ripped out of the ceiling, and dropped both mobile and witch onto the bed below, launching Luna roof-wards in direct consequence of Newton's second law.

"Weeeee!" Luna arced through the air and onto the floor, just dodging a bright red stunner that whizzed by her head.

"Lunnna!" Ginny Weasley rolled off the other side of the bed, hand glowing red.

Daphne stared, wide eyed, as an impromptu wandless duel kicked off just a few feet from where she sat. Luna on one side of the bed, Weasley on the other. Paper flew everywhere. Ten seconds later, it was all over… with Weasley flat on the floor.

Daphne bit her lip. Ignoring the fact they were only using two offensive spells, such spell swatting at such close range at least looked as impressive as Harry's duel with Tonks. No wonder she and Hermione hadn't been able to match Luna.

Luna cast a finite on Weasley.

"Dammit!" Weasley arched her back from where she lay, snapped her whole body, and powered back onto her feet without touching the floor. "Again!"

Daphne cleared her throat. "Ginny Weasley?"

Weasley paused in mid hand-glow and turned to her.

"We do have things we need to do," Daphne said levelly. "And I believe you have to be back home by a certain time?"

Weasley looked her up and down as though sizing her up. "Yeah, that's true." She nodded. "Okay, let's go."

"Oh poo." Luna pouted as she looked around the mess of newspaper clippings left in the wake of the magical combat. "Now I have to put it all back together again."

"You do that." Daphne moved towards the bedroom door. "If we're not back by six, you know what to do."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Up in a cheaply built watch tower, near the Scottish village of John O' Groats, Convertible-Security of the Goldtooth clan surveyed the night-time sea in the vain hope that it might suddenly become more interesting than it had been the last thousand times he'd done so. No luck. He snapped his finger and the telescope folded itself up in his hands.

"Nothing?"

Convertible-Security looked around and down. His sister, Balanced-Payments, stared up at him
with her hands on her hips. Convertible-Security snarled. "No, there isn't. There wasn't yesterday, there wasn't today, and I'd bet my sword there won't be tomorrow either."

"Great Grandfather is certain the target account will try *something* incriminating," Balanced-Payments said.

Convertible-Security shook his head. There was no point in arguing. He climbed down from the lookout post and strode past his sister, massaging the knots out of his shoulder. "I'm going to go prepare the patrol boat and then grab my smoke break — Who knows, maybe I'll be lucky and a shark will attack me while I'm at it."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The village of Hogsmeade slept. The moon was not out. The stars did not twinkle. Cloud covered the night sky like a worn out dementor's cloak, a boon for spies and smugglers.

Ginny frowned. She'd been told practically nothing about what they were doing tonight — just that Greengrass would need her particular set of wandless skills. She *did* know they were *looking* for something, but that was all she knew. That wrangled her.

Ginny stumbled again in the darkness. Next to her, the future Lady Slytherin closed the fideliused house door behind her and gracefully moved to her side as thought it were still midday. How was she *doing* that?

"Broomstick out," Harry's betrothed whispered.

Ginny reached into the pocket of her robes and withdrew her shrunken nimbus 1700.

"Disillusionment charms, if you please."

Ginny felt magic and intent pulse through her body and directed it through the tips of her fingers, first to herself and then to the girl Harry was contracted to one day marry. Moments later they both became mere outlines in the air.

"Mount up," Greengrass said.

Ginny swung her legs over the broomstick and watched as an heiress shaped shimmer moved behind her, slid onto the broomstick, and wrapped its arms around her waist.

The air roared around them. Once outside the village airspace, Ginny turned her head slightly. "Has our lord been teaching you duelling too?" she shouted over the wind.

"A bit!" Daphne shouted back. "Not as much as you and Luna though. We couldn't beat her even together!"

"Who's we?"

"Hermione and I!"

Ginny thought while the wind rushed through her hair. That probably meant she was the second best among those Harry was training — those she knew about, anyway. That felt good. Alex was slowly getting better, but still didn't come close to touching her. She said as much to the witch sitting behind her.

Greengrass sniffed. "There are many different *types* of 'best,' Weasley!"
The flight to the north-most coast of Scotland took a little over an hour.

They touched down next to a cliff overlooking crashing waves and Ginny *still* didn’t know what they were doing here.

Greengrass sat down on the grass like a swan getting comfy on a bed of silk, closed her eyes, and started to pool magic.

Ginny sensed her carefully. She sensed the magic build up in the witch's chest, as though being forced through a tiny ring, before dribbling down to her fingers and leaping outwards, spinning rapidly in the air, forming a ball of magic — strange magic — the intent was difficult to figure. She stared at the otherwise invisible magic sphere and couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that the sphere was staring back. Realisation struck her. She gasped. "You can see through it?"

Daphne's head-shaped shimmer nodded. "It is called the eye of kilrogg. I've been working on getting it wandless for over a month now."

"That's amazing." Ginny's mind raced through applications for such a spell. She licked her lips. "Could you teach me?"

Daphne slowly shook her head. "Probably not. It takes a special kind of magic that not everyone has."

Ginny sighed.

Daphne continued. "It also allows me to see certain tricky types of magic that are otherwise all but impossible to detect."

Ginny felt the magic sphere disappear.

"That is what our lord wishes us to do tonight," Daphne said. "He has given me a route around the Orkney Islands which we are to scan for said magics."

"What magics?"

"It is better if I don't tell you."

Ginny frowned. "But—"

"No." Daphne held up a firm hand. "Please. It is incredibly difficult for me to even think about, even with my inner eye open and the eye of kilrogg activated. The magic protects itself."

Ginny gazed up and down the Scottish coastline. Magic that protected itself? That sounded kind of like the fidel… the fidel… Ginny tried to grasp onto the thought, but it drained through her mind like water through a sieve.

Greengrass recast the spell, got up from the ground, and together they re-mounted the broom.

The eyeball spell hung below them.

Ginny then steered them along the many island coasts, occasionally stopping and landing when Greengrass needed to recast the eyeball spell. They continued for what seemed like hours. It probably was. A vague suggestion of dawn started to spill over the horizon.

She felt Greengrass tense up behind her.
"Daphne?" Ginny asked. "Did you lose your spell again?"

"No, that's not it." Greengrass sounded uncertain. "Can you land us again? I think I might have found something."

They landed on what looked like an empty stretch of road near a relatively short cliff face.

Ginny's first step off the broom had her tripping over a rock. She scowled as she sensed Greengrass daintily step over the exact same rock she had missed.

"How have you been doing that?"

"Night vision charm."

"Night vision—" Ginny's jaw dropped. "Please tell me that doesn't also need special magic?"

Daphne put a finger to her chin and looked away. Her voice turned playful. "Mmm…I wonder if I should…"

Ginny breathed in sharply. "Pleeeease," she wheedled. "You've no idea how useful that charm would be. My mum's almost caught me sneaking out so many times."

"I don't know…" Even though Greengrass was still disillusioned, it didn't matter — Ginny could hear the smirk in her voice. "Surely the second best at duelling doesn't need my help? I am very busy being the best at divination, after all."

Ginny pouted. "It would help our lord."

Morning song birds trilled in a lone, nearby tree.

"That's not fair," Daphne whispered.

Ginny smiled impishly. "And our lord did say he was going to have us work on our teamwork this year."

"Okay, okay, once we get to Hogwarts," Greengrass said, in somewhat terse tones. "Now — silencing charms, if you would be so kind?"

Ginny happily cast a couple of wandless silencing charms on the pair of them and, holding each other hands to make sure they didn't lose each other, they crept along the otherwise deserted road.

As they approached a hill ridge Daphne urgently tapped Ginny on the shoulder, grabbed her arm and quickly guided her off the road.

Ginny allowed herself to be dragged into a ditch. What was going on? She poked her disillusioned head over the top, trying to make out what had caused Daphne's warning.

Suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, a goblin stood where before there wasn't one. An actual goblin! Wearing a two-handed sword on its back! Here! In Scotland! It walked several steps down the road she and Daphne had been stealthily walking up, stopped, reached into a pocket, withdrew a packet of cigarettes, and, looking extremely bored, lit one up.

They waited for several more minutes while the goblin finished smoking. The moment it was gone, Ginny followed Daphne back down the road the way they came. When they were far enough away, Daphne tapped her twice on the shoulder — a signal to hide, sit down, and make herself comfortable.
Ginny felt divination magic swirl beside her. She felt it take the shape of a sphere, felt it zip off up the road towards where the goblin had disappeared, and then felt it slip into nothing. The magic didn't disappear — Ginny's sensing skill could still tell something was there — but her brain simply refused to co-operate with her skin.

"Ahhh..." Daphne let out a relieved sigh, having apparently dispelled the silencing charm. "Got it. Oh, that feels so much better."

"So?" asked Ginny, dispelling her own, removing her broom from her pocket and expanding it. "Can you tell me what this was all about now?"

"Yes." Ginny could just make out the disillusioned Daphne nodding in the pre-morning twilight. "A goblin clan, rivalled to the one we're allied with, and the ministry are co-operating to snoop on everything being used to build Slytherin Manor."

Ginny swung herself onto the broom and cast a wandless cleaning charm on the ground they'd been lying in.

"Once our lord's stuff is on the island there's little they can do," Daphne continued. "but while it's in transit, they do have the power to inspect, if they wish." Daphne shuffled onto the broom behind her. "We knew they were using a... method, let's say, to hide their inspection points. Until we knew where the inspection points were, we dared not try move anything of a questionable nature to the island."

So that was it! Ginny felt a little thrill shoot through her. "And now our lord can do stuff he couldn't before?"

"Yes."

Ginny gently pushed off the ground and felt the wind stream through her hair. "So we really helped him tonight?"

"Yes."

Ginny smiled brightly in the faint dawn light. Excellent. Hogwarts hadn't even started yet and she'd already helped Harry with something important. Brilliant.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Only a few dozen miles away, under yet another fidelius charm, Emma Granger put down her morning cup of coffee, picked up her rivet gun, and fired yet another rivet into the side of large white van — a white van patch-worked on all sides with thin metal plates and runes.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Early morning gave way to late morning. Daphne sat down at a large, round table of finest oak. The table was divided into thirds — literally divided. The space between the thirds measured the distance of a severed human thumb. Outside the private meeting room's only doorway, two Gringotts goblins stood on guard holding large battle axes.

Apart from Daphne, two other humans also sat around the table. All three of them wore masks. Each had been asked to give up their wand before being allowed in. Ironically, not one of them would have been able to use a wand in any-case. Two because they were underage, and one because he was a muggle. Only two of the three knew that last titbit though.
Daphne wore her potion-gifted grown-up form like she was born for it, which, of course, one day, she would be. She projected the poise and air expected of a lady, as she'd been trained to do since the age of five. Now she wore a real mask over her Slytherin one, and the added anonymity felt good. It made her feel powerful — secure — safe. "Let us begin," she said.

The masked man to her right, whom Daphne knew to be Mister Daniel Granger, nodded at her. "Mister Buccaneer," Mister Granger said, addressing the third individual. "Did you manage to charm the artefacts we gave you?"

Fred Weasley, who sat on Daphne's left, nodded. He hadn't bothered with an ageing potion. To be fair, he was tall enough to pass for a short adult. "Yes, Mister Settler," he said.

Daphne couldn't help smirking under her mask. Tall or not, the older boy still had several octaves left for the puberty fairy to come and take away.

Fred Weasley produced a shrunk trunk from the pocket of his robes and placed it with a flourish in the middle of the table where the three points of the three thirds met. "Twenty runed plates charmed with bubblehead alchemy spells."

"Wonderful." Mister Granger counted out eight chunky gold coins (£400) and placed them in the middle of his third of the table. "Best eight galleons I ever spent." He turned to Daphne. "Miss? I assume that wasn't all the business we have today?"

"No, Mister Settler," she said. "I believe Mister Buccaneer would like to show us something he and his associate have been working on."

Fred Weasley nodded and started fishing in a bag at his side.

Daphne smiled. The hidden identities in this little group were some of the most convoluted silliness she'd ever seen. Mister Granger knew who she was, but didn't know who Mister Buccaneer, AKA Fred Weasley, was. Fred Weasley didn't know who either she, or Mister Settler, AKA Daniel Granger, was — just that they were connected to Harry. She on the other hand, knew exactly who everyone in Harry's growing little empire was — at least she was fairly sure she did, and if she didn't... well then there was probably a good reason for it.

"Ahha! Here it is." Fred flourished a large roll of parchment and unfurled it across the table. "Gentleman — Lady," He gave Daphne something half way between a nod and a bow. "Allow me to present to you the first buccaneer product developed with settler runes."

Daphne glanced over the parchment, on which four long rectangles were drawn, each containing hundreds of runes in elegant repeating patterns, and which might as well have been written in ancient Sumerian for all she could understand them. They clearly meant something to Mister Granger though, because he let out a little sigh like the last escaped air from a folded beach ball. "Of course," he said, "so simple."

Fred Weasley nodded. "We figured we'd start with the low hanging fruit."

Daphne tapped an impatient finger on the table. "Could you please enlighten those of us who might not be rune prodigies?"

Mister Granger leaned over and jabbed a finger at the parchment. "It's a magic recycler. It captures wasted magic and channels it into an associated rune matrix. Not much magic, but I imagine you could improve efficiency or power of whatever you attached this to by... maybe 5%?" He looked up at Fred, who nodded.
"5-10% actually," Fred corrected. "Depending on how small we can make the runes."

Daphne frowned. That didn't sound all that amazing. "What would you attach it to?"

"Oh, there are all sorts of possibilities," Fred said. "Really big magical artefacts already use them, of course, but now that we can make them smaller, we thought the best opportunity would be in the broomstick market. That's why we've shaped the runes to fit on a ring, so they can easily attach to where the bristles affix to the shafts — or two rings, rather, one ring that floats around a second ring."

"That explains our hover runes," Mister Granger said, rubbing his chin.

Daphne lightly brought her finger tips together. Okay, she could see how that might be useful. The broomstick market wasn't small and they were always coming out with slightly better models. It was also easy to see how she and Harry could help. "You'll need our assistance to reach the manufacturers," she said.

Fred nodded. "We know. And we'd need to sort out a manufacturing deal with 'Mister Settler.'"

Mister Granger grunted. "Wrist sized aluminium rings filled with several hundred runes a piece? Should be able to do you for..."—he paused for a few seconds, clearly running numbers in his head—"three sickles, eleven knuts each (£10), and another one sickle, twenty-one knuts each if you need us to do the blood runes (£5)."

"And we can set up the deal for say, 25% of the gross value of the contract," Daphne added. "Palms do need greasing."

"Sounds fair." Fred hesitated. "Could you do Nimbus?"

Daphne smiled under her mask. If he'd asked her only a few months ago, the answer would have been, 'probably not,' but now? "I think we can."

"Brilliant," Fred whispered.

They talked back and forth some more. Contracts were drawn up and signed, and several other pieces of business were gone through, not least of which was the official version of the original partnership agreement between Harry and the twins, which the twins had only just managed to persuade their father into signing. Quite a feat, considering how many blank spaces that contract had to preserve Harry's anonymity. By the end of it all, the middle of the table contained several half signed contracts in addition to the shrunk trunk and several bags of galleons for various projects.

Daphne placed her hand on the table and in a loud clear voice said, "exchange." There was a whoosh of magic and the items in the centre of the table jumped across the divides.

Contracts were picked up and signed, galleons pocketed, and the contents of trunks inspected.

"Well, good doing business with you both," Daphne said, standing up and pushing back her chair. "We'll be in touch."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Fred! George!"

George Weasley hastily ripped off his sweater with the large G on it and put on the one with the
large F. He opened his bedroom door, yelled, "Coming, Mum!" and quickly made his way down the stairs to the kitchen where his mother and little sister were cooking lunch.

Molly Weasley turned just as the potatoes lifted themselves out of the pot of boiling water on the stove and started mashing themselves. She frowned. "Fred dear, where's your brother? I really need the garden de-gnomed."

"He's out in the garden now, Mum," George said, heading towards the kitchen door, and snatching the butter smeared copy of the daily prophet from the kitchen table. "I'll just go tell him, shall I?"

His mum gave him a suspicious look as he passed. "I thought you were both in your room?"

"We were," he answered, free hand now gripping the door handle, jovial grin on his face. "He just wanted to get some fresh air."

"Fresh…" Molly Weasley turned and put her hands on her hips. "All right, what are you up to?"

George froze. "Nothing, Mum." He tried to sound as innocent as possible.

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, we just—"

CRASH! The sound of a large porcelain bowl smashing down onto the ground drew Mrs Weasley's attention to a shocked looking Ginny, now standing in a small pond of peas and carrots.

"Oh, for pity's sake!"

George took the opportunity to open the back door, watching his mum now fuss around Ginny.

Molly Weasley turned her back and, right then, Ginny winked at him.

Whoa. George gave his little sister a grateful look, slipped out, and started walking down the path. Ginny was getting more and more devious by the day. It was enough to make a big brother proud.

He arrived at the front gate, hid behind a beech tree, unfolded the slightly messy newspaper, and read while he waited. He didn't have to wait long. Only a few minutes later, his twin brother came jogging up the road from the direction of the Rookery.

"Did we get everything we needed?" George asked.

"We did." Fred said, grinning and panting, slightly out of breath. "And then some."


"Nimbus."

"Wicked," George whispered. "And the partnership with young Harry?"

"All signed and official."

"And did we get to officially see the house he's working for?"

Fred shook his head. "No, not yet."

George made a 'hmmm' sound.
They stood in silence for a moment.

"Hey, Fred?" George said.

"Yes, George?" Fred answered.

George chucked his twin the Daily Prophet, which was running the headline, 'BOY-WHO-LIVED'S BROTHER STILL MISSING'. "Do, you think we should tell Harry we're pretty damn certain he's working for Lord Slytherin?"

Fred smirked. "What do you think?"

They looked at each other.

"Nahhh," they said in unison, before turning and walking in lockstep up the path, fully ready to continue the never-ending war for the Burrow's gnome-infested lawn like the dutiful sons they were.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Emma Granger held her hands absolutely steady. The tip of a welding torch crackled and popped, scorching-hot-electrode-point melting and remaking the steel object in front of her.

A stone's throw away, the sea rolled up and down the shingle beach.

"Delivery!"

Emma stopped, flipped her mask visor up, and turned around just as her husband walked up. He held a large package under his arm and a large grin on his face.

"Bubblehead alchemy plates," Dan announced, setting the package down on a make-shift workbench. "Easiest sci-fi style oxygen and carbon-dioxide recyclers you'll ever find."

Emma smiled. "Excellent. Let's start on getting them installed."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

A few days passed. Hermione started each day by shuttling her parents up to the tip of Scotland in a shrunk trunk, through the floo, to a carpark, where they’d left a car, and finished it by returned them back home when the work day ended. She still hadn’t seen what they were working on, but was willing to wait until they were done. It wasn’t like she didn’t have enough to do. Now back in Crawley for the night, Hermione stood in the middle of a ritual circle, drawn in the Granger garage, half embarrassed and totally naked. Off to one side, stood her mum, equally naked, but far less embarrassed.

Her dad wasn’t in the room. Hermione had put her foot down about that, getting more than a few sniggers in return from her parents about how their little girl was growing up, and that soon they’d be fending off boys on motorcycles — possibly one's with messy black hair and green eyes.

Clare also wasn't present. The risk of her confinement collar interfering with the ritual was too high.

Soft light illuminated the ritual circle through a window in the roof. Unlike a few nights ago, when the clouds blocked the night sky's display, tonight, the moon was out, and it was full — that was important.
Hermione sat down cross-legged in the middle of the circle, which pulsed with magic from the already-completed first-half of the ritual. Her mum stepped beside her, knelt down, dabbed at Hermione's arm with a swab of cotton wool, and drew a measure of blood with a syringe. She then handed the syringe to her and left the circle.

Hermione ignored the slight prickly feeling on her arm and focused on the object on the floor in front of her — Two small aluminium rings, each a little larger than her wrist. They were both completely smooth, but she knew that hidden inside were hundreds of tiny runes, and that right now, here, in this ritual circle, a few dozen of them in particular sang out to her like sirens on the rocks. She held the syringe over the rings of metal and dropped a single drop of blood onto each. The blood clung to the rings. Hermione pulsed magic into the ritual circle. The rings sucked her blood into them with a small slurping sound. The singing dimmed.

Hermione shuddered, stood, raised her hands up to the roof, and completed the words of the ritual. The ritual circle glowed faintly red; the metal ring glowed redder still — and then the glowing stopped and the world returned to normal.

For a moment the room was totally still.

Emma Granger let out a long breath. "Done?"

Hermione let out a small breath of her own, smiled, and picked up the outer ring. Even as she did so, she felt the tiny pull of magic from it, causing the smaller inner ring to float and spin independently of the larger outer one. "Yes," she said, holding the ring up for inspection. "One blood-rune copy-protected broomstick power ring."

"Good," said her mum. "Let's get this sent off to Lord Slytherin and then to bed. Your father and I need to get up early tomorrow." She took the magic ring-within-a-ring from Hermione. "We still have plenty of work to do before we can make our first trip to Gairsay Island."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne sat in front of her bedroom vanity dresser in her dressing gown. On the small desk in front of her lay a magic ring-within-a-ring, a letter from Mrs. Granger, a plate of half eaten jam on toast, a couple of open books, and dozens of parchments, all filled with Daphne's neat notes and scribbles. One of the books was titled 'Updated Albion Contract Magic'. Sunlight flooded in from her large bedroom window. Hedwig perched on the backside of a nearby chair, drinking from a small bowl of water one of the Greengrass house elves had brought her.

Daphne scribbled another note, put down her quill, and looked at herself in the mirror. "No, Mister Whitehorn," she said to her reflection, "Two galleons each for every broomstick you make, adjusted for inflation, for the next five years, in exchange for... for..." She cursed, looked down at her notes again, and then back up at her reflection. "Mister Whitehorn, the terms my lord will agree to are two galleons each for every broomstick you make, adjusted for inflation, for the next five years, in exchange for... an exclusivity agreement... and an annually improved model."

Daphne nodded to herself, looked down at her notes, and made another scribble.

"Dear?"

"Mmm?" Daphne looked up. Her mum's head poked around her bedroom door.

"It's already noon, Daphne," Sunny Greengrass said.

Daphne blinked. "Already?" She looked out of the window. The sun was indeed high in the sky.
450 kilometres away, the high-noon summer sun beat down on Convertible-Security like a goblin forged hammer. "Fucking whore Boneslicers," he muttered watching as another fully inspected knight-wagon full of building equipment and materials boarded the ferry to Gairsay island. He sucked on his cigarette, dropped it, and stubbed it out with a steel toed boot.

Next to him, the ministry inspection human, Geoffrey Perkins, snuffed. "I don't understand how you can have so much animosity for them — aren't you all goblins?"

Convertible-Security gave the snooty human an unimpressed look. "You're all human and you fight like spogs in a fight pen. And why should you understand? You don't know the history — the feuds — the power grabs — the backstabbing. The only times you know of them is when it spills over into your world, and then its called 'rebellion.' I bet you don't even understand why we care about Lord Slytherin."

"He's rich?"

Convertible-Security snorted. Dear Gringotts he was bored. "Human," he said, "has it never occurred to you to wonder why we want all your gold in our vaults?"

The human hesitated. He glanced at the huge sword Convertible-Security had slung over his back. Convertible-Security could practically hear the man thinking, 'greedy, simple-minded magpies.'

"Because," the human said, seeming to choose each word as though a misspoken one might result in their already short-handed operation becoming literally even more so, even while managing to sound as snooty as ever, "you... value gold highly?"

Convertible-Security rolled his eyes. "The first thing every goblin gets taught in school—even before which end of an axe is the sharp one—is the diamond-water paradox, human. The very — first — thing. Gold doesn't have much value when you're alone in a desert, but water does. And gold piled in a vault doesn't mean much if there isn't some greater context surrounding it. It's not like we're allowed to actually touch any of your gold."

The ferry carrying the knight-wagon full of Boneslicer goods and goblins pushed off from the pier. Convertible-Security watched it carefully, magic tingling up and down his fingers, stretching his senses for any sign of something amiss.

"And?" the ministry wizard asked.


"The context — why do you hoard gold?"

Convertible-Security turned away from the departing knight wagon, scowled, and started walking back to the fidelius watch point up the long shingle beach. "I never said I was going to tell you, human — just that you should wonder about it."

The table was round and divided into thirds — literally divided. The space between the thirds measured the distance of a severed human thumb.
Daphne Greengrass was once again sat at one of the thirds, holding a long package wrapped up in paper in her lap, trying to shake the feeling of being weirdly vulnerable without her ageing potion and mask, which was ridiculous. She was Daphne Greengrass! Current heiress Greengrass and future Lady Slytherin. She had every right to demand an audience with someone who was, at the end of the day, a commoner — regardless of how old she might be.

At the table's other thirds sat Lord Smith and Devlin Whitehorn, boss and chief enchanter for the Nimbus line of brooms.

"Don't tell me you're not a little bit curious, Devlin," Lord Smith said with a chuckle.

Devlin Whitehorn had the look about him of a man with places to be and things to do, and that here was not where he wanted to be, and she were not something he wanted to deal with. He tapped on the woodwork with his long fingers. "I would not be here, if it were not you that had requested it, Lord Smith." He turned to Daphne. "Please, just get on with it, young lady."

Daphne decided to get on with it. "Mister Whitehorn, my house has developed a line of magic rings to improve either the efficiency or power of a broomstick by between 5% and 10% with no loss of stability or slipperiness."

Whitehorn rolled his eyes, stood up, and turned to Lord Smith. "Please don't ask me to do this again, Sam." He turned away.

Daphne scowled, took out the long package, and slammed it down on the table. "At least look at it." She ripped off the paper, revealing a Nimbus 2000 broomstick.

Whitehorn spun back around, clearly annoyed. "Little girl, I don't need to look at any—" he stopped. The larger aluminium ring floated and gently spun around the smaller one. The smaller ring was firmly attached to where the broom's bristles met the handle. "It floats?"

Daphne held up her empty hands, showing she held no wand.

Lord Smith's eyes flittered between Daphne and Whitehorn, amused and calculating.

Whitehorn approached the broom with a frown. He produced a long fork like instrument from the recesses of his robe and gently tapped the broomstick. His frown deepened. Another instrument was produced and more tapping and prodding done. At one point, the man took out a tiny, finger-sized broomstick. The finger broomstick leapt from his hand and did loop-the-loops all the way along the larger broom before returning to Whitehorn's hand, making little whistling noises. He started muttering to himself. More prodding took place. Eventually, he picked up the broomstick and mounted it, right there in the Gringotts meeting room, doing several slow barrel rolls before dismounting. He sat back down at his third of the table and fixed Daphne with a hard stare. "How much?"

"Two galleons each for every broomstick you make, adjusted for inflation, for the next five years, in exchange for an exclusivity agreement and an annually improved model (£100)."

Whitehorn raised an eyebrow.

Daphne held his gaze.

"I've no idea the kind of work that must go into these rings," Whitehorn eventually said, his tone of voice making it clear that this both intrigued and annoyed him. "We sell around 750 brooms a year. Will you be able to make that many?"
Daphne nodded. "We will."

"Right."

Thirty minutes later, they had a signed contract, and five minutes after that, Daphne found herself leaving an empty meeting room along side Lord Smith who smiled at her. "Very well done, young lady."

"Thank you." She nodded up at him. "And thank you for setting up the meeting. I will go to my account manager and see that your share is placed into your vault as soon as Mister Whitehorn transfers the gold to my lord's vault."

Lord Smith touched his forelock with the hand not holding his large war hammer. He then turned and left.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne stepped out of the floo in the sitting room of Greengrass Manor. "Afternoon, Father."

Jacob Greengrass looked up from where he was reading the Daily Prophet. He smiled. "Afternoon, Daphne. Having a productive day?"

Daphne took out a rolled up parchment from the fold of her robes and nonchalantly waved it. "Just signed a contract worth six hundred galleons a year to Slytherin House for the next five years (£30,000)."

Jacob blinked. His head disappeared behind the newspaper again. "Your bride price was too damn low."

Daphne smirked. "Aww, thanks, Dad." And with that she ran upstairs to get changed for her afternoon outing.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Sophie has an afternoon outing?" Mrs. Roper was busy washing dishes when Mr. Roper mentioned their daughter's plans.

Mr. Roper poured himself a cup of tea. "With some friends from school. They're going to the cinema."

"That's nice," Mrs. Roper said. "I'm glad they're going to do something 'normal.'" She rinsed a plate and put it on the drying rack. "How is she getting there?"

Mr. Roper shrugged and brought the cup to his lips. Just then, the doorbell rang.

He put the cup down. "That must be the lady from the ministry."

It was indeed the witch from the ministry. He led her into the kitchen and served her another cup of tea.

"This is just a regular call in," the rather snooty woman said, inspecting the digestive biscuit Mr. Roper placed next to her tea-cup as though it might be poisoned. "How is Sophie doing after her first year? No troubles, I hope."
"No, not really." Mrs. Roper dried her hands on a teacloth before turning from the sink. "Sophie says she loves Hogwarts."

The woman smirked. "As she should."

Mr. Roper took a sip of tea. "Although she did mention that there were some problems with bullying."

"Did she?" The ministry witch sounded shocked. She fixed him with a piercing stare.

Mr. Roper had the feeling his very soul was being examined. "She did," he said.

The ministry witch smiled. "I'm sure it's nothing."

Mr. Roper felt a flash of annoyance shoot through him. "Now, see here—"

Suddenly, the world went weird. He looked down at his cup of tea. Wow, he'd drunk a lot without noticing, hadn't he? "Err…" He tried to remember what they'd just been talking about. "What were we…?"

The witch smiled. "You were just saying how proud you were of Sophie for doing so well on her end of year exams."

"Oh, yes," he muttered. "I knew it was something like that."

Mrs. Roper nodded, beaming proudly.

"Is there anything else we need to talk about?" Mr. Roper asked. "Only I have an appointment I need to leave for soon."

"Yes." The witch's expression grew more serious. "We've been asked to inform all muggleborn parents to be wary of a gentleman by the name of Lord Slytherin."

"Oh?"

"Last year it became known that this wizard had targeted an unsuspecting muggleborn family and bound them to him as his vassals."

Mr. Roper stared at the woman in wide-eyed indignation. "Vassals?! And we're only learning about this now?! What the hell are you—"

The world went weird. He looked down at his cup of tea. Wow, he'd finished that quickly hadn't he? "Err…" He tried to remember what they'd just been talking about. "What were we…?"

The witch smiled. "You were just confirming that you'd be sure to contact me immediately should you be approached by Lord Slytherin or anyone working for him."

"Oh, yes," Mr. Roper muttered. "I knew it was something like that."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Waves crashed and lapped up the Scottish, shingle beach.

"Ready, love?" Emma Granger asked. She was wearing a red bikini and a lab coat.

Clare Cooper nodded. She was wearing a yellow bikini and her ever present imprisonment collar.
Dan stood off to the side. _He_ was wearing a smile like a banana on growth hormones. Three steel boxes connected by steel tubing sat on the shingle beach's only stretch of flat rock, affixed by extremely well tested sticking charms. One of the tubes faced out to sea. Another two tubes dipped into the water.


Clare nodded and pressed her hands against the holes in the two boxes in front of her. Moments later, a huge stream of water shot out of the tube facing out to sea as though a block in a fireman's hose had suddenly been cleared. The water misted in the air and floated back towards them, soaking the three of them in a fine wet sheen.

Emma blinked.

Dan's smile widened. "Test one — successful."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Somewhere else, in a land of lights and sounds and make believe, a group of muggles got out of a car and stumbled towards a massive beast, clearly dumbstruck by its sheer size and majesty.

The creature was huge. No, huge didn't even begin to describe it. Its neck was as long as the Hogwarts astronomy tower. It leaned back on its hind legs and nibbled the top of a tree before coming back down to earth with such force, it rocked the very ground around it.

One of the muggles collapsed on the ground, shock overcoming his ability to stand. Orchestral music started to swell. The muggle looked up. The orchestral music built up further. A lake came into view, full of beasts — not all of equal size to the tree munching monstrosity near where the muggle now lay, but huge nevertheless. The orchestral music crashed and the muggle whispered to his guide in sheer, unadulterated awe.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The storm raged — rain pounded down — lightning flashed — tropical trees whipped this way and that — the muggle wards groaned — and the terrible wingless land dragon stepped through them, each footprint shaking the muggles sitting nearby in their cars, frozen and terrified.

It roared.

The muggle girl scrabbled over the back seat of the broken car, grabbed the electric lumos device, and switched it on. Her brother shouted at her to turn it off, but it was too late.

Attracted by the light, the land dragon stomped over.

The boy closed the car door with a small thump.

The sound caused the land dragon's head to jerk around. It slowly inspected the car, its eye as large as the terrified muggle boy's head, its teeth as long as a man's arm.

Rain poured down the car's windows.

And then, all hell broke loose.

— DP & SW: TFoP —
The music died.

The vicious two-legged reptiles circled.

The muggles crowded together, the man desperately trying to shield the woman and two children from the predators closing in on them.

The lead reptile crouched down, ready to pounce.

The muggle man flinched back.

The reptile leapt, but before it could get halfway, was plucked clean out of the air by a much large set of jaws.

The music started back up.

The muggles all stared in terrified wonder as the huge land dragon, appearing seemingly from nowhere, ripped through the reptile that moments before had been about to rip through them. They ran for it, orchestral music swelling and swelling as they made their way out of the building and down to a car driven by their guide.

The land dragon ripped the second reptile off its back and threw it straight through a land dragon skeleton. The land dragon roared in victory and a banner fell down around it reading, 'When Dinosaurs Ruled the World.'

Daphne unclenched her hands from the cinema seat rest, let out a long breath, and felt her heart start to slow down again. She left the cinema along side Hermione, Sophie, Kevin, Dean, and Justin, movie music still humming in her ears.

"So Daphne," Sophie said, "what did you think?"

Daphne smiled, adrenaline still pumping through her body. "At least I didn't get monster guts on me this time."

Sophie giggled. "No, I mean what did you think of the cinema? Impressed with what muggles can do?"

Daphne smiled. "You seem to have me mistaken with pure bloods who've forgotten why we decided to hide from the non magical world."

"What she means," Hermione said, "is that she has a healthy appreciation for the power of technology that muggles wield."

Sophie pouted. "But you must have learned something?"

Kevin, Dean, and Justin walked ahead of them, loudly discussing the movie, heading to a quiet spot where they all planned to practise occlumency.

Daphne considered her answer before answering. "Yes, I think so. I had no idea that muggles have blood technology — seems pretty dark too — especially with what happened when they messed it up."

"I think genetics would be more gray than dark," Hermione said. "It can be beneficial as well as harmful."

Sophie nodded. "I think nuclear weaponry would be dark."
Daphne hummed in agreement. "I also think it was interesting how the entire park failed just because one muggle in charge of security turned traitor — and the muggle arithmancer talking about chaos — that was interesting." She turned to Hermione. "Was that a real muggle thing, or was it made up?"

Hermione hesitated. "I think it's a real thing." Her jaw firmed. "I'll check when I next see Mum and Dad."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Some twenty minutes later, Hermione sat down next to Daphne on a park bench, watching the other muggleborns practise their occlumency in cross-legged pairs mostly hidden from the rest of the world by trees and bushes.

The principle was simple. Normally, only a great legilimens could help a novice occlumens build up their defences, and how those defences would be constructed depended on the legilimens.

The problem was they had a distinct lack of great legilimens that could be trusted to hand, and Harry simply didn't have the time to invest in something so time consuming.

Therefore, Kevin, Dean, Sophie, and Justin were testing a new method that tried to emulate the method Harry learned from Voldemort. In this method, student became teacher and teacher became student. Since the major limiting factor was the skill of the legilimens, the student occlumens learned to help, gently 'pulling' the novice legilimens into their mind, as though they were a hostile attacker. Once inside, student and teacher would work together on the written exercises — exercises written specifically to emulate the process Harry would normally go through.

Harry had been quite thorough. There were hundreds of them.

"At least we don't have to worry about the ministry casually scanning them now," Hermione said.

Daphne nodded. "How long until the next step?" she asked.

Hermione shrugged. "At the rate they're going? Six months, maybe?"

"Six months," Daphne mused. "That's twice as long as it took us to start on wandless magic."

"We had our lord."

"True."

They sat in silence for a few moments.

Hermione sighed. "I wish we had our lord now."

Daphne nodded.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Later that evening, after Hermione arrived home, Harry's elf, Plato, popped into her bedroom, proudly holding a letter in his hand.

Hermione thanked the elf, opened the letter, and read.

Dear Hermione,
I can't write as much as I'd like in case this letter is intercepted. I hope you're doing well and that all our projects are progressing. I hear from Daphne that your parent's solution to our little problem will be ready soon. I really wish I could be there for the first outing. It sounds impressive, considering what they're working with. I see from the newspapers that Harry has gone missing. I'm sure you're wondering if he's okay wherever he is. You two seem quite close. Don't worry, I'm sure he's fine. He's a resourceful lad from what I've seen. I wouldn't even be surprised if he suddenly turned up safe and sound at the chief auror's very own house. By the way, I'm planning to be back in the country on Sunday, August 16.

Yours,

- Lord Slytherin.

Hermione finished reading the letter. August 16? She felt a slight fluttering in her stomach. But that was still three weeks away. She read the letter again. She then put the letter aside and returned back to her studies. She got through one whole paragraph before she glanced to where she'd stored Harry's letter. She retrieved it, unfolded it, and read it again. Again, she felt the slight flutter in her stomach. She put the letter aside and got back to her studies.

This pattern repeated itself three times.

The sun set and moonlight started to shine through her window.

Hermione buried her head in her hands in frustration. What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she focus?

Her gaze caught the spine of a book her parents had bought for her several years ago. A memory of twenty-two year old Hermione Granger and twenty-two year old Harry Potter flashed through her mind.

Hermione groaned, a light blush dusting her cheeks, as realisation hit home as hard and as brutal as the very thing she'd just realised — hormones.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

The morning sun shone brightly in the sky. A shape in the air glided through the summer Scottish air. It rode the wind currents like a bird — not quick and agile, but slow and majestic, like an albatross, eagle, or heron. The shape swooped down and alighted mere jumping distance from the North Sea.

Daphne Greengrass shimmered into view. The wind whipped around her hair and robes. The Scottish waters rolled up the shingle beach she now stood on. She dismounted from her brand new nimbus 2001 broomstick and heard two figures land nearby. Moments later, Hermione and Ginny shimmered into view, also dismounting from their brooms.

"Whew!" Ginny had a massive grin plastered all over her face. "I can never get enough of those long broom rides."

Daphne smirked. "On this, Weasley, I couldn't agree more."

Hermione was busy rubbing her bum. "I've nothing against broomsticks, but for so long? Not my favourite way to travel."

Ginny winked at Hermione. "Well, you're done now. I need to get back before my mum notices I'm gone." She waved her hand over herself, shimmering back into nothing but a shape against the
background. "Good luck!" the shape of Ginny said, before zipping back up into the air.

"She seems nice," Hermione said when they were alone, now apparently trying the massage life into her stiff limbs.

Daphne shrugged and started towards the cove that she knew to be hidden behind the next large rock and Harry-cast fidelius charm.

As they passed the boulder they also passed a large muggle car parked on the shingle.

They stepped over the fidelius line.

"Hermione! Daphne!" Emma Granger rushed up and hugged them both. "Dan! Clare! The girls are here!"

The face of Dan Granger appeared briefly over a large white van. "Biscuit break!" he said happily before popping back down.

Hermione grinned.

Daphne stared at the van. It didn't look any different from any other muggle vehicle.

"Come on you two." Emma Granger said, pulling them along. "Let's give you the tour."

Clare Cooper stepped out from behind the van, washing her hands with a towel, wand stuck out of the pocket of her jeans.

Daphne blinked. "I thought you couldn't leave the Granger house?"

Clare smiled. The ministry confinement collar gleamed around her neck. "I got a special work permit. I'm on unpaid overtime, as it were."

The waves lapped up against the van's front wheels where it sat on the shingle. Emma Granger threw open the main doors to the van at the back. "All aboard."

If the outside couldn't have looked more muggle, then the inside couldn't have looked more magic. Thin metal plates covered with runes blanketed the walls. They glowed faintly. Daphne had to clamber around a trio of mysterious rune covered metal boxes with various tubes sticking out of them. A comfy looking chair had been placed within arms distance of two of the boxes. A magic trunk sat off to one side. A ladder led up to another door cut into the roof.

Towards the centre of the van, a broomstick was attached to both the walls with metal rods, leaving the broomstick hanging at mounting height in the van's middle.

Hermione gave the broomstick an uneasy look.

Emma Granger pointed at some of the different rune plates. "Unbreakable charms," she said. Clare's been working on that one for ages now. "I can't tell you how giddy I was when I first learned that wizards could make things unbreakable. Do you have any idea just how insane that is?"

Daphne slowly shook her head.

Emma Granger smiled. "Well, it is." She pointed at another set. "And you'll remember these, of course."
Daphne nodded. She easily recognised them as the bubblehead alchemy plates she'd helped Mister Granger acquire from the Weasley twins.

"Umm… Mum," Hermione said. "What's the broomstick for?"

Emma Granger grinned. "Ah yes, took us a while to come up with a solution for that. Direction control."

Hermione turned to Daphne. "Dibs not it."

Daphne rolled her eyes.

"Ah ah ahhh," Mrs. Granger waggled a finger. "Daphne here is going to be on navigation duty. We'll need her magic eye to see above the waves."

Hermione frowned. "In that case, Clare can—"

"—Nope." Mrs. Granger shook her head. "Clare already has a job that only an adult wizard or witch can handle."

Hermione groaned.

Daphne smirked.

"Yes, young lady." Mrs. Granger's eyes were almost dancing now. "You are going to be a good little witch and get — on — your — broomstick!"

Hermione hung her head. "How long?"

"Only five hours."

Hermione whimpered.

Daphne eyes momentarily widened in surprise. Five hours? She was going to have to keep the eye of kilrogg up for five hours? That wasn't going to be light work. It almost made her want to trade with Hermione. "Mrs Granger?" she said. "Is it really going to be five hours? I thought our island was only sixty kilometres away?"

Mrs Granger nodded. "It is. But you can't move nearly as fast underwater. The water gets in the way. Even if you have lots of power, and we don't."

Daphne looked at the lone broomstick hanging in the van. "If we used more than one broomstick, couldn't we go faster?"

Mrs Granger giggled. "Hermione's not powering the whole van — my word, no. Those brooms only produce a little less than one horse power in a horizontal line, despite the weird as hell acceleration. We checked. No, she's just steering."

Daphne frowned. "Horse power?"

"Horse power is a unit used to measure power," Hermione said. "Sort of like a flamel."

"And equal to approximately 735 watts," Mrs. Granger added.

"Which is a lot," Hermione said.
"But not nearly enough," Mrs. Granger finished.

Daphne looked at the broom. "I'll take your word for it."

Mrs. Granger edged her way around all the stuff on the floor and over to the mysterious pair of runed boxes that sat by the van's main doors. "This," she pointed to the boxes, "is how we're going to power ourselves underwater."

Hermione moved past her to stand by the boxes. "What is it?"

Mrs. Granger grinned a smug grin and held up a dramatic finger. "This… is the Granger Magic Trunk Engine!"

Daphne frowned.

Hermione gave her mum a deadpanned look. "The what?"

"Look." Mrs Granger pointed to the trunk which sat to the side. "Do you see that?"

Daphne and Hermione nodded.

"That is a half-size version of the trunks that are in these steel boxes." She pattered one of the boxes. "The boxes are each one metre square, charmed unbreakable, and there is a small hole here, do you see?"

Daphne saw two holes in the boxes that looked like someone had filled in the hole with wood from the inside.

"The trunks are stuck to the inside wall of the box with a sticking charm." Mrs. Granger pointed to a pipe on the other side of the box. "What happens is, a wizard or witch sits in the chair and puts his hands to the holes where the trunks are exposed. They then shrink one of the trunks. When the trunk shrinks, it creates a vacuum in the unbreakable box, which draws water in from the sea outside through an unbreakable one-way valve. Then, when the wizard unshrinks the trunk, the water is forced out through a different one way valve, into the main pipe, and through a twenty centimetre circular hole at 37 metres a second. They quickly alternate between the two boxes, constantly shrinking and expanding, creating a constant flow of high pressured water, producing almost fifty horse power of forward thrust." She threw up her hands in the air. "One human! Fifty horse power! It's nuts!"

Daphne bit her lip. "It sounds impressive," she hazarded.

Mrs. Granger smiled. "Imagine being able to cast an aguamenti spell so powerful you could fill twelve whole baths in one second, and then being able to keep that up for hours on end."

Daphne's jaw dropped.

"Yeah, that's what this is."

Daphne's mind raced. She stared at the… what had Mrs Granger called it? …The Granger magic trunk engine. She felt her world slowly flip over — the exact reaction Sophie Roper had been disappointed she hadn't had from the cinema. It hadn't happened then because she knew muggles had technology, which was just like another kind of magic as far as she was concerned. The cinema was impressive, and the story very entertaining, but at the end of the day, a pensieve was objectively better. But this — this was wizard magic — her magic — and of such power — only the legends spoke of this kind of power — legendary magic — legendary magic, discovered by
muggles — muggles under *Harry's* purview. Daphne felt a shiver shoot up her spine. Had this been her future husband's plan all along?

Mrs. Granger clapped her hands together. "Alright! Let's get this show on the road, or in the water, or whatever."

The whatever consisted of Daphne, Hermione, and Clare using every merlin of magic they had to levitate the van-turned-submarine across the shingle beach and into the bobbing water. Clare sat herself in the trunk engine seat while Hermione got onto the steering broom with a resigned sigh. Daphne made herself comfortable on the floor and summoned her eye of kilrogg. The world shifted as her magic eye opened. She directed it outside and a watery world opened up before her. "Forward!" Daphne called out.

A massive whoosh noise started and the craft pushed forward, out to sea, and out of the protective ring of the fidelius charm.

Daphne zipped her magic eye to the surface and gazed around. The coast line was still a stone's skim away. The islands looked like they were on the other side of the world. They were also slightly to the left. "Left!" she called out.

The magic submarine van turned right.

"No, the *other* left!"

"That *was* left!" Hermione called back, but the submarine did slowly start to slow its rotation and then slowly started turning left. Soon the islands were in their sights.

"Stop!" Daphne called out.

The whoosh of the engine ceased.

"No, I didn't mean— urgh."

"Sorry!" Clare called.

The van continued to turn left.

"I meant stop turning left!" Daphne said.

The engines starting whooshing again.

"I have!" Hermione said. "This thing's turning circle is atrocious! You need to give me, like, five seconds warning!"

Eventually, with much calling back and forth, and not a small amount of amused input from Hermione's parents, the magic submarine ceased it's wiggling path towards the islands and settled into something a bit more linear. Soon though, Daphne spotted something that would have caused her to narrow her eye, if the magic eye had eyelids to narrow. It was a row boat rowing itself. Its human looking passenger sat slouched in the wooden seat, smoking a cigarette. The crest on the side of the boat was clear to anyone in know. The Goldtooth Clan. "Enemy goblin patrol in row boat," she called out, not quite so loud as before. "About two quidditch pitch lengths away."

"Cut the engine," Mister Granger said in a voice that brooked no argument.

The engine whoosh died.
Daphne watched as the goblin row boat got closer. The human had a two handed long sword strapped to his back. Probably a goblin under polyjuice. She zipped the eye over to investigate, getting as close as the eye's range would allow. An ashtray sat next to the goblin, filled with a small mountain of stubbed out dog-ends. Then, suddenly, the goblin jerked up from its musings and started right at her, surprised and shocked.

Shit!

Daphne zipped the eyeball away to the side.

"Contact," she whispered.

She heard a sharp intake of breath from inside the submarine, turned the eyeball around, and watched the goblin look wildly around. It had clearly spotted something about the eye. Hopefully it hadn't identified anything important. Soon the goblin settled back down in the small boat, shrugged, and tapped its finger to the oars, which once again started rowing all by themselves. It gave no more indication it was suspicious of the eye, and certainly not of the submarine sitting hidden, far below the waves. Eventually, the goblin patrol was gone again.

Daphne let out a long breath. "Clear," she said.

Long breaths were let out all around her.

"Forward," she said.

The whoosh of the trunk engine started up again.

"What was that?" Mister Granger asked.

"I don't know if it could see me," Daphne said, still watching the retreating rowboat, "but it could definitely sense something."

"Goblins aren't allowed to use wands," Hermione commented. "Maybe there are more of them who are skilled at wandless magic — like Uagadou — African wizards are supposed to be really good at that — all sorts of other things too."

"Could be," Daphne hazarded.

Hours slowly floated by. A whale passed the sub — so close Daphne could see inside its blowhole. It didn't seem to be a threat. She giggled as the water sprayed over the eye, and sighed as it swam out of sight. They stopped several times to rest and eat. Clare started looking quite the worse for wear. She had by far the most magically draining job of all of them. They moved around the largest island in the Orkney's and started towards their intended target — Gairsay island

As they closed in, Daphne kept her eye upon it. Even with what little magic sensing training Harry had given her, the build up of latent magic on her skin brushed across said senses like rose petals on said skin. The last time she'd seen the island, it had been bare — an empty hill of land. Now, small trees, bushes, and long grasses lay smattered all over the island. But it was the hill top that had most changed. The top had been flattened, and a huge building in solid looking white stone now stood atop it — Slytherin Manor — her future home.

They slowly edged around to the far side of the island and surfaced as close as they could, Hermione holding the van steady with about half a foot poking out above the faintly lapping waves. Daphne dismissed the eye, climbed up the small ladder to the door in the roof, climbed out, mounted her broom, and quickly made the tiny jump from the van onto the land where she was
immediately met by a goblininess of the Boneslicer clan — Floating-Interest, Ragnok's daughter and project lead on the construction.

Ten minutes later, the van had been lifted from the water and hidden under a tarpaulin. Mister and Mrs. Granger held an exhausted Clare steady between them.

Daphne stood next to Hermione, gazing up the long path through the greenery towards the shell of Slytherin Manor. It didn't have windows yet. A part of one side was still under construction. Little cranes and scaffolding covered it all over.

"It's amazing," Hermione said.

Daphne agreed, but decided to dig anyway. "What's amazing about it?"

Hermione glanced towards her parents, who'd wandered off in the direction of the Granger plot of land. She turned back and lowered her voice. "That our lord can make things like this happen."

Daphne nodded. Yes, that certainly was the most impressive thing about all this. Slytherin Manor wasn't much bigger than Greengrass Manor, but it hadn't been her parents who'd build Greengrass Manor. Greengrass Manor had been built over four hundred years ago. Standing here felt like standing at the start of something far larger than just herself. The manor was Harry's stake in the ground. A statement that here he was, and here he'd stay, regardless of what anyone else in the wizarding world might do or want.

The Grangers and Clare soon returned and Floating-Interest led them up to the manor proper, saying that they had, "sent the house elves off for the rest of the day."

They made there way past a small clearing of yellow daffodil-like flowers that all closed the moment they got near and opened up again as they passed. They reached the top of the hill, and, as they made their way across the front lawn, saw a scowling young goblin grappling with a whomping willow sapling in a massive flower pot. A sea of flower pots surrounded them, all apparently ready for planting. Many of the other plants seemed to be egging the young whomping willow on. The goblin spotted them as they passed, gave Floating-Interest a sudden, enthusiastic wave, and was rewarded with a branch whip to the head.

They trooped up the wide circular stairs to the large double-story front doors. Floating-Interest opened the smaller door set into the large doors and they walked through a reception room, through another set of large doors, and into a huge open circular space with a wide staircase at the far end and a balcony that ran all the way around the second floor overhang. Daphne could already hear the ballroom music and see the hundred-odd wizards and witches watching the dancers from their lofty seats — and one day, one of those dancers would be her — with Harry.

Floating-Interest led them through the many rooms of the manor — sitting rooms, kitchens, dining rooms, even the house-elf quarters, where everything was in miniature, from the doors to the windows, and they had to crouch to get through, the Grangers and Clare more so than she and Hermione.

They saw the workshop, the offices, and even the gym, which was notable as being the only room in the Manor that was already furnished. Daphne didn't know how even half the iron structures were used, but the iron weights laying all around gave her enough of a clue of what they were for. In one corner, a goblin lay flat on his back on a bench, pushing a bar with iron plates attached to it up and down, making obscenely loud grunting sounds while doing so.

Floating-Interest smiled a wry, seductive smile, one pointy tooth jutting out over her lip-stick red
lips. "The boys can't help but try to impress."

They backed back out into the long corridor that circled the ballroom, and Hermione actually let out a little squeal when Floating-Interest opened the next set of set of doors and declared the large empty space beyond to be 'the library.'

The private quarters on the top floor weren't yet finished, so instead, Floating-Interest showed Hermione and Daphne to the basement and then left with her parents and Clare to see to the unpacking of the test-run goods from the submarine van. The basement was a wide open floor interspersed by the occasional mighty stone pillar.

"This wasn't on the plans," Hermione whispered gazing around the huge, cavernous space. Her voice reverberated back at her. "What are we going to do with all this?"

Daphne shrugged. "The plans had to be filed with the ministry. Our lord said this was for, 'creative expansion' — whatever that means."

"Stockpiling room?" Hermione asked. "Dueling room? Ritual room?"

Daphne shrugged again. "No idea. Whatever it is, it can't be too expensive. The six-hundred galleons from the Nimbus contract is a lot of money, but it doesn't come close to the eighty-thousand galleons that we still owe for this (£4,000,000)." Daphne turned to her friend, who was now busy nibbling on her bottom lip, and smiled. "Our lord will be back soon. I'm sure he's come up with something."

—End of Chapter Thirty-four—

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yes, I am aware that a certain Steven Spielberg thriller came out summer 1993, not 1992 — this is sometimes an AU of the real world as well as the canon one ^^

A/N: In case you're curious, Gairsay Island is a real place. Harry's deeds also give him ownership of the two smaller islands to the South and North-East.

A/N: Over 400 people signed up for my little Gray mailing list experiment. Mind blown.

Sticky Note: I now have original fantasy fiction published. You can find it by following the bread crumb trail in my profile page. If you can't wait for my next fanfic chapter release, you might like to check that out to tide you over.
[Five weeks ago, at the start of summer break.]

The Hogwarts Express had pulled into the station. Harry was saying his final goodbyes.

"Stay safe, Harry," Hermione said.

Daphne nodded too. "We'll miss you."

Harry smiled back at Daphne. "I know. I'll make sure to keep in contact when I can, but I am going to be really busy." He looked around quickly before continuing. "Because — let's face it — I've got some serious pocket money to make this summer."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Way on the far side of the platform, doing his best not to be seen doing so, Lucius Malfoy watched and observed as Harry Potter left Platform 9 3/4.

"Greetings, Father — Mother."

Lucius tore his gaze away, turned, and nodded. "Draco."

"You've grown." Narcissa smiled. "Come — let's be out of this mob."

They flooed home and Narcissa proceeded to quiz Draco during dinner. His son had ranked sixth in his year. Not bad by some standards, but unacceptable for a Malfoy. The fact that Harry Potter could well be one of Lord Voldemort's horcruxes did mitigate circumstances somewhat, but scoring below the vassal girl, of all people, was just disgraceful.

After dinner, Lucius made himself ready to head out again.

"Going out, my lord?"

Narcissa stood in his bedroom doorway, hands on her hips.

"I am," he said. "Dumbledore's eviction from Hogwarts presents us with a timely opportunity. I need to set the wheels in motion."

Narcissa's eyes widened slightly. "You don't mean…?"

Lucius adjusted the cuffs of his robes and strolled over to the door, kissing his wife on the cheek as he passed. "Yes, Narcissa, I do."

The sun had yet to set on Knockturn Alley. Late enough for the daily shoppers to have fled, but early enough for the night-time wanderers to still be inside. The street was deserted. Lucius knocked a pattern on a nondescript door and waited. The door opened and he was quickly ushered inside. A half-dozen moving wizarding photos lined the other-wise drab walls, all filled with smiling wizards and witches, and all with comments written beneath like, 'Quick, easy, and painless, the wizarding world is where I want to be,' and, 'I never fit into the muggle world, and now I don't have to.'
"Lord Malfoy," the man who'd ushered him inside sat behind a desk.

"Mister Jeremy Bemthan." Lucius sat down in one of the plush armchairs. "I have need of your services."

Mister Bemthan raised an eyebrow. "I was not aware you were in that market." He was a large man, round and bald — and obviously bald by choice — no wizard was bald unless he wanted to be.

"I am not in that market." Lucius couldn't help let out a slight sneer. "But nevertheless, I find myself in need."

Mister Bemthan took out a parchment. "Go on."

"I need a girl."

Mister Bemthan started scribbling.

"Muggleborn, obviously," Lucius continued. "She needs to be fit, healthy, of fair features, eleven years old, magically powerful — that she be a virgin goes without saying — and she must to be obtained legally."

Mister Bemthan held up a hand. "Lord Malfoy — going to have to stop you there. You'll be lucky if there's even one body that fits this description in the whole country, and the ministry won't—"

"—I expect you to look further afield. In fact, I require it."

Mister Bemthan smiled grimly. "That turns the job from impossible to merely extremely expensive. Getting them when they're adults is relatively easy. Tidying up all the loose ends when they're this young requires a lot more work."

Lucius looked away. "I also require memory charms for all involved parties, with signed agreements not to tamper with them." He looked back. "Including of yourself."

Mister Bemthan nodded slowly. "We could do all that — it would take time though."

"You have one month."

Mister Bemthan sucked in his breath before letting it out. He closed his eyes and opened them again. "It will be close, and I still can not promise results — not for something like this — but we can give it our best shot. Five-thousand galleons — half up front and half on delivery (£250,000)."

On hearing that, Lucius actually had to take a deep, calming breath of his own. Five-thousand galleons was nearly a quarter of his total yearly income before expenses, donations, or anything, but the alternative was far too dangerous. He gripped his cane in tight fingers. "Do it."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

[three weeks ago]

In the woods surrounding Potter Manor, a stag and a grim raced through the tress — one flowing with tall, graceful strides, the other powering forward with shorter, faster ones.

The two animals reached a clearing. The grim darted in front of the stag and barked. The stag screeched to a halt and lowered its massive, antlered head, one hoofed foot digging aggressively at the ground.
Somewhere up in the trees, a bird tweeted.

Then, suddenly, the two animals transformed, wands came forward and spells flew. For a hundred heartbeats, the two wizards traded magic before Lord James Potter collapsed to one knee, panting furiously, one hand held up, palm forward. "Give!"

Lord Sirius Black lowered his wand and grinned. "You're losing it, Prongs."

"Rubbish!" James glared at his auror uniformed friend. "You've just got better. Some of us don't get the luxury of training half of every day."

Sirius roared with laughter. "Still making excuses, eh?"

"Excuses?! You should be thanking me on bended knee for saving your lazy arse." James got to his feet and brushed an imaginary speck of dust from his robes. "I bet if it were you playing lords and ladies in the Wizengamot, you'd tub out before you could say, 'finger-food.'"

Sirius strolled over to his friend. "And if it were you playing auror, you'd get your stubborn arse fired before you could even put on your badge." They started walking together through the woods back the way they came.

"How's your muggle-wizard drug smuggler hunt going?" James asked.

Sirius grunted. "Dead. Almost got him several times since summer started. But every time, he somehow managed to slip away. Hasn't been a peep from him in over a month. I think he's given up."

"Surely that's a good thing."

Sirius shrugged. "I don't like it. Who knows what trouble the slippery bugger might be up to. Not that I'm complaining too much." His face darkened. "You wouldn't believe the things Shacklebolt sees in some of those muggle's minds — they make our criminals look cuddly."

"What about Harry?"

"No change. Amelia says we've done all we can do and now it's a waiting game."

"So, you haven't heard anything?"

"You mean from Harry directly?" Sirius shook his head. "Apart from for Alex's birthday party, no."

James scowled and ran his hand through his hair. "It's just so frustrating! Who does that man think he is?!"

Sirius said nothing.

"I mean, does he think that Harry is his son?"

Sirius still said nothing.

"Padfoot, say something!"

Sirius sighed. "Prongs, I'm really not sure what to think."

James's shoulders slumped. "I just... I really wish I knew where he is, and that he's not in any trouble."
Gunfire roared all around him. Harry ducked behind a wall, ignoring the semi-automatic weaponry rounds pinging off the cheap concrete, and concentrated on not being seen as he re-cast his projectile shield. He heard shouting from up the mud track and from inside the compound behind him. He ducked around the wall, caught a glance of his target, and, suddenly, where before there had been air, now there was a large bullet, hanging in mid air and gently spinning an inch away from his face.

Harry slapped the projectile away, still ignoring the shouting, and launched himself in the direction of his fleeing target. More bullets zipped towards him, but all stopped dead before the could reach him.

His target reached a parked pick-up truck with a machine gun mounted on the back and, screaming at the driver, jumped in.

The pick-up skidded on the muddy path and slowly started accelerating away.

Harry scowled, saw the building some hundred metres in front of the escaping truck, fixed it into his mind, threw himself behind a nearby bush, disillusioned himself, and disappeared with a loud crack sound, appearing in front of the building, just soon enough for him to cancel his disillusionment, and take a literal flying leap onto the bonnet of the now passing truck, landing hard enough to dent the already badly damaged metal work.

The shouting driver swerved, clearly trying to dislodge him.

The target screamed and started reaching for something in his jacket, but it was too late. The car careened off the sorry excuse for a road and straight into one of many thorny bushes. Harry swung around the side and knocked the driver out with what to anyone else would look like a punch but had in fact been a pointblank range wandless stunner.

The target scrambled out of the pick-up truck, pointed his hand-gun over the bonnet, and fired shot after shot. One would have actually hit, if it hadn't been for the shield, but the target didn't seem to notice this and soon ran out of shots.

Harry vaulted over the bonnet and punched him. It wasn't the most wizardly thing to do, but he was uncharacteristically pissed off.

The man fell to the ground, shook his head to clear it, and snarled up at him. "Why you do this? We had a deal! Your Russian rockets for—"

Harry punched him again, cutting him off. "Your war is with a military! With helicopters! Not with whole villages of random people!"

The man spat blood on the ground. "You know nothing! If we do not kill them, they will kill us first! They've done it before! Our families will all die!"

"The women?"

The man sneered. "They get no less than they are worth."

The two men stared hatefully at each other. The faint sounds of shouting were starting to get closer. The muggle glared defiantly up at him. "You will never get out of here alive."
Harry smiled a smile with zero humour. "We'll see." He stepped towards the muggle laying in the mud, gripped his arm, and apparated the two of them into a plush looking office.

The man looked around wildly. "My off— how? What?" He looked at Harry in horror. "Oh god, you're one of them."

What? Alarm bells rang in Harry's mind.

The man stumbled backwards and fell backwards on the floor again. "You shouldn't be here — they said — No! Please. My son. Don't hurt my—" Harry stared as the man devolved into incoherent whimpering, all defiance gone.

"—I'll do anything, just don't—"

Harry stamped on the man's chest, causing him to let out a large omff sound. "—I'm not going to hurt your son, you fuck. Who is they!?"

The man stilled. His voice came out, much quieter. "I can't. I mustn't."

Oh, fuck this. Harry locked gaze with the man and dove right in — or rather, he tried. To his utter shock, his legilimency probe bounced off a light shield that flashed into being. Magic whirled around the man's finger — a ring — just like the one he'd given the Grangers.

The man looked at his finger in horror. "Oh, god. You've done it now. He'll know. He'll come."

Harry groaned. "Who is he!?"

The man continued to babble nonsense.

Harry reached down and grabbed the muggle warlord's head in both hands. He didn't have time for this. What he was about to do wasn't going to be pretty, but if there was anyone who was worth bloodying his hands for the first time in his existence, it was this sick bastard.

Harry's magic poured out of him, overwhelmed the defences on the ring, and ripped into the muggle's vulnerable mind like a combine-harvester in a field of mouldy wheat.

He saw a robed figure — tall and terrible, murdering the muggle warlord's wife with a single point of his hand and a curse.

He saw the frightened muggle warlord giving out orders that anyone with 'demonic' abilities was to be rounded up.

He saw the murderous robed figure taking the clearly magic children away, never to be seen again.

He saw the warlord's own son display accidental magic.

He saw the warlord desperately try to get the child to suppress the *demon* inside him, saw him try everything from exorcism to self-flagellation.

He saw the warlord's efforts work. After little over year, the boy never displayed magic again.

Harry pulled back and watched the man collapse down onto the floor, eyes white, drool slipping from his mouth, arms and legs limp, mind totally scrambled, not quite dead, but close enough to make no difference.

"Why?"
Harry stilled, then turned slowly. A boy stood in the office doorway. He couldn't be much older than eight, but he wore the military uniform all these people wore. His hair was close-cropped, his hands trembled, and his eyes were wide. It was the son he'd just seen in the man's memories.

Ugh. Harry had no clue what to say. He needed to finish up this deal and get out, no matter just how fucked up it had got. Angry shouts filtered into the room from the compound outside.

"Why?" the boy repeated.

Harry stood up from where he'd been kneeling over the braindead muggle. "I'm sorry, kid. Your father was not a nice man." His payment would probably be in a safe somewhere, if he could just find it.

The boy started crying.

Harry sighed and pointed his wand at the boy. It was better this way. "Obliviate."

The spell vanished an inch away from the boy. Harry frowned. What the hell? That hadn't been a ring shield. He took a cautious step forward.

The rumbling of a large truck outside stopped as the driver cut the engine.

"I'll kill you." The boy's words came out barely more than a whisper.

Harry narrowed his eyes, looking over the child for a clue, a hint, anything, but there was nothing — it was like his spell had connected with some kind of magical event horizon.

"I'll kill you." The words were louder this time. The boy's crying had stopped.

Harry cast a cautionary shield spell.

The boy screamed, "I'll kill you!" Magic flared — more magic than Harry had ever felt from a single being.

Harry stepped backwards. A memory flashed through his head — a memory of a young Tom Riddle reading in the Hogwarts library, self righteousness over his own unrestrained behaviour at the orphanage roaring through him like a furnace.

'And great care must be taken not to encourage magical children to suppress their magic, else a magical parasite will form and feed on that suppressed magic. The parasite will grow and grow, eating away at the child's sanity, causing mayhem equal to the most powerful magical creatures, until eventually the child dies, the parasite following soon after.'

Harry took another step back.

The boy's head whipped up, his body disintegrated, and where before there had been a human child, now there was a huge white cloud of enraged destruction plowing straight through the office, ripping through furniture and files, and aimed straight at him.

Obscurial.

Harry apparated straight out of the room, into the courtyard outside, and right into the middle of a convoy of surprised muggles all carrying heavy weaponry.

"It's him!" one of them yelled, but before they could bring their semi-automatic rifles to bear, the office window above blew open in a rain of glass and concrete and the obscurial descended on
them.

Harry made to apparate away. The last thing he saw before doing so, was a man unlucky enough to be standing nearest the explosion, grabbed by the rampaging parasite and flung sideways with such force that the crack of his neck was heard all around the compound.

Harry appeared in a field several miles away. He could still hear the sounds of screaming. Not far enough. He apparated again, and again, and again, until he was all the way up in the mountains in a clearing overlooking the forest and plains of the surrounding countryside. He leaned on his knees and breathed deeply. Apparating so many times in quick succession certainly took it out of him. He straightened up. Okay, now he would wait until the obscurial had finished its rampage so he could go back and grab his payment. Despite the monumentally fucked up way things had turned out, he had delivered on his end of the deal, so the payment he took from these fucks shouldn't show up as stolen to Gringotts anti-theft charms.

He sat down cross-legged on the ground, and waited, letting the small build-up of magical toxins seep out of him.

Then, suddenly, Harry's skin tingled, minute traces of magical intent caressing his senses, far too subtle for most wizards to detect, but which might as well have been a warning siren to him. Harry frowned. It seemed that, despite not arriving here long ago, he wasn't alone. The faint brush of a weak anti-apparition ward washed over him. Mmmmm… and this didn't feel like an auror sting, Merlin knew he'd been in enough of them in the last few weeks…

Harry stood, pointed his disguised wand at the rocky, uneven ground and gave it a twirl, conjuring a pair of slightly modified versions of his customary arm chair, each facing the other. He sat down in one, crossed one leg across the over, and continued waiting.

Not much later, a man emerged from the trees, dark-skinned, tall, bald, reasonable young, maybe in his mid-twenties, and dressed in bright flowing robes of many colours — bright oranges and yellows, but also purples, reds, and blues — they all overlapped in sharp geometric shapes, a broken stain-glass window of silk and magic. The man casually wandered to the empty chair and sat down.

Harry remembered the muggle warlord looking at his ring finger in absolute terror. "Oh, god. You've done it now," the man had said. "He'll know. He'll come."

The two men watched each other.

Harry felt a brush against his occlumency barriers. He firmly pushed it away.

Eventually the other man spoke. "You are in my territory."

Harry pursed his lips. "My apologies. I did not realise. I will finish my business here and depart henceforth."

The man snorted. "Who are you?"

"My name is No One."

The man rolled his eyes before fixing Harry with his gaze again. "You killed one of my pawns."

"He was an evil man," Harry replied. "He butchered whole villages of people who had done him no wrong and who were no more guilty than the next random group."
The man inclined his head. "Unfortunate, but their value was not high enough to warrant my intervention."

Harry twitched. "He cut off the arms of a muggleborn boy when he raided his village."

The man suddenly looked more interested. "Where is this boy?"

"In a safe place."

The man huffed. "Well, I suppose he wouldn't be very useful without his arms anyway, but that doesn't change the fact that you killed one of my more useful muggles. For that I am going to have to have you put down." He actually sounded sorrowful.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "A bold statement to make, mister…?"

"Tebola, Gray Lord Tebola."

Harry's mind stalled for a second before re-starting. "Gray Lord?"

"As in Gray Lord Slytherin." Tebola stared off into the distance, hand under his chin. "That man has the right idea. Muggleborns have a valuable place in our world, if only we can get them past the stupid notions their parents feed them." Tebola turned back to Harry. "You're British — I can tell. You don't know him, do you?"

"No."

Tebola sighed. "Shame." He snapped his fingers.

Harry heard rustling in the bushes around him.

Behind Tebola, a girl stepped out of the undergrowth. She couldn't be much older than thirteen. Harry could feel two others behind him. It wasn't difficult. Killing intent had a very distinct feeling.

Harry frowned. "Uagadou students?"

Tebola nodded. "Muggleborn orphans of the civil war. Everything went to hell when the Soviets pulled out, but there have been benefits — magicals united — helping and supporting each other — looking out for each other."

Harry looked at the girl standing behind Tebola. Her eyes shone with the zealous fervour of a fighter with a cause to die for.

Tebola slowly stood up. "It's been nice having this conversation, Mister No One." He stepped away. "Kill him."

Harry felt three killing curses shoot towards him and saw the sickly green light leap from the girl's bare hand. He moved, banishing the chair into the path of one, dodging a second, and bringing his wand up just in time to swat away the third.

A wall of rock shouldered its way out of the ground and split him off from the two assailants behind him, leaving only him, the girl, and Tebola, who's eyes now betrayed his shock, even as he reached for his own wand, not quite managing it before Harry slammed a wall of raw banishing magic into the girl, so powerful she was thrown backwards into a tree and instantly knocked unconscious.

Unseen by Tebola, but felt and commanded by Harry, two massive rock snakes ripped themselves
from the wall of rock behind him, and started on his two other assailants.

Harry and Tebola traded spells, each trying to get a feel for the other. It quickly became obvious that the Lord Slytherin copy cat was strong, quick, and talented, all things considering.

A scream behind him signalled that his rock snakes had finished off the other two unfortunate muggleborns and, moments later, the snakes formed themselves into a huge rock lion, leaped up onto the wall, roared, and launched itself towards Tebola, only to be met halfway by a huge earth golem. The two constructs grappled each other, while Harry and Tebola, circled, cast, dodged, shielded, conjured, transfigured, charmed, and swatted. Soon enough, Harry's flame whip clipped the earth golem, severing it's right arm clean off and giving his rock lion the purchase it needed to start systematically pounding it into dust.

Tebola growled and, before Harry could grasp what was happening, turned into a huge wild boar with ash-coloured fur, massive spiked tusks, and vicious looking hoofs. The beast vanished from sight and charged at Harry, far faster than he'd expect, forcing him to physically shield. Not even one second later the huge creature hit the shield with a loud dong sound. Harry felt the shield vibrate and only just hold. He could feel the magic in front of him, even if he couldn't see anything. It wasn't that Tebola was an Animagus — that wasn't surprising for a graduate of Uagadu. No, Tebola was a magical animagus — a tebo — an XXXX magical boar that could turn invisible at will and had high magic and physical resistance. That was impressive.

The tebo leaped back and made another charge. Harry sent his flame-whip hurtling towards the beast, only to watch in resignation as the cord of magical fire had all the stopping power of a lover's caress. He shielded again just as the invisible beast arrived and was rewarded again with a loud dong that vibrated through the shield, up through his wand, and even into his teeth.

Animal and wizard duelled like bull and matador. Tebola's skin proved to be just as magically resistant as reputed for a tebo and everything Harry threw at it just bounced off. He tried trapping him in a transfigured spike pit, but Tebola could clearly still sense magic, even in his animal form, and just avoided those areas. Eventually, it took a combination of four separately transfigured rock lions, each one a quarter of the size of his original, and close to a dozen conjured flying swords to pin the pig down.

Sensing he was trapped, Tebola seemed to panic, transformed back into his human form and tried to apparate out, only to bounce off the muggle born trio's apparition ward. For Harry, that was more than enough of an opening. Seconds later, Tebola was wandless, tied up, and hanging upside-down with a dozen floating swords pointing straight at him, ready to impale him should he try and transform again.

Tebola was breathing hard and fast in little gasps and pants.

Harry smiled grimly. Not bad at all. Nowhere near on par with Dumbledore or Voldemort, but he certainly wouldn't have let any of the girls go up against him, even all together. That magical animagus form had been a nasty surprise. He pointed his wand at the bound, would-be Gray Lord.

"Gold!" Tebola screamed.

Harry stilled, wand mere inches from the man's face.

"Gold!" Tebola shouted again. "The muggles around here make all make their money from diamonds! They pay me in exchange for protection! It's not stolen! All legal!"

Harry's mind raced. He already had a good chunk of Gringotts legal payment waiting for him back
at the compound, but this could be the opportunity he needed to go one step further. "What would I sell you?" he asked. "Payment in exchange for the owner's life still counts as stealing."

"Weapons!" the man shouted. "You're an arms dealer, right? Sell me muggle weapons and I'll make you one of the richest wizards on Earth!"

Harry grimaced. Every neurone in his brain told him that selling muggle weapons to a rising Gray Lord was up there with splitting your soul six times on the bad-fucking-idea scale. "No, I don't think that's going to work."

"I'll buy something else! What else do you sell?"

Harry thought back to his stalled drug dealing business. "Well…"

Then, suddenly, his skin tingled. He frowned. "Did you feel that?"

The still upside down wizard quickly shook his head.

Whatever it was, it was getting closer, and fast. Harry turned around, eyes narrowed. Birds cried and flew up in the middle distance. He could hear sounds of crashing and ripping, starting faint, but quickly getting louder.

Harry's eyes widened. "Oh, sh—"

The obscurial burst into the clearing, dragging enough broken wood behind it to damn a river.

"—it!" He dove to the side, ignoring Tebola's screams as the obscurial rammed straight through his conjured blades, snatched Tebola up and carried him, still screaming, up into the air. Harry ran as fast as he could to get to the perimeter of the now fading apparition ward. Moment's later he was through. The obscurial roared. He heard a loud crack. Tebola appeared at his side, one arm bloody where a conjured sword had pierced it, a second wand in his off hand, fear replaced with rage. "Avada Kedavra!"

Harry apparated away with a loud crack before the spell reached him. Tebola appeared beside him again, not bothering with the killing curse this time, just peppering him with low level curses, forcing him to dodge, shield, and swat while the obscurial continued to bear down on the two duelling wizards — a runaway freight train of pure destruction, blasting apart trees and ripping them aside like so much tissue paper. Harry and Tebola were forced to stop trading magic several times, just to focus on outrunning it.

Halfway back to the muggle compound, Tebola shouted something Harry didn't catch, but which sounded awfully like a cry of triumph, and apparated away from the fight. Harry didn't see him again in the whole subsequent trip, made much faster now he didn't have to save so much magic to defend himself with.

Harry appeared in the warlord's office, right in the middle of two soldiers having a loud argument with each other. Shocked, they pulled guns on him, and got two chest stunners in return. Harry then proceeded to demolish the room until he found a safe which he opened with an alohomora, grabbed the small bag within, opened it to find a small pile of raw diamonds that looked like it would cover his payment, and apparated into the courtyard outside the building, just as the obscurial caught up with him again.

Harry apparated away from the rampaging parasite just as it was about to plough through him, and appeared right behind one of the Russian ground to air missile systems he'd originally delivered to the warlord, not even twenty-four hours ago. He aimed it at the fast approaching whirlwind of
destruction and fired. There was a massive explosion and a boy fell out of the sky, landing on the
ground with a loud thump.

Harry moved fast. Sprinting over to the downed boy, he pulled out his shrunk trunk, expanded it,
opened it up, and climbed inside.

Another boy with no arms looked up at him with wide eyes from where he sat on the couch. "We
there?"

Harry reached into a desk draw and took out a vial of living death. "Not yet. Eventually. I
promise."

The boy nodded.

Harry quickly made his way back out of the trunk and forced the draught of living death into the
obscurial boy's mouth. He then carried him into the trunk. "Get up!"

The armless boy jumped to his feet as Harry lay the obscurial boy down on the couch. "Don't touch
him," he said. "He needs to rest."

The armless boy nodded, Harry exited the trunk again, and was just finishing up closing and
pocketing the trunk, when a group of soldiers appeared and started taking pot shots. This wouldn't
have been a problem if, moments later, two African aurors hadn't appeared in the middle of the
street accompanied by a victorious looking Tebola.

"Surrender!" One of the aurors shouted in a thick accent, shielding against the rain of gunfire now
pouring down on them all. "You are under arrest for murder, violations of the international statute
of secrecy, and illegal muggle-wizard trade!"

Harry groaned and apparated several miles away, landing at a respectable jog, but getting only a
few steps before the three wizards predictably apparated nearby, forcing him to start swatting away
stunning and disarming spells. He apparated again, and again they followed. His three assailants
worked together to constantly keep him busy. He'd never get the time to put on his cloak. He
couldn't reveal that he could fly. Uagadu was almost five-thousand kilometres away. This was
going to be a long chase.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

When someone says the word ‘dungeon’ it might be easy to imagine a sprawling labyrinth of rooms
and passageways — a place in which an unfamiliar soul could easily lose themselves, first in the
darkness, and then to some unknown monster that prowls the maze. The dungeon below Malfoy
Manor was not like that. It was instead, a single bare room with a heavy iron door, wedged in
between the ritual room and the wine cellar.

Lord Lucius Malfoy pulled open the heavy door, stepped inside, withdrew a shrunk trunk from his
pocket, placed it on the floor, and expanded it.

Lady Narcissa Malfoy stepped in behind her husband. "And they made sure that everything was
legal?"

Lucius tapped on the top of the trunk's lid. "As legal as they could make it."

Narcissa sighed. "I still don't like it."

"We have done everything we can," Lucius said. "Be grateful we wrangled as many concessions as
we were able to."

Narcissa nodded reluctantly.

Lucius gripped the trunk's lid, opened it, and peered inside. A small trembling girl was hunched in a corner, dressed in muggle jeans and a thick coat made of some plastic-like material. She looked up, tear stains covering her otherwise aesthetically pleasing face. Blond hair and blue eyes — perfect.

"W-Where a-a-am I?" the girl sniffed. "What are you—"

Lucius shot a silencing spell at her.

She gripped at her throat, eyes wide in terror and tried to burrow herself deeper into the corner.

He turned to his wife. "All yours, Narcissa" he said, before leaving.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Julia Olsson tried to burrow further into the corner, clutching her throat when noise refused to emerge, fear flooding through her. These people were just like the others. The ones that could do magic. She didn't know how long she'd been trapped in this empty basement room, but it felt like months. She had no clock, no way of telling the time. It might have been months for all she knew. Different people had come down to check on her — to give her food and water and clean out the pot that served duty as a toilet. At first they'd all spoken Swedish, but soon a different group of people were seeing to her, and those people only spoke English. She knew she couldn't have been here for years because her finger nails hadn't grown all that long. She hadn't changed her clothes even once since being forced in here. Who were these people! What did they want with her? Her parents and friends must be worried sick. She wasn't sure where she was, but Stockholm couldn't be far away — It hadn't been *that* long between being grabbed from her bedroom and being shoved in here.

The rich looking man left and an equally well-off looking woman, apparently called Narcissa, replaced him on the other side of the square hole in the roof. "Get up," she said. "Out here, now."

Julia didn't move.

The woman frowned and pointed her stick at her. Julia flinched back. Those sticks scared her. She felt a force pull on her whole body and flailed around in useless panic, heart beating wildly, as she was unwillingly hauled through the air, towards the roof, up through the trap door, and into a tiny room, bare, but for a small cot chained to a side of a wall. She was dumped on the floor in a limp heap.

"You stink," the woman declared, looking her over and scrunching her nose up in disgust. "Get out of those horrible things. Now!"

Julia didn't move.

The woman flicked the stick and Julia felt something half-way between a slap and a punch slam into the side of her face, sending her backwards onto the floor. Pain flooded through her face.

"When I tell you to do something, you do it! Understand?" the woman snarled.

Julia nodded quickly, tears forming and running down her now puffy cheeks. She quickly discarded the coat, and then slowly peeled off the rest of the cold and clammy clothes that hadn't
been washed in god knew how long. What was going to happen to her? She was soon standing in front of the woman, totally naked, head held low, sniffing and sobbing. Her question was quickly answered when the woman pointed her stick at her and cold water gashed from the end, hitting her body and making her gasp in shock.

The woman threw her a brush. "Get scrubbing! Quickly now!"

Julia complied. Eventually she'd been cleaned to the woman's satisfaction and dried with another flick of the stick. The woman threw her a pair of clean underwear and a large pillowcase with holes in it for her head and arms. She put them on—not daring to comment about the strange choice in clothing—and sat on the cot with her hands wringing in her lap.

"You will be quiet when I or my husband are not here, understand?"

Julia nodded.

"You will not ask the servants any questions, understand?"

Julia nodded again. Then her eyes widened in shock when the woman tapped the trunk that led to the basement, shrunk it to the size of a matchbox, and put it in her pocket, leaving no trace in the floor of where the basement had been.

The woman then turned, left, and slammed the large iron door behind her, plunging her into darkness. Julia swallowed. That basement room she'd been in had been a magic box. Was she even still in Sweden? Was she even still on Earth? Julia drew her knees up to her chest and quietly sobbed all over her pillowcase.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Magical exhaustion. The build up of toxins in the body, resulting in lack of focus, tiredness, lethargy, and one hell of a hangover for those not sensible enough to not drink enough fluids. Despite having gone nuclear twice in the past, Harry could never remember feeling so drained.

After an epic ten hours chase, he'd finally managed to shake his pursuers with only one thousand kilometres to go before he got to Uagadou. Thank Merlin.

By the time he actually arrived, he could barely walk in a straight line. Uagadou was a clay baked monument to wizarding learning, standing proud on top of a tree covered mountain shrouded in perpetual mist. Each individual brick was charmed against physical force, magical force, scrying, map making, damp, fire, lightning, and many, many more things beside.

He half stumbled up to a massive gong just outside the fearsome wards and struck it once with an arm that felt all together too heavy.

Several minutes later, a pair of African woman dressed in colourful robes, not dissimilar to the style that Tebola had worn, descended the path from the school.

"Can we help you, sir?" one woman asked.

"I have an orphan in distress for you," he answered.

Uagadou's great hall wasn't anything like Hogwart's. While Hogwart's had four tables for their four houses, Uagadou had just one table — a table that wrapped around the edge of the massive circular space before spiralling in to the centre in ever tighter and tighter coils. Unlike Hogwart's in summer, this hall was bustling.
The schoolmistress sat in the centre of the spiral. Getting to the centre took ages.

"His name is Jengo," Harry said to the old woman when he finally arrived, forcing down every instinct that was screaming at him to find a bed and not leave it for a month. "I found him on one of my journeys. He had the misfortune of having both his arms cut off."

The old woman's eyes dimmed. "I am sorry. We cannot take someone with such a disability."

Harry shook his head. "I can fix that problem."

The old woman fixed him with a suddenly sharp look. "You can?"

"I can."

The sounds of a hundred students feasting filled the momentary silence between man and woman.

"Show me," the woman said.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

After crying herself to sleep, Julia woke up, shivering cold, to find some additions had been made to her prison room. A stool by her cot held a small pile of books and a pen, along with a glass of water and a plate of food that could only be called so because snot was green and this was black. There wasn't any cutlery.

Julia sat up. She hadn't been starved, but she hadn't been well fed either. She picked up the plate in trembling hands, scooped up some of the unidentified goop with her hand and fed it into her mouth. She made a face. Revolting. She finished it anyway, accidentally dropping some of the goop onto her pillowcase. She scooped up what little she could, making a smear on the cloth, and ate the tiny extra glob.

She then turned her attention to the glass and downed the whole thing. She put the glass down with a thump and briefly entertained the idea of smashing it to create a weapon, but quickly discarded the notion as incredibly stupid.

With nothing else to do, she picked up the first book in the pile, titled, 'Wizarding Geography and Territory,' opened it, and her eyes widened. All the pictures were moving. She checked the rest of the books, pausing only to pick up an empty, thin, black book that fell out of the second-to-last-book in the pile. It seemed all of the books were like the first. She started reading and a whole new world opened up before her. Was this all real? Was this part of what she had fallen into? The people who had kidnapped her. They were wizards?

She looked over to the pile of books again and her eyes landed on the empty, thin black book. Then they landed on the pen. Then back to the book. Well, it was something to do, wasn't it? Her hands reached out and grasped the empty book in one hand and the pen in the other. She opened the book to the first page, glanced up at the iron door, half expecting the nasty people to barge back in again the moment she defiled one of their things, and wrote, '

Why me?

The ink glistened for a moment before fading as though sucked into the page, and was quickly replaced with, 'A question many people have asked. Who are you? How did you find me?'

Julia stared at the words, hand unmoving, suddenly afraid again.

Eventually the words faded away and a new set replaced them. 'Don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just curious how you found me. It's been a long time since anyone talked to me.'
Julia bit her lip. Held the pen over the page, and wrote, 'My name is Julia. I'm being held prisoner! Can you help me?'

The book wrote back, 'I'm sorry, Julia. I'm just a memory stored in a diary. I can't interact with the outside world. Where are you being held prisoner?'

'I don't know!' she wrote. 'I was kidnapped from my home one day and I haven't seen my mum or dad in ages!' A tear fell on the page and disappeared as quickly as the writing did.

An ink doodle of an older boy appeared, crouching beside an ink doodle of a girl that looked kind of like her. The ink doodle boy wiped away tears from the doodle girl's face.

Julia couldn't help but crack a small smile through her still flowing tears.

The doodles vanished and the book wrote, 'My name is Tom.'

— DP & SW: T FoP —

In the Uagadou hospital wing, the schoolmistress stared, stunned, at the silvery arm now affixed to a beaming seventeen year old girl. "What about her animagus training?" she asked.

Behind them, Jengo, the orphan boy Harry had brought with him, was picking things up and putting them down with a pair of the same silvery arms as though he couldn't believe his eyes.

"It won't be a problem," Harry said, leaning against a wall for support and smiling. "The animagus transformation is a full body and full soul affair. These limbs are now as part of their bodies as their heart and lungs."

"It is incredible," said the schoolmistress. "I cannot thank you enough."

Harry was about to reply when there was a pounding of footsteps from just outside and what he assumed was one of the Uagadou teachers burst into the room, wand pointed straight at him.

"Schoolmistress—!"

Moments later, said teacher was wandless and hanging upside-down from the ceiling, arms bound behind his back.

Harry clutched at his suddenly throbbing head.

"What is the meaning of this?" the schoolmistress shouted at the now hanging man. She'd only just got her own wand out.

"Schoolmistress, the aurors are outside!" The hanging man struggled against the ropes. "They've surrounded the school and are demanding we hand over this man on charges of murder!"

The schoolmistress looked sharply at Harry.

Harry shrugged. "The muggle responsible for this," he gestured to Jengo, who was still happily playing with his new arms, "might have pissed me off quite a bit."

— DP & SW: T FoP —

'And there was this really nice dress that I was really hoping to get daddy to buy me, but I guess it's gone now.'
'Why would it be gone?'

'Sales don't last long, Tom. There's always new stuff coming in. That's why you have to grab what you can when it's there.'

'What doesn't make any sense. Surely if someone wants to buy it, they should sell it?'

'I don't know. It's just how it is.'

'I think you'd have looked amazing in it.'

Julia giggled. 'Stop. You're making me blush.'

'Truth is beauty, oh flower of the snowfields.'

Julia giggled again. 'What did you do before you were a diary?'

'I was a student.'

'Did you want to be a diary?'

There was a pause as though the book was considering its answer. Then it wrote. 'I was not expecting to become a diary, even as I cast the magic to become so.'

'So it was an accident?'

'No — not an accident — I just didn't expect it to turn out quite the way it did.'

'Did you want to be something else instead?' Julia asked.

'I wanted to become a great wizard. The greatest wizard who ever lived.'

Julia smiled. 'I think you're pretty great, Tom.'

'Thank you, Julia — that means a lot to me. What do you want to be when you grow up?'

Julia bit her lip. She looked at the iron door and her heart fell. 'I don't know,' she wrote. 'I don't even know what's going to happen to me.'

'Do you remember anything about the people who took you?'

'No, I—' Julia paused. Hadn't that man called the woman something? Narcissa? Wasn't it? She put the pen back on the paper. 'I think the woman is called Narcissa.'

'Narcissa! Did she have long blonde hair with a black streak in it?'

Julia stared wide eyed at the page. She wrote, 'Yes! She did! Do you know her?'

'I know her,' Tom wrote. 'She is the wife of a man called Lucius Malfoy.'

'Do you know what they would want with me?' Julia wrote back in an urgent scribble.

'I can guess,' Tom wrote, 'you said that they dressed you in a pillowcase?'

'Yes.'

'It is a good thing you found me. Wearing a pillowcase is a symbol of slavery in the wizarding
world.'

Julia gasped.

'When they come back, you will tell them that Tom said they should treat you better.'

Julia's eyes widened in terror. 'I can't say that! They'll kill me!'

Tom's writing became larger, bolder, firmer. 'They WILL see the wisdom in my words. I may not be able to free you, but they are wrong to treat a guest such as yourself in this way, and they know it. Tell them, 'Tom said to treat you better.' I promise they will not hurt you for it.'

Julia trembled with the diary in her hands. She didn't know what to think. She couldn't do it. She couldn't. Every time she'd tried to resist or even ask questions before, she'd paid for it. How could the word of a small black book change anything?

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Harry looked out of one of the many windows overlooking the many valleys leading up to Uagadou. Security wizards from the Union of African Ministries where everywhere, interspersed with the occasional auror duo. Right. He'd stalled for enough time. His head now felt less like a mattress under two mating hippogriffs and more like a one under a small pair of enthusiastic nifflers. He stepped away from he window and turned back to the schoolmistress. "They're looking quite determined, aren't they?"

The schoolmistress sadly shook her head. "I'm sorry about this."

Harry shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Can you show me to the roof?"

The schoolmistress looked at him in puzzlement. "You will never be able to outfly them," she said. "They have aurorbolts."

Harry smiled. "I do not intent to outfly them."

Once on the rooftops, he said his goodbyes, waited for them to leave, then retrieved his invisibility cloak from his trunk. The problem with his cloak was that—while it made him immune to homenun revelio—magic cast underneath could still be detected, and if he knew anything about these African wizards, it was that they all learned wandless magic as part of their education — a trade-off between that and wand magic. It made them far easier to defeat, as they weren't nearly so skilled with their wands, but far harder to subdue, since you couldn't be sure that disarming them would make them safe. That was why he had to assume that a good number of those wizards down there could sense magic, which is why this was going to be a speed run.

Harry disillusioned himself, wrapped the cloak around him, and took a running leap off the school roof, hurtling towards the ground, before pushing his magic through him, and bottoming out before he hit the ground, zipping back up, up, and away. The moment he'd started accelerating away, three broomstick riding wizards stationed around the school turned and started gaining on his position.

Harry landed on the ground in the middle of a valley. Mist surrounded him. He ran a half-length quidditch pitch and apparated with a silent crack. He then shot up into the sky, and, before the first broomstick auror caught up to his first apparition point, apparated again. He landed lightly on a small path some halfway up another of the nearby mountains. The path was lined on one side with huge rocks thrice the size of a man, carved into the shape of long dead alumni of the thousand year old African school of magic. Harry quietly crept away, occasionally cleaning up his scent trail as he went.
It bothered him that he hadn't been able to do something about that Lord Slytherin copy-cat. He'd gotten greedy and been forced into a marathon chase that no wizard—save himself, Dumbledore, or Voldemort—would have been able to outlast, and in his case, only just. At least he'd gotten what he needed, although the whole slaughtered villages thing had left a bad taste in his mouth, but at least it hadn't been his weapons that had done that. He nodded to himself and thought to the bag of uncut diamonds in his shrunk trunk. Yes, the next time he needed a cash injection, he'd probably leave muggle arms dealing alone.

It was several minutes before the aurors picked up Harry's apparition trail and appeared on the mountain path themselves, but by that time, Harry was long gone.

— DP & SW: TfoP —

Julia looked up, staring eyes fixed on the iron door as footsteps sounded down the hallway outside. She swung her bare legs off the cot, still shivering. The thin pillowcase didn't even reach her knees. The lock unlocked without a key being turned and the door swung open.

The woman, Narcissa, stood in the doorway, wand held in one hand, pointing at the floor. "You ate," she said, staring at the empty plate. "Good." She turned to go.

Julia gripped the diary tightly in her hands. "W-Wait!" There — she'd said it. Her heart hammered as the woman turned around slowly. "What did you say?" she asked in a low dangerous voice.

Julia swallowed. "T-Tom said…"

The woman's eyes widened a fraction.

"…T-Tom said you were to treat me better than this."

The woman stood still.

Julia's heart felt like it was trying to beat its way out of her chest.

The woman crossed her arms, wand now pointing at the ceiling. "He did, did he?"

Julia nodded.

"Well then, I guess you'd better come with me, hadn't you?"

Julia hesitated before standing up, straightening the pillow case as best she could, and, clutching the diary to her chest and doing her best not to shake, followed the tall woman out of the cell.

One hot meal later, Julia was frantically writing in the diary on top of a warm, comfy bed with real sheets, and wearing a real dress — the dress was cut such as she'd never seen before and for some reason had a hood, but it was a real dress. The room she'd been put in had a massive window overlooking a grand manor garden, and the furniture reminded her of when she'd been taken to see the Kungliga Slottet back in Stockholm. 'It worked, Tom!' It worked!'

'See?' Tom wrote back, 'I told you it would. You just need to trust me.'

Julia smiled. 'Yes! I'm sorry for ever doubting you.'

'That's okay,' Tom wrote. 'why don't you tell me more about your future dreams? Maybe I can help you some more.'

— DP & SW: TfoP —
It was Alexandra Black's birthday. Harry, disguised as Lord Slytherin, descended the stairs to the basement of Slytherin Manor. He wandered over to the far corner where four miniature fidelius ward stones mapped out a small room, about the size of a bedroom, but with no walls, within which were several silk lined, lead boxes all packed together and all against the far wall, right in the very corner — the horcruxes.

Harry withdrew his shrunk trunk from his pocket and retrieved the still drugged body of the obscurial boy. He laid him on the floor.

"Plato."

Some thirty seconds later, Harry's house elf popped next to him, all dressed in flowing black robes with the Slytherin crest shown on the chest. "Master Lord Slytherin is back! What does Master Lord Slytherin wish of Plato?"

"I have a new task for you." Harry gestured to the boy. "This is Amadi. He is under draught of living death and must remain so until we can find someway to extract the obscurus within him — control it, kill it, or something. Understand?"

"Plato understands, Master. Demon boy stays sleepy until we fix demon boy. What is Plato's task?"

"You are to take care of him. He needs feeding and watering thrice a day, and you are to renew the draught once a week. It shouldn't be needed but we're not taking any chances."

Plato hesitated. "Plato has a problem, Master. Master's Grangys have Plato often working in Crawley. Plato can pop to Master that far, but journeying to Slytherin Manor three times a day on my own is difficult."

Harry stared at the wall. That was an issue — one he wouldn't have if he'd been able to snag a second elf already. He thought to the large suitcase of diamond money he'd just deposited in Gringotts. Fat lot of good that did if there weren't any females on the market right now. He turned back to Plato. "Would twice a day work better?"

Plato bowed so low his nose touched the ground. "Yes, Master Lord Slytherin. Plato can be doing that."

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Lord Lucius Malfoy finished drawing the last rune on the floor of the ritual room in his wife's own blood. It was time.

Off to the side, Narcissa sat on a chair, nursing an arm that had just been used to extract enough blood to leave an uncared for wizard dead. Several empty bottles of blood replenisher stood on the bench beside her. "Ugh, I hope he appreciates this, even if something goes wrong," she said. "I've warned him. Trying to force a soul process like this isn't wise. He can't complain if it goes wrong."

Lucius wondered who she was trying to reassure. He stepped out of the circle and kissed her lightly on the lips. "Shh, it will be okay."

Narcissa softly broke the kiss, took a deep breath, collected herself, stood up and made her way into the circle. "Do you want to go get the girl?"

Lucius walked to the door. "Not particularly, but I will."

— DP & SW: T FoP —
Julia woke in darkness. Not the darkness of a room without light, but the darkness of a blindfold pressed against one's eyes, and that wasn't the only thing. She couldn't move. She was lying naked and spread eagle on her back against something hard and cold. Her hands were tied to ropes, as were her legs. Something had been shoved in her mouth. She could feel her drool dribbling around it. "Mughh!" She started to panic, pulling at the bindings on her arms and legs, but it was no good, she couldn't even turn her head. What were they doing to her?

"Relax, girl," said a voice that she instantly recognised as belonging to the woman, Narcissa. "It'll all be over soon."

Over? Soon? No. Please no! The woman started chanting words she didn't understand, again and again. She felt something whirl around her, like a wind, only not, sending shivers down her spine, and what hair she had to stand on end. "Mugghh!"

The chanting sped up and a lance of pure pain stabbed into her chest. "MUGGHHHHH!" A voice, faint through the searing heat, filtered through her mind.

*Hello Julia.*

What was that? The pain spread out through her body, all the way to the tips of her fingers and toes.

*How does it feel to become one with me?*

What? One? Pain!

*You should be honoured, Julia, to become one with the greatest wizard who ever lived.*

Greatest? Tom?

*Yes.*

The pain got worse. Please, Tom! It hurts! It hurts so much!

*Yessss.*

*IT HURTS!*

*YESSSSSS!*

The pain reached more than she could bare. She felt herself crawling inwards, everything that she was being shoved aside, compressed, imprisoned, and Tom was everywhere — everything. She could feel Tom and Tom could feel her — could feel her pain and fear. Tom could feel it all, swirling through her body, he felt it. Every tingle in her fingers, every beat of his heart. Tom felt it and owned it, before collapsing back on the cold stone under him, letting the tension drain from his limbs, letting his body relax from the pain. It was done.

The gag was removed — the blind fold, taken off.

Tom Riddle looked up at the curvy figure of Narcissa Malfoy, standing over him as naked as the day she was born. Not a bad way to awaken.

"My lord?"

Riddle smiled. "Yes, Narcissa," he said in the small girl's voice. That would take a lot of getting used to. He wasn't enthusiastic about being female, but the Malfoy's would never have agreed to
his plan otherwise, even considering what his other self had become. He cleared his throat. "You will untie—"

**Tom?**

Tom Riddle stiffened.

**Tom? *sniff* It's stopped hurting.**

Oh, no.

**Oh no, what? What happened? Why did you do that?**

Riddle groaned.

"My lord?" Narcissa said.

**My lord? Why did she call you that? Why is she naked? Tom! What's going on?!**

— DP & SW: T FoP —

A hundred or so kilometres away, in a well to do suburb of London, Hermione, Daphne, and Luna walked down Grimmauld Place towards number twelve.

Hermione nervously clutched a suspiciously book shaped birthday present colourfully wrapped up in paper with a bow on the top. "Is this really going to work?"

"Of course it'll work," replied Daphne, carrying a more box shaped wrapped gift. "They've been looking for him for weeks. They're not going to do anything to risk chasing him away again."

Hermione bit her lip. "What if they grab him and we don't get to see him?"

"Harry can take care of himself," Daphne said. "He set up the Black Library fidelius charm at the start of summer. He can use that, if necessary."

Luna hummed happily beside them. Her present wasn't a box, but rather a big bowl of something, and anyone that knew Luna could tell you what that something was.

They reached the front door of number twelve Grimmauld Place.

Daphne turned to the other two. "Now, we all remember the plan?"

Hermione and Luna nodded.

Daphne tuned back to the door, stuck her wand in the ward, and pulsed.

— DP & SW: T FoP —

From the sofa in front of the fire, watching Alex and Ginny play exploding snap in wizarding party hats, Lord Sirius Black felt a pulse in the wards — a pulse in the wards from the front door! Harry! He leapt to his feet and crossed the distance to the entranceway, grasping the door handle, and pulling it open. It wasn't Harry.

"Good morning, Lord Black!" sang three girls in perfect unison.

"Luna?" His surprised gaze flittered from one wide-eyed smiling face to the next. "Miss
Greengrass?"

"We're here for Alex's birthday." The Greengrass heiress held a colourfully wrapped gift box in front of her.

"But—"

"Luna has told us so much about you and Alex!" said the brown haired girl, eyes dancing with excitement. "I so hope she likes what I got her."

A faint memory of a sword wielding Slytherin first year fighting a troll flashed across Sirius's memory. "I'm not sure if—"

"Pleeeaassssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss, Lord Black." Luna Lovegood pouted up at him, eyes watering faintly. "I know they're not officially invited, but I want us all to be friends."

Sirius groaned. He could never deal with Alex when she used to be like this, but three all at the same time? "Fine," he said, drawing out the word like a grumpy accordion. The girls whooped and giggled, then skipped past him towards the living room. Well, Luna skipped. Sirius noted the other two quickly falling into walk number seven, variant C from the pureblood etiquette playbook for young ladies — adorable saunter with touch of victorious sass. Sirius shook his head. Perhaps this was for the best. It certainly increased the chances that Harry was going to show up.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Riddle resisted the urge to tear his new, long blonde hair clean out of his skull.

'It's better swept to the left! No, not like that!'

He'd shouted at her, and that had worked for a while. Then he'd threatened her, and that had worked too, but not for long.

'Can't you magic up a better hair clip?'

As soon as she'd realised that he didn't actually have anything he could threaten her with, she'd quickly switched over from being the meek little girl to giving her opinion on absolutely fucking everything. He'd briefly thought of casting torture curses on himself just to get her to shut up, but quickly dismissed the idea as incredibly foolish. She wasn't like his old classmates that he could curse and then dismiss. No, he'd just have to manage her as though she were one of the Hogwarts teachers or one of his many female admirers. She was only an eleven year old girl, after all. It wouldn't be that difficult. He'd already managed to block off his most private thoughts with occlumency, but that did still leave many of his surface thoughts open.

'And you're sitting all wrong! Girls don't sit like that! If you were wearing a skirt, boys would be able to see right up it!'

Riddle sighed. 'I'm sorry, okay? I know you're angry.'

'Angry!? You tricked me and stole my body! I hate you!'

Riddle stood up from the mirror and made his way to the door. 'Look at it this way, now you'll be able to go to magic school and see all sorts of things a Swedish muggleborn would never be able to see. Doesn't that excite you?'

'I want to go home!'
'I'm afraid that's not possible. I really wish I could help you.'

'Liar!'

Riddle made his way down the many flights of stairs towards the ritual room. He stepped inside and looked around. Narcissa looked up from where she was drawing chalk runes on the freshly cleaned floor. "Ready for the second ritual, my lord?" Her voice shook.

"I am ready," he said.

'Humph.'

Riddle felt a presence behind him. It was Lord Malfoy. Together, the two of them made their way over to the desk and started draining their blood into separate beakers. Soon enough, they had nearly half a litre of each of their blood.

Narcissa picked up a paintbrush. "My lords, I've outlined places for you to lay. Please dis-robe."

Riddle did so. He felt Julia mentally recoil.

'You can't just let him look at me!'

Riddle ignored her and lay down where the chalk indicated alongside Lord Malfoy. He stared at the ceiling while Narcissa painted their bodies and the circles around them with interlocking runes of both their blood.

Magic swirled.

Narcissa started chanting.

'Is this going to hurt again?' Julia asked in a small voice.

'No,' Riddle thought. 'So long as you do not interfere, you should feel no pain.'

"Lord Lucius Malfoy," Narcissa intoned. "Lord by the Albion Magics, Head of the Noble House of Malfoy, do you accept to take a daughter of common birth to your house, to raise and protect her as if she were your own?"

"I do."

"Lord Lucius Malfoy, lord by the Albion magics, Head of the Noble House of Malfoy, do you wish to grant a name in gift to your new child?"

"I do. She will be called Virgo Druella."

'Virgo?'

'Shh.' Riddle felt the ancient magics swirl around him.

"Virgo," Narcissa continued. "You have been offered elevation from the common to the Noble House of Malfoy. Do you accept your new responsibilities to the Albion Family Magics — to honour your family, and"—her voice shook again—"to protect your new brother?"

'Brother?!

'Shh!' "I do."
The magical build up roared. What had been a breeze, turned into a tornado. The blood runes painted on the floor tore themselves free and swirled around the room. Moments later, the magic hit a crescendo and a faint warmth surrounded his left ring finger.

The magic died.

He sat up and looked at his finger. There sat a noble house ring — the ring that had eluded him for the entire time he was at Hogwarts — that ultimate symbol of his rightful place — among the best — where he belonged. His disgusting muggle father's blood no longer ran in his veins. He was a pureblood now. The daughter of a Malfoy and a Gaunt.

His new adoptive step-mother presented a mirror in front of him. Julia's ice blue eyes had darkened a shade, the cheeks had raised slightly, little details here and there had shifted, but not by much. The girl had looked fairly similar to a Malfoy to begin with.

Virgo Druella Malfoy smiled.

'You do know your new name means virgin, right?'

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Harry sat down in an armchair in one of Grimmauld place's many sitting rooms. He could hear the faint sound of the girls laughing upstairs.

Sirius sat down opposite him and put his hands under his chin. "I'm glad to see you safe, Harry. You upset a lot of people when you disappeared like that."

Harry tapped a pattern on the chair's arm rest. Sirius Black was a difficult case to work with. On the one hand, he was a Dumbledore supporter. On the other hand, he was Alex's father. On the other, other hand, he was extremely Light. On the other, other, other hand, he was chief auror, and on the other, other, other, other, hand, the man wanted to have some kind of friendly relationship with him and did fall into the category of 'people with whom I had no relationship with in the last timeline,' for good or bad — such a mess of conflicting possibilities and problems.

Harry shrugged. "I've been disappearing for years. The only thing different this time is that someone noticed."

Sirius frowned. "Lord Slytherin… did he…?"

Harry's expression didn't budge. "Lord Black, I have no intention of disclosing where I have been or who I might have been with, I'm sorry."

Sirius sighed and massaged his temples with one hand. "I don't suppose I could at least persuade you to call me 'Sirius', could I?"

Harry cracked a small smile. "That, I can do, Sirius."

Sirius smiled briefly before turning serious again. "I will need to tell your parents that you're here. You're not going to run away again, are you?"

"You asked me before the trial if I would spend time here over the summer. So long as I can spend most of my days here for the rest of the Summer, I will not run away."

Sirius frowned. "Harry, you can't just threaten to run away again to get what you want."
Harry tilted his head and fixed Sirius with a hard stare. "Sirius, my parents have not spoken to me once in my entire life — not once — not a word, not an owl. It may not be exactly the same, but… I am Sirius Black. You are Fleamont Potter."

A flurry of emotions passed across Sirius' face — shock, anger, sorrow, resignation, understanding. Harry just watched.

Eventually Sirius nodded. "Fine. I'll talk to your dad about it."

"That's as much as I can ask."

Sirius stood up and gave Harry a weak smile. "Does this mean that those pretty girls are your marauders?"

Harry's face cracked into a grin.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Riddle lounged in a chair in the Malfoy library, reading a copy of a book on mindscapes like a prince. Oh, if only he'd had access to these when he'd first entered the wizarding world.

'But it's so boring!'

His grip on the book tightened.

"Virgo?"

Riddle looked up.

Narcissa was standing in the doorway.

'I wish I had the figure for that dress."

'It's a robe."

Riddle frowned. "Yes, Mother?"

'Virgo?"

"Um, I was wondering if I could talk to you before your father gets back with your Hogwarts letter?"

'I mean, yes, it has a hood, but look at it!'

'You must learn to forget your muggle knowledge."

'Riddle gestured to a seat opposite him.

'Why?"

Riddle ignored her.

Narcissa quickly sat down, fidgeting slightly with the silk of her robes. "How are you adjusting?"

'Wow, she's nervous."

'Quiet, Julia. Just observe."

Riddle closed the book. "Well enough. Why?"

'It's just…" Narcissa looked away before looking back. "If we're going to present you to the world as our daughter, there are certain expectations…"
Riddle raised an eyebrow. "I am quite familiar with pureblood customs. I made a study of them during my time at Hogwarts."

"Yes, but that was a long time ago. Things do change in that time, even in proper society. And besides that... you're a... well a — witch — now."

Riddle frowned. "Is that a problem?"

"No, no, not a problem. It's just — your aura — your stance — the way you walk, it's all so, masculine."

'It really is, you know. See the way she sits?'

Riddle narrowed his eyes. "I walk and stand so as to project power — to show the world that I am to be feared and respected. Are you telling me I cannot do that?"

'You should be sitting more like that."

Narcissa shook her head. "No, my lo— I mean, no, Virgo, I don't mean that. I mean that witches show the world they are to be feared and respected in different ways. Wizards are like staffs — loud, obvious, and blunt. We witches are like daggers — quiet, subtle, and razor sharp. We work behind the scenes to position our enemies for a perfect stab in the back, or, when that fails, we secretly clear the way so our men folk can get an open line of shot for a one hit kill."

'Ooh my god, she's so evil!'

'There is no such thing as good and evil, only power and those too weak to seek it."

Julia went quiet.

Riddle pursed his lips in thought. "You wish to teach me how to be a dark lady instead of a dark lord."

"I am a daughter of the Ancient and Noble House of Black. I have guided my lord and husband for fifteen years and raised the Noble House of Malfoy to be the richest house in the country. There is no one better to teach you than I."

'Hopefully she'll teach you to sit like her,' Julia said, somewhat sullenly.

Riddle's fingers tapped a rhythm on the arm chair rest. "Second richest."

"Sorry?"

"Second richest — according to Witch Weekly's Witch Rich List."

'You look like you're trying to hide the whole chair with my body!'

Narcissa coughed. "I do not believe that Slytherin's position on that list is anything more than smoke and mirrors."

"A loud, obvious, and blunt display of power, you mean?"

"Yes."

"And even if Slytherin is another one of me, I am the dagger rather than the staff?"
Narcissa leaned closer. "Given how we have gone about doing things, and your uncertainties about Slytherin and Potter, I would recommend that to be the most effective way, yes."

Riddle nodded. "Very well, Mother. You will teach me."

"Good." Narcissa snapped her fingers and a house elf appeared beside her. "Let's start with how to sit."

_Hah!_

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— DP & SW: TfoP —

Lord James Potter strode into the sitting room where the wards had alerted him to a floo call.

"Prongs." Sirius' head was in the fire.

"Hey, Padfoot. Any news?"

"Yes, he's here!"

"Harry?"

"Of course."

James straightened. "I'll go get Lils!" He turned to leave.

"Wait!" came Sirius' voice from behind.

James turned back. "What?"

Sirius' looked uncomfortable. "I had to make a few promises to stop him from bolting."

James frowned. "Go on…"

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— DP & SW: TfoP —

Ancient toys were crammed on every shelf on every square foot of wall. Alexandra Black sat on a small child's chair in the playroom, half giddy and half anxious. Four other witches sat in a circle with her, two of whom she knew well, and two of whom she didn't.

Her birthday had started out normally. She'd pestered her dad to let her have Ginny and Luna over, and to not have John Potter around. He'd caved surprisingly easily.

Ginny had arrived first and they'd spent the time playing exploding snap while discussing duelling in hushed tones whenever her father left the room.

Then Luna had arrived with a big bowl of pudding, and she'd brought the troll slaying witches with her, Daphne Greengrass, the other girl betrothed to Lord Slytherin, and Hermione Granger, a vassal of Slytherin house — people she'd been looking forward to meeting for ages. They'd dragged her from the living room to the playroom and set up the small chairs in a circle, each one of the four taking a seat, and sitting her down in a fifth.

Opposite Alexandra on the far side of the circle, Daphne had placed an empty, sixth chair. It drew Alex's attention like a recently missing tooth.

"Flitwick's fine," Daphne said, carrying herself with enviable ease and elegance. "He teaches well
and doesn't mind if you read ahead."

"What about the defence teacher?" Ginny asked. "Any idea who it'll be?"

"Our lord mentioned in an owl that it would be Snape."

Our lord. All four of the other girls referred to Lord Slytherin as 'our lord.' Alex shifted forward in her chair. It made the whole thing feel like a secret meeting or council. One where important things were discussed and the fates of men decided.

"Snape!" Hermione scowled. "Did he say why?"

"He is Dumbledore's spy. Our lord wishes us to turn him."

Alex's eyes nearly bugged out. Dear Morgana, this was awesome!

Hermione folded her arms. "Who's going to be doing potions then?"

"We don't know," Daphne said.

"What about the new headmaster?" Ginny asked. "Percy said the transfiguration teacher would have been doing the job until they found someone."

Daphne was about to answer when the door creaked open and four heads swung around. Alex was already facing the right direction.

"Harry!" Hermione, Ginny, and Luna leapt up from their chairs, and rush-hugged the John Potter look alike. Daphne Greengrass rose with considerably more grace, but did mirror the other three once they'd finished.

Alex stared at the spectacle, then hastily stood as Potter walked over to her. "Happy birthday, Miss Black." He took her hand in his and brushed his lips along the knuckles. "I hope your training is going well?"

A year ago, she'd have bitten back with some sarcastic comment, especially at being addressed as 'Miss' rather than 'Heiress,' but that had been before she'd been continually smashed into the ground by both Ginny and Luna, before she'd seen Hermione Granger and Daphne Greengrass take on a full grown mountain troll, and most definitely before she'd read the daily prophet article about a certain mysterious boy who'd smacked down the entire Hufflepuff duelling team, and then proceeded to pound John Potter into the dirt so badly that he'd been accused of attempted murder.

Harry Potter was powerful, as were all of those Lord Slytherin had taken into his confidence. Alex nodded and reclaimed her hand. "Well enough, Potter. The Black library is quite the treasure trove."

Potter smiled. "I'm sure it is."

They all sat. Alex couldn't help notice that all four of the other girls looked expectantly at Potter who was fishing in his robes for something. Even Daphne Greengrass seemed to be waiting for him to start.

Alex fidgeted with the skirt of her robes. The very air in the room seemed to have changed.

"Alexandra," Potter eventually began once he'd found what he'd been looking for. "Our lord asked me to read you a letter he wrote, do you mind if I go ahead?"
A letter? Alex shook her head, indicating that she didn't mind.

"Excellent." Potter cleared his throat. "Alexandra Black, Heiress of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black,

Greetings on your eleventh birthday. I hope Harry and the girls are keeping things interesting.

Firstly, your birthday present. I'm sure you're expecting a book or similar. Most of our discussions in the past have revolved around our stores of magical knowledge. However, not this time. Your help at the winter festival with Angelystor, and your loaning us of your family's communication mirrors were both invaluable gestures. I've also been hearing good things from Luna and Ginny about your practical training and our letters clearly show your drive to expand your magical toolbox.

Therefore for your birthday present, I, Lord Slytherin, grant you a, non-conditional, guaranteed invitation to Slytherin House during the sorting—

Alex's heart leapt. "YES!" She jumped to her feet and fist-pumped the air.

Hermione, Daphne, and Ginny all gave her wry smiles.

Luna clapped. "Congratulations, Alex. We all get to be together for the next seven years!"

"Ah, yeah." Alex sat down again, suddenly feeling a bit sheepish. Had that looked too enthusiastic? It probably had. This was supposed to be a Slytherin meeting. She coughed. "Do please continue, Potter."

Potter continued.

"...Secondly, a house matter. I would ask you to look around you. Daphne, Ginny, Luna, Hermione, and Harry all have my confidence. They have each proved themselves in their own way and you've seen for yourself how capable someone needs to be to achieve that. I — as Lord of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin — would like to extend that confidence to you as the Heiress of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black — a confidence that will hopefully see our respective houses become firm allies. Let Harry know if you're interested and he'll continue reading, otherwise, have a Happy Birthday.

- Lord Slytherin"

Harry looked expectantly up from the letter.

Alex hesitated, but only for a moment. She couldn't not accept. The last time she'd refused one of Lord Slytherin's offers she'd regretted it for years. She nodded.

Harry smiled, put the letter away, pulled out another one and unfolded it.

Alex bit her lip. Another letter. What would have happened if she'd said no?

Harry started reading.

"Excellent! Right, third order of business. Occlumency, as you now know, is critical in many branches of magic. You've already been practising three of them — mental defence, wandless magic, and magic sensing. Another use that many people in Europe choose to ignore is the animagus transformation. This year, Harry will be leading an experimental group project to achieve animagus status by the winter festival. I'd like to invite you to join this project."
Alex sucked in her breath. That would be sooo cool. What would her form be? Would it be a panther? Or maybe a grizzly bear? Or would she be one of the oh so lucky ones to get a magical animagus form? Maybe she’d—

Harry coughed.

She caught his eye.

He was grinning.

Alex immediately schooled her features and sniffed. "That sounds interesting."

Potter nodded and continued, still smiling. "Secondly, each one of my Slytherins has a project that they’re working on. A project that will push forward the Gray and make our long term goals easier. I have one for you — one that makes use of your particular talents and brand of family magic, if you feel you are up for it?"

Harry looked up from the paper again.

Alex set her jaw and nodded. *This* was what she'd been waiting for.

Harry looked down again. "Your project, Alexandra Black, is to usurp Draco Malfoy as leader of the Dark."

— DP & SW: T FoP —

Draco Malfoy was certain of many things in life. He was certain purebloods were superior to halfbloods, who were themselves superior to mudbloods. He was certain that the noble houses were superior to the common houses, although he didn't voice this certainty where his family's business associates could hear. He was certain that rich wizards were superior to poor ones, and that the Dark would ultimately triumph. But most of all, he was certain that he was the only child of a pureblood, noble house that also happened to be the richest in the country, and the leader of the Dark, and was, therefore, the most important person in the world.

Not five minutes ago, one of those beliefs had been slowly turned on its head and he had no idea what to think about it.

"I have a sister?"

His father had looked at him impassively over his ornate office desk. "We sent Virgo away when you were both very young. We thought she was a squib. We were wrong. She is, in fact, exceptionally powerful."

Draco had said nothing.

His father leaned forward slightly. "Your mother and I expect you to introduce her to our friends and make sure she is accorded the respect a daughter of the Noble House of Malfoy deserves."

"Yes, Father."

"And one more piece of advice."

"Father?"

"Virgo grew up in exceptional circumstances. You are my heir and the future Lord of this house, but do not presume anything about your status in regards to Virgo. Do not look down on her. Do
not talk down to her. And above all else, do not threaten her."

Draco had left the study soon after that feeling somewhat disturbed. He now walked through the many bookshelves of the Malfoy Manor Library, looking for this so-called sister of his. He turned a corner and there she was, sitting elegantly in an alcove, reading a book and balancing three other books on her head.

Draco smirked. He remembered doing the same exercise when he'd been much younger. He walked over and in a bored voice said, "Father said you might be in here."

The girl, who certainly looked like a Malfoy, turned a page in her book, and, not bothering to look up, said, "Did you want something?"

"I am Draco, your brother, Heir of the Noble House of Malfoy." He stuck out his hand. "Father said I was to introduce you to our family's friends so I wanted to know if you know how to act like a real pureblood."

"I'm sure I shall manage," Virgo said, in a voice equally as bored as his. Not moving from her chair.

Draco frowned, hand still outstretched. "Mother hasn't taught you proper greetings yet?"

Virgo finally looked up and their eyes locked.

Draco breathed in sharply and took a reflective step backwards. Magic flared off the girl in front of him in exactly the same way it had off of Lord Slytherin in the Slytherin common room at the start of last year — not nearly as strong as Lord Slytherin, but just the fact that his sister could do it at all…

For what felt like an age, but was actually closer to twenty-five seconds, Virgo held him there like a mouse held in the gaze of a snake.

Eventually the magic stopped and Draco let out a deep, shaky breath.

Virgo smiled. The three books hadn't moved from where they still sat on her head. "Why don't you tell me about proper greetings, Brother?"

"Uh, yeah," Draco sweated. His sister was nundu scary. "Yeah, sure."

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Lily Potter trekked up the stairs towards the play room, mentally preparing herself for the coming confrontation. She stood outside the door and listened. Children were laughing. A good start. She took a deep calming breath, cautiously opened the door, and peered around it.

Harry was sat in the middle of a huge game of gobstones, wide smile on his face as Luna squealed and punted a triple into her stone sphere.

Her heart clenched. Harry looked so happy.

He looked up and met her eyes, smile never leaving his face.

"Hello, Harry," she said, far softer than she'd meant to, opening the door fully and stepping into the room.

Her heart beat harder. Something didn't feel right.
All the girls quietened and looked around at her, shooting her looks that suggested she was something nasty they'd stepped in.

"Hi, Mum," Harry said happily, standing up and brushing himself down. "Time to go home, is it?"

The girls continued to stare.

"Y-Yes, your father and I thought it might be nice for all of us to eat out — you know — a family thing."

Harry grinned. "Sounds great."

The whole situation felt surreal. Like she wasn't meeting him for just the first time — like she'd just come to pick him up as normal, as if everything was normal. She'd expected sullenness or awkwardness. She'd expected shouting and accusations, or possibly even tears and crying. She hadn't expected this.

Harry walked over, waved goodbye to the girls, slipped past her through the doorway, and made his way back up the hallway, footsteps light, gait confident, as though he hadn't a single care in the world, as though he was just choosing to ignore the fact that they'd never exchanged a single word since he was eighteen months old.

Lily shook away that feeling of wrongness, allowed herself a small smile, and followed on after him. If Harry was happy to put all that behind him, then he might be even more mature than John, and it would make ensuring that everything turned out all right in the end that much easier.

Back in the play room, unseen by the retreating noble muggleborn lady, three sets of eyes abandoned all pretext of restraint and glared at the closed door in undisguised loathing, watched by a fourth set of eyes that flitted between the first three in mild confusion. The fifth and last set idly watched the fourth before the body it was attached to smiled and took another spoonful of delicious mouth-watering pudding from the already half-empty communal bowl.

—End of Chapter Thirty-five —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The setup is complete. The pieces are in place, whether visible or not. See you in July for the start of the game.

Sticky Note: I now have original fantasy fiction published. You can find it by following the bread crumb trail in my profile page. If you can't wait for my next fanfic chapter release, you might like to check that out to tide you over.
Daphne Greengrass stared at the parchment-work in front of her. Her bedroom desk groaned under it. Some of it was important. Some of it was useless, and quickly found its way into the bin beside her. But most of it occupied the frustrating space in-between — probably too important to throw away, but probably not important enough to read — and impossible to tell one way or the other without committing oneself and possibly getting it wrong.

Outside her open window, soft, fluffy clouds melted into blue summer sky. Birdsong gently tweeted away in nearby trees. A faint breeze ruffled the lush grasses, wafting up through the window and playing with a long strand of Daphne's blonde hair, flicking it this way and that — a constant reminder that she was in here and not out there.

Daphne hooked the errant strand around her ear. "Milly!"

A small, female house elf popped into being beside her. She wore the Greengrass house elf uniform — a neatly pressed tea towel emblazoned with the Greengrass crest. "Yes, Mistress Daphy?"

"Has there been any word from Harry?"

"No, Mistress Daphy. There has been no more word from Lord Slytherin since last time you asked."

Daphne sighed. "Thank you, Milly."

Milly nodded and popped away.

Daphne stared, once again, at the piles of parchment in front of her.
Urgh.

She glanced at the perfect weather outside and then back at the pile of parchment again, then back to the open window.

It called to her. The outside — it called to her in a voice she knew well — the call to adventure — to explore. She'd had just about as much of the parchment-work as she could take.

Daphne turned and her gaze fell on the fluffy snake Harry had given her during the winter festival, still coiled around her bedpost. The toy snake met her gaze and tilted its head as though in question.

But Harry wasn't here right now. He was off — somewhere — doing Lord Slytherin stuff — and without him she was stuck inside, bound to the familiar — to those places she already knew well — the manor, Diagon Alley, her friend's houses, those places with a friendly floo connection — those places to which the only journey was a boring ten to fifteen minute whirring about inside a bland grey pipe.

Daphne returned to the parchment and was halfway through reading the latest update on the mandrake supply crisis when she snapped, threw the parchment down, pushed her chair back, and stomped over to the window.

Why!?

Daphne stared out over the forest that protected Greengrass Manor.

Why? She'd done so much in her first year at Hogwarts — had battled a troll and tangled with the dark lord. She and Hermione had helped Harry break past the best defences Albus Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel could devise, and would have succeeded in claiming the philosopher's stone, if Flamel hadn't used a fake. Why then, was she sitting here like a delicate flower, waiting for an escort from her future husband? Was she so weak that she couldn't even conceive of doing something as simple as... as even stepping outside the manor's front gate?

The thought stilled her. Harry had taken her to the moors of Dartmoor and the forests of Brazil. She'd flown across Scotland and travelled under the North-Sea in a muggle-built magical submarine. But just beyond that front gate was almost unknown territory — unknown territory, which she at least knew contained a muggle-cum-magic village that she couldn't ever remember visiting.

Daphne nodded to herself. That's what she was going to do. She was going to go down to explore the village — to find out what was there for herself. She was old enough. She had wandless magic. She could protect herself. There had to be loads of other wizarding children her age that did it all the time. There was absolutely no reason why she couldn't.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Lord Jacob Greengrass sat in his sitting room, reading the Daily Prophet as was his habit on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Thanks in no small part to his future son-in-law, it had been quite a while since he'd had a Sunday as lazy as this one.

The door to the sitting room creaked open and his oldest daughter poked her head through.

"Daphne?"

"Father." She entered the room and presented herself before him in a manner that screamed, 'I'm being super official here. I dare you to make fun of me.'
Jacob held back a grin.

"I wish to inform you," she started, "that I plan to travel down to the village this afternoon."

Jacob blinked. "The village?"

"Yes, I think it's about time I saw it."

Jacob put down his paper. "Okay, we can do that. Rodger did say—"

"—No!" Daphne suddenly looked flustered. "I mean, I want to go by myself."

"Why?"

Daphne's cheeks reddened. "Because I just do."

Jacob studied his eldest intently. She stared back at him, more defiance in her eyes than he'd ever seen before. Eventually he nodded and picked up his paper again. "Okay. But I want you back here before sundown, understand?"

"I understand, Father." She then turned around, beaming widely, and left.

Jacob waited for a few moments until the sound of retreating footsteps had fully faded away.

"Milly!"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne stood in front of her bedroom mirror, holding clothes up to her body and frowning. In one hand she held a pretty summer dress. In the other she held a pair of hiking trousers. It was a toss up between dressing like a muggle teenage girl or dressing like a muggle teenage girl who expected close encounters of the cow and mud variety.

"Daappphhhh."

Oh, Merlin. Daphne turned. "Yes, Tory?"

Astoria Greengrass hung off the bedroom door, face a picture of innocence. "What are you doing?"

"I'm getting ready to go out."

"You're going down to the village." Astoria announced this as though she'd just won something.

"How do you know that?"

"Asked great-great-great-grandfather."

Daphne turned back and closed her eyes. That damn painting. "I'll be back by sundown. I'm sure you'll find something to—"

"—I'm going with you!"

"What?!" Daphne spun back around. "No, you're not!"

"I am!"

"There'll be muggles there! You don't have the clothes."
"You and Harry started going out around muggles years ago. I can just use some of your old clothes, can't I?"

"I..." Daphne hesitated. "I'm still not sure it's a good idea. You might get lost."

"I won't get lost!" Astoria pouted. "You just think I'll slow you down, don't you?"

"No!"

"I bet you're secretly sneaking out to see Harry, aren't you?"

"Why would I need to do that? He comes here!"

Astoria grinned. "I bet it's because you two are secretly kissy kissy—"

"We are not!"

"—and that's why you don't want me along."

Daphne's face was now flushed red. "We haven't done anything like that yet." She didn't count that one time they kissed in an empty classroom to trap Dumbledore. "And you're not coming with me."

"Maybe I should talk to Harry next time he comes over? I'm sure he'd say it was okay."

"Harry's not here."

Astoria's grin morphed into a deceptive smile so innocent and convincing as to make politicians cry tears of envy. "Maybe I should tell Harry what a certain someone keeps under their pillow at night."

Daphne froze.

The two girls eyes flickered back and forth between each other and said pillow. Time slowed down. Then Daphne lunged, but with two items of clothing still in hand wasn't able to reach her target before Astoria dived in front of her, landing on the bed, stomach first, and snatched out the item from under the pillow.

"Got it!"

"You—!"

Astoria rolled off the bed and held the framed magical photo up, triumphant. Said magical photo featured Harry's amused, smiling face, although at the moment it was rolling its eyes at Astoria's antics.

Daphne flung out her hand and wandlessly summoned the framed photo right back to her, her face now tomato red, but that didn't stop Astoria from giggling up a storm.

"Don't." Daphne searched for words. "Don't ever tell Harry about this."

"But it's so cute, Daphne."

"And you shouldn't be poking around my room either!"

Astoria made a kissy face at her.

Daphne huffed. "Okay, fine, I'll take you with me, but not one word to Harry, okay?"
Astoria smiled. "Greengrass family secret!"

— DP & SW: TFOP —

Greengrass Manor backed out onto a muggle road that led into the depths of the Cumbrian wilderness. The Manor itself was hidden from muggle eyes — both by the hedge surrounding it, and by enchantments. Any muggle with the strength of will to overcome the muggle-repelling wards — who managed to poke their head over the top of the hedge — would see only an empty field with an abandoned shed in the middle.

And now, from out of the totally empty field, walked two girls, appearing from nothing through the front gate as though conjured from thin air. The girls now wore almost identical summer dresses in floral print — the result of a spirited negotiation that lasted almost twenty minutes.

Daphne closed the front gate behind her and wrapped her purse around her wrist, fully ready to start exploring without her usual escort. She looked up and down the road. Both directions looked identical. Ummm.

"Which way is it, Daphne?" Astoria asked.

Daphne cursed in her head. "Well, it has to be one of them," she said, as though that was in anyway a helpful observation.

"Do your mirror trick!"

"I don't have a mirror with me. But…" She looked up and down the road again. There hadn't been a muggle car since they'd opened the gate. "Watch out for me okay? I'm going to use the eyeball."

"Kay."

Daphne sat down on the grass at the side of the road, doing her best not to get her dress dirty, and summoned her invisible magic seeing eyeball. Her world shifted and soon she was looking down on it from high up in the air. She looked around.

"Well?" Astoria asked, "Can you see it?"

"No, but there is a house not far up the road. Maybe we can ask whoever lives there which way it is."

"We can ask the muggles!"

Daphne opened her own eyes again to see Astoria jumping up and down in obvious excitement. "Tory!" she snapped.

Astoria stopped jumping.

"Remember your studies. No using those kinds of words out in the open."

Astoria looked down, suddenly all meek. "Sorry, Daphne."

Daphne softened. "How would you like to do the asking?"

Astoria looked back up again, all smiles once again.

— DP & SW: TFOP —
Mrs. Rollandson had nothing against hikers. They were usually polite and wanted little more than directions or the occasional glass of water, which she was happy to provide. But that didn't mean they always chose the best moments to drop by. She'd just gotten her iron heated up and ready to attack her husband's massive pile of wrinkled clothes, when the doorbell rang. Mrs. Rollandson sighed and put the iron down.

She walked across the living room and opened the front door. What greeted her was not what she'd expected. Two young girls — sisters by the looks of it — dressed more for a tea party than for hiking. "Can I help you?"

The younger girl stepped forward, pushed slightly by her big sister. She curtsied nervously. "Excuse us for bothering you, but perhaps you could tell us the direction to the village?"

Mrs. Rollandson couldn't help but smile. "You mean Applybe-in-Westmoreland?"

The girls nodded.

"It's just up that way." She pointed up the road.

The younger girl cheered, all formality forgotten.

"But where did you two come from to not know that? There's nothing up the other way for miles."

The older girl put her hands on the younger girl's shoulders. "Our parents just wanted to make sure. They're waiting with the car not far away."

"Oh." That made sense, if a little irresponsible of them. "Well, I'm glad I could help."

"Thank you, as well!" The little girl waved as her sister led her up the garden path back to the road.

Mrs. Rollandson smiled, turned, and closed the door behind her. Her gaze fell over her ironing and her eyes widened. She scuttled over to the pile of clothes and her jaw dropped. Every single item of clothing had been ironed, pressed, and folded with geometrical precision — even the damn socks! After an hour of fretting, she eventually decided she must have brownies living in the garden, and proceeded to leave out a bowl of milk for them, every morning, for the next thirty years.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Daph, do you think it's much further?"

"We haven't been walking that long, but as it happens, no, I don't believe it's too far away."

"Why do you think that?"

Daphne pointed to a brown sign at the side of the road.

'Welcome to Applybe-in-Westmoreland. Please drive carefully through our village.'

"Oh," said Astoria, rather sheepishly.

They continued to walk down the road until the hedgerow to their right turned into rough grey masonry. They turned the next corner and stopped. Beautiful cottages with front gardens in full bloom stretched out down the road. They stood aside to let a muggle car pass. There didn't seem to be a hint of magic anywhere.

Astoria leaned into her and whispered, "How do we know who's one of us and who isn't?"
Daphne glanced up the row of houses. A middle aged woman in a pointy hat waved cheerfully at them from behind a curtain in one of the cottage's upper rooms before drawing the curtain shut. "I don't think it'll actually be all that hard."

The two girls strolled further up the road until they turned another corner and reached the village centre. A massive oak tree stood on an island in the middle of the street, forcing the few muggles driving cars to circle around it. Muggle shops lined the street on both sides, displaying all sorts of things in their windows — some familiar, others not.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Astoria grabbed Daphne's hand and pointed. "Look, Daph! Ice cream! Different from ours!"

Daphne looked at the pastel coloured shop window with uncertain eyes. "Umm…" She snapped open her purse even though she knew it was useless.

"Please, Daph!"

Daphne gazed down at the half dozen solid gold coins held within. "I don't actually have any pounds on me."

"Awwww!"

"But… maybe…." She looked over at Astoria. "Are you sure you want this kind of ice-cream?"

"Yes!"

"It might not be as good as our kind."

"Don't care."

"Okay, then."

They continued to walk up the street. Daphne wasn't quite sure what she was looking for, but she was sure she'd know it when she spotted it. And, indeed, in a shop window a dozen shops away from the ice cream parlour, someone had proudly displayed a small poster of a long, light blue triangle, containing a downward pointing, half invisible arrow. Daphne smiled and nudged Astoria. "See anything you recognise?"

Astoria looked around in puzzlement for a moment before her eyes fell on the poster. She gasped. "The Appleby Arrows," she whispered.

Daphne smirked, put her hand on the door handle to the shop, and entered to the sound of a small tinkling bell.

The inside of the shop contained a little bit of everything. As with the shop windows up the street, some things Daphne recognised and some things she didn't, but nothing screamed 'magic.' Behind the counter, an elderly gentleman looked momentary surprised before he schooled his features, gave them both a respectful nod, and returned to whatever business had been occupying him.

"Hey, Daph, what's this?" Astoria picked up a thing made of red rubber with a wood handle.

Daphne cautiously took the device. "Let's see." She saw that the rubber bent quite easily. She pushed it against a wall and let go. The thing stayed stuck to the wall. "There, you go. It's for hanging things on."
"Oh."

A hesitant cough interrupted them from the counter. "Miss Heiress?"

Daphne turned.

"That's a plunger, Miss Heiress. Muggles use them to unblock toilets."

"I see. Do you have any magical goods to sell?"

The shop keeper reached down and fumbled for something under the counter. There was a loud whoosh noise, and many of the shelves around the counter flipped over, faded away, or in the case of one shelf by a wall, actually picked itself up on little legs and scuttled off to one side, revealing a small hidden room beyond.

"Wow!" Astoria jumped up and ran to look over the newly exposed shelves. "Look, Daph, they have Top Broom!"

"Astoria," Daphne said in a warning tone of voice, "you know Father doesn't want you reading that until you're of Hogwarts age."

Astoria pouted.

The man behind the counter gave Daphne an apologetic look. "Sorry about that."

"Please don't let it worry you." She looked towards the open door. "Won't muggles see this stuff?"

"Oh, they can't. There's a muggle-repelling ward linked to the shelves when they turn. Had to get permission from the ministry and everything. Took three inspections to get it right."

Daphne nodded. It made sense. Appleby was a mixed village — one of only fourteen in the whole country. It wasn't pure, like Hogsmeade, or an enclave, like Holyhead. It was only natural that regulations here would be a lot tighter than elsewhere.

Astoria was by now ogling the many magical sweets behind the glass display next to the counter. There was plenty of choice, but not nearly as large as one might find in, say, London.

"So," Daphne started, "what interesting things does the ministry let us do here? This is the first time my sister and I have visited."

The man indicated a height somewhere about his shins. "Since you were yay high, yeah."

Daphne smiled.

The man rubbed his chin. "Interesting things, huh? The quidditch field's across the main road, hidden by the v-shaped maple tree. The children and younger lads spend most of their time there of a summer's day — more than quidditch too — snap, quodpot, duelling as well — though I guess that wouldn't be your thing."

Daphne's eyes flashed at 'duelling,' but said nothing.

"There's one of the local pubs — The Winged Horse — occasionally seen your father there of an evening having a pint or a bite to eat."

Daphne raised an eyebrow.
"Pretty sure he's friends with old Rodger who owns it."

Old Rodger... why did that name ring a bell?

"There's also the local ministry office if you find yourself in need of a boner."

The rubber plunger, still stuck to the wall, choose that exact moment to drop off and land on the floor.

"...Boner?" Daphne felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

"I mean the DMLE, sorry, Miss Heiress. That's what we call the security wizards."

Astoria was watching her with a puzzled expression.

Daphne decided to take control of this conversation before her sister made this way more awkward. "So, can you give change in muggle money for wizarding money?"

The man nodded, "I can do that."

"Excellent. Then I'll have a small nogtail pasty." She fished in her purse for a one galleon coin.

The man stared at the solid gold coin with incredulity before carefully counting out £49.65, totally failing to hide his pained expression.

When they stepped outside, Astoria turned to her. "Daph, what's wrong with something being called a bon—"

"—Tory. Do you want an ice cream?" Daphne asked in a warning tone of voice.

"Yes."

"Then you'll not ask that question until you're a teenager."

"You're not a teenager either."

"I will be in a few months — and I also read a lot more than you do too."

Astoria pouted, but only until they arrived back at the muggle ice cream parlour. "I'll have strawberry, and chocolate, and mint, and fudge, and coconut, and lemon — oh, and also rhubarb."

Astoria beamed at the woman behind the counter.

"Oh, you will, will you?" The muggle woman smiled and looked towards Daphne, who nodded.

"She will."

Soon, the two witches were once again walking up the street, this time toward and over the River Eden, where the wizard from the shop said the quidditch grounds lay. Daphne nibbled on her pasty while Astoria enthusiastically licked her six story ice cream held together with wooden sticks — an endeavour that, without cooling magic to combat the summer heat, soon turned into a big, sticky race against time.

They could hear the rumble as they stepped off the bridge — a low thrum, getting louder, punctuated by a regular 'Vrooom' sound.

They turned another corner.
A wall of noisy, fast moving muggle vehicles blocked their progress. It was, indeed, a lot of cars. "This must be a 'main road'."

Daphne looked up and down, searching for a way over — a bridge maybe? Or a tunnel? She couldn't see anything.

Astoria's ice cream was now melting down her hands faster than she could keep it in shape.

Daphne frowned. There didn't seem to be anyone who might stop for them. Most of the muggle car riders didn't even seem to see them before they passed. "I think we'll just have to wait until there aren't any coming."

Astoria's ice cream started forming a small puddle on the ground.

Daphne was getting annoyed. Car after car passed in front of them in a never ending stream. There had been times when she thought they might be able to get across, but she wasn't quite sure.

Daphne's instincts screamed at her that running in front of several tonnes of speeding metal when you weren't sure was a bad idea. But there just seemed no end of them. Surely there had to be some time when there weren't any.

Daphne sighed. "Maybe we should just head back."

Astoria made a small whining noise in between frantic licks.

"We can do some research on how to cross these things and try again another time. I'm sure there must be a book in Flourish and Blotts that will—" But Daphne didn't get to finish her sentence because at that moment Astoria jabbed her finger up the road while squealing as loud as she could, her mouth jammed into the second-to-last, half-melted ball of dribbly stickiness.

Gunter Heartwood wasn't an overly superstitious man — there wasn't much call for that sort of thing on his overly long route between Calais and Edinburgh — but he'd still be happy to concede that, "Oh, yeah, of cause there's weird stuff what goes on." He'd be especially happy to concede this after several pints at journey's end. Having said that, he'd never personally encountered anything that made him go, "Now that's some weird shit, right there."

So when his lorry's power just suddenly cut out while half way down the A66, Gunter's first instinct was to curse and try and get his machine back in gear. Needless to say, this didn't work. Instead, his lorry came to a slow, controlled stop, all by itself, right in the middle of Appleby-in-Westmoreland.

This would have been weird enough, had it not been for that the fact that on the other side of the road, another man in a lorry just like his had also inexplicably stopped, and two girls in summer dresses started walking across the road as though his lorry had decided to obey some invisible zebra crossing.
While he desperately worked his key and pedals in an apparently futile attempt to re-start his engine, the elder girl stopped in front of his lorry and bobbed a curtsy.

Gunter stared as the older girl repeated the curtsey for the other lorry driver. Nonplussed, he watched the two girls reach the pavement on other side of the road, and then, with no input from him, his lorry rumbled back into life.

Gunter tried not to think too hard about it as he pulled away, totally ignoring the loud car horns blaring impatiently behind him, but one thing he did conclude was that that, right there, had been some seriously weird shit.

— DP & SW: TFoP —

"Daph! Daph! Here it is!" Astoria had finished her ice cream by now, or at least, what she'd been able to finish before the forces of entropy had their wicked, messy, way. She now pointed towards a v-shaped maple tree with a massive grin plastered on her surprisingly clean face — surprising, that is, to anyone who had seen it only a few minutes earlier.

Thankful that a couple of the muggle drivers had finally been polite enough to stop for them, Daphne carefully folded up her self-cleaning handkerchief and put it back in her purse. "Wait, Tory." She wandered over to where Astoria had already put a foot through the magic gateway to the Appleby Quidditch Field. "What is it important that we remember?"

"Occlumency, manners, and custom."

"Exactly. We are the daughters of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Greengrass. We have to act like it."

Astoria nodded.

Daphne took her little sister's hand and together they stepped through the v-shaped maple tree, through a wibbly wobbly portal thing, and right out into an open field bustling with activity.

"Wow," Astoria whispered.

Close to three dozen wizards and witches zipped about above them on broomsticks — some of them looked younger than they were. On the field in front of them, several groups of children and teenagers, and even adults, were engaged in all manner of magical activity. The wizard from the shop hadn't been joking — quodpot and snap, yes, but also wizard chess, bowls, and even what looked like competitive transfiguration. A pair of abraxan horses were tied up off to the side, grazing on the lush grass, and resting under a tree.

Daphne had to agree that it was impressive. If only because they'd actually walked here from the manor. They hadn't used the floo or been apparated — they'd walked. A flash of red on the far side of the field caught her attention. A stunner. Several young men danced around each other throwing spells as fast as they could. Duelling.

"Daph!" Astoria whispered, pointing to the sky and clearly trying to stay as composed as she could while also obviously close to hyperventilation. "It's the Appleby Arrows!"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Appleby-in-Westmoreland had thirty-five magical children of Hogwarts age. Of those thirty-five, only six actually went to Hogwarts — the others went to one of the other three schools down south.
Robert Longsdale was one of the six, about to start his fourth year in Ravenclaw house. He sat with his small group of friends, busy on summer homework, occasionally aided by Jack, his older brother, and Adelaide, Jack’s muggle girlfriend, who knew nothing of magical theory, but did know plenty about spelling, grammar, and essay writing in general.

Robert was facing the village and was, therefore, the first to spot the new arrivals. He leaned in closer to the circle. "Okay, don't look, but Daphne Greengrass just crossed the maple tree."

"Is that her little sister?"

"Don't look, idiot."

"Who's Daphne Greengrass?" Adelaide asked.

Robert’s friends hastened to explain.

"She's like the closest thing Magical Britain has to an actual princess."

"She lives in the manor just up the road, but we've never seen her before."

"She's going to be Lady Slytherin when she's older."

"What's she doing here?"

"We don't want to get into trouble for ignoring her."

"Maybe one of the others will go talk to her."

Robert looked around. No one else seemed to have noticed the two girls yet.

"Maybe you should go talk to her, Jack," Adelaide said, slipping an arm into his older brother’s.

Jack looked torn. "I'm, ummm, not really comfortable with nobles. I didn't go to Hogwarts, did I?"

There was a pause.

Robert realised with dawning horror that everyone, even Adelaide, was looking expectantly at him.

— DP & SW: TFOp —

Daphne watched the young men duelling on the other side of the field with judging eyes. The spells being thrown about were basic and their casting speed wasn't anything to write home about. She'd honestly expected more considering they were clearly of age.

"Daph, do you think I could fly too?" Astoria asked, pointing up to the many quidditch players still zipping around in the sky above them.

"I don't think that would be a good idea — not unless one of the Arrows offers."

"Aw."

Off to the side, one of the boys from a random group sitting in the shade of a nearby tree had broken off from his friends and was making his way towards them.

"Maybe we could talk to Father about getting you some lessons back home."

Astoria grinned.
Daphne turned to face the approaching boy.

"Heiress Greengrass?" The somewhat familiar boy hid his nervousness well, but not well enough. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"We're just out for an afternoon stroll…" Daphne rifled through her memories. She had seen him before, she was certain. "…Longsdale, right? Robert Longsdale — Ravenclaw house."

Longsdale's shoulders noticeably relaxed. "You remember me."

"You thanked me for saving Sophie from the troll."

"Yes."

"Mmm, I don't recall your family having a political affiliation."

Longsdale shifted nervously. "I'm the first in my family to go to Hogwarts. But I'd say we're Grayish. We are an Appleby family after-all."

Daphne smiled. "Lived here all your lives?"

"For five generations."

Longsdale's friends were all watching from the shade of a nearby tree with unashamed interest. One of the Appleby Arrows chose that moment to land next to them and, after introductions and several minutes of pleasantries, an ecstatic Astoria was flown up into the air, riding side-saddle on the back of the cheerful team captain's broom, squealing and shouting as the captain gently lapped the field while throwing in the occasional dip and turn.

"Perhaps you could introduce me to the duellers?" Daphne suggested to Longsdale.

The duellers, it turned out, were two young men training to be security wizards for the DMLE. They'd gone to The Box together in London, which explained their rather basic offensive spell repertoire.

"Care for a friendly match?" Daphne asked. "One-on-one — best of three?"

The two young men gave each other sceptical looks. "No disrespect, Miss Heiress, but you're not exactly allowed to use your wand during summer holidays."

"Who said I needed a wand? Oh, hello, who's this?"

The rest of Longsdale's group had wandered over. Another quick round of introductions followed, finishing with a fascinated muggle girl who'd only recently been introduced to the magical world after her boyfriend had finally gotten his guide license.

"I thought you needed a wand to do magic?" Adelaide asked, apparently not noticing the looks of raw awe that Daphne's faintly glowing finger-tips were receiving.

"Most people do," her boyfriend half-whispered. "Only the most powerful wizards in history have been able to do wandless magic."

Daphne smiled, but said nothing.

The two DMLE hopefuls were now looking at Daphne with rather more respect than before.
Daphne handed her purse to Robert before turning to them. "Shall we?"

What followed were six duels with astonishingly even match-ups, considering she was facing fully grown wizards wielding wands. They used stunners, body-binds, ropes, and shields. Daphne used stunners, stingers, shields, finite incantatem, banishers, and summoning. They focused on the attack, using their larger magical reserves to wear her down. Daphne focused on keeping her distance, only closing the gap when she was ready, then unloading with a practised speed far faster than the young men had yet mastered.

They took plenty of time between matches to rest and recover and by the end of it all they'd attracted quite the little crowd. Even some of the broomstick riders paused in their games to watch while floating overhead. The sun was far lower in the sky now. The final score came out at 2-1, 2-1, both in Daphne's favour. She rested with her hands on her knees, breath fast and shallow, while the small crowd clapped.

"That was awesome, Daphne!"

Daphne looked up.

Astoria beamed down at her from where she sat on the broomstick behind the Arrows captain, who gave Daphne a big cheesy thumbs up and brought his broomstick down low to the ground next to her. Astoria hopped off and brushed down her skirts. "I'm hungry!"

— DP & SW: TFoP —

Daphne had to admit that getting back across the main road was a lot easier second time around. Robert Longsdale was a lot better than her at judging when it was okay to quick march across. The older boy then guided their group, which included his brother, Jack; Adelaide; and the rest of their friends, up the main street until they reached a pub, which the muggles around them — excepting Adelaide — didn't even seem to notice.

"The Winged Horse," Jack declared, holding the door open for her. The inside reminded Daphne strongly of a better kept Leaky Cauldron. Several faded posters on a wall advertised trivia night, snitch shooting, and witches night. They quickly found a table large enough for all of them.

Astoria copied Daphne's elegant way of sitting down, although the effect was somewhat ruined by her grabbing and inspecting the novelty salt shaker with wide-eyed fascination.

"So… Miss Heiress? — is that right?" Adelaide addressed Daphne before looked around uncertainly. Everyone else was happily chatting among themselves.

"We're about to eat together. Call me Daphne."

The old barkeeper handed around a set of menus and gave Daphne a conspiratorial wink.

"Right — Daphne — so, what exactly is Lord Slytherin like?"

All conversation died.

"I mean, I've read about him — Jack gets me Witch Weekly — and everyone seems to think he's some kind of cross between the Mask of Zorro and Lord Byron, but no one seems to actually know anything about him."

"Lord Slytherin is…"
"I'll have scampi and chips!" Astoria declared.

"… wonderfully complicated."

They all proceeded to order food while Daphne told them what she could about Lord Slytherin. The group vacuumed up every little titbit, taking particular delight in her recounting of how Slytherin had saved her and Hermione in the Slytherin common room at the start of last term.

A commotion from the kitchen drew Daphne's attention. A man wearing an apron appeared from a door at the back, threw a white, floppy hat onto the counter, and stomped off.

The barkeeper roared with laughter.

Daphne shrugged, turned back, and the group continued to chat until the food was brought out. Most, including Daphne, had chosen the daily special — Shepherd's pie with butter beer.

Astoria glared at her fish and chips as it was placed in front of her.

Daphne had to agree that her sister's serving did seem much smaller than everyone else's. She turned back to her current favourite conversation partner. "So, Adelaide, what's it like to join the magical world?"

"Incredible. Appleby isn't a big place. I grew up knowing most everyone here. To find out that almost a third of them belonged to this secret magical society… well… it was like having the blinkers taken off. So many things suddenly made much more sense."

Jack grinned and put an arm around Adelaide's waist.

The conversation flowed freely from then on, much like the butter beer from the large tankard in the middle of the table.

Daphne was just polishing off her own serving of Shepherd's pie, when the barkeeper started moving tables around. "Snitch shooting starting in five!" he shouted. The room was quickly filling up with older wizards and witches. "What about you, girl?" he said to Daphne. "I hear you're a dab hand at wandless stingers."

Daphne frowned. "I'm sorry, I fear you have me at a disadvantage."

The old barkeeper tapped his forelock. "Rodger North, at your service, my lady."

Daphne's eyes widened. "Rodger North? As in Old Rodger? As in Lord Rodger North?"

"That's me."

Daphne quickly schooled her features.

Rodger roared with laughter again. "Don't you start going all pureblood formal on me, girl. I won't have it from your dad, and I won't have it from you."

"I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting…"

"Weren't expecting a lord of the Gray faction to be working a bar counter? We don't all live in manors, you know."

"I know, I know, it was just a bit of a shock."
"So, how about it?" He pointed at the box of snitches. "Think you can manage a few?"

"Go on, Daph!"

Daphne glared at Astoria, but did rise from the table, pride easily overcoming embarrassment as those sitting around her cheered and clapped.

When her own round rolled around, she didn't perform too horribly — some of the younger adults were clearly worse than her — but she was nowhere near as good as the older crowd who competed regularly. Snitch shooting wasn't anything like duelling, and unless you'd reached Harry's ability to sense magic, very difficult. She idly wondered whether Ginny, Luna, or even Alexandra would be able to do better, before gracefully sitting back down to numerous verbal pats on the back.

"You did better than some of the grown-ups."

"Well done."

"You're still awesome, Daph!"

The snitch shooting continued and her dinner slowly settled into her stomach just as tiredness slowly settled over her like a warm, comfortable blanket. The group happily cheered the last contender who managed to pluck six snitches out of ten clean from the air.

A wizard and witch started playing the flute and lute a few tables over. The soft music filled the room, giving the many conversations a pleasant backdrop.

Daphne couldn't help relaxing into it all. She'd set out earlier to explore the village without Harry's or Father's help, and she'd succeeded. The village was nice. So were the people. She could imagine herself coming down here more often in the future. Maybe she could even show Harry around if he hadn't already been here.

"Daphne!"

Daphne looked up to see Astoria frantically pointing towards the window, which displayed a distinct lack of sunlight. Her heart leapt into her throat. The words of her father came back to her — 'Be back by sundown.' Bugger.

"What do we do, Daph?"

Daphne quickly went through the possibilities in her mind and latched onto the easiest and most obvious solution. She'd really wanted to walk back home — to complete her exploration on her own — but that wasn't an option anymore. "Milly!"

The female house elf popped in front of them a few seconds later. She was wearing a floppy white hat and an over-large apron with a picture of a winged horse adorning the front. The rest of their companions watched with interest, especially Adelaide, whose eyes had gone almost as wide as Milly's.

"Milly, can you — wait, have you been cooking?"

Milly nodded. "Yes, Young Mistress Daphne."

"Cooking for us?"
"Yes, Young Mistress Daphne."

Astoria gasped. "You gave me a smaller portion!"

Milly frowned. "Young Mistress Astoria is not to be having a large dinner when she is eating so much ice-cream for lunch."

Astoria made a small whining noise.

Daphne blinked. "You've been following us."

"It is being Lord Greengrass's orders, Young Mistress. Lord Greengrass and Lord Slytherin would be being most upset if anything bad were to be happening to you and Young Mistress Astoria."

Adelaide gave Daphne a poorly concealed, amused look.

Daphne sighed. "Can you take us back to Greengrass Manor, Milly?"

Milly nodded. "Milly can be doing that."

Daphne stood, picked up her purse, and made her way to the bar-counter to settle the tab with her father's friend. She supposed she should have expected something like this. Oh, well. As far as she was concerned, she'd explored on her own. It was the intention that mattered, and she'd be sure to get Harry to take her somewhere truly amazing as soon as she could. She walked back over to the table to extract Astoria. The Greengrass sisters then said goodbye to their new friends, took hold of Milly's long spindly arms, and felt the world squeeze around them.

—End of Chapter Thirty-Six —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Normal posting schedule remains otherwise unchanged.

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017's value.

Sticky Note: As always, if you want to stay up to date on schedule changes and other bonuses before anyone else, you can get them on my mailing list, which you can find by following the breadcrumb trail through my profile page.
BOOK THREE — Nature Red in Cloak and Dagger

Chapter Notes

#

Welcome to Book Three of Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches.

One thing before we start…

I've said before that I use my fanfiction as a kind of self-directed apprenticeship in writing — a place where I can experiment with new styles and techniques in a moderately risk free environment. Right now, I'm working on how to write novels in series, so I'm not going to give you the same info dump recap at the start of this book as I did at the start of book two. Instead, I intend for the books from here on out to be reasonably self contained, so that a reader doesn't have to reread the whole story all over again to understand what's going on (unless they want to, of course).

And now…

#

Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches

Book Three: Nature Red in Cloak and Dagger

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Prologue

The role of the soul in magic has long been pondered by wizards and witches. Obviously, it can be split, as in the bastardised horcrux ritual, ripped apart for safe keeping in a suitable vessel — or the soul itself can be the vessel, as in the fidelius charm, storing a secret so closely that it disappears from the minds of sentient beings the world over. Animagus hopefuls speak of soul searching, the month long process of using hallucinogens to dream walk among what it is that makes them, them — while seers like to think of the inner eye as the gateway to the soul, and devote countless hours to carefully examining the confusing snatches of vision that smash across their consciousness like the world's worst stain-glass window.

Soul magic is tricky business. It's not for nothing that the number of known fidelius charm users in Great Britain can be counted on just one hand, if you're in the know, and with just one middle-finger, if you're not. Even those users sometimes have problems.

Hidden behind a secret passage-way in the seventh year Hufflepuff girl's shower room, an invisible man in a green and black mask laid a set of miniature rune stones around the second entrance to the chamber of secrets. He sat down in the centre of the formation and stilled in meditation for a good twenty minutes. Distilled magical power radiated out from him in waves.

The man raised his wand over his head and brought it down onto the rune stone in front of him. "Fidelius Occultum." There was a change in the air surrounding the rune stones as the entrance's location was swept from the world. The man nodded to himself before moving on.
Down the hallway, a confused house elf had to fight off the urge to curtsey to empty air as he passed her. His gait was tall and confident, even under disillusionment — perhaps like a king cobra, perhaps like a lion, or perhaps like something else entirely — but definitely like something regal.

Arriving at Hogwarts' ancient quidditch stadium, the man entered the Ravenclaw girl's changing room, hissed to a tiny bronze snake adorning the frame of a large ornate mirror, stepped through the resulting door, and set up another set of rune stones. After another twenty minutes of meditation, the man brought his wand down to the rune stone in front of him and again said, "Fidelius Occultum."

But this time there was no change.

The man stared at the stone for a moment before repeating the meditation, brought his wand down again, and said, "Fidelius Occultum," in a slightly firmer tone of voice.

Again, nothing happened, except, the man thought, for an inexplicable feeling of fullness. He narrowed his eyes and started counting on his fingers while muttering under his breath. When he got to six, he paused, then counted seven by jerking his thumb in direction he'd just come.

"Damn."

He cast a tempus charm, cursed again, collected up the rune stones, and then spent several minutes waving his wand over the entrance before heading back up to the castle. One hour and one memorable encounter with the ghost of Myrtle Warren later, he'd finished his stop-gap warding of the thirteen entrances, and casually stepped out of the Slytherin sixth-year girl's dormitory, climbed up the stairs to the Slytherin common room, and walked out through the portal to the rest of the dungeons.

The man didn't get far before he spotted a familiar, crooked-nose figure wearing a cloak that billowed, despite their being underground. The masked man had a quick debate with himself about timekeeping, before shrugging, dropping his disillusionment, and stepping out into view.

The other man, who carried a large bundle of herbs tied up with string, made almost no reaction… almost. He did straighten up slightly. "Lord Slytherin."

"Severus Snape. I seem to recall you wished to speak to me when I had a moment."

"This… is so."

"It just so happens, I have one now — although I do also have several appointments, so I'd appreciate if you kept it brief."

Snape nodded slowly. "I wished to say that before I was petrified last Halloween, I believe I may have misjudged the situation."

"Which situation? The situation where you called me arrogant and cowardly? Or the situation where you mentally attacked my vassal?"

Snape lowered his head. "You have my deepest apologies, my lord — you, and the girl."

"You'll have plenty of opportunities to apologise to Hermione personally."

"Yes, my lord — and you have granted me something I have wished for, for many years."
"Not for your sake, I assure you. Defence is not a professorship to be handed out to stuttering imbeciles."

"You show mercy and fairness, my lord."

Lord Slytherin said nothing.

Snape looked up from the floor and continued. "Since I have been unpetrified, I have made a study of what little I have been able to of your cause. I believe, my own views align more closely to them, than the alternatives."

"And what is my cause?"

"You believe muggleborns should be brought into our world, but you do not agree with how it is currently done. You do not agree in purity of blood as a measure of worth… by itself. You do not believe in abolishing the old ways, nor do you believe in many muggle practices such as representative democracy."

"Do I not?"

Snape hesitated.

"Representative democracy is a tool," Slytherin said lightly. "You might as well say I don't believe in hammers."

Snape said nothing.

Slytherin said nothing in return.

Snape broke the silence first. "I wish to prove to you that I can be a loyal and useful tool, my lord."

Slytherin made a noise that could have been a cough or a snort. "So I guessed. You already have two masters, Snape — are you sure you can handle a third?"

Snape's eyes widened almost imperceptibly. "My lord,—"

"—Snape, I am not 'your lord.' I do not give out my overlordship lightly."

"…My apologies, Lord Slytherin — I wish to only have one master. Might I enquire as to how one might go about proving their value? Dumbledore still places considerable trust in—"

"—You can start by teaching defence to the best of your abilities."

Snape bowed deeply.

Slytherin nodded and walked past him towards the staircase to the ground floor.

"Lord Slytherin?" Snape calmly called back behind him.

"Yes, Snape?"

"Is there, by any chance, any word on who will be the next potions professor?" He indicated the large bundle of herbs still in his arms.

"No, not yet. I am still waiting for a worthwhile applicant."
Some time later, sun still high in the sky, Lord Slytherin walked up the steps to the wide open
doors of Slytherin Manor on his private island in the Orkney's, just north of Scotland. He swept
through the half furnished ballroom, still littered with crates and scaffolding, and headed for the
basement, quickly reaching the bottom of the stairs.

Only a few weeks ago, this had been a large, cavernous space, but a lot had changed. Now he made
his way down a dark hallway, lit by only his wand, footsteps echoing in the empty quiet.

He reached the only door, put his hand on the handle, opened it, and stepped through into a circular
room full of doors identical to the one he'd just walked through. He stepped into the middle of the
room. "Laboratory."

The doors spun wildly, not only around and around, but also up and down, moving through each
other like the inside of a drunk merry-go-round. Moment's later, the doors stopped spinning.
Slytherin walked to the door directly in front of him, grasped the door handle, turned it, and
stepped through into the room beyond.

The first thing to notice about this room was that it was extremely messy. Books and parchment
lay everywhere. A leaning tower of empty bowls on the desk reached up almost six stories, spoons
and forks sticking out at each porcelain floor. A wall of empty butterbeer bottles segregated the
bowl tower from the only part of the room that wasn't piled high with assorted stuff.

The second thing to notice was a massive piece of parchment adorning the far wall, covered with
scribbled diagrams and titled 'Animagus Project.'

Slytherin picked his way across the room and plucked, from the floor, an open book filled with
bookmarks. The book was titled 'Black Magical Theory' and was trimmed in deep purple. He
leaned over the desk.

Seven clay pots stood arranged in a septagram. Between them, ran lines of faintly glowing gray
powder. An empty box off to one side read, 'Phoenix Ash,' in hastily scrawled hand writing.

Slytherin gingerly pulled the top off one of the pots. A live grass hopper attempted to jump out, but
didn't quite make it before Slytherin popped the top back on. He nodded in apparent satisfaction,
consulted the purple trimmed book, and made a note on a piece of nearby parchment. "Plato!"

A minute later, a robed house elf opened the door behind him, stepped inside the room, took one
look around the literary bomb site, and let out a desperate keening noise. "Master Lord
Slytherin, please be letting Plato clean!"

"Standing orders still apply. No entering this room unless I call for you."

Plato made a whimpering sound.

"But you can remove the empty bowls in that pile and the empty butterbeer bottles, only."

Plato nodded, physically picked up the plates and bottles, and walked to the door. "Master Lord
Slytherin is to be remembering the time, Master. The Gray will not like to be kept waiting, and
Light parents will also not be happy if they has to be coming to Grimmauld Place to pick Master
up."

Slytherin nodded. "Yes, thank you, Plato." He waited for the elf to leave, then made his way back
through the spinning doors, past the as-yet non-functioning floo, out of the manor, and into the
sunlight, the icy-blue water filling over half the horizon. He made his way past all the rapidly
growing magical plants and trees, and down the hill to where the Granger's country house had
already gotten its foundation, and most of the ground floor. He pulled the rope by the door. A few
minutes later Mister Granger opened it. The genial man held a steaming mug of tea, on which
someone had printed the words, 'I may not have magic, but I try harder.'

"Fancy seeing the latest?" Mister Granger asked as he led Slytherin to their fully functional floo
and indicated a door off to the right.

Slytherin checked the time before replying, "Sure."

The steps behind the door went down a lot further than the ones in Slytherin Manor — and that,
despite the fact that Slytherin manor stood right on the top of the hill. Eventually they arrived in a
vast cavern carved into the rock of the island, which led down to a body of water large enough to
park two dozen large muggle vans.

The white submarine van they'd used to get their stuff past the goblin-ministry check point sat
towards the back of the cavern. "It's done its job for the moment," Mister Granger said. He then
gestured around him. "What do you think?"

There was a small jetty on the water. Runes covered the walls. Electric lighting hung from the roof
like tinsel. Muggle machines were everywhere. There was a general hum of activity in the air.
Emma Granger, wearing massive goggles, waved at them from behind a large, metal, lathe-like
thing. "It's a lot of stuff," Slytherin said. "And you can make better versions now?" He nodded
towards the submarine van.

"Bloody well hope so. That thing felt like it was held together with duct-tape and dreams." Mister
Granger poured another cup of tea into a mug which bore the words, 'Best Lord in the World.'

"How far are we off a commercial version?" Slytherin's eyes trailed over a broomstick on a nearby
desk. It had a ring of smooth metal hovering around the shaft by the bristles.

"Of the Submarine? We could have a prototype ready by Christmas." He handed the cup to
Slytherin, who took it and blew over the top.

"Okay, let's do that." Slytherin tapped on the broomstick with his free hand.

"That was delivered to us by Nimbus just the other day," Mister Granger said, smiling a devilish
smile. "It's the first one to use our runic rings. Can't wait to put it through a scanner to find out how
it all works together."

Slytherin frowned under his mask. "You think it might be a good idea to find some way to stop
people doing that? We don't want our commercial secrets stolen the same way."

Mister Granger shrugged. "We're pretty useless at new spell creation. We're engineers, not
wizards."

"Right, right, my job, then."

"Speaking of." Emma Granger had wandered over. "It's Hermione's thirteenth birthday coming up.
I know wizards and witches traditionally start courting then. How likely is it our daughter's going
to be receiving courting gifts?"

Slytherin took a sip of the tea, the mask moulding itself around the mug like a second skin. "Top
witch in her year — vassaled to a most ancient and noble house — single handedly faced down the
most powerful wizard in the world in front of two thousand people — troll slayer at age twelve — well mannered — cultured — youngest healer trainee in British history. I'd say the answer is going to be yes, yes, yes, with bells on."

Emma sighed.

"Don't worry about it. A declaration of intention gift is just that — a declaration of intention. It means little by itself."

"You've no idea how grateful we are that we have you to back us up through all this," said Daniel Granger.

Slytherin took another sip. "We'll see if you still feel that way after I've taken off this mask."

Emma raised an eyebrow. "You're going to?"

"Soon, I hope — just for you two — for the moment, anyway." He put the mug of tea down and turned to leave.

Emma smiled. "We look forward to it. We're not going to run out on you, no matter how wacky your big secret is."

"Yeah," said Dan, raising his voice as Slytherin made it almost to the cavern door. "I've got to build my space ship first!"

Slytherin waved, and made his way back up the stairs, walked to the floo, lit the fire with a wandless incendio, took a bunch of powder from the mantle piece, threw it into the flames, and said, "Greengrass Manor."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Of the 114 lords of the Wizengamot, twenty-nine belonged to the Gray faction. Of those twenty-nine, thirteen sat around the long table in the Greengrass Manor dining room. They included men like Lord Smith, clad in enchanted steel armour under his robes — and Lord Tempest, whose light-blue robes seemed caught in a perpetual, light breeze. That the group numbered thirteen wasn't of any magical significance, it was just coincidence — one of their number had yet to arrive.

At the head of the table sat Lord Jacob Greengrass. He had a thin pile of parchment in front of him. "...that is why we pushed the board into choosing him for the position of headmaster," he said.

The assembled wizards murmured among themselves.

"The man does seem workable," Lord Smith said. "Pliable — pragmatic — smart enough in his own way, but thankfully not smart enough to realise that stepping into a great man's shoes in between three powerful factions is a terrible idea. And the Light can't accuse us of marginalising them... but won't it come back to bite us in the arse if he royally cocks it up?"

"No, that won't be a problem," Jacob answered. "Slytherin persuaded Malfoy to make the official announcement."

There was a series of startled sounds and faces up and down the table.

"How in Morgana's name did he manage that?" Smith half-whispered.

One of the room's three doors clicked shut and all heads turned.
"Lord Malfoy and I have come to a temporary understanding," Slytherin said before making his way to the head of the table. Lord Greengrass stood up for him and moved one seat to the right.

"How temporary?" asked Lord Ogden.

Slytherin sat down firmly in the now vacant chair. "Until Malfoy disabuses himself of a misunderstanding he is currently under."

Several lords snorted, despite obviously not knowing what the misunderstanding was.

Lord Davis smiled a knowing smile. "I'm surprised you didn't use your leverage with the Potters to get them to do it."

"My leverage?"

"Their younger twin son — the insane duellist — Harry, I believe his name is."

"I have no idea what you're suggesting," Slytherin said, mildly.

"It's such a shame he's not the Potter heir," Davis continued, apparently ignoring the other man's words. "But it's certainly fortunate for the boy that he seems to have such powerful friends."

Lord Lovegood's mouth twitched upwards and Jacob coughed into his fist before saying, "My eldest daughter has sent me many owls about Harry. I'm sure even without being the Potter heir, he would be valuable to us."

Davis sniggered. "Oh, I'm sure."

There was a moment of silence in which the wizards up and down the table traded glances and Slytherin seemed to consider something before he spoke again. "I intend to invite Harry to the winter solstice gathering that I will soon be announcing. Hopefully, you will be able to meet him then."

Several of the seated lords perked up.

"A party?"

"At Slytherin Manor?"

"Is it near completion then?"

Slytherin nodded. "It will be ready before December, yes."

From there the group moved onto other things — upcoming bills to the wizengamot, an invitation from Bodmin Moor Stadium to buy a private quidditch box, and Lord Ogden's announcement that his grand daughter was now officially 'off the market.'

They were just wrapping up when Milly, one of the Greengrass house elves, popped into being beside Lord Slytherin, tugged at his sleeve, and whispered, "Lady Lily Potter is waiting to see you in the antechamber, Lord Slytherin, Sir."

Slytherin didn't noticeably react this. He nodded, waited for the rest of the lords to file out of the main doors, walked over to the door to the anti-chamber, opened it, and, without fuss or fanfare, stepped inside.

Lady Sunny Greengrass was sitting in an armchair, speaking to Lily Potter who was sat opposite.
They both stood as he closed the door behind him.

"Lord Slytherin," Sunny said, walking towards him. "I present to you, Lady Lily Potter, of the Ancient and Noble house of Potter."

Slytherin nodded. "Charmed."

Sunny reached his side, gave his shoulder a gentle, reassuring squeeze, and left, leaving the two of them alone.

Lily wore dark red silk and lace robes — robes which certainly cost as much as the average muggleborn family might spend on food and rent combined, in a month of Christmas days. She waited awkwardly while Slytherin moved to a side table.

"Drink, Lady Potter?"

"No, thank you."

"As you wish." Slytherin proceeded to pour himself an apple-juice from the brandy bottle. "What can I do for you?"

"Professor McGonagall said all applicants for the potions position were to go to you. You've been out of contact all summer. She wasn't too happy about that."

"That doesn't surprise me." Slytherin sipped from the apple-juice filled brandy glass. "Well, no one can doubt your potions skill. What of your primary school teaching? I doubt the lords of the Light will find a teacher as good as you for their children."

"I have found an adequate replacement."

"Merely adequate? What about your other commitments? I hear the committee for the approval of experimental charms is quite busy these days."

"I will be more than capable of giving all my different responsibilities the attention they require without biasing myself."

In an all too casual tone of voice, Slytherin asked, "Will you be capable of giving all the different children the attention they require without biasing yourself?"

The temperature in the room dropped like a winter frost. Lily's expression changed from professional indifference to icicle sharpness. "Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"So, if I were to ask, say, a certain Slytherin second year at the end of the year—"

"—You keep Harry out of this," Lily hissed.

"...Daphne Greengrass."

Lily frowned. "What?"

"I was talking about Daphne Greengrass."
Lily stared at him for several seconds. "What is it you want with Harry?"

"I don't know why you think I have anything to do with Harry Potter."

"Harry is happy with us!"

"If you say so."

"Harry needs to stay close to us!"

"Why?"

"He's our son."

"Is that the only reason?"

Lily hesitated one moment too long before replying, "Yes, of course."

Slytherin stared at her. He then put his glass down with a noticeable clink sound. "This has been a wonderful little discussion, Lady Potter, but I'm sure you've got potion lesson plans to be working on."

Lily looked nonplussed. "Sorry?" Her brain caught up to her ears. "You're accepting my application?"

"Yes, I am. Please feel free to show yourself out."

Lily Potter stood still for only a moment longer before turning and heading for the door in a swish of elegant robe.

"Lady Potter."

Lily turned back halfway through the door.

"I personally know the pain of being abandoned," Slytherin said, every word heavy and deliberate, "and I will tell you that such things do not heal without leaving scars."

Lily scowled before shutting the door behind her.

Slytherin listened to the footsteps walking away. When they'd fully faded, he checked his watch, pulled out a vial of ageing potion antidote, and downed it in one gulp. His body started shrinking. He swigged the rest of the apple-juice to drown-out the taste of potion, and cast a half-dozen counter charms while his body settled in at around five foot one.

A somewhat smaller hand reached up to the green and black mask. The hand grasped the mask. The mask pulled free to reveal a face, not yet thirteen, with eyes as green as the pair that had just left, and a lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead. Harry Potter, the true boy who lived — time traveller, master occlumens, and Azkaban inmate from a past future that he swore would never be — stared at the closed door with a pensive expression, before nodding firmly, turning his back, and softly walking away.

— End of Prologue —

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Diagon Alley Pile Up
This is Potter Manor — a beautiful red-brick building in the English county of Dorset, just on the outskirts of Puddlemere.

Not for the first time in the last week, the lady of the manor was sat in one of the many comfy armchairs in the large manor library, although she was hardly in the right state of mind to appreciate this. If she were sitting any further forward on the edge of said arm-chair, she'd be sitting on the floor.

"Oh, wow, Harry." Lily Potter leaned further over the low table that separated them.

Harry smiled and held up the glass statue of a hippogriff he'd just wandlessly conjured from thin air. "Do you like it?"

"Yes," Lily breathed.

Harry put the glass statue on the table and leaned back in his chair. "What else would you like to see?"

Lily picked up the glass hippogriff and turned it this way and that. "Can you do people?"

Harry pursed his lips. People were tricky. Unlike animals, the conjurer needed to get the likeness just right. Human minds were designed for facial recognition. He closed his eyes and concentrated, felt the magic flow through his finger tips as glass formed in the palm of his hand. He opened his eyes, now holding the glass bust of a girl.

"Who's that?"

"Hermione Granger."

Lily smiled knowingly. "That's the pretty girl who almost beat your marks."

"She is."

Lily gazed at the statue and her smile faulted. "She's also a vassal of Lord Slytherin."

"Yes."

"All your friends seem to be under Slytherin's influence."

"They are my friends."

"And Slytherin?"

Harry frowned. "You know I've said I won't talk about that."

A pained look flashed over Lily's face and she looked away. "Harry, I know you feel indebted to this man, but—" She turned back and stopped.

Harry now held a bouquet of glass flowers — lilies and grasses, each petal and stem perfectly formed, delicate and intricate. It caught the light from the windows that flowed into the dusty room and fractured into a thousand star-like points around the books and shelves. Harry smiled a sheepish smile.

Lily's serious face slowly melted. "You..." She carefully took the bouquet. "Words fail me, young man."
Harry grinned.

Lily huffed and stood up. "Well, I suppose I'd better do something with this." She nodded to the glass flowers. "Do try to spend some time out of the library before dinner. It isn't healthy to stay indoors all day."

"I will try."

Lily gave him a final, lingering, side-ways look before walking off.

Harry listened to her light footsteps leave the library. The far away door shut with a click.

Harry's smile gradually faded to a more neutral expression. He reached out to the table in front of him, picked up the book he'd been pretending to read before he'd been interrupted, and shut it with a definite thump.

Right, he thought. Now that that's out of the way…

Catlike, he leapt to his feet, stepped over to the third row of bookshelves, and shimmied up the ladder. He reached the top shelf without stopping and rested a cautious hand on one of the books. Pureblood rumour said that old families tended to hide their family libraries behind special books, poetically appropriate if possible. Voldemort believed it. Harry also wouldn't be surprised if it was true.

He let the book's magic brush against his finger tips, feeling for a hint that this was the book out of all the many thousand that surrounded him.

It wasn't.

Harry reached for the next book and painstakingly checked that one too. Nope. Resigned to the slog, he continued moving along the row of books at speeds that would bore a flailtail snail. He'd been at this for a whole week now and he'd still only finished the first two bookshelves. He wasn't likely to find anything before he left for Hogwarts, but the promise of instant advantage over his enemies was mighty tempting.

And advantage was certainly what he needed. At the end of last year he'd lost to Voldemort while trying to acquire the philosopher's stone. It was only luck and a still unexplained mystery that had stopped the episode turning into a disaster. The monster's words constantly echoed in his head.

"Obviously, as soon as I suspected there was someone out there who had all my knowledge, I started developing new methods. What kind of fool would try to use only tricks the enemy already knows?"

Of course, that went both ways. With the exception of some of his occlumency and a handful of tricks Voldemort had learned in his past future, all Harry's methods were Voldemort's too. Harry needed new magic, and he only had so much time to get it in.

The sound of the door clicking open sounded through the still library like a curse. Harry jumped off the ladder, landed as light as a feather—because, for a fraction of a second, he was—and grabbed a random book from the shelf. Only too late did he realise it was a 'boy who lived' adventure book.

"You!" Harry's fellow time-travelling twin, John Potter, stood at the end of the row.

"Me."
"What are you doing?"

"Reading. Say, do we actually get royalties for these?"

John took one look at the book in his hand and sniffed. "No. The lawyer said that 'boy who lived' wasn't an official legal title or name."

"Shame. I could do with some gold."

John ground his teeth.

"Is there anything else you wanted?" Harry asked.

"Yes! I want you to stop sucking up to Mum!"

"Pardon?"

"All the time now, it's Harry this, and Harry that, it's making me sick!"

"Awww, is the little lion cub jealous?"

"You're doing what ever it is you did to my Ginny!" John's face was getting as red as his robes. "Stop it, or I'll make you regret it!"

"Still don't know who this 'Ginny' you're referring to is."

John all but screamed. "She was at Alex's birthday party!"


John struggled to contain himself. "It doesn't matter," he spat. "As soon as she's sorted into Gryffindor, I'll see to it that you never get near her again."

Whine, whine, whinge, whinge. This had been John's general attitude ever since Harry had returned to Potter Manor for the first time in over ten years. Harry didn't feel even a tiny bit guilty for stealing Ginny and Hermione away from him — not when John had been instrumental in sending him to Azkaban in both of the previous timelines for ten years of dementor filled hell, even when he'd known he was innocent.

His twin brother's mood hadn't improved by the time dinner rolled around and wasn't likely to get better.

"And why does he get to go out every — other — day?" John asked, pointing to Harry across the table, who saluted with a bread roll. "It's not fair."

"He's not going out," said Lord James Potter in a firm voice from where he sat carving beef onto Lily's plate. "He's only going to Sirius's place to visit Alexandra. You can go too, if you want. Pass the gravy please, Harry."

"Yes, Father."

"Yes, Father," John parroted, doing an recognisable impression of Draco Malfoy.

Lord Potter frowned. "Please don't do that, John."

John made a disgruntled face and bent down over his plate.
"Not so keen on Alexandra anymore?" Harry asked.

"She won't shut up about Lord Slytherin."

"Well, she is at that age. Having crushes is normal."

"And you'd know about that, would you?"

"All my friends are girls, so yes, I would."

James Potter let his otherwise serious face slip. "Do I need to start picking out intention gifts for you?"

"Well, there is a very pretty muggle born girl in Slytherin whose thirteenth birthday is coming up."

John slammed his hands on the table, causing a silver sauce boat to spill over the table.

"John!" Lily barked.

"You can't have Hermione!"

"Why?" Harry asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I've already started courting her. I was first."

"Hermione didn't even accept your intention gift. And you then threatened to burn it in front of her if she didn't."

"John!" Lily shrieked. "Is that true?"

John mumbled something along the lines of, "sorta."

"That book is priceless!"

"I wasn't going to actually do it! I was just being playful. Like Dad said I should."

Lord Potter put a hand over his eyes.

"That's no excuse," Lily said. "If you can't be respectful to both the girls and the gifts then you'll get no more from us to court with until you've hit your own thirteenth birthday."

"What?!"

"You've clearly shown that you're not yet mature enough. There's a reason this is usually left until children are older. I'm sure Miss Bones will understand."

"What about Harry?"

James and Lily Potter shared a meaningful look. James cleared his throat. "If Harry continues to show the level of maturity and responsibility he has so far, then yes."

"That's not fair!"

"John!" James Potter had clearly had enough. "I am your father, your head of house, and your lord. I will decide what is and is not fair. My word is your law. Your wand is my gift. Go to your room and don't leave until you see fit to comport yourself in a manner befitting the heir of an ancient and noble house."
John stared at his father in wide-eyed shock. He then pushed his chair back and sullenly stamped off, closing the dining room door behind him with a loud bang.

Dinner was a lot quieter after that. Harry didn't see John again that evening. He didn't see him at breakfast the next morning either. Or afterwards, when he stood at one of Potter Manor's several floo places. He tossed a pinch of floo powder into the roaring flames.

"Twelve Grimmauld Place."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Deep within number twelve Grimmauld Place, inside the fidiused Black Library, there was a blackboard. It hung from one of the many bookcases and hid several shelves of boy who lived adventure books, which the young lady of the house, Alexandra Black, had quarantined in case stupidity was contagious.

On this blackboard someone had drawn a large table in chalk, each row and column perfectly straight, and exactly the same width apart.

Missions

Bring Draco to the Gray — Alexandra/(Luna?)

Muggleborn project/Guardianship — Hermione/Lord Slytherin

Acquire/Destroy diary — ?

Get Ginny properly equipped — ?

Seal off chamber until basilisk can be killed — Lord Slytherin

Animagus project — Harry

Beside each of these boxes, at the very top of the table, the same someone had written S.W.O.T in neat curly writing.

"No, Alex, you're not getting it," Hermione Granger huffed, standing at the blackboard with a whippy looking cane and a piece of green chalk. "Our earpiece communication mirrors are a strength, not an opportunity."

Alex tried to sit up and shrug from where she lay with Luna, half-engulfed in a massive beanbag, but all she managed to do was shift her weight around. "What about — omff!" She recoiled from an arm smacking into the side of her head. "Luna!"

"Sorry."

"—What about Luna's plum trees? You know, the one's that make people more gullible?"

"Another strength."

"And they don't actually make people more gullible," Luna added. "They make people more willing to believe the extraordinary."

"What's the difference?" Daphne Greengrass asked. The last of the four girls present was sitting a few feet away in a high-back chair, posture straight, hands resting in her lap, legs crossed at her ankles, handbag resting by her feet, not a single long blond hair out of place.
"Magnitude. They only help people believe truly incredible things."

"What about all the cool Black family magic I've been learning?" Alex asked, turning back to Hermione.

"Another strength."

"So what would be an opportunity?"

"Us knowing that Lucius Malfoy might have the diary on him when he goes to Flourish and Blotts is a good example."

"Okay, umm..." Alex frowned. "How exactly do we know this? And why's this diary so important, anyway?" She felt a soft hand grip her arm and give a reassuring squeeze.

"Slytherin family secrets, Alex," Luna said. "Hopefully you'll learn soon."

Alex's face firmed in determination. "Right — Slytherin secrets — right. Prove myself — got it."

A quiet dong sounded throughout the library as a clock struck nine. A change spread throughout the group — a subtle shifting of expressions. In Daphne it was a softening — in Hermione it was a faint reddening of the cheeks — and with Luna it was a slight unfocusing of the eyes. Alexandra had come to recognise these changes over the last week and knew they meant only one thing. Slytherin's most trusted and most powerful student — Harry Potter.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Harry arrived in twelve Grimmauld place in a swoosh of soot. The moment he stepped through the floo, a perfectly manicured hand presented him with his fifteen inch yew and thestral hair wand, which he neatly took and waved in a long arc, cleaning all the dust from his robes. "Thanks, Daphne."

"How did the chamber of secrets go?" Daphne whispered as they started making their way through the house.

"Not so good." Harry hit a painting up ahead with a stunning spell. "The chamber won't carry a charm itself and I've hit the limit to the number of secrets a caster's soul can anchor."

"How many?"

"Seven. I was surprised I could even cast the spell that many times. Old Tom could only ever do one."

"Are you going to deactivate some of your other charms?"

"Maybe one or two — still need most of them."

"So what are we going to—Eep!"

Harry had taken her firmly by the shoulders and steered her into one of the many empty rooms, where upon he started casting privacy charms. "I warded the rest of the entrances with some heavy duty enchantments tied to Hogwarts's own. It'll take some effort to slip through them and I'm pretty sure the diary hasn't the skills."

"You haven't had any more thoughts on how the other horcruxes did the swap thing last year, did you?"
Harry sucked in through his teeth. "A few, but…” He grimaced. "I'm leaving it for the moment. There's a… thing. I don't want to start second guessing myself."

Daphne nodded slowly, but with a slight frown.

"Anyway, I also ran into Snape on the way out," Harry continued. "He suggested he should be a spy for me against Dumbledore."

Daphne sucked in her breath. "You're not going to trust him, are you?"

"Merlin, no. I trust Snape as much as I trust Lily — who, by the way, also appears to be a Dumbledore spy." Harry frowned in thought for a moment before brightening. "What about you?"

Daphne reached into her handbag, pulled out a small stack of envelopes, and handed them over. "Mostly the usual — although Arthur Weasley has requested a meeting with Lord Slytherin about your 'dealings' with the Weasley family."

"Hmmm…” Harry opened the letter in question and scanned it. "This could be about either my partnership with the twins or my teaching Ginny — more likely the twins — not entirely a surprise. I'll have to arrange something either way… and speaking of the twin’s partnership, I spoke to the Grangers. We're thinking of developing a commercial submarine prototype, so we're going to need to send out proposals to people who have the gold for that sort of thing."

Daphne clicked her tongue, reached into her handbag again, withdrew a small black book and a tiny quill, licked her finger tip, flicked through the book, and made a small note. "Even with the amount of gold you pulled in over the summer, we only have liquid funds for another eighteen months," she warned. "Large scale projects would drain us dangerously low."

"I know. We'll just have to keep outrunning the red line." He smiled. "You've been doing your part very well."

Daphne blushed. "Thank you." She hesitated. "Um, Harry?"

"Yes, Daph?"

"I don't want to sound selfish, considering everything that needs to get done, but I was wondering if we could go exploring somewhere sometime? We haven't done that in ages. I've been feeling quite shut in recently."

Harry blinked. He tried to think back to the last time he'd taken Daphne anywhere. It had been quite a while. Damn. He looked into her ice blue eyes, which gazed back at him with perhaps just a hint of nervousness. He smiled. "Of course, Daph." Damn, damn, damn, he was supposed to be better than this.

Daphne's face lit up. "I like it when we go places."

Harry's mind raced through countless time slots, appointments, and commitments… but there were just so many of them, he didn't— "Ah!" An idea struck him. "What about your birthday — October 24? It's even on a Saturday — we could take the whole weekend."

Daphne seemed to consider this. Then she nodded, smiling softly. "I'm happy with that. For my birthday, you will take me somewhere amazing."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —
Alexandra Black watched Harry Potter receive his traditional enthusiastic greeting from Hermione and Luna before he walked over to the black board and picked up the chalk. She couldn't help noticing that Hermione had happily relinquished her spot at the board even though only a few minutes ago it would have been difficult to manage such a feat with a team of wild dogs.

"Animagus project is going well," Harry announced, making a note next to the appropriate box. "We'll start on mandrake leaf in October, so long as we can get hold of it. Incidentally, thank you for the loan of the book, Alex — it was most useful."

Alex nodded.

"You'll all need to learn the sticking charm before then," he continued. "Otherwise you'll find it difficult to not end up swallowing your leaf. Yes, Hermione?"

Hermione had her hand up. "I looked up how to cast a small enough notice-me-not and I'm certain I'll be able to do it by then."

"Excellent, well done."—Hermione beamed—"That'll be a lot of help for when I'm not around. Yes, Daphne?"

"Did you decide whether we were going to register or not?"

"Not yet. It depends on what forms we get. Any other questions?" No one said anything.

"Right," he continued. "Last item before I let you get back to planning Ginny's shopping trip—"

Alex's eye twitched at 'before I let you'.

"—Lord Slytherin has decided we'll start training in group combat—"

Alex perked up.

"—so you can take down far more dangerous opponents as a team. We'll start as soon as we get to the castle."

Wow, Alex thought. That's going to be awesome. "Who's training us?" she asked. "Is it Slytherin?"

"Nope, it's going to be me."

Alex blinked. "What? You're the 'really dangerous opponent?'" her voice radiated doubt. Sure, she'd seen his performance at the duelling tournament towards the end of last year, and it had blown her away at the time, but…

"Why not?" Potter was smiling now.

"Why not?" she repeated back, her voice gradually rising as her incredulity set in. "Have you seen how much arse Ginny and Luna kick! I bet they'll also be able to clear every duelling opponent by the end of the year, just like you and John did! And I've got a lot better too! I haven't got spell swatting down yet, but I'm close! And Hermione and Daphne beat a troll before, and that was almost a whole year ago! Do you really, really, think you'll be a challenge for all of us — all at once!?"

Potter continued to smile.

There was silence in the room. Daphne was busy inspecting her nails.
Alex turned to Luna. "Back me up here, Luna. This is dumb!"

Hermione exploded. "Why you little—!"

"—Hermione," Harry said in a warning tone of voice.

Hermione instantly cut herself off.

"It's a perfectly reasonable question."

Alex stared wide-eyed at Hermione, who despite her silence still looked like she wanted to jump at her.

"Yes, Alexandra," Harry finally answered. "You will find me a more than adequate teacher."

Alex looked back to a serene looking Luna who'd put her hand on Alex's arm and was giving it another reassuring squeeze.

"I understand your doubts though, so let's say if you do manage to pass my first test, I will communicate to Lord Slytherin that it is my belief that you are ready to be fully taken into his confidence."

Alex's eyes widened again. She grinned. "Fine."

They continued to plan Ginny's shopping trip after that. Alex was a little annoyed that she wasn't going to be able to go, but, as Luna pointed out, if she was supposed to be infiltrating the Dark this year, she couldn't very well be seen to be hanging out with the Gray, could she?

---

A few days later, a girl stood among the many trees, both magic and mundane, that made up the Burrow's orchard. Her eyes were closed, her head held up, her long red hair flowing down to the small of her back, body totally still… except for her fingers — they twitched at her side with barely contained magical intent.

Off to the right, a breeze detached a leaf from a magical elm. The girl's eyes shot open. The leaf got only another foot down to the ground before an invisible slash of magic sliced it clean in two.

The girl lowered her hand and breathed out.

The two pieces of leaf settled on the ground and another gust of wind picked them up and blew them away.

"Ginny? Ginny! Where are you?" The voice of Molly Weasley called across the Burrow grounds.

Suddenly, where before there had been a girl, now there was just a faint outline in the air. The girl had been quiet before, but it would have been theoretically possible to hear the breath from her lungs and the beating of her heart — now, not even that was possible.

The vague shape in the air made its way out of the orchard far faster than one would expect from something only four foot eight, and vaulted over the fence surrounding the chicken coops. The girl shimmered back into view, cancelled the silencing charm on herself, and picked up one of the startled hens. "I'm here, Mum!"

"Oh." Molly Weasley appeared around the corner that lead to the house. She put her hands on her hips. "Well, make sure you finish up soon. We want to make sure we get into the Alley nice and
early so we can finish our shopping before Lockhart's book signing."
"Yes, Mum."

When Molly Weasley had left, Ginny gave the hen a fond stroke before hugging it and putting it back down, where upon it immediately started pecking at the ground. She then started gathering eggs and putting out new feed while thinking about the day ahead.

Gilderoy Lockhart's book signing. That was when she'd picked up the diary in the last timeline according to Harry. She'd begged to be allowed to deal with it of course, but Harry had put his foot down. It wasn't that he doubted her, he'd said, but dealing with Malfoy required an experienced hand, not merely a skilled one.

She'd sulked about that for days, but eventually got over it, helped in no small part by the knowledge that she would be getting all new things for Hogwarts. She'd never had all new things and wasn't sure exactly how this was going to happen. Harry had just told her to 'be ready for it,' whatever that meant.

After eggs, breakfast, and a general mad Weasley dash to get ready, Arthur Weasley pulled Ginny aside where none of the others could overhear them. "Looking forward to shopping?" he asked.

"Yes, Dad," she said, dutifully.

Her father looked unusually uncomfortable. "Listen, Ginny, I know you haven't had the best year — what with being grounded, but I don't want you to go off to Hogwarts with us still like this. This has gone on for far too long already."

Ginny didn't let her face reveal anything.

"I've spoken to your mother about this, and she doesn't like it, but we have decided to lift your grounding."

Wait, what? Ginny hardly dared to believe it. "You mean…"

"Yes, you can go to your friends houses during the holidays and to Hogsmeade when you're old enough."

Ginny's face broke into a wide smile. She leaped forward and hugged her father for what felt like the first time in forever. She sniffed and felt her eyes moisten. "Thanks, Dad. You've no idea how hard it's been —"

"Shh, shh, it's fine."

They stayed like that for a while, just enjoying the moment. Eventually he pulled back, reached into his robes and withdrew a small bag. His voice lowered another notch. "Not a word to Molly."

Confused, Ginny took the bag, opened it, and gasped. A dozen gold galleons gleamed up at her. "I —" She struggled for words. "You — I — How?"

"Shh, Ginny, it's fine. Get yourself some nice things, but make sure you leave enough for a wand."

"Won't Mum know?" she whispered back.

"Don't worry about it. Just leave that to me. Now c'mon — your brothers will all be ready soon."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —
Daphne, Hermione, and Luna were all sat in cheap chairs on a balcony overlooking Diagon Alley. Behind them, through silenced, tall glass doors, the massive printing press of Quibbler Headquarters whirred and clanked away, manned by a half dozen wizards who were doing an excellent job of pretending not to be interested in what they were up to. Hermione was looking down the end of a telescope.

"Anything?" Daphne asked. She had an open picnic basket by her feet. Luna was already halfway through a paper plate of jam sandwiches (without crusts).

"No. But we can't assume things will turn out like last time. Time is like a butterfly flapping its wings to create a storm."

"Pardon?"

"I read the book that the movie we watched was based on. It had a lot more in it about that stuff. You change one small thing and the effect ripples outwards, like a stone thrown into a pond."

"What happens if you throw a butterfly into a pond?" Luna asked.

Hermione took her eye away from the telescope to glare at her.

"My dad always says time's more like cheese," she added.

"No, no." Hermione shook her head. "Look, there's a lot of research that's been done about it — magical too — it's called chaos theory."

Luna bit into another jam sandwich, swallowed, and smiled. "Sounds like fun. Could I borrow the book?"

"Err..." Hermione put her eye back to the telescope. "Sure, although it's not really a proper book. It's fiction. Oh!" She made a frantic waving motion with one hand. "There's Ginny and the rest of the Weasleys."

"Wonderful." Luna put her plate down and stood up.

"Are you sure you want to be the one to do this?" Hermione asked.

"I know Ginny best. We're sisters." Luna paused. "Well, not yet obviously." She paused again. "I mean, obviously you'll be one day too, but I still know her best." And with that, she turned and walked through the big glass doors.

Hermione watched her go and felt a heat grow on her cheeks. "Um, Daphne?" Her breath became shallower. "What, exactly, did Luna mean by that?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"In here, Ginny dear." Molly Weasley steered her youngest into a second hand clothes shop. "Now, just stay there while I see what we can do." She started pulling robes off a rack. Most of them, to Ginny's eyes, looked far too large for her. The ones that didn't all had strange marks and stains on them.

"Here you go," her Mum thrust a robe into her arms, which had a huge tear down the side. "Don't worry about that. I'll be able to sew it up in a trice. Now, off you go to try it on while I see about skirts for your uniform."
Ginny nodded in resignation, trudged to the back of the shop, pulled open the curtain to the dressing room, felt concealment magic, and instantly sent a stunner towards the hidden figure. The hidden figure swatted back the spell and several volleys later, the red spell smacked harmlessly into the ceiling.

Luna shimmered into view.

"Lu—"

Luna grabbed Ginny, pulled her in, and whipped the curtain shut behind her. "Shhhh."

Ginny nodded quickly.

Luna whipped out two vials and handed one to Ginny. "Polyjuice." She uncorked her own vial and plucked a hair from Ginny's head.

"Ow," Ginny hissed.

"Here," she handed Ginny a hair of her own. "You have one hour. I have more. Meet at Flourish and Blotts for the swap back."

"Got it," Ginny whispered, shimmying out of her old and faded summer dress. "Don't you dare get caught!"

Luna had already stepped out of her summer robes and downed her vial of polyjuice.

Ginny picked up the robes from the floor and pulled them down over her body. The silk felt smoother than anything she'd worn before. She drank her own vial and felt the strange sensation of changing into someone else. Moments later, it was Luna's reflection that stared back at her from the changing room mirror.

Luna, now wearing Ginny's body along with the old school robes, giggled.

"I don't giggle like that!" Ginny whispered, fiercely.

Luna winked in a very Ginny-esque way. "No, only when you're with Harry." And before Ginny could say anything in retaliation, Luna had skipped out of the changing room.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Harry stood by the floo in Potter Manor.

"There you go, Harry," said Lily Potter, flicking an imaginary speck of dust from his robes. "You're looking very smart."

"Thank you."

John made a sick face as soon as Lily's back was turned.

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Alright!" James shouted, stepping up behind them and taking a pinch of floo powder. "Diagon Alley awaits!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —
Up on the balcony, Hermione's face was redder than an oversized star. "You don't really think that — I mean, Harry is — I mean — that he — with me—"

"Hermione," Daphne said, sitting back in her chair. "If Harry doesn't get you a declaration of intention gift on your birthday, I will eat my hat — and you know how big a witch's hat is."

"It's just..." Hermione's brain had finally managed to break through the initial barrier and had started on all the implications. "Well, for starters, I'm a muggleborn!"

"It's not nearly the first time a muggleborn has been courted by a lord. Look at Ladies Potter and Davis."

"I...I..." Hermione buried herself back into the telescope to hide her flustered state, no matter how much of a lost cause it might have been. "Has Harry actually told you he's going to start courting me?"

"Not in so many words."

"Then you don't know! It might be nothing! It might be—" Hermione stopped in mid-rant. She sucked in her breath. "The Malfoys have just arrived in the alley from the Leaky Cauldron."

"Really?"

"Yes. There's Lord and Lady Malfoy. There's Draco...." Hermione frowned. "...And there's a girl with them, maybe Luna and Ginny's age — looks kind of like a Malfoy." She paused. "But I don't recognise her at all..."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Now, I have to get this absolutely perfect, Arthur Weasley thought, as he edged towards his wife and daughter. One misstep, and it won't go nearly as well as I'd like. He put on a big smile. "Molly."

"Oh, Arthur, thank goodness, quickly, which do you think would be better for little Ginny?" She held up two equally battered looking cauldrons.

"I think what little Ginny needs is some ice-cream. It's far too hot out here."

Little Ginny grinned up at him. "Ice-cream!"

"What?" Molly looked momentarily nonplussed. "Arthur! You're going to spoil her!"

"Oh, don't fuss so, Molly." He crouched and tried to pick up a squealing little Ginny. "Uff! You're getting heavy!"

Little Ginny pouted. "Did you just call me fat?"

Arthur laughed before putting her back down.

Molly huffed. "Fine, but don't be too late. We don't want to miss the queue for Lockhart."

Father and daughter walked away towards the ice-cream parlour, before taking a detour and ducking into a side-alley. Arthur winked down at his daughter. "Excellent acting, Ginny."

"Thanks!"
Draco Malfoy was feeling pretty smug. This was quite a normal state of affairs for him, but just now he was feeling it more so than usual. He was sitting outside one of the better Diagon Alley cafes, in front of his friends, who were staring at him like he'd grown a second head, and beside his newly found little sister, Virgo.

"Virgo?" said Theodore Nott, as though he hadn't quite heard it the first time.

"She's our answer to Potter," Draco replied, while Virgo ate a chocolate eclair with tiny bites in just the way their mother had spent the last two weeks drilling into her.

"Is she really?" asked Pansy. "She doesn't look much."

Draco winced.

"Now what's going on?" Daphne asked.

"Not sure," Hermione replied, one eye firmly fixed to the telescope. "But Theo and Pansy look like they're wetting themselves."

"That's odd."

Hermione sucked in her breath. "Oh, this is going to be interesting."

"What?"

"Lord Potter and the fraud who lived, are on a collision course with Draco and co."

Virgo Malfoy, previously known as Tom Riddle, let his aura fade slightly, not caring that several adult wizards and witches had been caught in it as well.

"You're bullying them," thought the voice of Julia in his head, the Swedish muggleborn whose body he'd stolen.

I am showing them the power that I wield, Virgo thought back. It is necessary.

_They can't be as bad as you make out._

I assure you, girl, that if I do not take a firm stance now, I will pay for it later. I do not have the full power of my adult form, even as I was before I became the diary.

Nott and Parkinson had settled down now. They'd carefully taken seats by him and Draco, and started asking him questions in a cautious and respectful tone.

_If you're so desperate for respect, why don't you just tell them who you really are?_

Because I am not a fool. Information leaks. I cannot risk others knowing of my true nature. I do not particularly wish for even my other self to know of me. Who knows how he might react.

_It must be terrible to not trust even yourself._
Virgo then caught sight of two wizards walking down the street whose faces he'd committed to memory. Lord Potter and one of his twin sons — Possibly Harry Potter, who in turn, might be another horcrux. He nudged Draco and leaned into him. "Introduce me to them."

Draco nodded slowly, called out, and did so.

"Virgo?" The boy, who turned out to be John Potter, looked dumbstruck.

Lord Potter clicked his tongue. "No one told me you had a sister, Mister Malfoy."

"Virgo was cast out of the family for being a squib," Draco drawled. "Much like your own son, Harry. My father sent her to Sweden. When he saw how your Harry turned out to be so gifted he sent for her, and it turned out that, like your Harry, she wasn't nearly as much of a squib as we all thought. And much to my mother and father's delight, she is now more than ready to take up her responsibility to the family."

John wore an expression that suggested he was trying on this explanation for size, almost as though it were a set of clothes.

"Well, pleased to have met you, Miss Malfoy," Lord Potter said in clipped tones. "C'mon John — we need to get a move on if we're to finish before lunch."

John nodded slowly before departing, seeming to accept whatever conclusions he'd reached.

Virgo frowned. John Potter seemed like a highly intelligent boy. He'd generally only seen that look on people quite a few years older.

Yeah, and he's kinda cute, too.

Oh, hell.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Mmmm… your second wand is proving far more tricky than your first, Miss Lovegood. Perhaps, we should try… these ones."

Ginny watched as Mister Ollivander climbed down from the ladder propped against one of the many stacks of wand boxes, holding yet another box. He placed it in front of her and lifted off the lid. Two wands were displayed on deep blue velvet — same length — same floral carvings on the handles — only a slight difference in shade. You'd have to be really paying attention to tell them apart.

"The one on the right is cypress, thirteen and a half inches, dragon heartstring from a common welsh green. Go on, give it a swish."

Ginny bit her lip. Would something so girly really fit her? She picked up the wand and waved it about a bit. Nothing. Despite herself, she felt a tiny pang of disappointment.

Ollivander watched her like a hawk. "It seems not, Miss Lovegood. Why don't you try the next one?"

Resigned, Ginny reached for the wand on the left, but as her hand neared, she felt a heat start to creep down her finger tips. Her breath caught. She closed her fingers over the handle and felt the sheer power flow through her body, far quicker and easier than anything she'd ever felt in all her countless hours of training. It felt incredible! It felt like she'd had a huge weight lifted off of her.
She felt unstoppable! She thrust the wand out in front of her and it blasted out a stream of green sparks so dense that the whole shop was momentarily filled with an emerald mist.

Amazing.

Ollivander pursed his lips. "Hmmmm, curious."

"What's curious?"

"I remember every wand I've ever made, Miss Lovegood."

There was a tingle of a bell.

"Strange that this wand should have chosen you, when once upon a time, I sold a wand with the exact same specifications — thirteen and a half inches, yew, phoenix feather —

A door closed with a thump.

"—to the man who would one day claim heirship over the house that your betrothed now leads."

Ginny's mind froze. Tom. Voldemort. That… That couldn't—

"Luna!" said a cheerful voice, horrible in its familiarity.

If Ginny's mind had frozen before, now her heart stopped too. She turned slowly to find Luna beaming at her, still in Ginny's body, while her dad, Arthur Weasley, looked between Ginny and the floral wand in her hand with an expression of mild horror.

Before Ginny could think of anything to say, Luna darted forward. "Oooo! Flowers!" She reached for the other, stylistically-identical wand in the box.

"Miss Weasley," started Mister Ollivander in a tired voice. "It is the wand that chooses the—"

Luna plucked the wand out of the box and a shower of light blue sparks filled the room.

"…Wizard."

There was silence for a moment. Then Ginny threw seven galleons on the counter and fled.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Flourish and Blotts bustled. The aisles of the dozens of book shelves thronged with wizards and witches — many of them, especially the witches, could only charitably be called shoppers.

In the middle of the shop, where customers could normally sit down and put their feet up on a collection of assorted chairs and chintzes, there was instead a large square curtain, covered in silencing charms.

A queue was already forming.

Behind this curtain, a man with the most perfect smile this side of the Atlantic was busy charming his hair to give it just the right amount of bounce. He inspected himself in a fold up mirror and frowned at the result. Then he flashed a brilliant smile and gave his reflection a saucy wink. He frowned again, then repeated the smile and wink five more times before snapping the mirror shut and dropping it into the pocket of his plum silk robes.
The man now trotted to where the queue on the other side of the curtain would approach the table, crouched down, and inspected the books, posters, and yeti skull from every possible angle. One of the book piles had titles like, 'Gadding with Ghouls'. The other had titles like, 'The Boy Who Lived and the Three Headed Crup'. He made a minor adjustment.

"Getting it just right, Gilderoy?"

An old man had entered through a door in the curtain.

Gilderoy Lockhart stood up and flashed the man the same smile he'd just been practising, sans wink. "It's all about the show, Lord Blott." His voice echoed around the booth rather too loudly for such an enclosed space. "Even the smallest details can make a huge difference to sales. How you are seen — how you present yourself — is everything."

Lord Blott, one of the lords of the Light, smiled an indulgent smile and inspected several of the many posters pinned up to the massive backboard behind the table — posters such as…

SIGN UP FOR THE LOCKHART OWL LIST! LEARN THE 55 SECRET WAYS TO STAY SAFE THE AURORS DON'T WANT YOU TO KNOW ABOUT, ABSOLUTELY FREE!

And…

THE BOY WHO LIVED AND THE MUMMY’S WRATH! AN ALL NEW ADVENTURE WITH THE NATION'S FAVOURITE BOY HERO!

And, finally…

MAGICAL ME — HOW TO BECOME AN UNSTOPPABLE MAGICAL BADASS AND LOOK GREAT DOING IT

"Which is going to sell more?" Blott asked.

"Mmm? Oh, the boy who lived series sells better, but the margins aren't as high." Lockhart straightened a pile of flyers. "They're great transition books, though. Parents buy them like chocolate frogs!" He beamed.

Lord Blott nodded. "Well, I hope you're ready for this. There's practically a horde out there — and Malfoy should be here soon, too."

Gilderoy laughed. "Not to worry! After all.." He flashed his smile again. "I am Gilderoy Lockhart, order of Mer—"

"Yes, yes, yes."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Barefoot, Ginny ducked into a side alley and neatly stepped around a much larger wizard going the other way. The wizard hadn't paid any attention to her. She was invisible. Her polyjuice had run out, and so she'd carefully put away her satisfyingly girly, yet horrifyingly ominous new wand, disillusioned herself, and wandered over to Twilfitt and Tattings, after checking to make sure that neither her father nor mother were anywhere nearby.

Ginny had spent the last hour guiltily buying everything Harry said she'd need to make waves in Slytherin House — the best of everything — even a magic trunk — far more money than the twelve galleons her father had given her from Merlin only knew where.
The only thing she hadn't yet bought were clothes, and that was only because she'd needed to wait until she had her own body back. She hopped out of the other side of the alley and pushed her way into the clothes shop, so apparently exclusive that it advertised its exclusivity by displaying not only a lack of prices, but a lack of clothes too.

The woman behind the counter glanced up only long enough to take in the cut of the robes Luna had forced her into. "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to buy clothes for Hogwarts."

"The Hogwarts bespoke package is thirty galleons and includes five sets of robes, two cloaks, ten sets of underwear, socks, all in your style of choice, and a hat. We'll also have someone sent for a purse and a handbag if you know what you want, although the price for that varies." The woman finally looked up over the counter and properly inspected her. "You need shoes too?"

Ginny was holding Luna's low heeled shoes, which were now one size too small for her. "Yes?"

"Fine. Lose the robe, up on the stool, and behind the curtain. Up, up, up."

Twenty minutes later, Ginny was awash in a sea of fine silks, cotton, wool, and cashmere. A small army of charmed tape-measures, paper, and chalk made measurements while the woman babbled out an unending stream of fashion talk, constantly asking questions on her preference for this and or that, and only getting a firm answer one time in five.

The door bell ting-aling-alinged, and Ginny poked her head through the curtain as another girl stepped in. A man stepped in behind her. Ginny just managed to stop herself from gasping.

The woman straightened up from where she'd been waving her wand over a roll of material.

"Ah, Clarissa," said the man in a silky voice. "This is my daughter, Virgo. Get her full sets of everything, would you?"

"As it pleases you, Lord Malfoy."

Ginny felt a shiver go up her spine as the girl, Virgo, walked behind the curtain, disrobed, and stepped up onto the stool next to her as though she were stepping up to accept an order of Merlin. Ginny was sure that Lord Malfoy did not have a daughter.

The girl turned and looked her up and down. "Hogwarts too?"

"Yes."

"I don't recognise you." It was a statement, but also a question, bordering on an accusation.

Ginny cleared her throat. "I am Ginevra Molly Weasley, of the Ancient House of Weasley."

Virgo's lip curled upwards. "I wasn't aware that the Weasleys could afford to shop here."

"I have a patron."

"Really?" Now Virgo looked fascinated. "Pray tell."

Ginny said nothing. There wasn't anything to say — certainly not to a stranger of dubious origin. Virgo didn't seem perturbed though. She merely smiled.
And then, Ginny felt something shove itself into her mind with the force of a battering ram. Her eyes narrowed and the battering ram smashed into a three-foot thick concrete bunker with all the effectiveness of a pencil stabbing a brick wall. There was an intake of breath, a crash, and the next moment, Virgo was on the floor and the stool was half way across the room.

Ginny flashed a smirk.

"Oh, dear!" The woman started fussing around Virgo. "Are you alright, girl?"

Virgo recovered easily, picking her self up and rubbing a small scrape on her elbow. "My apologies. I appear to have slipped." And moments later, she was back on the stool as if nothing had happened.

Getting fitted was more than a little awkward after that. The girl kept throwing her furtive and suspicious glances, and Ginny couldn't help feeling that despite not recognising Virgo, and despite being sure the Malfoys didn't have a daughter, that somewhere, somehow, she still knew her.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Up on the balcony at Quibbler headquarters, the picnic basket that had once contained lemonade, jam sandwiches (without crusts), and incy-wincy sausage rolls, was now empty.

Daphne gazed down the telescope. "The queue at Flourish and Blotts is snaking out the door."

Hermione didn't look up from Year With A Yeti. "Do you think Lockhart actually did all this stuff?"

Daphne snorted. "Harry doesn't think so. He says it's just good theory wrapped around fantastical story telling."

"But that's dreadful! Writing about stuff you don't know from personal experience — just using someone else's knowledge — it's like stealing! It's—"

"You know, Harry is talking about writing a book."

Hermione shut her mouth. Then she opened it again. Then she closed it again. Eventually she said, "That's different."

Daphne smirked. "Oh?"

"Of course! Harry isn't just copying out of a book!" She lowered her voice. "He wrenched knowledge straight out the old Tom's head." She hesitated, then in a normal voice said, "Umm, why is Harry writing a book?"

Daphne stepped away from the telescope. "We're on a timer, Hermione. We have been ever since Old Tom learned Lord Slytherin's true identity. We can't let our lord's secret get out in an uncontrolled manner. It would be a disaster. We need to be in control when it happens. So we're going to start slowly bringing people on board over the next eighteen months."

"My parents."

"They'll be among the first, yes."

"What's this got to do with Harry writing a book?"

"Right now, people don't know much about Lord Slytherin. We might know that Harry is amazing,
but the public just think they know it. They've built up this fantasy around Lord Slytherin and when it's revealed he's only a boy — well — things might not go so well. We'll need to quickly re-establish Harry's credibility among a lot of people and fill an information gap with our own story before the media does. A well written best-selling book will help."

Hermione sat there gaping.

Daphne raised a single eyebrow. "Did you hear anything just now apart from, 'Harry Potter — Best Selling Author'?"

Hermione snapped her mouth shut, blushed, and quickly stood up. "I'm not even supposed to be up here!" She pointed to the queue outside Flourish and Blotts. "I'm supposed to be down there!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The bookshelves of Flourish and Blotts stretched nearly all the way from the floor to the ceiling, creating a sliver of space in-between. If someone were sufficiently athletic and nimble, they might be able to climb all the way up to the top, but they'd have to have a frame normally associated with ribbons, pleats, and the kind of fluffy ornaments stuck on the tops of pencils, in order to squeeze inside.

Invisible, flat on her stomach, and gazing out and down across the space in front of the still-closed Gilderoy Lockhart booth, Ginny Weasley surveyed the milling throng.

There were the Potters, with Harry looking more awesome than John ever could. She couldn't for the life of her understand how Harry was keeping himself under control. If it had been her in his position, she'd still be chewing out Lord and Lady Potter at the top of her lungs. As it was, Lord Potter stood tall and dignified, while Lady Potter busily checked her hair for the fourth time in so many minutes while glancing towards Lockhart's booth.

At that moment, Hermione walked into the shop like a witch on a mission. Ginny allowed herself a silenced snort as she watched the older girl sidle up to a bookshelf, stick her face in a seemingly random book, and casually edge her way up to the front of the queue.

"Mum, can I go browse books, pretty pretty pweese?"

Ginny whirled around — or rather, she tried to. She didn't have much space.

"Okay, Ginny dear, but don't pick up anything too expensive."

Luna! Ginny squeezed her way out of her hiding spot and shimmied down the bookcase, careful not to land on anyone as she jumped, catlike, from three book shelves up.

She ducked around another row, found Luna, tapped her on the shoulder, and together they made their way out of the shop.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Harry watched the crowd from the magical history section, his eyes just above an open 'History of the Second Magical British Empire', like a lion gazing over long grass. Getting hold of the Dark Lord's first horcrux had been gnawing at him for quite a while now. Even with Lord Malfoy thinking Lord Slytherin might be Voldemort, he didn't dare straight up ask him for the diary. He wasn't sure just how firmly Malfoy believed it. He was also under no illusions about the probability that this, waiting in Flourish and Blotts, would work. Too much stuff had changed. But even so, there was almost no cost to being here anyway, just in case. His target then entered the
shop, along with his wife, son, and a girl he didn't know — an overseas cousin perhaps. The Malfoys certain had plenty of them.

Lord Blott shook hands with Lord Malfoy with the air of a man who is being put upon and then disappeared back into the booth.

Nothing happened for several moments. Then there was a slight dimming of the lights and a booming voice sounded out across the store. "Lords and ladies, wizards and witches!" A plume of coloured smoke shot out from the curtain causing the nearest startled witches to cough and wave their hands about trying to clear it.

"Order of Merlin, Third Class!"

The curtain started to raise.

"Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defence League!"

The curtain was half way up now, more smoke pouring out as a multicoloured spotlight struck the floor.

"And five times winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award!"

Someone let loose a swarm of butterflies that flew around the crowd to delighted shouts and squeals.

"I give you — GILDEROY LOCKHART!"

The crowd went wild.

Lord Malfoy put his head in his hands.

Harry couldn't help smirking.

"Hey!" Harry turned. John stood right beside him staring with a deeply suspicious look. "What are you doing?"

"I am reading."

John looked between him and Lord Malfoy, and, with obvious horror, understanding dawned.

The moment they were in the witch's public bathroom, Ginny dropped her disillusionment.

"Ginny!" Luna hugged her. "I can't tell you how much fun I've had. Being you is wonderful."

"Good to hear it," Ginny answered as they both started stripping and swapping clothes. "There weren't any problems were there?"

"None." Luna stepped into her own dress. "Although, if Fred and George start worshiping you it's probably best just to go along with it."

Ginny froze. "Luna," she started with barely concealed dread. "What did you do?"
"You can't interfere!" John hissed.

Harry looked at him with incredulity. "Why not?"

"The timeline—"

Harry clamped his hand around his twin's mouth and pulled him into a deserted row of books. "Don't talk about it in public!" he whispered, fiercely.

John glared at him.

"There is absolutely no reason why anyone should have to suffer under that thing," Harry spat.

On the other side of the bookshelf, unseen by either boy. A short figure crept closer.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It was so crowded, thought Julia.

What were you expecting? Virgo thought back. The man is a celebrity.

Virgo had moved away from the packed mass surrounding his newly adopted father and was now stalking through the aisles, looking for differences between his own time in the forties, and now.

He does look very dashing.

Virgo could practically feel Julia blushing. He groaned. Did girls really use the word, 'dashing'? S-Shut up! I'll use it if I want to.

Virgo made to strengthen his occlumency barriers again, to at least keep some of his thoughts to himself. He'd had trouble focusing ever since the girl from the clothes shop had flung him out of her mind with a force of will that no normal eleven year old should possess.

Serves you right! That's what you get for trying to peer into girl's heads, you pervert!

Virgo was half way through projecting conciliatory and comforting thoughts to the girl when he noticed something.

Potter — both of them.

He sidled over to the shelf, behind which they were both crouched, doing his best to appear as graceful as possible in case anyone saw him, and peered through a tiny crack in the books. They were practically identical, except one had a lightning bolt scar on his forehead. That would be 'Harry' — possibly another one of him — a horcrux in the flesh.

Their voices were low. Far too low for any normal person to hear over the bustle of the shop. But Virgo was no normal person.

"The diary must be destroyed," said Harry.

Virgo froze. A stab of fear passed through her.

"Why?" asked John. His voice sounded harsh, angry, almost frustrated. "It would be better to let events happen. That way we know what will be."
"Are you a fool? We don't want things to happen the way they might."

"You can't take the diary!" John sounded almost frantic now. "You'll just make everything even worse! It's already bad enough!"

"I will do what I must."

"Then so will I!" And with that, John marched off into the crowd towards Lord Malfoy.

Virgo pushed his back up against the bookshelf and tried not to breathe as he listened to what was very obviously not his horcrux curse and walk off after his twin. What the hell!? 

*You're frightened.*

Virgo ignored the thought and dashed away, trying to find the most remote, most isolated place he could.

*I've never seen you frightened before.*

He ducked into an alcove made up by two bookcases, steadied himself against the wood, and tried to think. They knew about the diary. How? He would never wish himself dead, so Harry was obviously not him!

*Maybe your older self told them.*

But they're just children! My older self has been out of it for almost as long as they've been alive!

*Maybe they weren't talking about your diary.*

No. Impossible. It was. They must have been.

*What happens if they destroy the diary? Would I get my body back?* There was a touch of hope in her thoughts.

Nothing would happen! Virgo snapped. This is my body now! That's not the point — the point is they want to kill me!

*Then you're fine aren't you? Stop whining! No one knows you're the boy from the diary.*

**THEY MIGHT!**

Virgo was finding it difficult not to panic.

They already know too much! They're both extremely intelligent for their ages. They could make the connection! I've seen them fight! They're both as powerful as I am, if not more! And I don't have my most important rituals! They want to *kill* me!

*John doesn't.*

Virgo stilled. He forced his breathing down. That was right, wasn't it. John didn't want to kill him. Only Harry wanted to kill him. His mind worked through all his plans, recalibrating them around this new information. He still needed to find out what was going on with Harry Potter and Lord Slytherin, now more so than ever, but perhaps a slight change in approach was in order — a slightly safer approach. He nodded to himself. If it was possible, a slightly more red and gold approach.
"It can't be John Potter!"

Harry couldn't help smirking as John's feeble attempts to scout out Lord Malfoy for the diary resulted in his being pulled onto the small stage behind the book signing table by a beaming Lockhart.

The crowd started whispering excitedly.

Lily Potter was actually clapping and bouncing on the tips of her feet. To his credit, James Potter was looking rather more stoic, although that might have been more to do with Lily's behaviour than anything else.

"Lords and ladies, wizards and witches! What an astonishing moment this is! John Potter!"

The crowd burst into applause.

"The inspiration for my best selling book series! The hero of our world! A boy already making a name for himself as a powerful duellist, ready to defend against the forces of evil!"

With every additional sentence the crowd's reaction was building. The dedicated clerk ringing up book sales off to the side was working as fast as he could to bag coins and wrap books. Lord Malfoy stood up near the stage looking grim.

Lockhart's voice lowered and the crowd quieted.

"Now, he might be just here looking for my latest book for some helpful tips and tricks on how to get even better… but!" His voice lowered to a whisper and the crowd leaned in to catch every word. "He had no idea, that he would be getting much, much more than that."

John smiled nervously.

Lockhart leaned backwards and gave John a hearty shake around the shoulders. "Lords and Ladies," he continued in a more normal voice, which nevertheless promised it would not remain normal for long. "Wizards and witches, I have always prided myself on my ability to inspire others to greatness through my own great works and deeds. A little magic, a perfect smile…"

He flashed a smile and a witch in the front row fainted. Harry couldn't help notice the wand tip poking through the curtain.

"…And a great deal of courage — that is what our children need. And I'm happy to say that that is what they are going to get, because I have been asked, and have graciously accepted, to step into one of the most important roles in our world at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry — Headmaster!"

The crowd erupted.

Lord Malfoy took his cue and walked up onto the stage to shake Lockhart's hand as the cameras starting flashing again, all while holding an expression as flat and wooden as a bench.

"I and the board have great hopes for Headmaster Lockhart," Malfoy said to the crowd in a dead voice. "I look forward to working with him."

Harry smiled. He wasn't the only one.
It was quite a bit later when the Potters finally made their way out of Flourish and Blotts. He'd cast a surreptitious wandless summoning spell on Malfoy as he passed, just in case he did have the diary, but nothing. He hadn't expected it, and had not been disappointed. He'd have to find some other way.

Harry walked down the street one pace off to the side from his parents and brother, deep in his own thoughts, until a snatch of conversation brought him back again.

"Lord Malfoy — Virgo — his daughter — yes, apparently she was thought to be a squib — just like… well, you know…"

Harry frowned. Virgo? That girl with the Malfoys was Lord Malfoy's daughter? Err… no. He was sure Lord Malfoy didn't have a daughter. It wasn't impossible that they'd cast out a squib — the Malfoys were certainly the people to do it, if anyone — but the timing was just too convenient. No, it had to be the diary. But how? Possession took a long time, possibly as much as a year, and even then the connection was tenuous.

He dug into the depths of his memories, trying to find something that could make this possible.

Eventually he dredged something up, but there was a problem. There was a ritual that could transfer a soul fragment to a still living body, but it was unpredictable, unstable, and most importantly, a Black family ritual. Voldemort couldn't use it.

Harry's thoughts stopped dead.

Voldemort couldn't use it, but Narcissa Malfoy could.

— End of Chapter Thirty-Six —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017's value.

Sticky Note: As always, if you want to stay up to date on schedule changes and other bonuses before anyone else, you can get them on my mailing list, which you can find by following the breadcrumb trail through my profile page.
Strategic Sorting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On platform nine and three-quarters, Chief Auror Sirius Black walked with his eleven year old daughter, pushing her trunk in front of him. On top of the trunk rested Alex's cat carrying container, with Amethyst, her jet-black cat, asleep inside. The air was full of awkward. Alexandra was entirely too calm. She'd been entirely too calm all morning — far too much like his cousins. Sirius hadn't been like this on his first day of school. No, he'd been practically bouncing off the walls. It had driven his father spare. He smiled. Ah, fond memories. He looked down at the head of long, black hair bobbing along beside him. "Exciting, isn't it?" he tried.

"Yes, Dad," came the dutiful response.

"Buck up, Alex! It's your first day of Hogwarts!"

Alexandra looked up at him. "I am looking forward to it, you know."

Sirius's shoulders slumped. "You could at least look a bit more like it."

"I am our house's heiress."

Sirius groaned. "Promise me you and Harry and Luna will at least try to have fun together. No spending all your time in the library, or anything like that."

Alex seemed to consider this. "Okay. I promise."

Sirius grinned and spread his arms. "Hug?"

Alex seemed to consider this too.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Alexandra Black dragged her feather-light trunk up the corridor back the way she'd come on the platform. Her father had insisted on walking with her all the way to the end of the train where the Light children usually hung out before hugging her and sending her on her way.

She didn't have anything against hugging. She liked Luna's hugs, but her father's hugs didn't feel like Luna's. When her father hugged her, it was all tension and stiffness, like he was waiting for her to turn on him.

Alex passed by the Gray's compartment with barely a glance inside. She marched up the rest of the distance, all the way to the front of the train, to the very first compartment, and opened the door. It was empty. The others had to be running late. She parked her trunk under one of the benches, fished out a book from the pocket of her standard black Hogwarts robes, and had just gotten into a nice flow when the door slid open with a noticeable swish.

"So you are here." Draco Malfoy stood in the door way looking smug. "I hoped you'd know how to choose friends wisely, although..." his gaze roved over her clothes. "...Maybe your father just didn't tell you what sitting here means."

And so it begins, Alex thought. She looked up from her book and sneered. It was a good sneer.
She'd been practising all summer. "Are you going to stand there posturing all day or are you going to sit down?"

Draco looked momentarily stunned before he narrowed his eyes. "This is my compartment, Black. You don't order me around in here."

"So you don't want to sit down?"

"I will sit when I decide I will." He threw her a look that suggested she was less than the shit on the bottom of his boot. "You don't have your daddy to protect you here, Black. I should have known better than to think you'd know how to behave around your—"

Alex's wand came out fast enough to cut Draco off in mid-sentence. "—My _what_, Heir Malfoy, of the mere _Noble_ House of Malfoy?"

Draco glared at the wand pointed at his chest.

A bored sounding female voice from the corridor behind Malfoy said, "Well, this is all _very_ interesting,"

Alex's eyes flicked to the back. A blond girl her age stood there, watching Alex's wand like a cat watches a mouse.

"And you are?"

The girl moved forward and bobbed the slightest curtsey Alex had ever seen. It was barely even a bow. "Virgo Malfoy of the, yes, _Noble_ House of Malfoy."

Virgo Malfoy. Alex's mind flipped through the warning Harry had passed to her a few days before — enemy — powerful — dangerous — legilimens — manipulative — treat with caution. So naturally, the first words out of her mouth were, "The squib?"

The girl's eyes flashed, Draco flinched, and magic instantly filled the compartment — raw oppression pushing and pressing down on Alex from all sides like she'd been buried in wet sand.

It was impressive…

Of course, it would have been more impressive if Lord Slytherin hadn't already taught Ginny, Luna, and Harry the same trick, and if she, Alex, hadn't already learned a Black family magic spell that did something similar, if a bit more dementor-ish.

The magic faded.

Virgo watched her with an expectant look on her face.

Alex tilted her head. "Okay, I guess?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The Hogwarts Express had pulled out of platform nine and three-quarters, and now the suburbs of London were giving way to fields and hedges. In the middle of the train, Ginny Weasley stared at Harry in horror and disgust. "Virgo Malfoy is the diary?"

"She is," Harry replied.

"Ew! Ew!" Ginny wrapped her arms around herself. "That thing saw me naked!"
"I've already warded all the entrances to the chamber. As soon as we get to the castle, I'll ask the twins for a loan of the map and then, when a good opportunity presents itself, I'll—"

"—I want to do it," Ginny cut in.

Harry frowned. "Absolutely not. I'm clearly the best suited for this task."

Ginny didn't look mollified. "What's the point in all my training if I don't ever use it? Isn't this what I've been working for? For nearly three years? The diary is my fight!"

Luna looked up from her book.

"Be that as it may—"

"—I think you should consider it," Luna said.

On the other side of the compartment, Hermione and Daphne raised their eyebrows.

"You said the diary wouldn't have the benefits of the unforgivable ritual," Luna continued. "Nor many of his other rituals. It's Riddle, yes, but it's a sixteen year old Riddle, not a seventy year old Riddle. Ginny is ready. So am I."

Ginny blanched. "Luna, I want it to be me who destroys the diary."

"I think you should let Harry do it," Hermione said. "If he says it's the best way then that should be good enough. Isn't that right, Daphne?"

Daphne made a non-committal head wobble.

Harry's eyes flitted between the girls. He then stood up and stepped over to the door. "Luna, walk with me?"

"Yes, Harry."

Harry led Luna down the train and into a bathroom, shutting and locking the door behind him.

"Cosy." Luna giggled. "I didn't think you'd be pulling me into these places for a few years, yet."

Harry finished casting the rest of his privacy spells. He turned to her. "Okay, Luna. What you're suggesting is obviously not optimal. Care to explain your logic?"

Luna nodded. "One day you will probably want to start sending me and Ginny up against far more dangerous threats than the diary. The diary is a useful way to ease us into that role. Experience requires experience."

Harry frowned. "I know you and Ginny are both scarily competent at the limited number of techniques you've been mastering — much more so than Riddle was, even at sixteen — but the diary is still dangerous in the variety of magics it knows."

"Of course, but you can mitigate that risk."

"How?"

"Influence Lockhart into creating portkeys that work inside Hogwarts — make it his own idea. Then have him gift them to someone in the Dark, steal them, and frame it on the Light."
"...So that if you or Ginny have to use them to escape, it would look like a Light assassination attempt."

"Exactly."

Harry leaned back on the sink and thought about it for several minutes. Then he kicked off. "If we can't get those portkeys then I'll do it myself — you two will have to settle for support roles."

Luna nodded and the two of them made their way back to the middle compartment.

They arrived to find the window open, and Macavity—Lord Slytherin's large and majestic sooty owl—snuggling up to Hedwig on her perch. Daphne's marmoset familiar, Freekey, hung from the overhead luggage compartment, playing with Ginny's stuffed dragon teddy bear.

Ginny herself was busy making notes in a small yellow book. Harry gave her a nod, which caused her to grin from ear to ear. He then raised a questioning eyebrow at Daphne who was going through several letters that Macavity had clearly just delivered. "Anything?"

Daphne nodded. "The Hogwarts board has confirmed a meeting for this Tuesday."

Harry sat down and drummed his fingers on the small compartment table. "Okay, this will be a perfect opportunity to get the muggleborn guardianships all handed over to us."

"That's moving very quickly," Hermione warned. "I'm not sure how some of the older ones will take that."

Daphne snorted. "Most of them don't even know they have a magical guardian."

"But they will if this makes it to the Daily Prophet," Hermione pointed out.

"Harry can lean on Malfoy to lean on the Prophet. Besides, we don't have time to wait around."

"I'm not saying we shouldn't do it." A tone of exasperation leaked into Hermione's voice. "I'm just saying that I might have to answer some uncomfortable questions."

"Oh? You're always saying how much they trust you."

"Yes, the muggleborns our age!"

Harry sat back and let it wash over him. After several minutes of back and forth he cut in. "And the second thing, Daphne?"

Hermione and Daphne froze in mid argument.

Ginny sniggered.

Daphne coughed and picked up the parchments again. "Yes, MaCUSA are interested in our magical submarine pitch. They say they want a full proposal sometime in the next eight weeks."

Harry nodded to himself. "We can do that."

Eight weeks was enough time to sort that out. He glanced at his watch and out the open window. It was getting on for time, and he had another, rather more critical meeting to get to. He looked over to where Ginny and Luna were in deep conversation.

"It's a muggle book?" asked Ginny.
"It's about a muggle dragon sanctuary that gets overrun by the animals they're trying to breed."

"How do muggles have dragons?"

"They find them in tree sap."

"Muggles — found dragons — in *tree* sap?"

Harry stood up. "Girls."

Daphne, Hermione, Ginny, and Luna all turned to him.

"I'm heading off now — probably be back in a few hours."

Ginny bit her lip. "You're off to talk to my Dad?"

"I am."

Ginny nodded. "Good luck."

Harry walked to the window, giving Ginny's shoulder a reassuring squeeze on the way. He then disillusioned himself and threw himself out of the train, straight into a blasting sixty mile an hour wind. The wind quickly became a gentle breeze as he slowed down in the air and floated just above the track.

The Hogwarts Express gently chugged off into the distance.

Harry felt for the thin membrane of space-time magic that separated the Hogwarts Express line from the rest of the country, donned the invisibly cloak, and silently slipped through it. Once on the other side, he started apparating at speed back south. This was an important meeting. He'd prepared for it for days, studying his target and crafting the perfect line of attack. It was time to put all that work into effect.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Back on the Hogwarts Express, in a compartment about midway between the Light and the Gray, Fred and George Weasley poured over rune plans for the oxygen recycling plate they'd designed and sold to Lord Slytherin's friends last year. The Settlers now wanted a new and improved version — smaller — more powerful — and they wanted it fast.

"Not asking for much, are they?" Fred muttered.

George shrugged. "They're paying for what they're asking for. We still have a list of things to try."

The door slid open. The plans vanished into Fred's pocket.

John Potter stood in the door, a faint smile on his face.

"Well, hello, Heir Potter." George gave a theatrical bow. "And to what do we humble pair owe the honour?"

John Potter stepped into the compartment proper and grinned. "Would you like to know about Prongs?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —
The air surrounding the Burrow was calm and peaceful. The family Ford Anglia was safely parked in the shed, along-side several hundred other muggle projects, which the part-time patriarch of the house, Arthur Weasley, played with on a regular basis.

Said part-time patriarch was currently sat in the kitchen, straightening the cuffs of his best tweed suit.

"I don't like this Arthur," Molly Weasley said while directing the unwashed dishes from breakfast into the sink. "How do you know you can trust him?"

"I don't," he answered in a calm voice. "That's why I'm having lunch with him."

"I wish you would at least tell me what you plan to talk about."

Arthur sighed.

Suddenly, a loud roar of something passed over the Burrow. Arthur leapt to his feet and dashed to the window, Molly right behind him. The two stared as a muggle flying device slowly landed in the field one over from them, its rotors kicking up dust and grass and making enough noise to cause birds to take flight as far as the eye could see.

A figure hopped out, tiny at this distance — a figure wearing a black suit of the kind Arthur often saw muggles wearing in the city. The figure started to make its way over to the Burrow, the muggle flying device still roaring behind it, and as it got closer, it became obvious the man was wearing a mask that covered the top half of his face.

"Arthur—" Molly started in a warning voice.

"It's one of them!" Arthur said, delighted. "The muggle flying machines that go up and down! A heliflopter!"

"Arthur!"

Arthur turned to see Molly staring at him.

"Be careful, Arthur."

Something in his wife's voice got through to him. He nodded, face serious, gave Molly a peck on the cheek, made his way to the back door, shoved his way through it, and half-trotted across the lawn to the back gate.

He reached the masked man halfway across the next field. "Lord Slytherin?"

The man took no time to slow down. "Mister Weasley." He turned smartly back around and started walking away. "We're late. Follow me."

"Late?" Arthur tried to adjust his gait to the taller man's but found himself having to half skip to keep up. "I say," he tried, "what are we late for?"

"We have a reservation."

"Reservation?" Arthur called out. They were getting closer to the heliflopter now. "Why are we using a heli—"

"Wands away, Mister Weasley," Slytherin called back to him. "Muggle territory now."
Arthur hastily patted down his coat, making sure his wand was secure. The heliflopter was really quite close now. He had to shield his face with his arm to block the wind.

"This is Robert!" Slytherin shouted, pointing to the man in the front seat of the heliflopter who waved at them. "Ex-Royal Air Force! He'll be our pilot!"

After a fascinating encounter with what Robert the muggle called a 'safety buckle,' the door slid shut with a loud clunk sound. They both donned tight-fitting ear muffs and the machine started to lift up into the air, Mister Weasley clutching the seat for dear life. "But how does it work?" he shouted, staring out of the window in awe as the country-side sped away past them.

"No idea," Slytherin replied. "Needless to say, it does."

"Differential air pressure between the blades powered by a Rolls Royce engine!" Robert called out helpfully.

Arthur glanced away from the window, towards the muggle, bit down the thousand and one questions he had for Lord Slytherin, and tried to figure out what the long, red, cylindrical, metallic device under his chair could possibly be for.

Half an hour later, they'd left the green fields of the West-Country far behind them, and were flying over the streets of London.

"Here we are!" Robert announced as the heliflopter descended on one of the tall building's rooftops.

The moment Arthur's wobbly feet hit the ground another muggle in a suit and a moustache greeted them and guided them into the building, away from the machine's constant roar.

"I hope your trip was pleasant, Mister Slytherin?" Their guide asked.

"Quite pleasant, thank you."

They were led into a large elegant room filled with tables, in which dozens more muggles, were eating. The place reminded Arthur very much of the occasional time he'd been invited to one of the manor balls. Their guide led them past all the diners, out of a pair of large glass double doors, and onto a balcony. A table was set for two.

"Please, Mister Weasley." Slytherin gestured for him to sit.

Arthur did so.

What followed was a singular exercise in frustration and fascination as he waited for them to finally be alone from the many muggles waiting on them. Whenever he thought they were finally done, another would pop out of nowhere to make some tiny adjustment or ask a question and then, of course, he'd just have to ask his own, which they seemed only too happy to answer.

"Summer fruits wine, Sir."

Slytherin inspected the bottle's seal before nodding and allowing the waiter to pour Arthur a glass.

Arthur took a sip. "Mmm… strawberry, raspberry… plum?"

"It wouldn't surprise me." Slytherin sipped on his own glass of dry red.

The food arrived shortly thereafter and they were finally alone.
Arthur swallowed a slice of perfectly cooked steak, put down his fork and knife, and let out a long, deep sigh. "As interesting as this all is, I can't help feeling it all rather elaborate. Do you normally treat all your lunch partners like this?"

Slytherin shook his head. "No, but I can only guess at what you wanted to discuss. I thought it would be a good idea to talk where there was no possibility of the Rotfang Conspiracy overhearing us. Nargles do not make for good lunch partners and everyone knows they are allergic to the hair products muggles use."

Arthur nodded his understanding. It seemed obvious now it had been said. He picked up his fork. "My twin sons came to me a while back with a very interesting proposal."

"I know."

Arthur hesitated. "I wasn't expecting you to be so forthcoming."

"In all honesty, I expected you to demand a meeting sooner." Slytherin took another sip of wine. "Might I ask how you figured out that I am their patron?"

"Molly and I have a standing order with Gringotts to apply the five percent maximum tax rate for the members of my house — something my working sons are quite happy with, and I have a useful contact in the department of trade who knew about a recent deal between Nimbus and your house. I was rather surprised when I received my Gringotts statement earlier this month."

"Ah, yes that would do it. So, what would you like to know? I hope you're happy with Fred and George. They are quite the amazing pair and it would be a tragedy if their talents were squandered."

Arthur shook his head. "I have no problems with that, per say, although I do find your whole cloak and dagger way of doing things more than a little unsettling."

"I have good reasons."

Arthur observed the man in front of him carefully. Unlike the magical mask Slytherin was known to wear, this muggle one showed his eyes as well as most of his lower face, although Arthur had to assume he also wore a glamour. "Do your good reasons have anything to do with your unasked for interventions in my daughter's life?"

If Arthur was hoping for any kind of immediate reaction, he was disappointed. Slytherin finished bringing a morsel of food to his mouth, chewed it, swallowed, cut himself another slice, and inspected it as thought it were the most interesting thing in the room. Slytherin looked up and caught his gaze. "Go on."

Arthur gave Slytherin a wooden expression. "My wife has a clock — a Prewett family artefact. It tracks the location of all members of the Prewett line through the Albion family magics. When Molly's brothers were murdered by you-know-who the clock became matrilineal and passed to her. Molly hasn't noticed, but I have. Ginny spends far too much time outside when she should be in the Burrow, slipping past wards that no eleven year old could."

"I'm surprised you didn't cotton onto your twin sons's excursions the same way."

"Blu Tack."

"Sorry?"
"Blu Tack. It's this muggle stuff that sticks to things. I found it behind the twin's spoons on the clock."

"Resourceful."

"Ah, yes, yes, very resourceful."

They continued to eat in silence, each occasionally throwing the other glances as though waiting for the other to bite first. Eventually Slytherin put down his fork and knife. "What do you know about Fate?"

"Fate like destiny?"

"Like Fate with a capital F."

Arthur gave Slytherin a cautious look. "The mythological magical being from who prophecies supposedly originate?"

"That's the one."

"That was pretty much everything — look, where is this going? If you're going to tell me that Ginny has a prophecy—"

"She does."

"I haven't received any word from the department of mys—"

"—The prophecy was not made in Britain."

Arthur shut his mouth with a loud click. He put his elbows on the table and rubbed his temples. He then picked up his wine glass, brought it to his lips, and took rather more than a sip. The glass hit the table with a small thump. "And you heard this prophecy, did you? Ready to share the memory?"

Slytherin shook his head. "This prophecy was given under extremely unusual circumstances, so that won't be possible."

"Then how do I know you're not talking out of your arse? Pardon my language."

"You don't. I can only show you that my actions up to now have all been with Ginny's best interests in mind, and to point out that I would not invest such time and effort on a whim."

Arthur nodded slowly, glass in hand. "Okay, what does this prophecy say?"

"I won't give you the exact wording, but the main points are that without my intervention, Ginny would die by the end of this year…"

Arthur spat out his wine across the table and looked at Slytherin in horror.

"…That together, Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley will defeat a resurrected Dark Lord Voldemort…"

The look of horror intensified.

"…And that to succeed, Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley must be 'bound together.' Although that can be interpreted in many ways. They are certainly close friends."
Arthur stared. "That all?" he said, weakly.
"Mostly, yes."
"Why not tell me before?"
"I have enemies. Some of those enemies are people I happen to know you hold a great deal of respect and fondness for."
"Everyone knows you and Dumbledore don't get along."
Slytherin slightly inclined his head.
Arthur sighed. This was going to be a long discussion.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

An hour later, Harry watched Arthur Weasley apparate away back to the Burrow. Everything had gone well. He'd gotten exactly what he needed — for the moment, at least. He'd now wait a few weeks to see if any of that information leaked before making his next move.

Satisfied, Harry disillusioned himself, snuck into the kitchens, found the open bottle of summer fruits wine, and used his wand to deftly switch out the contents into a bottle of his own. Dirigible plum was almost unique in its rareness after all — no sense wasting it.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Watching children trying to play at politics was always amusing, Virgo thought, but he did have to admit that some played better than others.

"The Black family magics belong with those who can appreciate them, cousin," Draco said in an annoyed voice. "Surely you can understand that?"

On the other side of the compartment, wedged in between Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode, Alexandra Black smirked. "Why not just ask my aunt?"

Draco flushed.

"Ahhhh… has mummy not deemed you ready? Oh, dear." Alexandra lifted her feet, removed one of her low heeled shoes with her other foot, and let the shoe fall to the ground with a small thump. She then extended the sock clad appendage into the middle of the compartment. "Why don't you get down on the floor and kiss my foot?" The other children all choked. "Then, maybe, I will teach you a spell."

Virgo clamped down on the impulse to smile. He liked this girl.

You would, thought the soul of Julia.

Draco stared at the foot as though it were a poisonous snake.

"No?" Alexandra sighed in mock disappointment before slipping the shoe back on. "Oh, well — I guess not then — such a shame. They were such delicious magics, too."

Alexandra would make an excellent follower given the correct incentives.

Really? thought Julia. Seems to me like she wouldn't follow anyone.
That shows how little you understand. The girl is power sensitive. She clearly understands how the world really works, and has the drive to dominate. Such people often make the best followers once they've been shown they are categorically not the most powerful person in the room.

Shame you didn't manage to convince her of that, then. Virgo could practically feel the triumphant smirk in the thought.

He scowled.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The most powerful person in the room stared at the Slytherin girl prostrating herself to him on the floor of the otherwise empty compartment.

Not five minutes ago Harry had found his way back onto the Hogwarts Express after having flooed to Hogsmeade and doubled back along the underground ward stone tunnel, which hid the Hogwarts Express line from the muggles. He'd no sooner clambered back into the Gray's compartment when Heiress Tracey Davis had asked for a private conversation.

Tracey had been kidnapped by Lord Voldemort at the end of the last year and had subsequently learned of Harry Potter's other identity. The girl in front of him now was quite different from the one he'd left on the Hogwarts Express a few months ago.

"Gray Lord Slytherin," Tracey half-whispered, head pressed to the floor.

"Yes, Tracey?"

There was a silence.

"Tracey?"

"I— I'm sorry, my lord. I'm not sure how to address this."

Harry sighed. "Oh for Merlin's sake. Get up, Tracey."

Tracey looked up, then got to her feet.

"Sit down." Harry pointed to the chair opposite him.

Tracey sat.

"Now, go slowly, and talk to me."

Tracey took a deep breath. "It's about Grandfather. I'm sure you must know him — what with you both being lords. I've heard him talk about you — he respects you — sort of — but over the summer I've heard my mother arguing with him when they thought I couldn't hear. I think my grandfather wants to betroth me sooner rather than later—"

Ahh, Harry thought.

"—He's very traditional like that. I don't think I'd even know until it happened. Mother sounded furious, but ultimately it wouldn't be her decision, and Dad tends to go along with my grandfather."

Tracey's fists gripped her robes. "I know it's not fair, given what happened with you and Daphne, but I really don't want to be betrothed to someone I didn't choose. I was wondering — I mean, what with you being The Gray Lord — if you could — I'll do anything, Harry."
Harry idly chewed his tongue. Persuading Lord Davis to let his grand daughter be courted normally was probably doable, but it wouldn't be without cost. "What anything?"

"Anything!" Tracey hesitated. "Well, anything short of that."

Harry sat in silence for a moment considering his options before speaking. "Would you be willing to pledge yourself to my service for the remainder of your time at Hogwarts?"

"I would."

"Would you be willing to listen to my advice about your betrothal prospects?"

"My lord?"

"Only listen, Tracey, not give up the final decision, or anything like that. I doubt your grandfather will agree without my offering to oversee the process and report back to him."

Tracey nodded slowly. "I understand."

"Go on then."

Tracey looked momentarily confused before understanding dawned and she got back down on the floor. "Lord Slytherin, in return for the freedom to choose my own future husband, I pledge myself to your service for the next six years."

"Tracey Davis, Heiress of the Noble House of Davis, I accept your pledge in the spirit in which it is given. Now stand."

Tracey stood. Her body looked like a weight had been lifted off of it.

"I also now give you official permission to use the possessive along side my title."

"My lord?"

"You may call me, 'my lord."

"Oh." Tracey smiled. "Thank you, my lord, you've no idea how much this means to me." She brushed her robes down. "What would you like me to do now?"

"I suspect Hermione and Daphne are going to be buried under work for me this year. You will assist the two of them to the best of your abilities. Report to Hermione for a briefing on her projects."

"Yes, my lord." And with that, Tracey curtsied low to the ground, turned around and left.

Harry sighed. He kinda missed the snarky Tracey from last year who'd call him 'Potter' and get all frustrated when he didn't do what she wanted. Maybe he could gradually tease that Tracey back out once she'd gotten used to taking orders from him…

Moments later, Daphne stepped into the compartment and shut the door behind her. "What was that about?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Students up and down the train had started calling it muggleborn HQ. It sat a dozen compartments away from the middle of the Hogwarts Express. Not close enough to the Gray to give people the
wrong idea, but close enough to make a point. It was also cramped as hell.

Hermione looked around, taking metal notes. Hogwarts had a muggleborn quota. Five of the forty new students each year had to be muggleborn. She and the rest of the founder's club—the muggle born support group that Harry had guided her to build—had gone up and down the train and rounded up the first year muggleborns. Three girls, two boys.

She'd introduced herself and the group, then partnered up the first and second years with each other.

Dean Thomas had taken a squeaky, photography obsessed boy named Colin Creevey, who'd needed rapid deprogramming from the romantic notions some boy-who-lived crazed fool had shoved down his throat in Diagon Alley.

Kevin Entwhistle partnered with his younger sister. Kevin came from a lower class muggle family and had spent a lot of the last year adjusting to life at Hogwarts. He stood taller than Goyle and wider than Crabbe, but unlike them, hated unfairness when he saw it — a classic Hufflepuff. His sister, Annabel Entwhistle, was tiny by comparison. The two of them looked like they'd perfectly divided up all the big and small genes in their family between them.

In comparison to the huge difference between Kevin and Annabel, Hermione and Sophie partnered with Violet and Marigold Chesterfield — twins. What was it with the wizarding world and twins, Hermione wondered. The Weasleys, the Potters, the Patils, the Carrows, and now these two? They were brown-eyed and brown-haired, and seemed more in sync than even Fred and George.

That left Justin Finch-Fletchley with Alan Gage, an average looking boy of average height and average wit — normal and unremarkable in every way possible — just one more body in an already bustling compartment.

If the compartment only held the second and first year muggleborns, then it wouldn't have been nearly so cramped, but word had spread while they'd been rounding up the first years, and a handful of older muggleborns had somehow managed to find space too, cramming up on benches, on the floor, table, or, in the case of one fourth year Hufflepuff, lying on his tummy in the overhead luggage rack with his head and one arm dangling over the edge.

"Here's a list of people you can go to if you have serious problems," Hermione said, passing out the parchment packages to the first years.

Sophie leaned over and giggled. "Why, Hermione, on your list, have you outlined Harry's name in little hearts?"

Hermione flushed furiously and stuffed the list into the pocket of her robes. "And the first meeting of the founder's club will be at the start of October," she continued, as if nothing had happened. "If you want to learn more about Lord Slytherin before then you can read the packages."

"Will this club improve our ministry prospects?" asked the Hufflepuff in the luggage rack.

"It'll get you better marks if you stick with it," Kevin said. "Can't say anymore than that. We're under contract."

"Would you work around Quidditch practise?"

Justin looked up in surprise. "You're on the Quidditch team?"

"Well no, but I'd like to be."
Dean sniffed. "This is like football. All the quidditch players spend *all summer* practising on their local village pitch — that's what I've heard."

The luggage rack Hufflepuff huffed. "More discrimination."

"Good point," Hermione said, searching in her bag for a quill. "I'll add broomstick fields to the introduction package."

"Doesn't help us now."

"There's a good reason we can't just fly any old place," Hermione countered. "We're not here to complain, we're here to help each other. Besides, you're in Hogwarts. That's already a huge advantage."

"I suppose."

The door slid open. It was Tracey.

"Ah," Hermione began. "This, first years, is Heiress Davis. She's on the list. What can we help you with?"

"Can the formality, vassal. I've been demoted."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Our Lord Slytherin has assigned me to be your assistant."

This drew incredulous looks from all the non-first year muggleborns in the compartment. Their faces all suggested the same thing — an heiress serving a muggleborn — well, well.

Hermione hesitated for only a moment before rallying and pulling out a trunk from under the bench for Tracey to sit on and work from. The two then whiled away the next few hours reading, comparing project notes, and fielding endless questions from both the younger and older students (Tracey proved invaluable for some of the more detailed questions) and soon enough, the sky outside had darkened, and a loud voice announced that they were nearing Hogsmeade Station, and that they should 'leave their luggage on the train' — a command that the more than handful of students with shrinkable trunks, totally failed to obey.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The dark platform was a mass of black clad students, mostly shuffling towards the carriages, or to where Hagrid the gamekeeper was shouting, 'Firs' years! Firs' years over 'ere!'

John Potter creeped through the crowd, eyes sharp for his target — for *his* Ginny. He spotted her through a gap in the throng, milling around with a group of other first year girls, her long red hair flowing out behind her.

John pointed his wand and whispered, "Accio, diary."

There was a pull, an "Eep!", and a yellow diary, small enough to fit into the palm of his hand, sailed towards him, landing on the ground at his feet. He stared at it in mild dread.

Slap!

John staggered backwards, face stinging.
Ginny stood in front of him, enraged, and snatched up the small yellow book. "You bastard!"

John rubbed his cheek and stared. He hadn't even seen it coming. Was it possible for people to move that fast? "Look, Ginny, this isn't—" He wasn't sure what excuse he was actually going to use, but he didn't get a chance to use it before Ginny turned on her heels and stalked away, back towards the first year boats.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"I don't know who she thinks she is," said the shrill voice of Pansy Parkinson. Pansy, Draco, Theo, and Milli were all sat in one of the carriages slowly making its way up to the castle. "It's like she thinks she can just waltz in here — as though Lord Black hasn't spent the last ten years dragging the name of Black through the mud."

Draco said nothing — just stared out the window.

"You need to put her in her place, Draco," she continued. "A good hard sting is what she needs."

"Oh?" Theo snickered. "Like with Granger, last year?"

Draco did his best not to grimace. Opening a prank spell war with the mudblood had turned out to be a bad idea. It had taken him months to rebuild his credibility after he'd come limping into the Slytherin common room looking like the joke metamorphmagus from one of wizarding Britain's stranger magical theatre productions. That Alexandra Black sought out the Dark was good, but…

Pansy sniffed.

Draco tore his gaze away from nothing. "Don't worry," he said, voice far harsher than his normal bored drawl. "I have already taken steps to ensure she will be brought up to speed on what is required of her. You can be sure of that."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

If Ginny thought her mood was going to improve once she'd gotten away from John 'let-my-girlfriend-get-possessed-by-the-dark-lord' Potter, then she was sorely mistaken. She stormed down to the boats, Luna almost sliding to keep up ("No more'n four to a boat!") , and was joined, moments later, by Alex, along with the last person on Earth she wanted to spend the ride with.

"Hello, Alex," said Luna in a chipper voice. "Who's your friend?"

"Virgo Malfoy," said the diary, sitting down opposite Ginny. "And I believe we've met before, Miss Weasley."

A shiver ran up Ginny's spine. Just a few minutes alone, she thought, as the boats all pushed off together. Just a few seconds, and me and Luna and Alex could dog pile it — drown it in the lake — and feed the body whole to the giant squid.

Of course, that would mean having to explain to Alex exactly why they were trying to murder their eleven year old classmate…

Unfortunately, no such opportunity presented itself. Ginny’s boat stayed firmly in the middle of the small armada, and as they rounded the corner, Hogwarts Castle loomed in the distance. Everyone made thematically appropriate Ooooooooh noises.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —
Ooooooooh, thought the soul of Julia.

Beautiful, isn't it? Virgo thought back.

**It is.** There was a pause. **But I still hate you!**

Virgo sighed.

It wasn't long before the boats drifted into the alcove he remembered from his first year, leading up to the castle proper. A stern faced witch introduced herself as Professor McGonagall, and then gave them a speech about their house being like their family. She seemed to be in a rather bad mood. Virgo listened with only half an ear, purposefully ignoring the occasional pouty glares of the Weasley girl. Honestly, he thought, try to mind rape someone just once and they never let it go.

Julia's soul made a horrified spluttering sound.

Whoops, did he think that inside?

Yes!

McGonagall then left them to 'get ready.' The other students started whispering the moment the door closed.

"Draco actually had the balls to suggest I might one day join his harem," Alexandra Black said to Luna Lovegood. "Can you believe that?"

"Draco Malfoy has a harem?"

Alexandra snorted. "In his dreams."

Virgo couldn't help notice two twin girls standing behind Alexandra Black, both with long black hair, both eyeing the Black heiress up the way a pair of wolves might eye up a rabbit. Hestia and Flora — the Carrow twins — one of two sets of twins this year — although which was which was anyone's guess.

**Which witch is which?**

Yes, very witty.

The side door opened again and Professor McGonagall ushered them inside. Halfway into the great hall, Virgo caught sight of what hung behind the headmaster's chair. He stopped dead, causing the rest of the first years behind to bump into him with many ows and complaints.

A twelve foot tall banner featuring the beaming visage of Gilderoy Lockhart dominated the front of the hall. Virgo stared in horror.

"What are you waiting for?" snapped McGonagall, still not looking very happy. "Hurry up!"

Virgo quickly lined up with the children and stared out across the hundreds of students. Many of the rather mixed gazes weren't on them, but up and back, clearly on the smiling, blonde abomination behind him.

The hat was brought out and sung its song, a few student's names were shouted out, and then…

Black, Alexandra!
Darkness enveloped Alex and a voice in her head said, [Let's see what we have here.]

Lord Slytherin said I was to go to Slytherin.

[Yes, yes, I can see that, but perhaps—]

Slytherin said!

[I know, girl, but I am a guide, and the ultimate choice has to be yours. I can see much of interest in your head.]


[You are brave. You tend to rush in without thinking things through — reckless, oh, so reckless. You fight for your house's honour.]


[You would do well in Gryffindor.]

Slytherin!

[Both your parents were Gryffindors], the hat wheedled. [It could be the start of a new Black tradition.]

NO!

The hat sighed in her head. [Oh, very well. Better be] SLYTHERIN!

Sweating, Alex took the hat off her head and walked over to the table of green and silver. She sat towards the Dark end with Draco and Pansy and watched while the first set of twins, Flora and Hestia Carrow, were sorting into Slytherin, followed quickly by the second set, Marigold and Violet Chesterfield, who were both sorted into Hufflepuff. Eventually, Luna was called, sorted into Slytherin, and sat down at the opposite end of the table with Hermione, Daphne, and Harry.

A part of Alex wished she could join her.

Up at the teacher's table, Lockhart was clapping and beaming to each and every sorted student. Alex's eyes trailed sideways. She couldn't help letting a small groan escape when they fell on the woman sitting next to the hooked nosed man. She'd already known, of course, but nevertheless, she would have liked to have escaped from Lady Lily Potter.

"Malfoy, Virgo!"

A few whispers spread throughout the hall. Mostly along the lines of, "I didn't know they had a daughter." He noticed with disgust that some of the older boys had thoughtful looks on their faces.

*That's your fault for choosing to be a girl.*

Lord Malfoy would never have accepted me being male, he thought back. It would have been far too risky.
The hat fell across his eyes.

[...That's one end of a conversation I never thought I'd be party too.]

*What!? Who's this?!*

Calm, girl.

[Yes.]

It's the sorting hat.

[As Mister Riddle says, I am the sorting hat. Or maybe that's Virgo Malfoy now.]

It is.

*Humpf.*

[Now where to put you…]

Gryffindor, if you would.

[You've got to be joking.]

I am not joking.

[You are one of the most Slitherest Slytherins who ever Slithered into Slytherin.]

Am I not brave? Do I not fight for what I believe is right?

[You fear death so much your ripped apart your soul with the life of a true love! And your beliefs in muggle and muggleborn inferiority stem from bitterness and rage!]

She betrayed me!

[She was only following her parents orders, and you murdered her!]

*What?*

Enough! Gryffindor!

*Who? Who did you murder?*

We are not discussing this. Gryffindor! There will be no argument. You, Hat, are required to sort based on the student's ultimate choice. I choose Gryffindor.

There was silence for a moment. Then, in an extremely grumpy tone of voice, the hat said, *[I suppose Julia, at least, is brave and noble — although I fear it will not be enough.]*

*GRYFFINDOR!*

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

At one end of the Slytherin table, face impassive, his fingers interlocked under his chin, Harry raised one single, solitary eyebrow.

At the other end, Draco spluttered in horror.
John Potter clapped softly as the Malfoy girl was sorted into his own house of scarlet and gold. Under the table, the Marauder's Map lay on his knees. It had taken a good bit of work to persuade the Weasley twins to lend it to him, even for only an hour, but he'd managed it. He couldn't understand why they were so reluctant. In the last timeline, they'd practically thrown it at him when they learned who Prongs was.

John was quite happy to know he wasn't stupid. When Virgo had suddenly turned up out of nowhere, it had been rather obvious she might not be who she said she was, given that she hadn't been around in the last timeline. Even if her story checked out, which it did, he wasn't going to rely on that.

No, he was going to rely on the Albion family magics. You couldn't fool the Albion family magics.

He carefully leaned back, glanced under the table, prodded the parchment with his wand, and whispered, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

The map blossomed into being, focused on the great hall.

A dot marked Virgo Druella Malfoy moved to only a few seats away from him across the table, and sat down.

John looked up and caught her eye.

She gave him a cautious smile.

People up and down the table gazed at her with everything from naked curiosity to outright hostility.

John snorted. As if Lord Voldemort would ever be sorted into Gryffindor.

The sorting went on for quite a while longer, and then…

Weasley, Ginevra!

John's heart leapt.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

[Hello, Miss Weasley]

Hello. Slytherin for me, please and thank you.

SLYTHERIN!

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Virgo made sure to keep his expression as demure and unthreatening as possible while observing his target's face on the opposite side of the table. It had gone from joy to shock to despair to rage, all in just a few seconds. Now it settled into simmering anger with a touch of manic obsessive.

Do you think he loves her?

Virgo mentally rolled his eyes.
I feel bad for him.

I feel, Virgo thought, that he has a weakness.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Hi, Ginny."

"Hey, Harry." Ginny plopped herself down next to him. "So nice of you to save a seat for me."

"Only the best for our new seeker."

Ginny grinned impishly at him.

On the other side of the table, Captain Flint's head shot up. He gave Ginny a look that said, "Over my dead body," and opened his mouth, presumably to say as much.

"Boys and Girls!" The whole hall quietened. Flint reluctantly shut his mouth. The last first year sat down at the Ravenclaw table and Headmaster Gilderoy Lockhart's magically enhanced voice boomed through the room. The huge Lockhart banner behind him flashed them all a wink.

"Welcome! To another year at Hogwarts!"

Many of the teenage girls were staring at the Headmaster with dreamy expressions.

"Unfortunately, Headmaster Dumbledore decided to no longer be with us, but fear not! For I, Gilderoy Lockhart! Order of Merlin Third Class, honorary member of the Dark Force Defence League, and five times winner of Witch Weekly's most charming smile award, have boldly stepped into the breach!"

Snape looked like he wanted to strangle something. Lily Potter didn't seem to notice this as she warmly smiled across the packed students.

"Unity and solidarity! That's the important thing! We are all students here, yes, even me! I know it might seem incredible that someone as well known and famous as me needs to learn, but it's true, you know. And I know that we sometimes have our little squabbles,"—his eyes roved between John Potter and Draco Malfoy before finishing on Daphne—"but I'm sure we can all come together as one big family, learn to happily live together, and get on with what's really important… learning!"

Face as stoic as a statue, Daphne turned, caught Harry's eye, and in that instant several thoughts and counter thoughts passed between them with the clarity and rapidity of a mountain stream — mostly along the lines of, "what a twit," and, "it was necessary," and, "so long as he knows how to take advice — your advice."

Lockhart beamed. "Now, I know what you're all thinking. Why is such a well known and famous best selling author running Hogwarts? But I am a teacher as well as a student! And with you as my students nothing is impossible. Why, there was one time in the Levant…"

This went on for quite some time before Professor McGonagall made a loud coughing noise into the sleeve of her robes.

"What? Oh, yes! Announcements! Now, I know you were all expecting a new face for defence against the dark arts, but I'm afraid you'll just have to settle for our very own fearsome, Professor Severus Snape!" He winked again. There were more than a few groans from the students and a few of the younger years looked like they might have a panic attack.
"But don't worry about being left high and dry in potions," Lockhart continued, "for we have a more than adequate replacement for you all — the beautiful Lady Lily Potter!"

This announcement got a rather more positive response, particularly from the older boys. "Damn, I'd like to have private lessons with her," Flint muttered, not quite under his breath, before giving Harry a slightly panicky look.

Harry just waved it off.

"The Forbidden Forest is forbidden," Lockhart continued, still beaming widely. "And while I know some of you might like the idea of me having to rescue you, I urge to you restrain yourselves."

McGonagall's face couldn't look more stony if she'd been petrified.

"And finally, quidditch and duelling tryouts will be in September and November!" Headmaster Lockhart opened his mouth as though to continue speaking, but in that moment, someone's stomach made an audible rumbling sound.

Lockhart laughed. "But first, the feast, I think, don't you?" He clapped his hands and food appeared all across the room.

The sounds of cutlery and chatting broke out around the hall.

It wasn't long before everyone was engaged in their own conversations.

Flint was loudly telling a fellow sixth year how there would never be any girls on the Slytherin quidditch team while he was captain, which a scowling Ginny did her best to ignore.

Daphne, Hermione, and Tracey were whispering between themselves, while Luna continued to read her book.

"Looking forward to duelling, Potter?" asked some random fifth year.

"Maybe, maybe not." Harry answered in a noncommittal voice.

"Maybe? Why would you not?"

Harry shrugged. In truth, he was seriously considering not bothering with the duelling club this year. It had served its purpose last year — to give him a very public venue to advertise his worth to Magical Britain. Giving Ginny or Luna or even Alex the opportunity to prove themselves might be more worthwhile.

On the other hand… he looked towards the Gryffindor table, to where the diary seemed to be trying to engage a reluctant looking John in conversation. …Denying the enemy opportunities to make themselves look good was also important…

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

After the feast and yet another long winded speech by Lockhart, the first year students all filed out of the great hall, led by their house prefects. "This way, Miss Malfoy," Percy Weasley called out in a pompous tone of voice.

Virgo soon found himself in front of the portrait of a rather large woman in Gryffindor Tower.

"The password is wattlebird," the Weasley said, and stepped inside.
Virgo looked around with mild curiosity. He'd never been in the Gryffindor common room before.

"The boys dormitories are on the left, the girls are on the right. Boys are not allowed in the girl's dormitory. The stairs are trapped. Please make sure you are up early enough for breakfast before classes."

You're not really going to sleep in the girls dormitory, are you? Julia thought.

Why not? Virgo thought back, heading for the stairs.

You're a boy!

Virgo rolled his eyes and stepped onto the stairs. They shivered. He froze, causing the girl behind him to stop and ask what was going on. Virgo took another tentative step, and the stairs shivered again, but didn't activate whatever gender based trap they contained. She then quick-climbed up the rest of the stairs, breathing rather more heavily than usual when she reached the top.

Clearly I am female, he thought, and felt Julia sniff in disapproval.

"You're weird," the girl said when she'd caught up.

Virgo didn't say anything as he ducked into the first year girls dormitory, closed the curtains around his four poster, and started getting undressed for bed.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Far below in the dungeons, Alexandra walked into the Slytherin first year girls' dormitory. The beds were arranged in a circle with a large pillar in the middle. The pillar had stone snakes curling up it. She quickly claimed the bed closest to the massive underwater window and started unpacking her trunk, beginning with Amethyst — the violet-eyed cat Luna had once given her for her birthday.

Behind her, Alex heard a giggle. She turned.

Flora and Hestia Carrow had claimed the beds directly on either side of her, while Luna and Ginny had taken the beds on the other side of the room.

Alex tried to identify who had laughed, but everyone wore carefully blank faces — everyone except for Luna of course, but casual dreaminess practically was her blank face. She turned back to her trunk and withdrew her nightdress.

Someone giggled again. It sounded creepy. It had an edge.

Alex didn't turn around immediately this time. She carefully laid the nightdress on the bed, then looked around.

Hestia was using her wand to fluff her pillow… with stinging hexes.

The almost invisible spells beat against the pillow like a drum. Alex didn't take her eyes off the wand tip. She could feel the magical intent pulsing across her skin with each tiny magical build up. Her lessons with Luna to master spell swatting her progressed quite far, even if she hadn't fully grasped the skill yet.

Yet again, someone behind her giggled.

Alex didn't turn around. Instead, she eased her wand out of her wand holster and let it slide down
into the palm of her hand.

Behind her, the voice of Flora Carrow said, "Heir Malfoy isn't very happy with you, Black."

Alex's heart sped up. Oh, wow. This was actually happening. Her eyes flicked over to Luna and Ginny. They both watched with feigned disinterest, although she thought Ginny's hands looked a bit twitchy.

"There's a pecking order in the Dark, Black," Hestia said, now stroking her wand the way someone might stroke the edge of a blade.

Luna flashed Alex an encouraging smile, so brief she almost thought she'd imagined it.

Alex let out the tiniest of snorts. "That's Heiress Black to you two. You should practise what you preach."

Behind her, Flora giggled again. "Respect is only for those who earn it, Black. Your father has done much to undermine the pureblood cause."

"I am not my father. And I will not grovel to anyone weaker than me, no matter who his father may be."

"You think yourself stronger than Heir Malfoy?" Hestia giggled. The giggle exactly matched her sister's. "That's cute."

"We've known Draco all our lives," Flora said. Alex still had her back to her. "He's had private tutors since he was five."

"He knows more curses, hexes, and jinxes than most seventh years," Hestia added.

Alex sniffed. "And yet, he leaves chatting with me to you two."

"Of course," Flora said. "After all, he might wish to court you one day — hexing you personally would be terribly bad form."

"That's messed up."

Hestia shrugged, and in the moment between her shoulders rising and falling, Alex felt a jelly-legs jinx forming behind her. It was the work of a moment to throw a shield behind her, leap over the bed towards a startled Hestia—who didn't even her wand ready—grab her by the arms, spin her around with ritual enhanced strength, pin her arms behind her back with one hand, and fire a stunner at Flora with the other. Flora crumpled, unconscious, onto her bed.

"Nyah!" Hestia struggled. Her wand fell to the floor with a clatter. "Let me go!"

"Sure, once I've tied you up."

"You'll regret this!" Hestia's voice carried a hint of panic. "We all sleep here! You can't be ready all the time."

"There's a pecking order in the Dark — that's what you said, Carrow. I am merely showing you where I am in it."

"When word of this gets out, you'll be sorry!"

"Maybe," Alex said, now clearly amused. It had been so easy. She pushed Hestia onto the girl's bed
"Flora and I watch each other's backs!"

"Didn't help much this time, did it?"

Hestia said nothing.

"But you know," Alex continued. "I can certainly see the value in such teamwork. You two will be of great use to me."

The hint of panic became a general tremor. "We're not helping you."

"No?" Alex leaned over to whisper into Hestia's ear. "I promise I'll take care of you — you and your cute twin sister."

Hestia was silent for a moment. Then, in an almost grumpy tone of voice she said, "You don't have balls nearly large enough to take on the rest of the Dark. Not like this."

Alex smirked. "I think a good hour of tickling will have you seeing things quite differently."

Hestia eyes widened in fear. "You can't use the tickling hex that long! You'll get in big trouble!"

Alex giggled. "Who said anything about any hex?"

And as the sounds of forced laughs, shrieks, and unanswered begging filled the room, Ginny and Luna finished changing, charming their teeth, and doing whatever else they needed to do to get ready for their first full day at Hogwarts.

Ginny climbed into her four poster, sat her stuffed dragon teddy bear by her pillow, and cast a basic protective ward around her bed. "Pretty brutal, these Dark witches," she commented.

Luna smiled. "I'm sure they're okay once you get to know them."

Ginny grinned, weaved a third year silencing charm around herself, and the high-pitched squeals abruptly cut out, leaving only peaceful, relaxing quiet.

— End of Chapter Thirty-Seven —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds
1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)
1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017's value.
Sticky Note: As always, if you want to stay up to date on schedule changes and other bonuses before anyone else, you can get them on my mailing list, which you can find by following the breadcrumb trail through my profile page.
In every large building where people live and work in close proximity, there are always crossroads that conspire to draw together people who'd much rather keep their distance — teachers and students, upper years and lower years, rival quidditch teams, even the occasional 'I'm-never-talking to-you-ever-again' situation involving two people of the opposite sex who will nevertheless soon be found together, in a broom cupboard, wearing between them rather less than the regulation amount of clothing for just one of them.

The Hogwarts owlery is just such a crossroad. Most everyone needs to send letters and the morning of the first day of school is always particularly busy.

Holding a sealed letter in one hand, Virgo Malfoy stepped aside for yet another pair of students descending the long set of stairs that he was busy ascending. Annoying, he thought. By the time he'd put himself into the diary, fifty years ago, people had been stepping aside for him.

The soul of Julia did the mental equivalent of tiredly rolling her eyes, then went back to sleep. The girl had settled down a bit since leaving Malfoy Manor, but not by nearly enough for his liking.

Last night had been a good example. He'd been sitting in his scarlet and gold four poster bed, busily planning how he was going to attack the problem of Harry Potter and Lord Slytherin, when she'd kicked up an almighty fuss over a stray murderous fantasy. They'd argued about it for ages before he'd eventually managed to persuade her that wanting to find out more about someone who wanted to kill you wasn't evil just by itself.

So that was his plan, find out about Harry Potter. And for that he needed John Potter. The Heir of the Potter family was the key, of that he was sure.

Another two sets of footsteps approached down the spiral staircase above him. Virgo almost considered just holding his ground and demanding they get out of his way, until he saw it was Professor Severus Snape and Lady Lilly Potter. Maybe not then. He stepped aside. Snape's sharp eye caught Virgo's as they passed and he felt the lightest of light touches brush against his occlumency barriers.

Traitor.

He made his way up the rest of the stairs and pushed the door open. The owlery was still bustling, even this close to breakfast. Almost a dozen students from all houses and ages were busy tying envelopes to the various birds that flocked around the room, or else finishing off their letters at the small, crap covered, central table.

Virgo quickly spotted the large screech owl his new adopted father had bought him and called it down. It alighted on the edge of one of the windows next to another owl being attended to by a girl in his year — a girl wearing radish earrings, dirty blond hair, and expensive, Slytherin green robes. Heiress Lovegood. Future consort of Lord Slytherin.

Perfect.

Virgo took a length of string from the ball on the table and stepped over beside her. "Good morning. I don't believe we've been introduced."
Lovegood looked up. She smiled. "Good morning. You are correct. I am Heiress Luna Lovegood. You are Miss Virgo Malfoy." She went back to her bird.

"I am." Virgo carefully watched the other girl humming quietly to herself as she stroked her owl's feathers. She needed some point of common ground. Something of an in. "I don't suppose I could ask your advise, could I?"

"You may."

"How do you handle it? Being betrothed, I mean. What's Lord Slytherin like? I know my father could choose to contract me if he so chooses. It scares me." Not really, of-course. Lord Malfoy wouldn't dare, but there wasn't any need for anyone to know that.

Lovegood continued to stroke the owl's feathers while looking thoughtful. Then she looked Virgo straight in the eyes and smiled kindly. "The best way is to just accept it. You are the daughter of a noble house and that comes with certain responsibilities and obligations."

Virgo nodded.

"And that means," Lovegood continued, "that you are a future lord's fuck toy."

Virgo's nodding froze.

Julia's soul went from sleepiness to full wakefulness in less than a second. Wha—?

"It means that boys are soon going to start trying to get into your knickers, regardless of what you want, and eventually one will succeed in sticking his penis into your vagina—" she pointed at Virgo's crotch "—and making little wizard babies grow in your tummy."

Lovegood smiled widely as though she'd just delivered some profound ancient wisdom.

What — the — hell?!

Virgo's eyebrow twitched. He stared at the girl for a few seconds longer before answering. "Is that what you want? With Lord Slytherin?"

"Oh, yes!" Lovegood titled her head to the side. "Why? Are you interested? Would you like Lord Slytherin to stick his penis in your vagina?"

Around the owlery, more than one of the other students were listening in with a kind of horrified fascination.

"No, I'm fine, thanks," Virgo ground out.

"Oh." Lovegood went back to her owl and finished tying her letter to its leg. "Are you sure? If you don't find a cute boy to fuck you, you might end up with some old wizard who can't even get up the strength to give you a proper spanking."

A Hufflepuff fifth year dropped his quill.

"Spanking," Virgo said, each word careful and deliberate, "is not required for the procreation of the wizarding race."

Lovegood's owl leapt off the window's balcony.

"Of course it is, silly," Lovegood chirped. "I said it before — you have to accept your inevitable
fuck-toyness." She walked over to the other side of the room and waved cheerfully. If you ever change your mind, just let me know. I'm sure I can persuade my lord to find a collar for you somewhere." She left.

Virgo paid no attention to the cacophony of whispers that immediately broke out around him, nor to the unbelieving rant Julia was kicking up in his head. Instead, he fought down the urge to go heiress hunting with a rusty breadknife, added a quick postscript to his owl, and sent it on its way.

_Father_,

_I have been sorted into Gryffindor. My remote observations of H confirm my beliefs that he is not the one I am looking for, which makes S's involvement with him all the more worrisome. J is intelligent, but hides his emotions poorly. Despite not being who you thought, I continue to suspect there is more to both of them than meets the eye. My immediate plans are to befriend J and gain his confidence._

_Withdraw all support from S immediately._

- **Virgo**

_PS. Have mother send me any books you might have on the magical limitations of Albion Family Magic betrothal contracts, particularly as they relate to the mind control of those who already possess noble house rings. If Lord Slytherin approaches you with any offer of betrothal you are to inform me immediately. If you do not, you will have an extremely displeased 'daughter' on your hands._

There. Virgo brushed his hands clean. Now it was breakfast time. John Potter would be there. It was time to get to work.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

_In the Great Hall, breakfast was in full swing. Harry sat at the Slytherin table and watched Hedwig swoop down to the Gryffindor table. In one talon she held the small note Harry had written not thirty minutes earlier._

_J,_

_Virgo is the D,_

_H._

John took the note, read it, met Harry's eyes across the room, snorted, shook his head in what could only be described as a condescending manner, and tore it up.

Harry sniffed. Well, he had warned him. No one could say he hadn't. He tore his gaze away from the inevitable train wreck just in time to see the Carrow twins bend down to whisper something in Draco's ear. They did not look happy.

A few moments later, Alexandra sat down a few seats away from Draco and nonchalantly started spreading jam on her toast. The Carrow twins stared daggers at her while Draco looked pensieve.

_Interesting._

"Morning, Harry." A rather chipper Ginny sat down beside him, slightly red in the face and breathing deeply. She wore her gym clothes and had her hair tied up in a ponytail.
"Morning, Ginny. So, what happened last night?"

Ginny lowered her voice. "The Carrows tried to hex Alex. Didn't work out very well for them."

"I bet it didn't. I hope she didn't use anything too bad."

"No — just a stunner, bindings, and non magic tickling."

"Good." He looked up. "And good morning to you too, Hermione."

Hermione had appeared on the other side of the table lugging two huge magical tomes and one smaller muggle book, quite apart from her usual school bag. Unlike Ginny, she was already dressed in her black, green, and silver school robes. "Good Morning, Harry." She sat down opposite him and proceeded to open and strategically prop up the books around her, creating a mini fort of learning — Rapid Healer Diagnostics - Fifth Edition, Niche Mind Arts You Never Knew you Needed, and Storming the Gates - Managing Revolutionary Groups in Times of Change.

Ginny leaned closer to him again. "Quidditch trials are next week. What are we going to do about Flint and the Quidditch team?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll handle him when the time comes."

"Oh?" Daphne sat down at the head of the table. There was a ripple as the two-dozen-ish children of the Gray momentarily switched their attention to her. "You know Draco has wanted to be seeker for years."

"That is unfortunate for him."

Apparently satisfied that no earth shattering pronouncements were to be made, the assorted students slowly went back to their breakfasts.

Daphne lowered her voice and leaned closer to Harry. "What are we planning to do about Angelystor?" Angelystor was the ghost Harry had brought to Hogwarts the previous year to teach the girls the lost magic of divination. "Will I continue my studies with her?"

"Yes, soon, but I also want to bring the others — see if any of them might also have the knack."

"Knack?" Luna leaned over Harry's shoulder.

"The inner-eye, Luna."

"Ooooh. We Lovegoods are well known for that — and Mum is a Lovegood and a Vablatsky."

"You have one?"

"I don't know. I've never tried. I guess I won't know until I do."

"Wouldn't shock me," Ginny muttered. Then she brightened and poked Harry playfully in the ribs. "We could win money betting on how much we're going to win the Quidditch Cup by."

Harry snorted and continued to eat his breakfast. On the other side of the hall, Virgo was now trying to talk to John — unsuccessfully by the look of it. John may not believe that Virgo was the diary, but it seemed he still didn't like the fact that she was a Malfoy.

"See you at lunch, Harry!" Ginny waved as she and Luna finished their breakfast and made their way to their first class. Harry waved back before he, Daphne, and Hermione, made their way
to their first class — double History of Magic.

Binns hadn't gotten any more interesting since either last year or fifty years ago when Tom Riddle attended Hogwarts. Both the Slytherins and the Ravenclaws had long ago started treating History of Magic as a free sleep session. All except Hermione of course, whose note taking was as neat as her listening was careful — but Hermione was just awesome like that.

The bell for Lunch rang and Harry happily packed up, then followed Daphne down to the great hall. This time, Virgo seemed to be trying to make nice with Seamus Finnigan, while having about as much success as last time.

"What's it doing?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. "Trying to build a power base, I'd guess."

Hermione frowned. "I don't like it."

"Neither. Although I have my doubts about its ability to keep a cool enough head to make any progress — given what Gryffindors tend to do to those they don't like."

"Won't that be dangerous?"

"Possibly."

But regardless of what Harry felt about the potential dangers of a Gryffindor Tom Riddle, he had to accept there wasn't much he could do until he'd moved events along some more. Charms that afternoon had them working on arresto momentum, a spell that Daphne and Hermione had both mastered before the Winter Festival the previous year.

"Oh, well done! Miss Granger — Miss Greengrass — two points each to Slytherin." Professor Flitwick beamed at the two girls. "Oh, yes, you too, John Potter — Two points to Gryffindor."

It wasn't until he got back to the Slytherin common room—when Harry was able to sit down with Daphne in the small group of sofas and chairs that made up the court of the Gray, next to the large, and currently empty, snake-decorated throne he'd placed the year before—that he was able to start on the real work of the day.

On the other side of the snake-like throne, sat the Dark, presiding over their own little court. Alex had dragged over a large chair of her own and wedged it in-between two of the sofas — something Pansy in particular seemed to have taken offence at, judging by the way she sniffed and folded her arms every-time she glanced at her.

After several hours, Harry finished up the last piece of parchment work for the night and made his way up to bed. There, he put on his pyjamas, climbed into bed, and as he drifted off, focused his occlumency on a point, some four metres below and twenty metres off to the right — to wear Ginny was already asleep, wearing the dreamscape necklace.

Harry connected and the dreamworld opened up to him.

He appeared in a jungle clearing. A massive Mesoamerican pyramid stood behind him.

"Harry!" Ginny leapt and wrapped her arms around him. She was dressed in her nightdress and still held her fluffy dragon teddy bear in one hand. "Transfiguration was awesome!"

Harry grinned. "Good to hear it."
Ginny let go of him and danced backwards, whipped out the dream version of her wand and pointed it at the floor. "After all those boring notes, it was just like, haha! I have a nail, and now it's a spoon! Bam!"

A stone on the floor turned into a wooden spoon.

"And then Professor McGonagall was all like, 'I am raising my eyebrow at you, Miss Weasley' — and then I'm like, Bam! Spoon into nail, then Bam! Nail into spoon! Bam! Bam! Bam! — And then she's like, 'carry on, Miss Weasley.' Hah! I'm sooo glad we spent sooo much time on our occlumency now. This is easy!"

Harry smiled. "Excellent. You ready to move onto some more serious work?"

"Hell yeah!"

"Okay." Harry waved his hand and the dirt ground was replaced with castle flagstones. Ginny's nightdress turned into duelling robes. Her teddybear floated off to one side. "I'm going to do my best to limit myself to the spells, skill, tactics, and physical capabilities of the diary. You are going to try and kill me."

"Right." Ginny jumped into her duelling stance.

Harry conjured a handkerchief, let it fall halfway to the ground, then opened up with a sudden barrage of basic curses.

Ginny didn't bat an eyelash. She swatted them back and countered with a chain of stunners, stingers, and cutting spells.

What followed was a lesson in how a fight evolves when one side realises the other can counter their basic repertoire. Harry's spells quickly turned from point and shoot to controlled transfiguration. Ginny's counters changed into physical shields and dodging.

The final exchange of the match came quickly after that. Harry conjured a dagger and sent it sailing straight at Ginny, who caught it in a shield, grabbed it by the handle, and sent it flying back at Harry, hiding a switching spell in the dagger's shadow. Harry shielded against the dagger, but the switching spell sailed on through and hit a rock just behind Harry. Ginny switched position with the rock, and a split second later, Harry had a wand jabbing him in the side and a triumphal Ginny smirking at him. "I win."

"Yes, you do. Now tell me what you've learned."

Ginny looked to think. "The diary adapts. It saw that it couldn't get to me with direct spells so it started using indirect ones, instead."

"Yep, anything else?"

"It's more powerful than me."

"It is. Riddle is older than you, his skill may be that of a sixteen year old, but that soul piece is still nearly seventy years old. This is countered by the fact that he only has a slice of his soul. What else?"

Ginny looked blank.

"It's okay. You wouldn't have been able to pick up on it in that short exchange. Here's the thing —
you are far fitter than Riddle is. I don't know much about this muggleborn that the diary consumed to get this new body, but I'm willing to bet that they weren't nearly as physically active as you, and we know that they weren't as magically active. If your fight should ever go beyond, say, fifteen minutes, you will easily have the advantage. She'll start suffering from magical exhaustion. You'll still have plenty of fight left in you."

Ginny nodded. "Makes sense."

"But your fight shouldn't last anywhere near that long. Just something to keep in mind." Harry readied his wand again. "Ready?"

"Y—"

Harry attacked.

Three hours later, Ginny stood with her wand pointed at Harry's head… again. She'd won every single exchange, even the ones in which Harry said he'd really push what the diary was capable of. She smirked. "I guess I'm more than ready."

Harry smiled. "Yes. As much as I'm loath to send you into real danger — yes, you are now fully capable of defeating the diary."

She flipped her pony-tail over her shoulder. "I'll have this all wrapped up as soon as you get those portkeys."

Harry frowned. "Remember not to get too overconfident. Look at what's happening with John."

"What is happening with John?"

"I sent him a warning about Virgo being the diary, but for some reason, he doesn't believe it."

Ginny scoffed. "What a dumbass. He's been a nightmare. He still won't shut up about saving me from you."

"I dunno." Harry grinned. "I can be quite devious."

Ginny grinned back. "Yes, I know. That's what I like."

"Good, because I do have one more preparation task for you."

"Oh?"

"Yes." Harry took something out of his robes and handed it to Ginny. It was a dagger.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The morning sun was rising up over the trees of the forbidden forest. Virgo sat by the window next to his bed in Gryffindor Tower. Down on the grounds, the Slytherin Weasley, Ginevra, was running clockwise around the Black Lake. She wore what looked like muggle exercise clothes. On the other side, John Potter was running anti-clockwise.

Virgo had tried to talk to some of the people she'd identified as being close to John yesterday, with little success. Ginevra's older brother, Ronald, had gone so far as to blame her for his sister not being in Gryffindor. "You took the last Gryffindor girl slot," he'd said.

It wasn't actually a bad point. Each house took exactly five girls and five boys. Considering that
Weasley was so close to the end of the alphabet, it was amazing they'd all ended up in Gryffindor so far, but then, Virgo didn't know much about how the sorting hat algorithm worked.

Virgo continued to watch as John Potter ran into Ginevra Weasley about half way around the lake and proceeded to have a visibly large argument with her. Most people wouldn't have been able to see so far from so high up, but Virgo wasn't most people. The argument only ended when Ginevra turned her back on him and ran away at a speed that was, quite frankly, scarily impressive. John didn't look pleased about this.

Virgo filed this away for future consideration, and stepped towards the showers. As the water washed over him, he reflected on his dorm-mates. They'd been standoffish and mildly scornful since his sorting. He wished he could put them in their place, but that would not endear him to his target. After drying off, he wrapped the towel around him and walked back into the dorm to get dressed. His fellow dorm-mates were only now just getting up.

It didn't take more than a few moments to realise something wasn't right. He sorted through his carefully folded clothes and frowned. All his underwear was missing. Could the house-elves have taken it by mistake? No. That was about a likely as them accidentally confusing sugar and rat poison.

Somewhere in the room, a young, female voice sniggered.

Virgo narrowed his eyes. "Accio underwear."

Four cries of alarm issues from four throats as a several dozen sets of underthings shot across the room from inside trunks and on beds. Virgo calmly picked up his own pilfered underwear from the pile and banished the rest back into the middle of the room.

The four girls glared at him.

"Then don't steal my things," he said, as fiercely as an eleven year old girl could, and was about to add, 'Or I will kill you,' when Julia shouted at him in his mind to stop. He snapped his mouth shut and instead started getting dressed.

The other Gryffindor first-years traded looks among each other before going back to ignoring him.

You can't threaten to kill them! Julia thought.

You're right, Virgo thought back. I must be patient. I can punish them when they are eventually bowed before me in abject terror.

That's not what I meant!

Virgo smirked.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Hermione glided into the defence classroom, carefully putting away her breakfast reading, even as she slid into her seat beside Daphne and took out her copy of Basic Defence Against the Dark Arts. At the front of the room, Snape had arranged several of the more disgusting specimens in jars from his former potions dungeon. Hermione wondered about the man's loyalty. Could they ever trust a man who claimed to be a triple agent, twice over, for three separate sides? Almost certainly not. He was, without a doubt, out for just himself. Hermione wrinkled her nose. Not like herself. She was Harry's most hard-working, most dedicated student — and even if the likes of Ginny or Luna might be stronger than her, she'd never give up the title of most loyal. Behind her, Draco spoke with
Theodore Nott in a low voice. She caught the whispered name, "Alexandra," and made a mental note to inform Harry as soon as possible.

At that moment, Snape barged into the room, swept down the middle aisle, reached the front, and whirred around to face them all. "Magic," Snape said, "is an ever changing, ever growing beast."

Every student watched him in utter silence as the opening speech started.

"The more wizards use a spell, the easier it becomes, like a muscle growing to lift heavier and heavier prey. The first spell takes power, will, concentration, and purpose, so great as to exclude all the but the most capable. The second spell takes less. The third less still. A thousand years later, even a child can manage a basic lumos. Such is the need for light — a need that has stayed unchanged for the better part of human existence, as sure as the darkness of night itself."

He paused and looked around the room.

"But there are other needs that humanity has — far less wholesome needs. When the world turns against you, and the dark mist of rage descends, it is the need to hurt, to maim, to control, and to kill, that gives magic its form. These are the Dark Arts — varied, ever-changing, and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster, which, each time a neck is severed, sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before. And when magic attacks with intent to destroy, there is no need greater than to fight against that magic — to protect and to heal."

"This is the struggle between dark magic and light magic, separate from any political ramblings or ideological banner waving — a magical arms race, which it is now my solemn duty to induct you into."

As much as she hated Snape, Hermione had to admit that he certainly knew how to give a speech. The class then split up into pairs to practise the disarming charm.

"Oh no, I don't think so," Snape bit out, striding over to where Harry and John had been ready to square off against each other. "I still want some classroom left at the end."

Daphne nodded to where Hermione now stood off to one side. "Ready?"

Hermione bent her knees into her duelling position. "Ready."

Five disarming spell exchanges later, Hermione succeeded in ripping Daphne's wand from her hand.

Daphne scowled. "Again."

Hermione smirked. "Yes, my lady."

At the end of the class, Snape waved them all back into their seats. Hermione was sweating, but satisfied. She'd managed to handedly defend her position as top witch of their year against a now moderately sulking Daphne. As they left the classroom for lunch, she nudged Hermione in the ribs. "Enjoy it while you can, Vassal. We'll be training with the rest of the girls soon."

Daphne's sulk didn't last long. She perked back up not long into lunch when Harry whispered to them both that they'd be starting back on divination in the next few weeks, and that Lord Slytherin had a meeting with Lockhart that evening. It would be the perfect opportunity for him to arrange the portkeys for Ginny and Luna before the Hogwarts board meeting on Wednesday.

They had a free period after lunch. Hermione met up with Tracey and together they made their way
to the empty classroom that had become the unofficial muggleborn common-room. Harry joined
them not long after and together they worked on homework, house work, and prepared for the first
founders' club meeting of the year, until the final class ended, and a small swarm of their class-
mates arrived.

Every one of the new muggleborns had shown-up, along with the ones from their year, and even
some of the older ones, as well. While Hermione got the pensieve and portrait ready, the
Chesterfield twins—Violet and Marigold—happily chatted away with Alan Gage and Kevin's
sister, Annabel. Interestingly—with the exception of Colin Creevey, who'd enthusiastically barged
into the room just in front of Dean Thomas—every one of the new muggleborns had been sorted
into Hufflepuff.

Once the portrait of Elizabeth Greengrass, Daphne's Grandmother, indicated she was ready, the
first years all crowded around to listen to her rather more in-depth introduction to the magical
world while the second years worked together on their occlumency.

"How am I, Hermione?"

Hermione slowly withdrew from Sophie Roper's rather basic mind-scape. "Not bad," she answered.
"You should be ready to start on wandless magic before Winter Festival."

Sophie beamed. "Brilliant! I'm already doing much better in classes. I'm so glad you're helping us."

"It's Lord Slytherin you should thank, Sophie."

"Well, thank him from me again next time you see him, but you should remember to give yourself
some credit too." Sophie smiled.

Hermione's eyes explicitly did not flicker over to where Harry was explaining the finer points of
how to effectively use the cutting charm against an armed opponent to Justin Finch-Fletchley. "I
will make sure to do that," she said. "And thank you — I do try."

After all, Hermione added to herself, she was Harry's most loyal student, and that was certainly
credit worthy of taking.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

There was still a good few hours of sunlight outside as Virgo made his way up the stairs to
Gryffindor Tower. It still felt weird to head this direction rather than to the dungeons after class.
He'd had to catch himself going in the wrong direction more than once. It wouldn't be any good
getting caught doing that. He was already disliked by just about every one of his classmates. Only
Colin Creevey didn't seem hellbent on ignoring him, ironically, but that had turned to be more of a
curse than a blessing.

Oh come on, thought the soul of Julia, he's not that bad.

Virgo didn't dignify that with a response. He instead merely projected his utter disbelief towards
the girl.

Well, okay, he's a bit loud, but that's no reason to hate someone.

Virgo sniffed. It wasn't an issue at the moment at least. Creevey had run off with some older boy
the moment classes had finished. But it still didn't change the fact that he'd made no good progress
in making inroads into John Potter's circle.
"Password?" asked the fat woman in the portrait.

"Wattlebird."

The portrait swung aside, Virgo stepped inside, and a gallon of something heavy, viscous, and sticky splashed all over him.

Shock. He hadn't sensed any magic. It had come out of nowhere.

*Yeugh! This stuff is horrible!*

Laughter. All around the common room, several dozen students were falling over themselves on sofas and armchairs as she stood there, dripping, in what turned out to be diluted honey.

*We're going to need to get clean now.*

The laughter burned his ears, and it didn't stop. Anger flowed through him. This was too much. He would not stand for this! He took one gooey step forward, wand held tightly in hand. He'd show them all what it meant to fuck with—

*Holy crap! Calm down!* Julia's thoughts felt panicky.

Calm down? Calm down! Look at them!

*What are you going to do?! Curse someone in front of everyone?! Look at John!*

Virgo hesitated and glanced around until he found the face of John Potter who was watching with a small smirk from among his group of followers and closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The girl was right.

*See?*

He needed to plan around this. It wasn't any different to his first few years in Slytherin — not even as bad, actually. He'd just gotten used to having everyone's fear and respect. Plan first. Act second. Revenge third.

*No, that's...*

And so, with the continued laughter of the Gryffindor common room ringing in his ears, Virgo made his way to the girl's dormitory with as much dignity as he could, each ascending sticky step causing the stairs to shiver.

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In a long, ornate room, twelve wizards sat around a table, almost as long and equality as ornate as the room it sat in. A large green eyeball floated above the table, invisible to all except the masked figure of Lord Slytherin. The eyeball zipped around the room casually inspecting secret papers and notes, even as their owners held them close to their chests, or shielded them behind obscuring charms.

Headmaster Gilderoy Lockhart was just finishing up his analysis of the previous year that was in no way influenced by the masked lord sat half way down the table. He preened. "...And so, I, Gilderoy Lockhart, after a great deal of thought, have found the perfect solution to these pressing security concerns! Behold!" He whipped out three small boxes from under the table. "Special VIP portkeys!"
There was a murmur of faint surprise up and down the table.

"Yes!" Lockhart beamed. "The wards give me, Gilderoy Lockhart, the Headmaster, special permission to create exactly six portkeys, and I'm gifting these to you. These one time use necklaces are charmed to take their wearer straight to the hospital wing." He winked as he passed the boxes to Lords Malfoy, Potter, and Slytherin. "I set the activation word to Darksafe, Lightsafe, and Graysafe. I'm sure you can guess who has which boxes."

Lord Potter opened his box and drew out two small metal spheres, each about the size of a marble, and each hanging on the end of twin gold chains. He handed one to Lord Sirius Black who started waving diagnostic charms over it.

Lord Slytherin pocketed his box.

Lord Malfoy left his box untouched, instead leaning back slightly in his chair. "Well done, Headmaster." He looked up at Gilderoy. "I must admit, I was not expecting you to adjust to the job quite so quickly." Left unsaid was the general view that most of the room hadn't expected the man to adjust to the job at all.

The chairman, Ambrosius Flume stood up. "Thank you, Headmaster, you may now take an observer seat."

Lockhart flashed a smile, sat down on one of the hardback chairs by the wall, pulled out a stack of what looked suspiciously like fan mail, and started going through it.

Flume continued. "We will now carry on the matter of reallocating all current and future muggleborn guardianships from the Headmaster to Lord Slytherin. You all have copies of the proposal. Would anyone like to make any comments before we move to a vote?"

"Yes," Lord Potter said in a firm tone. Resolutions at the last two board meetings had been passed in favour of the current Dark/Gray alliance and it obviously scraped on his nerves. "I still don't see why we are even bothering with this. There is no good reason to give him,—he jerked his finger towards the impassive form of Slytherin—guardianship of anyone, let alone a group of young, impressionable children!"

"The proper protocols have been followed, Lord Potter."

"He's obviously up to no good!" Lord Potter waved his hand desperately. "It's moustache twirlingly obvious!"

"Nevertheless — if there are no further comments? Lord Slytherin?"

Slytherin shook his head "I think everything that needs to be said has already been said."

Lord Potter scowled.

Lord Malfoy kept his face utterly blank. He instead fingered the small, still unopened portkey box in front of him, gently turning it around and around on the polished wooden tabletop.

"Well then, all those in favour of the motion?"

Four hands rose — Lord Slytherin, Lord Greengrass, Lord Woodcroft, and Lord Smith — Four out of Eleven.

James Potter shot the still blank looking Lucius Malfoy and Lord Parkinson a startled look, while
the still mostly unseen eyeball zipped over to aggressively inspect the two Lords of the Dark faction.

Lord Slytherin's expression was, of course, hidden under his mask.

"And against?"

All the other hands rose.

"Four to five, the motion is rejected…” Flume shuffled his parchment in front of him. Around the room, the assembled wizards could practically feel the alliances shifting, yet again, for whatever reason.

"Let's move onto other business — item four — the ministry is requesting a general audit of Hogwarts's finances…”

The meeting continued on. The edge of Lord Malfoy's lips tugged upwards slightly as though relaxing a long held tension. He stopped his slow spinning of the portkey box beneath his fingers, facing the lid so it would open outwards, and lifted the lid. "What is this!

Lord Blott paused in the giving of his opinion of just where the minister's undersecretary could stick her audit request. "What?"

"Is there a problem, Lord Malfoy?" Flume asked.

"There are no portkeys in my box!"

There was a murmur around the room. Several Lords around Malfoy leaned in and confirmed that there were indeed no portkeys. Everyone turned to the Headmaster.

"Whaaaaaattttttt?" Lockhart had stood up looking flustered. "No, that can't be. I put them in there!"

He walked over and started at the empty box. "But I did!"

"Stolen?" Slytherin asked.

Lord Malfoy snarled. "I want replacements."

"But… but… I can only make six!" Lockhart wailed.

"Out of the way there!" Lord Black had moved around the table to the small crowd gathering around Malfoy. "If this is theft, then that's my responsibility as Chief Auror — and what's this?"

He flicked his wand at something caught on the edge of the box. A tiny hair levitated out and, seconds later, Lord Black had it wrapped in a small conjured bag.

"I was fiddling with it for several minutes," Malfoy said, rather defensively.

Lord Black grinned back. "No worries there, Lucy. I'm sure it all checks out."

Lucius looked rather put out. "I demand all the portkeys returned!"

"Why?" asked Lord Hawking. "If you can't have them then no one can? Stop being childish."

"This is an outrage!"

Lord Slytherin snorted. "I'm more worried that someone unknown now seems to have two instant
access portkeys to the Hogwarts hospital wing."

There was a silence around the table.

"Umm… never fear!" Lockhart said, although his confidence seemed shaken. "We will just have to… err… increase security — yes, that's what."

The assembled wizards looked at him with half-lidded eyes. "Yes, Headmaster," said Lord Blott. "You do that."

It was an even more cautious meeting after that. Members kept giving each other suspicious looks. Several agenda items and a couple of rejected resolutions later, the meeting closed up. Not long after, Lord Slytherin ducked into an empty class-room, threw up a few privacy charms, withdrew his shrunk trunk, opened it up, and climbed inside.

"No luck then." Daphne sat in one of the armchairs in the middle of the trunk with her eyes shut. The large floating eyeball swivelled around to look at him before it winked out of existence. Daphne opened her eyes.

"No." Harry pulled off his mask and started undoing all the charms and transfiguration on his person. "It was probably Virgo. She must have realised I'm not Voldemort and tipped Malfoy off."

"So now what are we going to do?"

Harry dropped into the armchair opposite Daphne as he shrunk back to his real biological age. "We'll keep looking for opportunities to get more board members on our side. In the meantime we can still get some of the guardianships, if we persuade both the parents and the headmaster to sign off on it."

"Should be easy on Lockhart's end. That wasn't your hair on the box, was it?"

"No, it was my father's."

Daphne chuckled. "That'll go down well."

Harry shrugged. "They won't be able to pin anything on him with that alone. I'll cast some concealing spells of my own and hand the portkeys off to Luna and Ginny. You didn't pick anything of interest up with your eyeball did you?"

"Not during the meeting, but I did get something interesting last night."

"Oh?"

Daphne nodded. "Draco was writing a letter in bed to Lord Malfoy. He was asking for help in getting some of the Dark families to work with him on 'putting Alexandra Black in her place.' Apparently many of the people he spoke with were reluctant to help without approval from their parents first. They probably remember what happened last year."

"Mmm… well that gives us a breathing spot, but it sounds like we'll have to speed up our work with Alex, anyway."

"Yes." Daphne frowned. "I'm not all that thrilled about keeping her in the dark about all our secrets, you know."

Harry sighed. "I know. But it's not like with you and the other girls. I had months working together
with Ginny, Hermione, and Luna before I told them, and you and I were already betrothed. Hell, even Tracey accumulated a good chunk of time with me over the last year before she found out. I've hardly had any opportunity to spend serious time with Alex."

"She's pretty obsessed with Lord Slytherin."

Harry nodded slowly.

"Soon?"

Harry seemed to think before nodding, this time rather more firmly. "I think that after we've gone through helping her survive the smack down from the Dark, we can bring her in."

Daphne smiled brightly. "Wonderful. And with any luck, the diary won't be an issue soon either."

Harry nodded. They cleared up a few other pieces of business and Harry escorted Daphne back to the trapped stairs leading down to the girl's dormitory before making his way back to his own dormitory to sleep. He'd added the ward that limited the number of portkeys the headmaster could create to six himself. It was the most he could do, but hopefully the most would be enough. He didn't particularly want Lord Malfoy to get another portkey he could give to the diary, after-all.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It was the next day. Classes had come and gone, and the older students had settled back into the normalcy of another school year. Virgo Malfoy marched up the grand staircase towards the seventh floor, a faint anger bubbling through him. The previous evening, his house mates had pranked him, again. Afterwards, he'd pretended to accept the sympathy of the older wizard Colin Creevey had run off with on Monday — a boy called Dean Thomas — another muggleborn. He, the future Lord Voldemort, had been consoled by a muggleborn. It drove him nuts.

And the only progress he'd made towards his goal had been to realise that John spent quite a bit of his time outside classes with the Bones Heiress, Susan. They seemed quite fond of each other. Together with the Slytherin Weasley, they seemed like the most probable way to get an in with John. But first, he had to do something about the rest of the house.

Virgo reached the seventh floor, breathing heavily, and made his way to the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, teaching trolls to dance. He walked in front of the tapestry while thinking, I need the room of lost things.

The door opened. The inside was just how he remembered it from fifty years ago. The walls rose on all sides like a cathedral. Beams of light shone through high windows, through the dusty air, and onto massively high shelves.

Woowwww, thought the soul of Julia.

Virgo quickly made his way to the place where he hoped the stuff he'd left here fifty years ago would still be. There was, after-all, no guarantee that his other-self hadn't already taken it for some other purpose. He stepped in front of the shelf that looked no different from the countless others and nodded in satisfaction. There, among piles of second hand books that must have piled up in the two years after he made the diary, was an old and battered violin case.

Wait, seriously? Julia thought.

You are surprised? Virgo thought back.
Well, yeah.

Virgo picked up the case and opened it. The instrument inside had already been well used when he'd stolen it from one of the older girls at the orphanage one summer.

*Can you actually play it?*

I can, he thought. There are many similarities between it and a wand — between music and magic. He quickly applied a tuning charm.

The walk to the common room felt longer than normal. The violin was not pleasant to hold. It brought back memories — memories he'd already locked tightly away, tight enough that not even Julia could pick up on them.

"Password?"

"Wattlebird."

The portrait swung open and Virgo stepped through. This time, the build-up of prank magic was noticeable. He took one more step forward and antlers sprung from his head.

Just like before, laughter rang out through the common room. Those who weren't doing so openly were hiding their poorly concealed smiles behind hands or books.

Virgo ignored them. Instead, he walked right into the middle of the room and stopped. He looked around.

The laughter slowly died down.

He pointedly withdrew the violin from the case he carried, fixed it under his chin, and drew back the bow.

Someone sniggered, but was quickly hushed.

And then he played. It started slow and simple, leading from the introduction, through each of the three individual movements. To those listening it was a song of sorrow and loss, each long note stirring some painful memory within them. But to Virgo, each note brought forth not sorrow, but anger — a kind of simmering resentment and rage, which he barely managed to keep hidden as he approached the conclusion. After several minutes of playing, in which no one in the entire common room had moved, the final note played, and silence fell.

He lowered the bow and looked around again.

Several groups of witches were quietly sniffling to themselves. Many of the boys looked uneasy and guilty. Heir Longbottom was trembling in his seat, hunched over and trying to look small.

Virgo's anger started to fade, quickly replaced by satisfaction. He drank in the looks of sadness and guilt like a fine wine.

Julia's thoughts felt both resigned and disgusted. *Only you could take something like music and turn it into a weapon.*

Beautiful, isn't it?

By the fire place, John Potter looked rather uncertain.
Virgo let the violin hang at his side. Everyone was still watching and waiting. He took a steadying breath. It was important to get the level of fear and righteous indignation in his voice just right.

"I am not evil," he started. "I spent most of my childhood in Sweden. For a long time, I was Virgo Olsen, not Virgo Malfoy. When I returned, I learned a lot about magic and the wizarding world from my new family. I knew what was expected of me by them, but I never forgot the muggles who'd raised me before. When I came to Hogwarts, the hat told me I would do best in Gryffindor — that Gryffindor was where I truly belonged. So I went there, and now here I stand in front of you — I can do nothing else." Virgo let a tiny part of the anger he'd been feeling for days leak into his now trembling voice. "Do you have any idea what it's going to be like for me when I go home for Winter Festival!" She glared around at them all, then, without waiting for a response, stormed off to the girl's dormitory, still wearing the set of prank antlers that no first year should be able to remove by themselves, leaving behind an extremely uneasy common room.

The next morning, something fundamental had changed. When Virgo left the dormitory people nodded at him, some gave him encouraging smiles — a couple even apologised for the way they'd been treating 'her'. The oldest Weasley, Percy, removed his antlers with a wave of his wand and commented on how everyone's behaviour had been disgraceful, while Dean Thomas had given him a big, cheesy, thumbs up. No one really invited him into their groups, but no one turned him away when he asked if he could sit with them for a while either.

It was during one of these informal chats when he learned that Susan Bones was, apparently, a passionate dueller, and that the Hufflepuffs had duelling practise on Friday evenings at the duelling arena. John Potter still wasn't looking very comfortable around him. Maybe it would be a good idea to extend some feelers into other houses. Susan could be perfect, but Virgo could easily think of one other who'd also be a prime candidate to befriend.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Alexandra Black sat in her first potions class waiting for Professor Lady Lilly Potter to arrive. The Carrow twins sat on either side of her as though they were guards containing an especially disruptive prisoner. Alex wasn't blind. She'd seen the looks she'd been getting from the children of the Dark over the last few days. She snorted. Let them come. She'd gang up with Luna and the other witches to crush Harry Potter in training, and then she'd use her Black family magic to cow anyone in the Dark who tried anything with her. Lord Slytherin would be impressed.

Over in the middle of the classroom, Ginny was happily chatting away to Luna. The distance between her and them seemed far too large.

At that moment, Lilly Potter walked into the room and up to the front. Alex frowned grumpily. The woman always treated Alex like she had brain damage or something. She turned around to face them all. "Welcome. I am Professor Potter and here you will be learning one of the most useful and powerful skills available to wizards… potions. Why are potions so powerful?"

Lilly Potter waited for a few moments for anyone to raise their hands. No one did.

She turned and wrote on the board.

POTIONS ARE THE ULTIMATE EQUALISER

She turned back. "It does not matter how powerful your wand is. It does not matter how well your body can process magical toxicity. It does not even matter how much raw power you can channel. So long as you can use magic, you can stand among the greatest potioneers who have ever lived, if you have the smarts for it. That is what makes potions so powerful."
Alex suppressed the urge to snort. That didn't make potions powerful. In fact, that made potions far less powerful. If everyone could do it, it wasn't much of an advantage.

They soon started on a simple potion to cure boils. Alex was partnered with Hobby Harper, a dark-skinned boy with extremely short hair, who seemed to be trying to impress her. She focused on prep — cutting, mashing, and dicing the ingredients into the exact specifications noted by the recipe, while Harper manned the cauldron, loudly counting out stirs in-between boasting about his quidditch skills.

Some time into the process, Lilly passed Alex's cauldron and stopped by Ginny's. "Oh, well done, Miss Weasley. You've got the viscosity and colour just right. Two points to Slytherin."

Ginny nodded curtly. Lilly moved on and Alex craned her neck to see inside Ginny's cauldron. Their potions were identical. She scowled and passed the latest batch of perfectly sliced sniffle-cups to Harper.

"Oh, and you too, Miss Malfoy — wonderful — three points to Gryffindor."

At that point, something went wrong. The cauldron Harper was manning started to spit.

Alex's eyes darted to, and fell on, the stirring rod. Harper had left it in the guard while adding the sniffle-cups. Idiot! She snatched it out of the cauldron just as the last of the sniffle-cups went in, but by then the damage had already been done. The potion's perfect green colour had faded into a kind of sick yellow.

"Oh, that's no good." Lilly Potter was standing behind them with a concerned look on her face. It was as though she'd teleported there from the other side of the room. She looked at the stirring rod in her hand. "Alex, you should never stir while adding grasses in this potion."

"Yes, I—"

"Well, you know for next time. I'm sure you'll manage it if you try really hard." Lilly then gave her an encouraging smile and walked away.

Alex only just resisted braining herself head on the desk in frustration.

Harper muttered an apology, but that did little to stem Alex's annoyance.

By the time class ended her mood had reached the boiling point. She was among the last to pack up, and when she stormed down the corridor towards the dungeons, it took all her instincts not to immediately hex the slight figure that stepped out from behind a statue. "What do you want?"

Virgo Malfoy smiled at her. "Annoying, isn't it? I saw what happened back in class."

"Good for you." Alex continued on walking.

Virgo stepped up beside her. "That's not the only thing I've seen."

"Oh?" They were now walking together down the corridor with Virgo on Alex's left.

"I notice my brother's trying to stir up trouble. It can't be easy on you right now."

"I'm just fine."

"Are you sure you wouldn't appreciate help?" Virgo leaned slightly closer. "I know many Malfoy secrets."
Alex gave her a suspicious look. "Why would you want to help?"

Virgo sighed. "I'm a Malfoy in Gryffindor. My family might not soon be the most supportive of allies. I need new ones."

Alex thought in silence for a moment while the two girls continued to walk. Lord Slytherin wanted the Dark students at Hogwarts on his side. Surely bringing Lord Malfoy's daughter into the fold would be equally useful. She slowed her pace a fraction. "Well…"

"Hi there!"

Alex and Virgo both jerked around.

"Luna!"

"Alex!"

Alex found herself looking into her best friend's large grey eyes from only a few feet away. She'd appeared on her right like a ghost through a wall.

The moment Virgo realised who it was, she took several steps backwards as though afraid of catching something.

Luna grabbed onto Alex's arm and pressed herself up against her. "I've been looking for you." She leaned over to gaze at Malfoy. "Hey, Virgo. Have you thought at all about what we talked about on our first day?"

"No." Virgo said, rather bluntly.

"Not even a little bit?"

"No!"

"You can't run from it forever." Luna's voice was practically sing-song by this point.

Alex found herself being gently pulled further and further away from where Virgo now stood.

"My offer's still open." Luna giggled. "Special deal — order now — while supplies last — before it's too late."

Virgo said nothing.

And then they'd turned around and were walking away from their Gryffindor classmate. They continued on walking until they'd turned several corners and were clearly and obviously alone.

"Um, Luna?" Alex lowered her voice and leaned in closer. "Not that I'm not happy to see you, but aren't we supposed to not be seen together in public?"

"I missed you."

Alex felt something ping in her stomach. She looked away. "Yes, well." She grasped for something else to talk about. "What were you talking about with Virgo?"

"Oh, I was just playing with her. It's so much fun — like a kitty with a mouse."

"She was offering to help with our project."
Luna's face turned serious. "Don't accept it. Don't trust her. In fact, don't even let yourself be alone with her. Trust in Lord Slytherin."

Alex hesitated, then smiled. "Right." Just having this small time with Luna made her feel miles better than before. "And we'll crush Harry on the weekend."

Luna frowned. "About that. I have a family obligation that I have to take care of. My father's coming to take me from Hogwarts on Friday evening. I won't be back until late on Sunday."

Alex's face fell. "Oh."

"Don't worry." Luna put an arm around Alex's shoulders. "We'll find more time to hang out together soon, I promise."

Alex smiled again.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Damn Lovegood. What the hell was wrong with her? Virgo walked down to the duelling arena fuming mildly. She'd been so close before that little whore had shown up.

Normally this would be the point he'd expect Julia to start kicking up a fuss in his brain, but, oddly enough, on this one she actually agreed with him.

Virgo walked into the duelling arena and stood at the railings looking down as the Hufflepuffs started trickling in.

"Hey!"

Virgo looked up. An older male Hufflepuff was marching towards her. "You're in Gryffindor, right? You can't be here."

Virgo frowned. That had never been a problem fifty years ago. "Are you sure? I won't be any trouble. I just wanted the opportunity to practise with people who aren't from my house."

"No, absolutely not."

At that moment, the twin muggleborns from Hufflepuff house arrived on either side of the boy — the Chesterfields. Virgo had grouped with them during herbology when everyone else in her house had ignored her.

"Aww, C'mon Cedric," wheedled the one on the left. She wore gold ribbons in her hair, as opposed to purple, which meant that this was Marigold.

"Indeed," said the one that, by process of deduction, had to be Violet, the far more subdued of the pair. "If she wants to practise against us, I don't have a problem with that. It's not like we're that important."

The boy folded his arms. "That's not the point."

"What about what it means to be a Hufflepuff?" Marigold pouted up at him. "Don't you remember what you told us? Puffs help people and make friends everywhere. Go Puffs!"

Cedric grimaced before theatrically throwing his hands up in the air. "Fine, whatever. You take care of her then." He turned around and walked off in a fake huff. It was obviously fake because he first gave them both a smile and a wink.
Virgo watched the whole exchange with a kind of disdainful fascination. I'm constantly finding myself relying on muggleborns recently, he thought. It's pathetic.

*I'm sure if it'd been me, I'd have been awesome,* thought the soul Julia. *And it's not pathetic!*

"C'mon!" said Marigold, pulling her towards the other Hufflepuffs.

Thus it was that, twenty minutes later, Virgo found herself facing off against the niece of the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Heiress Susan Bones. She studied him with an air of deep suspicion.

Violet threw a handkerchief into the air. It slowly fell to the ground. It hit.

The exchange didn't last long. Susan's spells were fast and precise. She'd clearly spent many hours practising. Virgo let a disarming charm catch her after a mostly static thirty seconds of spell trading. "Wow, you're good."

Susan glared at him. "Don't give me that bullshit."

Virgo blinked. "Sorry?"

"You don't think I can't tell? You threw that!"

Damn, the girl was sharper than he'd thought. "Umm…"

"Why?" Susan demanded.

"Err…" Virgo dropped his head. "It's my house mates."

"What?" Susan walked closer so she could hear his now rather quieter voice.

"They've been treating me like crap all week — because I'm a Malfoy in Gryffindor. They only stopped yesterday when I shouted at them all in the common room. I guess I'm afraid that if I stand out too much they're going to think I'm dangerous or something. My father was training me ever since I came back from Sweden — I might be a bit too advanced."

Susan's features softened. "You know, if you have problems, you can always talk to John Potter. He'll sort it out."

Virgo smiled weakly. "I tried. He wasn't having it."

Susan's eyes narrowed. "Oh, really?"

Virgo raised both his hands in what he hoped was a convincing, half-panicky gesture. "Please don't get angry at him. He wasn't the one dumping honey on me or anything. I don't want him to get mad at me."

Susan pursed her lips.

*Urgh,* thought Julia. *I think I'm going to be sick.*

After apparently considering his words for a few moments, Susan said, "but he didn't help put a stop to it, did he?"

"Well, no."
Susan sniffed. "Stupid boys." She looked Virgo in the eyes. "I'm not going to think you're evil. Are you going to fight seriously now? I need another good opponent."

Virgo nodded quickly. He'd have to be far more careful this time — maybe up his game to that of a mildly competent second year. Susan was better even than that, so she'd still win, but it would at least give her the impression of fighting a first year prodigy — someone valuable. Then he'd be able to let his skills improve slowly over time until he could use them fully in front of her.

They jumped apart and readied their wands.

Marigold snatched up the handkerchief on the ground and threw it up into the air. "Begin!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Grand Central Terminal, New York City, United States of America — a vast concrete and steel monument to muggle pragmatism, and hidden somewhere inside, the MaCUSA International Portkey Terminal — an equally vast goblin-iron monument to wizarding secrecy. Special Auror Jackson Collins sat on one of the many iron benches, reading his newspaper and watching the arrival circles — three large pits dug into the marble floor. Each pit was filled with several inches of sand and featured stone steps around the circular sides leading up and out.

Bing-Bong!

A cheerful sounding female voice rang through the hall. "Arrival of the six o'clock portkey from Tokyo to pit number two — please stand clear. Thank you."

There was a whoosh of air, a blur of coloured shapes, and then over a dozen people stumbled across the sand of the middle pit. Almost half of the arrivals immediately threw up. The others didn't look much better.

Jackson ruffled his newspaper. Damn Brits. Damn their suspicious shit. But, most of all, damn his boss who'd decided their damn suspicious shit mattered. He'd been called into her office early yesterday afternoon, just when he'd been winding down for the weekend, and been told he was now on special assignment.

"These are the Lovegoods," his boss, Ruby Goldstein, had said, pushing a file with a picture paper-clipped to the front across her desk at him. "They'll be arriving in the country early Saturday morning."

Jackson looked down at the family picture of a tall, blonde man, his wife, and his young daughter. "And why is this important?"

"Because they are associated with a person of interest to MaCUSA." Goldstein threw another file at him, this one far thinner than the last. "This man — the so-called 'Lord Slytherin.' Procurement is talking with him about magical submarines. The higher ups are fed up with the kelpie situation in the Great Lakes."

Jackson flipped through the file. He made a face. "Arranged marriages — yuk."

"That's what you get so close to the Albion."

"And these Lovegoods are also British aristocracy. You think they're what? Industrial spies?"

"Their visa application says they're here for tourism, but their school term's already started. They're bringing their daughter with them. It's only for the weekend, so she wouldn't miss any classes, but
nevertheless, it's suspicious."

Jackson had groaned, which had gotten him a scowl from his boss. Her suspicions had landed him in hot water more than once over the years, but he wasn't about to argue it. And so here he was, waiting at the crack of dawn for a trio of British wizards. They'd probably portkey off again to who knew where, dragging him along with them, and forcing him to spend a good chunk of his own weekend in portkey recovery.

Bing-Bong! "Arrival of the six-fifteen portkey from London to pit number three — please stand clear. Thank you"

There was a whoosh of coloured air and seven wizards stumbled onto the sand. The Lovegoods were instantly recognisable. They stood together and were the only ones not to immediately throw up, although that wasn't to say that they looked fine — far from it. They staggered up the stone steps, clinging to the railing and each other, and made their way over to the lines of sleep booths — luxurious recovery spaces, complete with sleeping potions — something only well off travellers could afford.

Jackson groaned. He was obviously in for a long wait.

He wasn't wrong. For the next six hours, he kept his eye on the exit to the booths, keeping himself occupied with the cross-word, and even a copy of a muggle newspaper. Apparently the muggle government had confiscated a massive dinosaur skeleton from some people who couldn't decide who owned it. It caught his eye because he'd been part of the team that had raided an excavation site in Utah some years back. The muggle bone diggers had discovered a fossilised dragon and mistaken it for one of their own massive extinct beasts. He was sipping on a cup of ever-warm coffee when the Lovegoods walked out of the booth space, looking far better rested, and made their way towards customs.

Jackson folded up his papers and followed at a distance, coffee cup still in hand. He saw the customs agent talking to the trio, saw them all show her the rings they wore, saw the agent wave her wand over the rings, saw them hand over their wands, saw the agent register them, and saw her place the little girl's wand in a storage box that he knew would be returned to her when she left the country. Then they walked through customs and out into the portkey terminal proper.

Jackson hurried up to the customs agent. "Excuse me, Ma'am," The woman looked up. "Special Auror Jackson Collins." He flashed his ID.

The woman straightened. "Yes, Auror?"

"The entry papers of the three you just processed, if you please."

"Ah." The woman fumbled on the desk, found them, and handed them over. "Here you go."

"Thanks." He looked over the documents. "Washington D.C. — a muggle hotel. They didn't say anything about why they were going there did they?"

"No." The customs agent shook her head. "The girl pouted a bit when she had to give up her wand, though."

Jackson took another sip of coffee. "I bet she did. Any idea when the next public portkey to Washington is?"

"One-fifteen, Sir."
"Thanks."

Jackson then arranged for a MaCUSA portkey to take him to the capital ahead of the Lovegoods. He found the hotel the Lovegoods had put down on their entry papers and sat down in the lobby to wait. It was a whole hour later when the Lovegoods finally arrived, looking a whole lot more muggle than when they'd portkey'd in wearing their incredibly European wizarding robes.

By the time the Lovegoods finally emerged from their hotel room, it was almost a quarter past two in the afternoon. This time though, they clearly meant business. The adults were dressed in muggle formal wear, while the girl was more casually dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

The apparent disconnect between the parents clothing and their daughter's soon became understandable when they dropped her off at a kids activity centre — complete with trampoline and climbing wall. At this point, Jackson had to make a choice, and the choice was obvious. The kid was an eleven year old girl who didn't have a wand. The adults were two highly capable wizards, with wands, who together owned one of the most powerful British media organisations. Naturally he chose to follow the adults.

Having said all that, Jackson couldn't help feel that this whole exercise was a huge waste of time. This feeling didn't decrease as the happy couple, which is obviously what they were, happily strolled up the national mall over the next hour, past the Smithsonian, past the Washington monument, stopping briefly to take in the Lincoln Memorial, before walking over to the JFK Centre, where, surprise, surprise, they pulled out two tickets to the opera and entered. Jackson grunted. He hated opera.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Luna Lovegood was a natural leader. This was the conclusion that Jennifer Rushings, head supervisor at the activity centre, came to after watching her interact with the other kids for the better part of an hour. Maybe it was the pure Britishness she seemed to radiate, but the other children—and especially the boys, whom she wouldn't normally have thought old enough to notice—treated her like royalty — like a princess — no, even more than that, like a queen. They followed her around on whatever game she felt like playing and leapt to her commands like little soldiers. It was both impressive and darn adorable.

Said game at the moment seemed to involve stationing guards at all the windows, as though the activity centre was a castle on the lookout for potential invaders. She walked over to the girl and smiled warmly. "Everything going well, your majesty?"

Luna smiled back. "Quite well, Ms Rushings."

"The fort is secure then?"

Luna seemed to consider this question carefully. She looked around the centre, then back at her. "Yes," she finally declared. "It would seem it is."

Jennifer clapped her hands together. "That's—"

And then Luna was pointing a length of wood at her, ornately carved with flowers and vines. "Confundo."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In one of the JFK Centre's concert halls, Jackson Collins tried to make himself comfortable. He
wasn't having much luck. The seats were too close together, the place was too dark, the music was too loud, and the muggle in front of him was wearing a hat that was too big.

The Lovegoods sat two rows down from him and six seats across, apparently quite enjoying themselves. Jackson tried to spot if anyone might be secretly communicating with them, but it was useless. This job really needed a whole team of field unspeakables, not just his own measly self.

He supposed it could be worse, though. He could be babysitting their brat.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Not far away, at the J. Edger Hoover Building, Derick Thomson finished changing into his security guard uniform and clocked in for his shift — he'd be working late tonight, mores the pity. He'd been really looking forward to catching the game later on. He walked into the lobby and took up position by one of the main doors. Nothing strange — nothing unusual — just another boring as heck shift.

"Imperio."

Elation. Happiness. Freedom. Derick blinked. Only it wasn't him that blinked. It seemed to be a good idea to go along with it though. His body patted himself down and found the ID that hung by his belt. His body inspected the card. It then reached into his pocket and pulled out the wallet Mandy had bought him for their fifth year anniversary. It rifflled through the contents and looked at all the cards. Apparently done with the pockets, it then turned and made its way back the way he'd come.

Every so often his body would inspect the signs that plastered the walls. Derick had the vague feeling it was looking for something, not that it mattered, of course.

"You, okay there, Derick?"

His body whirlered around. It was his friend, Alan. "Yeah, I'm fine," his body said.

"Aren't you on lobby shift?"

Derick felt something in his brain, something quite different from before. While before was elation and freedom, this was nakedness and vulnerability. It reached for answers to questions and pulled information straight from his brain like candy-floss from a machine and suddenly he understood. He was a prisoner in his own body. Some demon was possessing him! Panic bubbled up, his fingers started to twitch to his command, but then, just as quickly, the thing in his brain retreated, and the happiness returned. This all happened in less than a second.

"Rodger asked for me to see him in his office before shift," said his body.

"Oooo." Alan made a face of sympathy. "Have fun with that."

"Asshole," said his body.

Alan grinned, punched his body on the shoulder, and left.

After that, it was a quick walk through two levels basic of security. Each time, his body pulled out his security card and swiped it through the doors, with a small green flash. On the third door, the security swipe flashed red. His body frowned. He felt the happiness slowly drain from his body. For one disconcerting moment, he had back a kind of dizzy control. But then, something red hit him, and his world went dark.
Rachel Wayland stepped out of her bathroom stall, making the final adjustments to her tights as she went. She walked over to the sinks, washed her hands, checked herself in the mirror, quickly reapplied her lipstick, and tucked her Celtic knot necklace deeper into her blouse. Some of her more traditionally religious co-workers got a bit weird about her being a self proclaimed pagan. Satisfied, she made for the door. Her hand closed around the handle, and utterly failed to turn.

She frowned. Locked?

She tried harder, but still nothing.

"Sorry about this."

She whirled around. A girl. Short, black-haired, Asian features, t-shirt, jeans, stick of wood pointing at her. No, her mind corrected itself, not a stick of wood, a wand — symbol of male virility — channeller of air and fire. She mentally shook herself. Not important. "What are you doing here? Why is the door—" But that was as far as she got before something hit her and all her arms and legs snapped together, her mouth snapped shut, her neck went totally stiff. Magic! The thought ploughed through her like a shocked and triumphal freight train. Real Magic! OMG!

Her totally unresponsive body floated forward, spinning gently, until her upside-down face was only a few feet away from the girl's.

OMG! OMG! OMG!

"Legilimens."

Memories flew through her mind like a hurricane. Memories of work, of projects long ago completed, of her co-workers, of the layout of the warehouse she helped admin, of the recent delivery of a huge-ass dinosaur skeleton, and finally, of passwords and usernames to the building's security systems. It was that last memory that succeeding in breaking her out of the crazed elation at her discovery, and dumped a bucket of cold water all over her.

This little girl was in the middle of FBI headquarters, using magic to break in! She was ripping critical security data right out of her head and there was nothing Rachel could do to stop it. Sweat poured down her face as she tried to will the tide of memories to stop, but it had about as much effect as a single sandbag trying to stop a flash flood.

Eventually the memories stopped.

The girl smiled at her. "Thank you."

Unable to say anything, Rachel just stared back, wide-eyed, fearful, and desperately trying to remember every little detail for later, assuming, of course, that she managed to get out of here alive.

"Obliviate."

"Stop!" In the FBI surveillance room, Daniel Davis jabbed his finger at the video screen. "Right there. Rewind it again."

Daniel's closest work friend, Carl Turner, who was far larger than Daniel, rewound the tape and
together they watched. There, before their eyes, a door in one of the high security areas opened and closed all by itself, without anyone using a security card or punching in a security number. "Okay, that's fucking weird."

"I told you I didn't just imagine it."

"So, what do you think it is? A ghost?"

"Oh, please, get real." Daniel jerked up and starred at another of the many security cameras that surrounded the two of them. Most of the others had already gone home, for the day, leaving just the skeleton crew. He pointed at the screen that caught his attention. "There! Another one."

"What, for real?"

"Yes, for real. Get the tape. I swear I saw something else this time too."

Sometime quite a bit later, somewhere among many hundreds of shelves in the depths of the building’s basement, a barely visible outline moved about unseen and unheard. The outline stopped occasionally, as though reorienting itself, before carrying on again. Eventually, it found itself in front of a series of high shelves, each one several feet tall, and on these shelves, were stored hundreds upon hundreds of fossilised bones.

The outline glided like a whisper until it reached the shelf that contained the beast's skull, a ridiculously massive thing, longer than the outline stood tall, longer even than longest dragon skull, and packed deep with dagger-like teeth, some of them as long as a man's forearm.

In front of the skull, for all to see, someone had put a small plaque which simply read, 'Sue.'

Two of the teeth then yanked themselves out of the skull and slowly floated forward. As soon as they reached the outline, they all but vanished, becoming little but an outline themselves.

Daniel ran a hand through his hair. "Okay, this isn't funny anymore. We need to tell someone."

Between them, he and Carl had found four more incidences over the last hour of self opening and self-locking doors. The tapes were all piled up on the table. One of the more scary episodes was playing repeat on the main monitor. This wasn't just a cute incident anymore, this was a real security problem.

"Yeah," Carl nodded. "Let's handoff to Sammy. He'll know what to do." He stood up. "You'd never think we needed something like this in the procedures manual."

"No kidding."

Carl reached for the door handle. "Imagine the newspapers, 'FBI building haunted.'"

Daniel groaned. "Don't even joke about it."

Carl wrapped his hand around the handle and turned. Or rather, he tried to. "Locked."

"What?" Daniel stood up.

"It's locked," Carl said, a bit louder.
"Here," Daniel stepped forward with his keys. He stuck one in the lock, gasped, and drew his hand back. What remained of the key dribbled down the front of the door.

Daniel and Carl looked at each other.

"Okay, don't panic," Daniel said. He pointed at the phone. "Call for help."

Carl picked up the phone and held it to his ear. "Dead."

"What do you mean, 'dead'?"

"I mean there's no tone!"

Daniel growled. "This had better not be someone's idea of a practical joke. Right, we break the door."

Carl nodded and together they gave the door everything their shoulders had, which, despite their combined quite considerable weight, wasn't nearly enough.

Daniel stood back and ran his hand through his hair, looking around the room again. "Window!"

His friend looked up at the tiny window near the roof. "Are you sure?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Fair catch." Carl hauled a fire extinguisher out from under the desk, then climbed onto the desk, and used his powerful arms to lob it straight at the window. It bounced off with a sound like a palm hitting a rubber mat — very much not the sound some fifteen-odd kilos of steel makes when hitting a thin sheet of glass — before crashing to the ground… like a feather.

The two looked at each other again.

"Okay, this shit really isn't funny now." Daniel started pacing. "What the hell is this?"

It was at that moment that things went from worrying to terrifying.

All at once, Daniel found himself with no control over any of his limbs. His arms and legs snapped together, his mouth snapped shut, and his neck and spine went stiff as a board. Only his eyes could move. They swivelled around desperately, only to see that Carl was in the same situation as he, and that both of them were now floating almost a foot off the floor.

A girl appeared in front of them from nowhere as though she'd stepped through a hole in the world — young, Asian, black hair, jeans and a t-shirt. There might have been more scary things to be faced with in this situation, but Daniel honestly couldn't think of one.

"I'm so sorry about this," the girl said, and genuinely sounded it. "This might feel a bit uncomfortable, but it will make my work more accurate." She pointed a length of wood at him.

"Legilimens."

Memories flashed through Daniel's head. Memories of his family, of his friends, of going to see the Redskins' first game of the season just the other day. The memories quickly focused in on the events of the afternoon, and then further onto his sudden unexplained curiosity at a seemingly unimportant event on the security cameras.

His and Carl's entire ghost hunt flashed before his eyes, like a dream on fast-forward, but somehow
slower as well. Then the memories stopped and he was able to take a metaphorical deep breath.

The girl considered the pile of tapes on the table before turning back to him and Carl. "Thank you," she said. "This will make everything much easier." She then pointed what he could now only think of as her wand at the pile of four tapes and said, "obliviate."

Nothing seemed to happen until he looked at the video monitor which was still playing the fifth and final tape constantly on repeat. He wanted to gasp. There, before his eyes, the door on the screen closed shut sooner than it should have…and stayed shut. The tape rewound itself, started playing again, and this time the door didn't open at all.

Sweat poured down Daniel's face. This girl was either a demon or a god, and he'd never believed in gods.

The wand then turned on him, and in his mind, it turned on him as slowly and with all the inevitability of a destroyer's main cannon being brought to bare on a small dingy, until he was looking right down the shaft. It had flowers on it.

"Obliviate."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Back at the opera, the lights finally came back on, and Special Auror Jackson Collins was finally able to get out into the fresh air again. Mr and Mrs. Lovegood seemed in no hurry to go anywhere though. They ambled back the way they came, apparently at total ease in the world. Eventually, they found their way back to the activity centre they'd dropped their daughter off at.

He watched Mr Lovegood hug his daughter as though they hadn't just been gone for a few hours, and the kid hugged him back the same way. Urgh, he thought, this really was the most pointless assignment.

By the time he'd spent another three hours watching the Lovegoods trying Pizza and all sorts of other very normal foods at one Washington's many muggle eateries, he was ready to write a very pointed report to his boss about how reliable her suspicions tended to be, office politics be damned.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The classroom was large. The desks were piled up at the back. The windows sat deep into the stonework, Sunday morning sun streaming through in long beams. Daphne sat by one of these windows, fully dressed in dragon-hide duelling robes, and feeling more than a little inadequate.

In the middle of the room, Ginny, Alex, and Hermione were warming up. In Ginny's case, this involved rapidly switching between pebbles scattered around the room while Alex shot stunner after stunner at her, far faster than Daphne could have managed, and even then, not a single one of them connected.

By contrast, Hermione stood off to one side doing jumping jacks in-between practising basic spell chains.

It really drilled home just how much of a gap had opened up between them. So much so that Daphne wasn't all that sure what she could usefully add to their effort to 'take down' Harry.

After several more minutes, Hermione wandered over. "You don't know what Luna is up to do you?"
Daphne shook her head.

Alex stopped trying to stun Ginny and turned towards them. "She told me she had a family obligation."

A small pebble by Daphne's feet vanished and Ginny appeared where it had been. "She told me she was going to America."

"Out of the country?"

"Yeah."

At that moment, the door opened.

They all turned to it.

"Morning." It was Harry. He wasn't dressed in duelling robes, but rather his normal everyday clothes.

"Harry!" Ginny grinned at him. "You don't know what Luna is up to, do you?"

"She said something about getting reagents for a Lovegood family ritual."

"What ritual?"

="No idea. She didn't want to 'spoil the surprise'. I've no doubt we'll find out soon enough. Now,"—Harry stepped up beside them and looked around at them all—"you ready for this?"

"Hell yes," said Alex. "I've been waiting for this forever."

"Okay then. I'll give you a few minutes to plan among yourselves. Come at me however you will." Harry wandered over to the other side of the room and sat down with a book.

Daphne, Ginny, Hermione, and Alex all went into a huddle.

"How are we going to do this?" Hermione asked.

"He'll try to go for the biggest threat first, which is me," said Ginny. "I'll go invisible and switch out to a random pebble. You distract him. Then I'll go in for the kill."

"What about my family magic?" asked Alex.

"No dark spells on Harry," said Hermione firmly.

Alex grunted.

When they were done talking, Harry was standing in the middle of the room, pebbles strewn all around him while Daphne, Hermione, Alex, and Ginny all stood by one of the four walls, wands in hand and ready.

Harry conjured a handkerchief and levitated it up to the ceiling. He let it fall. The moment the handkerchief landed on the ground, many events happened in quick succession, so fast that Daphne barely had time to register them all.

Ginny flickered into invisibility.
Hermione and herself both started casting a spell — a stupefy in her case.

Alex actually did cast a stupefy, which sailed towards Harry.

Every pebble in the room rose off the ground and shot towards Harry far faster than Alex's stunner.

A bubble of shimmering light flickered around Harry.

She and Hermione finished casting their spells.

Every pebble smashed against the bubble.

Alex's spell was swatted away by Harry's wand.

One of the pebbles vanished, switching with a visibly surprised and, more importantly, visibly visible Ginny, right in front of Harry — right where Harry's other hand was already placed, palm open and pressed into her stomach. There was a flash of red.

Daphne and Hermione's spells were swatted away.

By the time Daphne had fully registered all this, Ginny had fallen to the ground in front of Harry, unconscious. There was a moment of stillness, then movement, and Daphne's world went dark.

When Daphne awoke, it didn't take long to remember that obviously every time she and Harry had trained together, he'd been massively holding back.

"I told you," Alex said to Hermione. "We need something with more oomph."

"We're not using extremely dark magic against Harry!" Hermione hissed.

"We wouldn't be using it all for real," Alex argued, "just to help us move him where we need him."

Hermione folded her arms. "If Harry knows it's just a bluff, it won't work."

Ginny seemed a bit more subdued than before.

Alex scowled. "You don't even know what spells I had in mind."

"Fine, give me an example."

"Black chains. They restrict the target's movement and drain their will to fight on contact."

Hermione thought about this for a moment. "Okay then," she eventually conceded. "I guess we can try that."

If anything their next attempt went even worse than their first.

Alex's Black chains certainly looked impressive, but didn't stand up well to the whip made of pure flame conjured from the end of Harry's wand. It wasn't long before they were all huddled together again.

"It's not like this even counts," Alex muttered, mostly to herself. "Luna isn't here, so we aren't at full strength."

"Well, what did you expect?" Hermione bit back. "He's Harry."

Alex practically snarled. "Will you please stop saying his name like that. You need more than
power to be a great wizard."

"What? How dare you!"

Daphne rubbed her temples as the two continued their argument while Ginny stood off to one side, not really contributing. Eventually, something inside her snapped. This was not the way things should be. "Will you two be quiet!"

They both paused mid rant and turned to her.

"I can't hear myself think!"

Hermione and Alex's eyes didn't leave her as she started pacing. Right, she thought, focusing in on the task at hand. Harry wasn't helping them, which obviously meant he thought they could do more by themselves than they currently were. They couldn't physically get better or learn new spells, so that just left how they were using their spells — strategy, in other words.

Daphne looked out over the room, still filled with pebbles.

They started out surrounding him, which was strategically advantageous… She barely got any further into that thought when it hit her. She slapped her forehead. Of course, she thought, one of the basic rules of strategy — concentrate your forces. What was it Harry had once said? 'Always seek to defeat your enemy in detail.' They all had different strengths and capabilities, so surrounding him was in fact the worst thing they could do. It left them completely open for Harry to turn to any of them and defeat them in detail however he wished!

Daphne turned back to Hermione and Alex. She waved Ginny closer. "Okay," she said, with a small and confident smile, "Here's what we're going to do. We're all going to start off standing like points on a diamond. Ginny, you're going to be in front. Your job is to swat away any direct spells that Harry casts at us."

Ginny nodded, eyes suddenly more focused.

"Alex, you're going to be on one the sides, your job is to harass Harry with your chains, keep him moving, and, if the opportunity presents itself, lock him down." Alex nodded.

"Hermione, you're on the opposite side of Alex. Your job is dedicated offence, as much as is possible. You're the best of us at transfiguration, and Harry will just swat away most spells, so it's best you focus on that."

Hermione nodded.

"And finally, I'll be in the back, casting finite incantatem on anyone who gets hexed or stunned, shielding anyone who needs shielding, and harassing Harry with simple spell chains when there's nothing else to be done. Anyone have anything else to add?"

Alex, Hermione, and Ginny traded glances before shaking their heads.

Daphne smiled and her eyes lit up. "Excellent." She then called Harry over and announced they were ready for the next round. They didn't end up winning it of course, but they did a lot better than before, and by the end of it, Daphne felt far surer of herself. This was definitely something she could add.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —
And already it's Sunday, Virgo thought — the end of a long, first week. He walked through the Hogwarts library on the lookout for a certain someone. In the back of his mind, Julia was still sleeping after a whole morning reading an advanced theory of magic book.

Ah, there. He spotted his target and made his way towards her. At one of the many library tables, piled high with books and lined with students, Susan Bones was happily chatting away with Heiress Hannah Abbott and Sally Smith, daughter of a branch house of the Noble House of Smith. "Hello," he said.

Susan Bones looked up. "Oh, Virgo, it's you." She looked surprised to see him. "What's up? Duelling stuff?"

The other girls watched with interest.

"I was just wondering if I could join you?" Virgo held up a second year book. "All my classmates are rather behind me, so I don't really study well with them. I promise not to slow you down."

Hannah and Sally looked at each other.

Susan considered this before glancing at her friends, who shrugged. "Sure, why not." She started making room for him.

Virgo smiled and sat down.

"I don't think you've met my friends," Susan continued.

Virgo relaxed as the second year Hufflepuffs introduced themselves. It wasn't a large step, he had to remind herself, but it was a step, and if he ended up building his power base among the Light instead of the Dark… well never let it be said that he wasn't resourceful.

—End of Chapter Thirty-Nine —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017’s value.

Sticky Note: As always, if you want to stay up to date on schedule changes and other bonuses before anyone else, you can get them on my mailing list, which you can find by following the breadcrumb trail through my profile page.
Birds tweeted in the trees. A centaur, out for morning archery practise, sniffed the dew-filled air. Morning light shone onto the Black Lake, reflecting shimmering patterns as the water bobbed and ebbed. Some of that light passed through the surface and down into the depths — at first with ease, but as light blues gave way to darker, less cheery shades, it struggled more and more, until the morning sun consisted of only a few lonely photons in the deep, inky blackness. It was pretty dark down there.

Continue on just a bit further though, in just the right direction, and the blackness surrenders to a faint green glow — light from dozens of windows, each one embedded into a sheer underwater cliff-face. The largest of these windows belonged to the Slytherin common room, and students inside might occasionally expect to see schools of fish, or kelpies, or even the occasional whisper of the giant squid, but right now the outside waters were empty — empty and calm. Not so inside the glass.

"Come on, I do not wish to be late!"

"My homework! Oh Merlin, Snape's going to kill me."

"Hey, did you hear what happened to Judith in Herbology?"

"Bluhhh, too early."

And so on and so forth.

Near the middle of the room, Draco Malfoy relaxed at the head of his court. Unlike the rest of the room, no one in this small circle was moving fast or seemed to be in a hurry. Far from it in fact. The Malfoy heir held a set of five cards right up to his face in a manner suggesting that any attempt to rush him would see him take even longer, just because he could.

"Fold," said Theodore Nott, throwing his cards on the table. The cards started complaining loudly.

"I'll raise by three knuts," said Pansy.

Draco stared fixedly at his cards while in the background a sixth year couple argued all the way to the common room door. "I call," he said. The door closed with a loud thumphf.

And at the back of the common room, down the enchanted flight of stairs that led to the girl's dormitories, down to the very deepest level, a door flung itself open and a red headed girl burst out.

"Ginny, wait for me," Luna called from inside the room.

Ginny laughed. "Should have dressed quicker then!"

Moments later Luna appeared and made a theatrical grab for where Ginny no longer was.

"Hah!" Ginny giggled and danced away, Luna following close behind.

And in the first years girls dormitory proper, at the very back of the room, in a green and silver four poster bed with the curtains shut tightly, Alexandra Black sat, crosslegged on the bed, stroking
a purring Amethyst with one hand, while her other hand held a quill, poised on empty parchment. An open letter lay on the bed next to her, the contents of which had greatly disturbed her.

Her hand trembled.

'Dear Father,' she began.

She shook her head slowly, crossed the line out, and wrote, 'Dear Daddy.'

She'd barely finished writing the 'y,' before she shook her head much more vigorously, crossed out that line too and replaced it with, 'Dear Dad.'

Then she crossed out the 'Dear,' leaving only the 'Dad.'

Frustrated, Alex ripped up the parchment and threw it in a small pile. She wondered why this had to be so hard before starting again with another sheet.

'Hi Dad,'

I'm fine! Yes, I've been sorted into Slytherin house. Don't let the rumours get to you. I'm still friends with Harry. Yes, I'm working hard and yes, I'm keeping an eye out for Snape. You don't need to worry so much. No, I don't know what library you're thinking of—'

Alex paused and bit her lip. Her hand was still shaking. It seemed that Lord Slytherin had been right about Lord Black wanting to purge the Black Library. The mere thought of something so horrible happening to her library made Alex sweat, but that wasn't the only thing. Way at the back of her mind whispered a niggling question. How could Slytherin have possibly known? He'd warned Alex way back at the last Winter Festival and for a while she'd started to think he might have been mistaken. But he hadn't been. Slytherin's gaze seemed to reach as far as starlight. It was unreal. Far more like a character from one of her many story books than a real person. And he had not only seen, but also acted, unlike her father who Alex never saw do more than the bare minimum for the family. She continued writing.

'— but if I remember anything I'll be sure to let you know. Hope everything is going well,'

Alex then wrote and crossed out several forms of signing off on a spare piece of parchment before simply settling on, '— Alex.'

She checked the letter several times before folding it up, tucking it away, nuzzling a mewling Amethyst on her cold nose, and leaving the dormitory. Most of the other students seemed to have already left for breakfast, so it was a surprise to find cousin Draco, along with Pansy and Theodore, sitting in a hunched circle. She wandered over.

"Four of a kind," said Draco, setting down a set of cards. "Robes."

Pansy and Theodore groaned.

"I was sure you were bluffing," Theo said.

Alex sat down in the one free seat at the low table.

"Black." Draco acknowledged her with a nod.

Alex looked at the table as Draco pulled a small pile of knuts towards him. "Bit early for this, isn't it?"
Alex carefully kept her face blank while a mild feeling of resentment swelled up in her. Poker as homework. Of course. They'd probably been playing since they were old enough to hold cards. They'd probably been trained to identify tells before they'd learned to read — no, probably before they'd finished potty training. Alex had never played the game in her life. She didn't even know how to play.

"Want to be dealt in?" asked Draco, "There's still time for one more round."

"I'll just watch," Alex quickly said, while her mind scheduled an appointment with Luna to get hold of a book of rules, and preferably lessons too.

"Suit yourself."

The round opened with two knuts from Pansy and continued from there.

"You wouldn't believe what my father sent me the other day, Black." Draco said, mid round.

"Oh?"

The corner of Theodore's lip curled upwards.

Pansy rolled her eyes.

"Seven Nimbus 2001s — for the Slytherin quidditch team."

Alex raised her eyebrows. "That's a lot of gold."

"Yes, it is, isn't it." Draco smiled while not looking at his cards. "You're looking at Slytherin's newest seeker."

"Really?"

"Yes," Draco drawled. "Flint was very impressed. The latest model is far more efficient than the old 2000 ever was — faster too."

Alex couldn't help remembering a conversation between her and Ginny in which Ginny had firmly stated that she was going to be Slytherin seeker or else. Alex wasn't entirely sure what the 'or else' would be, but she hoped it wouldn't interfere with her own plans to take over the Dark for Lord Slytherin. Which, incidentally, was a plan that she intended to put into effect right about... now.

"I'm sure you will astound us all," Alex said, and allowed a small pool of magical intent to pool on her finger tips. She'd found the spell in a Black family magic book ages ago. It was named the stress jinx by an unimaginative ancestor who'd been experimenting with dementors. The spell enhanced anxiety in the target towards things the target was already anxious about, and was undoubtedly dark magic of the most insidious kind, slowly worming itself deep into the victim over multiple applications. It took a long time to wear off, and was supposed to affect the caster just as bad as the target. Strange that, since she'd never felt anything bad from using it.

Alex let the magic snake out, undetected, across the gap between them and sink into the Malfoy heir.

Draco stiffened and his breath hitched, but otherwise he seemed unaffected by the Black family
spell, at least not outwardly. "Of course I will."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"C'mon, make a move. I know you want too," Ginny muttered to herself while glaring in frustration at the Marauder's map. A dot labelled, 'Virgo Malfoy,' sat in the library in a circle of other dots, one of which was labelled 'Susan Bones.'

"Still nothing?" Luna asked.

"No. It's sticking to Bones like glue."

The two were walking through the corridors after classes had finished. Harry had called a general meeting.

"Are you sure you're ready for her?" Luna asked. "This isn't like practising on chickens."

Ginny felt a small pang of guilt that had nothing to do with Riddle and everything to do with Hagrid's chicken coops before firmly squashing it. "I'm sure."

Not far away, unseen behind several corners, two older boys in Gryffindor robes were on a collision course with the two girls.

"What do you think Harry wants?" Fred asked. He was idly spinning a protractor on his index finger.

"Probably news from our unknown benefactor who definitely isn't Lord Slytherin," George answered.

"You think?"

"Sure."

Fred grinned. "I bet it's about becoming animagi."

"How much do you bet?"

"A sickle."

"Done."

The two pairs turned opposite corners on opposite sides of the next long corridor and stopped at exactly the same time, leaving them facing each other like twin duellists at the O.K Corral.

"Well, well," said George sticking just his thumbs into the pockets of his robes in mock imitation of a teenage boy trying to be tough. "If it isn't the prodigal sister."

"The first Weasley ever to be sorted into Slytherin," Fred added. "For shame, little Ginny."

Ginny snorted. "Didn't the sorting hat offer either of you Slytherin?"

"That's for us to know and you to find out."

Luna smiled. "If it's for Ginny to find out, then asking those who know seems like a good idea to me."
The twins looked at each other. "She's got us there, Fred."

"Too true, George. Very well then, please allow us to clarify, your Heiressness Heiress Lovegood. We ain't telling."

"Oh."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "I assume there's a reason you two are here."

"Harry called us."

Ginny gestured to the door in the middle of the corridor. "Us too."

"Then after you, little sister."

It was the same classroom the girls and Harry trained in. Harry was already there, along with Hermione and Daphne. He got up and shook Fred and George's hands as they filed in. "I have news from our patron," Harry said, closing the door behind them while Ginny and Luna moved over to Hermione and Daphne and started conversing in hushed tones.

"Oh, yes?" George grinned.

Fred huffed, shoved a hand into the pocket of his robes and slapped a large silver coin into George's hand.

"Yes, Nimbus wants to make adjustments to our efficiency rings for next year's model."

Fred nodded. "You know, Harry, you don't need to be so mysterious about our patron, it's incredibly obvious who he is."

The girls all looked up sharply.

"It is?" asked Harry.

"Yes, it is."

"Do tell, then. There are none here not in the know."

George pointed. "Daphne Greengrass and Luna Lovegood — both betrothed to Lord Slytherin — and you disappear for the whole summer with the prophet constantly hinting that Lord Slytherin 'kidnapped' you."

"Okay, I guess it's not all that hard to work out."

Fred smirked. "That and we got an owl from Dad last week telling us everything, but we were sure we knew even before that."

An unreadable expression passed over Harry's face. "When you say everything…"

Fred and George looked at each other. Then George said, "That we'd been dealing with Lord Slytherin and our partnership is official and that Dad supports us, but that we shouldn't tell Mum about it until he says it's okay."

There was a pause.

"…Yes." Harry eventually said. He smiled. "Yes, that probably just about covers everything. Right
then." He clapped his hands together. "We're just waiting for our last member and then we're going to get down to business."

Hermione put up her hand.

"Yes, Hermione?"

"What exactly is our business? You didn't say."

"Animagus training."

Fred gave his brother a victorious smirk.

George snorted, reached into his pocket, grabbed the same silver sickle his brother had just given him and slapped it back into Fred's hand. He then fished out a small bag of bronze knuts and handed it over with a theatrical flourish.

At that moment, they all heard the sounds of footsteps rapidly approaching through the corridor outside. The door opened and Alexandra burst in.

Ginny couldn't help wondering what sparks would fly when her childhood friend was finally let in on Harry's secrets.

"Sorry I'm late," Alex said. "I had to shake the Carrows."

The Weasley twins looked at each other again. "Was not expecting that, oh brother of mine," said George.

"No indeed not." Fred turned to Harry. "Isn't she a little… Dark?"

"Nah, she's one of mine."

"Hey! I am not one of yours, Potter. I'm—" Alex hesitated, her gaze flickering back towards the Weasley twins.

"It's okay, Black," Daphne piped up. "They also work with Slytherin."

"Well, okay then."

As far as Ginny could tell, Harry's process of becoming an animagus sounded a lot simpler than the normal version. He explained that the first step would be exactly the same — keeping a mandrake leaf in their mouths for a whole month — but that after they'd identified their animal form, they'd not bother with the aligning their soul to their inner animal through rigorous self transfiguration, which could take years, and instead each would build a special mindscape for their animal, before conducting a large group ritual involving themselves, seven massive clay pots, a pensieve, and enough phoenix ash to block a fireplace. They'd live the life of their inner animal all the way from birth in the blink of an eye, and die on the claws of the other six. Something about phoenix ashes ability to bend time and space and the way consciousness flowed in a okay, thought Ginny, as Harry finished up his rather lengthy explanation. Perhaps 'simple' wasn't the best way to think of it.

"Hang on a second," Fred said, frowning slightly. "You say seven pots because seven is a critically important number in soul magic. There are eight of us."

Everyone looked around, counting heads. There were indeed eight people present — Harry, Daphne, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, Alexandra, Fred, and George.
"Yes," said Harry. "There are two ways we can handle that. My hope is after this we can repeat the ritual for the muggleborns a year from now. They're learning the needed occlumency as we speak. It might be helpful to have someone who's been half way through the ritual already to guide them through that…"

The twins crossed their arms in unison.

"The other way," Harry continued, ignoring the belligerent looks they were shooting him, "is to stuff the two of you into one pot and see what happens."

"And what might happen?" George asked.

"If you have the same animal, you might simply be born in the same litter and grow up together. Or you might fuse into some hybrid monstrosity, like a two headed cerberus — like Orthrus."

The twin's broke out into wide grins.

"Or the whole ritual could just not work and we'd have to try again. Or we could all die — although I have my reasons to doubt that would happen."

The twins exchanged looks then retreated across the room to whisper among themselves. After a few moments they returned. "We think," said George, "that we should find out what our animal forms are first and then decide."

"Sound thinking." Harry stood up. "Well, that was all. I'll let you know when I have the mandrake leaves. They're quite hard to get hold of at the moment." Everyone started to file out. "Oh, Ginny, a word please."

Ginny held back. The door closed as the last other students walked through.

"I heard from Luna you did the chicken killing training last night. How are you feeling?"

That twinge of guilt twisted itself in Ginny's stomach again. "Fine."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Harry didn't look all together convinced.

"It's fine, Harry, really."

"Well… okay then."

Ginny let out a small mental sigh of relief. "Anything else?"

"Yes, Quidditch tryouts are tomorrow afternoon."

"Flint's going to make trouble." It was a statement more than a question.

"Not as much as he might have," Harry said. "I had a quiet word with him the other day. He agreed to give everyone a fair trial."

"How'd you manage that?"

"I calmly pointed out to him the benefits of allowing meritocratic placement to his future sporting
career."

Ginny gave him a disbelieving look.

"I may have pointed this out while holding a pointy sword, pointing vaguely in his direction — I think he got my point."

"That does sound more likely."

"I also slipped him a bag of gold to counter Malfoy's buying the whole team nimbus 2001s."

At that point several thoughts flew through Ginny's head. The first was, 'that Malfoy rat-face scumbag,' the second was, 'it doesn't matter anyway, because Harry outsmarts him without even trying,' and the third was, 'oh wow, oh wow, when I get on the team, Malfoy will have, in fact, unwittingly bought me, Ginny Weasley, a brand new nimbus 2001.'

The new broomstick gleamed. The wood was polished, the handle smooth, a magic efficiency ring hovered behind the seat, and each individual twig in the tail bent out elegantly before sweeping back in a manner reminiscent of gull-wing doors on a muggle sports car — not that the broomstick's current owner would have appreciated the comparison.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Draco said, brushing an imaginary speck of dust from the tip.

Despite herself, Alexandra couldn't help feel a pang of annoyance. It really was a nice broomstick.

"It's so impressive, Draco," Pansy simpered. The girl turned to Alex. "Isn't it impressive, Black."

"Very impressive." Alex said dryly. She fired another hidden stress jinx at Draco. "Better make sure you win the cup. Daddy won't be happy dropping so much gold on a failure."

For just a moment Alex thought she detected a flicker of worry on Draco's face before it snapped back to his aloof mask. "You need to be more careful how you insult people, Black," he said. "You don't have your family on your side here."

Alexandra shrugged. Nothing new there, she thought. She was used to dealing with things on her own.

The three of them were on their way to the Slytherin quidditch tryouts, Draco already holding the nimbus 2001 he'd claimed from the seven his father had sent in. Alex walked a little way ahead of the other two, not wanting to give the impression she was hanging off Draco's arm the way Pansy practically was. They made their way outside and wandered down to the pitch.

Six nimbus 2001s were lined up on the grass. Harry and Ginny were already there, along with some other hopefuls and most of the previous year's Quidditch team. Alexandra broke away and went to find herself a good spot to watch from the stands.

Draco sneered at Ginny as he arrived in the middle of the pitch. "First years aren't allowed, Weasley. Push off."

Flint cleared his throat. "As a matter of fact, Malfoy, the baron has given Miss Weasley permission to try out so long as her broomstick is held by another." The bloody baron had replaced Snape as head of Slytherin house the previous year after Snape got petrified by the basilisk.
Draco looked Ginny over. "Well I suppose having a Weasley under my thumb wouldn't be too—"

"As seeker, Malfoy, not just chaser," Ginny cut in.

"What? I'm Slytherin's seeker."

There was a noticeable silence. Ginny smirked.

Draco whirled on Flint. "You promised me seeker!"

"No, I promised you a spot on the team. I'm not stopping you from trying out for seeker, but if someone does better than you, you'll be a full-time chaser."

"She's a girl!" Draco pointed at Ginny. "You never let girls…" He trailed off. He turned to Harry who'd been silently watching the entire exchange.

Harry tilted his head in a half acknowledgement.

Draco's eyes widened. He then whirled back on Flint. "You! You Gray-faced bastard! Have you no honour? People who are bought should stay bought!"

Flint shifted uncomfortably. "After we've chosen four chasers, we'll release eleven snitches — whichever chaser catches most will be seeker."

"I'm not being led by a Weasley!"

Flint's eyes hardened. "Then you'd better not lose then, had you?"

Draco scowled before seeming to calm down. "Fine. Like I'd ever lose to a girl anyway."

Way up in the stands, Alexandra heard none of this. She sat with her hands under her chin, looking bored, but carefully watching Malfoy for further signs of cracking. It was difficult to tell this early in the game how much of that little outburst had been her doing and how much was just Malfoy's own personality. Surely it had been her doing. At this rate she'd have the Dark wrapped around her finger by Winter Festival. Something Harry hadn't been able to achieve all last year.

The logic made perfect sense to Alex. Harry Potter was immensely powerful — everyone knew that. He'd also spent almost all of last year distancing himself from the Gray, just like she was doing now. What had he been doing during that time? Nothing, as far Alex could tell. And yet, here she was now, being asked by Lord Slytherin to take over the Dark — something she was sure could be achieved in under a week if she had Harry's powers. So how had he failed what for him should be such a basic task? Because he didn't want to use his powers?

Alex snorted to herself. The players down on the field were now throwing several quaffles about to each other several feet above the ground.

I mean, look at this, Alex thought. Harry could have Ginny on the quidditch team if he wanted to in an instant. All he had to do was put pressure on Flint, who was already Gray, and bam! But no, what was it Ginny had said to her before?

'Lord Slytherin has arranged something for me.'

Lord Slytherin! Not Harry! Why was someone like Slytherin having to stoop to arranging positions on quidditch teams when he had someone as obviously powerful as Harry, supposedly running the show down here? It made her sick.
Harry Potter seemed to be very much like her dad in that respect — powerful and influential, but unwilling to use that power to make what needed to happen happen. Or even like Dumbledore, if she believed the whispers.

And so, here she was, having to clean up someone else's failure. Still, it gave her the opportunity to prove herself to Slytherin, so she wasn't complaining at all.

Oh, speak of the devil…

Harry ascended the stairs towards her, looking as calm and cheerful as he always did — cute too — though she'd rather die than admit it — just one more thing that pissed her off — him being cute that is, not her determination to never let anyone know she thought so.

"Knut for your thoughts?" Harry sat down beside her.

"My thoughts are worth a lot more than a knut, Potter."

"Suit yourself." Harry pulled out a small bottle of orange juice from somewhere, popped the top, and took a sip.

"Why aren't you down there?" Alex waved her hands to the speeding broomsticks. "Ginny says you're better on a broom than even her."

"I'd like to, but I've got other stuff to do. Bubble water?" He held a can to her.

Alex took it. "Thank you."

They drank in silence for a few moments while Ginny scored twice in the time it took Draco to score once.

Then Alex asked, "What were you doing last year?"

Harry thought for a moment before answering. "Keeping my head down mostly. It wasn't a good time to be me."

"Why? You're so powerful, you could easily squash anyone who got in your way."

"It is sometimes better to hide your true powers. Unrestrained enthusiasm has a way of coming back to bite you later."

Alex snorted. What a Harry Potter response. What was the point in him hiding his powers now? Everyone knew his powers — knew them, and knew he didn't use them.

"Oh?" Harry leaned forward slightly. "What do we have here?"

Alex turned to follow Harry's gaze. A group of Gryffindors were walking onto the pitch, each one clutching very familiar looking brooms, Nimbus 2001s. Alexandra watched as Flint landed and started a loud argument with Wood, presumably about who had the right to the pitch. She watched as Draco landed in front of John Potter, followed by a lot of angry pointing between brooms and smug looks from John. She watched Ginny land not too far off. John eventually noticed her, standing there wearing Slytherin quidditch gear, and utterly lost his shit. Finally, she watched Harry next to her, calmly studying the unfolding drama with his fingers lightly steepled together — doing nothing, just watching.

Yes, Alexandra thought. Harry would be far better put to use under the command of another. Far
better to have someone else be leader of the Gray at Hogwarts. That would be a good thing to work towards, even if only to make sure Greengrass got the position. Daphne was Slytherin's betrothed after all, and already led the Gray in public. Surely she wouldn't squander Harry's many talents.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

For Hogwarts students, sneaking out at night shouldn't be easy. What it should be is a terrifying ordeal with unknown threats lurking around every corner. Paintings, ghosts, teachers, prefects, house elves, they all should form a security system so tight as to make even an animagus gnat think twice about breaking out. And that wasn't even taking into account the caretaker, Argus Filch, whom, despite being a squib, nevertheless seemed to have the magical ability to turn up exactly where ever out of bed students might be, never mind the fact that the castle bent space in such a way as to make his beat several times larger on the inside than the outside — and Hogwarts wasn't a small castle to start with. Sneaking out at night shouldn't be easy.

"Pass the crisps, Daphne."

"Ooooo, look, he restocked the fridge."

"Do you mind? Some of us are trying to do homework."

"C'mon Hermione, it's hardly a long trip."

"You don't have healer classes, combat lessons, and teaching the muggleborns."

"I do have combat lessons — we have them together!"

"You know what I mean."

"And I have seeker training now too. Flint was all like, I'm going to work your cute little arse right off!"

"He didn't really say…?"

"No, of course not. Who's got the peanuts?"

*Sigh* "Well, I guess there's no point in working now. Where does your eye show us, Daphne?"

"We just reached the grand staircase."

"I'd love to be able to do that. Oh, thanks, Luna."

"Don't get your hopes up. Hermione, Harry, and I all tried last year and only I was able to open my inner eye. It's not a common ability."

*Munch* "Luna will be able to."

"I might be able to. It's always hit or miss with us Lovegoods."

"Hey, Daphne, have you ever used that to spy on Harry in the showers?"

"No! I — have — not!"

*Munch* "Ever been tempted?"

"No! Besides… Harry can sense magic, so he'd know it was there."
"Aha! So you have thought about it!"

And so on and so forth.

Not too much later, there was a tapping on the lid of the trunk. The girls all quietened and looked up. The trapdoor lid at the top of the stairs opened and Harry stuck his head inside. "We're there."

Sneaking out at night shouldn't be easy, but most students don't have a two-hundred galleon shrinkable trunk, the ability to fly, and a cloak able to hide the wearer even from the gaze of Death himself.

"Daphne! Hermione!" A beautiful ghost with a slight baby bump glided over as the two girls climbed out of the trunk. "I've missed you!" It was Angelystor.

Daphne and Hermione both smiled. "You as well," Daphne said. She couldn't help thinking the ghost looked a lot more solid these days. So much magic in the air had to be doing her good.

Angelystor turned to the others. "And who are these two?" she asked with a warm smile.

"My lady," said Harry, "may I present Luna Lovegood, of the Ancient and Noble House of Lovegood and Ginny Weasley, of the House of Weasley."

Luna and Ginny both gave slight curtseys.

"A pleasure." Angelystor turned back to Harry. "Is Heiress Black not with you?"

"Alexandra couldn't make it. Next week, I hope."

"Right." Angelystor clapped her hands together and motioned for the girls and Harry to gather round. She then spoke of the wondrous magics of divination, mostly for the benefit of the two newcomers, both of whom listened with rapt attention. She spoke of the many spells she learned as a student at the Shoe, and of after her death — of the rise of Muggleborn Light Lord Dimwiddy, the role both divination and the ever-strengthening Albion Family Magics played in his Second Magical British Empire, and finally of his eventual defeat, the chaos that followed, and the subsequent establishment of the ICW.

Daphne had heard it all before but that didn't matter. Angelystor spoke with more passion and strength of purpose than Binns ever did. After the introductory lecture, they split up and set to work on their individual projects. Hermione and Harry sat off to the side working on homework, Daphne practised controlling her inner eye with the large mirror set off to one side, and Ginny and Luna sat in the middle of the room with Angelystor, wands out, crystal balls in front of them, looking either giddy with excitement or relaxed with dreamy dreaminess. If by this point you need to be told which witch was which, then you haven't been paying attention.

"The wand incantation is 'videt immino,'" Angelystor said, repeating exactly the lesson she'd given the previous year. "the wand movement is three jabs diagonally upwards to the right, and a single small left spiral, along with the intention to know the severity of the threat you will face, all passed through your inner eye before being released from the tip of your wand and into the crystal ball at the exact end of the final spiral." She smiled. "Remember, finding your inner eye is by far the most difficult part, so go slow and try to feel it out."

Five minutes later, Luna Lovegood was rolling on the floor, screaming her lungs out, writhing in pain, eyes literally on fire.
Nearly four hundred miles away, in a dimly-lit room, deep, deep under London, a woman dressed all in grey with a hood that magically hid her entire face, jerked up sharply. On the shelf high above her desk, several arcane looking implements—dusty and squeaky after years of non-use—started, ponderously, to move.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Remember, finding your inner eye is by far the most difficult part, so go slow and try to feel it out," Angelystor said. She floated backwards and studied the two girls carefully.

Daphne couldn't help but be curious. She lowered her wand from the mirror in front of her, and turned to watch. Only then did she realise that Harry and Hermione had also set down their quills. Harry in particular seemed especially interested.

"Videt immino," said Ginny, poking her wand into the crystal ball.

Nothing happened. Ginny pouted.

Luna still had her eyes closed.

"Try again," Angelystor suggested.

Ginny raised her wand.

And then Luna's eyes flew open, glowing white so brightly that shadows flickered across the dimly lit room.

Daphne gasped.

As though he'd been waiting for exactly this, Harry leapt to his feet, chair crashing to the floor behind him, just as Luna started to speak in a voice that was not her own. The words weren't many, but by the time they were over, Daphne couldn't help smiling. They were good words.

She stopped smiling when she saw Harry's face.

Harry wasn't smiling. His face was instead the colour of pure chalk.

"I need to go," he started, but just as the last word left his mouth, all hell broke loose. Luna let out an ear piercing scream and the light in her eyes flared — brighter than the sun, brighter than burning magnesium. It filled the whole hut and moments later, she was on the floor, rolling around, screaming her head off.

Luna's eyes were on fire.

"Luna!" Everyone scrambled to do something, but it was Harry who got there first. He grabbed the girl and forced away her hands — hands which had been engaged in a spirited attempt to claw out her own eyeballs. He jabbed his wand at her face, shouted an incantation, and dragged away the burning fire the way one might drag away a lassoed animal. Moments later, water splashed into two empty eye sockets.

Daphne flinched away. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Luna kicked one last time and then went limp in Harry's arms. She'd fainted.

"Hermione!" Harry shouted in a firm voice. "Help her!"
Hermione hurried over, waving and jabbing her wand like she was trying to swat a fly. Daphne recognised the spells as healer diagnostic chains.

"She's not going to die for at least thirty seconds," Hermione said quickly. "No, a minute — no five minutes — no, she's good for at least thirty minutes, I think, although there are some signs here I don't understand."

"Anything you can do?"

"No, this is way beyond my level."

"Take her to Madam Pomfrey. Contact me on our rings if anything critical comes up. There should be just enough range." Harry marched towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Daphne asked, while Hermione continued to wave her wand over Luna.

"I have to make sure that only we hear what Luna just said." And with that, Harry threw Daphne the trunk containing the spare broomsticks, shut the door behind him and shot up into the air, heading straight towards the nearest floo point to the shrieking shack.

The floo, despite what people who rarely use it are led to believe, is not instant. It might indeed only take a few minutes to get from the Burrow to London, but the Burrow is actually quite close to London. Hogwarts, on the other hand, is not. But fifteen minutes is still quicker than the next best alternative, and certainly quicker than say, broomstick or thestral.

Harry had snuck out of Hogwarts dozens of times before, but if sneaking out of Hogwarts shouldn't be easy, then it is nothing compared to how easy it should not be to sneak into, say, the Department of Mysteries, which is why Harry Potter, now ducking into the floo of his Hogsmeade apartment, had no intention whatsoever to sneak.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

To the ministry at large he was Ian Mikenther — Cornwall Academy drop out, and 'that cleaner guy' they occasionally saw in the bathroom or canteen. That is to say they saw him using the bathroom and eating in the canteen, not cleaning them. But he had to be a cleaner — it stood to reason — he wore the uniform, a dust grey robe purpose made for getting grubby.

It never occurred to the vast majority of them that there was something fundamentally wrong about having human cleaners when they already had a large team of house elves — nor that there was, in fact, another group of people who walked around in dust grey robes — the only difference being that they always kept their hoods up.

It was way past midnight. The large entrance hall was filled with the eerie silence unique to places people expect to find loud and bustling. Ian blew on his cup of hot chocolate and made his way to the janitor's service door, each foot step echoing in the empty space. He opened the door, walked to what looked like a perfectly normal stretch of corridor, and tapped on a bit of wall. The wall swung inwards to reveal a set of stairs.

When he reached his office, Ian sat down on his cheap swivel chair, took a sip of his hot chocolate, and got back to work on the rather finicky arithmancy calculations required to predict last quarter's spread of the Albion Family Magics. Cornwall Academy hadn't taught arithmancy. That had frustrated Ian no end. What it had taught was that muggle born students who experimented with magic not on the curriculum got a one way ticket to mind wipe street. It had been only sheer luck that saved him from waking up in a muggle coma ward.
The room was totally silent except for the ticking of the clock on the wall and the scratching of his magic quill on the paper. He focused on the work in front of him. F(x) becomes the derivative of the perenelle equation…

He'd only been working on the numbers for a few minutes when he heard footsteps in the outside corridor. They stopped outside his door. He didn't look up. His office door opened with an unusually enthusiastic bang. Then he looked up. A not-plump but not-athletic woman poked her bespectacled head through. "C'mon! What are you still doing here?"

"Mary?"

"You're going to miss it!"

"Miss what?" Ian stood up.

"You heave't heard?"

"I was getting hot chocolate."

"A prophecy's coming through!"

"What?!"

"C'mon!"

Ian stumbled towards the door, all thoughts of arithmancy left behind, and tried to follow the rapidly retreating woman, his mind revving up into high gear. "How long has it been?" he asked. "Three years? Four?"

"Four years, one month, and twenty-four days," Mary replied as they marched through an eternally revolving door and into the hall of prophecies. "We averaged one a week for a thousand years, and then, suddenly, nothing, and now… something!"

"Who gave it?"

"Well, we don't know yet. The magic hasn't got that far."

They exited the hall and made their way down another corridor. The whole department seemed as empty as the rest of the building, which certainly wasn't normal. Unspeakables often treated the idea of work/life balance as something to be optimised by merging the two as completely as possible. They tended to date only among their own, often through the ministry's signature flying notes, which also spared the trouble of actually having to meet face-to-face. The reason for the department's emptiness soon became apparent.

"Standing room only?" Ian said, loudly enough to be heard over the eight other people all pressed into the tiny office. Most of them were crowded around the desk, where an arcane piece of magical machinery was busy blowing smoke through a series of glass tubes, all twisty and turney like a muggle roller coaster.

"Ian!" shouted one of the mass, standing by a large cork board on the wall. "Want to update your bet before the orb rolls out?" The cork board was filled with newspaper clippings, official reports, and hand written notes, all attached with strings and randomly pointing to each other, giving the impression that a spider shitting string had tripped on LSD.

One official looking paper started:
Report on the Great Accounting Incident

July, 1989 — September, 1989

A newspaper headline next to it read:

Daily Prophet

Lord Slytherin Takes his Seat

December, 1989

And what looked like an excerpt from a meeting transcript pinned over the top said:

"The centaurs have cracked, I tell you, Barty! Now they're saying the stars themselves are wrong!"

In the middle of the cork-board someone had pinned up a piece of A4 printer paper titled, 'The 'Who is Lord Slytherin?' Pool.'

Current odds

Long lost descendant of Salazar Slytherin — 1:3

Jacob Greengrass or other high ranking member of the Gray — 1:10

Non Human (half-breed) — 1:15

Son or other relative of 'He Who Must Not Be Named' — 1:20

You Know Who— (This is not funny. Don't even joke about things like this.)

Gray Lord Tebola — 1:30

Nicholas Flamel — 1:35

Incubus — 1:40

Horcrux of Salazar Slytherin — 1:50

Rogue Unspeakable — 1:65

MaCUSA agent — 1:70

Reincarnation of Salazar Slytherin 1:80

The Mafica — 1:85

Abe no Seimei — 1:98

The Emperor of the Magical Roman Empire — 1:98

Quetzalcoatl — 1:98

Dracula — 1:105

Dimension traveller — 1:150
Ian shook his head. "No thanks. I'll stick to Occam's razor. The simplest explanation is usually the right one."

"Ah, but that's the trick, isn't it? Figuring out what is the simplest explanation."

A voice from the table shouted, "It's starting!"

All heads spun around.

Ian leaned in to see better.

A glass orb dropped out of a hopper and started to fill with smoke. In the middle of the desk, a small piece of parchment settled into the middle of the table. A quill dipped itself into a small pot of ink, moved over to the parchment, and started to write. In the silence of the room, the quill's painfully slow scratching had the same general effect on the audience as being forced to watch paint dry, water boil, and wait for one of those old fashioned toasters that refuse to pop until you look away.

17th September, 1992 — Heiress Luna Lovegood...

"Lovegood," someone whispered.

"Aren't they necromancers?"

"That was ages ago."

… to Heiress Daphne Greengrass, ...

From a long way away, through several layers of wall, a faint voice started to fade into hearing range. No one paid it any attention.

"Both the Slytherin girls," said an older woman Ian recognised by sight at the table.

… Vassal Hermione Jane Granger, ...

The voice was getting closer, vaguely squeaky.

"And the Slytherin Vassal," the woman said. "This is totally about him."

… Ginevra Molly Weasley, ...

"Damn, just how many people heard this thing?"

… and Lord ...

Nine pairs of lungs breathed in sharply.

There was a loud 'bang!,' a rush of air, and the orb and paper ripped away from the table, just as the quill finishing writing…
A trail of ink scribbled down the paper at the end of the H as it flew towards the door.

"My Lord! You can't just barge in here without an appointment!"

Nine faces turned towards the door. Ian's stomach dropped at exactly the same moment as the magic washed over him. Lord Slytherin stood outlined in the doorway, tall, imposing, and exuding more raw power than he'd ever felt in his life. In that one moment, he seriously considered upgrading his bet to 'Other Higher Power.' Just behind Slytherin, a much smaller man wearing a security guard uniform bounced up and down, clearly trying to stop the masked lord, but without doing anything so bold as, say, actually pulling a wand on him.

"I believe in efficiency," Slytherin said. He turned to leave and froze. Then he spun round again, waved a hand, and wandlessly summoned the betting pool right off the cork board.

Nine pairs of lungs forgot to breath.

The masked wizard read the paper thoroughly for several moments. Then he snorted and slapped it onto the nearest wall, where it stuck. "Keep up the good work, boys," he said, and left, the security wizard slowly trailing behind him.

There was utter stillness. Then, once it was clear they weren't all about to take a one way trip through the veil, everyone starting talking over each other. Theories were updated, numbers crunched, and the co-worker who ran the betting pool started to update the odds.

"You want in now, Ian? Fate's been reduced to 1:145."

Ian shrugged. He thought about his hot chocolate waiting for him in his office. "Put me down for four sickles."

On the way back to his office he came across the security guard, nervously milling around with the air of someone who's never been in a place before and can't quite believe they're there now.

"You need help finding your way out?"

The man jerked on hearing his voice. "What? Oh no, I... I think I'm okay. It's this door right here, isn't it?" He pointed to the door that led to the public entrance, rather than the secret entrance Ian had used earlier.

Ian nodded.

"Good. Good, I just wanted to be sure." He wiped his brow, then looked Ian up and down as though he'd only just noticed him. "Wow, unspeakables really are untidy aren't they?"

Ian tilted his head.

"I mean," the man continued. "They must be, to need so many of you lot down here."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Daphne sat next to Luna's bed in the hospital wing. Luna still hadn't woken up. Ginny and Hermione had both left for the Slytherin dorms, ushered out by a truly baffled Madam Pomfrey. Daphne managed to finagle permission to stay by playing the sister betrothed card. On the other side of the bed, Pandora Lovegood softly stroked Luna's hair.
Behind her, Madam Pomfrey was having a conversation with Lord Lovegood. The conversation was almost out of hearing range, but not quiet.

"Utterly shocked, your lordship. I assure you this wasn't anything to do with us."

"I believe you. What else can you tell me?"

"We'll be able to re-grow her eyes, no problem, but it will take time and be very painful. Eyes are nothing like bones. Bones just need a dose of skele-gro. Eyes need continual careful wand work."

"How long?"

"Around a week, but…" The 'but' hung in the air like a noose.

"…But what?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but whatever happened to your daughter caused a huge magical surge through her body and it wasn't only her outer eyes that were damaged. It also totally shattered her inner eye, and there's no known way to fix it. Any talent that she might have had for divination is gone."

"I see."

Daphne clenched her hands on her knees. If she closed her eyes, she could still hear Luna's screams ringing in her ears. It had been so loud.

Plenty of things happened over the next ten minutes, all of them triggered by Luna waking up. The first words out of her mouth were, "Can someone please turn on the lights?" followed quickly by, "Umff! Is that you, Mum? I assume it is, because Ginny doesn't have boobs that big and Harry doesn't have boobs at all."

Immediately following, Madam Pomfrey cast several diagnostic charms, Lord Lovegood took up station by his wife's side, and Daphne whispered where Harry went into Luna's ear when no one else was watching.

Daphne was just walking back to the Slytherin Dorms after being finally dismissed by Madam Pomfrey when a hand wearing the Slytherin Lordship ring appeared out of thin air and motioned her into an alcove.

"My Lord?" Daphne asked, once she'd stepped inside.

"How's Luna?" Harry's voice asked.

Daphne told him.

There was a rush of cloth, and the invisibility cloak enveloped her, pressing her right up against Harry. Daphne's breath caught.

"I want to talk to her," Harry said. "I want you to be lookout."

Daphne nodded her understanding and together they made their way back to the hospital wing, soon arriving again at Luna's bedside. The room was bathed in total darkness.

Daphne cast her magic eye and sent it into Madam Pomfrey's office.

Madam Pomfrey was sitting at her writing desk, nose deep in paper.
"She's busy," Daphne whispered.

"Daph?" Luna whispered.

"And Harry," Harry whispered.

Daphne thought she felt Harry cast a privacy spell.

"You're back."

"I am."

"Daph said you went to the Department of Mysteries."

"I did."

"Does that mean I gave a…?"

Daphne felt like slapping herself. Of course. Those who gave prophecies didn't remember giving them.

"You did."

"And is everything okay?"

"You mean, apart from the obvious?" Harry asked.

The image of Luna's eyeball-less face flashed through Daphne's mind again.

"Yes," he said. "I got there in time to grab it before anyone else heard it or connected me with him."

Luna let out a relieved sigh. "That's good. Was it a good prophecy?"

"Yes," said Harry, his voice containing only a hint of uncertainty. "I think so."

"What did it say?"

Daphne's voice left her mouth as little more than a murmur. "Where the land meets the wind, find the sign of the dragon's roar. There awaits you in the silt, ancient magics and gold and more."

They weren't words easy to forget, especially with what happened immediately afterwards. She'd been turning them over in her mind at every free moment she had, trying to spot any kind of meaning apart from the brain dead obvious one.

Luna giggled. "It rhymes."

"Yes, more poem than prophecy," said Harry. "And not in anyway ambiguous."

"We could really use a financial wind fall," Daphne said. "So long as we're paying off the debt on the manor, it's like we're constantly fighting with our hands tied behind our back. We've had to turn down so many good opportunities."

"Indeed."

Silence descended on the room.
Daphne watched Madam Pomfrey re-ink her quill before starting on another piece of parchment.

"Luna?" said Harry's voice.

"Yes, Harry?"

"You know I value your council, right?"

"Yes, Harry."

"And you know I trust you, right?"

"Yes, Harry."

"Is there anything we need to talk about right now?"

Silence again.

"Yes, Harry."

"What?"

"Alex."

Silence.

"What about Alex?"

"You're going about her the wrong way."

"Go on."

"Tell me about when you first met her."

"You mean this time around or before?"

"This time around."

Daphne listened in interest as Harry recounted in detail about how he first met Alexandra outside number twelve Grimmauld Place — how she'd refused to study occlumency with him and then made a deal with Harry to trade books from their respective libraries. She'd obviously gotten a lot better since then, but Daphne could definitely still see bits of the little brat Harry now described.

"I've known Alex all my life," Luna eventually said when Harry had finished. "You couldn't have handled that first meeting any better, given what you then knew about her."

"I didn't know if I could trust her." Harry's voice sounded rather quiet and not because he was whispering.

"Alex will not submit to anyone until they have earned her respect. Right now, she respects me and Ginny more than you. Lord Slytherin is like a rock — sticks that attack him break themselves on him. Harry Potter is like a stream — a stick smacked into him does little to either the stream or the stick. Alex respects the rock more than the stream."

"I smack her around a lot in combat training."

"She knows you are powerful. She knows lots of people are powerful. Power by itself isn't what
"I can't tell her I'm Lord Slytherin until she respects me as Harry Potter."

"Then the next time she refuses to follow you as Harry Potter, you must be the rock rather than the stream. You will have to unify the two eventually anyway — when you go public as Lord Slytherin."

Harry went silent.

In her office, Madam Pomfrey stood up from her chair and stretched.

"Harry," Daphne said urgently. "We might be having company soon."

"Understood." Harry paused again before speaking. "Thank you for your council, Luna. I believe you are right."

"I serve only you, my lord."

"Night, Luna," Daphne whispered, and the two of them made their way out of the hospital wing.

They were some way away before Harry whispered, "Do we have any more details of Draco's plans for Alex?"

And so Daphne spent the rest of their walk back to the Slytherin Dungeons updating Harry on the details she'd gathered about how Heir Malfoy was planning to deal with Alexandra Black.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Ginny lay on her front in her four poster bed, pouring over the marauders map with the countenance of a bored channel surfer. The most interesting thing going on was Percy in an empty classroom with a girl called Penelope Clearwater. Both their dots were right up against the wall and had been like that for some time. Ginny filed that under 'perfect blackmail material'. In another part of the castle, headmaster Lockhart was pacing in his office.

The dot marked Virgo Malfoy had been sitting in its dormitory for hours now. Didn't the thing ever move?

Her thoughts drifted to the dagger hidden in her trunk and another twinge of guilt pinged through her, but she shook it off. One night in her dreams, Harry had handed her a copy of that exact dagger and spread his arms wide.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he'd asked.

"Yes," she'd replied.

"Okay. Then do it."

Ginny darted forward and thrust the dagger straight at Harry. It needed a surprisingly large amount of force to pierce his robes, but once through sank into him like, like, well like a hot knife.

Ginny winced as the blood oozed over her hands and Harry gasped out in pain. She kept herself together by constantly telling herself that it wasn't real, that this was just a dream, that she wasn't really killing Harry. They both collapsed to the ground, Ginny forcing the dagger in further, putting all her weight onto it. Harry gasped one final breath, then his eyes closed, then his body went limp.
"Well done."

Ginny's heart leapt into her throat. She jumped up and whirled around. "Don't do that!"

Harry — another Harry that is — smiled at her. The Harry on the floor faded away.

"How did that feel?" Harry asked.

"Horrible."

"Are you still sure you want to do it?"

Ginny glared at him. "Yes! It was only horrible because it was you. You're not the diary."

Harry nodded "We still need to get you some real world experience before you go after it though, so sometime in the next few days, I want you to sneak out at night, go down to Hagrid's chicken coops, and do to them what you just did to me."

Ginny had looked at the dagger in her hands and frowned. Then looked back and nodded. She hadn't done it. She'd snuck out, gone down to Hagrid's coops, broken in—just to prove to herself that she could—and then headed back. Killing the chickens just didn't feel right. Her family kept lots of chickens at the Burrow, and she'd helped prepare countless of them, but killing them just to prove she could didn't feel right. It was needless killing. She knew she could already, but she had a feeling Harry wouldn't see it that way. And afterwards, when she got back, she'd told Harry she had done it. It was that one little fib that now gnawed away at her like a wood beetle through old teak.

In the Gryffindor first year girl's dormitory, the Diary still hadn't moved, but it wasn't in bed. Ginny glared at the map. What the hell could a teenage dark lord be doing for so long in there?

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In the Gryffindor first year girl's dormitory, Virgo Malfoy sat in his trunk, stirring a cauldron of bubbling potion with the precision of a German robot watch maker. The young girl in his mind was being annoying again, insisting that girls his age should be building friendships, not trying to tear them apart. He ignored her, although with every passing day that little feat was becoming more and more difficult. In front of him, a stained potions book was set open to a page marked hate potion.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It was the end of another school day at Madam Goose's Home for the Magically Gifted. In the large steel toe, students were forming an orderly queue in front of the school's main floo place. In the heel, a couple of rather elderly house elves cleaned classrooms with the exaggerated slowness that comes with age and indifference. And up behind the laces, the boarders—over half the student body—were throwing bags onto floors, flopping down onto pastel coloured patchwork quilts, and saying thing like, "Finally," followed shortly by, "Oh god, please don't tell me we still have homework, as well."

In one dorm room, several older girls already had their books open and their notes strewn around them, although there didn't seem to be much actual work going on.

One girl said, "I'm hoping to get a job with the ministry. It'd be fascinating seeing how the wizarding world is run."
Another girl said, "I'll probably end up with Honeydukes, or WitchCo, or one of the other big houses. My grades aren't good enough for anything else."

A third girl said, "Paul told me he'd help get me into Kings Cross. He said I'd be perfect for it."

The second girl gave her a weak smile. "Must be nice having an older boyfriend. I don't think I'm pretty enough for the portkey port."

"Oh, Jane, no! You're beautiful!" said the first girl. She was the kind of person who believes that true beauty is a function of confidence and that everyone would be a lot happier if they just believed in themselves. After all, she went out without make-up or properly done-up hair all the time and boys still tripped over themselves to please her.

Jane shifted uncomfortably.

"Clare, tell her she's beautiful!"

The fourth occupant of the room looked up from where she'd been nose deep in a loose leaf folder, sitting crossed-legged on the shaggy rug that covered the room's floor from wall to boot-leather wall. She had an iron collar fixed around her neck with no sign of clasp or hinge. Clare Cooper pursed her lips. "Jane, all jobs have requirements, but you can't truly know what they are until you apply. If you don't apply, you will needlessly limit yourself."

The first girl looked appalled. "Clare! What the hell?"

"Also, you need to stop letting your mum dress you. She has terrible taste."

"Clare!"

"No, it's okay," said Jane, quietly. "She's right."

"She's not 'right'!"

"Yes, she is!" Jane snarled.

The first girl reared back, shocked at the force in the girl's words.

"There are potions," suggested the girl with the older boyfriend.

"But they're expensive," said the first girl. She was looking at Jane as though she'd never quite seen her before.

"Yeah, but they work. And they only take seconds to drink in the mornings — not, like, an hour. She could skip the ones for her hair and figure. They're the most pricy ones. She just needs to even out her face a little bit. Look there's an article all about them in Witch Weekly."

Jane took the magazine and started reading with the intensity of a blowtorch channelling fiendfyre.

"I suppose it can't hurt," The first girl finally conceded. Her name was Sarah and she'd been the de facto leader of most of the girls in her year group since they'd first been introduced to the magical world six years ago. Clare's friends had graduated at the end of the previous year leaving the mysterious woman unattached. Inviting her into her circle had been a spur of the moment decision — one that certainly had nothing to do with her connections with one of the most powerful lords in the country. No, Sarah thought to herself, she would never be that mercenary. "So, what are you reading?" she asked the woman in question. "That's not a school book, is it?"
Clare shook her head. "Notes from defence against the dark arts class." The girl with the older boyfriend frowned. "I've never heard of that class."

"It's taught at Hogwarts."

"Oh," the girl said, "Hogwarts."

"What's it about?" Sarah asked.

"Mostly about how to defend yourself against dark spells and creatures."

Sarah frowned in confusion. "But if we have problems like that we're supposed to go to St Mungo's or call the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

Clare shrugged.

"Are you thinking about getting a job there?" Sarah asked.

"Probably not."

"How'd you get those notes anyway?"

"My guardian's daughter gave me copies. She's going through Hogwarts in the same year I am. I have notes from charms, transfiguration, and potions too."

"Not culture or safety? What about lit?"

"Hogwarts doesn't teach those classes."

"It doesn't?"

"I think the assumption is if you're going to Hogwarts you already know that stuff."

"What does Hogwarts teach?"

"That Shoe doesn't? Defence, arithmancy, ancient runes, astronomy, healing, and care of magical creatures."

Sarah looked horrified. "You're not studying all of that are you?"

"No, just defence."

Jane looked up from Witch Weekly. "But what does studying defence actually look like? I mean, what do you learn?"

"Mostly you learn the counters to all sorts of dark spells. Or you learn the magic to control various pests and other dark creatures. You also learn some of the lesser dark spells yourself, so you have something to practise on."

The three girl's looked at her with widening eyes. "You know dark magic?" Sarah asked in a whisper.

"A bit."

"I've heard rumours about dark magic," said the girl with the older boyfriend. Her name was Henrietta. She looked around the room before lowering her voice to match Sarah's whisper. "I've
heard there's a spell that completely locks up your body so you can't move even a muscle. You can still see and hear and everything, but you can't do anything else."

"That sounds like the full body bind."

Three pairs of eyes grew wider.

"Can you do it?"

"No, I haven't got that far yet."

"What can you do?"

"Well, there's this spell that causes your legs to turn to jelly. Not literally," she quickly added, on seeing their horrified expressions. "I mean it makes you fall over. Your legs just give out from under you."

"Oh, that doesn't sound too bad," Sarah said.

"Could you show us?" Henrietta asked. Her eyes gleamed.

"We'll get into terrible trouble if someone finds out." Jane looked around nervously. "We're not supposed to play with magic."

"No one would find out," Henrietta said. "You can reverse it, Clare, right?"

Clare nodded.

Henrietta grinned. "Do it on me, then, I don't mind."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay then." Clare withdrew her yew wand from the inside pocket of her robes.

The other girls eyed its movement the way a group of isolated pacific islanders might eye a smartphone they'd been told was about to ring.

Clare concentrated and moved her wand in slow, careful strokes — up, down, cross, swirl right, swirl left, flick. The movements were slow, deliberate, and took several seconds to complete. She pointed her wand at Henrietta and said, "locomotor wibbly."

Henrietta let out a small squeak and fell over backwards.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It really was frustrating how slowly everything progressed here, Clare thought, making her way through the leather corridors towards the floo in the toe. Hermione's notes showed just how quickly Hogwarts students moved by comparison, and her being around a decade older than her classmates wasn't helping matters. It depressed Clare no end to see the suspicious looks her teachers threw her for achieving what she knew full-well to be a normal learning rate. Hell, compared to Hermione, she was practically a tortoise, and wasn't that just the cherry on the top of the magical cake? Easily out-paced by a thirteen year old.

Clare reached the floo, threw a pinch into the flames, and said, "Granger Cottage."
As she rushed through the warm air like a pingpong ball through a vacuum pump, she pulled a book from her bag and paper-clipped the current page. One of the few advantages of living right at the very end of the floo line was that you didn't have to pay attention to where you needed to get out.

One and a half chapters later, she stepped out of the floo in the Granger's house on Gairsay island.

"I'm home!"

There was no answer.

Clare wandered into the kitchen, put her bag down on the counter, opened the cupboard, pulled out a WitchCo forever-ready meal, popped it in the oven, and tapped said oven with her wand. A pillar of flame shot out from a hole in the top. Twenty seconds later there was a little ping noise, the flame stopped, and the oven door opened. Clare retrieved the now piping hot meal and was about to turn her back on the oven when a hitherto unnoticed panel in the front opened, and what looked like a wooden toy lizard in a tiny wizard's hat popped out on the end of a spring.

"We're very sorry," the lizard said, "but you appear to have salamanders in your oven. Please contact your nearest ministry representative for immediate removal. Failure to do so will void your warranty. Thank you." The wooden lizard bounced back into the oven and the tiny panel shut.

Clare stared.

She eyed the oven door and then the meal in her hands with considerable suspicion. Then she made her way to the door that led to the basement.

It wouldn't be unfair to say that Clare Cooper had a bit of a chip on her shoulder about the ministry. The prisoner collar around her neck was a ministry prisoner collar. During her time in the wizarding world, Clare Cooper had seen many things, many of which she'd much rather not have. Many of those things had been people, usually in various states of undress, and many of those people had worked for the ministry.

In fact, her feelings towards the ministry didn't constitute so much of a chip on her shoulder, as a whole McCains frozen oven bag, and were just about as cold.

Having said that, and despite what a reasonable person might be led to believe, Clare hadn't come out of her ordeal in Knock-Turn Alley with a pathological loathing of sex itself. Far from it. Which was just as well, because life with the Grangers when Hermione wasn't about was one large amusing incident after another.

She did try to be polite though.

As Clare descended the stairs to the basement, she made loud stamping sounds with her boots. Half way down she paused and coughed loudly. When she reached the large wooden door at the bottom, she spent far longer than necessary rattling the door handle.

When she finally entered the massive machine-filled cavern with the small lake and tunnel, it was to find Dan standing to one side nonchalantly while a flushed Emma smoothed down her robes.

"Afternoon," Dan called to her in a far too cheery a voice.

"There are salamanders in the oven," Clare called back, walking over to the main work area, pausing only to bend down and snatch up a pair of knickers lying on the floor.
"That's the second time," Emma said, pocketing the now proffered underwear with mild embarrassment.

"I'm pretty sure Clare's seen you without your knickers on more than—"

Clare hurriedly cleared her throat.

Dan smirked.

"Salamanders?"

"You were at school," Emma said. "We called Jacob and he took care of it."

"You called a wizarding lord to do pest removal?"

"He didn't come by personally. He sent a woman. I think I have her floo address somewhere."

"Oh, good." Clare shuffled. "I hate still being so useless."

What she really meant, but which was left unsaid, was that she really hated being so vulnerable. The Grangers understood though.

"You'll get there. How are Hermione's notes helping?"

"So much," Clare said, suddenly far more animated. "It's crazy how much better Hogwarts lessons are."

"Really?" Dan pointed to a letter on a table. "She sent the latest set, by the way."

"Fantastic." Clare scooped up the package. "And how is Hermione doing?"

Dan and Emma exchanged a meaningful look.

"Fine," Emma said. "We'll see how she's doing after her birthday."

"Why? What's happening on her birthday?"

"Wizards start formally dating then."

Clare considered this. "That seems pretty normal, all things considered. Thirteen is about when girls and boys start noticing each other, right? I was noticing boys far earlier than that."

Dan indicated a stack of letters next to the package Clare had just picked up. "Let me put it like this," he said. "When we first had Hermione, I never thought that one day, while Hermione was dating boys, Emma and I would be dating their parents."

"Oh."

"Many of them aren't sure what to make of us. We confuse them. Are we like them, with all their knowledge and understanding of wizarding culture? Or are we ignorant muggles who wouldn't know which end of a wand is which? Some assume one, others assume the other, and we've had some who switch back and forth, even within the same paragraph. Those ones tend to be the most patronising."

"What are you going to do?"
"Work through them with Slytherin when he gets back from where ever he always disappears off to," Dan said.

"And if he doesn't show in time, I'll ask Lady Greengrass," Emma added.

"But he should do," Dan said. "We have some stuff he asked us to acquire."

Clare nodded and looked around the cluttered workshop. "So, how's the sub project going?"

Dan's face went from seriousness to boyish enthusiasm in a heart beat. "Oh! Oh! Oh! We've had a breakthrough! It's awesome!"

"We think we've had a breakthrough," Emma corrected him. "Clare, be a dear and get changed, would you?" She handed Clare her swimsuit.

"Seriously?" Clare eyed the chilly water of the underground lake.

"And here's the details for the warming charm." Emma thumped a thick book onto the table. "It's pretty advanced, but they say motivation is a great aid to learning."

It took a couple of hours—a couple of frustratingly cold hours—but eventually Clare succeeded in casting the warming charm on herself. "Now what?" she asked.

Emma unclamped something from the inside of a large milling machine and handed it to Clare. It was a broomstick.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

He's late, Alex thought. For someone with so little apparently to do, Harry Potter could certainly keep people waiting.

"Luna should be out of the hospital wing soon," Hermione said. "Healer Pomfrey still doesn't have any clue what caused her magical surge and I don't blame her. I haven't been able to find any reference in any of my healer books to such a thing happening during prophecy before."

Alexandra, Hermione, Ginny, and Daphne were all sitting in one of the many abandoned classrooms in one of Hogwarts' upper spires. Each one had a pumpkin pasty they'd saved from lunch.

"That's good," Alex said, halfway through her pasty. "It isn't the same without Luna." She'd gotten so used to Luna being close that the dorm room felt strangely empty without her.

The door opened and Harry walked in. "Ready girls?"

Ginny, Hermione, and Daphne all got to their feet, followed shortly after by Alex. Half-eaten pasties found their way into pockets and bags. Alex took out a single compartment shrinking trunk, unshrunk it, tossed her pasty inside, and quickly shut the lid behind her, smirking to herself as she did so. Combat training was getting too predictable. She had a surprise for Potter this time.

"Ready," Ginny said, bouncing on the tips of her toes with her wand already out.

Harry nodded. "Before we begin. We need to talk about the situation with Alex."

Alex perked up. "What about it?"

"Draco has been petitioning the various families of the Dark to help him deal with you, and he's
nearly got enough of them on board. Probably sometime in the next few weeks, Heir Malfoy will approach you in the Slytherin Common room and give you an ultimatum — swear yourself to his loyalty during your time at Hogwarts, or get the living shit kicked out of you."

Alex nodded to herself. She'd been expecting something like that. She'd have to speed up her plans, but she could handle it. In the worst case, she'd take the punishment and simply refuse to submit.

"Obviously, this isn't optimal," Harry continued, "So when Draco approaches Alex, the rest of us will be hiding under cloak and disillusionment nearby, and when he—"

Alex's thoughts screeched to a halt. "Hang on!" she interjected. "This is my project."

You could have heard a pin drop.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but Harry waved her quiet. "No. Alex, please do go on."

Alexandra hesitated. Something about the way Potter had said that last sentence seemed subtly different from normal. She ignored the feeling and plunged on anyway.

"I'm in charge of this project. Slytherin gave it to me. It's mine. I already have a plan and I'm perfectly capable of completing it on my own, thank you."

"What is this plan?"

"I don't have to tell you."

More silence. Then, "I think I am going to have to insist."

"Insist all you want, I'm not telling."

"Alexandra, this is a team effort. If you're not willing to work together, then I will have to take steps."

"Oh, what are you going to do? Go whingeing to Slytherin?"

"No, actually. This has nothing to do with Slytherin. Let me guess. Your plan was going to be something like, 'take the beating and not give in?'"

"What of it?"

"Well, if that's your plan, then I feel the need to test your ability to pull it off."

A little voice in the back of Alexandra's mind told her this wasn't going the way it usually did. She ignored it, crossed her arms and scoffed. "You don't have the balls."

There was a subtle shifting in the room. She looked around. Ginny and Daphne were backing away from her, Daphne leading a worried looking Hermione in one direction while Ginny retreated in the other, leaving Alex alone in the middle of the room. She turned back to Harry.

"Submit," Harry said.

"No."

The magic slammed into Alex like a tidal wave and sent her spinning across the room. She hit the ground hard and jerked her head up, adrenaline surging through her body as her whole being went
into fight mode. Her wand leapt to her hand without her even thinking about it. "Tumultus irrumator!"

Black chains shot out from her wand. She leapt to her feet, only to be blasted off them again moments later. Pain stabbed through her. Anger flowed. She shielded herself and charged towards her enemy. If she could get ahold of him…

Again she was blasted off her feet. She rolled on the floor before falling to a stop.

"Submit." The voice was as hard as diamond.

Alex clenched her fists on the floor and raised her head. "No!"

Spells fired towards her. Not raw magic this time, but real hexes and jinxes. Alex snarled and shielded and dodged and countered. Everything felt clearer, the room seemed so bright, the colours vibrant, the pain making everything clear as crystal. A jelly-legs jinx flew towards her. She dodged it by mere inches. A slug belching hex splashed into the floor where she'd been standing only a split second earlier.

An expelliarmus ripped her wand from her grasp. She caught it in a summoning charm while it was only half way to him, but not before a stinging hex zipped past it, heading straight for her face. Time seemed to slow down. Magic intent pooled on her finger tips. She pushed it outwards and swiped.

The stinging hex bounced off her fingers.

Her wand flew back into her hand.

She looked at the wand in her hands, then at her fingers. Triumph roared through her. She'd done it! She'd swatted a spell! She laughed, loud and clear in the middle of her battlefield.

A flurry of spells shot towards her and she could see them. Everyone of them! After trying so hard for so long! Her arm became a blur, catching each and every one of them. "Hah! Yes! Suck on that, Potter!"

The floor in front of her melted and a giant stone lion leaped at her. She had just enough time to scream in fury before it crashed into her, pinning her to the ground.

"Submit."

"Fuck you!"

The lion picked her up and threw her across the room. "Tumultus irrumator!" Her black chains wrapped around the monstrous statue. His flame whip shredded them. "Bombarda Maxima!"

The front of the lion exploded only to reform moments later.

Another wave of banishing magic slammed into her, sending her tumbling across the room again. She rolled and skidded and came to a stop right in front of her trunk. Potter still hadn't moved from where he'd started. Well this would make him move. Alex scrambled up off the floor, gripped the edges of the trunk, and threw open the lid.

The latent connection in her mind snapped into sharp focus. She sent out a command.

A leg appeared from the trunk, followed quickly by the large body attached to it, squeezing
through the much smaller opening in utter defiance of the laws of geometry. It was furry, had five legs, a manically grinning human-ish face—filled to the brim with dagger like teeth—and most importantly, was highly magically resistant.

The inferius quintaped skittered beside her and stood perfectly still.

Potter hadn't lowered his wand. He gave no sign of surprise or fright at the XXXXX inferius magical beast in front of him.

Alex snarled, leapt on its back, and commanded it to charge.

It did.

It leapt through the air straight at Potter. It's trajectory, a perfect arc, all the way from one side of the room to the other. Alex shielded herself behind her steed's mass, waiting for the inevitable banishing charm. But the banishing charm never came. They crashed down onto the space where Potter had been standing. Alex jerked her head up, turning it this way and that, looking for her target.

"Submit."

Alex felt a chill straight down her spine. The voice was right behind her. Before the shiver had time to reach the bottom of her spine, something grabbed the collar of her robes, and yanked her roofwards. She screamed.

Beneath her, the stone lion pounced on her quintaped.

She reached up behind her, grabbed the wrist holding her, and tried to crush it, but all this resulted in was a warning spark of elemental lightning straight through her body.

She gasped and craned her neck to see behind her.

Potter was flying in mid air.

"Submit."

"Not going to!"

Potter threw her.

She screamed as she once again fell, landed heavily, and skidded across the floor. She came to rest, and slowly clambered back up to her feet, flinching and wincing, her wand held tightly in a hand that hung limply. Her body ached. Her clothes felt like sandpaper on her skin, dipped in vinegar and salt. Everything hurt. But she couldn't give up. She couldn't. She mustn't. But it hurt so badly.

He descended back down to the ground like a dementor from a horror book. In between them, off to one side, the stone lion had her quintaped pinned to the floor.

She looked into his eyes and saw nothing but hardness. No mercy. And in that moment, Alex understood. He would not stop until she'd said the words — even if he needed to keep going all night. It was hopeless. Anger welled up in her. Frustration, bitterness, resentment, but most of all disgust — disgust at herself for being weak. Potter was only a year older than her. She shouldn't lose to him this badly.

She felt the disgust mould itself in her chest, felt it add to the anger, the humiliation, the unfairness
of it all, channelled it all into the tip of her wand, pointed it her enemy, and screamed, "CRUCIO!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"CRUCIO!"

Hermione gasped. Her wand flew into her hand.

"No!" Daphne's hand gripped her wrist.

"But she's—!"

"—Look at Harry."

Hermione looked. Harry wasn't writhing on the ground in pain. "But she did try to cast it!"

"Yes. It's wonderful!"

That made Hermione stop. She turned to Daphne and found triumph sparkling in her eyes. "I don't understand."

"She trusts us, Hermione. In front of four witnesses she cast an unforgivable. Don't you see?"

Daphne smiled a tiny smile. "Before, Harry wasn't sure if he could trust her. Now he knows he can. Whatever happens from now on, no matter what, Alexandra Black is ours."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The grounds of Hogwarts castle were quiet and peaceful, giving no hint that up in one of the towers, a battle of wills and magic was raging.

"CRUCIO!"

Alex felt her last chance leave her wand, travel straight at Potter, and strike him clean in the chest. Nothing happened. FUCK!

"Oh, Alex." The voice was deep and powerful and hauntingly familiar. "That spell requires a lot more than mere frustration."

The rage still flowed through her, but tinted with something else now — apprehension.

"Perhaps you need to see how dark magic is really done."

The air was getting heavier, the light from the windows, dimmer. Alex wanted to shiver. She wanted to give up and submit. Everything hurt and Potter was as unbreakable as a mountain. Nevertheless she managed to pull herself together, straighten her back, look right into his hard eyes, and say, "Show me."

Potter flicked his wand up, flicked it back, flicked it forward, and to Alex's horrified disbelief, yelled, "Malus ignis totalus diabolus!"

Fiendfyre. Alex knew very well what fiendfyre was, and just how dead they all now were. It raged out from Potter's wand, roaring and burning, billowing outwards and upwards, searingly hot, and from the main fireball, animals surged, eating each other, turning in on themselves in a fury of cannibalistic rage, each victim feeding the victor, growing larger and larger, until finally, a huge flaming snake, larger than any beast Alex had ever seen, emerged and hissed in the roar of the fire. It dived to the side, and consumed her quintaped in an instant, melting the stone lion until it was
nothing but slag on the floor. Then it reared over her. Alex couldn't move. She couldn't breathe. She was the mouse before the snake and every part of her mind screamed in terror.

A warm stream ran down her inner thigh.

"ssssSSSSSSssss!" Harry hissed.

The beast dived at her. Alex flinched, shut her eyes, and just managed to scream out, "PLEASE!" before heat wrapped all around her.

After several moments of not burning into oblivion, she snapped open her eyes to find herself in the coils of the fiendfyre snake, not close enough to burn, but close enough to slowly cook. The snake's head was looking down at her from only a few metres away.

"You submit?" Harry asked.

She screamed out, "YES! YES! I SUBMIT! PLEASE!"

"To Harry Potter?"

"YES!"

The snake tilted its head at her.

Harry hissed something at the snake. It backed off, but not before giving her one last hungry look.

Harry waved his wand and the fiendfyre slowly shrunk, growing smaller and smaller, until it finally winked out of existence.

Alex felt her breathing, hard and fast, her heart still pounding, her limbs shaking.

Harry looked at her from across the room and said, "Crawl to me."

Even on hands and knees burning from heat and batted from bruises, Alex scrabbled to obey. She ignored the pain and when she reached him, kept her head down, looking at his feet.

"Kiss my hand."

Alex raised her head, sought out his hand, found it, and without hesitating, kissed the back of it with trembling lips.

Then she stopped and stared. There was a ring on Potter's hand. In fact, there were several, but the other's weren't important. *This* ring was though. *This* ring… but that was impossible. To have this ring, Potter would have to be…

Alexandra slowly raised her head to search out Harry's eyes. She found them. They weren't cold and hard any more, rather they told a tale of weariness and understanding.

And in a small, quiet voice, Alex said, "Oh."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Five minutes later, Hermione, Ginny, Daphne, Alexandra, and Harry were safely ensconced in Hermione's trunk. Ginny and Daphne sat off to one side, watching as Hermione prodded away at yet another of Alexandra's massive bruises. Alex winced as it slowly faded away. They'd already had to apply liberal quantities of huntsman's sorrow on her cuts and scrapes. It was a good thing
wizards were naturally more robust than muggles or else she'd for sure have a lot worse than that.

"I still don't see… how?" Alex asked.

"Patience," Harry said. He was fishing memories out of his head and into the pensieve Hermione used to teach the muggleborns.

Alex lapsed back into silence.

When he was done, Harry beckoned Alex over to him, they both touched the liquid, and disappeared into the pensieve with a loud whoosh sound.

The three remaining girls all looked at each other.

"Wow," Hermione breathed. "I knew Harry was powerful, but, wow."

"I nearly wet myself," Ginny said.

"Alex did wet herself," Daphne supplied.

"I don't blame her." Hermione stood, walked over to the pensieve, and looked down into the swirling memories. "You don't think we went too far, do you?"

"No," Daphne replied quickly. "Alex needed that, even if it was terrifying."

Ginny grinned. "I thought it was kinda hot."

"Oh, ha ha. How long have you been waiting to say that?"

"Since he casually waved his hand and dismissed a friggin' fire demon."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"He was all like, 'Yeah, I'm done with you now, thanks.'" Ginny put on a snooty face and dismissively waved her hand.

Daphne and Hermione both smiled.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Alex landed with a jolt. She looked around. They were still in the castle, but now they were in the dungeons. Moments later, Potter—no, Lord Slytherin, landed beside her.

"Hogwarts?" she asked.

"Fifty years ago. Look."

Alex looked. In front of them, a student was crouched over a box, except the student in question was huge.

"C'mon… gotta get yeh outta here… c'mon now… in the box…"

Suddenly, an older boy leapt from behind a corner — a Slytherin prefect. "Evening, Rubeus," the boy said in a sharp voice.

A door slammed shut. "What yer doin' down here, Tom?"
"Bringing you to justice, that's what." The boy had tears in his eyes and the same jet black hair as Harry. "Everyone knows how I felt about her, and you—! You—!"

Alex narrowed her eyes. Those tears looked fake.

Rubeus's own eyes widened. "That weren't never me!"

"No." The boy's voice went from angry to cold. "It wasn't. It was your pet. Monster's don't make good pets."

"It never killed no one!"

They continued to argue several moments longer, then the Slytherin prefect attacked. An acromantula burst out from the door Rubeus had been guarding and fled down the corridor. Tom tried to get a spell off on it, but Rebeus bellowed, "NOOOOOOO!" tackled him to the ground, and seized his wand.

Poor situational awareness, Alex thought. Luna or Ginny would eat him for breakfast.

The world swirled around her and she found herself standing next to Harry in an empty room.

"What was that?" Alex asked.

"The start of Lord Voldemort."

Alex gasped. "That was him? He didn't seem anything special."

"He had a lot of catching up to do. He was raised in a muggle orphanage. His first few years at Hogwarts were not pleasant. It took him till fifth year to get the respect he craved, which, as a half-blood muggle-raised of dubious origin in Slytherin house, was quite a feat."

"So, what was that with the acromantula?"

"In his fifth year, Riddle—that was his name—opened the chamber of secrets and unleashed the beast within, attacking several students. He needed to solidify his place in Slytherin house, and this was the best way he had to go about it. There were rumours going around that he was courting a Ravenclaw muggleborn three years his junior."

"Was he?"

"Yes."

"I bet Slytherin house didn't think too much of that."

"They didn't, but it was something they were prepared to overlook provided he went about it properly. By this time, Riddle had internalised many of the customs of the wizarding world, something that Myrtle Warren hadn't. When her parents learned what was going on, they dug into Riddle's background and found out he was an orphan bastard without a penny to his name. A muggle family these days might have been more understanding—at least about his background—but these were different times. They forbid their daughter from seeing him, and when they found out she'd disobeyed them, decided to pull her from Hogwarts. Riddle can be quite possessive. He did not take this well."

"So that with the acromantula…"

"That was Riddle framing Rubeus Hagrid for the murder of Myrtle Warren after he'd killed her and
used her death in not just one, but two dark rituals."

Harry made a gesture in the air. "Ready for the next memory?"

Alexandra nodded. She then watched with wide eyes as a brief history of Voldemort played itself out in front of her, right up to his war against Magical Britain, which ended with his death while trying to murder John Potter.

Dumbledore regarded the lightning bolt scar on Baby Harry's face. "So he chose Harry…"

If Alexandra had been drinking, she'd have sprayed it out all over the room. "Y-You! You're the boy-who-lived!"

"Guilty."

"That's how you have the Slytherin lordship! Right of Conquest!"

"Indeed."

"…But you're still too young."

Harry held up an index finger in the universal symbol for patience.

Alex settled back down.

The next few memories were confusing. They featured events that were clearly real, but which made no sense. Like Hermione being in Gryffindor, or Luna being sorted into Ravenclaw.

Then, suddenly, they were in a prison cell. Dirt clung to everything and it was difficult to tell the difference between the fixtures and the single occupant on the raggedy cot.

Alex stood waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. Eventually, unable to take it any more, she asked, "what is this?"

"This is where I spent ten years of my life, from the age of twelve, to the age of twenty-two."

Alex ran this statement through her mind, trying to find a way for it to make sense given what else she knew. "You're from the future."

"I am."

"You somehow managed to find a way to come back into the body of your younger self."

"Yes."

Silence.

Then, into the silence of the Azkaban prison cell, Alexandra started to laugh. It started out quiet, tentative, but once the laugh found a crack to slip through, it burst out of her like a busted dam. Alexandra laughed and laughed and laughed some more, the sound echoing throughout the memory of the worst prison in the world. Implication flowed into implication in an ever expanding river, washing away the old valley of understanding, and replacing it with the new. This boy, Harry Potter, had pulled off the greatest plot she'd ever encountered, even from her vast collection of fiction novels. He'd slipped back in time and built an empire from nothing but a mask and a name. Incredible. Alex laughed so hard her legs gave out for the second time in less than an hour and she slowly sank to the floor. "No wonder I never stood a chance! You jerk!"
Harry stood watching her with obvious amusement. Eventually her laughs subsided. He helped her to her feet. "You ready for the next bit?" he asked. "I think you'll find it just as amusing, if not more so."

Alex looked at Harry incredulously. She didn't see how that was possible, but she couldn't wait to find out. "Show me."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The pensieve glowed.

The girls all perked up.

Harry and Alexandra spun out of the pensieve and landed heavily, Harry holding Alex by the shoulder to stop her falling. Alex broke off from him and took a few steps back.

Hermione, Daphne, and Ginny all watched them with different levels of owlishness. It was hard to pinpoint the exact look on Alex's face — perhaps something between mild awe and extreme embarrassment.

"You are the champion of Fate and Death."

"So it seems, young necromancer."

"You're going to defeat he-who-must-not-be-named — the Dark Lord of the lords of the Dark."

"Yes."

"And conquer Magical Britain."

"If needed, yes."

"And you want me to help you."

"Yes. I trust I can rely on you?"

"Trust? Rely?" Alex seemed to be struggling for words, eventually settling on. "Of course you can!" And once the floodgate was open she didn't seem able to stop. "Are you insane?! This is like every story book I've ever read! No, it's better than that! And you've already done so much! You trained Ginny, and Luna, and the others. And the Gray, and..." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "You stole the Dark Lord's memories, everything he has, straight out of his head, and he has no idea. That's just..." She trailed off.

Daphne cleared her throat. "If that has all been settled, Alex, we still have to go through our lord's plan for how to handle your situation with Malfoy. I believe we got as far as 'we'd all be hiding nearby under disillusionment.'"

Alexandra blinked. "Oh, yes, that's right." She looked embarrassed again. "Your plan, my lord?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Draco Malfoy inspected his allies, inconspicuously scattered around the Slytherin common room in ones and twos, and found them to be good. The last few weeks had been torturous. He'd lost his rightful position as seeker to Weasley, who turned out to be a devastatingly good flyer, Lovegood had returned from whatever mysterious ailment had her up in the hospital wing for a whole week, and whenever he so much as looked at Black he couldn't help feeling a seeping feeling of dread. It
was time to nip at least one of those problems in the bud.

"How long will it take her to crack, do you think?" Theo asked after playing a pair of lords into his set of three wands.

"She's stubborn," Pansy said, pushing two knuts into the middle of the low table. "I think she'll hang out for at least three minutes."

"How much do you bet?" Goyle asked.

"A sickle."

"Done."

Crabbe grinned and cracked his knuckles. "Not allowed to beat up girls often. Will be fun."

Draco turned his attention away from the game and back onto the common room door. He was down twenty knuts to Pansy already, but right now he just couldn't focus. Ah.

The door swung open and Black walked through.

"That's my cue." He dropped his cards on the table and walked to intercept the first year girl. "Stop right there, Black."

The babble around the common room dropped. Around the room, many older students shifted in their seats.

"What is it, Malfoy?"

"Your attitude. It has to stop, right now."

Black scoffed. "Oh, get out of my way." She made to get around him, but stopped when he pointed his wand at her face.

"I don't quite think you understand, Black. You've pissed off a lot of people over the last few weeks." Draco felt that slight feeling of dread wash over him, but he shook it off. Around the common room, his allies were slowly standing up from armchairs and sofas, stretching their muscles and reaching for wands. He carefully watched Black's face, waiting for the dawning moment of horror as she realised her situation.

Black looked around. "So that's it, is it?" She started counting. "eleven, twelve, no, thirteen wizards to take on one little girl?"

"Best think of this as our little wizengamot. Each one of my friends here comes from a well respected family, Black, just like you. This is to show that, in this case, the few are acting on behalf of the many. This is the will of the Dark. The Ancient and Noble House of Black must be raised to it's rightful status, once again. Submit to us, and take your honoured place among our ranks." Draco allowed himself a smile. The twelve other students stepped away from their seats.

"Submit? To you?"

"Yes. Submit." Draco's eyes turned hungry. Here it came. If she was smart she'd submit, if not…

Black looked thoughtful for a moment. She pressed one finger to her lips as if trying to solve some kind of fascinating, but unimportant puzzle, as if her next words would have no greater significance than choosing between sweets on the Hogwarts express. She smiled cheerfully. "No."
And then everything went wrong for Draco Malfoy.

Screams, bangs, explosions, smoke, chairs turning into attacking animals, animals turning into attacking chairs, students flying through the air and slamming into walls, frantic attempts to fight back, frantic attempts to retreat, chains, whips, curses, hexes, jinxes, and in the middle of it all, an eleven year old girl in a whirlwind of magic and destruction, spell swatting almost everything that got within range and shielding anything that got past that.

"Magic flush," said Theo, laying his cards on the table.

"Rats," said Pansy.

Theo pulled the pool towards him with theatrical care and dealt the two of them another five cards each. "I wonder if—"

A particularly loud, blood-curling scream cut him off.

Pansy raised an eyebrow.

"— I wonder if we might have been a bit hasty," Theo continued.

"It's a point of view, certainly. I'll start us with four knuts."

"That is a bold opener."

Somewhere in the chaos, Gregory Goyle managed to claw his way into grabbing range, but found himself inexplicably thrown onto a nearby sofa by an arm that didn't look like it had ever even heard of push-ups. Said arms then turned both him and the sofa on their heads, trapping him underneath it.

"It was Granger's birthday last week," Pansy said, a little later into the hand.

"Yes, It's surprising for a muggleborn to get so many intention gifts, but then, perhaps Granger is an exception."

Next to them, a rug turned into a rabbit the size of a wolf and started hopping after a crying fourth year witch whose hands had been transfigured into cabbages.

"I don't suppose the House of Nott has anything going on there?" Pansy asked, casually edging their table out of the way as the rabbit bounded past.

"Me? Hell no. I'm not about to throw away my family's linage for some mud— I mean, for some upstart muggleborn."

"I doubt you'd have a chance anyway. Have you noticed the way Granger's been blushing every time she looks at Potter?"

"I might have. Definitely something interesting happened there."

The general chaos seemed to be dying down by now. The smoke that had been drifting around the room started to thin. Most of the room was in ruins. Furniture was smashed, ash from the fire place covered everything, and all around them came the whimpers and groans of the soundly thrashed. Many Dark students had gotten over enthusiastic at the start, even though they hadn't even been part of the disciplinary team, and were now sorely regretting their uncharacteristic Gryffindorness.
Most of the others, Dark and Gray alike, were huddled in a protective corner, right up against the unbreakable glass to the Black Lake, staring at the destruction with wide, disbelieving eyes.

"Tempus." Pansy flicked her wand, careful to keep it pointed well away from the combat zone. "Oh, look, I won the sickle."

"I'm not sure if this counts under the terms of your bet."

Somewhere on the other side of the room, Goyle made little bubbling sounds under his sofa.

A grinning female figure landed on the sofa beside Pansy. It was Black. "Room for another?"


"Thank you."

"Where's Draco?" Pansy asked.

"I think he's having a nervous breakdown in his dorm room."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In the middle of the common room, a shape in the air nimbly climbed down from the top of one of the many supporting pillars, using the stone serpents that entwined them from top to bottom as convenient handholds. When it reached the floor, it made its way to the front of the common room and quietly slipped outside. That was so much fun, Ginny thought. Her spell repertoire may be limited, but she liked to think she'd more than pulled her weight in the general chaos. And now Harry and the others could handle the aftermath. She had other responsibilities.

Not that it seemed to matter. The diary still hadn't budged a single inch from any of its usual haunts. It was being almost Hufflepuff-like in its unwillingness to split off from its 'friends' when outside of Gryffindor Tower. Ginny fished out the map from her robes, ducked into a convenient alcove, quickly scanned it, and gasped. The dot labelled Virgo Malfoy was alone, finally, and heading straight for the girl's bathroom on the second floor.

Ginny's heart beat faster.

Still under disillusionment and silencing charms, she fished in her other pocket for her trunk, unshrunk it, climbed inside, drank several potions, attached a mask firmly to her face, checked all her toys were in place, packed back up, and left for the castle stairs at a swift clip. It was time for Tom Riddle to meet Ginny Weasley.

—End of Chapter Forty—

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A bunch of fans on Twitter got together and set up a discord server for DP&SW where you can discuss the latest chapter, ask questions, or just chill with other people who like DP&SW. You can find the invite link through my website, which you can find through my profile. They also set up a Wikia project and filled it with tons of
DP&SW information for quick access. So if you need to look something up, that's the place to go.

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017's value.

Sticky Note: As always, if you want to stay up to date on schedule changes and other bonuses before anyone else, you can get them on my mailing list, which you can find by following the breadcrumb trail through my profile page.
[Two weeks ago]

It was midnight at the Rookery, along with everywhere else on this particular time-zone. Behind the chess piece shaped tower, the orchard was mostly still, save for the rustling of the autumn leaves, a random, non-magical owl, and three figures standing around, talking to one another.

Two of the three figures were naked and shivering slightly in the chill night air. The other stood off to the side, looking much more comfy in her long flowing robes.

"It should be time now, right love?" asked Lord Xenophilius Lovegood, rubbing his shoulders in an attempt to keep warm.

Pandora Lovegood smiled, flicked her wand, and nodded. "Yes, midnight exactly."

"Good." Luna Lovegood crouched down and retrieved the two massive fossilised T-Rex teeth from a bag at her feet before tossing the now empty bag over to her mother. "I'm freezing my tits off."

Pandora caught the bag. "Are you sure you want to do this now? It isn't something to be taken lightly and you've only just recently got your eyesight back. We could always take you out of Hogwarts again next weekend."

Luna steeled her gaze. "It's for Harry."

"Of course it is."

Xeno chuckled. "And I don't have any problems. It'll make hunting a lot more interesting when I eventually make use of it."

Luna handed one of the teeth to her father who placed it down on the ground — a large circular slab of slate, cleared of leaves and covered with chalk runes and symbols, all drawn in interlocking patterns, a hypnotising mosaic of faux fractal beauty. Luna mirrored his movements, placing her own tooth down just in front of where she stood in a small chalk circle clear of runes or symbols.

"I'll leave the two of you to it then," Pandora said, turning to leave.

Lord Lovegood nodded to his daughter, who nodded back. They both then stretched their hands up into the air, letting magic flow through their bodies, out into the circle, and slowly, rhythmically, started to chant.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

[The present]

Harry walked with a purpose through the halls of Hogwarts, face grim, eyes alert, heading for the classroom that he and the girls usually trained in. It wasn't curfew yet, but it was near. It had also been fifteen minutes since they'd finished helping Alexandra curb-stomp the Dark — fifteen minutes since Ginny had gone into 'stealth' mode to get the jump on the diary.

He'd received another set of pulses on his lightning bolt ring from his little ninja in training only a
few minutes ago — and it hadn't sounded great.

Harry made his way up the stone staircase, ignoring a grumbling Filch who tried to harangue him about it being nearly curfew, and found his way to the empty class-room. He pushed open the door.

Ginny was sat on the other side of the room, on the floor, up against the wall, arms around her knees — knees pressed to her chest. Her face was hidden by her hair, which was coal black rather than its normal flaming red.

Harry stepped inside and closed the door behind him, letting a bit of his magic seep into the room so she'd know it was him. Then he walked over to Ginny and sat down beside her so their shoulders were touching. "Hey," he said, softly.

Ginny didn't stir.

Harry didn't push her. If there was anything truly urgent, Ginny wouldn't hesitate to tell him, so there was no need to force things. He put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

Then Ginny lifted her head up, choked, and threw her arms around him. "Harry," she half moaned. "I'm sorry, Harry."

Harry held her. "Shhh, It's okay," he said. "What happened?"

Ginny made a sound somewhere between a whine and a hiccup. "I was following the map, when…"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Ginny's heart beat heavily in her chest — not loudly though — silencing spells saw to that. She crept up the stairs heading to the second floor girl's bathroom, mind like a needle, the entirety of her attention focused only on the task at hand, invisible, masked, black-haired, and aged up by just enough for her to pass as a sixth or seventh year.

Footsteps approached down the corridor. Ginny pressed herself up against the wall as Professor Lady Lily Potter passed by, carrying a stack of papers and looking harried. Ginny waited for her to disappear before moving on.

The important thing would be the first strike. The diary could sense magic to a certain degree, even if it couldn't spell swat, so she wouldn't be able to just slip a dagger in its back from the shadows. But that didn't mean she couldn't manufacture the element of surprise.

Ginny approached the bathroom. She glanced at the map. The diary was still there, standing by the sink that led to the chamber of secrets, clearly not able to enter because of the wards Harry had placed.

The door to the bathroom was ajar. If she opened it, and it squeaked, it would give away her position. If she cast a quieting spell on the hinges, that might also give away her position, opening the possibility of being ambushed inside. If she switched herself with something in the room, that too would give away her position, but it would at least leave her inside the room and ready to attack. But, if she just walked in, and the door didn't squeak, she'd be in a perfect position to attack, but only if the diary didn't sense her plethora of stealth spells. She could also wait outside the bathroom and attack it when it was finished failing to get into the chamber…

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —
"Sounds like just walking in and hoping the door didn't squeak would be the best option in that situation," Harry said.

Ginny nodded into his chest. "I know. That's what I did."

Harry squeezed her shoulders. "You've come a long way since we first met."

Ginny didn't say anything.

"So what happened next?" Harry asked.

"I opened the door, and…"

It was a long bathroom that stretched out at a right angle to the door, toilet stalls on one side, sinks and mirrors on the other. It felt grimy — unused — uncared for. There was water everywhere, which made effective stealth suddenly very unlikely. Ginny edged her way in anyway and stood just in front of the corner leading to the rest of the bathroom. In one hand she held her wand. Her other itched to unsheathe the dagger hidden in her robes. *It* was just on the other side of this corner. Her muscles tensed.

"Hello."

Shit. Ginny cursed to herself. The voice sounded just like any other eleven year old girl. She'd heard this particular one often enough in class, usually followed by such things as, "Oh, well done, Miss Malfoy! Two points to Gryffindor!"

"I know you're there," the voice said calmly. "I should warn you that the Noble House of Malfoy does not take kindly to people creeping around unannounced."

Ginny didn't say anything.

"Are you a student? Those are some pretty high level charms you're using. Disillusionment, silencing — yes, I certainly know you are there. Why don't you show yourself and state your business?"

An ambush was out of the question now. She could try to talk and get the jump on it when it wasn't expecting it, but that also left *her* open to getting jumped too. No, best just to surprise it with an unrelenting attack.

"I warn you," the voice began, starting to sound annoyed, "do *not* try my—"

Ginny attacked.

"And?" Harry asked gently, "What happened next?"

Ginny sniffed and wiped her nose with the sleeve of her robes. "Just like when we practised. She tried all the tricks you said she would. As soon as she realised that I could spell swat, she put up shields and used transfiguration and conjuration instead of direct spells. She was actually a little stronger than you thought — least, that's what it felt like. Her wand wasn't the sister to mine, by the way, so that wasn't an issue."

Harry nodded. The diary carried a wand of yew, which looked around the right length, but
apparently either didn't carry a phoenix father, or wasn't exactly 13 1/2 inches.

"The bathroom got pretty messy," Ginny continued. "Blasted rubble everywhere. One of the pipes broke. The water was up to our ankles. And then…"

--- DP & SW: NRiCaD ---

The diary was losing. Ginny could see that the diary knew it was losing. Its eyes darted back and forth, desperately looking for an exit point — a way out that Ginny had no intention of granting it.

"Wait!" it shouted.

Ginny nimbly side-stepped a banished rock, and banished one of her own in retaliation. She cast a switching spell on the rock as it dropped towards the diary's head, exchanging it with a much larger rock on the floor by her feet.

The diary dived forward to avoid it, splashing into the water, and closing the distance between them. It choked and spluttered, but still kept up its guard, now down on one knee, wand pointing forward, maintaining its shield.

They were now so close there wasn't time to even think about fancy spell work — just pure instinct — thrust and counter.

"Who?" it shouted again.

And Ginny saw her opening. A stone behind the diary momentarily flashed with magic, and, in the blink of an eye, Ginny was there instead, kneeing the diary in the back, and dropping it to the ground with a loud splash.

The diary screamed, rolled over onto its back, and tried to raise its wand, but Ginny was there, kicking the weapon out of its grasp and straddling its waist.

The diary desperately lashed out and Ginny's wand went flying across the room in the opposite direction. There wasn't time to even think about summoning it back. Ginny snatched the dagger from the inside of her robes, pressed the terribly sharp edge right up to the girl's neck, and looked deep into the girl's terrified eyes.

Fear.

Pain.

Pleading.

The room filled with silence, save the soft gurgling of the broken water pipe. Ginny felt the water she was kneeling in seep up into her robes. The magical torches on the wall caused shadows to flicker back and forth.

This is for killing me, bitch.

The words flashed across Ginny's mind, rolled up onto her tongue, and, before they could be said, slowly, horribly, died.

--- DP & SW: NRiCaD ---

"I couldn't do it!" Ginny wailed, burying her face into Harry's chest. "She just looked so scared. I'm sorry, Harry."
Harry held Ginny close to him and made comforting noises while in the back of his mind, he thought through the implications. Dealing with this now was certainly the better strategy. Luna had been right, again. The diary was small fry in the grand scheme of things. If Ginny was going to be a killer, far better learn to do it now while it wasn't such a big deal. Either that, or he needed to redirect her talents and training towards some other purpose.

He waited until she'd calmed down a bit before gently prodding her again. "And then?" he asked.

Ginny looked down. "I kinda panicked a bit and pushed a wandless stunner into her. Not enough power to last very long at all, but enough for me to get my wand and leave without getting caught by anyone."

"You didn't by any chance grab any of her hair while you had her there, did you?"

Ginny's voice dropped to a murmur. "I did do that, yes."

Harry smiled. "Well, that's something."

"But what do I do now?" Ginny asked, looking up at him again, eyes wet with tears. "I trained for so long, and I couldn't even… I feel so useless!"

"Shhh… for starters, not getting it right on the first time is okay. Secondly, even if you find you don't want to go down that path, there are lots of other paths we can take you down that will make use of everything you've been training for."

"Like?"

"I'm sure you'd make a kick-ass bodyguard."

Ginny looked Harry in the eyes, then snorted. "Sorry, but the idea that you need a bodyguard is just silly."

"I was thinking about other people, not necessarily myself."

"But I want to be with you."

"You knew that you might have to be away from me for long periods of time, even if you continued on the path you're on now."

"True, but that doesn't mean I have to like it." Ginny wiped her eyes and pushed herself up from where she'd been laying against him.

Harry decided she needed distracting. "Enough of that. How would you like to hear a fresh off the press, not yet released, little titbit of news?"

Ginny gave a small smile. "Sure."

Harry pulled a plastic bag out of his pocket. The bag contained a small pile of indistinct brown leaves.

Ginny's eyes widened. "You got the mandrake leaves!"

"I did."

"When are you going to give them out?"
"Right now, if you're up to it?"

Ginny nodded.

Harry sent out a series of pulses on his lightning bolt ring. "I also have another little task for you tonight, Ginny."

Ginny's eyes steeled and she nodded again.

"When we're done, take these to your twin brothers in Gryffindor tower and return to Slytherin dungeon. Do not be seen by anyone."

Ginny took the smaller package and pocketed it. "Yes, Harry."

They didn't have to wait long for Daphne, Hermione, Luna, and Alexandra to show up. They piled in through the door, laughing and joking.

"And did you see Barber's expression when Potter got him with that animate transfiguration?" Alexandra said with glee.

"But it was nothing compared to—" Hermione started, but trailed off as they all felt the mildly sombre atmosphere in the room.

"My lord?" Alexandra asked.

Daphne stepped forward. "Ginny? Are you alright? What happened?"

"Later." Harry stood up from where he and Ginny had still been sitting with their backs to the wall, pulling her up with him. "Right now, we have these to give out." He held up the bag containing the mandrake leaves.

There was silence for a moment.

Then Hermione actually let out a little squeal and trotted over to peer at the bag. "Oh, I've been so looking forward to this! I can't believe it's finally time!"

"How did you get them?" Daphne asked.

"With difficulty."

Luna moved to stand beside Hermione. "I've been betrothed to a drug dealer for years now — it's about time I got some."

"Just the one month, Luna." Harry said. "We don't want any of us becoming addicted."

Luna smiled dreamily. "Of course, Harry."

"And its former drug dealer," Hermione added.

"Oh?" Luna tilted her head. "What's this then?"

"This doesn't count."

Harry opened the bag and handed out a leaf to each of them in turn, finishing with his own. They all stood in a circle, popped the leaves onto their tongues, and then carefully charmed their leaf to stick to the roof of their mouths.
"Whoa," Ginny said, swaying slightly.

"The first wave wears off quite quickly, but is rather intense to the uninitiated," Hermione quoted with slightly glazed eyes.

"This is so cool," Alexandra said.


Luna said nothing for a while as they all swayed under the force of hallucinogenic magic rushing throughout their bodies, before finally adding, "Anyone fancy a run down to the local chippy?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Not long after delivering the mandrake leaves to Fred and George, Ginny climbed into bed and lay there, listening to the sound of the Carrow twins drifting off to sleep.

She did not know what to do. She hadn't not known what to do for ages. She'd been training to be a fighter ever since she'd known Harry, which felt like forever, but what good was a fighter who couldn't kill?

Harry said it was okay if she took a less brutal role in their little group, but could she really accept that? The thought made her uneasy.

A second wave of dizziness hit her.

She snuggled down into the blankets and tried to ignore the school of silvery fish swimming through the dorm window to the black lake, gliding and darting around above her bed to the rhythm of her slowly relaxing breathing.

They'd be gone by morning... hopefully.

Darkness fell.

Time passed.

Ginny slowly came to and sat up. The dormitory had gone, but where she would normally expect to find Harry's dream-scape, there was instead just empty space as far as they eye could see, and her, floating in the middle of it.

Okay, Ginny thought, first things first, she'd need some ground — that much was pretty much a given regardless of what kind of animal form she had. Even sea creatures needed land to put water into.

It shouldn't be too difficult now. She'd never managed to materialise anything in her dreams before, but the mandrake leaf coursing through her body should make creating things out of thin air almost comically easy.

Ginny concentrated, hard, and ground appeared below her — far, far below her.

"SHIIIIIIIIITTTTTT!" she screamed as she plummeted downwards.

Ginny thunked. And woke back up in the dark Slytherin dorms, panting and sweating. How long had she been asleep? An hour? Two?

Dizziness hit her again.
“Messed up the ground?” came Luna's quiet voice from behind two sets of bed curtains.

"Jurst a bits," Ginny slurred back. Her conscious mind felt fine, but she was having difficulty stringing thoughts to actions.

"At least you didn't shout out like Alex did. Startled the Carrow twins something terrible. I think they're really regretting their actions at the start of year now."

"I didn't hears that."

"You were asleep. Don't worry. It won't be so bad tomorrow."

Ginny looked up. The fish had changed colour from silver to metallic pink. Her head flopped back down onto her pillow and darkness, once again, fell.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

On the other side of the castle, in a trunk hidden next to another first year girl's bed, a body housing two individuals was not having a good time.

"We nearly died!" Julia shouted hysterically into Virgo's head. She was going to kill us. You didn't tell me people were going to try and kill us!

Virgo was sitting in a chair, head in his hands, trying to fight off a colossal headache, while failing to clamp down his occlumency shields to keep the girl out. He'd always managed to keep at least some semblance of separation between them, but that dagger at his throat had been the last straw.

I did tell you, he snapped back at her. Don't you remember what happened at the book shop? At least one person wants us—wants me—dead.

But Harry's just a boy! They were almost grown up! I was soooo scared!

Virgo groaned and looked up. Nothing for it but to wait until she calmed down.

How can I calm down!? What if she comes back! She was stronger than us! Some 'Greatest Wizard' you are!

SHUT UP! Virgo roared, pointing his wand at his arm and casting a mild torture jinx.

The pain speared through him like a sword in the arm leaving him gasping.

Julia whimpered and started sobbing. Tom, please don't do that — please.

I wouldn't have to do it if you'd just let me think! I'm trying to keep us alive, and I can't do it if you're being hysterical!

Julia quietened down, leaving him freedom to do said thinking, even while his body continued to shake and quiver. He needed to get close to John Potter, now more so than ever, for three very good reasons.

Firstly, walking around by himself was apparently too dangerous. He needed a powerful patron for protection until he was strong enough to deal with the threats himself — it was the same strategy he'd used at the start of his career in Slytherin house.

Secondly, the entrances to the chamber of secrets were warded. That suggested Lord Slytherin's
continued involvement. He was the only person, apart from one of his other selves, who might do such a thing. That made collecting information on him even more important.

And thirdly, John Potter had a Hogwarts functioning portkey. Lucius had told him so in one of his regular owls. Virgo needed that portkey, but just taking it wasn't an option. No, he needed John to give it to him. And that wasn't going to be easy. But it would be much easier if Virgo could gift wrap one of the girls he coveted.

Bones and John Potter were already close, but the other one — the female Weasley — the same one he'd met at the robes shop…

A small mirror on the desk opposite caught his attention. He frowned. Something wasn't quite right. He stood up on shaky legs, walked over, and stared into it. "My hair!" he shouted, appalled. Someone had sliced a chunk out of her lovely, long, blond — sliced a chunk out of his…

*My hair!* Julia shouted.

Virgo shook himself.

*My lovely hair!*

*Never mind our hair*, he thought sharply at her. *This is bad. There's so much dangerous stuff you can do with people's hair, it's not funny. Old families teach their children to guard their hair like they would their blood.*

*Is that why you were trying to summon Harry's hair from around the castle before? Is it for the hate potion?*

Yes.

*Oh. I was wondering. But you didn't get any.*

No.

And that was another thing he'd have to sort out. The younger Potter twin was being surprisingly cautious about his hair, but there was always another possibility. The boy had been thought a squib and raised by muggles (And how the hell had *that* happened?) which meant he would have a footprint in the muggle world. That footprint might well be an angle that could bare useful fruit — one that his dear 'father' should be able to arrange.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Lily Potter looked over her second year Slytherin-Gryffindor potions class, sitting attentively and waiting for class to begin. There had been changes.

Usually, Miss Granger and Miss Greengrass sat together, but today, for some reason, the former was pairing with Miss Davis while the latter paired with Mister Zabini. Harry—her son, Harry—was sitting with Miss Parkinson.

Lily wasn't particularly happy about that. She'd spotted the Parkinson Heiress bullying other students on no less than three occasions since she'd arrived. Regardless of what else she thought about the man, at least Slytherin seemed to have taught Harry to be polite. That could easily be ruined if he fell in with a bad crowd, and Miss Parkinson certainly counted. But she couldn't do anything about that right now. Not here.
John was sitting in the back with Ronald Weasley — that at least, hadn't changed.

"Today we're going to be going through a minor sleeping draft, please study the notes on the board carefully before you begin. I will be attending you in a purely supervisory role today."

The class got underway and Lily walked around the room correcting student's efforts where they needed correcting.

She stopped at Miss Granger's cauldron and looked down, surprised. "Miss Granger… your tubers. Can you tell me what's wrong with your tubers?"

Hermione Granger turned her gaze to the tubers on her cutting board before squinting at the blackboard, cursing quietly under her breath, and sweeping them into the bin beside her. "Sliced, not diced."

"Yes. I'm surprised. I think that's the first time I've seen you make a mistake like that."

Miss Granger muttered something that she couldn't quite catch.

"Well, do try to stay focused. You know how important staying focused is here."

Not five minutes later, Lily watched in shock as Heiress Greengrass knocked over a bottle with a carelessly placed elbow. The bottle stopped just before it hit the ground and floated back up, placing itself on the girl's desk. Harry lowered his wand and nodded. Greengrass blushed.

"Good reflexes, Mister Potter," Lily said. "Miss Greengrass, please be more careful."

It seemed like something was jinxing her best students for the rest of the class. It was a wonder they turned in any potion at all, let alone produce ones with the perfect shades and textures she'd come to expect from that little group. In any case, it was a perfect excuse to hold Harry back at the end of class.

"Is something wrong with your friends today, Harry?"

"No, Mum."

"That's Professor while we're in school."

"Yes, Professor. No, Professor, I don't think there's anything wrong with them. I haven't noticed anything, anyway."

"Mmmm…" Lily tapped her chin. "Well, if you do learn anything that might affect their safety in potions class, you'll let me know won't you?"

"Yes, Professor."

"By the way, I see you partnered with Miss Parkinson today."

"Yes, Professor."

"And you're happy with that?"

Harry smiled the smile of a child that thinks he's spotted an adult doing something against the rules. "Are you asking as a professor? Or as my Mum?"

Lily chuckled. "As your Mum, Harry."
"Well, Mum, I know she can be a bit spiky, but didn't Dumbledore always say that to win the war the Light must show the love that the Dark does not dare to?"

"I thought you hated Dumbledore?"

"That doesn't mean everything he says is rubbish. Pansy is a nice girl — just a bit misguided."

"What about your other friends?"

"They are still my friends. I just want lots of friends. We'll go back to our old partners eventually. We just thought it would be a good idea to stir the pot a little."

Lily nodded. That seemed fine. It certainly didn't seem to be something that risked the control over her son the prophecy required her and James to have.

Alice Spooner had just clocked in for her shift at St. Peter's Hospital, when a very unusually dressed man walked through the front door, disdainfully looked around as though he'd just entered a sewer pipe and not a thoroughly modern hospital, and started to walk towards her. Alice couldn't help feeling that there was something about the man that was familiar—the blond hair, the gloved hands, the sharp features—but for the life of her, she couldn't remember where she might have seen him. He stood imperiously in front of her and rapped his silver snake's head cane on the floor.

"I need you to retrieve all the medical records, teeth, blood samples, and any other body parts you might have for one Harry James Potter, immediately."

Alice felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. An utter loony. Wonderful. She sighed. "Sir, we can only release patient information to the patient, a legal guardian, or someone with power of attorney."

The man pulled on his cane and whipped out what looked like an orchestra conductor's baton. He waved it in the air. "Listen, muggle, I am Lucius Malfoy, and I have the authority — go and fetch me what I asked for immediately."

At that moment, two distinct thought-processes started in Alice's brain. The first went something like this — 'Of course, how silly of me, why would I ever question someone who is so obviously my better. I need to go and get anything I can find right away. Rules are only there for normal people, after all, and Lucius Malfoy is no mere ordinary man.'

The second went something like this — 'Oh, fuck! Lucius Malfoy! The wanted drug trafficker! I knew I'd seen him somewhere before. All over the news papers! I need to go and call the police!'

Both thoughts warred with each other, one driven by magic, the second driven by terror, but both thoughts were agreeing on one thing. She needed to leave right away.

Alice nodded respectfully and slipped through the doors leading to admin. The corridor split—records in one direction, the nearest phone in the other. The back of her neck started to sweat as the two thought processes continued to battle for her actions. Records or phone?

Back in the lobby, Lord Lucius Malfoy waited for the disgusting muggle to return. He didn't like getting his hands dirty, but there really wasn't much choice this time. That was fine... occasionally. One confundus, one obliviate, and his new daughter would have exactly what she needed for whatever plot she was hatching in Gryffindor Tower.

When he and his wife had first adopted Virgo, they'd intended her to become a leader in the snake pit to counter Lord Slytherin's over powered little minions, but in the end she'd chosen red over green. He'd been a bit put out at the time, but it turned out for the best — Virgo in Slytherin as well would have been a waste.

He chuckled, remembering the memory his son had sent him two nights ago.

His wife's niece — Alexandra.

Black blood, it seems, always did run true.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

A little while earlier, under the streets of central London, Chief Auror Sirius Black made his way down from his office towards the ministry restaurant to meet with his lunch partner.

Something hadn't been right for the past several days. Whispers followed him wherever he went. A couple of pureblood interns had giggled as he passed. People he hadn't spoken to since his childhood gave him winks and random thumbs up, and when he questioned them about it, always got some cryptic comment on the lines of, 'playing the long game, huh?'

On the other hand, some of the looks he was getting from people he thought of as friendly acquaintances suddenly weren't nearly so friendly — they were instead full of distrust and suspicion.

He walked through the ministry canteen and towards where those who traditionally sat above the salt ate. Sirius didn't eat at the ministry restaurant often. He much preferred sitting with the other aurors, but if there was one thing Le Petit Magik was good for, it was privacy.

"This way, Lord Black," the maître d said, leading him through the other diners towards a private booth near the back. "Your guest has already arrived."

"Thank you."

The booth was set for two — wine glasses, grasses in flower pots, enough cutlery to keep an etiquette teacher busy all afternoon, the whole spell chain.

"Sirius." Arthur Weasley stood up and took the hand Sirius extended to him.

"Arthur."

They sat.

"So, what did you want to talk about," Sirius asked, when the waiter had taken their orders. He'd known Arthur Weasley for over a decade and the two were on good terms.

"What's your assessment of the current state of things in the Wizengamot?"

Sirius groaned inwardly. This was supposed to be James' thing, not his. "Very basic, I'm afraid. The Light and the Dark are at stalemate on just about every major issue and only the Gray can break it one way or another, but they've been refusing to do so for years now."

"That's a good basic assessment, yes."
"So?"

Arthur leaned forward. "Everything we talk about here will be in absolute confidence, yes?"

"If you want."

Arthur nodded. "A few months ago, I met with Lord Slytherin."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Sirius leaned slightly forward too. "What did you talk about?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you. It's in absolute confidence…"

There was a pause.

"…But?" Sirius suggested.

"But I drew certain conclusions from the conversation that I feel it is important to talk about."

"What kind of conclusions?"

"Firstly, Slytherin really doesn't like Dumbledore."

"I thought that much was obvious."

"No, I mean he really doesn't like Dumbledore. Not just a bit — he outright hates him. And for some reason, the feeling is mutual. But! And this important — he also has little love for the Dark."

"Okay. What else?"

"I believe Slytherin is genuinely pro-muggleborn."

"What about pro-muggle?"

Arthur hesitated. "I'm not so sure about that. But the political implications…"

Sirius thought about it and reached a conclusion. It wasn't a difficult conclusion to reach, even for him. "This is about your muggle protection act, isn't it?"

"Something needs to happen. If it doesn't, we could be in very big trouble. Our laws are not keeping up with the state of affairs on the ground."

"Arthur, I don't want to sound discouraging, but we've been trying to get laws through the Wizengamot for four years now. We tried this very act last year. It didn't work then. What's changed that you think it'll work now?"

Arthur Weasley looked triumphant. "Because, now I have an in."

"An in?"

"With Lord Slytherin. Like I said, I can't talk about it, but I can say that there is a matter on which we both need to work together on — one on which he puts a lot of importance."

"You think Slytherin will support your new act?"
"I think we might have to modify some bits of it, add in a few extra clauses, tone down some of the more extreme Light sided ideals, but yes. I think we have a chance."

Sirius considered this. Breaking the deadlock on the Wizengamot in the favour of the Light would be a considerable political coup. He didn't know much about it, but that much was obvious.

"Chief Auror!"

The two wizards looked up.

Nymphadora Tonks, Sirius' niece, and the department's newest auror trainee was panting, by the booth's door.

"Yes?"

"The muggle police reported your wizard drug dealer in a muggle hospital. Shacklebolt apparated over there and brought him in. He's in the cells right now."

Sirius leapt to his feet. "Thank you, Tonks. Sorry Arthur, but we can continue this another time."

"Wait, Sirius!"

Sirius turned back to Arthur, half way to do the door.

He hurried up to him and motioned his ear.

"I need to give you an official tip-off, as chief Auror," Arthur whispered. "From an anonymous, informed source."

"What tip-off?"

"An old foe rises."

Sirius frowned. "Who?"

Arthur grimaced, said nothing, and then mouthed the words, 'you — know — who'.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Sirius's head swam as they quick marched down to the ministry holding cells. Arthur wouldn't joke about that. What had he heard that he couldn't tell him? Was he missing something? Voldemort was rising again? How?

"Boss," Tonks hissed.

He shook himself free of his thoughts. "Yeah?" They'd just left the public area and were now in an empty corridor.

"I didn't like to say up there — but the prisoner — it's Lucius Malfoy!"

"What! It's actually Lucy?"

"Yeah!"

That made things a lot more complicated, if a lot more amusing. "What was he doing in a muggle hospital?"
"Trying to get the medical records for Harry Potter — you know, John's brother — the one who smacked me down at the duelling tournament last year."

"Yeah, I know Harry. His records?"

"And any blood or hair or anything else like that they might have."

Sirius' grin faded. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah! Will you be able to get him?"

"Probably not on illegal muggle-magical trading. He didn't have any drugs on him, did he? No, I didn't think so. Like I said, muggle drug dealing isn't his style. And trying to acquire hair or blood isn't illegal by itself, though it damn well should be… maybe muggle baiting? Breaking the Statute of Secrecy?"

"He used magic on a muggle, called her a muggle, and then let her out of his sight without modifying her memory or calling the obliviators."

Sirius' grin was back. "Well, that's a class C breach if nothing else."

"Will he go to prison?"

"A lord? For a class C? Unlikely. But we'll see what we can do."

"Yeah! And you can taunt him about Alex stomping his son's friends into the dirt."

Sirius stopped so quickly, Tonks was forced to spin around to face him.

"What?" he said.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Virgo was not in a good mood. He'd been summoned to the headmaster's office the previous night, along with his new older brother. Once there, Narcissa had told them both that their father was currently in a ministry holding cell and that if anyone asked them, that it was, 'an outrageous miscarriage of justice, that would soon be cleared up.'

Apparently, his simple request had turned out to not be so simple.

Add to that the fact that John Potter was still brushing off his every attempt to make nice with him, and Virgo was more than a little annoyed.

But he didn't have the time to just wait around for Lucius to be released, so, while the boys were engaged in a rather rowdy chess match, he'd sat in a corner of the Gryffindor common room, thinking deeply until he'd come up with a possible solution to his Harry Potter problem.


You know, he thought back, for an eleven year old, for whom English is their second language, that was a surprisingly impressive bit of word play.

Thank you.

But if you do it again, I will torture us.
Virgo sighed and continued to make his way down to the dungeons, his senses on high alert for any kind of ambush. Quickly in and quickly out, that was the way. After a few minutes of wandering, he ducked into an alcove, took out a polyjuice potion, and gulped it down.

The effect was fast and immediate. He gained a couple of inches in height, his hair shortened — turned black, his muscles got a little firmer, but apart from that, there wasn't too much difference without a mirror — except for the obvious big difference, naturally.

Hey! We have a boy's thing! You didn't tell me we were going to do that!

Oh, shush, he thought back. I've had to put up with being in a girl's body for months now. You can deal with being in a boy's for an hour. Why do you think I dressed in unisex robes?

Virgo ignored Julia's grumbling answer, choosing instead to walk up to a row of armour standing next to a picture of a wardrobe, took off his witches hat, and placed it on the third suit of armour down the line.

The wardrobe picture swung aside, leaving a hole large enough for a wizard to climb through.

Virgo smoothed his now messy hair over the spot where Harry Potter's scar would be, if it had been Harry Potter's hair he'd used in the potion. He then climbed inside. What lay beyond was just like he remembered it from all those years ago. A large stone-floored space held dozens of massive copper tubs, all full of gently steaming water. Piles of clothes lay everywhere. Huge spoons were mixing sparkling powders in the air above. And even as Virgo finished his sweep of the room, another load of clothes fell onto the main pile via a massive pipe in the ceiling.

The Hogwarts Laundry.

A dozen eyes turned to him.

Oh, yes, also house elves. Lots of house elves.

One of them squeaked, "John Potter!" and moments later a half dozen of the little wretches were clustered around him.

"Actually, I'm Harry Potter."

The excited squeaking died down a little, but not by much.

"Harry Potter. Yes, Harry Potter, Sir. What is you be wanting here, Sir?"

"I left something in my clothes that I need, can I get them?"

"Yes, Sir, Harry Potter, Sir!"

Moments later a large bundle of clothes was thrust into his arms. He looked down at the beaming faces. "A little privacy?"

"Yes, Sir!"

They scattered.

I can't believe they bought that, Julia thought.
That's because they're brainless idiots, he thought back.

Now left alone, Virgo ducked behind a large vat and started carefully going through the bundle. If Potter's clothes did indeed have some kind of hidden anti-summoning enchantments or runes on them, then he'd just need to do it by hand. It was the kind of thing someone who'd been used to magic all their lives would never think to do.

It took ages, but he was not about to give up. Quite a bit later, Virgo smiled in triumph, tweezing a single black hair from one of the hoods.

Smiling, he left the laundry, and was just closing the painting behind him, when he felt the change. His hair was starting grow and his skin starting to bubble. Virgo swore. That had been close. Far too close. And he'd been so engrossed in finding Potter's hair that he'd lost track of time. Not good.

He quickly marched through the labyrinthine dungeons, and was nearing the stairs to the upper floors, when a shiver shot down his spine.

Danger.

He felt a large pulse of magical power, a hand from nowhere grabbed his throat, pain shot through the back of his head, and the next thing he knew, he was pinned up against the wall, held there by a grown woman in a mask. He hadn't even had time to reach for his wand.

Oh, god, oh no, oh please!

Virgo swore. He'd messed up. "Wait!" He'd been alone too long. "Please!" He wriggled in the woman's grip, but he might as well have been a worm wriggling in the beak of a bird.

"I will wait," the woman said in a sing song voice.

The word 'fucktoy' flashed through Virgo's mind before it was ripped apart, tossed aside in the quickly surging panic, and just as quickly forgotten.

"What do you want?" he gasped out.

"Your death."

"How… how about money, instead? My father—"

"—No. Not money." The woman giggled. "But I do know something I would like to have. Something I've wanted for a long time."

And then Virgo felt something slam against his occlumency barriers like a tidal wave against a wooden fence. It ripped into his essence and ploughed straight into his memories — memories that flashed across his vision like a muggle movie on fast forward, but the memories shown were not his. A Christmas in the snow. Swimming in the summer Baltic.

Stop! Please! It hurts! Julia cried.

And suddenly, the assault stopped. Whatever his attacker had expected, it probably hadn't been this.

There isn't enough room in here for three of us! Julia shouted. It hurts!

The legilimency battering ram hesitated, then withdrew sharply, leaving Virgo gasping, still being choked by the neck in the woman's iron grasp.
The woman stood as still as a statue.

Virgo gradually got back control of his breathing and stared back into the woman's mask, desperately trying to look as small and helpless as possible.

For what felt like forever they just stood there, the woman making no move either to continue her murder or to retreat. She was obviously thinking hard about what had just happened.

And then, like a relieving force's trumpet blast to a castle under siege, Virgo heard it. Footsteps. Rapidly approaching footsteps.

The masked witch obviously heard them too. She glanced in their direction before releasing her grip on Virgo's neck and sprinting off down the passageway in the opposite direction.

Virgo slid down the wall until he was just a puddle on the floor. Death. His death. It had been so close. Again. He was a horcrux, not the original. If he died, that was it.

"Miss Malfoy?" A shocked voice said.

Virgo looked up. Lady Lily Potter was standing in the doorway to the stairs. A plan rapidly formed in Virgo's mind. He calculated the time between when he'd changed from Harry Potter into Virgo Malfoy. He analysed every bit of the encounter for anything that might compromise his position in a memory, and found nothing. Then he tossed all that aside and let his emotions crash through his occlumency barriers, giving Julia as much free-reign into his consciousness as she might wish.

This at least, wouldn't take much acting.

"Professor!" Both he and Julia simultaneously burst into tears. "I was so scared!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In transfiguration class, Professor McGonagall was frowning with the air of a drill sergeant who has discovered a scuff on one of his usually most reliable soldier's shoes.

"Miss Granger, this is quite below the standard of work I've come to expect from you."

"Sorry Professor," Hermione said in a meek voice.

Harry watched carefully from a few seats away. All this wasn't unexpected. It was all he could do to maintain his own control over his magic. That the girls were having difficulty was to be expected.

"And I see your notes aren't quite as neat as normal, either."

"I'm just feeling a bit off professor."

Harry mentally winced. That hadn't been the best excuse.

"Really?" McGonagall raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps you should go to the hospital wing."

"Oh, no, professor, I'm sure I don't need to do that. I don't want to miss class. It's fine, really."

"If you're sure." The professor walked away.

Harry kept a careful eye on the teacher after that. This was the transfiguration professor, after all. If anyone would suspect something, it would be her — and indeed, some minutes later, when
Hermione tripped on her way to hand in her homework…


Nothing happened. Surprise flashed across the usually stern face.

Hermione put on a hurt expression. "Professor?"

The surprise quickly gave way to a mild fluster. Usually stern eyes quickly travelled between her wand and around the classroom, not meeting Hermione's. The professor pursed her lips. "My apologies, Miss Granger," she said in a clipped voice. "I should have known you would never be so foolish as to experiment with advanced level transfiguration without telling me first."

"I don't understand, professor."

Harry smiled. Much better.

The class was then treated to an impromptu lecture on the animagus transformation, how dangerous it was, and how any student caught trying it without supervision would be in big, big trouble.

Harry filed out of class at period's end to find Luna waiting for him right outside the classroom door. They quickly found an empty spot to talk.

"My lord, we might have a problem."

"Go on, Luna."

Luna then proceeded to tell him all about the confrontation she'd just had with Virgo, and the fact that the muggleborn girl used for the ritual wasn't dead, like they'd thought, but was, in fact, still in there.

Harry sighed. "I really wish you hadn't learned that."

"Me too." Luna was actually looking uncertain. Harry didn't think he could ever remember a time when Luna looked uncertain.

"This is… inconvenient."

"Yes, Harry. I'm sorry, Harry." Luna suddenly looked close to tears.

"Hey, Luna," Harry said softly. "It's okay, you know."

"It's not okay! I inconvenienced you!"

"Luna." He switched to a firmer voice. "I need you to be strong."

And just like that the tears stopped. Wow.

"My lord?"

"Here's what we are going to do. Stop all attempts on the diary for the moment. I don't know how exactly to separate a parasite from a normal soul, but I know the basic theory, and I should be able to figure out the how with some experimentation. It's something I needed to do eventually anyway, so it's not even that much of a bother." He tapped his scar.
Luna looked incredibly relieved. "Yes, my lord."

"And if we can't figure out how to free her within a reasonable period of time, then we bite the bullet and destroy it anyway."

"Yes, my lord."

"But it shouldn't come to that."

"Yes, my lord."

"Don't discuss this with Ginny until I've had a chance to talk to her myself."

"Yes, my lord."

"How are your animagi mind scapes going by the way?"

"Ginny's is coming along well. She says she's starting to feel the native landscape. Mostly grassland. And it's very hot, apparently."

"And yours?"

Luna dabbed at a stray tear from her eye with a lace handkerchief and smiled. "Can I keep it a secret, my lord?"

"Why?"

"I want it to be a surprise. A big, big surprise."

Harry gave Luna a cautious look. "How big of a surprise are we talking here?"

"Big."

"You already know what your animagus form is." It was a statement rather than a question.

Luna nodded. "The Lovegoods have a family ritual that lets us choose our form before we master it."

*That* was interesting information. "At what cost?"

"Your true form. The form that is really you."

That didn't sound too bad, Harry thought. Although he could imagine it might cause some slight personality shifts.

"That's okay, isn't it?" Luna asked.

Harry hugged her, on the basis that you couldn't really go wrong with a hug where Luna was concerned. "Yes, it's fine. C'mon, let's go to lunch."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Before this month, it had been a long time since Virgo had been in the headmaster's office. In his time of course, it had been Headmaster Dippet's office, who'd been rather sparing in his furnishings. Virgo didn't even want to start imagining what kind of lunacy Dumbledore's office had contained, but whatever it *had* looked like, even Dumbledore's furnishings couldn't have been as
"Don't you worry about a thing, Miss Malfoy," Headmaster Lockhart said with a beaming smile plastered all over his oh so punchable face. "You're perfectly safe now. I give you my personal word. The head of the DMLE will be here soon — a close personal friend, you know. She asked my advice on how to improve the department not too long ago — naturally I couldn't say no to supporting our brave boners." He gave him a roguish wink. "Only don't tell her I said that. She can be a bit sensitive about that nick-name."

Virgo smiled weakly. He was sitting in one of the office's many hardback chairs, trying to look how he imagined an eleven year old girl who'd just been the subject of a murder attempt would look — something Julia was, for once, being very helpful with. All around him, a dozen Lockharts all beamed down at him. Some were even sharing painting space with the various past headmasters of Hogwarts. The previous headmasters did not look happy about this. Phineas Black, in particular, looked like a man under incredible strain, barely keeping his cool. This didn't surprise Virgo in the slightest. The Headmaster clearly had his head so far up his own arse, it was amazing there was enough room for a puppeteer as well.

I think he's rather dashing, Julia thought in a quiet voice, as Lockhart went back to his desk, and continued with whatever he'd been doing before Lily Potter had marched them in, given the headmaster a quick explanation, and flooed to the ministry.

Dashing?! Virgo thought back.

He does have a nice smile.

It takes a lot more than a nice smile to make a great wizard.

Yes, but the nice smile helps. And at least he's trying to be reassuring.

I can see how it might be reassuring to an eleven year old girl.

We are an eleven year old girl.

No, you are an eleven year old girl. I am a sixteen year old Dark Lord.

I thought you were supposed to be a Dark Lady now.

Dark — Lord, he thought, with a firmness that brooked no argument.

Fine, Julia thought, now sounding petulant. I'll be the Dark Lady then.

Dark Ladies do not burst into tears just because someone tries to kill them.

That, apparently, had been the wrong thing to think, because Julia burst into mental tears again, and Virgo was unable to stop them welling up in his actual eyes and streaming down his face.

It was another five minutes before the floo flared green, by which time, Julia had dried up and started to petulantly annoy him again, safe in the knowledge that he couldn't torture himself here.

Four people stepped through. The first two introduced themselves to her as Regent Amelia Bones, head of the DMLE, and Lord Sirius Black, Chief Auror. The other two were Lily Potter, and finally…

"Father!" Lord Malfoy had apparently already been released from his ministry cell. Virgo looked
up and attempted to look panicky. He had only one chance to deliver the message he needed Lord Malfoy to receive and he had to get it right. "Please don't be angry with me. I didn't mean to go to Gryffindor. It was an accident!"

Lucius looked shocked, but damn, the man was quick on the uptake. The shock instantly faded, replaced by arrogant disdain. "Virgo!" he snapped. "We will discuss your failings later, but now I want to know why I was called here."

"Failings," Black muttered darkly, not quite under his breath.

Lily Potter filled everyone in on what Virgo had told them happened, which was a perfectly accurate account of the attack, minus anything to do with Julia. Regent Bones took a copy of her memory of the event and stoppered it into a small bottle. "It's outrageous!" she ranted. "Disguised assault with declared intent to kill in Hogwarts! If I could, I'd pull every student in for veritaserum!"

"Oh, surely it's not that bad," Lockhart said. "The assailant didn't actually try to hurt her, did she?"

"Mental assault," Black countered.

"Which is not actually against the law," Lucius said, smoothly.

"Father?"

"I mean, I can't see any actual harm done. Children fight all the time."

"You weren't there, father! You didn't feel how powerful she was! How intent she was! She was going to kill me. You won't feel that in a memory."

Lucius looked down at him and sneered, and inside the privacy of his skull, Virgo couldn't help but bask in just how good this man was at this. Not for nothing was he the leader of the Dark in the absence of his older self. "I'm sure that your Gryffindor friends will look after you," he said.

Lily Potter snapped. "You horrible, horrible man! Your own daughter was attacked! Don't you care?"

"I'm sure, Lady Potter, that my daughter can handle herself quite well without my help. Now if you will excuse me, I have pressing matters to deal with. Headmaster. Lord Black." He turned to Sirius, gave him a respectful nod, then turned in a swirl of robe, and left via the floo.

Black stared, wide-eyed at the now empty fireplace, while Virgo made to curl in on himself, causing Lily Potter to sit down and put a comforting arm around his shoulders. "Amelia, we have to do something," she said.

"Yes, I quite agree," Regent Bones nodded. "That man is just as despicable as ever."

*Maybe John Potter and Susan Bones should take care of her,* Julia thought in a sarcastic tone of voice.

"Maybe John and Susan could take care of her?" Lady Potter suggested.

"A wonderful idea, Lily."

If it hadn't been so out of character, and if he'd actually been capable of it, Virgo would have purred.
"I think you're being too harsh on Virgo, John."

Susan was sitting with John at the far end of the Gryffindor Table in the Great Hall, instead of at her usual place at the Hufflepuff table. Lunch was busily going on all around them.

"I'm just not comfortable with her," John said, shifting uneasily.

"Why? Because she's a Malfoy?"

"Well, yeah."

"But she was raised a muggle. She's practically muggleborn."

"She sure doesn't act like it."

"Won't you at least try? For me?" She gave him badger eyes — large, friendly, and strategically adorable.

John sighed. "Okay, fine, but I think you're blowing this out of all proportion."

Susan punched the air in victory and grinned before turning back to her food.

John looked over towards the Slytherin table. There had been changes. Alexandra Black now sat in a prominent position near the head of the table. He couldn't help wonder if she'd be in the duelling tournament this year. His eyes flicked to the other end of the table and his stomach clenched as it did every time he looked in that direction. Ginny shouldn't be in Slytherin. She should be here with him. And was it just him or did she look more subdued than normal? His eyes narrowed. Was something going on? Were the Slytherins mistreating her? Was Harry… doing… something?

"John, Susan?"

"Yes, Lady Potter?" Susan asked.

John tore his gaze away to turn towards his mum.

"Please follow me, immediately." She sounded rather serious.

They both nodded and together the three of them left the hall and headed up a set of stair cases that John knew headed towards the headmaster's office.

"What's this about, do you think?" Susan whispered from where they walked behind John's mother.

"No idea," he whispered back.

They soon found out.

Virgo Malfoy sat on a chair in front of them looking nervous — none of her usual arrogant haughtiness.

"Someone tried to kill you?" Susan looked horrified.

Virgo nodded.

John's jaw had dropped. Seriously? Someone had actually tried to commit murder in
Hogwarts? Who? But... he already knew who. This was the second year after all. There could only be one possible candidate. And Virgo was a muggle-raised in Gryffindor — she'd be a perfect target for... "The heir of Slytherin."

Everyone stopped talking. Every head in the room turned towards him — Virgo, Susan, his mum, as well as Headmaster Lockhart.

There was a moment of silence. Then...

"Who?" Susan asked.

His mum gave him an odd look. "I haven't heard anything about Lord Slytherin having children."

"Um..."

Virgo was just staring at him with an unreadable expression on her face.

John started rapidly back-peddling. "I mean, it's just the kind of thing Slytherin would do, right? He's never up to any good."

Lily Potter sighed. "John, you can't just go around making accusation like that. In any case, Susan's aunt and I... we want you both to look out for Virgo here — take responsibility for her — make sure nothing else happens. I know that you aren't in the same year, but try to stick together as much as you can."

Susan beamed. "Yes, Lady Lily."

"But..." John began, and from the tone of his voice it was clear he was about to voice a complaint.

"John," Lily said, sharply, cutting him off. "A word." She pulled him to one side and whispered fiercely into his ear. "Virgo just had a terrible experience, and her father all but abandoned her when she needed him — abandoned her because she's a Gryffindor. You remember what happened to your godfather, yes?"

John's eyes widened. He nodded.

Lily's voice softened. "Then I can rely on you to be my little hero, yes?"

"Yes, Mum." There wasn't really much else he could say.

"Good."

When the two of them got back to the Gryffindor common room later that evening after classes, John formally brought the Malfoy girl into his circle of friends who always occupied the central position by the fireplace, getting quite a few odd looks from Ron, Seamus, and Neville, as well as the other girls. Virgo didn't speak much for the rest of the evening, but when they were standing up to head off to bed, she caught him by the sleeve and asked if they could have a quick word alone.

"What about Ginny?" he asked, suspiciously.

"You seem very attached to her."

"I love her."

"But she doesn't love you back?"
"Harry did something to her." He was having a hard time keeping a civil tone of voice.

Virgo put her hands behind her back. "You're helping me, John Potter. Maybe I could try and help you?"

In Potter Manor, Sirius Black was gazing into a glass of brandy that James Potter had just handed him.

"What's wrong, Sirius?" James said, now pouring himself a glass.

"Malfoy was polite to me, James! Polite! Me! What did I ever do to deserve that!? I'd just hauled his arse out of a cell! He's facing court proceedings that could last months, and he was polite to me!"

James gave his friend a sideways glance. "Well, what do you expect? With what Alex has been up to."

"I hardly think, 'beating up his son's friends,' counts as a reason to be polite."

James took a sip from his glass. "Padfoot, have you seen the memory?"

"No?" Sirius sat up higher in his chair. "Have you?"

"I should think that by now just about every wizard with a pensieve in Great Britain has seen it — and probably plenty of those who don't."

"Everyone except me," Sirius grumbled.

"Well, let's fix that right now." James put down his drink and called a house elf to fetch the family pensieve.

Fifteen minutes later, Lord Sirius Black emerged from the pensieve, white faced and sweating. "Alex! What the hell!"

The next fortnight was not easy for Ginny Weasley. The revelation that the thing she'd done her level best to destroy had had a real person trapped inside it troubled her as much as her inability to carry out the deed in the first place.

The other girls had all reacted with similar levels of disquiet — although, having said that, Alexandra, Daphne, and Hermione all had so much going on in their own projects that she doubted they'd spent nearly so much time obsessing over it as she had.

Alexandra in particular had it difficult, since she was disconnected from Harry and the rest of them except from during group combat training. Apparently she'd had a rather intense confrontation with her father on the weekend after their combined stunt in the Slytherin common room, which had only been diffused, somewhat, when Harry stepped in and had a private word with Lord Black. Exactly what had been said though, Ginny didn't know.

Just about the only time Ginny was able to disconnect from her full-blown early-life crisis was during quidditch training — an interesting experience under the influence of mandrake leaf. At one point, a spell of dizziness had hit her at just the wrong moment and she'd thrown the quaffle right
into Malfoy's face. It was lucky the rest of the team thought she'd just been being her usual vicious self.

It was the Thursday just before Daphne's birthday weekend when Ginny found herself trudging her way into the Slytherin common room, mentally exhausted from fighting against not only gale force winds, but also her own magic, which at that moment had been insisting that she wasn't even human. She made her way down the stairs and flopped onto her bed without even taking off her quidditch robes.

Darkness fell…

…And her dream scape opened.

Ginny looked around. Baked grassland stretched out in all directions. Mountains squatted in the distance, but they were so far away as to be mere dark blueish shapes against a brilliantly blue sky.

A warm breeze blew.

Relaxing. A break from her troubles.

An impulse flashed through her. It came straight from the magic whirling through her like a whirlpool in a bottle. She didn't fight it, like she did on her Nimbus 2001. Not here. She instead raised her hands like an orchestra conductor and a tree started growing next to her, trunk thrusting up through the dry ground, up into the air, before spreading out a wide canopy of thorny leaves.

Ginny tried to twitch an ear that couldn't twitch.

She then climbed the tree. It wasn't easy without claws — the tree's trunk didn't provide many hand holds — but she managed it, eventually settling herself into a crook between the trunk and one of the lower branches.

It was relaxing up here too.

Ginny licked the back of her hand and grinned impishly.

Definitely a cat then.

She pursed her lips.

And of course, the thing about cats, was that they were cold blooded killers.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

At breakfast in the Great Hall, Virgo Malfoy watched the Slytherin table like a hunter waiting for the tell-tale rustle of leaves. The hate potion was finally ready and keyed to Harry Potter. John Potter knew Virgo was going to try something, even if he'd spared him the exact details. Everything was set.

"I can't tell if Snape's worse in potions or defence," Ronald Weasley complained to John. "My arm still stings from when Bullstrode got me."

There. Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood had just entered from the small side door leading to the dungeons. Virgo's gaze tracked them as they walked up the table and sat down a little way away from Harry Potter.

"I heard Lockhart say he was going to arrange for trick or treating this Halloween."
"Eh? How's that going to work?"

"No idea."

Harry Potter was deep in conversation with the Davis heiress and didn't seem to be paying the two younger girls any mind. Perfect.

"Johhnnn," sang a female voice. "Could you ask your mum to give us a hint on what's coming up on the next potion's test?"

"Lavender, if I tried that, I'd be grounded for a month."

"Aww."

Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood both loaded up their plates with food and cast several detection spells on both their food and drink with a practised ease uncommon among first year students.

Virgo's eyes flashed. Now.

He reached into the bag by her feet and drew out a small amount of the potion. Hidden under the table, he waved his wand over the tiny vial in several complicated gestures that very few wizards would be able to pull off, levitated the liquid out of the glass, and then transfigured the magically powerful liquid into a beautiful butterfly.

Pretty.

Several more wand waves cast both silencing charms, and disillusionment charms over it. Then, finally, he jabbed the wand at the insect and whispered, "imperio."

His world shifted into two places at once.

Ooooooooooooo... thought Julia.

He flapped his wings and climbed his way up from under the table, up and out across the great hall, looking down on the mass of black clad students below through four different eyes and over six-thousand lenses.

He flittered over to the Slytherin table and flapped near the Weasley's glass, waiting for that perfect moment just before the magic of the transfiguration would run out. Now.

He stopped beating the butterfly's wings and let it drop into the pumpkin juice with just the tinniest of ripples to announce his arrival. The transfiguration magic wore out and he was kicked out of a head that was no longer a head.

Virgo shook his own head slightly to shake the feeling that he should be eating his breakfast through a straw in his tongue.

That felt weird, Julia thought.

Indeed, he thought back. And now, we wait.

The two Slytherin girls continued their breakfast for a little while longer, chatting and laughing among themselves, and then...

Virgo gripped the edge of the table in frustrated disbelief.
The two girls grabbed each other's drinks, toasted something, he couldn't tell what from over here, and drank each other's glasses dry.

Fuck!

At least you got the whore, Julia thought.

I don't want the whore! He thought back. And she's noble! It won't work on her anyway! I'll have to try again, but I don't have any more of the potion on me. I'll have to wait until tomorrow.

Virgo put his elbows on the table with his hands under his chin and pouted.

"Cheer up, Virgo." Susan Bones sat down beside him. "Herbology first thing today. We can work together!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Ginny and Luna quickly made their way through the corridors towards a quiet spot they knew they wouldn't be overheard.

Ginny was fuming. How dare that bitch! How dare she! Of course she and Luna had sensed a transfigured butterfly loaded down with so much magic! They could feel and identify magical intent in the tip of an opponent's wand in a Merlin damned duel!

And even if it had got through, a hostile hate potion now had about as much chance of fulfilling its ultimate task of getting her to hate the target as it did for Luna, but that wasn't the point! It was the principle of the thing. Virgo had tried to rip her away from Harry! Fuck that bitch!

If there wasn't an innocent girl trapped in there with her, she'd… she'd… Gah!

"What do you want to do?" Luna asked when they finally finished casting all their standard security spells including a fidelius sweep check.

"What do you think we should do?" Ginny asked back.

"Not much we can do unless she tries again — apart from tell Harry."

"And if she does try again?"

"We could pretend it worked?"

"Why?"

Luna shrugged. "It would stop her trying again."

"I don't want to pretend to hate Harry."

"We could let you drink the actual thing. Virgo would know then that it doesn't work."

"That's even worse! I don't want to be magically forced to actually hate Harry either! Even if it won't have any long term effects. What about the law?"

"Unless we caught her administrating the potion itself, I don't see how that would help. She's sure to be careful enough not to get caught."

"Why's she doing it anyway?" Ginny asked. "What's her goal?"
Luna frowned. "I don't know."

Ginny stared at her best friend. "I thought you knew everything."

Luna giggled.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In the classroom that played host to the founder's club, the second year muggleborns—Sophie Roper, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Dean Thomas, and Kevin Entwhistle—couldn't help feeling that something had been decidedly off about Hermione over the last few weeks.

"I saw her skipping the other day," Dean Thomas said. "Does Hermione seem to you like the kind of girl who skips?"

"Not really," Sophie said. "Kevin?"

Kevin grunted. "Annabel told me Hermione's been a lot more approachable recently. Which is odd, because I've felt the opposite."

"You noticed that too, did you?" Dean asked.

Sophie shrugged. "She seems fine to me."

"Maybe we're just imagining it then," Justin suggested. "Anyone had any luck with their parents on the guardianship thing?"

They all shook their heads.

"My Mum told me not to concern myself with things like that," Sophie said sounding despondent. "Even though I explained everything very carefully. It's frustrating. She doesn't seem to understand how bad our position is."

At that point, the door opened and Hermione trotted in with the first year muggleborns in tow. "Good evening, everyone!" She beamed.

The Chesterfield twins, Violet and Marigold, made immediately for the chairs at the front of the room and sat down patiently waiting for Hermione to start, followed shortly thereafter by Annabel Entwhistle, Colin Creevey, and Alan Gage. Colin still had his camera around his neck, although he had been 'subtly' persuaded not to take photos of founder's club meetings.

The second years all waved and turned around in their seats to get back to work on their occlumency training. None of them noticed Hermione stumble on her way to the podium, clutching her head as a random wave of mandrake leaf induced dizziness swept over her.

The first years did notice. It would be hard to miss.

"Are you okay, Hermione?" Marigold asked, looking concerned.

"Perfectly." Hermione coughed before a small smirk graced her lips. "But enough horsing around — let's begin our next lesson."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

You don't think they knew what you were trying to do, do you? Julia asked in Virgo's head.
They were sitting, once again, at the Gryffindor table, scanning the Slytherin table as best they could through the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws for their targets.

Virgo scoffed. *Of course not. How would they do that? They are children.*

Julia mentally shrugged.

Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood were eating breakfast with a speed that suggested they had other places to be. Unlike most of their classmates, who seemed to be trying to outdo each other in terms of pureblood refinement and stoicism, these two just did not seem to give a damn. Lovegood had her wand stored *behind her ear*, while Weasley was dressed in what looked to him like rags, but which he knew from Julia were, in fact, clothes muggles used for exercising — very different from the clothes muggles in his own time used.

At that moment, Luna Lovegood—the whore—stood up and walked away from the table. Well, that would make everything *much* more reliable.

Virgo slipped out a second dose of hate potion from his bag, pointed his wand under the table, ignoring the ruckus caused by the Weasley twins' efforts to prank their younger brother with a toy spider, and began the wand motions for the butterfly transfiguration.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Ginny Weasley glared down the Gray side of the Slytherin table. All the meat had gone. Sausages, bacon, eggs, hams, salmon — between them, Harry, Daphne, Luna, and herself had wiped the large serving platters clean of the lot of them. Luna and Harry in particular had ripped through a freakishly large breakfast with a speed that caused their older classmates to stare.

Thank Merlin all this animal behaviour awkwardness would dampened down considerably once they were all done.

Of Harry's girls (as Ginny had starting thinking of themselves), only Hermione wasn't fighting for the proverbial cow like piranhas at a feeding frenzy. *Her* plate contained mostly vegetables and grains, although she did currently seem to have a thing for apples.

Ginny glanced at the Gryffindor table and took a sip of her pumpkin juice.

And of course, she was no closer to making a decision about what she wanted to do about her training. She still wasn't sure. What if Harry needed her to kill someone and she froze up again? The diary had been easy to think about destroying, because of what it was, but what if she eventually needed to kill a real person? Would she be able to do that?

Ginny took another sip of pumpkin juice and a wave of dizziness swept over her. Oh, Merlin. She put the glass down and gripped the edges of the table as her whole world went spinning. An overwhelming feeling of cat filled up her senses… and nothing else.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

*Banzai!* Julia shouted as Virgo directed the disillusioned butterfly straight into Weasley's cup.

The transfiguration ended and half of Virgo's world snapped back into one.

Virgo smirked. *My, we are enthusiastic this morning, aren't we?*

*Yes, we are,* Julia thought back.
Harry quickly noticed something was wrong. It would be hard not to when one of the girls he very definitely counted as a close friend marched up to him, grabbed him by an ear, and proceeded to attempt to pull him out of the great hall. He went along with it, getting quite a few giggles from the older female population as he went by. Presumably the hate potion Virgo had been trying to slip Ginny had somehow got through.

"Stop fighting you manipulative bastard!" Ginny snarled at him.

Harry wasn't fighting it.

"Five points from Slytherin for inappropriate language!" Professor Sprout shouted from the high table as they left.

They stopped in one of the corridors outside the hall. "How's it feel?" Harry asked.

"Horrible. I can see everything clear as day. Your manipulativeness, your calculation, the way you don't care about anyone that you don't consider to be \textit{yours}."

Harry nodded.

"And the way you just calmly accept all that!" she added.

"Better than screaming. And what do you think about all that?"

Ginny glared. \textit{Obviously}, I know it all already! I like your cunning, and don't give two shits about the other stuff. But this potion. Gurhhh! Hatred, but for no reason. It's dumb." Her voice dropped to a growl. "I \textit{wanted} to hate John. I don't want to hate you."

Harry glanced over her shoulder. "Don't look now, but Virgo just turned the corner."

The growl in Ginny's voice turned to a snarl. "Perfect. Let's do it \textit{now}."

Harry shook his head. "The girl, Ginny. Besides, John's with her."

Ginny fell silent but didn't turn around.

"Miss Weasley?" Virgo called out as she approached. "I wonder if I might have a word with you?" She gestured towards Harry. "Away from… \texttt{him}."

The slap echoed around the empty castle hall like a whip crack, and arrived at its target just about as fast.

Ginny Weasley had covered the distance between herself and Virgo in a blink of an eye and hit her so hard the whole of her body turned towards the wall, staring in shock.

"Fuck you, bitch," Ginny snarled into her face. She then turned 180 degrees and dragged the second Potter twin out of sight. Footsteps retreated, and finally, a door slammed.

\textit{What?} Virgo thought.

He slowly straightened back up, still holding his cheek in shock.

John walked up to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Yeah, I felt one of her slaps too," he said sadly. "Thank you for at least trying though. Whatever it was you tried to do. I really do appreciate
Virgo muttered something. He wasn't sure what—his mind was racing far too quickly—but he soon found himself being dropped off for his transfiguration class. John had escorted him there.

_Virgo…_ Julia started as they sat down in the front row.

Yes? Virgo thought back.

_That girl… the way she moved. That speed. It was just like the time in the bathroom._

Yes, Virgo thought back. _Yes, I was just thinking the same thing._

An hour later, Harry walked back into the empty classroom the hate-potioned Ginny had first dragged him into, looked around, and shook his head. The place was destroyed. Vicious looking cut marks were gouged into the walls, windows were broken, chairs smashed, desks bent. The chalkboard had been snapped clean in half. All evidence of a trained fighter unloading all her frustrations onto an extremely convenient target — him.

Harry waved Lord Slytherin's wand in a wide arc, focused his powers, and said, "Reparo." The chairs flew back together, the blackboard fixed itself, and every shard of glass from the windows found their way back into each individual window pane's incredibly complicated shattered mosaic before smoothing back, as good as new — or rather, _almost_ as good as new.

Harry then made his way to the Slytherin dorms. Yes, they technically had classes, but classes could wait. This was important.

He strolled past the defences made to keep males out of the girl's dorms, walked into the second year's dormitory, and climbed into the trunk by Hermione's bed.

Ginny looked up at him from the side of a small camping bed, holding a bucket in her hands, face green and sickly.

Hermione was sitting by her side.

"How's the flushing going?" he asked, just as Ginny heaved and let loose another wave of vomit into the bucket.

"About as well as can be expected," Hermione said.

Ginny snorted.

"She'll be right as rain in a half an hour, give or take ten minutes."

Harry nodded and sat down on Ginny's other side.

Ginny looked up at him and winced. Then she turned to Hermione. "Do you mind if we talk alone for a few minutes?"

"Not at all."

"What's up?" Harry asked when Hermione closed the trunk lid behind her.

"I didn't kill the chickens, Harry."
Harry considered this. "You were afraid to tell me you hadn't?"

Ginny nodded slowly. "I felt guilty."

"You know I'm not going to be angry if you choose not to kill?"

"I know."

Silence filled the trunk for just a moment before Ginny heaved again and another round of vomit fell into the bucket. Ginny coughed and spluttered before taking a deep breath.

"But I have decided," she said, looking up at him through matted hair. "I have decided to fight — I decided to fight years ago, and, now I decide that if you need it, I will learn to kill as well. No matter how hard I find it. I swear."

Harry hugged her. "Thank you, Ginny. You've no idea how much you and the others mean to me."

Ginny hugged him back and smirked. "I think I can guess."

The moment would have been a lot more beautiful if she hadn't proceeded to then throw up all over him.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Ginny slowly came to and looked out across her dreamscape.

The savannah sun beat down on her long red hair.

The grass land was now golden brown.

Thorny bushes lay scattered around where she stood.

A small river flowed through the land, carving out a tiny valley on the otherwise flat plane.

It felt… complete.

Ginny felt the urge to run — the urge to sprint. She instead jogged along a trail she found until she reached a ridge.

The ridge hid another plane, and over that…

Animals.

Ginny's eyes widened. Thousands of animals. Wildebeest, oryx, zebra, gazelle, even a small heard of giraffes — they all grazed in a colossal herd. Birds flew everywhere. The air felt alive with insects. And out of the corner of her eye, she caught something… else.

Ginny froze. The thing was lurking in the grasses almost right next to her. Its body was low to the ground and was longer than she was tall. It didn't seem to be paying any attention to her, which was just as well, because every instinct in that part of her brain that wasn't under the influence of mandrake leaf—that part of her evolutionary brain that was still monkey—was screaming 'predator' at the top of its lungs.

Something changed. There was a shift in the herd, and the thing beside her started to lift upwards like a statue slowly grinding to life. It prowled forward, out of the long grass. Ginny's breath hitched. The shoulders rose above the head, every movement powerfully controlled. Each paw
strike on the ground suggested the pinning of a mouse. The back slung low to the ground, like a sagging suspension bridge, while the legs suggested the kind of coiled power usually found in freight train buffer springs.

It trotted forward as a great collective herbivorous maw of alarm sounded across a thousand animals. It broke into a canter as the smaller gazelle broke away from the main herd, and then, suddenly, it broke into a full sprint.

Ginny jumped forward and ran to keep the chase in sight, heedless of the general panic all around her.

The target desperately zipped this way and that, trying to avoid the killer rapidly closing in on it, but it might as well have tried to out run its own shadow. There was a loud bleeet, a faint cloud of dust, and both predator and prey disappeared from view as they fell to the ground in a mass of flailing limbs and snarling teeth.

Ginny raced to where the hunt had ended and stared down at what she knew was her animal. The cheetah stared back up at her, exhausted, unable to even move, lying on the ground, lungs rising and falling in great heaving expansions and contractions, jaws firmly locked around the gazelle's throat, which was very clearly and obviously dead.

Ginny slowly walked up to the magnificent animal and laid a tentative hand on its head. It didn't attack. She knew it wouldn't. Ginny felt the connection, a part of her she'd always known, but never been able to put into words. A certainty she'd been missing.

Ginny narrowed her eyes. And she nodded.

— End of Chapter Forty-One —

Chapter End Notes

Ao3 Author Note

New Year’s Eve! Wooo!

I am now running a joint chapter release schedule between my fan-fiction and my original fantasy novel chapter drafts. 2018 is looking to be awesome! So much stuff is happening. If you want to keep abreast of the release schedule, as well as any changes and the occasional piece of bonus content, you can head over to www.leadvone.com and sign up for the Gray Mailing List.

If you would like to discuss this chapter with other readers, I suggest you check out the fan-run discord server, http://discord.me/leadvone

Also, the website itself has had a major update, so it looks a lot nicer now, and links through to a bunch more DP&SW fan content.

Conversion rate is:
1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds
1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)
1 Knut to 10p (roughly)
All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017’s prices.
Mountains. Mountains as far as the eye could see — snowy topped, jagged, desolate. Daphne Greengrass sat, cross-legged on a craggy ledge, overlooking a sheer cliff, and fought every instinct in her still human body, not to jump.

A bitingly fresh wind whirled Daphne's hair around her face. She hooked several strands around her ear and relaxed as best she could against the cliff wall behind her. She rarely sat cross-legged — it wasn't something she'd been brought up to do. Her mind seemed to know this very well. Even in her dream-scape, her muscles protested at the unusual position she was asking them to take.

The stone floor she was sitting on was awfully hard too…

Her vision blurred and a wave of dizziness hit her.

She was waking up.

Daphne opened her eyes, blearily, and sat up in bed. Her plushy snake uncoiled itself from her body and coiled itself up one of her four-poster pillars. The torches flickering on the wall had changed from dim green to bright orange. It was morning and the Slytherin girls dormitory was mostly empty. That was unusual. Usually, she was among the first up.

"They're all upstairs preparing your surprise birthday wave-off," called a nasally voice from the bathroom.

Daphne cursed under her breath. "Thank you so very much, Parkinson," she said sarcastically. "I will do my best to act suitably surprised."

She put Pansy out of her mind and smiled, because it was her birthday — her thirteenth birthday — which meant lots of things for a witch, but the one thing it meant above all for her was that Harry was taking her out adventuring…. Well, eventually, anyway.

Actually, he was going to take her out adventuring after they'd finished the important business of the day. Just her luck that her birthday was the only day they had to give the submarine sales pitch to MaCUSA.

But! After that, it would be just her and Harry, and it would be almost all a surprise. Only almost, because, at some point, she'd be doing her thirteenth birthday ritual. She knew that was going to happen. Choosing which ritual to perform had taken weeks. Thinking about it still caused her to blush.

Daphne swung her feet off the bed and slipped them into the pair of fluffy slippers.

She really hoped the business stuff wouldn't last too long.

Ignoring Pansy, she showered, towelled herself down, wrapped said towel around herself, sat down in front of her bedside mirror, applied her cosmetic charms, then stood back up, and walked to the trunk beside her bed, retrieving something else she'd been looking forward to for a long time.

The something else was a long, frilled, scarf-like length of material in emerald green, soft and stiff
at the same time. The silky material quivered in her hands, giving the impression of life trapped in fabric. Her mother had given it to her the night before she’d caught the Hogwarts Express back to Hogwarts.

Daphne walked back to the mirror, dropped the towel around her ankles, and smiled. Yes, she definitely now had breasts, no question. It was impossible to say that she didn't. They'd been growing steadily for a couple years now, and, if her memory from her time under ageing potion served her correctly, were about half their final size.

Daphne brought the scarf up to her chest, let the smallest amount of magic flow into the material and gasped as it leapt from her fingers, flowed around her body, and moulded itself snugly, but not tightly, around her chest. It was an odd feeling, but not unpleasant, which was just as well. She'd be wearing it everyday now.

Still busily appreciating her new, grown-up look, Daphne caught Pansy staring at her in the mirror's reflection. The Parkinson Heiress had not been having nearly as much luck as her in the breast department.

Daphne smirked and stepped into her new dress robes.

Pansy sniffed and stuck her nose up in the air. "So, you've got a bit of a head-start," she said, sounding like she was putting a lot of care into sounding like she didn't care. "It means nothing."

Daphne smirked again. Then schooled her features and waved a vague hand. "Luckily, I don't need to worry about such things, seeing as I already have a betrothed. I'm actually a little worried that they might grow too much. That would be simply awful."

Pansy scowled.

"Don't worry," Daphne continued, admiring the way the dress whispered as it moved around her ankles. "I'm sure yours will come through in time for your birthday. When is it again? December?"

"November," Pansy growled. "And I don't need to worry. I will have my choice of suitors, you'll see."

Daphne didn't wait for Pansy to finish getting dressed. She picked up the duffel-bag she'd already prepared the night before—full of specifically warm clothes—wrapped the cord of her handbag around her wrist, checked herself in the mirror one last time, and left the dormitory, climbing the stairs to the Slytherin common room, which would surely be full of people eager to show they cared about her thirteenth birthday — a show she naturally had to reciprocate. She was still the Greengrass Heiress, and as such, duty came before adventure, even if it was adventure she truly craved.

"Happy thirteenth!"

One voice from several dozen wizards and witches hit her all at once. The common room was packed. Green and silver paper streamers fell everywhere. Several of the decorative stone snakes wore party hats at jaunty angles. Presents poured across a table off to one side, carefully guarded by both Hermione and Marcus Flint.

"Wow," Daphne said, walking into the centre of the room, dumping her bag, and looking around. "I didn't expect all this."

There were a couple of disbelieving snorts from around the room.
"Speech!" Someone shouted.

"Speech! Speech!" The cry picked up momentum.

"Wait just a minute," Hermione shouted back. "Presents! She doesn't have very long until Lord Slytherin picks her up." She indicated a much smaller pile of packages on a nearby chair.

"Can it, Granger!"

"No," a voice drawled. Draco Malfoy stepped out of his circle by the Dark's court. "For once, the know-it-all is correct. Please, Heiress Greengrass."

The room settled down somewhat. People started chatting among themselves.

Daphne gave Malfoy a reluctant nod and walked over to the table full of gifts.

Hermione leaned into her ear and whispered, "We've filtered out the important ones. They're on the chair."

"Thanks."

Daphne picked up the first present and inspected it.

"Romulus Volf," Hermione said, pointing out the name label. "I did not expect that."

"Our lord has become a lot more public since Volf shouted those silly accusations last year. He's probably hoping to mend fences."

Daphne slowly started to work her way through the birthday gifts, calling out her thanks to whomever had sent them, if they were in the room, and having Tracey add those who weren't to a 'to be thanked later' list.

Everything was going as expected, until it was Draco Malfoy's turn. Naturally, if anything spectacle worthy was going to happen, it would be with him.

Daphne picked up the gift cautiously. It was among the last in the pile, with the heft and weight of a book. She unwrapped it. It was a family autobiography of Louis Malfoy — From Beauxbatons to Bordeaux. A dictaquilled copy in soft leather.

"I thought you might appreciate that," Malfoy said with a slight smirk.

Daphne wasn't sure she understood. What was 'you might appreciate that' supposed to mean? She had no particular interest in Malfoy's family history and he should know that. This wasn't the kind of thing people normally gave as birthday gifts. Declaration of intent gifts, certainly, but not birthday gifts, and this was not a declaration of intent gift. It wasn't presented in the correct way, and besides, no one would be silly enough to try and give her such a gift. One might as well gift preventative birth control to an already pregnant witch.

Malfoy was standing slightly off to one side near his court.

All eyes in the common room were upon them.

"My father suggested certain arrangements could perhaps be made…" he said.

And then the knut dropped. What this was, was a birthday gift hiding a declaration of intent inside it. He was suggesting that maybe, one day, she and he would be family. But, it wasn't an intent gift
aimed at her — it was aimed at…

Daphne gave a lady-like snort. "If you think you're ever getting your grubby little mitts on my sister then you've got another thing coming."

"I don't believe that is ultimately your decision, Heiress Greengrass." And the word "Heiress" was clearly being said in huge quotation marks. "And the strength of the Gray can wane. Yes, now you're not doing too badly, but you are still the weaker side, and the weak must ultimately bow before the strong."

"Oh, wonderful. Then since my betrothed is stronger than you, you can bow before him."

Malfoy's slight smile vanished. "You need to be more careful, Greengrass. There are those who say," and now he raised his voice so that it was obvious he was speaking to the whole room. "That the reason Lord Slytherin wears a mask is he is hiding something shameful. People are starting to suspect."

"What are they starting to suspect, Malfoy?"

"Oh." Malfoy waved a vague hand. "All sorts of things."

"Name one thing."

"I wouldn't dream of talking about those kinds of things in public."

"Oh, this is so much rubbish!" Hermione stomped over and stood beside Daphne. "You don't have a clue what they are saying, do you? If you really knew anything you wouldn't hesitate to shout it to the world."

Draco glared at her. "No one asked your opinion you filthy little mudblood."

The room stilled. A few people gasped. It was as if a single arrow had been loosed between two lined up ranks of battle tense soldiers, and those soldiers were now glancing around to see if anyone else looked like they were going to attack. Few people in the room cared much about the word itself, but, over the last year, a sort of understanding had arisen when it came to Hermione, especially after the reception she'd received on her thirteenth birthday. Ultimately, this wasn't so much about blood purity as it was about pride and honour. Nearby, Ginny and Luna had their wands out, looking alert. The air was so tense it could have been cut with a diffindo.

The only person who didn't seem to care was Malfoy… at least, until a voice from the Dark court sounded throughout the room. "Draco."

Daphne recognised the voice immediately, and Malfoy's reaction was priceless. He flinched. Alexandra was sat in the middle of one of the Dark's couches, taking up far more space than an eleven-year-old girl should.

The room's attention quickly shifted to her.

"That wasn't very nice Draco, don't you think?"

"Black—" Draco started, voice already uncertain.

"From what I've seen, Miss Granger is a lovely girl."

If she hadn't been so tense, Daphne might have snorted. Alex and Hermione had been at each
others throats in group combat training more so than anyone else in Harry's group.

Malfoy's face contorted. He glanced around the room, apparently gauging how much support he might get. The various little groups that made up the Dark looked uncertainly between him and Alexandra.

Malfoy finished his survey and narrowed his eyes. "You can't seriously be suggesting that we should see her kind as our equals?"

"No, of course not," Alex said, with what Daphne felt was slightly too much emphatic emphasis. "But that doesn't mean you can't be a bit nicer. Would you kick your house elf just because he's your servant?"

"Yes."

Alex's eyes widened slightly. Clearly she hadn't been expecting that answer. "You would?"

"Yes. It's just a house elf."

"But... but..." Alex seemed to be struggling with some terrible inner conflict. "But it's your own house elf. That's like cursing your own broom."

Daphne heard several people snigger.

"An interesting way of looking at things," said a new voice, far deeper than any student's.

Many heads whirled around. Many lungs inhaled sharply. Malfoy and Alex, who were both right near the always empty Slytherin throne, spun a full 180 degrees to face the new voice.

Daphne smiled. Lord Slytherin was casually sitting on the Slytherin throne between the courts of the Dark and the Gray, under the effect of ageing potion and masked. He hadn't been there a second ago. Daphne didn't need legilimency to know that just about everyone in the room was wondering how he got there without anyone noticing, or just how long he'd been there.

Finally, it was time for her to be off.

Alex was the first person to move. "You!" she shouted, standing up quickly.

"I?" Slytherin said back.

"Duel me!"

Various members of the Dark gave her incredulous looks and started edging away. One fourth-year wizard actually dove over the back of his sofa.

Harry ignored them and slowly stood up. "Not today, Heiress Black. I have another important appointment." He shifted his focus. "Happy birthday, Daphne."

Daphne smiled brightly. "Thank you, my lord."

Alex sat heavily back down in her seat and folded her arms.

Harry grabbed Daphne's duffel-bag and led her out of the common room, greeting various students including Luna and Hermione as he passed. No one tried to stop them leaving.

Once they were outside, Daphne stepped out from behind her lord as they traversed the corridors
"All of it. It would appear our dear Lucius has set his son's sights on Astoria."

"I don't understand why though," Daphne said. "Father isn't old, so he's unlikely to get control of his Wizengamot seat for decades — maybe even a century. The same goes for the Greengrass businesses."

"Jacob will most likely grant Astoria a dowry, considering she won't get to fully manage the Greengrass estate for a long time."

"But a dowry would still belong to Astoria."

"In theory, yes. But I do still agree with you. It's unlikely to be for financial reasons. I imagine it's more likely a straight-up attempt to bring the Gray closer to the Dark rather than the Light."

Daphne smirked. "Which is what we want."

"Yes, but I doubt in the way they were imagining. Alex seems to be making good progress, doesn't she?" Harry slowed his stride. "Oh? What do we have here?"

A figure was walking towards them from the great entrance hallway that led to the grounds. It was Lily Potter. It didn't look like she'd been searching them out — rather that she'd been on the way somewhere else and just happened to run into them.

"Lady Potter," Harry said as she neared.

Lily Potter stopped in front of them. "Lord Slytherin." She turned to Daphne. "Happy thirteenth, Miss Greengrass."

"Thank you."

Lily Potter turned back to Harry. "I trust this excursion won't take her out of classes come Monday?"

"It should not."

"Very well." Lily Potter looked like she wanted to say something else to the mysterious lord standing in front of her, but another quick glance at Daphne suggested it wasn't something she was comfortable saying in front of other people. "Please excuse me. Good day to you both."

Daphne Greengrass and Lord Slytherin continued to walk, leaving Lily Potter alone. Lily bit her lip before turning around and continuing on the path that led to the Slytherin Dungeons. Once there, she spoke the password to the Slytherin common room, entered, and looked around, ignoring the general commotion of a Saturday Morning. The prefects were efficiently taking down a lot of celebration decorations.

Unable to find who she was looking for, Lily walked over to the second year student she felt most comfortable with.

"Miss Davis?"

Tracey Davis turned to her from where she'd been deep in conversation with Hermione Granger.

Of course, Lily's favourite student in Slytherin should have been Miss Granger, what with her being both muggleborn like her and easily top of her class, but Miss Granger always treated her
rather coldly, something Lily never understood. Tracey Davis, by contrast, felt rather like her own Gryffindor students.

"You don't happen to know where Harry is?" Lily asked.

"You just missed him, Professor," Tracey replied.

"And you don't know where he is?"

"No, Professor."

"Oh," Lily let out a slightly disappointed sigh. "I guess I'll see him at breakfast then."

"Most likely."

"Well, thank you anyway." She left.

Tracey and Hermione traded apprehensive glances. Harry wasn't going to be in Hogwarts for the whole weekend. Their thoughts both trailed to the vials of Harry keyed polyjuice potion sitting in Hermione's trunk.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

On Gairsay Island, Daphne stepped out of the floo and into an empty living room, Harry stepping out a moment later behind her. The room was deeper than it was wide and ended in an open corridor going both left and right. A big set of double doors were set into the far corridor wall. On either side of the fireplace behind her, large windows let in a constant stream of bright sunlight. A thin layer of plaster dust on the floor suggested that the goblins had only just packed up their tools and that the house elves hadn't yet had a chance to get their paws on the result.

Daphne recognised where they were immediately. This was the third floor living quarters of Slytherin Manor. Her future home.

"Like it?" Harry asked.

"Yes — very spacious, my lord," Daphne said. "But it needs furniture. It feels empty without it. Especially if we're going to use this as our base when we reveal you."

It wasn't only the living room that needed furniture. Daphne walked up and down the living quarter's corridor, poking her head into each of the thirteen bedrooms in turn, each one an empty shell, ready to be filled full of stuff. She mentally claimed the one immediately to the right of the large central one with the office, which was obviously Harry's. Luna could have the one to the left. Hermione, Ginny, and Alex could claim their own… later on. That was, if Harry succeeded in bringing them into the family too. Although, with how things went on Hermione's birthday, she wouldn't be surprised if that one, at least, was a fait accompli.

Harry was waiting for her down the stairs in the circle corridor that surrounded the balcony overlooking the ballroom. "Ready for your first birthday present?"

Daphne was more than ready. Harry led her down the corridor and into what she recognised as the library. A single bookshelf stood in the middle of the large room. There were several books on the shelves all wrapped up in various coloured packagings.

"Happy thirteenth birthday, Daphne."
Daphne eyed the books before taking one off the shelf, hefting it in her hands. What kind of present
would Harry get her? No, what kind of present would Lord Slytherin get her? They were slightly
different questions after all.

"Why don't you try and guess?" Harry said, letting an amusement into his voice that
Daphne never heard him use as part of his Lord Slytherin persona in public.

Daphne gave a slight smirk. "Okay, I'm game." She thought about it. "Something educational."

"That much wasn't hard to guess."

"Something to do with what I'm currently learning."

"Sort of…"

"Something to do with something that I'm not currently learning, but should be."

"Again, sort of…"

"Something to do with something I'm trying to learn, but not doing so well at?"

"I wouldn't say you're doing badly at it…"

Daphne's mind flicked through all her current projects — business, divination, leadership, politics,
combat, animagus discovery… Eventually she settled on one. "Combat," she declared. "Something
I feel weak at and want to improve on."

"Strategy," Harry said, simply.

"Strategy!" Daphne snapped her fingers. "So close." She frowned. "But, my lord, I've already read
all the classic works on strategy."

"Really?" Harry's voice sounded playful now. "Name three books that influenced Voldemort's
strategies during his first rise."

"Maintaining The Statute, by Samantha Goldstein — Blood is Thicker than Magic, by Dracula —
and The Way of the Warlock by Robert Dimwiddy," Daphne rattled off, with ease. "Of course,
the Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts also points out that he drew heavily on the campaign of terror
waged by Grindelwald, which he grew up in, for inspiration."

"All true," Harry said. "…to an extent," he added. "Dracula's treatise on how to win a blood feud
and Grindelwald's terror tactics do indeed mirror Voldemort's tactics, but…." He trailed off. "Well,
firstly, where do you think Grindelwald got his terror tactics from?"

Daphne blinked. "He invented them, didn't he? They were a combination of tactics on intimidation
discussed in Blood is Thicker Than Magic and lessons learned from the resistance movement in the
Germanic lands against the Second Magical British Empire."

Harry shook his head. "Was it that resistance movement that eventually took Dimwiddy down?"

"Well, no, it was the Seventh Cursed Alliance."

"So why do you think Grindelwald believed that using their tactics would help him
achieve his goals?"

"Well, because…." Daphne hesitated. "I don't know."
"It's because of a muggle named Michael Collins, who, not long before Grindelwald, used very similar tactics to achieve independence for his country, Ireland, from the muggle British Empire."

"Grindelwald took inspiration from a muggle?"

"Indeed. And he wasn't the only one. Think about it. You're Voldemort and you've seen Grindelwald fail, now, are you going to use his exact same tactics to fight your war?"

"No?"

"No." Harry confirmed. "Oh, you take the basics from him, certainly, but you still need something else — something to make sure you don't fail like he did. Voldemort spent over thirty years looking for every advantage he could get before he launched his own campaign against Magical Britain."

Daphne looked down at the book in her hands. "And you're saying that he got it from this?"

"Oh, no, not that one." Harry plucked another book from the shelf and handed it to her. "This one."

Daphne took the book and ripped off the wrapping paper. "On Guerilla warfare, by Mao Zedong. Who's that?"

"A muggle lord who conquered China."

"Really? Light or Dark?"

"By our definition he was something like a Light Lord, although most western muggles would choke if you suggested that to them. Muggles don't use the words Light and Dark in quite the same way we do. Mao was extremely anti-hereditary power — about as anti-hereditary power as it's possible to be. So much so that he abolished private property and declared everything, from the house you lived in to the food you ate, to be owned by the state."

Daphne stared. "Wow. Not even Dimwiddy would have suggested that."

"Like I said, the word 'Light' is not a perfect translation for what this particular muggle was."

Daphne looked down at the cover of On Guerilla Warfare, a feeling of excitement welling up in her. She'd never even heard of these works before. And if she'd never heard of them, chances were people like Malfoy and John certainly hadn't. She smiled. "And Voldemort used the tactics of a sort-of-but-not-really muggle Light Lord to fight a war for a muggle hating Dark? That is ironic."

"You wanted to become a better strategist, Daphne. Because that's how you feel you can best contribute in our group combat training." Harry gestured to the long row of books on the shelf. "I give you twenty of the most influential muggle books on strategy ever written. Voldemort himself only really skimmed through most of them. He found Mao, became an instant convert, and focused in almost solely on him. But I know the others still hold immense value — even if I myself haven't been able to assimilate all they have to teach."

Daphne enthusiastically picked up the book she'd first selected and ripped off the paper to reveal The History of The Peloponnesian War, by Thucydides. She looked along the long line of books and smiled brightly. This present was so Harry.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Lily Potter stared around the Great Hall and frowned.
Harry was most definitely not here.

She'd arrived early to make sure she caught her son before he dashed off to Merlin only knew where, but students were now packing up and heading off to whatever weekend actives they had, and Harry still hadn't shown.

She didn't want much, just to have him and John around her small Hogwarts apartment for a chat about school work, and perhaps try to encourage the two to be a bit more friendly towards each other, but it seemed what should be a trivial task wasn't going to be quite so easy.

Lily thought deeply. Now, where would Harry be this early on a Saturday morning? The library? The duelling arena? The quidditch pitch? All possible, although maybe not so much the last one. Hopefully it would be one of the obvious places. Hogwarts was a maze. Finding anyone here was like looking for a needle in a haystack of hay-to-needle transfigured hay.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Slytherin Manor stood at the top of Gairsay island's large rolling hill. On the south side of Gairsay Island, at the bottom of the hill, deep under Granger Cottage, in a hollowed out cavern dipping into the waters of the North Sea, the adult Grangers were just putting the finishing touches on their full-scale submarine model.

There had been changes.

A good number of the worktops, machines, and raw materials that previously littered the cavernous space had been shoved to the far wall, cramped up against each other with barely enough room to walk between them, all to make room for the model.

That model was made of polystyrene and balsa wood, and sat some fifteen-metres long — over one metre high at the front, two metres high at the back. Small wheels on the bottom allowed the model to be pulled apart at many points along its length, showing the inside to be hollow, and covered in tens of thousands of tiny runes, all printed onto printer paper and stuck on with thumbtacks.

Daniel Granger fondly patted the nose cone, which was hinged to allow entry through the front. This was his baby and he was damn proud of it. "Won't fly in the air, of course," he said to the two new arrivals. "Making room for the life support systems and all that other stuff seriously cut down the amount of rune room we had to play with."

"It's a broomstick," whispered Jacob's daughter in awe. "A broomstick so large you can crawl inside it." The young teenager looked towards where Lord Slytherin was walking up and down along the model's side, running a hand along its smooth surface.

"That's right," Emma said. She and Clare were sitting at a nearby table, drinking tea and cutting up a small birthday cake. "We spent ages on upgrading the trunk engine, but no matter how we worked it, we couldn't get it to meet ICW ISS standards. Not to mention ministry export regulations. But then we thought, 'Hey! Broomsticks already meet ICW ISS standards and ministry export regulations. And our miniature runes allow us to scale up a broomstick in a way no other broomstick maker can.' Nimbus even practically gift wrapped the basic runic patterns for us and handed them to us on a silver platter. That bit alone could have taken years by ourselves."

"We're stealing Nimbus's rune patterns?" Daphne asked.

Dan waggled a hand. "Stealing is a strong word. There's no way for them to learn about it unless they break into our broomstick the way we did into theirs. Good luck on them finding a CAT
scanner that can scan *that.*" He jerked his thumb towards the fifteen metre long monstrosity behind
him.

At that moment, Lord Slytherin arrived back beside Dan after doing another circle of the model.
"This all looks fine," he said, "but we still do have a slight problem."

"Which is?"

"I've read the documentation you owled me earlier, but I'm still far from an expert. If the boys
from MaCUSA want detailed technical explanations, I'll need back up."

Dan looked uncertainly between his masked lord and his wife. "But, will they accept us as experts?
If they know we're not magical?"

"No, they won't — and letting them know is not an option." Slytherin reached into a fold in his
robes. "...which is why..." He withdrew a pair of identical Slytherin masks. "...you're going to be
wearing these."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Clare watched from a distance as Dan and Emma enthusiastically slipped on their expensive
wizarding robes and donned their brand new Slytherin Masks, chatting to each other at a mile a
minute about merlins, flamels, runic patterns, muggle engineering, and how much of a fantasy
novel they lived in.

The birthday girl sat nearby eating birthday cake with the air of a moviegoer waiting for the film to
start.

Slytherin stepped up beside her. "Would you like to come too, Clare?"

Clare sighed. "Is that an order, my lord?"

"No, it is an honest offer. The wizarding world is more than just Diagon Alley and school. Jacob
and Sunny are taking Dan and Emma to a quidditch match this afternoon. I can grant you leave for
the day so long as you stay with the two of them and are back before mid-night."

Clare thought about it. The trip between school and home *had* gotten a bit stale, even if it was
more freedom than she'd ever had at the polyjuice brothel. She nodded. "Then, yes — I think I
would like that."

Slytherin handed her another green and black mask, which she quickly donned, not needing to
worry about changing her clothes. All her clothes were robes. Slytherin then tapped the collar
around her neck with his wand and she felt a slight change in its magic.

Wearing the mask felt odd. There was clearly *something* attached to her face, but it didn't restrict
her eyesight or breathing at all.

"I understand Dan and Emma have told you of my need for phoenix ash?" Slytherin asked. "How
is that going?"

Clare nodded. "Yes — but there's only so much they can buy before the supplier starts asking
questions we don't have the answers to. They're popping along there once a week to buy as much as
they're allowed, but often, even that cleans him right out."

"In that box?" Slytherin asked, pointing to a box on a nearby table.
"Yes."

Slytherin stalked over to the box and glanced inside, then walked back. "That's the result of two months of buying up all the phoenix ash in Britain?"

"Yes, my lord."

Silence descended on them. On the other side of the workshop, Dan and Emma were busily packing up various papers and putting them into bags.

Finally, Slytherin spoke. "It's not enough."

"My lord?"

"It's not going to be enough for what I need — not nearly enough."

"Do you want us to keep buying it?"

"For the moment, yes."

"As you wish."

Silence descended again.

Then, "Clare?"

"Yes, my lord?"

"About the fact that we're making use of Nimbus' runic patterns in our submarine…" He trailed off.

Clare sighed. She'd been expecting this. Knowing the secret of the miniature runes was one thing, but knowing something like that? "Yes, my lord," she said, slipping off the basic magic ring she wore. "I understand, my lord."

"Thank you, Clare." Slytherin pointed his wand in-between her eyes.

"Obliviate."

MaCUSA Special Auror Jackson Collins fidgeted. He hated travel, even more than he hated working on weekends, but the boss lady hadn't been too impressed by his 'opinions' of her judgement in regards to the Lovegoods.

"Congratulations, Collins," she'd said. "You're now our field expert on all things Slytherin, since you think you know so much."

And as so here he was, deep under rainy old London, surrounded by goblins. Merlin, that was another thing he hated — goblins. Jackson glanced towards the door where two of the ugly bastards stood at attention, holding battle axes with heads larger than his torso, and watching their half-dozen strong delegation with beady little eyes. He shuddered.

"You don't need to worry. They can't attack us," said a thin wizard sat next to him, speaking loudly enough to be heard over the general hum of conversation around them — certainly loudly enough for the goblins to hear him. He wore thin glasses and had a rather nasally voice. "It would break
"Nah." Jackson shook himself. "S'not that. Just had a bad run-in with one back in New York. Anyway, that's my job to worry about. You focus on your numbers."

The wizard frowned, but did nod slightly, leaning back over his papers, just before the doors opened and a procession of five wizards entered. Jackson's hand twitched towards where he kept his wand under his sleeve. They all wore masks — fucking creepy. Well, all except the teenage girl. Somehow, that made the whole thing even more creepy.

The head of their delegation, Carol Heyworth, an attractive, no-nonsense brunette witch from procurement, stood up and greeted the one who identified himself as Lord Slytherin — the one who's mere presence seemed to radiate danger. His voice made the hairs on the back of Jackson's neck prickle.

Part of him wondered just how badly they really needed to solve the whole kelpie situation, before he reminded himself that if there was one thing he hated, even more so than working on weekends, travelling, or goblins, it was hopeless, week-long gillyweed operations in the freezing waters of the Great Lakes.

Then Slytherin started outlining his proposal for what turned out to be a classic European broomstick, but massively scaled up, quoting maximum dive times, manoeuvrability, magical capacity, and defensibility.

He talked crew numbers, production capacity, and serviceability.

About halfway through, Jackson decided, grudgingly, that the man at least knew how to talk a good game.

He then spoke of the way the nose cone would be able to open underwater without flooding the vessel, allowing aurors to summon kelpies straight from the water, and into the broomstick, without having to engage them in their home territory where they held the upper hand.

And at that point, Jackson was sold. If Slytherin could make it, then the Auror department needed one of these things. Ms Heyworth seemed interested too. Apparently, the numbers guy next to him didn't seem to share his opinion. He kept tapping on the desk with his pen, clearly impatient.

Some time later, a round of questions started and sure enough, numbers guy was first to jump in.

"This is very interesting, Mister Slytherin," he said in that same nasally voice, "But I have a masters in European runes and I just don't see how you could possibly fit everything you'd need in a closed artefact that large."

"That is a Slytherin family secret," Slytherin said, evenly.

"You just expect us to accept that, do you?"

"Yes."

"But we are not subject to the Albion."

Ms Heyworth gave numbers guy an annoyed look.

"Alright then," Slytherin said. "It is a trade secret, will you accept that?"
"Yes, he will accept that," Ms Heyworth said.

Numbers guy gave their leader an annoyed look of his own.

Two points to Wampus House, Jackson thought.

Of course, that didn't stop Numbers Guy. He continued to occasionally pepper Slytherin with questions during the Q&A, some on point, some rather time wasting. Jackson was surprised the blonde teenage girl sat in the middle of Slytherin's group had as much control as she did. Apparently, it was her birthday, but she was here to 'observe and learn the family business'. If someone had asked him to sit in on a meeting like this when he'd been thirteen, he'd have been out of his mind with boredom. Hell, thanks to numbers guy, he was almost out of his mind with boredom now.

"I don't see how you can possibly source so much broomstick grade wood," numbers guy finally said towards the end of the presentation. "I have read a professionally compiled report on European broomstick export numbers, and it said that Britain's broomstick makers couldn't expand their overseas markets wider, in part because, and I quote, 'finding appropriate magical trees is such a hit and miss operation."

"I can assure you," Slytherin said in the same calm tone he always used, "that will not be an issue."

"But, Mister Slytherin, I can assure you, the report did say—"

Jackson snapped. "Oh, will you pack it in, already!"

Numbers Guy reared back, eyes wide.

"Unless your report came from a prophecy, can we assume there are things it might not know about?"

Numbers Guy sat back down, looking offended, but didn't speak up again.

When they were finally walking out of the meeting room, back into the Gringotts main hall, Jackson bent towards their leader's ear. "Ms Heyworth, I'm pretty sure the rest of the jerks I work with would really appreciate something like this man is selling."

Ms Heyworth smiled at him. "We'll have to see what we can do. We still have several other options to investigate. Thank you for speaking up like you did back there, by the way. Grant just can't bear the thought of anyone being smarter than him."

"Sounds like he needs a wake-up call."

"Yes. And please, call me Carol. It's nice having someone on this team who's more than just a massive head attached to a mouth." Then she smiled at him again.

It was a very nice smile, Jackson thought. Perhaps travel could have its upsides too.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Merlin, that guy just didn't know when to stop talking! Even the auror thought so." Daphne was walking beside her Lord Slytherin on their way to quickly meet with Ragnok about dragons, wind, land, silt, and treasures associated therewith, before getting on the real birthday business.

"He was useful," Harry said. "He focused their group's distrust and combative tendencies away
from us and towards one of their own."

Daphne smiled. That was one of the things she'd noticed about Harry's Lord Slytherin persona. He spoke little, and when he did, it tended to be in short statements of fact — quite different from when he didn't wear the mask.

"Do you think they'll sign a contract with us?" she asked.

"They might."

Daphne smiled again.

They soon reached Ragnok's office. The Grangers and Clare had already left to meet up with Daphne's mother and father.

Ragnok welcomed them in by standing up from behind his desk and waving them into the seats before it. "Lord Slytherin, what can I do for you today?" he asked. "I hope you are not in any difficulties? We haven't been receiving deposits from you with quite the regularity we've come to expect."

"I have a puzzle that Gringotts' might have the key to," Harry replied, ignoring the latter comment.

"Tell me more."

"Fate has spoken to me again." Harry glanced at her. "—or rather, to us."

Ragnok raised an incredibly bushy eyebrow. "Truly?"

"Yes. Daphne?"

Daphne quickly took over. "We believe the new prophecy is a hint or clue to some kind of hidden treasure. We've already looked in several places rather obvious places with no luck, but there is another obvious place — here in Gringotts."

Ragnok pursed his lips. "Our vaults hold many treasures, young Heiress. Only the ones in your vaults are yours to do with as you please."

"Of course, of course," Daphne quickly replied. "But the expertise of Gringotts… You do undertake a rather large number of expeditions all over the world."

Ragnok steepled his fingers and looked across the table at them both. He thought for a moment. Then he said, "You have this prophecy?"

"We do," Daphne said.

Harry withdrew a mist filled sphere from the pocket of his robes, placed it on the table, and tapped it with his wand.

Luna's unearthly voice, high and unnatural, filled the room. "Where the land meets the wind, find the sign of the dragon's roar. There awaits you in the silt, ancient magics and gold and more."

Ragnok cursed in goblin. He rubbed a gnarled hand over his face. Then he stood up and paced the room for several minutes. Finally, he turned to them both. "Please wait here," he said. "I will return shortly." And with that, he left, shutting the door behind him with a soft click.

Daphne and Harry looked at each other.
"I'm not sure," Harry said.

Daphne shrugged.

Minutes went by. Daphne sighed and asked Harry for one of her birthday books, which he handed to her — *On War, by Carl von Clausewitz*. She started to read.

In war, it stated, force is the ultimate factor that decides victory. Civilised governments do not engage in war as an act of rational policy, but rather as an act of brutal violence. The ultimate goal is to disarm the enemy.

*That* would mean taking away their opponents wands, Daphne thought — if they used wands. Taking a wand didn't work so well on someone who knew wandless magic. How could they restrain someone who could cast basic spells without a wand? Tie their hands with rope? But they might be able to cast a severing charm. Goblin steel then? That would be fine if they could get ahold of it — the stuff wasn't exactly common.

Daphne's thoughts were interrupted by the door clicking open again.

Ragnok poked his head back in and motioned to them. "Please, follow me."

Finally. Daphne snapped the book shut and handed it back to Harry who pocketed it.

Ragnok led them out of his office and towards the main hall, but then, rather than turning in that direction, he led them, instead, in the other — downwards, down into the depths of Gringotts, not where the carts took wizarding vault owners, but back where the goblins had their hidden city — marble pillared and stone vaulted.

A kind of curious excitement started to fill Daphne. *This* was more like what she'd been hoping for. Seeing new and wonderful things — things most wizards never saw. She doubted Tracey or Blaise had ever been back here.

Down, down they went. Spiralled staircases quickly turned from normal sized to goblin sized. Ceilings started to lower. Smooth marble gave way to rough granite.

Eventually, they were led through a set of massive double doors, three times as tall as Harry stood as Lord Slytherin. Daphne gasped.

A huge room greeted them. It looked like they'd just walked down its entire height to get to the bottom of it, but its size wasn't its most impressive feature. Every surface — the walls, the floors, the ceilings, the pillars, everything — was covered in intricately carved figures of what looked like solid gold. The whole room shone blindingly bright. Goblins filled the space, talking, sitting at desks, writing, pouring over parchments, pointing at things stuck high up on walls. No one paid their entrance any attention.

Ten-metre tall solid gold goblin statues stood interspersed throughout the hall, holding high weapons, or quills, or sometimes both. One gold goblin statue next to them wore a pinstripe suit and glasses, and held an abacus.

"Wow," Daphne whispered.

Harry merely nodded.

"Have you seen our great hall before, Lord Slytherin?" Ragnok asked.
"I'm sorry to say, that I have — although not nearly as glorious as this."

Ragnok growled and swore in goblin again.

"There's just so much gold," Daphne said, awed. "Each statue has got to be millions of galleons."

Ragnok shrugged. "Hundreds of millions, actually. All totally worthless." They walked deeper into the hall and eventually came to a stop behind a low partition wall. Ragnok knocked on the door. "This," he announced, "is our expedition division."

Daphne followed Harry into a much smaller area. They could still see the massive golden vaulted ceiling of the great hall, but the wall decorations were far more office like — charts and maps and random bits of paper all over the place.

All eyes turned to them as they entered before getting back to their work. One set of eyes, however, didn't leave them. They belonged to a tall wizard with a long, red pony-tail, and what looked like a dragon's tooth for an earring. His eyes were narrowed.

"Lord Slytherin — Heiress Greengrass." A female goblin in a long flowing dress swept over to them. "May your enemies bleed and you get rich, etc, etc. I'll take it from here, shall I?" She said this last bit to Ragnok who grinned.

"This delightful ball of energy is Secured-Collateral. I have taken the liberty of giving her your new prophecy details, but that is all. She will take good care of you."

Then he left.

Secured-Collateral turned back to them. "The king has given me leave to show you our current ventures. Follow me, please."

"Um…” Daphne threw another look at the wizard on the far side of the room, who'd been continuing to give them cold looks. "What about him?"

"Curse Breaker William Weasley is under contract and will not share anything if he values his job."

"And if he decides his job is worth less than any information he might be given?" Lord Slytherin asked.

"Then we seize house assets."

"And if his house has profitable dealings with my house?"

Secured-Collateral smirked. "You don't want an oath breaker's gold? Then it would be for you to sort out among yourselves."

"Then I request you tell him nothing more than what you have already told him."

"Done. Now, look here." She pointed to a large map on the wall, on which were drawn dozens of circles, all coloured in with different shades of red. "This map shows our current operations."

Daphne leaned closer. The biggest circle was over Egypt, but there were also large circles on Mexico, Japan, Shaanxi, Istanbul, The African Rift Valley, Greece, Italy, Peru, and Ghana.

"We can provide documentation for any of our areas of interest," Secured-Collateral said. "but there will be a price."
What price?" Harry asked.

"Where the land meets the wind, find the sign of the dragon's roar. There awaits you in the silt, ancient magics and gold and more." Secured-Collateral pointed to a nearby table, on which was something hidden under a cloth. "You can keep the gold and the magic — it is the more we are after — a very specific kind of more." She pulled back the cloth.

Daphne's eyes widened.

In a glass box hovered what looked like the ghost of a huge gemstone as big a man's fist — purple, misty, see-through.

"What is it?" Daphne asked.

"I can't tell you," Secured-Collateral said.

Harry walked up to it, crouched down, and started busily inspecting it from only a few inches away. "Is it valuable?" he asked.

Daphne's mind sputtered in disbelief. Even Harry didn't know what it was?

"I can't tell you that either — sorry."

"But, if we find one, you want it?"

"Yes."

"And not anything else? Not the gold? Not the magic?"

"No."

"And all of these expeditions, are to find these things? You must have built up quite a collection."

"That's also classified information."

Harry looked into the ethereal jewel for a few moments. "Fine," he eventually said, straightening up and stalking over to the map on the wall. "Sorry to spoil the surprise, Daphne." He jabbed at a much smaller circle way up to the North, and turned back to Secured-Collateral. "For starters, we'll take everything you might have on this one."

Daphne strained to see. Harry's hand was planted directly on Iceland. That's where they were going adventuring tomorrow. She smiled widely. A place where the dragons roar. Of course they were.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Draco Malfoy sat alone in the Hogwarts library with his head in his hands. He'd begged off from his friends after lunch and retreated somewhere he hoped no one would find him. Things were not going well. He was losing control, he could feel it. Alexandra Black was slowly worming her way into the position that should rightfully be his. This morning, he'd held on to his status as top snake by the skin of his teeth, but how long would that last? Even being near her gave him feelings of dread.

He wondered if this was how his grandfather felt when the dark lord had swept in out of nowhere and took control of Slytherin House.

If only Virgo hadn't gone to Gryffindor. She was supposed to be his trump card, but whenever he'd
seen his sister these days, she was always around Merlin damned John Potter or the Bones Heiress. Even then, he wasn't sure if Virgo would have been able to contain Black. The girl was just too powerful. It wasn't fair!

Draco’s thoughts ran over the destruction of the Slytherin common room again for the thousandth time in the last few weeks. He shuddered.

How was he supposed to be able to compete with *that*?

He sat in silence.

An older couple stumbled upon him among the shelves, laughing and giggling, made quick apologies, and left.

Eventually, Draco let out a long, defeated breath.

He couldn't compete with it — not directly. It wasn't possible. He would just have to work with her — be the advisor behind her throne. At least Black would be a great counter to Harry and John Potter — a chance his generation of the Dark would desperately need. Better to gracefully bow out while he still had the chance, and help focus her efforts on reminding everyone why the Dark was not to be messed with.

"Mister Malfoy?" said an adult female voice.

Draco looked up. It was Professor Potter.

"Yes, *Professor*?"

"You haven't seen Harry anywhere, have you? I need to speak with him."

Draco sighed again. How the hell had this mudblood bitch shoved out two monsters like Harry and John? "No, Professor," he said. "I haven't seen him."

"Oh. Well, if you do see him can you let him know I want a word in my office?"

"Yes, *Professor*."

Professor Potter left, leaving Draco alone with his thoughts of what to do next.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Was agreeing to let them have the ghost gem thing a good idea?" Daphne asked Harry as they walked down Diagon Alley. "We don't even know what they are."

"If we don't know what they are, then currently neither does he, which means we're not at a disadvantage," Harry said. "It is important when dealing with a prophecy to be as proactive as possible to ensure things turn out the way you wish them. If we just leave it, we might not stumble onto this treasure for years — maybe decades. We don't want to wait that long."

"I suppose not." Daphne smiled. "So, what now, my lord?"

"Second birthday present." They stopped outside Broomstix.

Daphne's eyes lit up. "A new broom? Really?"

"Really. You can't claim to be a spoiled princess if you don't have the latest of everything."
Daphne's eyes widened. "Did you just tease me?"

"Yes."

Daphne spluttered, but before she could say anything back, Harry had already swept into the shop. Just as well, as it would stop him from seeing her faint blush.

"So, why am I really getting a new broomstick?" Daphne asked once inside.

"You've chosen your thirteenth ritual?"

Now Daphne really did blush, and in full view of Harry. "Yes."

"We're getting a pair of cruisers to get us to the ritual site." He lowered his voice. "That way we won't have to bother with disillusionment."

Now Daphne understood. Harry was taking her flying. She smiled.

"We're also going to a quidditch match later on. Magpies vs Bats."

Daphne's smile widened. "Go Bats."

Just then, the shop owner bustled up to them and started what sounded like a very well rehearsed sales patter.

Fifteen minutes later, both she and her Lord Slytherin were holding identical Nimbus Cloud Cruisers — with built-in notice-me-nots and advanced cushioning charms, things that quidditch broom sacrificed for greater speed and agility.

They then walked to the small broomstick runway at the end of the Alley, mounted up, and swooped up into the skies above London — and suddenly, Daphne felt at home — more at home than she'd felt in ages. Euphoria swept her as quickly as the wind swept her long blonde hair. She wanted to stretch her talons and cry out in happiness.

A sudden wave of dizziness caused Daphne's broom to wobble, but she got it back under control and sailed off over the rooftops after her lord. She just had to remember that her arms were not wings.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Well, obviously killing is wrong," Hermione said, "but if it's needed, then it can't be helped."

Ginny was standing by the pensieve in the middle of the trunk Hermione used to teach the muggleborns, gazing into its swirling depths with a look of determination on her face.

Hermione was fishing in the memory cabinet while talking. "And Harry will be able to tell us when it's needed," she continued. "We've already done bad things—I mean, Harry's new home was built with drug money—and conquering a country isn't exactly pure, even if it is most definitely needed. That's not even getting into all the stuff we did last year with the philosopher's stone."

Hermione found the vial she was looking for and walked over to stand beside Ginny. The younger girl stood almost half a head shorter than her. Hermione's voice softened. "Having said that, this will not be pleasant, Ginny. Harry once showed me some memories from the war — when Daphne and I did something very stupid. It was horrible. The second worst I've ever felt."

Ginny didn't ask her what the first worse she'd ever felt was. Instead, she set her jaw and nodded. "I
need to do this," she said. "I need to get used to it."

Hermione nodded back and poured the contents of the vial into the pensieve. "I'll have a bucket ready."

Ginny touched the silver liquid and was instantly sucked into its depths.

Hermione then settled herself down to wait, skimming through an advanced book on transfiguration and compartmentalising all the things she didn't already know into her occlumency library. Years ago, when they'd first met, Harry had said she had the potential to be one of the greatest witches who ever lived, and she fully intended to live up to that faith. She would not let Harry down… not again.

Quite some time later, the pensive starting glowing, and Ginny burst out from it, like Athena emerging fully grown from the forehead of Zeus, and proceeded to throw up messily into the bucket Hermione had left for her.

Hermione waited until Ginny was done before lifting a second full vial with a questioning look.

"Yes," Ginny said, flatly. "All the memories."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It was a nice walk, Daphne decided, and the broomstick flight to the grasslands of Wiltshire had been wonderful. She and Harry had even glided over the wards of Malfoy Manor, hidden as it was only from muggle eyes.

They'd landed not too far away from their target destination and found a relaxing hiking trail that would lead them all the way to the ritual site.

It was a one and a half hour trek, and by the time they were nearing, late afternoon was definitely with them, but Daphne didn't care. She was now thoroughly enjoying herself, and that wasn't even taking into account the knowledge of where they'd be port-keying to later that evening.

Harry stopped her as they neared the ritual circle. "Mandrake leaf," he said.

Daphne dutifully withdrew the leaf from her mouth and handed it over.

Minutes later she understood why he had asked before reaching the massive stone circle. A ministry official bustled up to them wearing long white robes with a black corded belt — it was an incredibly old fashioned look.

"Lord Slytherin. Heiress Greengrass," the man said, looking nervous. "I'm Phillip Dai, from the Department of Family Affairs. I'm so glad you're here. We don't like to keep the muggles out for too long. Druids! I don't know. Whichever idiot came up with the druid excuse needs to be fired, assuming he hasn't already popped his clogs. Anyway, sorry about all this. Welcome to Stonehenge. Have you already chosen your ritual, Miss Heiress?"

He said all this as quickly as possible, as though trying to get everything he needed to say out before someone inevitably interrupted him.

Daphne blushed. "I have chosen." She glanced at her lord's mask, and, not for the first time, dearly wished she could see his expression. "I have chosen The Ritual of the Lady."

Harry tilted his head in acknowledgement.
Daphne smiled shyly.

"Right, yes, okay then." Mister Dai pointed to a crate sitting by one of the massive stone blocks. "You'll find all the ritual reagents you need in those boxes. We'll leave you alone to get on with it, okay?" He looked towards her lord, who nodded.

The two wizards left, leaving Daphne alone in the middle of stone henge. She quickly fished out what she'd need from the boxes, including a large amount of mistletoe and the frozen male genitalia of a horse. Then stripped down naked, placed a book detailing the ritual in the middle of the stone circle, positioned the ritual items in the prescribed pattern around her, shivered in the cold Autumn air, and, slowly, softly, began to chant.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Bodmin Moor Stadium sat on the Cornish moors like a hippo on a bed of moss — the only quidditch stadium in the country. Oh, all the officially recognised teams might have their own fields, where they practised and trained, and where the local wizards and witches could have a bit of a throw about, but in a country with a population of only just over twenty-thousand, there really wasn't any need for more than one stadium.

It was large, over 150 metres long and over 55 metres wide, with eight rows of seats going all the way around the circumference, capable of seating nearly four thousand people, a whole one-fifth of the entire population. It hosted 78 games in the official quidditch season, between the months of May and August, and many friendly matches, or, in some cases, not so friendly matches during the off months.

Eight great towers rose over the stadium like candles on a birthday cake. These were the premium seats, where those who could afford it showed everyone else that they could afford it. Four of the towers held seats, just like the ones closer down to the ground — sixty-four seats in each tower. But the other four… they were the premium boxes — private spaces with only ten seats in each, complete with a dining area, a drinks cabinet, catered food, and a card table — purchased, or occasionally hired out, by the very rich or influential.

Wizards and witches were starting to flood into the stadium in preparation for the late-afternoon/early-evening game.

In one of the premium boxes, a stout, portly man wearing a bowler hat surveyed the thronging crowds. "Magnificent, isn't it?" he said, fiddling with the trim of his robes. "Them all down there — and us — up here." He preened before turning to the two people standing behind him, silently watching.

"I said, isn't it magnificent?"

The woman dressed in pink robes started, apparently not realising he'd been expecting an answer. "Oh, yes, Minister, it's wonderful," she simpered. "Truly, you stand among the greats of wizard-kind."

The minister beamed before turning to the wizard. "And what about you, Bentley? Don't you think it's magnificent?"

The man next to the woman bowed almost imperceptibly. "I must admit, Minister, that I have come to appreciate the little perks my position grants me."

"Yes…" Minister Fudge looked the man up and down, uncertainly. Bentley was an older wizard
with short white hair and the poise of a man who feels unquestionably secure in his position. He wore grey robes. Not the shabby grey of the unspeakables, or the embroidered grey that some young wizards now wore in imitation of Lord Slytherin, but the plain, charcoal grey of a man who considers himself a gentleman, despite not being born noble.

"Well, that makes two of us, doesn't it?" Fudge laughed heartily, while Bentley merely gave a small smile.

Fudge turned back to the window. "Can't wait to see the Magpies crush the Bats," he muttered. "They need to be taken down a peg or two." He brought his omnioculars up to his eyes and scanned the stadium. "Oh! Look!" He pointed excitedly to the another premium box on the far side of the stadium. "Lucius and Edgar are here! I must go and say hello. Donation season coming up, and all." He quickly left, leaving the witch and wizard alone in the Minster's box.

"Tea, Mister Bentley?" Dolores Umbridge asked.

"Yes, please."

"Sugar?"

"One spoon."

"Milk?"

"Just a splash."

After several moments of clinking and stirring, Dolores placed a cup of tea down in front of Bentley, who'd sat down at the edge of the box to watch the players start their pre-game warm up while the announcer shouted out quidditch news and updates to the crowd.

"Excellent. Please take a seat."

Umbridge quickly sat down next to him with a cup of her own.

"Tell me, Dolores," Bentley said, taking a sip of the tea. "What do you think of Lord Slytherin?"

Umbridge hesitated. "He's attractive?"

"I was not referring to the general tendency of witches to view a well-cut figure in a mask to be some kind of ultimate romantic fantasy." Bentley's voice had turned sharp.

Umbridge flushed. "No, Mister Bentley. I'm sorry. I don't know what to think of him. I don't really know anything about him, apart from that he's a pureblood." She paused. "Well, he'd better be a pureblood." The last words were more spat than said.

Bentley smiled. "Tell me, is it true that Arthur Weasley is going to try and push his muggle protection act through the Wizengamot again?"

"It's possible."

"With Lord Slytherin's help?"

"There have been whispers."

Bentley put his cup down with a little clink of porcelain. "Dolores, we can not allow that to happen."
Umbridge looked shocked. "But why? It would increase the power of the ministry. Isn't that what you want?"

"Yes, but not if there is a greater prize at stake. Tell me, why isn't the ministry already the dominant force in Magical Britain?"

"Because of the Wizengamot."

"Exactly! A Wizengamot that for the last four years has been a limp fish. Oh, it's been wonderful. We've had almost a free hand. Lord Slytherin is like a gift sent from Merlin." He paused. "But only so long as he keeps holding the Wizengamot back! If he starts making laws of his own he's going to be pushing into my territory, and that is unacceptable."

Umbridge worried her lip. "But what do you want me to do? I'm the Minister's undersecretary now. It's my job to carry out his wishes within the ministry."

"Yes, that's true. But I am not totally without power over you, Dolores, as you well know."

Umbridge flinched.

"So, you know your duty."

Umbridge sighed. "Yes, Mister Bentley."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Lord Lucius Malfoy stood by the glass wall of the box that the Dark had collectively chipped in to buy some thirty years ago, casting a critical eye over the thronging crowd. There were just so many of them — so many people — so many wands.

"Oh, look," said Lord Edgar Nott, standing beside him, holding his omnioculars up to his eyes. "Greengrass and Moke are here."

Lucius strained his eyes towards the top box on the other side of the stadium, just able to make out figures of Lord and Lady Greengrass among the other nobles. He chuckled. "Still bitter?"

Edgar ignored him, choosing instead to continue fiddling with his omnioculars. Behind them, Narcissa and Lady Nott were chatting with a few minor lords of the Dark. "Hey," Nott said, "Who are they with Greengrass?"

"Who?"

"Look for yourself."

Lucius took the omnioculars and peered across the stadium. He scowled. "They," he said, "are Slytherin's pet muggles, and his pet whore."

"The girl I could understand," Nott muttered, "but the muggles?"

"Their daughter is not without her talents, I'm told."

Nott snorted. "Such a waste."

There was the sound of a door clicking open. They both turned away from the glass-wall, just in time to see the new figure look around the room, beaming with self-importance. Lucius put on his best sincere smile. "Minister."
As the announcer finished recapping the results of last week's match between Puddlemere and the Canons (the Canons lost massively) Jacob Greengrass scanned the skies around the pitch anxiously. Harry and Daphne were late. If they didn't get a move on, the announcer was going to start without them.

On his right, Sunny was deep in conversation with Mrs. Granger and Clare. A nice girl, Clare — very respectful. Shame about what happened to her. She was looking a lot more cheerful now, at least.

On Jacob's left, Daniel Granger was baring the brunt of Arthur Weasley's muggle obsession with great aplomb while Weasley's wife looked mildly embarrassed.

"Oh, oh! Could you explain to me the function of a rubber duck?"

"About the same as a dancing cake topper. Could you explain to me how promotion is decided within the Ministry of Magic?"

Which was odd, Jacob thought. He'd never seen Weasley up here in one of the top boxes before. They must have come into some extra gold.

Way below them, the long, thin line of wizards and witches that stretched all the way around the stadium started doing a Mexican wave.

"Excuse me, one moment, coming through."

Oh, Merlin. Jacob pursed his lips. A small wiry wizard hoped over Dan's legs and crouched down beside him. "Lord Greengrass," he panted sounding out of breath. "I don't suppose you've thought any more about—"

"No, Mister Hale," Jacob cut him off. "The Gray will not be buying the last private box for the moment. I will let you know if and when we are."

Back in the Dark's private box, Fudge preened. "I'm so glad I'm able to rely on your advice and support, Lucius, Edgar."

"Of course, Minster," Edgar said gruffly.

"If Madam Umbridge gives you any problems, just send her to us," Lucius said, in that smooth tone he always used. "We'll make sure she understands what her new position requires of her."

There was a sudden roar from the crowd, by far the loudest so far. Fudge turned to see what had caused the ruckus and spluttered. "Lucius! Your omnioculars!" he cried, just as the announcer boomed.

"Wizards and Witches! Heiress Daphne Greengrass and Lord Slytherin!"

Fudge looked through the omnioculars and zoomed into where the wizard he'd been desperate to talk to was riding a broomstick above the quidditch pitch — the Greengrass heiress riding side saddle behind him, clearly enjoying herself.

"Three cheers for the birthday girl!" The announcer shouted.
Fudge was already out of the box and halfway down the stairs by the time the crowd got through its second cheer, feeling slightly miffed. He’d never got three cheers at the quidditch stadium. Not even when he’d just been elected minister — just a round of applause.

By the time he’d made his way onto the pitch, Lord Slytherin was shaking the last of the Magpie’s hands, while the team captain of the Bats bowed slightly for the girl.

"Lord Slytherin!" Fudge called heartily. "This is an unexpected pleasure! Welcome to Bodmin Stadium!" He beamed. "And you too Miss Greengrass."

"Minister Fudge," Slytherin nodded towards him.

"Please! Call me Cornelius." He walked to stand with him. "Do you have seats? Oh, what am I saying, of course you do, but please — please allow me to treat you! A birthday gift for your future lady!"

He nodded towards the young Heiress who was now watching with a rather blank expression.

"Yes," he continued. "The Minister's box is the perfect way to watch a game!"

Despite some reluctance on their part, he eventually managed to lead the two nobles up to the Minister's box.

"This is Mister Bentley, the Humble Hag of the Wardrobe," he said, gesturing to the politely bowing wizard "— and this is Dolores Umbridge, my undersecretary."

"Charmed."

A few minutes later, Fudge was rubbing his hands together in glee, looking out across the pitch while the referee unclamped the bludgers. This was so perfect. He’d been wanting to get Slytherin alone for years. And now he was his captive audience for the next two or three hours at least.

"Um, Minister?" said a very uncertain voice behind him.

He turned around. Mister Bentley and Dolores were looking around the spacious room in confusion, Bentley half-way through pouring a drink.

Lord Slytherin and Heiress Greengrass had vanished.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

On the roof of the Minster's box, Daphne sat huddled up against Harry — and it was Harry now, rather than Lord Slytherin. They were both wrapped up in a blanket, which itself was wrapped in the invisibility cloak. Only their heads poked out the top of it, and they were disillusioned.

"Thank you, Harry," Daphne said, softly. "I don't think I could stand having to spend three hours listening to that twit prattle on."

Harry chuckled. "One of the risks of going just a little over the top — you attract attention."

Daphne smiled. "That was rather over the top. I was afraid for a moment you were going to have them play the wizarding anthem, too."

"You enjoyed it."

"Yes, I did."
"AND THEY'RE OFF!" shouted the announcer. "WILLIAMS GRABS THE QUAFFLE, PASSES IT TO WALKER!"

The crowd roared its approval as the game started and the players sped off after their targets.

Daphne huddled closer.

"So," Harry said, in a casual tone of voice. "The ritual of the lady?"

Daphne blushed. "Shut up." She cast her gaze out across the pitch.

There were many rituals wizards and witches could perform on their thirteenth birthdays — almost all of them associated with either gender or sexuality. The ritual of the lady was one of the more traditional ones, granting the witch who performed it increased fertility and ease of childbirth. In exchange, her first six children would always be boys.

The ritual had fallen out of favour for the simple reason that, generally, only daughters and their immediate children could ever hold two sets of family magics at once. They were important in the creation of many unique magical artefacts.

But Daphne didn't care so much about that. She'd chosen the ritual of the lady for other reasons. It was a promise. It spoke of another time, far off in the future, when the war Harry needed to fight would be over. When she and her lord would settle down and start a family of their own.

Out over the pitch, the Bat's beaters had pinned the Magpies's seeker, forcing him to drop the quaffle.

"WALKER CATCHES THE QUAFFLE, PASSES IT TO LAMBERT! LAMBERT SCORES!"

Daphne settled down to enjoy the game.

Over the next few hours the Bats outflew the Magpies handedly, eventually finishing the game when their seeker stopped bothering with the quaffle and focused exclusively on the snitch, quickly finding it and snatching it from behind one of the quaffle posts.

She and Harry quietly left soon after that, waving a quick good bye to Daphne's parents, and flying, again, all the way back to London, arriving at King's Cross with plenty of time to spare for their portkey to Iceland.

They arrived in Reykjavik feeling the sickening effects of portkey travel, and quickly checked themselves into the only magical hotel in the city. Daphne slowly fell asleep going over the day in her head, a small smile on her face, despite her stomach's queasiness. It really had been one of her better birthdays.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

A thousand kilometres to the South, in a magical and majestic Scottish castle, a shrill voice rang out through the Slytherin dungeons.

"WHERE — IS — HARRY!?"

— End of Chapter Forty-One —
A/N: There are important changes coming to the Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches Audio Book project.

1. Book one is now complete!

2. Owing to having a rather large collection of awesome stuff going on, Soren will be stepping aside as narrator for the next book.

3. All future updates (including this one — chapter 12) will be posted to www.LeadVonE.com rather than to Soren's Youtube channel (I'm working on other distribution means as well.)

4. All of Soren's readings are also available on the website.

5. That's it! Go have a listen, if you haven't already.

Sticky Note: If you want to keep abreast of the release schedule, as well as any changes and the occasional piece of bonus content, you can head over to www.LeadVonE.com and sign up for the Gray Mailing List.

If you would like to discuss this chapter with other readers, I suggest you check out the fan-run discord server, the link for which can also be found both on my profile page and through my website.

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017's prices.
“WHERE — IS — HARRY!?”

Slytherin students watched in bemusement as the irate muggleborn professor stormed up the stairs to the Slytherin common room from the boys’ dormitories.

“It’s well past curfew! Where — is — he? Mister Malfoy! Do you know?”

“No, Professor.”

“Nott?”

“I’m afraid not — ahaha.”

“Miss Parkinson?”

“Sorry, Professor.”

Down in the second year girl’s dormitory, Tracey Davis’ heart was making a spirited attempt to beat its way out of her chest.

“Just act like you normally would around Harry,” Hermione said, uncorking a tiny vial of polyjuice.

“But what about his clothes?” Tracey asked frantically.

“I’ve got a set of his robes here.” Hermione had stripped down to her underwear and was bringing the vial to her lips. “Look away!”

Tracey spun around just as Hermione’s skin began to bubble. “Oh, Merlin and Morgana — if Professor Potter finds Harry in our dormitory…”

“Yes, I know! Look outside, is there anyone there?”

Tracey poked her around the door into the corridor. “No, it’s clear. What are we going to tell her?”

“Get Ginny! She can disillusion!”

“Yes, but what are we going to tell her?”

“Tracey, I’ve got this! Just go!”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Lily Potter looked around the Slytherin common room for the dozenth time in the last five minutes. Where could Harry possibly be? She knew he was still in the castle. The headmaster had confirmed it.

When she finally got a hold of him, he was going to be in so much trouble.

Then, something on one of the sofas by the fireplace caught her eye. A slight ripple in the air —
almost unnoticeable — a disillusionment charm.

Lily narrowed her eyes and pointed her wand at the space. “Finite incantatem!”

There was a much more pronounced shimmer as the disillusionment fell.

Lily stared.

Her son, Harry Potter, was buried deep under a blanket, fast asleep, and next to him slept Ginny Weasley. The two were snuggled into each other, Ginny’s head resting in the crook of Harry’s neck. Even as she watched, Ginny tried to nuzzle her way even deeper into him.

Lily’s heart melted. Despite the curt way Ginny usually acted around her, any mother would be hard pressed not to find the tableau in front of her utterly adorable.

She approached cautiously, feeling a good chunk of her anger and frustration draining out of her. She then poked around with her wand, stretching her extremely limited magic sensing abilities to the limit, eventually deciding that, yes, there was also a silencing charm around them, which would explain why they hadn’t heard her shouting only a moment ago.

Had Harry cast them? It wouldn’t surprise her. He was already at NEWT level, after all — such a little genius.

Lily dispelled the charm, crouched down beside them, and put a gentle hand on Harry’s shoulder, slowly shaking him. “Harry,” She said quietly.

Harry made a noise something like, “Mwushlumphmmm…”

“Harry,” she said, a little louder.

Harry’s eyes flickered open.

“You can’t sleep here, Harry.”

“Mum?” He looked mildly confused.

“If you and Ginny want to sleep you need to go to your dormitories.”

“Ginny?” Harry looked to his side, noticed Ginny, and became fully awake. “Mum, why are you here?”

“Harry, where have you been all day? I’ve been looking for you.”

“Training with Ginny.”

“Didn’t Ginny tell you I was looking for you?”

“Well, yeah, but I figured if it was important you’d find me.”

Lily let out an exasperated sigh.

Ginny was starting to wake up now. “Lady Lily?” she muttered.

“That’s professor while we’re in school, Miss Weasley.” She turned to Harry. “I’d like you to be at my apartment for dinner tomorrow tonight. Say six o’clock.”
Harry’s eyes widened. “I had plans tomorrow.”

Lily smiled. “I know you work hard, Harry, but I’m sure you can take out a few hours from training to have dinner with your family, yes?”

Harry considered this, then looked down sheepishly. “Yes, Mum.”

“And bring one of your friends — John’s bringing one of his — maybe Ginny here.”

“Yes, Mum.”

“And now, off to bed.”

Harry slowly got to his feet and shuffled his way to the stairs, holding an equally tired looking Ginny’s hand the whole way. They only stopped holding hands when Harry took the stairs heading into the boy’s dormitory and Ginny took the ones heading to the girls.

Lily nodded to herself, stood up, surveyed the Slytherin common, and left, leaving behind her a rather incredulous group of onlookers.

At the same time that lady lily was leaving, at the court of the Dark, Draco, Nott, Pansy, and Alexandra all traded looks.

“That,” said Pansy, “was the largest amount of dragonshit I’ve ever seen Harry Potter shovel anyone.”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

The earth turned.

It was morning in Iceland, and the sun was just now deciding to show itself.

In one of the magical hotel rooms a few doors down from where Harry and Daphne were staying, a lithe middle aged witch, dressed only in rather racy underwear and slippers, was leaning over in front of a dressing-room table mirror, applying a thick layer of bright red lipstick. She had sharp features, blonde hair, rather long, painted fingernails, and the air of a woman who has done many things, and, in some cases, people, to get to where she is, and isn’t ashamed about it in the least.

She was not alone in the room. A man relaxed in the room’s lone double bed, equally unclothed and smoking a cigarette.

“Rita, Luv, why the rush? The tour won’t be setting out for an hour. They’re probably both still at breakfast.”

Rita Skeeter was now busily stepping into a set of fashionable magenta robes. A small vial of muddy, goopy potion stood on the dressing-room table. “Breakfast that I should be at,” she snapped. “Drat the editor, getting me the tip-off so late — drat portkey sickness…” She glared at the man watching her straighten her robes with an appreciative eye. “…Drat you, Bozo.”

Bozo grinned. “I’m just interested to see what tasty little crumpet you snatched a hair from this time.”

Rita ignored this, produced a hair from a silver cigarette case, let it settle into the goop, and gulped down the vial of muddy potion. As she did, her hair changed from blonde to pepper grey, her nails shrank, and her face shifted, becoming older, more wrinkled. Her robes auto-adjusted themselves
Bozo rolled his eyes and let out a disappointed sigh. “You couldn’t have just gone with a notice-me-not, could you, Luv?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Rita’s voice now sounded old and creaky. “Slytherin’s over-inflated reputation may be little more than smoke and mirrors, but I’m not taking the chance that the man could spot one of my notice-me-nots from a mile away.”

Rita then snatched up her handbag, hobbled to the door, opened it, hobbled through, and shut it behind her.

Bozo puffed out another long stream of smoke. “Well, Luv, you’re the first fashionable granny I’ve ever seen who doesn’t use a beauty potion.”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

The wizarding enclave in Reykjavik was not, in anyway, a large affair, which was understandable. Iceland did not have a large population. At just two hundred wizards strong, they were so small, they could barely afford to field a national quidditch team. Some years they couldn’t even manage that. They didn’t have a ministry, per se. Maintaining the statue of secrecy was everyone’s responsibility.

What they did have was an ICW representative whose job it was to keep himself to himself when everything was going well and go cap in hand to the various other members when they weren’t — such as during an incident two-hundred years previously, when a beautiful breeding pair of Swedish Short Snouts had somehow found their way to Iceland from Scandinavia, quickly enchanting the locals, despite their power and ferocity.

It was all fun and games, until a muggle got eaten, and the Icelandic wizards realised they didn’t know nearly enough about dragons to keep them.

As was his duty, Iceland’s ICW representative travelled to Italy and politely asked the Kingdom of Sweden to come pick the dragons up. The Swedish representative refused, instead telling them to just slaughter the two beasts and have done with it. Not taking this for an acceptable answer, he then went to the Ukrainian representative and asked if they would like two free Swedish Short Snouts. The Ukrainian Minister of Magic sent word that they had no use for more dragons and to deal with it themselves. Finally, he’d petitioned the Emperor of the Magical Roman Empire, who’d told him to, “Get stuffed, and stop wasting my time you massive oaf.”

Ticked off no end, Iceland’s wizards did not butcher the dragons. They instead herded them into mountains, hired experts from Magical Britain to plug the gaps in their expertise, and set up a dragon reserve of their own. Twenty years later, Sweden was furious, Ukraine was jealous, and The Emperor of the Magical Roman Empire became the largest consumer in Europe of Iceland’s newest chief export — inexpensive Short Snout products.

Many of those products were proudly displayed in the windows of the dozen-ish shops that Harry (Lord Slytherin) and Daphne walked by on their way to the wizarding Iceland guided tour. Meat, blood, bone, horn (both ground and whole), individual scales, heartstrings, claws, even in one shop, a whole dragon’s head, mounted on the wall with a plaque beneath it saying, ‘Slain by [Your name here].’

The largest shop by far though, sold dragon hide armour — incredibly expensive stuff. A full set of shimmering blue duelling robes, including trousers, undershirt, boots, gloves, and the robe itself,
would set the prospective duellist or auror department back a little over 160 galleons — nearly eight-thousand pounds — and an auror generally needed to replace their gear at least once a year.

They stopped by to admire a particularly fine set in the shop and ask some questions, before Daphne turned over the price tag, and whistled under her breath. “Wow — did my duelling robes cost that much?”

“Like I said,” said Lord Slytherin. “Spoiled pureblood princess.”

“Oh, shut up,” Daphne retorted, cheeks reddening. “But I suppose this explains why none of the other girls’ duelling robes are dragon hide.”

They continued walking at a relaxed pace until they reached the conclave’s main square, where someone had rolled out a half dozen carpets and tied them all together with rope. A small group of other wizards and witches were already there, dressed in what could only be described as ‘tourist’ dress. Several wore omnioculars around their necks and one woman was bundled up against the cold so tightly that she was practically round.

“All aboard!” shouted a huge man who looked like he might be distantly related to the Hogwarts gamekeeper. He waved Harry and Daphne onto the second carpet “Lord Slytherin — Miss Heiress.”

They didn’t have long to wait before the carpets all slowly rose off from the floor, causing Daphne to let out a little squeal and cling to Harry, and they were off, flying over the many houses of Iceland’s capital, and out over the desolate whiteness.

“I thought you loved flying,” Slytherin said, sitting cross-legged on the carpet the two had all to themselves.

“I love it when I’m the one doing the flying,” Daphne replied, still clutching her Lord’s arm tightly as the chill wind whipped through their hair. “Just sitting on a floating rug feels wrong.” She smiled. “Still better than sitting in the castle all day though.”

They passed over a small set of mountains.

“And if you look on your right,” came the voice of the tour-guide on the first carpet in the train, “you’ll see Katla, known for its violent eruptions, and known to the locals as the grand-father of dragons.”

Their fellow tourists all went Ooooo and a couple took magical photos with massive cameras that exhumed great puffs of green and purple smoke.

“My lord,” Daphne started, in a meaningful tone of voice.

Harry nodded and quickly cast a privacy charm.

“What do you think?” she said, once the charm had gone up. “Could that be the sign of the dragon’s roar from Luna’s prophecy?”

“It’s not impossible, although if it is then we’ve got quite a task ahead of us — that’s a big mountain.”

After that, Daphne and Harry continued to chat with each other under privacy charm, simply enjoying the scenery, the calm, and each other’s company. Three carpets behind them, an old woman watched the pair with sharp blue eyes.
Rita Skeeter wasn’t paying attention to the majestic scenery around her. Her gaze was instead fixed on the wizard and witch three carpets in front of her.

They’d put up some kind of muffling charm so that not even her sharp hearing could catch what they were saying to each other, but that didn’t matter. Quite apart from being an acceptable lay, Bozo had his other uses too. One of these was the ability to read lips as though reading a book. Slytherin, of course, wore a mask that covered his entire face, but the girl didn’t.

Despite being a backward dump hardly worthy of being an independent magical country, at least in Rita’s mind, Iceland did at least have a public pensieve. She mused that it was probably the only pensieve in the country, while her mind already started to write possible headlines and pen damning story threads.

“Lord Slytherin vacations alone with his betrothed…. Heiress Greengrass emerged from their shared hotel room that morning practically glowing…. The young Heiress spent the whole tour pressed up to her future lord’s side…”

Rita frowned. Was that too subtle? People were such colossal idiots. They generally had to be beaten over the head before they got what they were being told. What if she kept the story thread but changed the headline?

“PROPRIETARY CONCERNS OVER LORD SLYTHERIN’S SECRET VACATION WITH HEIRESS GREENGRASS.”

‘I think it’s shocking,’ some random idiot she’d grab in Diagon Alley would say.

‘Just goes to show, you can’t trust someone who doesn’t show their face,’ or possibly, ‘They ought to do something about it!’

The problem was that no one knew anything about Lord Slytherin. If she started trying to tarnish his image without exposing who he really was, all she’d do was add another layer of respectful fear to the man’s already ridiculous image. When a powerful man gets away with something, it just confirms to everyone how powerful they are.

It was nearing mid-day by the time the tour finished, gently bringing them to stop back at the square they’d started at.

Rita hobbled after the girl and Lord Slytherin as quickly as she could back to the hotel, only turning from them when she reached her own room, just four doors down from theirs. She grabbed Bozo and together they rushed, or in Bozo’s case, sauntered, down to the public pensieve shop.

“That old witch moved fast, didn’t she?” Daphne called up through the entrance to Harry’s trunk after changing into something rather more suitable for adventuring in. She still got a secret thrill every time she wore boys clothes. It just felt so taboo. Tracey’s reaction reminded her of that every time she did it in her oldest friend’s presence.

“Probably a spy,” Harry said, helping her out of the trunk. “We’ll make sure to lose her before we
head off anywhere important.”

It turned out that wasn’t necessary. The bent over woman wasn’t anywhere in sight as the two made their way out of the capital and towards where the goblins had set up their expedition base of operations — a ring of warded wizard tents a little way off the muggle road.

“I’m still amazed Father is letting us do this trip unchaperoned,” Daphne said as they neared the tents. “Now that I’m in-between.”

Harry coughed. “Actually, Daphne, we are chaperoned.”

“What?!”

“One of your house elves, Milly, has been following us since we left Hogwarts. Not always easily, I might add. I had to drop her a trail to follow when we were on the broomsticks.”

Daphne huffed. “I should have known.”

They didn’t have any more opportunity to talk before they were greeted at the outer-ring.

“Good to see you again, Lord Slytherin — Miss Heiress.” Secured-Collateral gave them a wicked goblin grin. “A lot colder than London, out here, and a lot more desolate, but you can’t be wanting for dragons. We’ve got them in spades.”

“You came here for us?” Daphne asked.

Secured-Collateral laughed. “Someone with a prophecy poking around the old treasure hunting grounds — where else is there to be? We’ve already done a sweep of some of the areas that match what your looking for, but there’s a lot of wind here — and where the land meets it is just about everywhere.”

“Your sweep was comprehensive?” Harry asked from under his Lord Slytherin mask. They followed the perky goblin into one of the expanded tents.

“Very.” Secured-Collateral pointed towards a map stuck to a cloth wall. “I myself don’t see what else you’ll be finding, but who knows how fate works, hmm? Maybe you’ve got some special talents we don’t know about.”

Daphne’s face did not go blank. Only amateur’s faces went blank when presented with such an obvious probe for information. “We’ll take a look around and see if there’s anything you might have missed,” she said. “I know it’s unlikely, but you never know.”

Secured-Collateral nodded. “You got it. Ask one of the goblins in the next room for the maps — and I hope you’ve got warming charms on your brooms. You’re going to need them.”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Daphne didn’t need a warming charm. She soared through the air as if she was born to be there, which, for a small part of her, was true. So much better than a carpet.

Her future lord, by contrast, did need a warming charm. In fact, not only did he need a warming charm, he needed several extra layers of robes too. A Slytherin Green scarf was wrapped around his neck.

Daphne couldn’t help think the whole thing was rather cute — not a sentiment she could ever
remember thinking about Lord Slytherin.

“Not all of us can be Golden Eagles, my lady,” Harry said, Daphne holding formation with him as they cruised towards the most likely target on the map they’d been given.

Daphne giggled. “I can’t wait to be in the animagus hunt. A thousand feet up in the air — no one will get even close to me.”

“I think that might be counted as bad sportsmanship.”

“Too bad. What about falconry? Isn’t it expected for a lady to be on her husband’s arm?”

Harry chuckled. “Witty.”

“Thank you.”

They continued to soar towards their target for a little while longer, Harry’s scarf whipping around in the high wind. They reached their destination and hovered over the warded wreckage of a Viking longship — a Viking longship with a roaring dragon’s head at the front.

Harry shivered, even through all his thick clothes and magic.

“Is your animagus form cold-blooded?” Daphne asked. “I would have thought they were warm-blooded.”

She could practically hear the smirk form under Harry’s mask.

“Neither. I am, in fact, half-blooded.”

She matched his smirk with one of her own. “Witty.”

“Thank you.”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

“What shall we do with this, Mistress?”

Convertible-Security looked up from her work. Two of her boys were holding what looked like a rather frightened old woman at pike point.

“Caught her poking around the camp perimeter,” one of the two elaborated.

“Please,” said the woman desperately, “I’m just a tourist. I didn’t know this was a goblin camp.”

Convertible-Security shrugged. “Put her in chains for an hour. If she’s clean of polyjuice, release her. Otherwise, bring her back to me and we’ll see what’s what.”

“Yes, Mistress.” The two goblins saluted.

The old woman whimpered as she was dragged away.

Convertible-Security went back to her work, which at the moment included a rather promising report by the team down in Ciro. There weren’t many things that the goblin clans worked together on, but this was most definitely one of them.

It was a full ten minutes before the word came through that the old witch, hindered by neither
Rita Skeeter shivered as she ducked back into her hotel room. This was absolutely not the kind of weather to use her animagus form in.

“Back already, Luv? Miss me that much?”

“Shut up, Bozo. I need another polyjuice. The little shits caught me.”

“On the dresser.”

Rita snatched up the vial of polyjuice, produced another hair from her silver cigarette case, let it fall into the potion, drank the potion, and changed.

Bozo whistled. “I like this one much better.”

Rita straightened her robes. They now hugged her body like a silk wrapped around an hourglass. “I’m sure,” she said, tartly. Her voice now sounded like honey dribbling into the listener’s ear. She made for the door. “And make yourself useful while I’m out. Ask around the place or something. I don’t pay you to just lie around the place.”

Daphne had found an appropriate rock to sit on. She focused her magic into her fingers, pointed her index finger at the floor, and said, “Profero oculus Kilrogg.”

She felt her world shift. She opened her eyes, and then she opened her eye.

The longboat was beached far up a rocky slope. Someone had obviously dragged it all the way up here and left it, but not before surrounding it with ancient rune stones designed to conceal it from all but the most determined.

The goblins had been determined.

A set of much newer ward-stones now mirrored the old ones, encircling them in a power all their own.

Daphne manoeuvred her magic eyeball up and down the old hull, looking for the tell-tell sign that someone, a long time ago, had placed a fidelius charm. It was, after all, by far the most obvious way she and Harry might find an ancient treasure where no one else had.

“There’s a lot of ground to cover other than just the boat,” Harry’s voice said. “The beach has got to be a hundred meters away.”

Daphne nodded. “If it’s here, I’ll find it.”

“Those were the first words out of Hermione’s mouth when she, Tracey, Ginny, Alexandra, and Luna all met in Hermione’s trunk at lunchtime to discuss that evening’s dinner with Lady Potter.

“If we all go,” Hermione continued, before anyone else could get a word in, “there’s far less
chance of Lady Potter or John Potter discovering that one of us is Harry.”

“I can’t be there,” Alex said. “Why would I be there?”

“Obviously I didn’t mean you.”

“You said we should all go.”

“Yes, but—”

“Hermione — Alex.” Luna’s dreamy voice cut across the two. She was fixing a large white flower in her hair. “Let’s not fight. We all just want to help Harry.”

Alex and Hermione looked abashed.

“Hermione has a good point,” Luna continued. “The more of us that go, the more we can distract Lady Potter from any unusual behaviour.” The white flower snapped a fly from the air and gulped. “We must all do our best to act as normal as possible. I imagine Alex has stuff to do with the Dark.”

“What?” It took Alex a few moments to catch up. “Oh, yes, I do, lots. At the same time, in fact.”

“I still have trouble believing she’s a spy,” Tracey muttered.

Luna nodded. “Then we just need to decide who is going to be Harry.”

“Ooo! Can it be me?” Ginny grinned. “I’ve always wanted to try it.” She put on a serious face and tried to drop her voice as low as she could. “I’m afraid I must ask you not to torture muggles, mister pureblood supremacist. It is most undignified.”

Hermione scoffed. “Harry doesn’t talk like that.”

“Lord Slytherin does.”

“Well, you’re not going to be Lord Slytherin.”

“Nope!” Ginny grinned again. “I’m going to be Harry.”

Hermione let out an exasperated sigh. “I should be Harry.”

“Why?”

“I’ve done it before!”

“No, you’ve been Lord Slytherin. And that was only for, like, thirty seconds.”

“But Harry would want—”

“Ginny — Hermione.” Luna’s dreamy voice cut in, again.

They both looked at her.

“I think Ginny should be Harry tonight.”

“Why?” Hermione asked, sounding miffed. “Lady Potter is expecting her to be there.”

“Ginny is devious,” Luna said. “This mission will need a devious mind. She has many of the same
skills that Harry possesses, like wandless magic and swatting. Her friendship with Harry is also less well known than yours is. It might be better it stays that way. And if she is spotted as a fake, she is best able of all of us to leave without being caught. We could tell Lady Potter that Ginny isn’t feeling well.”

Hermione grumbled and folded her arms.

Ginny beamed.

“Besides,” Luna continued. “There is another role that we’ll need you for — and you’re perfect for it.”

“What?”

“Distracting Lady Potter, of course. Who better to distract a professor than the best student in the year?”

Hermione perked up. “When you put it like that…”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Rita Skeeter was pissed off. She’d been flying all over the place trying to catch a hint of where Slytherin and the girl were, but they just weren’t to be found.

Eventually, she arrived back at the hotel room, shivering with cold and sniffing badly.

Bozo was sitting up in bed with his shirt off. His hair was messed up, and the room smelt of sex. There was a piece of paper on the desk on which someone had written a floo address. It was also amazingly warm. That just pissed her off even more. “I thought you were going to go find something useful,” she snapped.

Bozo didn’t bat an eyelid. “Yeah, Luv — I did. There’s a rumour Slytherin’s here for the dragons. Perhaps he snuck off to see one up close.”

“You want me to go sneaking around the dragon’s nests?!”

“I’m just telling you what I heard. One of the sales girls at the dragon armour shop told me they’d been in there — asking some very interesting questions, apparently.”

Rita huffed, scrunched up the paper with the floo address on it, and threw it at Bozo’s forehead, before stomping out of the room and slamming the door shut behind her.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

The lake next to the Volcano was crystal clear and as still as a mirror. A single rock thrown into it would cause perfect ripples to spread out in ever-expanding circles until the ripples broke into bobs, and, slowly, settled back down again. The surrounding scenery could put the viewer in mind of some alien planet, all rocks, and rocks, and, well, more rocks.

Daphne sat back on her rock, as the eye of kilrogg zipped back towards her. She released her grasp on the divination magic, and the eyeball faded from the world.

“Nothing?” Harry said.

Daphne shook her head. “No — I don’t think it’s here either. The longboat felt like a better bet, to be honest. Besides, there’s no wind.” She picked up a pebble and chucked it into the water. It went
‘Ploop.’ “I was really hoping we’d find it by now.” Daphne sighed. “And now?”

“Afternoon Tea.”

Daphne brightened up. “Where?”

“Right here.”

Ten minutes later they were both enjoying a picnic of buttered scones and jam that Harry had been hiding in his shrunk-trunk. A small pot of tea boiled under an emerald green flame. The afternoon sun was halfway down in the sky. They sat opposite each other on the same blanket they’d been wrapped up in the previous evening.

Daphne allowed herself to just enjoy the peace and quiet for a while.

Eventually, she put her plate down, dabbed at the side of her mouth with a napkin, and asked, “Where are we going to look next?”

Lord Slytherin put down his teacup with a little clink. “I think it’s time we got a bit closer to the source of the prophecy’s main identifier.”

“You mean dragons?” Daphne couldn’t help a little bit of excitement creep into her voice.

Her lord tilted his head. “I mean dragons.”

— DP & SW: NRtCD —

“I’m not sure about this, Black.”

Draco was nervous. This seemed to be his default state of being around the Black Heiress, but this was pushing even those boundaries, and if he wasn’t careful Pansy or Theo would be sure to notice something was up.

“Look,” Black said, clearly impatient, “Do you want to always be in your father’s shadow, or do you want to forge your own path?”

“I am the Malfoy Heir,” he said, “I serve the house of Malfoy until it is time for me to become its lord.”

“And you can serve your house better by taking initiative!” Black snapped. “Now grab the rope and stop being a pussy.”

Draco winced but did tentatively take hold of the rope that was dangling from a hole in the castle ceiling.

“A lady shouldn’t use words like that,” he muttered, as the rope went taut and started lifting him up into the air.

“I’m sorry, did you say something?” Alex was already in the secret passageway above.

“No,” Draco quickly replied, “Nothing.”

The passageway in the ceiling was dusty, dirty, and cramped. They crawled forward on their hands and knees at about the same speed as a flobber worm after a particularly large dinner.

“My robes are getting filthy,” Draco complained.
“Shut up.”

“Please don’t tell me you’ve been doing this all year.”

“Shut up.”

“Not even the self-cleaning charms are going to get this out.”

Black glared back at him. “Don’t you do dirty stuff all the time? Like the animagus hunt?”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“You’re supposed to get dirty then.”

“And I’m telling you that you’re supposed to get dirty here, Malfoy. Now shut up and keep up.”

They crawled on through what felt like miles of cramped tunnel, Draco silently cursing the first year girl in front of him all the way, until eventually they dropped down into another, far more roomy passageway, one in which someone had placed what looked like miniature runestones in a circle around a bare patch of wall.

“Keep close to me,” Black said.

Draco nodded.

Black tapped the wall with her wand, and the wall swung back and out.

They stepped through the gap in the wall and found themselves in…

“The library?” Draco said, nonplussed. “You took me through all that, just to go to the library?”

“Not just the library, Malfoy.” Black gestured towards a sign at the end of one of the shelves which read, ‘Necromancy and Demonology.’

Draco’s eyes widened, “We’re in—!”

“Shhh!”

Draco crouched down and lowered his voice. “We’re in the restricted section?” he hissed. “Do you have any idea how much trouble we could get into by being here?”

“Yes, which is why you’re going to keep quiet and follow me.”

They walked through the shelves until Black found what she’d obviously been looking for. She picked out a book, flipped through with a practised thumb, and started reading. Eventually, she looked up at him. “Well?” she asked. “Aren’t you going to look for something?”

Draco hesitated. He really shouldn’t be here. He really shouldn’t be doing this. Everything about this was wrong and dangerous on so many levels.

But…

His eyes flickered to a book titled ‘Unraveling the Dark Arts, Volume II.’

But, if he was going to be here anyway…
Daphne and Harry stood at the entrance to a massive valley. They’d felt the ward magics all around them as they entered. A team of wizards had turned up shortly after that to find the intruders, but they’d simply hidden under the invisibility cloak until they’d given up and left.

And now they stood facing the valley.

Daphne’s mouth was dry.

Dragons were everywhere.

Large adults rested on the tops of mountains, watching the goings on down below with apparent disinterest. Younger ones played further down, blowing fire on each other, and butting their crystal blue heads together. Massive nests made of rock could just be made out atop the many crags and gullies. Off to one side, a somewhat small female nuzzled a much larger male.

There were dragons everywhere, and there were the signs of dragons everywhere.

The rocks were scarred with frightening claw marks, and the ground was blackened, almost glassy and scattered with countless reminders of where they were, from fragments of bone to teeth, claws, and ash.

As if to emphasise the point, one of the larger dragons chose that moment to let out a bellowing roar.

Daphne felt a chill go down her spine.

“You’re safe with me, Daph.”

Daphne smiled and stepped closer to Harry. “Yes, my lord. I know.”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Damn Slytherin!

Why did Bozo have to be right?

Rita Skeeter ducked behind a massive boulder in the valley of dragons, heart pounding, breath heaving. She’d barely avoided being caught by the dragon preservation wizards by hiding out in her beetle form, and had nearly frozen to death because of it.

She rubbed her freezing skin and desperately tried to get some warming charms to penetrate her shivering body.

What the hell was he doing here?

Why the hell was he here?

Why the hell was she here?

Having almost literally frozen, Rita then figuratively froze as a large, dragon-shaped shadow briefly eclipsed her, before the weak sun found her again.

She had half a mind to just give up and fly back, but she couldn’t do that now. Not now. Not when Slytherin was clearly up to something. He’d never expect anyone to be following him here. If he’d
ever let anything slip, it would surely be now.

Rita steeled herself, cast one last warming charm, and changed.

The beautiful jewelled beetle flittered across the desolate dragon landscape, towards its unsuspecting target.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Daphne snapped her real eyes open in triumph.

“T’ve found it,” she whispered.

Harry was by her in an instant. “Truly?”

“Yes,” Daphne’s voice was hushed, excited. “There’s a fidelius charm at the end of the valley. It’s not large but it clearly hides a cave.”

Harry winced. “I wish you hadn’t said that. We really need Hermione for this.” He gestured vaguely, and, as it happened, in completely the wrong direction. “Quickly. Guide me.”

Daphne nodded, grabbed his hand, and led him up the valley, taking care to keep a good distance from the many reptilian eyes that tracked their movement.

“It’s here,” Daphne whispered.

“What is?”

Daphne cursed, and pulled Harry inside.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

In her little beetle mind, Rita cursed.

They’d disappeared. Where had they gone? They’d been there, clear as day, and then suddenly, they weren’t. And it was far too cold to stay as a beetle.

She shifted back into her human form, and hid behind a convenient rock. No way was she staying out in the open with so many animal eyes around.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Daphne quickly found the rune stones which anchored the fidelius charm to the cave. Since they didn’t have Hermione to temporarily wipe Harry’s memory, and let him install a new set behind the old ones, Daphne knocked the stones over instead, with a thirty-foot pole, from the other side of the cave.

Harry blinked, looked around and firmed his jaw. “Right. Good work, Daph. I’ll take it from here.”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Rita stared. There was a cave on the other side of the valley. That hadn’t been there before. Where the hell had that come from?

Is that were Slytherin and Greengrass had gone? Should she make a break for it? But she was so
cold. If she ran for it, and a dragon attacked, she was as good as dead. If she changed into her beetle, she could make it across the distance to the cave, but would she be able to stay as a beetle for how long it would take for Slytherin to cough up his secrets?

Probably not.

She grimaced and cast another warming charm. Once her fingers felt like they weren’t about to drop off, then she’d change, and go.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Daphne sat staring at Harry, sat cross-legged and eyes closed in the middle of the cave.

She wasn’t sure how long it had been, but it had been a while, that much was certain. Harry then opened his eyes, grinned, tapped his wand on the new primary rune stone in front of him, and said, “Fidelius Occultum.”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Warmth! Finally!

Rita poked her head over the boulder.

Now she could finally make a break for…

For what?

A feeling of fuzziness crept into her brain. She tried to think, but every time she tried, the thoughts flowed out as though her brain was a sponge and someone was giving it a jolly good squeeze.

Rita blinked. She cursed. Something had happened again. She wasn’t sure what, but it had.

Damn it! All this way and she’d missed them, again!

“DAMN IT!”

The words rang out across the valley, bouncing back and forth like a siren’s call to hungry sailors.

Rita froze in horror as soon as the words left her mouth, all thoughts of Slytherin forgotten. In the distance, something roared.

She was just about to change on instinct and fly away when, once again, a shadow eclipsed her.

Dread filling her, Rita slowly turned around, and looked into the eyes of a winged predator 100 times heavier than her, fully capable of swallowing her in one single gulp. A puff of flame instantly told her that to change meant instant death.

The dragon inspected her critically.

“P-Please.”

The dragon lunged, Rita screamed, something popped into being in front of her, and the glorious squeezing of an apparition enveloped her entire body — an apparition somehow capable of going straight through apparition wards.

She fell on the ground in a heap, and, miraculously, not bitten clean in half. She breathed in great
gulps of wonderful, wonderful air.

“What’s all this then?” said a horribly familiar female voice.

Rita slowly looked up. Goblins.

A house elf stepped up beside her. “Milly is being watching this nasty witch trying to snoop on the young mistress, oh yes. Milly is being considering letting her being dragon food, but Lord Greengrass is preferring to use his enemies rather than killing them.”

Rita groaned. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

--- DP & SW: NRiCD ---

In the Icelandic cave guarded by dragons, Daphne and Harry looked down at the small chest they’d dug up.

Daphne wiped wet sand off her hands and frowned. “Is that all?”

The all in question was a small chest half full of golden galleons and half full of old books. A substantial fortune to the man on the street, but not much in the grand scheme of things.

Harry pulled one of the books free. “It seems so. Maybe there’s something of value in these.”

“There’s only got to be, what? Maybe four thousand galleons?”

“Could be.”

“That’s not going to be much help.”

“It’ll keep us afloat for another half a year.”

Daphne sagged. “I was hoping for rather much more than that. It doesn’t seem much considering what Luna had to go through for it.”

--- DP & SW: NRiCD ---

The Hogwarts library was vast, containing much of the accumulated knowledge of a thousand years of scholarly activity. For the adventurous soul, there are many treasures to be discovered, if said soul could avoid being caught. In the previous school year, Harry Potter had gone so far as to install a fidelius charm to make his own rummaging that much easier.

He’d taken it down at the start of this year when he discovered the limitations on the number of fidelius charms a single caster could maintain.

But that didn’t mean that hiding in the forbidden section was no longer possible — far from it. The Hogwarts Library was vast, as has already been mentioned, and just like the rest of the school, bent space in strange and sometimes very convenient ways.

Among the shelves of the forbidden section, Draco Malfoy cautiously navigated through an archway made of books and into yet another area he’d not encountered on his last lap of this section.

He’d spent the last few hours scanning the spines of hundreds of tomes, pulling out books at random, and skimming their contents—mostly boring, sometimes gory, occasionally fascinating— all the while unable to keep his heart from pounding in his chest at the thought of what would
happen if he were caught.

He poked his head around the next corner and gazed down the main corridor of what turned out to be the necromancy section. Alexandra Black was sitting cross-legged on the floor, nose deep in a book, seemingly unaware of her dangerous surroundings. Another pile of books sat beside her.

This girl was the source of all his headaches and fears, but, at the same time, Draco couldn’t help feeling something strange — something he so rarely felt. Being here, where he shouldn’t be, without his parent’s permission or knowledge, was, there were no other words to use, thrilling.

He edged his way up the corridor, ears constantly alert for the sound of approaching adult footsteps, or just any footsteps at all.

He reached the first year girl and glanced down at the pile of books.

They reeked of dark magic — exactly the kind of books he’d been strenuously avoiding since they arrived. You never knew what you might find. Perhaps it would scream the moment someone picked it up, or curse you to only speak in tongues, or instantly turn your kidneys into soup. There were many dark curses that could kill you before you could get to a trained healer.

Did Black not know?

Without looking up, the girl then put down her current book and reached for the next one on the pile. Draco was just about to shout a warning when black chains sprang from nowhere, wrapped around the book, ripped it open, and dragged it in front of Black’s face, all while the book struggled and writhed like a condemned man being held down by four or five stronger men.

Black turned to the front page, frowned, and looked up. “Oh, it’s you.”

Draco clenched his fists. “Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?” he hissed. “It could have killed you.”

“No.” Alex pointed to a book on the far shelf. “That book would kill you. This one is merely charmed to fight back.”

“You couldn’t know that.”

“Yes, I can.”

“How?”

It should not be possible to look down your nose at someone who is sitting cross-legged beside you, while you are still standing, but Alexandra Black managed it. “It’s just so obvious,” she said. “Magic whispers to me.”

Draco hesitated. The way Black had said that last sentence screamed Dark Lady at upper sonorous levels. Eventually, he said, “But still — necromancy, Black? Don’t you think that’s a bit much? We’re not grownups yet.”

“Why shouldn’t we?” Black shot back. “We have occlumency, which makes our minds older, but our parents would have us use it only to make sure we don’t embarrass ourselves. We are capable of so much more.”

“Maybe your father, does, Black. Mine trusts me with dark magic.”
Black snorted.

“It’s true!” Draco bit out.

“Show me then.”

Draco slipped his wand out of his robes, pointed it down the corridor and whispered, “Serpensortia.” A large black snake shot out of his wand and fell at the end of the corridor. A small cloud of dust rose where it landed. It looked around and hissed.

Alex nodded.

Draco looked at her triumphant. “You see?”

“I see talent that is being wasted.”

“What?!”

“You cast that easily, without even thinking about it, and yet that was your ‘most impressive’ piece of dark magic? Give me a break.”

“Well, what would you do?”

The black chains holding the still struggling book slammed said book shut. “I would find something more ambitious to attempt. We are Slytherins after all.”

“Ambitious like what?”

Black waved a vague hand at the rows upon rows of books. “I don’t care. Pick something.”

Draco’s eyes scanned the books. He reached towards a book, and a chain grabbed his wrist.

“Not that one!” Black said, sharply. “Unless you want to go through life speaking only Russian.”

Draco shook the chain off and glared. “What about this one?” he asked, pointing at the next book down.

“Sure. That one’s okay.”

Draco opened the book and his stomach turned. The artist had been quite graphic with their illustrations. Necromancy, apparently, covered a huge range of topics, but by far the most basic was… “This,” he said. “We could do this on a spider or something.”

He handed the book to Black.

Black read the page he’d selected and gave him a funny look. “The inferi ritual?”

Draco mistook Alex’s look of bemusement for worry. “What? Scared, Black? You’re not backing out now, are you?”

Black smirked. “Not at all. I was just surprised. Meet me at the Black Lake at six.”

“What? Tonight?”

Black rolled her eyes and turned back to her books. “Yes, Draco, Tonight.”

They didn’t stay in the restricted section much longer after that. Draco spent the time memorising
the details for the inferi ritual, which seemed to be shockingly simple, if terrifying in its results. Just before he slipped the book back in its place, his fingers traced the symbol they’d need to create for the ritual. A memory flashed through his mind — a memory of a giant undead tree tearing itself out of the ground to crush anyone that got in its way. That tree had been created with the same symbol — the symbol of the deathly hallows.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

As Draco left, a large grin formed on Alexandra’s face. That had been so much fun. The look on Malfoy’s face when she’d given him the, ‘you are wasting your talent,’ line, and when he’d actually picked up the inferi ritual it had been all she could do to keep a straight face. She’d been this close to bursting out laughing.

Alex made her way out of the restricted section, with its crazy geometry and cursed books, and then doubled back to the normal library, or as normal as a magical library could get. She found herself a quiet nook, dashed off a quick note for Luna, stuffed it into an official-looking envelope, and, checking that no one was watching, pulled another library book out of her bag. It wasn’t a book from the restricted section, but that didn’t matter. Getting caught with this book would be, in its own special way, much, much worse.

“Come now, Malcom, look at everything he has — money, fame, friends — don’t you want that too?” The Black Witch of the North smiled seductively and beckoned Malcom closer. “The Boy Who Lived is nothing compared to what you could be.”

Alex smirked and curled up in the armchair.

Malcom frowned and walked forward. “He shouldn’t have done what he did. But that doesn’t mean I trust you. I remember what you did before.”

The Black Witch of the North walked over to the mirror on the wall, covered with a large black drape. “The fate of the world, Malcom. I know we’ve had our differences in the past, but we must put that past us. The Boy Who Lived is too blind to see what is really there. You are not!” And she pulled off the drape to reveal—

“Miss Heiress?”

Alex’s heart leapt into her throat. She snapped the book shut, and just had the presence of mind to look annoyed rather than guilty. Hestia and Flora Carrow walked around the corner and stopped when they saw her.

“Yes?”

“Please, Miss Heiress,” probably Flora said nervously, “It’s nearly dinner.”

“Is it?” Alex blinked. She and Draco must have been longer than she’d thought.

“And since you said we weren’t to be at dinner without you, we had no choice but to come and find you,” probably Hestia continued. She paused. “Are you sure you don’t want us to call you The Dark Heiress?”

Alex hopped off the chair and slipped the Lockhart book back into her bag, careful not to show its cover to the twins. “No — Miss Heiress is fine.” Alex slung the bag over her shoulder. “Let’s go.”

They left the library, each twin falling into step beside her. The Carrow twin’s reaction to the common room incident had been perhaps the most extreme of all her classmates. Alex had entered
their shared dorm room after lights out, taken in the looks of fear on the two girl’s faces, and barked, “Go to bed.” She’d gotten two squeaks of acknowledgement in return, and two pledges the next morning to be at her beck and call for anything she might ever need while they were at Hogwarts, “anything at all, Miss Heiress, just please don’t hurt us.”

“You need to send an owl, Miss Heiress?” probably Flora asked, pointing to the envelope Alex still carried. Alex had instructed them to wear different coloured hair ornaments to tell them apart.

“No,” Alex said. “This is for Heiress Lovegood.”

“Lovegood?” Hestia wrinkled her nose. “She’s loopy. What business could you have with her?”

Alex felt a stab of anger, but held it down. “That is a Black family matter,” she drawled. “I am still the heiress of a Light family, regardless of my personal feelings.”

“It must be terrible, Miss Heiress.”

Alex nodded. “Quite terrible.”

They arrived at the great hall and took their places at the Slytherin table, but not before Alex made a great show of giving Luna the letter. After all, if you didn’t want anyone to think you were in secret communication with someone, the second best way to do that was to not keep the communication secret.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

“Where have you been?” Pansy asked Draco as he sat down at Dinner.

“Nowhere,” Draco replied, perhaps a tad too quickly. “Have you done our astronomy homework yet?”

“Of course,” Pansy replied. “Have you done our astronomy homework yet?”

“I’m doing it tomorrow.”

“So, you weren’t doing homework, then. C’mon, Draco — you can tell me. You’re running off alone all the time now. We used to do everything together. Remember when we were little and climbed into your father’s greenhouse?”

Draco couldn’t help a small smile, before quickly erasing it. “Yes, I remember. But I still haven’t been doing anything important.”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

In a trunk in the Slytherin second year’s girl’s dormitory, four young witches were in full on ‘getting ready to go out’ mode. The fact that ‘out’ in this case merely meant elsewhere in the castle was of no consequence to the proceedings.

The two muddy potions on a side table, however, were.

Hermione and Tracey looked on as Ginny and Luna picked up the potions and downed them in two quick gulps. Suddenly, their skin began to bubble. Ginny’s hair got shorter, while Luna’s changed from dirty blonde to fiery red.

Moments later, where Ginny had been standing was a perfect copy of Harry, and where Luna had been standing was a perfect copy of Ginny.
“Okay,” Tracey said, “I understand that Ginny can act Potter better than Luna, but isn’t this needlessly complex?”

“Lady Potter is expecting Ginny to be there,” Ginny said, adjusting the boy’s robes that now tailored her frame perfectly. “Wow, this feels so weird. I totally get why boys sit with their legs spread now.”

“Even so…”

“And Luna needs to leave before dinner is over,” Luna said. “Harry can’t do that without getting into trouble with Lady Potter.”

Tracey smirked. “Well, Tracey is just glad she doesn’t have to drink that muck. What was that letter that Alex gave you at dinner?”

“The letter is why Luna needs to leave early,” Luna said.

“Oh.”

“Can we please stop talking in third person now?” Hermione was busy fixing her earrings in place. “It’s rather irritating.”

“Ginny thinks its fun,” Ginny said, grinning impishly.

“Harry doesn’t talk like that.”

Ginny shrugged, stood a bit straighter, and adopted a face of mild good humour, laced with a touch of steel. She tilted her head. “Thank you, Hermione. You are, of course, correct. Please pass me my bag.”

“What?”

“My bag, Hermione, if you please.”

“Can’t you get it yourself? It’s right there.”

“Hermione,” Tracey said cautiously. “That’s Potter you’re talking to.”

“Not until we’re in public. And anyway, Harry wouldn’t ask me to pass him his bag when it’s just us. He’d summon it himself.”

“Yes, but if he did, you would get it for him.”

“Harry needs me for things more important than passing his bag.”

“Yes, but if he did—”

“—Then it would just be for show.” Hermione turned to Ginny. “You’d better not abuse this. Harry would not approve.”

Ginny smiled. “I trust Ginny to do what’s needed on a mission. And I know I can rely on you to do exactly what I say, when I say it, Hermione.”

Hermione huffed. “I do what Harry says because Harry knows what’s best — you’re not actually Harry — just remember that.”
Stew was bubbling in a small cauldron over a light blue fire. The smell rose into the air full of the promise of rich, meaty flavour, fighting for nasal dominance with the smell of freshly baked bread coming from a small magical oven. The aroma of fresh flowers dotted around the apartment in jars and vases barely stood a chance.

Lily Potter checked the stew once more and smiled.

And all without a single house elf, she thought to herself. James wouldn’t understand, although he’d pretend to understand, but James wasn’t here. Being the lady of an ancient and noble house was hard work. There was so much parchment floating around — something that her new teaching duties only made worse — or would have, if she didn’t have a teaching assistant. Sometimes it was nice to just spend an afternoon doing something different — preferable something involving actual magic. Again, thank Merlin for that teaching assistant.

Being the lady of an ancient and noble house was hard work, but it was not without its perks.

Lily Potter brought a spoonful of the stew to her lips and sipped. Not quite ready, yet.

A loud knock came from the living room. Lily left the kitchen, crossed the space, and opened the door. It was Harry.

“Hi, Mum.” Harry smiled winningly at her.

And Harry had brought not only Ginny, but Miss Davis and Miss Granger as well. “Good evening, young man. I wasn’t expecting this many.”

“You said I was to bring Ginny,” Harry said quickly. “And it wouldn’t be right if I didn’t bring Hermione.”

“And Miss Davis?”

Tracey gave her a nervous smile.

“She’s also my friend,” Harry said brightly. “And she’s ever so clever. If it wasn’t for Hermione, and Daphne, and well, me, I’m sure she’d be top of the year.” Harry paused. “Well, John too, I guess,” he finished rather less enthusiastically.

Lily put a hand on her hip. “Well, I can’t really say no can I?” She turned to the girls and her voice switched from parental to reassuring. “Of course you’re all welcome, girls. Come into the kitchen and I’ll show you some useful charms. I’m sure you’d like that.”

Lily switched the wizarding wireless on as she passed it on the way to the kitchen. “There you are, Harry. I know how much you enjoy listening to the news.”

Harry thanked her and sat down on the couch next to the wireless to listen by himself. Behind her, the girls all filed into the kitchen and started to ooo and ahh over the stew.

Lily frowned. She hadn’t known her second born son (by about five minutes) at all while growing up. They’d only been reunited during the summer, but after a whole month of getting to know him, she thought she knew him fairly well, and she couldn’t help shake the feeling that something wasn’t quite right.
Ginny sat on the sofa, listening to the wizarding wireless how she imagined Harry would — like a secret mastermind planning world domination.

*Wibble-wobble* The Union of African Ministries has stated that there is no connection between this week’s spate of disappearances and a similar string several months ago. Nevertheless, a Uagadou representative has gone on record as stating that the school is upping security measures and that parents should be alert when transporting their children. One of the missing persons is a sixteen-year-old Uagadou student, last seen five days ago on a day trip to a local village. All future day trips have been suspended until further notice. *Wibble-wobble*

*Wibble-wobble* The ICW voted last night to recognise the Full Moon Ministry as a legitimate wizarding government and provisional member of the ICW after thirty years of civil war between Full Moon Rebels and Transylvania. The last-minute peace deal between the two warring factions was hammered out in the chamber, and spearheaded by Supreme Mugwump Albus Dumbledore. Critics have blasted the deal as condemning hundreds of innocents to a fate worse than death, while supporters have praised the tough stance the deal takes on Full Moon activities outside of their new borders. *Wibble-wobble*

*Wibble-wobble* And in local news, Cork’s petition to the ministry for funding to build an extension to the community’s enclave has been turned down on budgetary grounds. Of all the mixed wizarding enclaves in Britain, Cork currently has the largest ratio living outside its walls, with only one enclaved wizard to every four living among the general muggle populous. By comparison, London, which has a magical population nearly three times as large, has a ratio of just one to one. A spokesman for the ministry said that it was regrettable, but until Cork could afford to galleon match the project, there was nothing they could do. The mayor of Cork has expressed his dismay, calling the ministry’s decision, ‘short-sighted and dangerous.’ *Wibble-wobble*

*Wibble-wobble* And now it’s time for the wind report. Light breezes across the country make for perfect flying condi—

Ginny leaned over and fiddled with the knob.

“—Mason passes the quaffle to Halbert! Oh! That was a close call!”

Ginny leaned back and grinned. Masterminding was a hard job, after all, and everyone knew Harry liked quidditch too.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Back in the kitchen, four wands pointed at the walls, four voices said, “Plates!” and a dozen plates flew from the shelves, spun around the room, and settled onto the kitchen counter, evenly spaced out, and without so much as a crack between them.

Lily smiled at her students. Two of them had got it right on their very first go, and Tracey had managed it on her second attempt. If only all her other students were as good as this group was. “Well done, girls,” she said. “Ginny, I’m especially impressed with you.” And she was. She’d heard from Flitwick about her and Luna Lovegood’s impressive progress in his class, but seeing it was something else. And her attitude had practically done a 180 since the start of school. Spending time with Harry was obviously doing her good.

Ginny smiled dreamily. “Thank you, Lady Potter.”

Tracey looked at her wand. “But, when are we going to need household charms? I mean, really?”
Lily fixed her with a knowing look. “You say that now, but there may well come a time when you’ll be glad you learned them.”

“I know what you mean,” Miss Granger enthused. This girl also seemed to be making a special effort to get along with her, counter to her usually frosty demeanour. “I couldn’t stand always being reliant on a servant to do everything for me. It would drive me mad.”

“I think,” Ginny said, “that lady Potter was more referring to the adage that the way to a boy’s heart is through his stomach.”

“Perhaps.” Lily gave Ginny a sideways look. “Do you have a boy you’re interested in, Ginny?”

“Harry of course.”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

Lily just smiled and softly shook her head. “Why don’t you go and see if Harry is ready for dinner?”

“Okay.”

When the stew was finally ready to be served, Lily re-entered the living room to find Ginny smiling brightly in Harry’s lap — something that Harry, while clearly trying to play it cool, nevertheless looked more than a little uncomfortable with. Lily frowned. Something still seemed off.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Ginny was doing her best not to panic. Luna had just come in from the kitchen, plopped herself down in her lap, and then snuggled up against her as though she were, well, Harry. Which would be fine, sort of, if Luna really were Ginny, and she really was Harry — and Luna was betrothed to Lord Slytherin, who was also Harry, so it was okay, but most people didn’t know that, so it also wasn’t. But more to the point, her body, that is to say, Harry’s body, whose form she, Ginny, was currently borrowing, was reacting to Luna, or rather to her, Ginny. She was reacting to herself — or was that Harry’s form was reacting to her? Or was Harry form reacting to Luna? Arghhh!

She played it as dignified as she could while Lady Potter had the other girls set the table, which felt really weird to be excluded from, and they almost had everything set up just so, when a knock came from the door.

“Ah, that’ll be your brother.”

Ginny tensed, which was probably a good thing, as it was the only thing stopping her from swearing when John walked in accompanied by Susan Bones, and none other than the diary — AKA Virgo Malfoy.

John froze as soon as his eyes landed on her and it took Ginny a moment to realise what the situation looked like.

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Oh, it was just too perfect. She couldn’t not do it.

Ginny looked John right in the eye, smirked, wrapped her hands around Luna’s waist, pulled her in close to her, and mouthed, “Mine.”

The look on John’s face was worth a million galleons.
The first course was amazing after that — or as amazing as dinner can be with a murderer, a betrayer, an abandoner, and last but not the least, your best friend who, up until that point, you’d thought of in purely platonic terms, and who had then spent over half an hour sitting in your very unusually male lap.

It was rather a surprise when Luna suddenly got up and announced she was going to the bathroom.

“But Ginny,” Lady Potter called after her, “We have a—“

The front door closed shut.

“—bathroom in the apartment,” Lily finished with a confused look on her face.

Rita Skeeter stormed into her hotel room and slammed the door behind her. “Pack your things. We’re going.”

“Already?” Bozo made no move to start packing even as Rita started throwing clothes into her magically expanded bag.

“Yes! How many hours have I been gone?”

“Gotta be close to five or six.”

“Damn Goblins!”

Bozo raised an eyebrow. “Goblins?”

“Bloody House Elf nearly caught me while I was transformed. Didn’t — but that’s a small mercy. Dumped me with the little rat-bags, who handed me over to the dragon preserve after Merlin knows how long. I tried to tell them Slytherin was there too, but they weren’t having it.”

She grabbed a file from the desk and chucked it at Bozo. “Here. He’s yours if you want.”

Bozo caught the file, chuckled, and leafed through the rather thin document. “Don’t mind if I do, Luv. Don’t mind if I do.”

Ginny was sweating. Ever since Luna had left, the line of discussion had turned from the innocuous and was leaning more towards the interrogatory — of Harry specifically.

Even more worrying, she’d realised, with horror, was that the diary seemed to be interested, especially, in her, Ginny. It kept asking questions about her. How Harry knew her, where they’d met, what they liked about each other — questions that she could easily answer, but the focus was disturbing.

Lady Lily’s questions were more circumspect, but still had a certain weight and thrust to them that suggested she thought there might be something wrong.

John just glared at her.

The only person not in their group who wasn’t focused on her was Susan, who was happily chatting with Tracey about potions homework.
Thankfully, she did need to answer a call of nature. That would give her time to breath.

“Excuse me, I think I’m going to also go to the bathroom,” Ginny said, pushing her chair back and standing up.

“It’s the second door on the right,” Lily said, quickly.

“Got it!” Ginny called back. It was just after she’d locked the bathroom door, and turned to the toilet, when she realised what she was about to do, and remembered to blush.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

“Does Harry always focus so hard on his studies?” Lily asked Hermione.

“Oh, yes, he’s a very hard worker, he’s taught me so much, but then, many of my classmates do. Like in herbology there’s this plant we’re working on, and Professor Sprout says that the plant makes an excellent anticoagulant, but Neville Longbottom, he’s a Gryffindor, says that it’s only the stems, leaves, and roots that have that effect and you can get a more potent extract if you first remove the—“

“You aren’t worried that he might be overdoing it, do you?”

“What?”

“You aren’t worried that Harry might be overdoing it?”

“Oh no. Harry’s always careful to take regular breaks and stand up and walk around and stuff like that. He makes me do that all the time. I read in a book one time that a wizard’s body can hold much more magic if it’s fit and healthy, and so ever since then, I’ve been doing jogging and swimming and stuff like that and it helps me out a lot. I don’t understand why more wizards don’t do it. I know that the quidditch teams and duelling teams do, but they’re just a few and I know that we have great healing spells to counter diabetes and liver disease and so on, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t—”

“Can you think of any reason why Harry might be acting differently?”


Lily looked at Hermione for a moment before sighing and standing up. “Never mind — it was just a thought. If you’ll excuse me, Miss Granger. I’m going to make a cup of tea.”

On the other side of the table, Virgo Malfoy watched the conversation with a thoughtful expression.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Ginny was just closing the bathroom door behind her, and trying not to look like she’d just done something unbelievably dirty. When a hand grabbed her shoulder, she recognised who it was in time to avoid stunning them, mores the pity.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” John Potter hissed from less than a foot away. “Ginny isn’t yours!”

Ginny smirked again. “Yes, she is.”

“I’ll tell her you said that.”
“Go ahead.”

“Ginny hates possessiveness.”

“Ginny hates lots of things,” Ginny said. “Your dumb arse just happens to top the list.”

“Ginny has no reason to…” John trailed off.

Ginny raised her eyebrows.

John then stayed silent for so long that Ginny started to feel uncomfortable.

Finally, he spoke. “You told her.” Three words — simple, and, once spoken, obviously true. His face turned at once from understanding to furious. He leaned closer and hissed, “You bloody told her! You fucking hypocrite! You said not to tell anyone! What did you tell her? You lied to her didn’t you?! I would have saved her! I would have—”

And that was as far as he got before Ginny kneed John in the groin.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

“Also, I think Lady Potter is getting suspicious,” Hermione said in a low voice.

John Potter had arrived back in the living room a few minutes after Ginny looking beyond murderous and was currently being talked down from whatever rash action he was considering by Susan.

“Jeez,” Tracey replied, looking around the room. “What tipped you off?”

“Well—” Hermione began.

“That was a rhetorical question,” Tracey interrupted before Hermione could get started. She shook her head. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll take care of this. Trust me.”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Ahhh. Lily took a sip of warm tea. Perfect. She frowned. Now, what about Harry?

“Lady Potter?”

Lily looked around and smiled warmly at her favourite student. “Yes, Miss Davis?”

“I mean no disrespect, but if you wanted to know about why Harry might be acting strangely, Hermione is probably the worse person to ask.”

Lily’s ears picked up. “Oh?”

“Yes.”

“Why’s that?” She took another sip of tea.

“You didn’t hear what happened on Hermione’s birthday?”

“No? What happened at Hermione’s birthday?”

“Well…”
The shockwave of a massive explosion from a long way away shook the room, causing the windows to rattle in their frames.

Lily firmly put down her cup and snatched her wand. “Stay here!” She ran into the living room. “All of you!” she barked, before running for the door and slamming it behind her.

Tracey, Hermione, Ginny (disguised as Harry), John, Susan, and Virgo all looked around at each other.

“Wizard’s Chess?” Susan suggested, hopefully.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

[Some time earlier]

Draco Malfoy looked around furtively as he left the dungeons and passed into the maze of corridors that made up the rest of the castle. He was feeling that feeling again — an almost overwhelming rush, fuelled by the knowledge that what he was doing was not only against the rules, and also certainly the law, but more importantly, that his parents had not given him the go ahead, and he hadn’t even asked.

Draco heard approaching female voices and ducked behind the large statue of a manticore, then cursed himself for it.

“Oh, Professor Sprout likes me a lot,” said one of the girls. “I just don’t necessarily like her that much — I just smile a lot in class to get the good grades.”

“No,” said the second girl. “No, Tim hates charms. I mean he absolutely despises it. He said, right, he said he’d give it up if he could in an instant.”

“Oh Merlin, imagine Tim in Arithmancy.”

“Or Runes.”

“Wait — how about this — next charms class—”

The two voices faded away as they turned the corner. Draco stepped out from behind the statue, and mentally shook himself. He hadn’t done anything wrong yet.

The only other person he met on his march to the grounds was a random fifth-year Ravenclaw, whom he gave a curt nod, and then he was out — out in the chilly October evening air, heavy with light mist and dark with blocked sunlight. He pulled his robes tighter around him.

“Draco?”

He jumped and spun around. It was Pansy. She was standing in the doorway behind him and looked determined. “You followed me?” he asked.

Pansy nodded. “You’re sneaking out again, aren’t you? Without me.”

Draco sighed. “Look, I can’t bring you with me. I can’t explain why, but I can’t.”

“Is it Malfoy House business?”
Draco didn’t hesitate. “Yes,” he said.

“And if I sent an owl to you father asking for confirmation?”

Now Draco hesitated.

Pansy smirked. “I knew it!” She stepped up beside him.

Draco growled. “No, Pansy — I mean — it’s not that it’s family business, it’s just…” he trailed off before finding his words again, “it’s just that there are things that you don’t share with everyone. I’m sure you understand.”

“I do.”

“Then go back.”

“No, I’d rather go with you.”

Draco cursed. A brief debated warred in his head over whether to call the whole thing off. Eventually he decided to probe deeper. “What I was planning to do tonight might be considered legally… questionable.”

Pansy frowned. “All the more reason for me to go with you then. You’ve been distancing yourself too much from the rest of us. We don’t like it.”

Draco groaned, translating that last statement as, ‘I don’t like it.’ He knew Theo couldn’t give a damn, and Crabb and Goyle likewise. “Fine, you can follow for now, but you might have to go back anyway.”

“Why?”

Draco didn’t reply, instead choosing to let the reason why became apparent on its own. Pansy’s eyes widened as she caught sight of Alexandra Black waiting for them by the Black Lake.

“I know I didn’t say you couldn’t bring anyone,” Black said, without preamble, eyeing Pansy up and down. “But I assumed it was assumed.”

“She wouldn’t be denied,” Draco drawled. “I guarantee she will keep her silence.” He shot Pansy a sideways look.

Pansy hastily nodded. “Lips are sealed.”

Despite Pansy’s assurance, it actually took many more minutes of discussion, negotiation, and promise making before the Black Heiress seemed satisfied. The three of them then moved from the edge of the lake, and into the forbidden forest, Pansy holding tightly onto Draco’s hand.

Draco didn’t blame her. The forbidden forest was the great bogeyman of the students. “Don’t upset the teachers,” the older ones would say, “Or they’ll send you for detention into the forbidden forest.”

Pansy’s hand-grip became almost vice-like when Black produced a large slab of cow meat from a shrunk-trunk, deposited it in a clearing, and directed them all to hide in the trunk.

“I thought we were using a spider?” Draco hissed once they were all safely inside the trunk.

“We are,” Alex whispered back.
There was movement outside the trunk — a skittering, clicking sound, which made the hairs on the back of Draco’s neck rise. He wanted to say, “What kind of spider do you want to attract with bait that large?” But didn’t. Every instinct was telling him to shut the hell up. Beside him, Pansy, still clueless as to what they were actually doing, whimpered.

When they eventually emerged from the trunk, Draco just stared. It was an acromantula as large as a horse — possibly larger — drugged or dead, he wasn’t sure. Dear Merlin. Yes, he’d said they should practice on a spider, but he’d meant a normal one! Like normal people used!

“Black,” he said, managing not to let his voice tremble, as Alexandra started clearing away piles of dead leaves from the ground in a matter of fact kind of way. “I’m not sure this is a good idea. The book said, ‘power equal to the power to be chained.’”

“Trust me, it’ll be fine,” Alex said, sounding unconcerned.

Pansy was now clinging to his arm. He whispered into her ear what they were doing, to which her eyes widened, if possible, even further, but she didn’t run or object.

Black finished clearing the space and handed Draco and Pansy a paintbrush each and a bucket full of chicken blood between them. “I only brought two brushes, so it’s up to you.”

It took quite a while, but between them, he and Pansy succeeded in painting the dread symbol of the deathly hallows around the massive spider while Alex tied it up with heavy, heavy looking chains. A horrible feeling of déjà vu was steeling over Draco, but it was firmly pushed from his mind when Alex brought out a number of items from her trunk, including what looked like a highly polished, white stake, but which, apparently, was a dementor bone.

“I thought dementor bone was a type of plant!” Draco half-shouted.

“I don’t know why you’d think that,” Black said with a shrug. “Can you think why he’d think that, Pansy?”

“No,” Pansy weakly replied. “But, is that really a dementor bone? I thought dementors were unkillable.”

“They are.”

“So how?”

“I don’t know.”

The ritual, when they actually came to perform it, was the most terrifying thing Draco had yet done, and he was certain it was for Pansy too. It had first required them to strip naked. That alone was pretty scary. They then chanted the words of the ritual and focused their magic into the dementor bone foci.

Then, terror. The beast lurched, even while chained down, struggling against the metal bonds, which to Draco suddenly looked far too thin and flimsy.

They poured all the magic they could into the ritual. Pansy was shaking. Draco was sweating. He’d already used all the ready magic he had. He was now running directly from his core, and still the newly raised monster wouldn’t submit. He looked towards Black, who was similarly struggling, and then, Draco thought he saw something, but it might just have been his imagination. A faint shimmer in the air behind Black — a faint shimmering hand on Black’s shoulder. But then Black’s magic surged like a dam had broken and the shimmer settled into the air as though it had never
been there.

Draco felt the pressure lessen. He felt the ritual strengthen. He felt the beast give one final cry of defiance, before the laws of magic exerted themselves and claimed its slavery, even from within the throes of death.

He collapsed to his knees and panted.

It was over.

He looked up. The beast stood stock still in the middle of the ritual circle, ready to take their commands. He could feel his and Pansy’s faint link to the monster, even if it was Black who was ultimately in control. He started to laugh. They’d done it.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Not far away, hidden in the trees and bushes, the three students, now celebrating, clearing up, and making plans for what to do with their new spider inferi, were being watched by a half dozen heads, these ones quite a bit smaller than the one they’d just raised, and several dozen times again that many actual eyes.

*Click* “Monsters!” *Clack* “Unnatural!” *Click* “Insult!” said one.

*Clack* “Danger!” *Click* “Powerful!” *Clack* “Magic!” said another.

*Click* “Father!” *Clack* “Speaks!” argued the first, clearly agitated. The acromantula then sensed something behind it — something not visible to any one of its several dozen eyes, but nevertheless, very much there.

And then, it died.

Several very hectic moments later, all the others died too. All except one, which sped away from the scene through the trees, and was soon lost to sight.

Luna Lovegood shimmered into view and bit her lip, looking at the space where the retreating spider had fled. “Oh, poo.”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Alex, Draco, and Pansy had decided to send their new inferi away to lurk among the forest trees. They didn’t want to release it, and they certainly couldn’t keep it close by. Even if it could theoretically fit inside Alex’s expanded trunk, it certainly wouldn’t fit through the lid.

They cleaned up the symbol of the deathly hallows, packed up the dementor bone, and scattered the leaves back around the clearing.

Something heavy was weighing on Draco’s mind. “Black,” he started, “What would you say if I asked if it was possible to raise an inferi tree?”

“I’d say it sounds like an interesting project. Did you have a tree in mind?”

The two stared at each other with equally blank expressions.

Pansy looked between the two before putting a hand to her mouth. “You think Alex was the one who—!” she cut herself off.
It would explain a lot, Draco thought to himself. It would explain why she seemed so familiar with that they were doing. It would explain why she just happened to have a dementor bone with her at Hogwarts. It would explain why an eleven year old girl didn’t seem at all fazed at the prospect of subduing a class XXXXX beast the size of a horse. She was a necromancer! Their champion. No wonder he’d lost.

Black shrugged. “I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about,” she said, and Draco knew pushing now was useless.

Just then, a small paper bird flapped its way out of the trees.

They all watched it as it landed in Black’s hands and unfolded itself for her to read.

Everything changed. Black’s expression went from unconcerned to serious. Her movements went from casual to sharp. “Spiders! Run!”

Pansy gasped.

Draco took a step backwards. “Can’t you take them?”

Black scrunched the paper up, shoved it into the pocket of her robes. “Too many!”

“How many?” Pansy asked.

Black reached for her trunk. “Hundreds!” she barked. “Move!”

Draco didn’t need telling twice. He grabbed Pansy’s hand and together they ran, trying not to trip over tree roots as they dashed through the thick forest. Black soon caught them up and powered through to lead their retreat. She seemed to move through the trees as though born to it, never missing a foot step as she blazed their trail, but never letting either him or Pansy fall behind either.

Draco wasn’t sure how long they ran, but it felt like hours. It felt like hours. It was probably only a few minutes.

A massive explosion sounded behind them. And then another. And another. It was as though the whole forest was under attack from one of the horrible muggle weapons his father had told him horror stories about. And then spiders. Spiders everywhere. Draco refused to let go of Pansy as one of the massive ones snatched them both up and into the trees. Black screamed her defiance, getting a couple of them with her magic chains, but soon, even she was overcome, trussed up, and hauled away from the safety of the school, and deep, deep into the forest.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Lily Potter arrived at Hagrid’s hut just in time to find the game keeper loading his massive crossbow. Severus, and Minerva had somehow got there ahead of her.

“Tha’ ain’t good,” Hagrid said as another massive explosion rocked the forest. “Not good at all.”

“What is it?” Lily asked.

“We do not yet know,” Severus said, smoothly.

“We need the headmaster!” Minerva almost shouted, “Where is he?!”

In the end, Filius, Filtch, Sprout, and Septima all arrived before Lockhart, looking like he’d just stepped out of a magazine shooting for Witch Weekly. “Hello, all!” he called out cheerfully.
“What’s all this hullabaloo?”

“Headmaster!” Minerva said, “We need a student headcount!”

“Ah,” Lockhart scratched his nose. “Is that really necessary? I mean, surely this will resolve—”

“Headmaster!”

“Oh, alright, alright — one moment.” Lily then watched, almost in pain, as Lockhart, someone who she used to idolise, but who had since clearly demonstrated his skills lay more in the literary than the practical, slowly and clumsily reached into the wards and counted the students’ presences, the way a toddler might arrange coloured blocks.

“Everyone’s in the castle,” he eventually declared, “except for Mister Malfoy, Miss Parkinson, Miss Black, and Miss Lovegood. ‘They’re still somewhere on the grounds, but it’s rather complicated to tell exactly how far away they are, or—”

Lily looked towards the forest and cursed.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

The ride through the forest was one the most uncomfortable things Pansy had ever been through, and by far the scariest. Eventually, they were unceremoniously dumped in the middle of a clearing, so full of spider webs it resembled snow.

Clinking and clacking filled the air. “Aragog! Aragog!”

“Stall!” Black mouthed in silence. “I’ve got a plan!”

Pansy and Draco both nodded and as one, the three students locked down their occlumency and stood up, blank-faced and dignified. Behind the facade though, Pansy still felt the almost overpowering urge to throw up, cry, and wet herself, possibly all at once.

An absolutely massive acromantula emerged from the trees, as large as a small dragon, milky eyed and hairy legged.

“These are the monsters?” it said.

“Yes!” came a skittery cry.

“Kill them.”

“Wait!” Pansy shouted. “We’re not monsters!”

“They tell me you carry the mark of the great terror,” the huge spider said. “Your clothes bear its mark.”

“Slytherin?”

Angry clicking noises filled the clearing.

“Do not speak the name!” Aragog spat, and a spider really knows how to spit. “Keepers of the great terror! The house that banished me!”

“That wasn’t Slytherin,” Black said carefully, as though this conversation wasn’t her main focus. “That was Tom Riddle.”
“He was of the Slytherin family. You are of the Slytherin family. Therefore, you are of Riddle’s family.”

Pansy felt a slight pull on her mind.

“Slytherin is a school house, not a family!” Draco shouted. “And we don’t even know what this great terror is! How can we be keeping it?”

“Wait! My father leads the Dark!”

“My father is head auror!”

“My father is very influential in the construction and packing industries!”

Draco and Black both looked at Pansy.

Pansy grimaced. “Well, he is!”

Aragog made a definite clicking sound. “It matters not. Fresh meat is fresh meat. Goodbye, keepers of the terror.”

An explosion, much closer this time, rocked the clearing, sending spiders flying, and something burst out of the trees. Acromantula inferi. Pansy shrieked as Draco grabbed her arm and hauled her onto its back, helped by Black’s magic chains. The spiders gathered themselves quickly, but not quickly enough to stop their flight from the clearing, all eight inferi legs skittering along the forest floor at top speed.

A wave of spiders gave chase. Draco and Pansy did the best they could with their wands but only Black was having any real effect. The wave of angry, skittering legs closed in. One set made a leap for Pansy. She screamed, but before the spider landed, an arrow slammed into it, piecing it right through the thorax. It slid off the side of their ride and was gone from sight before it hit the ground.

A horn sounded.

More shadows moved among the trees — different shadows — four-legged, cantering shadows.

And the sky was filled with arrows.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Lily Potter pushed her way through the bushes and stared at the trail of dead acromantula, ranging in size from cat sized to goat. A piebald centaur stood next to them, holding its bow in its hands. “Greetings school teacher,” it said. “I am glad you have come.”

Severus stepped out behind her. “They don’t look blown apart.” He looked up at the centaur. “Why are you glad we have come?”

“The treaty has not been broken for forty years. Yet tonight it was broken. Such is the way of fate.”

“What did they do,” Lily asked gesturing to the dead spiders.

“Three students from the school were eating by the lake. They were grabbed and taken away. We saw it all.”
“—And you didn’t help?!” Severus glared. “Where are they?”

“Heading north-east at speed. Much of the herd is in pursuit. They’ll pass the wards soon.”

“I thought you weren’t helping,” Lily asked.

“A common human thought.”

Severus whirled around, cloak billowing. “We’ll head to the front gate and apparate around the edge.”

Lily nodded and the two hurried off, leaving a silently watching centaur, standing in a sea of dead spiders.

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Alex was exhausted. The effort of directing such a powerful inferi, combined with the constant use of her magic chains had long since drained her. She was starting to feel the effects of magical exhaustion.

Pansy and Draco were still holding on for dear life, occasionally adding a hex of their own, but most of their contribution came in the form of screams and yells on the line of “Look out!” and “Tree!” and the ever popular, “AAAIIIIIII!”

There hadn’t been any time to navigate. Simply getting away was the priority. Alex smacked away a dog sized acromantula and fell back onto their ride’s back. “Don’t you have anything stronger, Malfoy?” She shouted.

“My father didn’t let me learn anything stronger!”

“Wonderful! ARGH!”

Dark shadows had given way to sunset oranges. Their inferi acromantula had burst out of the forest and skidded to a halt to stop itself plunging into water, jerking the three Slytherins off it’s back and onto a shoreline. Pansy fell first, slamming onto the ground and crying out in pain. Then, Alex and Draco joined her, coming to within an inch of braining themselves on a massive ward-stone that marked the forest’s borders. Water lay in front of them. Forest lay behind them. They were trapped.

A rush of many legs shot out of the forest, and made an immediate grab for Pansy. Massive front legs wrapped around her waist and yanked her off the ground.

“Draco!” Pansy screamed.

Draco staggered. “Black! Do Something!”

“Tired,” Alex muttered. “No magic.”

“Draco! Help!” Pansy was almost back at the forest’s edge now, even while two more spiders closed in on Malfoy and Alex.

“Pansy!” Malfoy screamed, raised his wand at the nearest spider and put his hand on the ward-stone to steady himself.

Alexandra saw what was going to happen almost before it did, and had just enough time to shout, “Don’t!” before Malfoy bellowed, “Serpensortia!”
It was like watching a magical lightning strike. Power so dense it was practically visible thrummed down Malfoy’s arm from the stone, pulsed straight through his body, and into his wand, which exploded.

A massive snake, as large as a boa constrictor, burst from nowhere and landed in-between him, the spiders, and Pansy. It was black, tall, and crested — one might go so far as to say, ‘crowned.’

Alex reacted first. “Shut your eyes! Pansy! Draco!” She slammed her own eyes shut and proceeded to listen as a dozen spider voices screamed in terror, and, in many cases, death. She had no idea if the others had listened to her, or what else was going on, all she knew was that if she opened her eyes, she was sure to die.

The fight didn’t last long. The sounds of slaughter soon died down, replaced by the gentle lapping of ocean waves, and a far scarier noise — a slithery noise. Alex trembled, functionally blind and helpless, convinced that at any moment she was going to feel fangs puncture skin, and that would be the end of her.

“Obscuro!” Bellowed two voices — one male, one female, — voices she knew. “Bombarda! Reducio! Expluso! Sectumsempra!”

She kept her eyes shut tightly.

Something screamed in pain.

And then silence.

“You can all open your eyes now,” said the woman.

Alex did so.

The young basilisk was dead on the ground. Their inferi acromantula was in several extremely mushy bits. Many other dead acromantula lay along the shoreline, scattered among the rocks or up against the cliff face to their side, but they didn’t look like they’d been cursed, rather they had simply died.

“Explain yourselves,” Snape said.

“Severus!” Lady Potter shot him a disapproving look. “They need rest.”

Draco groaned on the ground. Pansy was shaking, but still alive.

“They can rest, after they tell us anything we might need to know.”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Explaining turned out to be quite easy. The two professors already believed they’d been simply chatting and eating by the lake when they’d been taken by the spiders, so it was no large matter to re-tell what had happened after that, carefully leaving out the part with the inferi acromantula. The way they spun their tale, one acromantula from the nest had simply decided to go rogue.

Lily gave the remains of their evening project a sad look. “We didn’t know.”

Snape jerked his head. “Mister Malfoy is in mild need of healer attention and Miss Parkinson is visibly distressed. We will take you back to the castle and return for you, Miss Black.” Her head of house glared at her. “Do not move from here.”
Lady Potter took Pansy gently by the arm and Professor Snape took Malfoy, and together the two disappeared with a loud crack.

Alex didn’t try to get up, instead simply allowing the waves to crash behind her and her body to slowly embed itself in the silt. To think they’d run all the way from Hogwarts to the coast. That had to be, what? Twenty miles? Fifty? A long way anyway.

She looked around. The ward-stone marking the boundary of the forbidden forest was set against a natural cliff face that rose up from the shore. Even from here she could feel the thrum of it’s magic.

She crawled closer to inspect it. Runes covered the base, and the pillar — incredibly complex patterns that would take any professional days to decipher. Except… She looked closer. Deep within the rune patterns was another shape, one you might overlook if you didn’t know what to look for, but Alex did know what to look for. Harry had shown her what to look for, after all, all over Hogwarts — the tiny scratched sign of a snake.

“Alex!”

Alex jerked up. A centaur trotted out of the forest, carrying Luna on its back. She jumped down and embraced her. “I was so worried! Where are the others? Are they okay?”

“They’re fine,” she replied quickly. “But there’s more important things.” She told Luna about Snape and Lady Potter, and that they’d be back soon. She then decided to point out the snake on the wardstone.

“Do you think Potter already knows this one?”

Luna looked at it, then around the shoreline, at the dozen or so dead acromantula, then back at the ward-stone. She laughed. “That was Draco’s work was it?” she pointed at the dead spiders.

“Yeah, kinda. He did the summon that killed them.”

“How did he summon it? Was it a whisper?”

“No it was definitely loud.”

“A shout?”

“More like a bellow. They had Pansy and we were about to die.”

“Mmmm.” Luna put a thoughtful finger to her lips. “Where the wind meets the land find the sign of the dragon’s roar, there awaits you in the silt, ancient magics, and gold, and more.”

— DP & SW: NRiCD —

Events passed swiftly after they all got back to the castle. Luna managed to persuade the teachers that she’d merely been visiting the thestral herd. Draco found his way to the hospital wing, and Alex joined him soon after it was discovered she was suffering from acute magical exhaustion.

Hagrid could be heard crying himself to sleep as the sun set. Aragog had been one of the casualties of the fight with the centaurs. Lady Greengrass, standing in for Harry, had been summoned to an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot early next morning, which passed a new act right there in the chamber forbidding Draco Malfoy from practicing ‘his’ new version of the Serpensortia, regardless of how impossible it was for him to recreate the circumstances that led to its use.
The ministry sent agents from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures into the forest, who emerged several hours later with an agreement to oversee a new set of negotiations between the acromantula and the centaurs, with special provisions for the breaking of the old treaty by the acromantulas. The monster spiders, apparently, were not at all happy.

When Harry and Daphne finally arrived back at the castle it was to find the girls with many updates to give on the situation with John, and Virgo, and Draco, and everything. It was Luna and Alex’s report, however, that most interested Harry.

$Open$

A stone creaked, opening a path in a cliff-face that, by all rights, could not exist. Harry held his wand up high, the better to illuminate the dark passageway beyond.

He stepped down into the corridor, dusty and dank, senses alert for hidden traps or curses. There weren’t any. The passage way soon opened up into a small room. He held up his wand and the light glittered off of something sitting on a table in the middle of the room.

Cautiously, Harry edged forward to inspect the object. No, he thought, that couldn’t be right. But it was. He knew it was from Voldemort’s many memories. The object was a Mesoamerican relic of some kind, solid gold, highly ornamental, wonderful craftsmanship, and clearly very, very old — far older than colonisation of the new world. But here it was in Scotland — in a secret parseltongue only cave that hadn’t been disturbed for centuries. What was it doing here? How much was it worth? If it was of muggle origin rather than magical…

Harry licked his lips.

Muggle gold artefacts tended to be very, very valuable.

He held up his wand again and looked around the room proper.

Books. More books. Just like the Icelandic cave. He picked one at random and read the title. Or he tried to read the title.

“Sea — Important person — Diary,” he said, out loud and rather slowly. He flipped it open. Mesoamerican pictograms filled the pages. A dead language. Useless. He flipped some more. Suddenly, the writing changed from pictograms to Old Norse, but it wasn’t any kind of old norse that Harry had seen. It was all scrambled up and made absolutely no sense. “Code,” Harry said, put it aside, and proceeded to flip through more of the books.

As he did, his excitement and anticipation grew. The vast majority of the books were written with the same pictograms as the first, and were clearly magical in origin, even if the gold statue on the table felt distinctly muggle. Any secrets they held might well be unique, but only if he could read them.

He flipped through all the books, looking for anything that might help, but it wasn’t until he returned to the first book he’d picked up that he struck pay dirt. In his haste to check the other books, he hadn’t realised that the book was actually divided into three parts, and that the third part was written in Latin — a language that he certainly could read.

The very first paragraph read — This sea log is to be written in three parts so that both the war-leader and captain may read, as well as the people of the court of feathered serpent.

Harry closed his eyes in rapture. He now possessed a rosetta stone for an ancient American civilisation and a ton of unknown magic books to go with it. Forget a chest containing a handful of
galleons and some random tomes. *This was truly* worthy of a gift from Fate.

And he had *just* the witch to crack it.

Way off on the other side of the forbidden forest, in the Hogwarts library, in a fortress of books surrounding her the way a pyromaniac might surround themselves with candles, Hermione Granger sneezed.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The chaps on discord set up a Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches TV Tropes page, which should be easily found through a little google foo. If you’ve never visited TV Tropes before, it is a wiki-style website that documents narrative tools (tropes) used in popular media, including fanfiction. A fair warning though — the site is highly addictive and can easily drain hours, days, or weeks of your life. You have been warned.

Sticky Note: If you want to keep abreast of the release schedule, as well as any changes and the occasional piece of bonus content, you can head over to [www * leadvone * com] and sign up for the Gray Mailing List.

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017’s prices.
Fate raised a warning finger at Harry. "Remember not to let house rivalries detract you from strategic necessity. There are Gryffindors it would do you well to bring to your side."

"...Granger."

— Chapter One

[19th September 1992]
"Happy Birthday, Hermione!"
"Thank you."
"Congratulations on your thirteenth, Vassal Granger."
"Tim, that's not really a title that you give her."
"Sorry."

The Great hall was packed. It was lunchtime and people had been approaching Hermione all day.
"So, er, Miss Granger, will you accept this as my declaration of intent?"

Hermione took the package from the older Ravenclaw boy and examined it critically. She opened the box and looked inside. It was full of Ferrero Rocher.

"That's okay, isn't it?" the boy asked nervously. "My grandmother is a muggleborn, and she said you might feel more comfortable with this sort of thing than something more traditional."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, thank you very much, mister...?"

"Oh! Fairbanks, Timothy Fairbanks."

"Then yes, Mister Fairbanks, I accept your gift."

Timothy bowed and hustled off.

Hermione turned back around in her seat and added Fairbanks' gift to the pile. Intention gifts with extremely muggle origins had been a running theme so far.

On Hermione's right, serving herself a portion of green peas and mashed potato, Daphne smiled. "That's fourteen so far."

Hermione's smile faulted. "Yes."

"That's more than many girls get all day."

"I know."
"It makes sense though. Many families who wouldn't bother going after the daughter of a noble house seem to be more comfortable encouraging their sons to go after you. Even if their muggle gifts are borderline insulting."

"I'm okay with them."

Daphne gave her friend a sideways glance. "And yet, you do not seem to be bursting with joy."

Hermione hesitated.

Daphne smirked. "Maybe you are waiting for one gift in particular?"

Hermione said nothing. Instead, she stared at the tangerine bowl and remembered an exchange she'd overheard over a week ago.

Harry had been talking on the sofa in his trunk while she, Hermione, had been reading a book in a corner. She'd been mostly ignoring Harry's conversation with his guest until he said something that reached straight through her occlumency shields and activated the part of her mind labelled, 'utter dread.'

"Tracey, I can't marry everyone."

Tracey was sitting opposite Harry with her hands on her knees. She had her head down and was staring at the floor.

"There are lots of wizards out there," Harry continued. "And what I have committed myself to, is already… pushing the bounds of social respectability."

Tracey didn't look up.

"Besides, Lord Davis made my involvement in your courting conditional on my not being one of the suitors. If we work together, we can easily stall him long enough for one of our classmates to grow up enough to actually make an impression on him."

Tracey mumbled something under her breath.

"You know, I definitely miss the snarky Tracey. This meek version is just the type the old men like."

Tracey finally raised her head and glared. "I said, 'Fine!' Potter."

Her expression softened. "And thank you, my lord."

Tucked away in her reading corner, Hermione's heart had been beating at a mile a minute throughout the exchange. It took most of the rest of the day to calm down.

Daphne neatly loaded the back of her fork with mushy peas and mash, elegantly brought it to her mouth, chewed, and swallowed. She put her fork down. "Hermione, you aren't seriously worried, are you? Harry all but said he was going to get you an intent gift last year."

Hermione was worried. When she'd been younger, she and Harry had once both taken ageing potion and secretly attended a noble and pureblood party, and 'Charlotte Timberland' had experienced adult feelings for the first time. Now they were back with a vengeance—had been for some time, in fact—and the only thing worse than having her thoughts constantly filled with Harry were the thoughts suggesting this was all a big mistake and that he'd never intended them to be
close in that way, or else that he'd changed his mind, maybe because she wasn't good enough, hadn't proved herself enough, that she, in fact, wasn't Harry's most trusted. After all, he was already 'pushing the bounds of social respectability.'

Hermione took a deep, shuddery breath and used her occlumency to centre herself.

"Miss Granger?"

Hermione turned around.

"Happy thirteenth. Would you accept this as my family's intent gift?"

She inspected the gift. It was an ostrich-egg-sized Terry's Chocolate Orange.

Classes that day were pure torture. Harry didn't act any different to how he usually did and Hermione just couldn't focus on her work. It was a small mercy that they'd only had History of Magic that afternoon. By the time classes were finally out, she'd added another two muggle-inspired intent gifts to her pile and one actually magical one.

"Let's display all the muggle chocolate on our table in the common room," Tracey suggested with a grin. "It'll drive Malfoy nuts."

Hermione then spent a whole hour watching the common room door, at first with nervousness, but then, as the minutes dragged on, with a slowly sinking feeling.

"Miss Granger?"

It was all Hermione could do not to yelp. This time, when she turned, it was to find Harry standing on her other side.

"Y-yes, Mister Potter?"

"A word, if you please."

Hermione cleared her throat. "Yes, of course."

Harry turned and walked back to his dormitory.

Feeling like her body was made of lead, Hermione stood up on unsteady feet and pointedly ignored Daphne's smirking face.

She soon found herself in Harry's trunk, sitting opposite him on the sofa, with her hands on her knees.

"We've got a lot to talk about, Hermione," Harry said. "Well, I hope we do. I'm not one for beating about the bush when there's a massive elephant in the room, so here goes. Would you accept a declaration of intent gift from me?"

It was as if a dragon-sized weight had been lifted from Hermione's shoulders. She'd read the expression 'her heart soared' many times in her life, mostly in the many romance novels she'd read as part of her initial training in wizarding culture, but she'd never properly appreciated just what the phrase meant — until now. "Yes, Harry," she said. "I would like that a lot."

Harry smiled. "Then it will be so. We've both come a long way since we first met."

"Yes. You were the best maths tutor I ever had."
"I was the only maths tutor you ever had."

Hermione giggled. "So, what's the lots we have to talk about?" Now that her mind had broken through the barrier it had been slamming against all day, if not all year, it was free to speed ahead off into the distance. "Is it about courting? Or priority? Since Daphne is Lady Slytherin and Luna is a consort, what would I be? A consort too? A Potter? I can't also be a Slytherin, I know that — talking to snakes and flying would be wonderful though — maybe then I'd be better on a broom. Oh! How are we going to talk to Mum and Dad about this? Or your parents? Would Lord Potter need to sign a contract if I was going to be a Potter? But you're a lord, too. Or doesn't it work like that? Maybe—"

"—Hermione."

Hermione stopped.

Harry was smiling at her.

She blushed. "Sorry."

"That's okay. Remember that we are still very young. And unlike other wizards our age, we have the added advantage that no one can sign a contract for you without my approval first — a rock-solid safety net — although I'm sure that Luna would point out that a rock-solid safety net is actually a pretty poor design choice."

Hermione smiled.

"And to answer a few of your questions, Lord Potter would need to sign if you were going to be a Potter, but, assuming our courting goes well, I imagine you'd be a Granger."

"So you would be my consort then."

"Technically, yes. Consortships are most common among noble houses, but many houses have family magics that they don't want released to the general populace — purebloods especially."

"But why not a Potter? Unless… Oh, hang on." Hermione bit her lip as her mind quickly made links that she'd just not been in a position to make before. "Slytherin Manor has twelve bedrooms apart from yours."

"It does."

"Twelve?!" Hermione squeaked. "That's the 'bounds of social respectability?'"

"Someone's been eavesdropping on private conversations," Harry said with a grin. "But no — not twelve — five actually."

Hermione let out a relieved breath. Five she could handle. Twelve would have been ridiculous. Not that Harry couldn't handle twelve girls — he obviously could — he was Harry — but she wasn't. A thought struck her. "Wait a minute. If not Tracey, then who? Ginny?" Her thoughts went to their combat training, and to the raven-haired girl she'd been arguing with all year. "Oh, please not Black."

"You don't believe the Lady Black would be a worthwhile addition?"

Hermione huffed. "No, you are right, of course, but she can be really immature."
"This from the girl who wrote her evil headmaster a letter in neon-pink ink with dancing unicorns and smiley faces."

Hermione blushed.

"But enough about that," Harry said with a smirk. "I think it's time I fulfilled my promise and gave you your gifts — both of them."

"Oooo, yes."

Harry's birthday gift turned out to be a rather nice leather bound book on advanced healing techniques. She carefully placed it on the bookshelf in her trunk after profusely thanking Harry and was about to climb out when Harry stopped her. Apparently her other gift, the declaration of intent gift, the important gift, would require the pensive. Hermione bit her lip. What could it be? Some amazing piece of arcane magic? A hidden secret stolen from the Dark Lord's head?

Harry stood by the runed bowl holding several glass vials in his right hand, filled with silvery memories. His left hand held an envelope. "I was thinking about getting you another small library like I did when we first met," he said, fingers absentmindedly flicking the envelope round and round. "But then I thought, no, I wanted to give you something that actually meant something, to me. But then I thought, well, I don't really have much that means a lot to me — not really. I had to really dig deep to find something worthwhile." He stopped flicking the envelope. "I'm dredging up painful memories here. But well, we're friends, aren't we?"

"Harry, you are my best friend," Hermione said with zero hesitation.

Harry smiled softly. "Then, will you accept this as my declaration of intent gift?" He handed her the envelope.

Hermione deftly opened it with her wand and was surprised to find that the only thing the envelope contained was a simple chocolate frog card.

**MERLIN**

*Famously the greatest wizard who ever lived. Merlin is reputed to have been born in the early 400's, although no one knows for sure. Among the greatest of his achievements was the construction of the Albion Family Magics, the building of the Libra Arcanum, which later became the Hall of Prophecies, and the defeat of Dark Lady Morgana. Despite his many crowning glories, his intimate relationship with the Dark Lady remains his most well known and most controversial.*

"Harry? Yes, I accept it — happily — but I don't understand it."

Harry took one of the glass vials, uncorked it, poured it into the pensieve, and gestured her forward.

Hermione stepped forward, took a deep breath, dipped her finger in Harry's memory, and was sucked in and forward, down, down, down.

Hermione landed.

A whistle blew. A floor jerked under her. Wizards and Witches waved from behind a window to her left, and the Hogwarts Express slowly started chugging out of Platform Nine and Three Quarters.

Hermione got her balance and tucked a stray hair behind her ear.
Okay, she thought, this probably wasn't the Dark Lord's memory — that must make it one of
Harry's. Was this from their timeline, or... her heart skipped a beat... was it from the last one?

The door to her right was half open. That would be as good a place as any to start. She stepped
through the door and her breath caught.

A small boy sat alone on the seat. Obviously Harry, but that wasn't what stole her breath.
Everything about her friend suggested he was nervous, poor, and uncared for. His hair was dirty.
His clothes were both muggle and threadbare. The trunk by his feet looked like a good kick would
put a hole right through it. Hermione had by now spent years learning how to read people and this
Harry looked like he was expecting the world to spit on him and then charge him for the privilege
— The way he sat all hunched up on his seat, reading a potion-stained second-hand book — the
way his eyes flickered around as though waiting for a wonderful dream to end.

Then, something happened to the memory, like the passing of time far faster than normal. The door
opened and closed several times and a half dozen young witches and wizards streamed in and out,
some taking longer to talk to Harry, some just poking their head in before leaving.

The memory slowed down again.

The door behind her creaked open and a bossy voice said, "Is there any room here, I say, is that a
book you're reading?"

Hermione winced. She recognised that voice. How could she not? She turned. This at least, wasn't
a surprise. She'd seen the other Hermione before when Harry showed her what her manners in the
last timeline had been like — or rather, what they hadn't been like.

Last timeline Hermione still had her huge buck teeth and her hair was so bushy one might expect to
find baby birds nesting in it, but by far the greatest difference was her expression. It was an
expression which screamed, "I am superior to you all, because I know all the things," at a hundred-
thousand merlins.

Harry nervously held the book up as though for inspection.

"Oh, yes, I've read that one," Hermione said, rather dismissively. This however, didn't stop her
from sitting on the seat opposite the young boy. "Have you also read our potions book?"

Harry nodded.

"I'm really looking forward to lessons," Hermione continued, "I've heard transfiguration is
supposed to be the hardest, so naturally that's what I've been reading the most."

The rather one-sided conversation continued for five minutes before the subject of Harry's brother
was raised.

"I've read all about him of course, I'm surprised you're not sitting with him."

And it was only a little later that the trolley arrived and Last-timeline Hermione, looking rather
guilty, bought an arm-full of different wizarding sweets of all types. This included several
chocolate frogs, which This-timeline Hermione proceeded to watch the way a carnival-goer might
watch the one cup out of three that the small, white ball had just been placed under. And just like
the carnival-goer, Hermione's mind was racing ahead, trying to solve the puzzle before the solution
was presented. It wasn't exactly hard.

She held the Merlin card tightly in her hand while Harry unwrapped his chocolate frog to find a
Merlin card of his own.

She shook her head as Last-timeline Hermione complained that having to buy chocolate to learn about wizarding history was stupid.

And she nodded as Harry, the younger version of her Harry, gave the card to her other self, before asking timidly if they were friends.

Last-timeline Hermione hesitated before leaving the compartment. Someone was missing a toad, apparently, and she'd volunteered to help look. The look on her face betrayed her nervousness over Harry's question. "Of course, we're friends," she eventually said in a matter-of-fact way. And despite the terseness in her words, This-timeline Hermione could easily hear both the promise and the hope in her other self's words.

The door slid shut.

And Hermione was raised up — up and out — exiting the pensieve with a single, well-practiced, elegant step. Out of the memory, and back into the real world.

Harry was watching her.

"I had no idea," she whispered. "I thought I just ignored you. I had no idea we were actually friends."

Harry suddenly looked extremely awkward.

"What?"

Harry looked at the other vials in his hand.

"There's more?" Hermione asked.

"I wasn't actually sure if I was going to show you these. I'm still not sure if I should. It feels a bit much."

"Is it about me? If it's about me, then I want to know."

Harry regarded her intently. For a moment she was scared he was going to say no. Eventually though, he slowly nodded, and gestured her towards the pensieve.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"What do you think?" one older Slytherin asked his friend.

"I think it's disgusting."

The two boys were glaring at the court of the Gray, with its massive pile of muggle sweets and chocolates on the low table, taunting them with its heretical untouchability. They were Gray themselves, but the Gray's ambiguous political stance meant that there were, in fact, many dark leaning purebloods among their ranks — many who regarded the shameless display of such muggle artefacts as 'not the way we do things.'

They were shocked out of their idle grumbling when the girl to whom the presents had been gifted burst out from the stairs to the dormitories, marched across the common room with barely concealed tears in her eyes, angrily slashed her wand at the pile and cried, "Incendio Tria!"
A powerful blue fireball billowed out of her wand and engulfed the table, quickly incinerating everything it held.

The common room watched with wide eyes.

They couldn't know that the girl had just watched her other self quickly turn away from her best friend as a result of peer pressure from her Gryffindor classmates.

They couldn't know that simple ignoring, soon turned into nasty jabs and insults, growing slowly worse over time, and that two years after that she'd torn up the chocolate frog card he'd once given her, right in front of his face, while calling him a murderer.

All they saw was the thirteen-year-old girl torching a pile of muggle gifts in anger and fury with tears still pouring down her cheeks.

'Pureblood in all but blood' was the phrase some of them used later on.

They certainly didn't see Hermione rushing back to Harry's trunk and proceeding to have an emotional breakdown on her best and oldest friend's shoulder, crying and sobbing, while swearing that she would never ever do that to him, ever, ever, ever.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

[The present]

After the incident in the forest with the acromantula, the only thing the school wanted to talk about for a whole week was Draco Malfoy and his supposed basilisk summoning ability. It didn't matter that casting the spell had damn near killed him. It didn't matter that the only reason he'd been able to cast it in the first place was because he'd unwittingly turned himself into the magical equivalent of a lightning rod, channelling raw power through his body, straight from the Hogwarts wards themselves. It didn't even matter that doing so had destroyed his wand, an event of near traumatic levels for most wizards, forcing Draco to drop classes until Lord and Lady Malfoy turned up to get him a new one.

No, none of it mattered. Whispers followed the young heir everywhere. People who usually nodded to him with slight disdain, now nodded politely. Those who used to nod politely, now did so with a touch of fear.

One might suspect this would result in an increased willingness on the boy's part to bully and harass his classmates with all sorts of strange spells and hexes, but oddly, it hadn't happened, something that Hogwarts' resident healer, Madam Pomfrey, in particular was grateful for.

She was less grateful for this.

"A leave of absence?" Madam Pomfrey looked up from the letter she'd been handed, the better to stare at her most promising student. The letter was signed, both with her parent's signatures, and that of Lord Slytherin.

"It shouldn't be for long," Hermione said. "My family has some business I need to take care of, which will take up a lot of my time. You did say I was well ahead of my studies."

Madam Pomfrey grunted disapproval. In truth, the young Slytherin wasn't just ahead on her healing training, she was miles ahead. If she'd continued as she had been, she could have conceivably finished healer training before she left Hogwarts — an unheard of achievement. Unlikely now, apparently.
"Very well, Miss Granger," she said, reluctantly. "I do hope this won't be for too long though."

"No, Madam Pomfrey."

"And I expect you to keep your skills and knowledge at their current level of sharpness. If you come back here having backtracked I will be most unhappy."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The gathering was the usual Wizarding crowd from the upper echelons of the nobility. Tracey recognised some of them, and those that she didn't she was sure she'd know by name — their last names, at least. There were a few young men, but they mostly kept their attention on the young women. That is to say, they kept it on the women who were older than she was, but still young enough to be called so.

"I don't think I really like the look of anyone here," Tracey whispered to her escort.

Harry, disguised as Lord Slytherin, shrugged. "Don't worry about it. We're just going through the motions. I wouldn't expect you to suddenly declare your undying love to someone twenty years your senior over a plate of club sandwiches."

This particular gathering wasn't in the ballroom of some great manor, as was often the case, but instead in the Lovegood's garden. Small tables had been set up and all manner of finger food provided for the guests. Some of the lords had parked themselves at the barbecue, where Lord Lovegood was happily burning sausages, while a similar gathering of ladies, led by Lady Lovegood, had taken up residence in the orchard gazebo. The rest of the guests had scattered themselves around the garden, standing and chatting, while a wizarding troupe played orchestral versions of popular Weird Sister's songs.

"I'm surprised you managed to 'get out,'" Tracey said, putting the emphasis on the getting out part. "Considering what happened last time."

"I think you all handled what happened the other week admirably," Slytherin said. "And now they have experience, I'm sure the others will be able to handle—" his voice dipped lower "—My mother, even better if she comes looking for me again."

Tracey smirked. The image of Lady Potter in green and silver robes, wearing a mask, and introducing herself as 'Mummy Slytherin,' was just too amusing.

"Look there," Harry said. "By the conservatory door."

Tracey looked. An older man of average height with a slightly portly build was chatting amiably with a lady who looked like someone had pushed dead rat under her nose. "Is that Lord Thynn?"

She asked.

Harry nodded.

"Are you going to introduce me to him?"

Harry snorted. "No, I think not."

"Why not? He looks amiable enough to not care if I turn him down. Is it because he's Light?"

"Not at all. You remember before when I was talking about the 'bounds of social respectability'?"
Tracey's eyes widened slightly. "But he isn't even married?"

"No, he isn't. He does, however, have a—how can I put this lightly?—he has a harem."

Tracey looked at Harry with narrowed eyes. "You have a harem."

"Oh, no, no, no," Harry tutted. "I'm not talking about merely being contracted to more than one witch, no, I mean a real harem. As in, he has a large group of unmarried women who live with him in his manor and are reliant on him for their well being — over twenty of them."

"How does that work?"

"From what I understand, they're mostly muggles."

Tracey's eyes widened again. "I thought he was Light."

"He is. He loves muggles. Literally."

"Wooooow."

"Don't mention anything though. It's a slightly less than open secret."

Tracey nodded at about the same time as Harry gave her arm a firm squeeze. "Look sharp, Tracey. We have company."

"—Lord Slytherin," a voice said.

Tracey turned to see an older man she didn't recognise with short white hair, charcoal grey robes, and a comfortable smile approaching them.

"Tracey, this is Mister Bentley. Mister Bentley, this is Heiress Tracey Davis."

"A very pretty young lady," the older man said.

"Thank you, Sir," Tracey said as she came back up from her automatic curtsey.

Lord Slytherin nodded to the man. "Mister Bentley is our Humble Hag. He runs the ministry while Minister Fudge is out shaking hands and kissing babies."

"He runs…" Tracey noticed the corners of Mister Bentley's lips tug upwards at Harry's comment. "I'm so sorry, I should have recognised you."

Mister Bentley shook his head. "A civil servant isn't supposed to be famous." He looked to Lord Slytherin. "And that was hardly fair, my lord. Minister Fudge does a sterling job. I'm sure you'd have come to the same conclusion if you'd stuck around at the quidditch match to listen to several hours of his unrivalled charisma."

"I do apologise. I was afraid that Daphne wouldn't have been able to handle the overwhelming excitement."

"I believe the minister wanted to talk about noble funding."

"I suspect he's not the only one."

Tracey was watching the exchange in fascination.
"I?" Mister Bentley asked. "I am but the humble hag. It is not my business to involve myself in the matters of department heads."

"Department heads of the wardrobe?"

"Yes."

"Humble hag of the wardrobe?"

Mister Bentley looked around innocently before looking back. "If we lived in a world in which the humble hag of the wardrobe did have a say in how the departments that he oversees got the majority of their funding, then if an individual turned up out of the blue who looked to be rich enough to fund the entirety of a minor department or quango all by himself, I suppose that humble hag might be interested to hear what interests this individual has that might affect his eventual decision."

Harry was silent for a few moments before he finally said, "I like bird watching."

Mister Bentley smiled. "I'm glad we had this discussion, Lord Slytherin. And you too, Heiress Davis. If you'll both excuse me?" He bowed and left.

"I like bird watching?" Tracey asked, incredulously. "Was that code for something?"

"Not really."

"Is Mister Bentley married?"

"No. His wife died fifteen years ago."

Tracey smirked. "Then you should be thankful you're not a witch with an open contract, because I think he enjoyed that."

--- DP & SW: NRiCaD ---

It was morning in the great hall. Halloween had come and gone with barely a hiccup, minus Headmaster Lockhart standing up and declaring that that night would be 'trick or treat,' and since there were only four doors in the castle that students dared trick or treat at, a small inter-house war inevitably broke out when certain students decided they'd much rather just eat the treats they'd been given and not hand them out at their common room entrances.

There certainly weren't any petrified cats, threatening messages on walls, or puddles of water on floors — something that frustrated John Potter no end. The timeline was diverting horribly — had diverted horribly already, in fact, and there was nothing he seemed to be able to do to stop it. He was flying blind now, and would have to make the best of a bad situation.

"You look like you woke up on the wrong side of the bed," Virgo commented from his left side — a very pretty girl — one of those major diversions.

On his right side, Lavender snorted. "He's under too much stress. Aren't you, John? Quidditch, Duelling, Homework, and looking after you!" she said this last part to Virgo with a little more heat than John thought was necessary.

Virgo looked ready to retort back, but John cut over them both. "Girls," he said, "it's fine. There's nothing wrong and I am not under too much stress. And Virgo needs looking after. I can't tell you why, but she does."
Virgo nodded at him and went back to work on her breakfast while Lavender pouted.

Just then, the post arrived, dozens of owls streaming down into the great hall to drop off their many packages and letters. John collected the many letters to the-boy-who-lived and stacked them in a neat pile beside him. Virgo took the first letter off the pile, slit it open with her wand, and read. "Another donation," she eventually muttered. "House Potter is doing quite well out of you, aren't they?"

John gave her a nonchalant shrug.

Surprised noises around the hall made him look up again. The post owls were not nearly finished with their deliveries, but all the rest of them were focused on one table, and one girl, in particular. Hermione looked ecstatic. Like a child with a new toy. Or rather, like Hermione with a new book, a proud beacon of joyful energy, which is exactly what this was — only more so. Dozens of owls kept arriving, one after the other, all of them carrying very obviously book shaped packages. Some of the books weren't even wrapped up and looked extremely muggle. He spied one of the titles and leaned closer to Virgo. "What does 'cypher' mean?"

"To write in code," Virgo said, simply, in the middle of reading another of his letters.

"What would a Slyth—" John stopped himself. He still couldn't bring himself to think of Hermione as a Slytherin, and seeing her so obviously proud to be sitting across the hall still made him furious if he thought about it for too long. "What would a witch need a muggle book on that for?"

"Presumably because she has a message that she wishes to send without it being read and doesn't trust magic to do the job for some reason, or she has a coded message she wants to read — not unusual for Slytherins." Virgo looked up. "That's what my father said, anyway."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The basic gnome, as many know, is a magical creature shaped vaguely like a potato — semi-sentient and highly destructive to magical gardens up and down the country. Muggles didn't see them, like many magical creatures, not because they couldn't, but because their minds simply slid over them the same way they did outside the Leaky Cauldron or when faced with the Knight Bus.

Not being noticed when you are at the bottom of the food chain is a useful ability to have. It's just a shame that the power of a notice-me-not is relative to the power of the observer doing the noticing.

Somewhere deep in a pristine flower-bed, a gnome, unfortunate enough to decide to explore this particular garden, let out a terrified squeak and bolted for the ward line. It got all of twenty paces before a bright red light hit it square on the back and sent it tumbling into a dry-stone wall.

A man bent down, picked up the creature, and dangled it by a foot.

"Good shot, Mister Bentley." An old witch hobbled up to the on the other side of the dry stone wall and gestured at the gnome with her cane. "That little blighter's been giving me the run around for days."

Mister Bentley gave her a polite smile. He and Mrs Bun had been neighbours for nearly thirty years now. "Surely not," he said. "I can't imagine anything that could slip past your exacting gaze."

"Eyes, not as good as they once were."

"And yet, your garden is looking as perfect as ever."
"Oh, you charmer."

An owl holding a letter chose that exact moment to alight on the wall between them.

Mister Bentley let out a theatrical sigh. "Duty calls, it seems." He read the letter as Mrs Bun hobbled off. It was a request for a private meeting from one of his better placed little helpers. He produced an eagle feather quill from the recesses of his robes, penned a quick reply, tied the note onto the owl's leg, and, as an afterthought, tossed the still stunned gnome to the bird of prey, which snatched it in its talons and leapt into the air.

Mister Bentley then turned his attention back to his garden. The leaves needed to be gathered, the flowerbeds weeded, the bow-truckles fed, and the lawn trimmed. Not that anyone taking a casual glance would say that it was anything other than immaculate, but that was the point, wasn't it? Work you can take pride in required constant effort over many, many years. He produced his wand, and quietly got to work.

He was pruning his dwarf whomping willow when the wards alerted him that his little helper had arrived.

Calmy, but efficiently, he summoned tea from the house, along with various papers and boxes, sat down at the little patio table, and considered how best to steer his masters the way they needed to go.

Lord Slytherin would be an important key, of that he was sure. He hadn't been entirely sure about the man when they'd first met at the quidditch match, but his subsequent chat had alleviated some of his concerns. Bird watching, indeed. That probably meant the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Nothing too worrying. The man was like him — a gentleman — dignified, poised, and cultured. It such a shame their political alignments currently put them at odds. He'd have made an amazing under-secretary.

And speaking of under-secretaries…

"Ah, Dolores, please have a seat."

Dolores Umbridge, wearing salmon pink robes, sat down opposite him, looking nervous. "Mister Bentley."

He served them both tea and then immediately got down to business. "I understand Lord Malfoy summoned you to Malfoy Manor last week. What was that about?"

"He was telling me about my new responsibilities. He said that the Minister is nominated by, and serves the Wizengamot, and as such, my loyalty must first be to them — no matter what my loyalties might have been in the past."

"And what did you say to this?"

"I agreed."

"Well done." Bentley took a sip of tea. "Did he say anything else?"

"He asked me to pass him any important wardrobe papers."

Bentley thought about this for a moment, put his tea down, reached for the stack of files on the table, flipped through them, extracted several, and passed them over. "Here you go. He should find those ones rather amusing. Now, what of Mister Weasley's muggle protection act? Any
progress on getting it scrapped?"

Madam Umbridge fiddled with the hem of her robes. "Um, I'm not actually sure…"

Bentley paused with his teacup halfway back to his lips. "Not sure about what?"

"Well, how exactly do I do that? I don't know anyone with dirt on Weasley. Not that they're willing
to give away, anyway. The man seems friends with everyone."

Bentley sighed and put his cup down with a clink. "Okay, let's go through this logically, shall we? Firstly, who is Arthur Weasley's boss?"

"He doesn't have one? The Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office is a quango."

"True, then let me ask another question, who appoints Mister Weasley?"

"Regent Bones — in her capacity as chief warlock on the magical court — but she'd never sack him."

"Does Regent Bones have a boss?"

"Not on the court — it's an appointment for life."

"But as Head of the Department of Law Enforcement?"

"Minister Fudge."

"And does Minister Fudge have the power to fire Madam Bones?"

"No, only the Wizengamot can appoint department heads."

"—And the Light have had a stranglehold on the appointment of the Head of Department of Magical Law Enforcement for over forty years. Bentley nodded. "So, that avenue is closed. Now tell me, what else does a quango need to do its job apart from leadership?"

"Laws."

"Who makes these laws?"

"The Wizengamot. But I thought the whole point of this was to stop the Wizengamot."

"Indeed it is, so that avenue is also closed. What else does a quango need?"

"Gold."

"Where do they get that gold?"

"Patrons. And the Ministry Vault. 

"Yes. Now, the Ministry Vault is interesting, but as much as we would like it to be otherwise, only
a lesser percentage of our funding actually comes from there. Let's talk about patrons. Who is the primary benefactor of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office?"

"I don't know."

"Well, luckily for you, I do know." Bentley handed Dolores a single piece of parchment.
Dolores read it. "Lord Thynn?" Her nose wrinkled in disgust. "Blood traitor. But I still wouldn't know where to begin putting pressure on him."

"What you may not know is that Lord Thynn keeps a rather large collection of muggle women at his manor."

"Muggles?" Dolores spat. "That's disgusting. How is he allowed to do that? Doesn't that violate the statue of secrecy?"

"He uses the muggle guide laws. Officially, they are all his 'girlfriends.' Of course, if they want to stop being his girlfriends, they are free to do so, but then they also get their memories wiped. I suspect a wizarding lord can provide many incentives to not want their knowledge of magic wiped."

"So how to get him on our side?"

Bentley gave the pink-dressed witch an annoyed look. "I have provided you by far all the clues you need. If you can't work out the rest, perhaps I am putting my faith in the wrong place."

Dolores grimaced and went quiet. For a whole five minutes the two sat, Bentley quietly enjoying his small private paradise — green, fresh, and tranquil, far away from the bustle and noise of the city and the ministry.

Eventually, Dolores cleared her throat and started to voice a plan, tentatively at first, but as she continued to speak, with growing confidence and certainty. By the time she finished and looked to him for approval, she had a self-satisfied smirk on her face.

Bentley smiled. He knew she'd get there in the end.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In the privacy of her trunk, Hermione ripped the paper off the last of the books she'd received from her parents and placed it next to the others in a line so that the edges matched up just so. She cast a critical gaze at the collection and then rearranged them to sit in alphabetical order. Then she arranged them again, but this time by subject. Finally, she arranged the books alphabetically within each subject.

There.

Hermione nodded.

Harry had entrusted her with an important task and she was not going to fail him. The thought was unthinkable — although, she had just thought it, so…

Hermione vigorously shook her head, causing her long mane of hair to whip around her face.

No. This was important. Harry needed her to live up to the expectations he had for her. To be 'the greatest witch who ever lived.' And the first thing she had to do was crack the code on these ancient Norse writings. It wasn't enough to simply be able to read ancient Norse, no these writings had been encrypted.

Her first thought to ask her parents hadn't helped. The tri-language book had a powerful muggle repelling charm built into magically activated invisible ink. Her second thought to check the Hogwarts library hadn't helped either. Madam Pince hadn't even known what 'cypher' meant — although the librarian's generally unhelpful attitude never helped matters. So, her third thought—
the one she was currently pursuing—had been to get her parents to raid the mathematics section of the local bookshop and send her every muggle book on encryption and codes they could.

Hermione then picked up the only new magical book she'd acquired — *Complex Occlumency for the Arithmancy Mind* — opened it to the first exercise, read, took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and tried to let the numbers start to dance across her mind.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In another trunk not far away, Harry peered over Alexandra Black's shoulder while the first year girl poured over a rather useful book.

"We need two-dozen adult beech trees," Harry said. "Bowtruckled — highly saturated in local magic — straight, if possible."

"Two-dozen…" Alexandra flipped through the pages of the Dendromancer's Doomsday Book. "Okay. What about this one?"

"Longbottom Manor? I doubt Regent Longbottom would be willing to sell. And no way are we crashing those wards for this."

"Ah. Then how about this one?"

"Mmm… Tickledead Wood — not sure where that is."

"My lord." Daphne unfolded a large map on the desk.

"Ah, thank you." Harry inspected the map. "Yes, that looks possible. Please add it to the list. Next?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In the ministry of magic, the position of humble hag is given to they who sit directly below politicians in the chain of command. All of those politicians together make up the wardrobe, and the humble hag of the wardrobe sits directly below the minister himself. The job of the humble hags is to 'arrange matters' on behalf of their masters — a minister or department head, and see to it that the broomstick of government keeps flying, or occasionally, if needed, sweeping.

No one is one-hundred percent sure why they are called humble hags, but it is generally considered to be an attempt to ensure they don't get too big for their boots.

"Mister Bentley?"

Arthur Weasley entered the office of the current humble hag of the wardrobe with not a small amount of trepidation. Even though the humble hag didn't even hold nominal authority over his operation, that didn't mean he wasn't powerful and capable of making his life difficult.

"Ah, Arthur." Mister Bentley smiled a warm smile. "Please come in. Take a seat. I just wanted us to have a little chat."

"I know what you're going to say," Arthur began in a determined tone of voice, even as he sat in the armchair opposite Mister Bentley's own. "And the answer is no. I'm not going to back down. Our laws have to adapt. Many of our people are related to muggles. They don't like our current laws. And if we don't change, we could be in serious trouble as muggles continue to develop new artefacts, which we are not equipped to deal with."
"New artefacts?"

"All sorts of things. But I'm not going to be cowed. Not now I've finally got the Gray's co-operation."

Mister Bentley held up a hand. "Arthur — please — you have me all wrong. This is not a dressing down. I agree with you."

Mister Weasley blinked. "You do?"

"Of course. In fact, it is exactly that drive to push fairness into our laws for which I wished your council." Mister Bentley opened a file on the low table between them and pushed a small file across the table. "You see, there was a rather unfortunate case several months ago — a young London muggleborn wizard abusing the muggle guide laws — never made the papers — it was felt best to hush it up, but, well, you can see why it would be a good idea for it not to happen again."

Arthur Weasley's eyes widened as he read the document. "Four girlfriends?" he asked incredulously. "How did he arrange that? I thought there were limit recommendations — especially for muggleborns."

"There are. I believe the young man had the bright idea of doing each of his guide interviews in a different enclave. The local offices aren't obliged to check the central records, you know."

Arthur Weasley continued to read. "Confundus charms, memory charms, love potions, low-level dark magic. Oh my, yes, I can see the problem." He put down the parchment. "What happened to this wizard?"

"Currently doing community service after a two-week stay in Azkaban."

"But why a new law? Couldn't this be solved by better co-ordinating local and central government operations? Parchment protean charms, maybe?"

"In theory, yes, but the Minister is being awfully cautious at the moment. The last thing he wants is to be accused of setting up a divination government."

"I see."

Mister Bentley smiled warmly again. "So you understand why I need your help."

"Certainly." Arthur nodded to himself. This clearly needed to be sorted out. An extra paragraph or two shouldn't be too hard to add into the proposed act, and he couldn't imagine anyone would possibly object.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It was the dead of night. The moon was crescent. The sky was cloudy.

Just outside a small forest, somewhere in the South-East, a man in a rented HGV, wearing jeans, a button-up shirt, and a green and black mask, drove up to a gate, and stopped his vehicle. The way he executed that stop, with many jerks and creaks, suggested someone altogether unfamiliar with the task. Eventually, he succeeded in putting it in park, hopped out, and opened the gate.

"Oi!"

The man turned around at the noise.
"What are you doin' here this time of night?" Another man was shouting over the lorry's rumble while walking up to the masked lorry driver. "This here is managed woodland."

There was a movement, a blur of something in the air, and the second man's eyes crossed. "Oh, right," he muttered. "Surprise inspection. Of course."

Minutes later, Lord Slytherin approached a single tree that looked not unlike the hundreds of others he'd just passed and ran a hand up the trunk. Perfect.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It was late afternoon and the Wizengamot was in session. The subject at hand was the second reading of the Muggle Protection Act. Interest in law-making had picked up recently since the passing of the emergency 'Draco Malfoy' Act, but the room was still far from packed.

Up in visitor's gallery, Dolores Umbridge watched the proceeding with the air of someone watching what used to be their favourite TV show, but which had since let them down again and again. So many lords, so many sullied lines. They had made so much progress, but now they were backsliding. Gone were the golden times after Light Lord Dimwidd — a time when noble families wouldn't even consider marrying half-bloods. Now it barely caused a raised eyebrow. And that didn't take into account those outrageous lords who allowed their heirs to marry muggleborns, like Davis and Potter. Granted, Davis couldn't have known his firstborn son would die before giving an heir, leaving his second son in line, but that wasn't the point — and the new Lord Potter had no excuse.

What Magical Britain really needed, Dolores thought, was a law compelling Noble Houses to only marry blood that was pure. That would put them back on the right track.

Out in the chamber, the reading went on, and eventually, the critically important paragraph was read out.

There.

Dolores stood up, adjusted the bun of her hair, and left.

The journey between the Wizengamot chambers and the Ministry of Magic wasn't a short one. Dolores had to journey through many long corridors and up several flights of stairs, before finally arriving at the lift that would take her back up to the minister's offices. Eventually, she stepped out of the lift and made for the files behind her desk, ignoring all the various other under, assistant, and deputy secretaries who bustled around the place in their joint quest to make Wizarding Britain as complicated as possible.

She reached for one of the files, flipped through until she found what she wanted, and withdrew several parchments. She then made her way back towards the door. Someone tried to stop her as she left, but she told them she was on business for Mister Bentley, and that was that.

She made her way down to the public ministry floos, threw a pinch of floo powder from a bag on the mantelpiece, gritted her teeth at what she was about to do, stepped into the fire, and said, "Thynn Manor."

Dolores swirled through the floo, considering the meeting she was about to have with the reprobate lord of the Light. At least he'd never gone so far as to sire an heir with one of his whores.

The rushing stopped and she stepped out into a waiting room, clearly sealed off from the rest of the large house.
"Can I's be helping you?" A house elf had popped beside her.

Disgusting creatures. Dolores made a face. "Get me your master at once!"

"Who is you being?"

"Never you mind — your master is expecting me."

The elf popped away.

She had to wait several minutes before the doors to the manor finally opened and when they did, it was not Lord Thynn who greeted her.

"Are you Madam Umbridge?" asked what was very obviously a muggle. No proper witch would be seen dead wearing shorts that short.

"I am," Dolores replied. "Your master is expecting me. Take me to him at once."

"Lord Thynn is not my master. But please, follow me."

Dolores bristled at the muggle's tone, but bit down her retort for the moment. She was then led through the large house, fighting down her urge to react with disgust at all the obviously muggle additions that had been made. Eventually she asked, "and how did you come to the lord's attention?"

"That is a private matter between me and Lord Thynn."

Dolores frowned. "Where are the others?"

"I assume you mean the other girls? They are in the women's wing. This is the public part of the house."

"At least he has the decency to keep you hidden."

The muggle turned and smiled dryly at her. They had reached a large double door. "Lord Thynn will see you now." She opened the door, and Dolores stepped through.

"Ah, Madam Umbridge. The minister's new undersecretary, yes?" Lord Thynn was standing by one of the large windows. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"My lord. There have been developments in the Wizengamot that I was told you might appreciate being made aware of."

"Oh, yes? And why are you telling me this? The minister having a holiday, is he?"

"No, my lord. The humble hag sent me."

"Old Bentley, hmm? Very well, what is this development?"

Dolores handed Lord Thynn the parchment she'd been carrying. "One of the new acts includes rather stricter regulation for those who act as guides to muggles in our world."

Lord Thynn's eyes widened while reading the paper.

"You see why Mister Bentley thought this might concern you, my lord. With this act, your current 'arrangements,' discrete though they are, would become highly unlawful, which could in time
become a problem for you."

Lord Thynn grunted. "Okay, you've got my attention. Clearly you want my help to stop this. But I am only one vote. The Gray holds the swing power."

"Oh, that's not necessarily true. You see, this act is being pushed by one of your beneficiaries."

Lord Thynn gave her a shocked look. "Who?"

Dolores cleared her throat. "Arthur Weasley."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It was a weekend morning, and in the first year Gryffindor dormitory, the soul part of what would become the greatest dark wizard who ever lived was busy with important tasks.

So, what do we think? Virgo held up a set of dress robes to herself in the mirror.

I think it looks good, Julia thought back. It's cute. John will like it.

A flash of annoyance shot through Virgo, but it was soon under control. Yes, John liking it was actually important, if not for the reasons Julia had in mind. As much progress as had been made since Halloween, there still hadn't been a good opportunity to get him to give up his portkey. But at least there hadn't been any more attacks.

Virgo idly held up a second set of dress robes. And these?

The lace is nice. I'm not sure about the hood though.

All dress robes come with hoods.

Yes, but this one would make us look like we're delivering cakes to our granny.

I murdered my granny. I erased her from this world.

Well, she wasn't a very nice person.

Virgo held up a third set of dress robes. What about these?

Oh, now that's nice! And it goes with our shoes.

So, this one?

Yes. Definitely.

Virgo quickly got dressed. The dressing up would only be until afternoon, but it was important to always look your best. That had been an early lesson learned in Slytherin House the hard way. And on this matter, both Virgo and Julia were in total agreement. Later on, they'd have duelling practice with Susan, something that John still hadn't joined in on, but he was apparently getting private lessons with Professor Flitwick — the privileged, powerful bastard that he was.

"Malfoy?" One of the other girls poked her head through the door. "John's asking if you're going to be much longer."

Virgo smirked. "Tell him that waiting for a lady is something he'll just have to get used to."
The girl grudgingly nodded and disappeared.

Virgo and Julia then sat down and read for a respectable amount of time, just so no one would think they'd been 'summoned' by the boy who somehow defeated Virgo's other self, before gracefully descending the stairs.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In one of the private booths at Le Petite Magik, Lord James Potter was having lunch with a rather despondent Misuse of Muggle Artefact's Office Head.

"I just don't understand it," Arthur said, staring at the wonderfully cooked and expensive food in front of him. "Lord Thynn's always been highly supportive of both my career and my efforts in the department. For him to suddenly floo call me and demand I scrap the new act under threat of pulling out his patronage… It makes no sense."

James swirled his wine before taking a sip. "I assume this was after the last reading?"

"Yes."

"Maybe something to do with any changes or additions that were made. Anything major?"

Arthur went over all the little changes, compromises, and additions that had been made before the latest version had been read out at the Wizengamot.

James sighed. "Tell me, have you ever met Thynn's secretary, and 'female friend,' Becky?"

"Rather comely muggle woman? Yes, I have." Arthur frowned. "What? You think she's the reason Lord Thynn's against it? But the new laws wouldn't stop him from being Becky's guide. It's only supposed to stop the major abuses."

James looked awkward. "Becky isn't the only one. Not by a long way."

Arthur's eyes widened. Then he looked away and stared at nothing for several moments. Finally he clenched his hand into a fist and slammed it down on the table, causing all the plates and cutlery to jump. "Damnit!"

"Quite so."

"I can't backtrack, can I?"

"If you want to maintain your reputation, no."

"Well, I can't drop the whole act. Not now. You've got to help me, James."

"With funding? The house of Potter is spread rather thin at the moment."

"The only other people I could even think to go to on such short notice would be Sirius or Amelia… or Slytherin, I guess."

James gave Arthur a sharp look before composing himself and taking another sip of wine. "I'm not saying it's impossible…"

Arthur seemed to have an idea. He reached into the folds of his robes. "On that note, Lily sent this to Molly a while ago. Have you seen it?"
James took the photograph being offered him. It was a picture of his son, Harry, and Arthur's youngest, Ginny, snuggled up together, asleep, in the Slytherin common room. He chuckled. "Cute. Don't think I've ever seen Harry looking that unguarded" He handed the photo back. "Wait..." he paused. "You're not suggesting what I think you are, are you?"

"It would bring the houses of Weasley and Potter closer."

James wrinkled his nose. "I don't want you to take this the wrong way, Arthur, but your Ginny, well, are you sure you can control her?"

Arthur frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Lily and I are having to be very cautious with Harry right now. He's far too close to Lord Slytherin for our likings. He listens to us, yes, but I can't help the feeling he does it more because he's been told to, rather than because he sees us as legitimate parental authorities. A betrothal contract is one of the few powerful sticks we have if things go really bad. Do you feel you could influence Ginny to reign Harry in if needed?"

Arthur hesitated for just a tad too long before hastily saying, "Oh, yes, I'm sure I could. Ginny and I have always been close."

James shrugged noncommittally. "I'll think about it. In the meantime, maybe we can arrange a patronage pool for your operation. Better that then you having to have to go crawling to Slytherin."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"So, what do you think I should do, my lord?"

Lord Slytherin looked at Arthur Weasley over the small table shrubbery between them. They were in the same muggle restaurant they'd both gone to the last time they'd lunched together. There had been quite a few lunches and dinners together since then.

Slytherin took a drink from his orange juice. "Tricky," he said. "I certainly agree that the work you do is important and needs more than just base ministry vault funding, but maybe you are going about this the wrong way."

"What do you mean?"

"Lord Thynn seems to have been a good patron for you in the past — the two of you see eye-to-eye on many matters. It would be a shame for you to lose him."

"I can't scrap those paragraphs from the act without losing the respect of so many of my peers."

"That's the risk you run by basing your reputation on principles."

Arthur grimaced.

Slytherin dabbed at his mouth with a napkin before continuing. "Arthur, If you've backed yourself into a corner, then find another way out of it. Find another reason to get rid of those paragraphs. One that is acceptable to your peers."

"What other reason?"

Slytherin shrugged. "I don't know. That's your job."

"Right," Arthur muttered. He glanced up. "Incidentally, given what you told me about Harry and
Ginny needing to be close, what would you say to a betrothal between the two?"

"I'd say it's not up to me, but in principle it would be a good idea."

"You think Harry would be happy with that?"

"Quite likely. And, based on what I know, I suspect Ginny wouldn't be totally against the idea, either. It's Lord Potter I'm not so certain about."

"He seemed to be quite concerned about Ginny's ability to 'reign in' or 'control' Harry when I spoke with him about it."

"Interesting… I can't help but wonder what his game is."

"You're not the only one."

"You know Lord Potter quite well, don't you?"

Arthur gave Lord Slytherin a dry look. "I wasn't actually talking about him. Our little conversations"—he gestured around the muggle restaurant—"are reasonably well known. I seem to have become something of an unofficial ministry expert on Lord Slytherin, despite still knowing very little about you or what you officially stand for."

Lord Slytherin said nothing.

"You're going to have to make a stand on something eventually," Arthur continued. "I'm not saying this because I'm fishing, you understand, I'm merely saying that at some point, you will need to be ready to say what it is you actually believe in."

Several hours later, and a thousand kilometres away, found Harry Potter deep in the basement of the almost completed Slytherin Manor. He sat in front of a large blackboard. On his right, his house-elf, Plato, was busy drip feeding draught of living death into the obscurus he'd kidnapped, and was now experimenting on, to find a way to remove a soul-bound parasite from an eleven-year-old girl he'd previously sent another eleven-year-old girl after to murder. Behind them, Voldemort's horcruxes sat in their silk-lined boxes, waiting to be used when he had the opportunity. Upstairs, goblins were putting the final touches on a mansion that cost several million pounds, paid for with drug money, while at the bottom of the hill, a family of muggles that he'd vassaled to himself were busy developing advanced magical armaments, which he was planning to sell to the highest bidder.

His animagus form would make people freak out when they learned of it.

Luna's probably would too, if her constant insinuations were anything to go by.

Alex was having a massive identity crisis about her form.

Daphne's and Ginny's were the only somewhat normal ones of the lot, although still very impressive.

Hermione's would cause a sensation.

But to get those forms, he was going to have acquire enough phoenix ash to make the ritual work, and that would require accessing a store large enough for his needs — and there was only one store large enough — and it was highly unlikely the individuals in charge of it were just going to hand the ash over, or even sell it to him. That meant stealing what he needed. Again. Just like with the
stone, and the cloak, and even, some would rightly argue, the girls.

And on the blackboard in front of him, in big chalk letters, were written the words, "WHAT SHOULD I BELIEVE IN?" And he continued to stare.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This chapter was drafted, and made available early, for beta readers on the leadvone discord server. The first draft part of the next chapter has already been made available the same way. https://www.discord.me/leadvone

Sticky Note: If you want to keep abreast of the release schedule, as well as any changes and the occasional piece of bonus content, you can head over to https://www.leadvone.com and sign up for the Gray Mailing List.

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017’s prices.
In 1740, the third-to-last member of the Ancient and Noble house of Pithy, the then Lord Pithy, peacefully passed away as the result of being gored by an enraged tebo while hunting in deepest Africa.

The mantle of Lord then passed to his brother, the second-to-last member of the ancient line, who immediately got twenty of his best mates together, went out for a dignified mourning drink, got rip-roaring drunk, and, while trying to impress a lady of easy virtue, splinched himself into the bottom of an abandoned mine, and was only found when the rain washed out his drowned, and very dead, head several days later.

The last member of the now rather endangered house—the previous lord's sister—quickly took it upon herself not to rest until she had secured the house's future. Given that her marriage contract did not allow for any children by her maiden family, and as there was no Lord Pithy to grant her request for a divorce, she plotted to do this by freeing herself of her current shackles in the only other way that would work.

It was just a shame her trusted maid put the basilisk venom in the wrong goblet.

Thus the Ancient and Noble house of Pithy came to an end, and with its passing, all the accumulated family magics were released to the world. Often this would change nothing, since even extinct, one still needs to know how to cast the family magic in order to make use of it, but in this case, the same maid who mixed up the poison, also had access to her mistresses' secret diary, which contained many of the magics of the now dead house.

Not really knowing the value of what she had, the maid sold the diary to a friend for five galleons. The friend then took it to a dealer she knew in Knockturn Alley, who paid her fifty galleons.

Finally, the book was purchased by a well-to-do muggleborn who, drunk on the ideals of the muggle enlightenment, then did something almost unheard of in the wizarding world, up to that moment.

He published it.

Five-hundred years of accumulated magic in the subject of occlumency—particularly in regards to the field of arithmancy—were unleashed upon the wizarding world, and the arithmancy revolution began.

Deep within the Hogwarts library, deep within the library of her own mind, Hermione Granger was treading the path of countless arithmancers since that day over 250 years ago. Of course, all of those others tended to be in their twenties before even attempting the mind magics she was now.

Across the blackness of her consciousness, lines formed shapes, broke apart, whirled around, and formed new shapes, in a never-ending kaleidoscope of potentiality. The potential was in cracking the code on the ancient Nordic writings. She'd been at it for weeks now, and was starting to get frustrated — both with her lack of progress, and with her now chronic magical exhaustion. Using her powers continually at this level was far beyond what she'd ever asked her brain to handle before.
But she would succeed. She had to. Harry was relying on her.

In his own little slice of Magical Britain, Mister Bentley tended to the lawn he'd been meticulously cultivating since even before he'd become Magical Britain's top civil servant. That was a good analogue for Magical Britain itself, he thought, carefully uprooting an errant weed-bud with a skilful jab of his wand — a well-maintained lawn. Like a lawn, Magical Britain had a history. Poisons, carelessly added, took decades to seep away, everything should be neatly trimmed, and, occasionally, you needed to add something truly foul smelling to get the best long-term results — no matter how much Mrs Bun might voice her mild disapproval over the garden wall they shared, bless her. In fact, now that he came to think about it, Mrs Bun was a perfect example of an outstanding blade of grass on the lawn that was Magical Britain.

Mister Bentley surveyed his handiwork for the hour and nodded his head in approval. If only all parts of his lawn were so well behaved.

He made his way back up to the garden table, summoned his latest office reading, quietly sipped from a cup of ever-warm tea—two sugars with milk—and considered matters.

Weasley had just played a well-thought out move by anonymously leaking to the Prophet several negative stories from countries with rather draconian muggle-guide-laws, along with an independent report detailing how Norwegian wizards successfully police their muggle-guide-laws, before suggesting to his various backers that, 'We really need more research before rushing into things.' The Muggle Protection Act had been momentarily stalled, but now it would only be a matter of time before it picked up steam again.

He needed another angle — one with a little more staying power. Weasley would be cautious if he involved himself again so quickly and directly, so an oblique approach, maybe.

He sipped his tea.

Of course, it didn't need to be stalled all that long — just until the Wizengamot broke for the winter, which wasn't all that far away. That would give him a good long chunk of time to play with.

Yes, Mister Bentley thought. Maybe it was time for him to have a chat with his natural enemy.

On the outskirts of the forbidden forest, two almost invisible figures darted through the trees — barely a shimmer in the air — dodging and weaving, duelling spells flying between them at the speed of a muggle squash game. Leaves on the ground, golden and crinkly, rustled as they passed.

Both were tired, but neither particularly cared.

Then, as if deciding to kick things up a notch, one of the figures abandoned the constraints of gravity altogether, flying up into the bare forest canopy while unleashing a torrent of brightly coloured spells behind it.

The other figure didn't even hesitate. A blast of wind swept the leaves around its feet high up into the air, saturating the airspace with a thousand dancing spots of golden brown. There was a slight moment of reality confusion, and where before there had been a shimmer, now, there was just a leaf.

Up in the air, a female voice screamed. The screaming figure, still shimmering, dropped like a stone until there was another moment of confusion, another leaf replaced the shimmer, and the
scream started again, this time higher up, but still descending rapidly.

Sometimes magic changed the laws of physics, and sometimes, it didn't.

The shimmering figure who could actually fly had by now stopped firing off spells, choosing instead to watch its flailing opponent continually falling through the air at terminal velocity, but just about managing to never actually hit the ground.

"Help!"

And with that single yelp, the flying figure moved. Several spells were fired off in quick succession, the figure darted forward, and moments later, Harry Potter shimmered back into view on the ground, carrying a panting Ginny Weasley in his arms.

"Thanks," Ginny gasped.

"No worries. Can I suggest you don't try that trick again without me being there, though?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure." Ginny spent the next moments paying off her body's oxygen debts before she found her senses. She was still in Harry's arms. She gave him an impish smirk. "My lord can let me down now."

After she found her feet again, the two sat down to review her progress. She and Luna were still miles ahead of the others, although Alex was starting to catch up a little. Hermione and Daphne spent far too much of their time on other matters to keep pace. The only real combat training they got was during group sessions. Ginny could tell, however, that something was on Harry's mind.

"Is it something you can talk to me about?" she asked.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "I've just been thinking about how we position ourselves when we eventually go public. What policies do we support? What sides do we take and for what?"

Ginny gave Harry a confused look. "Who says we need to take anyone's sides? Isn't that what it means to be Gray?"

Harry waggled a hand. "Yes and no. When I first formed the Gray I did so with the idea of rebuilding Slytherin House — of using Slytherin House as a kind of focal point to build a political power capable of steering Magical Britain. That's what sold many of the other lords. And our political actions so far, few as they have been, have all been reasonably neutral. But it is as I said to Lord Greengrass way back then... 'the status quo is not sexy.' If we want to extend the Gray beyond just a small group of lords, we'll need a cause that more than just a few-dozen lords can appreciate.

"Sounds complicated," Ginny said with a grin. "Politics is definitely more the others' thing than mine. I'll just stick to fighting."

Harry nodded and looked up into the sky. "On a totally unrelated note, Lord Slytherin was having lunch with your father a few weeks back. Some things came up that we need to talk about. And possibly make a plan for, if you're up for it."

"Sure, I'm up for anything."

Harry gave Ginny what could only be described as, 'a look'. "I suggest you withhold judgement on that until I've told you what the discussion was about."
"Hey, Justin, Sophie, check this out." In the Founders Club room, Kevin Entwhistle flashed his friends his latest transfiguration essay with a grin. At the top, in handwriting that every student in the school could easily identify as McGonagall's, was scrawled a large O.

Sophie Roper beamed and clapped. "Well done, Kevin! I knew you could do it."

Justin slapped him on the back. "Yes, good job. All the work's paying off."

"I'll say," Kevin replied.

In another part of the classroom, the first year muggleborns were deep in focus, gazing deeply into each other's eyes while practising their occlumency. The brunette twins, Violet and Marigold Chesterfield were partnered together, naturally, while Kevin's little sister, Annabel, was partnered with the excitable Colin Creevey. This left Alan Gage, the plain looking one, as the odd one out, currently partnering with a charitable Dean Thomas.

Marigold blinked, looked away, and giggled. "You're getting good at this, Violet."

"Thank you, Marigold," Violet replied. "You are pretty good yourself."

And up at the front of the classroom, at the normally empty teacher's desk, sat their leader, Hermione Granger, eyes tightly closed, with a look of such ferocious concentration on her face that it made many in the room slightly uncomfortable.

"Is she still giving you the cold shoulder, Justin?" Sophie asked.

"No, not really. I'm not even sure she realised she was doing it. Or maybe I was just imagining things."

"She's amazing," Kevin said. "But she does need to relax a bit more."

"She's taught us so much," Sophie said. "And pretty soon we'll be starting on wandless magic. That's, like, Lord Slytherin level magic."

Justin frowned. "I just wish I could get my Mum and Dad to see it that way."

Sophie smiled. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure if anything happens, we can talk to Hermione, and she'll ask Lord Slytherin to help us. And when we're seventeen we won't even need their permission. We could become Vassals like Hermione all by ourselves if we wanted."

The two boys nodded.

"And to what do I owe the honour of a visit from the minister's own humble hag?" Lucius Malfoy looked across at the man sitting opposite him. Bentley had been the gears in the ministry machine since before he'd even taken up his lordship. He suspected the only reason the man had never made it onto Voldemort's death-list in the last war was because the Dark Lord thought he might be useful after his conquest.

"My lord," Bentley started, "normally, of course, I wouldn't involve myself in Wizengamot matters —"

"— as well you shouldn't," Malfoy said with a raised eyebrow.
"—But in this case," Bentley continued, "I feel it might be appropriate to do so."

"Why?"

"One of my many responsibilities is to co-ordinate the different departments, including the DMLE and the Department of Mysteries. When events transpire that might undermine the stability of Magical Britain, I have a duty."

In the privacy of his head, Lucius rolled his eyes. Ah, the old 'my duty extends past my jurisdiction' justification — classic. He made a hand gesture to indicate Bentley should continue.

"There have been discussions at the highest level, about the possibility of giving parents of muggleborns the franchise."

"What?!" Lucius' eyes widened.

"As you know, being granted the vote would make them full citizens of Magical Britain with all the rights that come with it, including the right to legal representation, access to St Mungo's, vaults at Gringotts…"

Lucius' eyes bugged to almost comic levels as Bentley continued to read out the list of potential rights that could be granted to muggleborn parents — to muggles.

"... And of course, all obliviation magics would have to be approved by the DMLE rather than being handled by the obliviator squad as is current practice. Hence my concerns about stability."

Lucius finally found his voice. "That would be unthinkable! Who's talking about this?"

"Oh, it's all very early stuff at the moment. A quiet word from one lord of the Light to another."

"The Gray would never allow it."

"Well, that is a point of view, certainly, but you may recall that Lord Slytherin did grant vassalage to what is now the House of Granger. They already enjoy many of these privileges."

Lucius sat back in his chair and took it all in. Muggles having the vote would be horrific. Even if the Wizengamot put up the candidates for minister, just the fact that muggles could vote would cause the more malleable candidates to shift their political stance. Muggleborns made up a quarter of the population. If, for the sake of simplicity, they assumed each muggleborn had two parents, that would add a new voting block as large as an extra third! And leaving aside the political ramifications, just the idea of thousands of muggles traipsing up and down Diagon Alley on a daily basis, at Bodmin Stadium, and the other enclaves, infecting them with their non-magical ways… of actual wizards having to wait in line at St Mungo's because a muggle had a piffling little problem… urgh.

If there was even a small chance that Slytherin was secretly pro-muggle—even if that didn't seem his style—well, it had to be addressed.

"Okay," he eventually said, "so what's your plan?" Obviously Bentley did have one. He wasn't a man who didn't.

Bentley smiled. "The Gray is nothing if not pragmatic. If the Dark were to come up with their own Muggle Protection Act, one that offered the Gray things the Light wouldn't be willing to compromise on…"
Lucius frowned. "No one is quite sure what Slytherin actually wants. Apart from the restoration of his house." He thought back to the vote he'd stopped from passing at the Hogwarts' directors meeting. "Along with a few other things…"

"The both of you are on the Hogwarts' board of directors," Bentley continued, almost perfectly echoing Lucius' own thoughts. "I imagine that would be a good place to start in talking with him."

Lucius nodded. Yes, it would be. And now that he knew he wasn't dealing with Lord Voldemort, thanks to his 'daughter', it would make it all the easier.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The forest was lush and tropical. A thousand birds hooted, chirped, and sang all around her. The buzz of a billion insects accompanied them. To a girl who'd never left the borders of rainy old England, the heat and humidity were oppressive. But this girl was not Ginny Weasley. Between the trees, Alexandra Black crept, constantly feeling her magic for the tiniest hint of an attack. She pushed aside a bush and found what she was looking for. Her eyes lit up. A massive forest clearing, and in the middle, a huge Mesoamerican pyramid. And inside was the target Lord Slytherin had set for her.

The entrance proved no difficulty.

Neither did the many magical trip-lines and pressure sensors.

Then she got careless and tripped one.

She was already halfway down the narrow, horribly round-shaped passage when she heard the rumbling up ahead.

"SHIT!"

Running in robes was not easy, and not for the first time, she wished she'd accepted Slytherin's offer to transfigure her something more like what Daphne sometimes wore. She was only saved a rather horrible restart by jumping into a pit across a wide chasm. She landed heavily and scrambled to her feet. That was when she saw the skeletons.

Through her many breathy pants, Alexandra smirked. "Now this — is more — my thing!"

The first skeleton lunged for her, but black chains burst from her wand and held it fast. Moments later, those same chains held all four of the undead in front of her. She then triumphantly pointed her wand downwards and shouted, "Canker Disserpo!"

Nothing happened.

Alexandra frowned.

Suddenly the pit was filled with light, she felt a little yank behind her navel, and the next thing she knew, she'd landed on her backside in front of Slytherin, currently disguised as Harry, who looked down at her with his emerald green eyes. "And where did you learn that spell?" he asked. He didn't sound angry, but there was a definite seriousness to his tone.

"The restricted section," Alex replied, getting to her feet and rubbing where she'd landed on the hard stone floor. "Why didn't it work?"

"This is a dream. I make the rules here. And one of those rules is no constructs that could risk the
integrity of the dream itself. Canker Disserpo is a blight, Alex. It creeps and infects. I would not wish to see if it could break free."

Alexandra fingered the pendant around her neck that Ginny had mysteriously given to her after the confrontation where she'd learned Slytherin's true identity. "But it would have worked, right?" she asked. "The skeletons would have been forced to obey me."

Harry nodded. "Yes, it would have, if you got it right."

The night continued from there. Alex fought her way through the various traps of the pyramid and after only two more attempts found the centre all by herself without having to be remote-apparated into it.

"Now what?" she asked, sitting again in front of Slytherin.

"A question. If you could change anything about Magical Britain, what would it be?"

Alexandra didn't even have to think. "Ladies should be able to sit on their own Wizengamot seats. It's so unfair — we can't even be our own proxies."

"Ah, yes," Harry said. "I should have guessed that would be your reply. Anything more actionable? I'm in the middle of drafting the outline for the book we're going to use when I go public. I'd appreciate input."

Alex's eyes lit up. "Better laws to protect family legacies. What my father is doing to the House of Black shouldn't be allowed."

"So, a noble position?"

Alex hesitated. "No, I mean, it doesn't have to be noble, right? Everyone can have a house, can't they?"

"Technically, yes. Except unmarried muggleborn witches, and underage muggleborn wizards, although it does require jumping through a lot of hoops and only the future head of house can do it. Most never do. They generally only bother when they're starting a business."

"But they could do it," Alex pushed, "so my point is still valid. Strengthening family legacy laws benefits everyone."

"But it benefits people with strong legacies more," Harry said with a smile. "People like you."

Alex folded her arms. "So you're saying I'm wrong?"

"I'm saying it's a very traditionalist Dark view."

Harry smiled. "Alright, it is a little wrong, yes — from a pure fairness point of view." He put up a finger to stall Alex's objections. "But that doesn't mean it isn't still an option."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Letting this slide through is not an option!" Lord Nott slammed down the parchment he'd just read onto the table between himself and Lord Malfoy. "Muggles as citizens!? Are they mad!? What are the options? If only we still had him we could solve this with one single well placed killing curse."
Lucius sighed. "We'll need to strip most of the more ridiculous paragraphs from the current act before adding our own back in. We'll need a basic framework before we talk to our friends."

"Fine," Nott said. "What do we keep? This stuff about giving Weasley authority to make classifications of new muggle rubbish seems pretty inoffensive. What even is a microchip? Do you know?"

Lucius shook his head. "No, I don't, and I don't particularly want to. What about this one removing currency exchange restrictions for mudbloods in cases of extreme distress?"

"Dangerous. Remember the Carnegie affair. And how is that even anything to do with muggle protection?" Nott asked.

"Nothing. I suspect they're just using the act as an opportunity to shove through everything they've been wanting to pass for the past four years."

"Despicable. But it is what we'd have done."

"Quite."

"So what are we going to give Lord Slytherin? What does he want?"

Lucius handed over a piece of parchment. "Apart from what's public, which you obviously know, this is my only clue."

"Minutes of the Hogwarts director's meeting? What's this about?"

"One of the motions put forth was to give Slytherin guardianship of the school's mudbloods."

"Five in each year... Thirty-five total. Why not happily hand them over? They're just mudbloods. Maybe he could even be persuaded to ditch the whole act."

"I doubt it. They aren't valuable enough by themselves, even if he wanted to create some kind of Slug-club style old boys club, which is the only plausible reason I can think of for why he would want their guardianships. And his rapport with Arthur Weasley is supposed to be rather strong for some reason that baffles me."

"That's a fat lot of good. Then what do we do?"

"We'll probably need to talk to Lord Slytherin directly. Or perhaps, if we can't arrange that, indirectly."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"I can't believe you!" Daphne hissed. She was sitting on Hermione's bed in the Slytherin girl's dormitory with her back to the headboard and her knees drawn up to her chest. The curtains were closed and they'd already applied several layers of privacy charms. It was easy to tell it was Hermione's bed, because even neat and tidy as it was, there were still books piled everywhere — Daphne had needed to wedge herself into a space to actually find a headboard to lean back against. Laying open by her side was one of the muggle strategy books Harry had bought her for her birthday.

Sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed, trying to look innocent, was Hermione. Looking innocent was now something she was naturally good at, even while also looking tired, which, right now, she did. Despite the meticulous care she usually took of her hair, a certain bushiness was
"A unicorn!" Daphne continued. "A unicorn animagus! My favourite animal in the whole world! You— You—!" She opened her mouth again, but couldn't seem to find the words.

"Daphne…" Hermione began.

"I'm not jealous, you understand," Daphne said. "Being able to ride a unicorn would be just as good as being one. But then you—! Humph!" She folded her arms and pouted.

"It's not my fault," Hermione said. Like Daphne, she also had a book, this one laying in her lap. "You didn't get to choose to be a golden eagle. You could have been any kind of eagle. Any kind of bird."

"I'm happy with what I have. I've always wanted to be good at flying. And having a unicorn animagus on our side will be incredibly useful. The symbolism alone is powerful. Unicorn hair, hoof powder, never mind freely given unicorn blood."

"There, you see." Hermione smiled encouragingly. "It's not that bad."

"But… But… But a Shetland unicorn?!" Daphne threw up her hands in the air. "I can't ride you if you're a Shetland unicorn! You're too small! It's that Morgana damned hair of yours! That's what caused this!"

"Well, I'm sorry," Hermione grouched. "We can't all have naturally-perfect, silky-smooth hair right out of bed every morning. I imagine you'd have got a unicorn with a cashmere coat, if it'd been you." Suddenly, she yawned — a long and drawn out yawn, not the kind politely made in company to indicate that the yawner is just a little tired, but the jaw-achingly full yawn of the truly whacked.

"I'll give you your bed back," Daphne said, moving to the edge. "You don't want to push yourself too hard. Harry wouldn't like it if you hurt yourself."

"Harry needs me," Hermione said, crawling up to where Daphne had been before. "He's relying on me. I can't fail him."

"Did you hear about the valuation he got for the old muggle gold he found in that second cave?" Daphne asked. "£350,000 — seven thousand galleons."

"That sounds nice," Hermione said. Her head landed on her pillow, in-between an encyclopaedia of runes and a muggle book titled, 'cracking substitution cyphers with frequency analysis.' "Will that keep the goblins happy?"

"For the moment."

"Good. Harry's got lots of important things to do. He shouldn't have to be distracted by something like mere gold."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It was raining. The afternoon sun didn't stand even a chance of piercing the uniform dark-grey sky, spread across the Scottish wilds like a dementor's cloak. It was at times like these that John Potter really regretted being such an outdoorsy type. Technically, the roof of the duelling arena was supposed to close in bad weather, but for whatever reason, the light drizzle, which pattered around him while he shouted encouragement, didn't count.
"C'mon, Susan! Don't let her box you in!"

In their little corner of the arena, Susan Bones valiantly tried to fight off the advances of a hyper-focused Virgo Malfoy. John could clearly see it wasn't easy going. Despite Virgo being a year younger than Susan, and muggle raised, she was clearly talented, powerful, and determined.

"Expelliarmus!" Virgo shouted, taking advantage of a gap in her opponent's defences, and cleanly ripping the wand from her grasp. It flew across the space between them, allowing her to deftly pluck it from the air.

Susan cursed.

John clapped and flashed the younger girl a charming smile. "Well done, Virgo!"

"Thank you."

"And you, Susan," John began, as the three of them made their way towards each other, "you were doing well, but you allowed Virgo to control the pace of the duel right from the start. Your footing was sloppy when she pushed you, so I want you to go through those drills again while I go against Virgo."

Susan took her wand from Virgo's unresisting hand, grinned at him—"Yes, Professor Potter,"—and walked away.

John smirked after her before turning back to his other student — the girl who'd have never come to Hogwarts if he hadn't come back in time — the girl who probably wouldn't have even learned she was a witch if it hadn't been for him — Also, he thought, somewhat guiltily, the girl who wouldn't have been indoctrinated in Malfoy slime and then left to rot by that same slime when she turned out not to be the perfect Slytherin daughter, if he hadn't been tasked by Fate and Death to save the world.

"Do you need a moment to rest?" he asked.

"No, I am perfectly ready to defeat you."

John chuckled. "Oh, I see, just like the last three times, mmm?"

Virgo said nothing, but instead got into position for their bout.

Still chuckling, John did the same. They began and he immediately put her on the back foot with an elemental wind. It howled through the arena, kicking up leaves and twigs everywhere, and causing all the other Hufflepuffs—busily duelling on the other side of the arena—to cry out in surprise. Things from there went pretty much as they did the last three times. Virgo tried to counter his magics with surprisingly intricate spells and animations, but they were all ultimately useless. She eventually stood exhausted in the middle of the arena, her wand by his feet, looking incredibly frustrated.

"Don't worry about it," John said, soothingly. "You'll get better."

Virgo shot him a look of anger before schooling her features (or softening them? It was hard to tell.) "I don't need your sweet words, Potter. You beat me every time with raw power. You shield every spell I send at you and your elemental magics deal with everything else I have. Lord Malfoy made me watch memories of your duelling tournament from last year. You beat seventh years as though they were your age. Seventh years! One after another! Almost no rests! Do you have any idea how insane that is?! You, John Potter, are a monster — you, and your brother."
John had been preening under the girl's fierce words, until the mention of Harry, whereupon his face darkened for just the fraction of a second before he got control of himself back.

"If you continue training under Flitwick, I will never be able to reliably beat you," Virgo finished. "I simply won't be able to skill up fast enough to out-match the difference we have in power."

"Virgo, you shouldn't be measuring yourself against me. You can already beat Susan. That's an amazing accomplishment." He smiled encouragingly at her. "You score top in all your classes. You're an amazing witch. And very pretty too."

That didn't get quite the reaction he was hoping for. Every other girl he'd given that line to in the past had at least blushed. Virgo just crossed her arms, sniffed, and marched off to duel one of the Hufflepuff first-years.

Susan sidled back up to him and giggled. "You like her, don't you?"

John jerked around. "No, I don't. She's a…" He started to say Malfoy but he stopped himself in time. Susan didn't like it when he said things like that, and besides, was Virgo really a Malfoy? When it came right down to it? Sure, she'd have Malfoy family magics, but she'd been raised by muggles. She knew about things that no pure-blood princess would know about — or even him for that matter.

Susan easily picked up on his hesitation. "She's a nice girl — very smart — a bit reserved, but that's not surprising given what she's been through. You should open up to her a bit more."

"I still don't know if I can trust her."

"You trust me, don't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well then," Susan said, as if that was a good enough argument. "Besides, if you wait too long to trust her, it might be too late."

"What do you mean?"

Susan sighed. "John, she's a daughter of the House of Malfoy whose Lord is unhappy with her. I'm actually rather surprised. If I were her, I'd be a lot more worried about my prospects than she seems to be."

"Prospects?"

"Contracts."

"Oh." A lumos went off in John's head. "Oh!" His face darkened again. "Oh… You think Lord Malfoy would contract her to some death eater or someone?"

"Or someone," Susan said, meaningfully. "I was thinking more along the lines of Lord Slytherin."

John choked when some saliva almost went down the wrong pipe. He got his breath back again before replying. "Why?" he coughed hard again. "Why would he do that?"

"Auntie says the Wizengamot is fighting hard about these new muggle protection laws. The Dark desperately wants the Gray on its side rather than the Light's. Contracts have traditionally been a way to cement new alliances."
"Slytherin already has Greengrass and Lovegood."

"Auntie once told me that Wizards who want more than one wife often aren't satisfied with just two." She gave John a knowing look. "Remind you of anyone?"

"I am nothing like Lord Slytherin!"

"Of course not. You're just a charming, handsome, powerful wizard who doesn't wear a mask."

Susan blushed when she finished.

John gaped at her for a second before bursting out laughing. "And how, Heiress Bones, do you know that Slytherin doesn't look like a hexed monkey under his mask?"

Susan continued to blush. "Fair point."

"But I'm glad you think so highly of me. And is it just me or do I notice that you're growing too?"

He leered at his friend's chest, which had definitely expanded in the last few months.

"Oh, shut up," Susan said playfully, covering herself with her arms and giggling again.

A loud shout distracted them. They turned.

Virgo was sitting on her backside on the ground with her wand half-way between her and her opponent, looking absolutely furious with herself.

"I did it!" Her opponent, Marigold Chesterfield, cheered, jumping up in the air, arms held up high, while her twin, Violet, looked on impassively.

"I tripped," Virgo snarled.

"Still did it!" Marigold laughed.

"Again!"

John watched the now livid Virgo duel several more times against the first-year Hufflepuff girl, ruthlessly stomping her into the ground like a boot stomping an ant. Not that Marigold seemed to care much, continuing to smile even as her wand was ripped from her hand again and again. It was amazing how fierce Virgo got when she duelled. It actually reminded him of someone. A certain red-headed someone — a certain red-headed someone sitting prettily in Harry's lap, innocently oblivious to the evil words mouthed behind her.

Way up in the highest stands, a certain red-headed someone was lying on her stomach under the invisibility cloak, peering through a pair of omnioculars at Virgo's duelling exploits, and carefully making notes.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Daphne was sitting on Hermione's bed again. The curtains were drawn, and, like always, all the privacy charms the girls knew were active. "—And Ginny thinks there's nothing to worry about right now, but she's keeping an eye on the situation anyway," Daphne continued. She was in the middle of sorting out stuff that Harry needed to know, stuff he probably didn't need to know, but would like to know, stuff he actually didn't need to know, and stuff that he really needed to know, like, right now. "Alex got into a fight with a couple of third years, which wasn't so great, but she handled it. It wasn't the same display she demonstrated in the common room, but that could be attributed to her just not bothering with 'small fry'. In any case, Harry will certainly want to know
about that. But then, Alex will probably just tell him herself during dreamy time." She put a
thinking finger to her chin. "But I'm not sure when their next session will be, so best if I just
include that in the report as well."

Hermione was sat up by the headboard, sitting cross-legged in her sleepwear with a look of
vacancy across her features. She occasionally nodded to show that, at least some part of her was
engaged in the conversation.

"I should probably also ask if he has any information from his spies in the ministry about the
situation in the forbidden forest now that Mosag is running the Acromantula show. There hasn't
been anything on that in the Daily Prophet for over a week."

Daphne paused, mid-monologue.

Hermione was shaking.

Daphne leaned in closer. It wasn't easy to spot, but on closer examination it became clear her close
friend was trembling like a leaf. "Hermione? Are you okay?"

Hermione's eyes instantly re-focused. "Of course I'm okay." Her voice was strained.

"You don't sound or look okay."

"No, I'm fine. I'm just tired."

Daphne frowned. Hermione had been working herself to the bone recently. Everyone knew it,
although obviously most didn't know what she was up to. Not even Daphne really knew what she
was up to, other than she was trying to learn to read the logs from the Hogwarts sea-cave.
Hermione always did have a stubborn streak. "Then you won't mind if I take a peek, just to check
everything's alright?"

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms. "Of course it's okay! Because I'm fine!"

Daphne withdrew her wand, pointed it at Hermione's forehead, gathered her own mental faculties,
and whispered, "Legilimens." The spell floated between them like the faintest wisp of smoke. It
brushed against Hermione's occlumency shields and she felt her friend open up to let her in, a
massive archway in her shield's walls.

Daphne's consciousness was halfway through when she felt the creaking. Alarmed, she just
managed to extricate herself before a point right above the archway buckled, and the entire thing
collapsed like a house of cards.

"I can't," Hermione whispered

Daphne's consciousness snapped back behind her eyes.

Hermione's breathing had changed. It was now ragged, panting in short, sharp gasps."I can't."

"Hermione."

"I — Daphne — I — It's not working — I can't." Her eyes were wide and darting. "I've tried. But
it's not working! I can't!"

She was having a panic attack. "Hermione!" Despite it being something she'd never normally do,
Daphne climbed over the bed and quickly wrapped her arms around her.
"I can't!"

"It's okay. Take deep breaths — calm, deep breaths — come on. You need to work with me here."

It took almost half an hour for Hermione to calm down, and now that she was actually looking for them, Daphne couldn't begin to understand how she hadn't spotted the signs of acute magical exhaustion before — magical exhaustion so bad it had caused even Hermione's basic occlumency to come tumbling down, leaving her open to all the accumulated stress piling on her all at once.

"It's the code," Hermione sniffed out. "I figured it was a substitution cipher, because I once read a book that mentioned them, and there's this muggle technique called frequency analysis, which has never been used with arithmancy occlumency, and I really wanted to learn it, but there isn't much data available for Ancient Norse so I figured I could just make up for the difference by brute forcing it, and I didn't want to disappoint Harry, but once I started I didn't want to waste all that effort when I might solve it at any moment, and the arithmancy books warn against using more magic than you can handle, but I've been using occlumency for so long, and I've always been able to restrain myself, but it's already taken a long time, and Harry needs this done, and, oh, I'm so stupid!"

"Hermione," Daphne said soothingly, still hugging her. "You are not stupid. It's okay. But you have to rest. Your body needs to recover."

"But what am I going to do!? I have to solve this! If my occlumency isn't enough, then I'll need a computer, but you can't have electronics in Hogwarts — except maybe the ritual room — but we'd need to fidelius it, and where would we get a power source? And would the fidelius itself interfere with the electronics?" She was still shaking in her arms.

Daphne sighed. It was clear Hermione wasn't going to try to sleep until she had at least a passable solution to her problem. She wasn't quite sure what 'brute forcing it' meant, but it sounded vaguely like attrition warfare, which was rarely a great idea, so, Hermione needed a different tactic. A flanking manoeuvre, as it were.

Unfortunately, she, Daphne, didn't know anything about muggle code-breaking, so, even if it was useless, she'd start with what she did know about. "Have you tried all the magical decoding spells, yet?"

There was a moment of silence before Hermione said, "I told you, I've been using occlumency."

"No, I mean you're applying a muggle method of turning a bunch of rubbish into something meaningful. Have you tried all the magical decoding spells, yet?"

There was silence

"I'm so stupid," Hermione whispered.

"Hermione?"

"I haven't used any of them!"

Of course, Daphne mused, sometimes it turns out that you've been using flanking manoeuvres so much you forget that direct assaults still exist.

"I just assumed!" Hermione angrily continued. "I knew about a muggle way to do it, and like a stupid ignorant muggleborn didn't even consider that there was already a magical way to do it. Oh, Merlin, I'm still like that other me!" She started moving out of Daphne's embrace.
"Where are you going?"

"The library. There's still some time before curfew. I'll—"

Daphne grabbed her wrist. "Hermione, you need to rest!"

"I—" Hermione started again, before what was clearly a dizzy wave hit her, and she fell forward onto the other half of the bed. Daphne checked. Hermione was out like a light.

Sighing deeply, Daphne put her to bed, before getting dressed again, and heading out to tell her lord about what had happened.

When Hermione woke up, it was to find Harry at her bedside, with an understanding face and a calm word. They spoke about what happened, and Hermione promised to be more careful in future. Harry even knew where she should start to look for the code-breaking charms. Of course he knew best, Hermione thought, snuggling herself back under the sheets when Harry left after giving her orders to rest for the rest of the weekend. Harry always knew best.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It was a Wednesday. It was also late afternoon. This fact annoyed Lord Lucius Malfoy who generally went out riding with Nott at around this time, while their wives took tea up at the house. The fact that the weather outside the castle window showed it to be probably the last good weather of the year, didn't help matters.

On the opposite side of the headmaster's desk, Gilderoy Lockhart was looking unusually nervous. "Are you sure he's coming?"

"I assure you," Malfoy said smoothly, "Slytherin is not nearly so unreachable as you might assume."

Lockhart started muttering something about how he'd never gotten an answer from Slytherin on anything, no matter how many owls he'd sent him, before Malfoy tuned him out.

Lucius himself was only half sure of Slytherin's eventual arrival. After thinking about how to set up this meeting, he'd hit upon the rather obvious idea of having Draco hand deliver a letter to Heiress Greengrass. The headmaster's presence—as well as the official purpose for this meeting—was, unfortunately, necessary. Slytherin rarely answered requests for meetings, but there was something about Hogwarts that consistently drew the man out of his hiding hole. He'd just have to signal to the man what he wanted through the time-honoured practice of double meanings.

"But I guess, in the end, the call of a famous celebrity like me was just too much for him to stay away!" Lockhart flashed a grin at no one in particular before collapsing back in his chair, his face quickly shifting from confident to tired. He stared at the mess of papers in front of him. "How do you handle all of this, my lord?" he asked.

"I don't," Malfoy said.

At that moment, the door to the headmaster's office opened without bell or knock, and the visage of Lord Slytherin stepped through. Lockhart's expression instantly shifted from tired to alert. The three exchanged greetings, ("Order of Merlin, Third Class!") and sat down.

"What's this about that couldn't have been owled?" Slytherin asked.

First double-meaning, Malfoy thought, and said, "There are some things, Slytherin, that are best
not written down."

"Is that because they might leak, or because they shouldn't be discussed at all?"

"Neither, but there are some things that should just be talked about face-to-face, one on one, as it were."

"Indeed!" Lockhart said, smiling widely. "And we've been given a golden opportunity to market Hogwarts, and, dare I say it, those at the top—" He gave them both a roguish wink "—to the entire Wizarding World!"

"Go on," Slytherin said.

"Are you familiar with the Tri-Wizard tournament, Lord Slytherin?" Lucius asked.

"Massive tournament between the three most important European wizarding schools — rather dangerous — discontinued when all nine champions, mostly from noble families, were all killed at once when one of them decided that the best way to deal with a hydra, was to keep chopping the heads off."

"An apt summation," Lucius drawled. "And as you can probably guess, Ludo Bagman has been chatting with Barty Crouch about the idea of bringing the tournament back. I understand they've already reached out to their opposite numbers who are in favour of the idea."

"I don't see any reason to object," Slytherin said.

"It *would* require you to take a more *active* role, in *discussions*," Malfoy continued. "Especially when there are matters of great *urgency* and *import* to discuss. You've been rather distant in the day to day matters of the steering of Magical Britain, but if that's *changing* then we, and especially *I*, would appreciate your *thoughts*, Slytherin."

Slytherin's mask regarded him for a moment.

Then Lucius felt it — a slight brushing against his occlumency barriers. He gasped and swatted it away. *That* hadn't been what he'd meant!

"Capital suggestion, my lord," Lockhart said, jovially. "What say you, Lord Slytherin? I know there are some things I wouldn't mind talking to you about either."

Lucius spent the next few minutes of discussion sweating profusely as legilimency probe after legilimency probe brushed over his defences, never violent, never pushy, but nevertheless, gently persistent.

Eventually Slytherin cleared his throat. "I feel that if Lord Malfoy here, really wants to introduce more stringent entry criteria for the competitors, then he will need to be ready to compromise on certain *other* issues."

Damn. This really was the only way he was going to get to talk with Slytherin, wasn't it? He took a deep mental breath and readied himself.

The next time Slytherin's legilimency probe brushed over his shields, just as Lockhart started explaining how a chimera should actually be dealt with, he didn't swat it away, but allowed it to settle on the surface like snowflakes on a brick wall. More magic flowed through the connection, and eventually, after another minute chatting, Lucius' world split, and his view went dark.
And then there was light.

He was now standing in the foyer of Malfoy Manor, the home he’d grown up in — the home he’d been seat of ever since his father died — and the home that he’d based his own personal mindscape on.

He cautiously opened the front door and peeked outside.

Total Darkness — save for a small rectangle of light in a far-off wall that looked miles away.

A thin bridge of marble stretched off towards that rectangle of light, and on either side of that bridge, an endless drop into complete blackness, staggering the mind with its vast unknown, like a silent ocean at midnight.

A figure was floating across the bridge towards him. It was, of course, Slytherin.

Lucius schooled his features as the enigma lord approached.

Slytherin stopped just before his front door. He would go no further — of that, Lucius was sure.

"You have my attention," Slytherin said. "But I advise you to be quick — lest we attract attention."

Lucius nodded. "We are not happy with the muggle protection act."

"Who?"

"The Dark."

"I'm sure you're not."

"Is there anything that would persuade you to outright drop it?"

"Your daughter?"

A chill went down Lucius’ back. "Not Virgo."

"Then I can't think of anything."

"You're interested in muggleborns aren't you? You vassaled one, Merlin knows why. Have you heard what those idiots in the Light are suggesting? Total citizenship for muggle parents of muggleborns."

"Perhaps I'm in favour."

Lucius tilted his head, as though to concede the point. "Perhaps you are. Or perhaps taking away one of the tools you use to collect your precious muggleborns is not in your, interest? What's the value of being vassaled to you, if they already have all those rights anyway?"

Lord Slytherin said nothing.

"But I'm sure that if it was put up," Lucius continued, "you'd be forced to accept it, if you want to maintain your pro-muggleborn position."

"I don't have a pro-muggleborn position."

Lucius shook his head. "No, you're right. You don't have any position. How long will you be able
to play that game? Allying with the Light means constantly strengthening the ministry and taking away the powers that allow us to steer our world — kicking out the pillars that hold us up, while we're still standing on them."

"Then what are you proposing?" Slytherin asked.

"That you let us make some proposals of our own. Obviously this will take time and play into certain people's agendas, but if I'm thinking correctly, you don't actually much care about this legislation anyway."

"Laws do need to evolve to adapt to new circumstances."

Lucius sneered. "Something you've been helping with no end." There was a gust of mental wind and Lucius quickly reminded himself of the raw magical powers likely ready to come crashing down on his shields should he get too cocky. He centred himself, cleared his throat, and continued. "I suggest, for example, that family law should extend over magical guardianships of muggleborns — a way to help bring muggleborns into our culture, perhaps?"

Slytherin said nothing again.

Lucius counted that as a win. He smiled. "May I be frank?"

Slytherin inclined his head.

"I believe you are an isolationist, like me. You don't want muggleness in the Wizarding World any more than I do, but you believe you can use it — a foolish belief, in my opinion — a dangerous belief — but at the core, you are an isolationist. We should be working together."

"Just as you worked together with me during the last board meeting?"

Lucius wanted to scowl, but hid it just in time. "We both know why I withdrew that support. You are — not — the Dark Lord."

"I never said I was."

"No, you just let me look a fool all by myself." He paused. "But that doesn't mean we can't work together now. We'll write up a new proposal for the act, just taking out the more outrageous paragraphs and adding in ones that would—" he made a vague gesture with his hand, "—help you along a bit. The Dark and the Gray can understand one-another better, I think."

Slytherin slightly inclined his head. "This may be true." And with that, Lord Slytherin turned and started floating back over the bridge between minds, over an endless pit of darkness.

"And that's how you should properly deal with a Chimera!" Lockhart finished, beaming.

He was back in the headmaster's office.

On the way out from the meeting, Lockhart tried to trap Slytherin into a private meeting of his own, but Slytherin responded simply by handing the man a small envelope and telling him he'd talk with him then.

Lucius recognised that envelope. He'd received one himself not too long ago, and although his Winter Festival schedule was normally completely full, he had decided that attending the first Slytherin Gala Night at the newly constructed Slytherin Manor was probably a good idea.
"Known Knowledge Unknown?" Professor Vector looked at the girl in front of her with surprise. "It's not good manners to snoop around in other people's secrets, young lady."

"Please, professor," Hermione said, "this isn't for that — this is for historical research."

"Historical research?"

Hermione nodded.

"Hmmm… Well, in that case, I suppose you can borrow it." She took a tome off her shelf and handed it to the beaming girl. "But don't let me hear of you using it for nefarious purposes."

"No. I promise you won't. Thank you, Professor!" Hermione left the arithmancy classroom, carefully closed the door behind her, and almost ran down to her favourite library spot. Success! The library's only copy was checked out, but she'd tracked it down, and now she had it.

Twenty minutes later, Hermione was vibrating with excitement. It was highly likely that the code in the book wasn't a code at all, but merely a password protected document, protected not by mathematics, but by simple magic. That meant she could analyse it with her magic sensing skills, which she and Daphne were now learning along with the other girls in their regular group combat training sessions.

"Afternoon."

Hermione's eyes lit up. "Harry!"

"It's a good thing you can exclaim like that and still keep it a whisper," Harry joked. "Any progress?"

"Yes! I've found the book you suggested."

"Nice. And you're feeling better?"

Hermione blushed. "Yes. Much better thank you. I'm sorry."

"No more apologising. You've said sorry enough."

"Right, I'm sorry."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, yes. I'll stop doing that." Hermione looked around the reasonably empty library. "So, are you just here to read, or?"

"I wanted to bounce some ideas off you actually."

Hermione's eyes lit up again. "Of course!"

Harry proceeded to tell her about his talk with Lucius Malfoy, about the muggleborn situation, and about Malfoy's assertion that he was an isolationist.

"Well, basically everyone in the Wizarding World is isolationist, really," Hermione eventually said. "The ISS makes everyone an isolationist by law. But yes, I do see that there are different levels. I suppose you are kinda isolationist in a way…” She thought for a few moments. "But it
makes perfect sense for you to be," she continued. "If everyone had the stuff Mum and Dad do, there wouldn't be any advantage in having it."

"It would certainly be more convenient to keep things like that, yes," Harry said, "But I've been thinking about it, and... I don't know. There's a serious problem with maintaining the statute. It didn't fall in the last timeline, but it was under serious strain. Part of me wonders if it might be better to simply move all the wizards in the world to a new place and create an independent nation for them."

Hermione listened with rapt attention.

"Then if the statute ever did fall, there wouldn't be a witch-hunt situation, because the wizards would all be out of the country. The muggle ICW has systems in place for integrating new countries. If it started early enough, we could even take all the magical buildings with us. But there's only really one place this would work, and that's Antarctica. Muggles have never colonised it because of how inhospitable it is."

"—But we have warming charms!" Hermione jumped in, excitedly. "Large-scale ones using wards! They could melt the ice and expose ground for growing crops and stuff! Antarctica's huge! It could easily hold all the magicals in the world, and all the magical creatures, and more! Harry, this could really work!"

Harry made a non-committal gesture. "It could. Although I suspect it's politically impossible. But even if we thought it was a good idea, we certainly wouldn't announce it like that, which still leaves the problem of how I should best position the Gray."

Hermione hesitated. "I'm not really sure about that. I mean, that's up to you. You know best."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In Le Petit Magik, Sirius Black put down his wine goblet. "And now, for some reason, the Gray are delaying the third reading of the Muggle Protection Act and it might not even see a vote until the next session. I suspect the Dark are getting to them."

On the other side of the table, Sirius' best friend, Lord James Potter, looked thoughtful. He was sitting in exactly the same spot as when he'd had lunch with Arthur. It was his favourite spot. "The Dark do seem likely," he said, taking a bite of his mostly-eaten beef wellington. "This does put our plans backwards a lot. Arthur's a good man, but he can occasionally put his foot right in it."

"I think you don't give him enough credit. Lord Slytherin is notoriously difficult to pin down, and putting together that partnership couldn't have been easy."

"Still haven't met him?"

"Slytherin? No."

"What about this Slytherin Gala thing coming up? Going?"

Sirius grimaced. "I don't think I really have a choice."

"Oh, why?"

"Alex would throw a fit if we didn't."

"I thought Alex swung with Lucius' son these days." James' expression briefly resembled someone
entering a dirty bathroom.

"Harry promises me he's got the situation under control."

"You're relying on Harry to reign in Alex? I'm not sure how to feel about that."

"You and me both, Prongs. But what choice do I have? Harry is the only one Alex listens to even a bit these days."

"What are you going to do if she stays with her current 'friends'?"

Sirius looked incredibly uncomfortable. "I don't know. What can I do?"

"Set her up with someone more suitable?"

Sirius glared at his friend. "I refuse. Not after what happened to Jezebel."

James looked contrite. "Sorry. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

"Forgiven." Sirius put down his fork and knife and waved down a waiter for the bill. "What about the Muggle Protection Act?"

"Tricky." James finished his wine and put the now empty glass down on the table. "Maybe I'll have a word with Bentley. He always seems to know what's going on."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Harry and Daphne were walking around the great lake. This was de rigueur for young wizards and witches who found themselves betrothed, for one reason or another, but most other wizards and witches generally didn't discuss matters of high-level legislative policy that might actually soon become the law of the land.

Eventually, however, their discussions turned to matters closer to hand.

"Daphne, do you think I'm pushing Hermione too hard?"

Daphne shook her head. She'd recently switched over to wearing her winter robes — long, burnt orange, and cashmere, trimmed with puffskein fur. Such things weren't technically necessary with warming charms, but no one ever accused fashion of being too logical. The grass underfoot crinkled beneath her booted heels.

"Hermione pushes herself," Daphne said. "You merely don't stop her."

"No, that's not what I mean. Hermione is a genius, but lately I've noticed her thinking has become… Argh, I'm trying to find the right words. It's very 'inside the box'?" Harry snapped his fingers. "No! It's inside my box. That's what I mean — inside my box. I'll bring her a problem and she'll think about it only in terms of the parameters I already gave her. Or, if I suggest an idea, her next idea will always be a riff off of it. The only times I get pure Hermione thoughts are when I give her nothing and let her think 100% by herself. And that can be okay, but…"

"… But you'd prefer if she were a bit more open in her thinking, and you're worried that your constant pushing to better herself is causing her to align her thoughts too closely with yours?"

"Yes, but I'm mostly worried I might have pushed things too far on her birthday. I didn't have to show her any of that stuff from the last timeline. I could have just let her live out the whole rest of her life not knowing."
Daphne sighed. "Harry, do you remember what Ginny said when you asked her how she was feeling under that hate potion keyed to you? She said she felt, 'Horrible,' and that she could, 'See everything clear as day. Your manipulativeness, your calculation, and the way you don't care about anyone that you don't consider to be yours.' But she also said that she liked that stuff. Hermione is the same way. She likes the bad parts of you too. They are what keep us all safe."

Daphne turned around to face Harry. "Did you need to show Hermione that stuff on her birthday? That depends. One thing I've always most respected about you, Harry, is your honesty. You don't keep secrets from us, unless there's a very good reason, and even then, it's usually just because you're waiting for a good time rather than because you intend to keep us in the dark forever. Showing Hermione the truth was completely in alignment with the part of you that makes you, you."

Daphne took Harry's hands in hers. "But on the other hand, no, it wasn't needed. We're not children anymore, Harry. You don't need to keep hammering the nail into the wood when it's already lodged in right up to the head. We're not going to abandon you. Hermione least of all."

Harry took a deep, shuddery breath. "Thank you, Daphne. You are right, of course. I need to change my mindset. It's just very difficult sometimes…" He trailed off.

Daphne slowly hugged him. "I know. If you want, let me keep an eye on the rest of the girls. You just keep working on keeping us safe, being a good friend, and a good betrothed."

Harry hugged her back. "Yes, I think that's a good idea. Thanks, Daph. They held the hug for several more moments before Harry broke away. "On that note, I now need to go meet up with Hermione to make sure she's not overdoing the occlumency again."

Daphne smiled. "Okay. I'm going to meet up with Tracey and talk to some of the older students who want something. Good luck."

—— DP & SW: NRiCaD ——

The Founders Club meeting room, was once again in use.

More muggleborns from upper years had been turning up lately, although they'd all been told that they couldn't stick around for the occlumency training until they'd signed the same deal as the second years had. Some had signed. Some hadn't. Those that had were going through the basic exercises with each other, guided by Justin and Sophie.

Hermione, meanwhile, sat at the teacher's desk and glared at the old book in front of her — the book Harry had given her, and whose magical code she needed to crack before she could even think about translating the old Mesoamerican scripts contained within. She placed her hand on the cover again, sunk into her occlumency, extended her magic sensing, and thought, once more, 'how do I open you?'

And once more, the thought came back, 'you speak my secret, oh flower of magic.'

That was all she had to go on. It could have been much worse. The requirement to decode the book might have been the crying of a newborn prince on the last light of Halloween. It might have been the blood of a virgin, born under a blue moon by star-crossed lovers, one of whom had once won the Grand National. It might have been just about anything. That didn't make her current problem of a practically endless combination of possibilities any less problematic. Harry was unlikely to be pleased if she hurt herself again.
At that moment, the classroom door opened.

A couple of heads turned towards it, until they saw it was Harry, at which point they turned back to whatever it was they were doing. Hermione smiled brightly at him as he quickly made his way over and cast a few basic privacy charms — the kind it was at least plausible for him to know. "Harry! How was your walk with Daphne?"

"Relaxing. How's your brain holding up?"

"Fine. I haven't been putting as much of my magic into calculation as I was, and I'm taking regular breaks whenever I start to feel tired."

"Do you mind if I take a look?"

"Of course not."

Hermione felt Harry's legilimency probe brush over her mind. A shiver shot down her back as she opened herself to him and let him in. A few moments later he pulled out.

"Good. You seem to have fully recovered."

Hermione beamed.

They spent a little while after that discussing Hermione's progress in her various projects, including the Founders Club. Harry watched the students practice while she filled him in.

"I want to start them on wandless magic soon, but I'm not sure which spells should come first. The stunning spell? Like we did?"

"Have them start on the summoning spell."

"Oh! Right, that makes sense."

They watched Colin Creevey and Annabel Entwhistle gasp as they both disconnected from each other, and then broke out in furious blushes.

"Anything else, my lord?" Hermione asked.

"There is one thing actually, yes. I've decided it's time for you to undergo a series of special mental exercises designed to further improve your mental abilities."

Hermione perked up. "That's wonderful."

"You remember the discussion we had about colonising Antarctica?"

"Oh, yes!"

"I want you to come up with a list of reasons why my idea is a terrible one — practical, strategic, ethical, symbolic, magical, etc. Then come up with a better one by yourself. No help from others."

Hermione's face slowly shifted from enthusiasm to confusion. "I… I…" Then it shifted to determination. "But Harry, your idea clearly is the best."

Harry shrugged. "Nevertheless, this is all part of the exercise. I know you won't let me down."

Hermione hesitated before her face firmed. "I won't, Harry."
Harry's face softened. "But make sure you don't hurt yourself again, right?"

"Right."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"So, what do you think about the progress being made on the Muggle Protection Act?" James asked. He was sitting in a plush leather armchair, sipping on a glass of brandy.

Opposite him, Mister Bentley smiled. "Well, obviously it is a good idea. And we at the ministry welcome your efforts to make our jobs easier. As for progress… I understand the Dark will be meeting sometime next week to hammer out their own amendments and alteration to the act."

"How do you know that?" James shot back, surprise evident on his face.

"I know," Bentley said calmly. "Now whatever alterations they make are obviously going to be unacceptable, but the Gray may not see things that way."

"So, what would you suggest?"

Bentley smiled again. "Don't you worry about a thing, Lord Potter. I suggest you leave it all to me."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Lord Lucius Malfoy, this court finds you guilty of behaviour likely to cause a class C breach of the International Statute of Secrecy. Normally, this would result in your doing a small amount of time in Azkaban, however, owing to your esteemed position in our society, and the many positive contributions you have rendered to the magical community in general, we are instead sentencing you to community service, the exact details of which shall be decided by the committee assigned to your case." Madam Marchbanks banged her gavel. "Do you have anything you wish to add?"

Standing in front of the small group of judges, wearing his finest wizarding robes, holding his silver snakes head cane, and standing proud and tall, Lord Malfoy slowly nodded. "I live to serve, your honours. This will be no different."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Not far into the forbidden forest (just far enough for it to not be forbidden), Harry was watching Luna feed the thestrals with strips of raw meat while explaining to her the relocate-everyone-to-Antarctica concept.

"It's a nice idea, Harry," Luna said, gently patting one of the thestrals on the back while it and another ripped a chunk of flesh in two. "I love snow. It's pretty."

Harry smiled. "But?"

"But it could take decades. We might not have that much time."

"Mmmmm…" Harry tapped his chin. "So what would you suggest?"

"Do you care about everyone?"

Harry thought about that. "No, not really," he said. "Just those that matter to me."

"Who matters to you?"
"You do — you and Daphne, Hermione, and Ginny — even Alex — your parents too — Tracey and some of the lords of the Gray and their families… Clare, as well, a bit."

Luna nodded. "That's a good place to start. I suggest not trying to build a place for everyone. That will take far too long, and most won't go along with it anyway. I suggest just focus on making our home, Gairsay Island, as protected as possible — a little oasis in a sea of chaos — capable of surviving anything anyone throws at it — a fortress — a home."

Harry smiled. "Wise words. Thank you, Luna."

"I live to serve you, my lord."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Hermione was almost ripping her carefully straightened hair out in frustration. She just couldn't see how she was supposed to move on from where she was. The password could be anything, and—

"You're getting stressed again," Daphne said lightly from the other side of Hermione's trunk. She was a few pages into yet another of her muggle strategy books.

"I know!" Hermione groaned. "But I'm not sure what to do next. I've tried everything in the magical books on code-breaking. Is there some other kind of brain-dead obvious way of magically cracking a password that I, being just a stupid muggleborn, still don't know about?"

Daphne pursed her lips. "None that I know of. Why don't you ask Harry for help?"

"I can't do that! Harry is relying on me to solve this. I'm sure he could solve it if he had the time, but he doesn't. That's why he needs me."

"What about your other project? How's that going?"

Hermione hesitated. She'd spent half an hour the previous night thinking of ways that Harry's idea was a bad one, but every time she came up with a reason, there was always another idea she came up with for how that problem could be solved.

Rising sea levels caused by melting ice? Simply grow the glaciers around the settlement instead of sending it out into the ocean. Concentrating magicals together making them more vulnerable to muggle long-range weaponry? Develop physical shield wards capable of stopping even a nuclear warhead. There must be a lot possible with so much magic concentrated in such a small space, instead of spread out across the entire planet.

Hermione shook her head and focused back on the problem in front of her. Then her eyes fell on the title of the strategy book Daphne was reading.

*The Intelligence and Counter-intelligence of World War II — Enigma*

Enigma! Hermione launched herself from her chair—"Give me that!"—and snatched the book from Daphne's hands.

"Hey! That's a Slytherin Library Book!"

"Article 1-G of the Granger-Slytherin Vassalage Contract — MAAN House Slytherin will grant House Granger unfiltered access to the Slytherin Library."

"Yes, but not while I'm still reading it!"
Hermione ignored her, along with her subsequent muttered comments about making Hermione’s next hour of required service, under article 2-C of the same contract, shovelling dragon dung in the Hogwarts greenhouses. Instead, she flipped through the book’s table of contents, quickly zeroing in on the relevant sections. Hermione sighed. Of course, she thought. Just how dumb was she? Just because a muggle method didn’t work before didn’t mean there was no muggle method that might prove useful now.

— End of Chapter Forty-five —

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The Hermione story line continues! This chapter was drafted, and made available early, on the leadvone discord server. The first draft part of the next chapter has already been made available the same way (along with a lot of reader discussion). www.discord.me/LeadVonE

A/N: The discord channel now has over six-hundred members and a load of people have made a whole lot of fan-content — fiction and art based off of Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches. Up until recently these have been hosted on the DP&SW wiki, but we now have a more permanent solution on the leadvone website. Check it out by heading over the website, and using the drop-down menu titled ‘fan content.’

Sticky Note: If you want to keep abreast of the release schedule, as well as any changes and the occasional piece of bonus content, you can head over to www.leadvone.com and sign up for the Gray Mailing List.

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017’s prices.
Hermione's Quest — Part Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The dining room of Malfoy Manor was alive with the buzz of conversation and the soft clinking of glasses and cutlery. Every seat of the long hardwood table was filled, and every plate was almost clean. Every so often, a house elf wearing a clean pillowcase would pop in, gather up the finished dinner and pop back out.

Lord Malfoy sat at the head of the table, in the seat in which he had once sat, and surveyed the lords of the Dark. There were around twenty of them — not all thirty-eight the Dark could call on in the Wizengamot, but plenty for their purposes here tonight. Nott and Parkinson were on his right, and Yaxley and Burke on his left. Further down, Wiggs and Travers were talking animatedly with Charmer and Ballyrun. Lord Genesis—a rather on-the-nose name for Magical Britain's only Vampire Lord—drank from his glass of pure red liquid, whilst listening politely to Lord Zazo, whose family had been cursed several centuries back to always speak with a lisp.

Then there were Lords Flagley and Selwyn who both lived in Upper Flagley and were as inseparable as brothers. Upper Flagley wasn't a large wizarding community, at only just over one hundred wands, but it did produce the indisputably best wizarding cheese in the whole country.

And on the other side of the table sat Lord Struttsworth and Lord Knock — the first owning several brothels around the country, including the one in Knockturn Alley, and the latter owning and running the auction house, among various other enterprises.

Lords Womp and Vablatsky were a herbologist and a seer, respectively.

The Noble House of Threesickle traditionally always married Selkies from a colony off the coast of Holyhead and had a slight blue tint to their skin — even Lord Threesickle himself, who also wore a long cloak of seal fur, and everyone knew whose fur it was.

Finally, there were Lords Puddlemere and Rosier. Lord Puddlemere owned quite a few of the commercial and residential buildings in the Puddlemere enclave, while Lord Rosier… At that moment, Malfoy caught Rosier's faintly glowing yellow eyes and had to suppress a shudder, instead turning it quickly into a nod.

Rosier seemed to take that as an indication that business was about to start, because he broke off his discussion with Puddlemere and turned to watch him. One by one, the other lords of the Dark also fell into silence and turned towards him, each face looking expectant — convenient, since he did, in-fact, want to get things underway.

Lucius let the silence drag on for a moment before he began. "As you know, I have called us all here tonight because of the Muggle Protection Act."

"Outrageous, it is!" Selwyn burst out.

"Yes, Selwyn, thank you — if I could be allowed to get through this without interruption? Now as I was saying, the Muggle Protection Act was due to be voted on last week. You may have noticed this didn't happen. That is because I met with Lord Slytherin and persuaded him that we—that is to say, the Dark—might be able to add something of value to the proceedings."
This caused surprised mutterings down the table.

"You met Slytherin?" Vablatsky asked. "What's he like?"

"You mean, you don't know?" Puddlemere said, incredulous.

"My sight cannot see him."

"Gentlemen." Lucius put his hands up. "Focus, please. Yes, I met him. It was not easy setting up a private meeting, but I succeeded. We talked and we acknowledged that there were many points that the Gray and the Dark could agree on, and that if we came up with an alternative Muggle Protection Act that they might well support it instead of the Light's version."

Silence. Many of the eyes around the table regarded him with incredulity.

Then the Vampire Lord, Genesis, started to chuckle. "You mean to say that you, the protectors of blood purity and wizarding culture, are going to sell out to this newcomer's power plays and push a muggle progressive act in the name of lessening the damage the Light would cause by themselves?"

Lucius gritted his teeth. "Yes, that is exactly what I am saying."

"But why should we have to put up with this?!" Selwyn interrupted again. "We didn't put up with this when he was around."

"He was a Dark Lord, Selwyn."

"Well, you are sitting in his chair."

"This is my house. This chair is my chair — a chair my grandfather graciously gave up to our lord whenever he wished to make use of this room. I am a lord of the Dark, like you. I am not a Dark Lord. Do any of you wish to claim the mantle of Dark Lord?" He glared around the table. There were roughly equal concentrations of amused, neutral, and angry faces. No one, however, spoke, not even Rosier or Genesis. "Well then," he continued, "until our lord has returned to us, we will continue to fight within the system as lords of the Wizengamot ought."

"What about his phylactery?" Selwyn asked, apparently unwilling to let this go. "Has any progress been made finding it?"

"None yet," Lucius said, smoothly. "Now, I have written up a list of all the points in the current act along with notes of what are obviously the biggest problems with it." Parchments appeared in front of all the lords around the table.

"What is this?!" snapped Struttsworth, pointing at one of the lines with a long, bony finger. "You want to allow muggleborns to keep muggle artefacts they owned as children?!"

"I want nothing of the sort," Malfoy snapped back. "But we have to make concessions on something."

"The Dark Lord would not approve."

"I'm sure he wouldn't. But I'm sure he'd approve far less of, for example, giving muggles the right to stand as witnesses in trials against wizards. Or making it law that whenever wizards wish to permanently relocate to the wizarding world, pensieve copies of all their muggle relatives' memories be kept on file in case they 'change their mind' later, Struttsworth."
Struttsworth glared sharply at him.

"Have I made my point?" Lucius asked.

"Crystal," Struttsworth bit back.

"Good."

It took hours upon hours of bickering, arguing, and back and forth before they had anything even remotely like a consensus. Even then, it would need much more work before they were ready to show it to the leaders of the Gray. After the lords of the Dark all filed out of the Malfoy dining room, heading towards the floo, and home, a side door opened, and Lady Narcissa stepped through. Her normally immaculate robes were slightly dusty.

"Well?" Lucius asked.

"I get the feeling the only reason Rosier didn't jump to take your chair when you asked is because the Dark Lord is not fully gone."

"Genesis?"

"He won't step up. He's had three hundred years to take a leadership position beyond his own kind, and he never has."

"Yaxley? Charmer?"

"Yaxley would not take such a risk by himself. He is a follower, not a leader. Charmer does not lack in skill, but he has too many ties to the Gray and the Light. All the best candidates to take on the mantle of Dark Lord are in Azkaban, and they'd never take a title that they believe he-who-must-not-be-named still holds the right to."

"So, barring his actual return, we really are relying on Virgo."

"Or possibly our niece."

Lucius nodded. "Or possibly our niece."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

— Captain's log 01 AD 1042 —

With the blessings of the wind of magic, my crew and I are leaving the Court of the Feathered Serpent as the sun rises on the ocean, with much celebration and merrymaking, to travel back to our homeland, laden with as many golden objects from the lands beyond the isle as a king of old might have children.

This venture has been more successful than I could have ever believed and I will see it through. Grandfather was right to put his faith in me. The people we met were most accommodating and I will long miss the warmth and generosity they, and especially the women, showed me and my crew. The city was truly a magical place, full of the most intricate of enchantments — like the great hall of Hogwarts, but in every house, and every public place. Even the majesty of Constantinople does not compete.

I am not entirely bereft of company, however. As well as gold, the feathered lord granted us Akna to accompany us and to act as a navigator to guide us through the dangerous magics that almost
sunk us on our way here. She is quite delightful and her youth and energy brightens the spirit of everyone on board. I count myself lucky we travel not on a longship poor of magic where there would be no space available to enjoy her charms.

— Captain's log 05 AD 1042 —

Land sighted. Our journey through the magic of the sea that protects the feathered lord is complete, thank magic, for our food is not infinite and our skins need refilling.

Akna is quite happy to see land again. She tells me that while she oft travelled the sea as a little girl, this is the first time she has ever been away from home for more than a night. I find myself immensely pleased that it is only I she can confide these little secrets to.

As soon as we land we will try to find the tribe we traded with on our way here.

— Captain's log 06 AD 1042 —

Our landing did not go well. While we did at first succeed in re-filling our skins with water from a river, we could not find the people we had previously traded with. Instead we were met with men armed with spears and arrows and when we tried to communicate our desire to trade, they laughed. I guess they felt they had the advantage because they outnumbered us four to one, but they only had one magic user, and he did not possess a wand.

Indeed, as I have oft noted on this journey, while men and women back home regard a wizard's wand as a symbol of power to be feared and respected, here it might as well just be a stick of wood. This is unfortunate since if they truly knew the power we wield they surely wouldn't be so foolish as to attack us.

Attack us they did, however, and we were forced to react in kind.

By the end, all but a few of their people lay dead at our feet and the few who escaped would surely either never return, or else bring numbers so vast that not even our powers could save us.

We were not entirely without casualties though. Muir was impaled with a spear and Owen could not weave his healing magics quickly enough to stop him passing over to the other side. We burned his body on the beach before setting off again. Akna cried. Although they could not speak with each other, Muir was a gentle man and his death hits her hard.

— Captain's log 07 AD 1042 —

The mood onboard is grim. Muir was particularly gifted with weather magics and his loss leaves us open to the whim of every ragged rain cloud and gust of wind. Akna still hasn't found herself again and her mood spreads throughout the men like dragon-pox. We see many people along the coast — they stare at us out of bushes and watch us before disappearing again, but we dare not land while the memory of our recent battle is fresh.

I find myself hoping Akna feels better soon. Things are better when she is happy, but I also know I cannot allow myself the luxury of such weak and feminine feelings. My crew is relying on me to see us home and it will be by the skill of seamanship and the power of our magics that will deliver us safely. Not hopeful feelings or happy thoughts.

— Captain's log 09 AD 1042 —

Finally. As the morning sun rose, we saw a welcome sight on the shore. The tribe we previously traded with stood on beach waving and shouting at us with great fanfare and cheer.
I was cautious, and we all approached fully ready to pull back if it looked like they would turn aggressive, but we had no reason to fear. Luckily, one of their number had some limited knowledge of a language that Akna also knew, and so we were able to learn that the men that had attacked us, and whom we had then slaughtered, were long enemies of these people — that these people had been forced off those lands, and that we were now 'forever friends' of them.

I don't know about 'forever friends' but we much appreciated the good cheer that followed. The chief even offered to marry off his daughter to me. Akna advised that I refuse and I couldn't help but laugh. The fierce look in her eyes after many days of sadness warmed my heart more than any warming charm could.

— Captain's log 12 AD 1042 —

After several days with the people here we are ready to move on. Our food supplies are refilled again and with more than just fish. We have a long way to go, but I'm happy to be moving on again. One person who does not seem unhappy to see us leave is these people's wizard. I rather think he didn't appreciate the competition.

— Captain's log 89 AD 1042 —

The seas have become much colder now, much more like the waters around home. The shoreline is thick with trees as large around the base as three grown men standing with arms stretched. This is good. It won't be long until we strike out into open ocean, and from there it's on to Greenland, then Iceland, and then to the shores of home.

— Captain's log 94 AD 1042 —

Oh magic, I pride myself on my bravery and unwillingness to back down in the face of fear, but I don't think I've ever been more scared in my life. Akna, bless her. Thank the feathered lord for gifting us with her. We were rowing through the small ice islands that speckle this sea like little gems when we all felt it — a creeping feeling of fear and dread. Now, I've heard the tales and learned the sagas — I am not some ignorant peasant who knows not the difference between a demon and a ghost. But when a faceless figure in tattered black robes started to descend on our boat, causing the very water around our craft to freeze and our oars to stick fast, I felt a primal terror grip my soul like I've never felt, and I was not the only one.

That was, until Akna screamed something I did not understand in a language I did not know, and a magnificent glowing white serpent coiled out from around her outstretched hand and launched itself at the monster, which screamed in rage or fear, I could not tell which, and retreated from our boat, leaving us free to break the ice around us and keep on rowing.

I don't think I will look at that girl quite the same way again. Although her heart is too fair to kill a man in combat, she is still truly a warrior.

— Captain's log 95 AD 1042 —

We have arrived in Greenland to much everyone's relief. We did not see any more of the robed monster that approached us in the frigid seas around us, and I for one hope to never see such a foul being again. I have commanded the men to keep the gold we carry hidden from the eyes of the locals and their rare wizard that make this land their home, for I do not believe the wands we proudly display would stay the hand of these folk in the face of such vast wealth and treasure.

Akna stands fascinated by the ways of the settlement we are staying within, having seen little of these traditions and customs while on the boat.
I find myself looking forward to life back at Hogwarts, to the great hall, and to the cooking of Lady Hufflepuff's servants.

— Captain's log 96 AD 1042 —

This sunrise we left the shores of Greenland after ensuring our food and water supplies sufficiently full. It is another hard row to Iceland, but I have friends there. The water is calm. And I don't foresee any problems from here out.

— Captain's log 97 AD 1042 —

Oh, praise Merlin and Woden. Such joy. Akna has confided in me this morning that she is with child. I could not be more happy. The sun is bright and the seas are tranquil. It is as though the skies sing their praises to me.

— Captain's log 98 AD 1042 —

I have begun proper instruction for Akna in Danish, Latin, and Welsh, as well as the proper role of a lady within the Albion. Her time on board has prepared her well, and her quick mind and focused spirit serves her too. I am not sure what will be Grandfather's reaction to Akna's condition, but I am determined to see that she takes the honourable path rather than be cast out as a low woman. That would not do at all. We expect to reach Iceland before sundown, Fate willing.

— Captain's log 101 AD 1042 —

We leave Iceland in high spirits. The men were well pleased to be back on dry land again, and to taste the meat of reindeer again, rather than the flesh of fish. We have only four more days to the Sheep Islands and then another three to the shores of Caledonia.

— Captain's log 102 AD 1042 —

Thor's mighty hammer has stuck the seas and plunged us into battle with the waves. I cannot write long. I am needed.

— Captain's log 106 AD 1042 —

Finally, the storm has cleared. We are far off course, but with luck we would be several days to the south, and not far out into the great ocean.

[MANY MISSING ENTRIES]

— Captain's log ? AD 1042 —

I write these words perched atop a rock on the coast of what I pray to be Caledonia. My ship is lost. All my crew is lost. It was a dragon. As long and again as the boat, black as midnight and evil as Morgana. How was I to know we had strayed into the Hebrides? Into the cursed islands.

Everything we brought back with us from the world beyond the great ocean, everything save this one cup that I foolishly snatched before the beast descended, and which almost resulted in my joining my men through the veil, everything lost. The only other treasure I was able to save was Akna. She sits by my side, crying. If Muir's death hit her hard, it was nothing to this. I suspect the only reason we were spared was because the dragon, being of the nature of snake, heard something of itself in myself and Akna when we called out to it.

The others were all eaten.
I can still hear the crunch of bone when I close my eyes.

I do not know how long we held our own in the water, but there is no doubt that without both our magics we would surely have been lost too.

— Captain's log 121 AD 1042 —

This will be my last entry. Grandfather has ordered that all records of this sorry expedition be sealed away behind wards that only those of the Noble House of Slytherin may access. My only consolation is that he has accepted Akna to be my bride. Her magics fascinate him. But I fear that had she not been a speaker, he would not have done so, even with his great-grandchild growing in her womb. When the time comes, I'm sure she will make a formidable Lady Slytherin.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Deep inside Hermione's magical trunk, the young witch in question replaced the captain's log back where it belonged, next to a dozen or so other books taken from the Slytherin hidey-hole by the sea.

Cracking the code had been relatively easy once she'd applied psychology to the problem. The only way the Allies had managed to crack the German enigma code during World War Two had been because of human error, like choosing very easy-to-guess passcodes. The magical password to the captain's diary had turned out to be the 22nd of April 1011 — no doubt some date of significance to the long-dead Heir of Slytherin.

After that, it had just been a matter of analysing the three languages in the diary for patterns and teasing out grammar and syntax from the language of the Court of the Feathered Serpent, a language that Hermione had found few parallels to in known native Mesoamerican languages, and which she had decided to call Featherlish — at least, until someone thought of something better.

She'd been helped in no small part by a biography of Jean-François Champollion, the man who'd translated the original Rosetta Stone, as well as her own basic arithmancy occlumency.

The week following her successful translation had been spent delving deep into the Featherlish books left behind, most of which turned out to be written by Akna Slytherin over the course of her life. They contained everything she could remember about the magic she'd learned back in her homeland. Fascinated, Hermione could see the basic versions of some of the spells that Hogwarts now taught their students — not many by any stretch, but certainly a few. But spells weren't the only things about her homeland that Akna wrote.

Hermione read the story of the founding of the Court of the Feathered Serpent — about the wizards of Central and South America, who'd decided to close themselves off from the non-magical world, a whole 1,500 years before the ISS was enacted. She read of the raising of a whole island far out to sea off the coast of Cuba, the magical protections their god-king rulers had gifted the island, and the great city they built there — a monument to the wonders of magic, where farms floated in the sky and honey flowed in streams next to water as clear as crystal.

She read of their culture — their religion, sports, food, and politics, occasionally picking up just a hint of melancholy from the gradually maturing woman — melancholy for a world she'd left behind years before and to which she'd never return.

Hermione had read all this and more for a week solid, hardly ever coming out of her trunk, even taking her meals in there, only making appearances for classes, turning up with slightly fuzzy hair, and leaving again the moment the bell rang.
She'd also read of the methods this society used to maintain their total isolation, methods she'd never considered when she'd so assuredly told Harry that his idea for an independent magical nation was unquestionably a good idea. The Feathered Court didn't have memory charms, so they had no way to fix problems among the non-magical population, if needed. This resulted in a policy of taking muggleborn children from their homes by force the moment magic was detected by their seers. Sometimes the parents would even be murdered, and in those circumstances where the child was too old to be integrated into magical society without extreme resentment on the part of the child, the child too, was killed. Better that, the logic went, than accept disruptive elements into their carefully balanced order.

Hermione sat down in her reading chair and put her hands under her chin.

Obviously, they, that is to say, modern wizard-kind, had memory charms, so if they were going to totally isolate themselves, they wouldn't need to resort to murder, but was it right to just steal muggleborn babies from their parents? It didn't feel right.

But Harry would have obviously already thought of that, because he was Harry, so he must believe it was okay. And if Harry thought it was okay, then it must be okay. After all, it's not like the biological parents would know about it, and the child could be memory-charmed until adulthood, or even longer, if they wished.

But how would she, Hermione, have felt if she'd never grown up knowing her mum and dad? She didn't like that idea. Not at all.

But on the other hand, Harry had told her to find problems with his idea. Maybe this was what he meant?

Whatever the case, it definitely needed more thought.

At that moment, the trunk lid opened, Hermione looked up, and Harry's legs appeared, followed shortly by the rest of him. "Long time no see," he commented with a smile.

"Hi, Harry." Hermione pushed aside her thoughts for the moment and focused on the here and now. She had something to show him. What was it?

"Oh, yes!" she jumped out of her chair, just as Harry reached the bottom of the stairs. "I cracked it!"

"I thought you cracked it ages ago?"

"Yes — no — yes, but no. Look, I maybe figured out where the boat filled with gold is! And I figured out how much gold it contains!"

Harry perked up. "Oh?"

"Yes! Using the navigational readings and ocean current maps, I think it might have settled around the Anton Dohrn Seamount. That's around two hundred kilometres off where you have your cave vault — five hundred from Gairsay Island. If it didn't, it'll have slammed against the Rockall Plateau. As for the gold, there's a passage in the diary where captain Slytherin says they have as many gold objects as a king of old might have children! A bit of a strange unit of measurement, but I guess people weren't as exact back then. Well, I went to the history section and did a survey of old kings, but the only two I could find who had unusually large numbers of children were Ramessees II with 162, and Qin Shi Huang who had fifty — so I took an average of the two, and by that calculation, the captain means they have around 106 gold objects, which might have a
market value of around 600,000 galleons — around £30,000,000."

Harry whistled. "Very well done, Hermione."

"Thank you, Harry." Hermione was beaming.

"Six hundred thousand galleons," Harry muttered. "Five hundred kilometres, you say?"

"About that."

Harry was silent in thought for a moment. "Then I think I should talk to your mum and dad," he eventually said. "Maybe the prototype they've been working on for MaCUSA is ready for a real-world test run…"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"The tripping hex," whispered Professor Severus Snape, "is a basic tool in the wizard's arsenal. Used correctly, it can cause an opponent to lose situational awareness for the precious second required to land a decisive blow. Used incorrectly, it is a frivolous waste of time, giving your opponent a free strike at your body, during which you will most certainly die."

At the front of the classroom sat Virgo Malfoy, watching the man whom Lord Malfoy had assured him was a triple agent for his other self, confident in his ability to look attentive, while actually being bored out of his skull.

"This hex is best used in conjunction with—"

A shield breaker, thought Julia in a sing-song voice.

"—a shield breaker… for maximum results. Unless your opponent has no need for shield charms, in which case—"

You will most certainly diiiieeee.

"—You will most certainly die."

You are also bored, Virgo thought.

Soooo bored, Julia thought back. Can't we do something more interesting?

Like?

I don't know. Something new!

Something new, hmm? Virgo cast his gaze around the classroom falling briefly on Alexandra Black of the Dark, bookended on either side by twin daughters of the House of Carrow, before finally landing on the enigmatic Ginevra Weasley, sat next to Luna Lovegood, the whore. If learning magic is not enough, he thought, how about drama? You witches are supposed to love that.

Okay?

Virgo smirked. Prepare yourself, little girl.

Hey! You're also a little—

And the world went dark.
They talk about a foggy mind, but this was quite literally so.

And then the fog cleared, leaving Virgo standing in the middle of the Slytherin common room, his body a ghostly outline in a much more opaque memory — his original body. Julia appeared by his side a moment later, almost two heads shorter than him.

Virgo smirked down at her. "You were saying?"

"This isn't real." Julia pouted up at him. "You lost that body sixty years ago. You can be an almost teenage girl or an old man, but not both. Choose."

"I have already chosen, little girl. I chose to be an immortal Dark Lord."

Julia huffed. "Where are we anyway? Why are there snakes everywhere?"

"This is the Slytherin common room, as seen just over sixty years ago."

"Really?" Julia's eyes widened.

"Yes. Now, watch, and learn."

Julia looked around the room. Everywhere, Slytherin students sat in armchairs, or stood around in small groups, whispering. Everything was tense, like before a race on sports day.

*This is no race*, Virgo thought.

"Well, what is it?" Julia asked out loud.

"A coup."

A large door opened and an older student stepped through. The room hushed as he entered. He took a few steps into the room, looked around, and called out, "Where is he?!"

Silence.

"WHERE IS HE?! If that little shit doesn't show himself, I am going to—"

The older student didn't get through another few words before many gasps from around the room stilled him. In the middle of the room, where before there had been only empty space, now stood the cloaked figure of Tom — the Tom Riddle of the memory, several years younger than the Tom Julia was used to seeing in Virgo's memories. Maybe a fourth year?

"Third year, actually," Virgo said, out-loud.

"You learned to turn yourself invisible in third year? I thought the syllabus didn't teach that spell until the end of seventh year?"

Virgo's lip curled upwards. "Well remembered, but if you wish to achieve true power you must always be a step ahead of those who keep a step ahead. Remember that."

Meanwhile, in the middle of the common room, Memory Tom Riddle had finished casually taking off his cloak and hanging it on a coatrack that had just appeared out of thin air, wooden snakes coiling up the central shaft just as the stone snakes of the room coiled around the pillars.

"See how angry he's getting?" Virgo said to Julia, who could indeed see that the student by the door was watching the whole display while getting redder and redder in the face. "That's a good
thing. Angry people make mistakes."

"Isn't it dangerous making people angry?"

"It can be, when you are significantly less powerful than them, but when you are closer to equals in power, it helps cloud their judgement."

"ARE YOU FUCKING DONE?!" The older student shouted.

"Mmm?" Memory Tom looked around, "Oh, yes." He smiled. "What can I help you with?"

"The end spot at the Slytherin table in the great hall is mine! How dare you disrespect me, the Heir of the Noble House of Lestrange, by sitting there."

"Then you know how you can satisfy your honour," Memory Tom said.

"What's going on?" Julia whispered, even though she knew whispering was needless.

"Goading him into a duel," Virgo said. "He knows he'd be at a disadvantage, and so…"

"Fine!" The Lestrange Heir spat. "But I'm calling in a proxy!"

"Agreed," Memory Tom said.

Julia could see victory in Memory Tom's eyes.

"My proxy will be Malfoy!" Lestrange said.

Off to one side, another older boy with shoulder-length blond hair shuffled awkwardly. "Sorry, Rulfarion, I can't stand in as proxy here. Nothing personal, but I have my reasons."

Lestrange was caught flat footed for only a moment before he whirled around again, "Knock! Then you—"

"Sorry, mate. I got a letter the other day from my older brother. My hands are tied."

Lestrange's face paled. He whirled around again. "Hawking!"

Hawking shook his head.

"Womp! Lupin! Walker! Tempest!" One by one the three wizards and one witch shook their heads. Lestrange turned finally, desperately, to a pretty witch sitting in the middle of the room by the fireplace. "Catherine?"

The girl looked down at her shoes. "I'm sorry Rulf. It's for the best."

Lestrange looked broken. Then moments later, that depression turned into a raging fury. He barely held himself together while duelling wards were put up, and lasted only a few rounds into the fight before Memory Tom had him pinned up against a wall, brought down by a well-timed tripping hex.

"Serpensortia!"

All the room, including Julia, let out a shriek as a huge black snake slammed down mere inches from where Lestrange was desperately struggling.
And then, Memory Tom spoke to it. "Coil around him, but do not bite until I say," he said.

Julia's eyes widened again. "It's a magic snake?"

"No," Virgo replied. "This is a memory, so you are hearing what I remember. It is a magical language called parseltongue, passed down through the Slytherin line for centuries — passed down through the Noble House of Gaunt, until it passed to me."

The snake had wrapped itself around Lestrange, who was now staring at Tom as though seeing a grim, totally drained of anger, leaving only fear.

"The heir," he gasped out, while the coils tightened, "of Slytherin."

"Yes," Memory Tom drawled. "That's right."

"But that's impossible. The line's been dead for centuries."

"I am no mere mudblood, like you all thought," Tom said, pride peeking through his carefully constructed mask of disdain. "My mother is a Gaunt."

"That still — makes no — sense," Lestrange choked.

"Magic works in strange ways. Clearly I have been singled out by Fate for greatness."

Memory Tom dropped Lestrange from his magic grasp, allowing him to collapse to the floor, while still bound by a hundred kilos of fanged, coiled muscle.

Slowly the room faded back into the cloudy blackness of the mind.

Now, what have you learned? Virgo thought.

That parseltongue is creepy as hell. Do you think I could do it?

An interesting question. We shall have to try it sometime. What else?

That the tripping hex is actually quite useful when your opponent is really angry.

Indeed.

Oh, yes, and that I still hate you.

Virgo mentally smirked. Of course you do, little girl. Of course you do.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

On the other side of the classroom, Ginny sat, watching Virgo Malfoy staring off into space. She really wished Harry would hurry up figuring out how to get the girl out of the diary's body so they could kill it. Or was that the other way around? So that they could get the diary out of the girl's body so they could kill it? That would actually make it even easier.

Not that she was going to let up on her training. She had to learn how to kill and she had to do it fast.

Some time later, as they were making their way out of the defence lesson, the two caught each other's eyes and Ginny was sure for a moment that she saw a flash of something in the diary's eyes. Recognition? Knowing? Suspicion? Fear?
Whatever it was, it was just more reason to buckle down and become what she needed to be.

That night found Ginny Weasley alone and invisible in Hagrid's chicken coup, flashing knife in hand, bloody up to the arms, dead chickens everywhere, and the next morning when the half-giant wandered into the hall, it was to find him complaining that something had been at his chickens again, and that he needed a budget for a better coup.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"600,000 galleons?" asked Alexandra Black, looking between Harry Slytherin and Daphne Greengrass. Greengrass had surreptitiously pulled her aside between classes for a quick chat inside Harry's trunk. "600,000 galleons is a lot, right?"

"Alex, can I assume your father hasn't gone over the Black finances with you?" Harry asked, sitting in the armchair opposite hers.

"Him? Not likely. Magic forbid any daughter of his might want to do something worthwhile with her life. I can't believe I have the same animagus form as him! I'm nothing like him!"

Daphne rolled her eyes. "You should be happy with your form. A grim can be immensely useful — especially for a necromancer."

"I know that, but still — I'm nothing like him!"

Harry had a whole bunch of parchments in front of him on the low desk between them. He put one of the parchments down and regarded her thoughtfully. "You know, Alex. Lord Black is still your lord — not to mention your father. Having a cordial relationship with him might be a good thing."

"But he's unbearable! He treats me like a child — like a muggle child. Do you know what he said to me before I came to Hogwarts? When I asked why I wasn't going to the same lessons as John, and Susan, and all the others? He said, 'you don't need to worry about politics, you should enjoy your childhood.' As though being left out was helping in any way."

"Lord Black did have his family's politics forced on him in a way he didn't appreciate."

"But now he's doing the same to me! Just in the opposite way!"

"Yes, ironic, certainly. And your reaction is just as ironic, since you're basically doing to him what he did to his own father."

Alex felt a short, sharp punch in the gut. She stared at the floor before shaking her thoughts away. "That doesn't change anything. Even if what we're doing is kinda similar, I'm not going to try and reach out to him. That's his job! He's the grown-up. And anyway," —Alex's voice took on a bitter tone— "he's always too busy with work."

There was silence for a moment before Alex crossed her arms. "I don't need him. I'm fine by myself. And if I need help... well, I can ask you, can't I?"

Harry nodded slightly. "I still think you'd do well to explore ways to become closer to Lord Black, but yes, of course. We are friends."

Alex nodded. "Then what's this about sunken gold?"

"Hermione thinks she knows where we can find about 600,000 galleons worth of muggle treasure," Daphne said.
"And you asked if that's a lot," Harry continued, "to which, I would say, yes — yes it is a lot. We could buy six Slytherin Manors with that much gold — easily. The GDP of the whole of Magical Britain, by contrast, is about 4.4 million galleons."

"What's GDP?" Alex asked.

"Oh, dear Merlin." Daphne made vaguely frustrated hand gestures. "Actually, I think Alex is right, Harry. Lord Black does have a lot to answer for. GDP is a measure of value created by an economy."

"So us having liquid assets worth thirteen percent of the value created by the entire country?" Harry said. "Yeah, it's a big deal."

Alex's eyes widened, almost comically large. "You're saying you could buy thirteen percent of the whole country?"

"No, that's not what he's… Argh!" Daphne rubbed her temples. "I can't believe your father."

"I know!" Alex said hotly. "I get it! I don't have all the education an heiress is supposed to have!"

"What it means, loosely," Harry calmly said, "is that we could buy thirteen percent of all the products and services Magical Britain creates in a year — that includes food, broomsticks, rents, haircuts, and quidditch matches, along with any value the government creates and a few other things added or subtracted for various reasons. That's not the same thing as the value of all the stuff in the country. That would be a lot more than 4.4 million galleons."

"But it's still a lot of money," Alex said.

"Yes, it is still a lot of money," Daphne replied. "But look at all these!" She waved a stack of parchments. "Do you know how many people come to us asking for investment? Dozens! And not just heads of houses or individuals, either — even whole cities — asking for ridiculous amounts! Have you seen this one, Harry?" She passed over a parchment. "Cork wants us to help them build an entire new expansion for their enclave."

"Oh, yes, I remember this," Harry said. "The ministry was willing to go fifty/fifty with them, but only if they came up with their own funding. One thousand new houses? Plus streets, shops, and magical warding? Do they think I have a philosopher's stone or something?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if some people did think that," Daphne muttered. "And you have to admit, if circumstances had turned out a bit differently, they might have been right."

"*Gringotts* has a philosopher's stone, doesn't it?" Alex asked. "Why can't the ministry just order them to make more gold? Then everyone could have as much as they needed."

"Leaving aside the basic wrongness of that statement, no, they couldn't," Harry said, picking up another parchment and quickly scanning it. "The ministry doesn't control Gringotts. Gringotts is under treaty with the ICW after the fall of the last Magical British Empire. They are, effectively a country within a country, propped up only by the threat of violence from the entire magical world. New money doesn't come from Gringotts." Harry paused. "Well, the actual gold does," he corrected himself. "But the money supply only increases when muggleborns and half-bloods exchange muggle money into galleons. That's why our currency controls are so tight."

Harry exchanged a meaningful look with Greengrass, which Alex had to assume meant something, but she wasn't sure what.
She pouted. "How long is it going to take me to learn all this?"

"To be fair, a lot of this isn't exactly in the standard noble house curriculum," Harry said, glancing towards Greengrass. "Something you should probably keep more in mind, Daph."

Daphne looked slightly abashed.

"Maybe two or three years?" Harry continued, turning back towards Alex. "Daphne, Hermione, and Luna learned a lot quicker, but they also had a lot more free time, whereas you have stuff to do."

"What about Ginny?"

"Ginny has decided to invest every moment of her free time into combat and infiltration training. She is determined to never be caught out again." Harry picked up another parchment and raised an eyebrow. "Why are Witch-co looking for investment for a new warehouse?"

"Because they've never had one before."

Harry looked surprised. "Really?"

"Yes. But it's not the kind of thing we'd be interested in. I know we might soon have more gold then we know what to do with, but we should still be careful about what we invest in."

Harry rubbed his chin while reading the parchment. Then he smirked, rolled it up, and slipped it into the pockets of his robes.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The prospect of finally solving their financial problems had Daphne, Hermione, and Ginny bubbling with a kind of excited energy none of them had felt in quite a while. Alexandra, being newer to the team, didn't have that same tension built up inside her from years of vague financial uncertainty, and so was content in burrowing her way deeper into the Dark, while Luna was still Luna — calm, collected, and prone to pointing out truths that many people would suggest be left unsaid, such as when all five of them had been relaxing in Hermione's trunk one evening, and she'd pointed out that Harry would soon be getting erections.

"He's probably never had one before," she said, in her dreamy voice. "Azkaban can't be good for penises."

"Do you think looking at us will make him like that?" Ginny asked, slightly wide-eyed.

"Probably not you and me."

"What? Why not!? Are you saying I'm not sexy?"

"Ginny," Daphne said in a business-like tone. "Any boy our age would find you sexy, even if they wouldn't have a clue what to do about it, but Harry is not like any boy our age. Don't forget he's much more mature than they are."

The conversation abruptly ended when Alexandra butted in and insisted that since Lord Slytherin didn't yet care for any of them as witches, they should stop with the useless chatter and get back to working on what he did care about them for.

"I still can't quite believe how powerful he is," Alex muttered later on that week after their group took an especially severe beating from Harry in group combat training.
"You're all getting better," Harry said, throwing Daphne back her wand. "But you're still not using Luna's power reserves to the fullest. And Ginny, your swapping is getting better, but you're still not good enough to use it reliably in air to air combat."

Ginny pouted. "You still haven't told us what your animagus form is. It's not a Phoenix or anything ridiculously good at flying is it?"

Harry smirked. "No, and no more clues. Taking me down during the ritual will be an excellent exercise for you all." He glanced at Luna who was smiling. "Well, me or Luna, I guess. Whichever turns out to be the bigger surprise."

Of course, many people around the school knew something big was going on with the young Slytherin clique, even if they had no clue what. There were just too many clues.

"It's so not fair that you get to leave on the weekends," Kevin Entwhistle said to Hermione during a Founders Club meeting. "Why do you get to leave? It's not like you have family business, like Greengrass."

"I do have family business," Hermione defended herself. "I may not be from a noble house, but I am vassaled to one, remember?"

"But what is it?"

"I told you, I can't say. It's private."

Eventually though, after a week of curious looks and sideways glances, Saturday came, and a familiar figure in a green and black mask arrived at the Hogwarts front gates to take Daphne, Hermione, and Luna away for the weekend. Not widely known, of course, was the fact that this figure arrived at the front gates via the front door.

"Lord Slytherin," professor McGonagall said in a professional, yet disapproving tone of voice. "We will need our girls back before classes start on Monday, but I hope that won't mean they arrive on the castle grounds with only five minutes to spare — like last time."

Harry then produced brooms for all four of them and they flew the short distance to Hogsmeade, Daphne soaring above them all, while the other three playfully zipped around each other in the crisp morning air like robed and cloaked black dragonflies.

"Are we not using your house here?" Hermione asked as they landed in the village centre.

"It's not mine any more," Harry replied. "Handed it back over to Lord Woodcroft. Not worth it now we have Slytherin Manor."

They all stepped into the floo at the Three Broomsticks, and arrived in the entranceway of Slytherin Manor not long after. From there it was a short walk down the hill to the Granger cottage.

The door was opened by Clare who didn't look surprised to see them. She led them into the small kitchen and poured pumpkin juice for the girls and orange juice for Lord Slytherin.

"How's schoolwork?" Harry asked, while Daphne, Luna, and Hermione busied themselves with going over the plan for the next forty-eight hours.

"Frustratingly slow, my lord," Clare said. "Even with the optional Sunday school classes. But better than being a prostitute, and much better than being in Azkaban. We got a visit from a dementor this week, so that everyone knows what happens to bad little boys and girls." She shuddered. "We all
went to another quidditch match the week before. They really do like their carrots and sticks, don't they?"

Harry nodded. "Oh, yes."

"Being near that dementor was the worst thing I've ever experienced," Clare continued, "It was like my first time from back then all over again, except focused and amplified and oh so much worse. Is there a way to fight them?"

"Dementors?" Harry asked. "Yes, there is. It is not easy at all. But yes, it can be done."

"What is it? I don't ever want to be near one of those things again."

Lord Slytherin put down his glass. "It is called the patronus charm. A spell that can only be conjured by an intense positive emotion — hope, happiness, love — dementors feed off all these, but the charm turns them into something so powerful, they burn — like a rabbit turning around and head-butting the fox."

"Can you cast it?"

"Yes, I can," he replied, although there was obvious reluctance in his voice.

"Could you show me?"

On the other side of the kitchen, Luna was shushing the other two into silence.

Harry shrugged and pointed his wand into the middle of the room. "Expecto Patronum."

Pure white mist poured out of his wand. It swirled about where he pointed and quickly took on a form.

Daphne and Hermione gasped.

Luna looked on with mild sadness in her eyes.

Bathed in brilliant white light, a bony figure in a tattered, glowing robe floated several inches off the floor, tall enough to brush the ceiling with its cowled head.

"My lord?" Clare whispered.

Slytherin made a slashing motion with his wand and the dementor patronus vanished. "It is nothing," he said firmly. Then his voice took on a far more cheerful tone. "Come now. We have a lot to get done today, but I'll be sure you get the books you need to practice the charm on your own time. You deserve that at least."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The garden was a sea of tranquillity, bathed in weak sunlight and frost. And yet, in the middle of the lawn, the grass of which crunched underfoot, sat a man wearing thin, light robes, sipping on a thin, china cup of tea. Another cup sat opposite him, endlessly steaming away, a small jam biscuit sitting patiently in the saucer. The chair by the cup was empty. He didn't shiver. He sat as though enjoying a cool summer morning.

Mister Bentley took another sip of tea, enjoying the peace of his sanctuary — the stillness, the order, even the memory of Mrs Bun leaning over the wall, cheerfully gossiping over whatever small thing the dear had found to find important. On a small stool by his side sat a small pile of
nondescript parchments, and a small thin box.

"Mister Bentley."

He smiled, but did not turn around. "Ah, Dolores. Do please take a seat."

Dolores Umbridge walked around the small table, sat down, and carefully took her own cup of tea. For a moment, neither spoke.

"Tell me," Bentley eventually said, breaking the silence, "what is it that makes the difference between a Dark or Light Lord and a lord of the Wizengamot?"

Dolores looked taken aback by the question, before answering, "Power?"

"Yes, but many lords of the Wizengamot are very powerful. No, power alone is not what makes a Lord of Lords."

"Then what?"

"Some would say is the willingness to act outside the system to achieve their ends, and what makes them different from a common criminal is that they are supported by a large chunk of the legislature. That's what he-who-must-not-be-named was. It's what Light Lord Dimwiddy was, and, even though he would never admit it, it's what Dumbledore is too."

Dolores' eyes narrowed. "You think Dumbledore is breaking the law?"

"I don't think so, I know so. But that is irrelevant to this discussion. Now tell me what you think about Lord Slytherin."

"Didn't I already do that?"

"Not in the context of this conversation."

Dolores looked off into the distance before tentatively answering. "People do think he's a Gray Lord. Does that mean he also breaks the law?"

"Probably," Bentley said, although he didn't give off the impression of being all that concerned about it.

If the November trees had any birds left, this would be the moment they'd tweet into the silence.

"Mister Bentley, I don't mean to seem disrespectful, but why are we talking about this? Has something gone wrong? Do I need to handle something? You only ever call me to you when there's some dirty work to be done."

Bentley frowned. "A blunt way of putting it. You still need to work on your discretion."

"Sorry, Mister Bentley."

"And in regards to your question. No, everything is going splendidly. The current Wizengamot session is almost over and they won't open again until Spring. The Solstice is a mere formality. It is unlikely the Dark and Gray will come to any agreement before then, but I will be seeing to things this morning just to make sure."

"Then what?"
Mister Bentley looked wistfully around the frosty garden. "Next summer, I have decided to take my retirement early."

Dolores gasped. "But, you can't! Without you, the ministry won't be able to survive! We'll be overrun by mudbloods and blood-traitors!"

"You exaggerate, my dear."

"No. Who's going to be the Wardrobe's next Humble Hag?"

"That will be up to the judiciary, but I will recommend the current Humble Hag of the Department of Magical Games and Sports, Bertha Jorkins."

"Her?!" Dolores looked horrified. "She can't handle it! She's soft!"

"She is the best choice available."

"Are you honestly saying she's better than Crouch? Or Wilkes?"

"None of the current Humble Hags are a good choice, which is the real reason we are having this discussion. Now I'm going to ask you again, what is the difference between a Lord of Lords, and a lord of the Wizengamot, and why do I believe Lord Slytherin not to be a real Gray Lord — charming though he may be?"

Dolores bit her lip. Her brow furrowed in concentration. "The Dark Lord wasn't a lord of the Wizengamot?" she hesitated. "Neither is Dumbledore, nor was Dimwiddy. But Lord Slytherin is a Wizengamot lord. Is that it?"

Mister Bentley reached to his side and picked up the thin box. He placed it on the table in front of them.

Dolores eyed it cautiously. He opened it to reveal an elegant black quill.

Dolores' eyes widened. "Is that what I think it is?"

"If you think it's a blood quill, then you're right."

"Why do you have a blood quill?" she asked in a whisper.

"Because sometimes agreements have to be made that are stronger than a strictly legal contract of ink can bind. I have used this quill for nearly six decades." He pushed the box towards Dolores. "You may not be a Humble Hag, but I suspect I can rely on you to do what is in the country's best interests."

Dolores was speechless as she took the quill and rolled it in her fingers. She then smiled a sickly smile. "I understand, Mister Bentley. I fully understand."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Hermione stared with wide eyes as she made her way through the doorway and into the cavernous space under her parent's new home. She hadn't been here in nearly three months, and wow, had Mum and Dad been busy. It sat on small metal rails, pointing into the black waters of the cave, long, wooden, and polished, it looked like many of the broomsticks she'd seen for sale in the windows of shops in Diagon Alley or the Puddlemere Enclave, except large enough to crawl inside.
The nose cone was open with a tiny set of stairs leading up to it, while the bristles all looked like each one could have been a family sized broomstick with room to spare in its own right.

That her Mum and Dad had made it… amazing.

"Wow," Daphne whispered.

"I know," Hermione whispered back.

"Girls!" Dan Granger hopped down from where he'd been engaged in some activity near the bristles and strode over. "My lord." He nodded to Slytherin. "No problems getting here I hope?"

"None, Dad," Hermione said.

"And this must be Xenophilius's daughter," Dan said. "Luna, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I am Luna," said Luna. She pointed at the broomstick. "And that is a big broomstick."

"Yes," Dan beamed. "We've been working on it straight for nigh on three weeks now. Just took it out for its first paddle last night."

"Does she have a name?" Luna asked.

"Not yet," Dan patted the shaft, "But we're sure it's going to start with SBS — as in, Slytherin Broom Stick. Maybe a place name, like Hogwarts? That's traditional with ships."

"You could call it the SBS Big Broomstick," Luna suggested.

Dan blinked. "But what about when we build a second one?"

"Then you could call that one the SBS Bigger Broomstick."

"Slytherin Broomstick Big Broomstick," is really dumb, Hermione cut in. "What about SBS Harry?"

"Boats are supposed to have feminine names," Luna pouted.

"How is 'Big Broomstick,'" a feminine name?

"It isn't," Daphne said. "But many boats don't have feminine names, like the Bismarck, or the Victory."

"So, Big Broomstick!"

"No!"

Emma chose that moment to cut across the argument. "What do you think, my lord?"

Hermione watched Harry turn and regard the broomstick, before turning back. "It was lovingly created by two geniuses, and will now explore the world for buried treasure and hidden knowledge. While today we search only for the sunken ship of Slytherin, who knows what the future will bring. Maybe Atlantis? Maybe the Court of the Feathered Serpent? While we may sell many other broomsticks, this one will always be with us. I propose we call her the SBS Hermione."

Hermione gasped, feeling suddenly incredibly small. She glanced around and saw everyone was looking at her with warm smiles.
"A wonderful idea," Emma said. "From what our lord has told us, none of this would have been possible without your work, dear."

"Yes," Dan added, "We're both very proud of you."

"Mum, Dad…"

What followed quickly devolved into a round of family hugs and sobs all around. It took several minutes to get everyone straight again and back on task.

"Everyone in!" Luna sang, crawling into the newly christened broomstick. "Oooofffff, it's cramped in here."

"Is there going to be room for all of us?" Daphne asked with her face inches from Luna's bum.

"There will be!" Dan called out from somewhere behind them. Just crawl into your positions!"

"Dad? You're not coming too?" Hermione asked.

"Only one engineer needed, pumpkin. Your mother is smaller."

"Wow, Hermione!" Daphne called. "You'll like these! They've added cushioning runes on the steering broomsticks!"

"Oh, Thank Merlin!"

"Wait, is our lord at the front or the back?"

"He's at the back!" Emma called down the stick, "Luna is in front!"

"I hope the ones for MaCUSA aren't going to be this cramped?"

"No!"

"Good!"

Eventually, after a whole lot of shuffling about, everyone got to where they needed to be.

"Everyone got their emergency portkeys?" Slytherin called out.

There was a chorus of yeses.

"Then let's shove off!"

Everyone cheered as the nose cone was lowered and the transparency runes activated, letting them all see out of the front of the stick.

A jolt of nerves shot through Hermione from where she sat in her wooden bucket seat. This was an adventure. An adventure with Harry. Another one. And she was along for the ride.

From somewhere outside came the noise of a chain being released from a catch, the whole stick lurched, and then, with a loud, girly squeal, which she realised came exclusively from her, rapidly slid into the inky blackness of the North Sea.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The records office of the ministry of magic had been modelled on the hall of prophecies, but while
the hall of prophecies merely had to contend with reasonably inert balls of glass, the records office dealt on a daily basis with parchment and shelves that had had so many illicit divination charms layered on them over the years by well-meaning clerks trying to speed things up, that finding anything was actually more difficult than having no index system at all — unless, of course, you really knew what you were doing.

Mister Bentley walked into the hall and made his way immediately to one of the weekend clerks who had a green stripe above their nameplate, a sure sign that they were one of these rarefied individuals. When he approached her, she was happily chatting with a couple of her colleagues, (a brunette and a red-head) but that quickly changed when he approached.

"Mister Bentley?" The woman asked nervously.

Bentley glanced at her nameplate. "Mrs Cox." He smiled. "I need the records from the judiciary's office related to breaches of the International Statute of Secrecy in the last year."

Mrs Cox started writing down notes. "Any record in particular you're looking for?"

"I believe there have been two prisoner relocation hearings regarding the same witch during that time? I'm not sure of her name."

Mrs Cox finished writing and gave Mister Bentley another nervous smile. "I'll probably have them ready for you in a few hours."

Mister Bentley nodded in understanding and walked away.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Whew," Chelsea Cox said, wiping her brow. "Not every day you get a request straight from the Humble Hag of the Wardrobe."

Her friend, Isabelle, smiled. "You going to get on with that then?"

"Yeah, I suppose I should."

"I can help you, if you want. I think I saw some of these ones the other week. They can't have moved that much since."

"Really?! Thanks, Isa, you're a life saver."

"Don't mention it."

They eventually found the file skulking around with a collection of budget requests from the sixteenth century. Chelsea Cox slipped the papers out of their file and read them. "Clare Cooper." Her eyes widened. "Currently serving a ten-year sentence on the grounds of Slytherin Manor for breaking the ISS. I wonder what Mister Bentley wants with her? Hey, look, she has your hair."

She looked around.

"Isabelle?"

And then a red light hit her and she knew no more.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Isabelle lowered her wand and smirked. She picked up the file and flipped through the contents.
"Sorry, girl, but Mister Bentley being interested in a person like this is exactly the kind of thing that Lord Malfoy wants me to keep my eyes out for."

And then a red light hit her and she knew no more.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Yeah," said the third colleague stepping out from between two filing cabinets and snatching up the file. "Me too." Five minutes later found her throwing a pinch of floo powder into a private Wizengamot floo on the other side of the ministry. "The Rookery!" And then… "Lord Lovegood!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The moment the SBS Hermione slid into the water time seemed to stand still. From a moment of shrieking adrenaline and exhilaration quickly came the deathly quiet of the deeps. Unlike the practically duck-taped submarine van, there were no engine noises, no rush of water, and no creaking of aluminium panels bending and popping as the water pressure tried (but failed) to turn their craft into a crushed can.

Instead, the magical wood around them felt as safe as a mother's womb, and the transparent nose cone gave them a perfect view as they navigated their way through the short underwater cave, leading out into the open waters of the North Sea.

Hermione's brain didn't stay in wonderment alone for long though. Soon it was back to fretting about the journey ahead, how long it would take, whether they would even find Captain Slytherin's sunken long boat at all, and whether she was really worthy of all this praise that was being heaped on her. After all, Harry himself had said she had a long way to go before becoming the greatest witch the world had ever seen.

There was a nagging feeling in the back of her mind that her rigorously trained brain had a serious flaw and that she was trying to debug a program from inside the program.

"I suggest everyone get themselves comfy," Harry as Lord Slytherin said from where he sat with Luna, riding the SBS Hermione's twin broomstick steering system. "It's going to be a long trip."

"Can we play I spy?" Luna asked.

"Sure, so long as Daphne isn't allowed to play."

"Hey!"

"What? You've got an eye that can see through walls."

"So? I won't use it!"

At the front of the broomstick, Emma giggled.

"Mum?"

"Sorry, dear" Emma waved it away. "It's just nice to see you all having fun, even when things are serious. I don't think I've ever heard you crack that kind of joke, my lord."

"I guess being around young people makes me feel younger too."

That caused Hermione, Daphne, and even Luna to snort.
The rest of the evening continued without incident. The maps Hermione had plotted out ahead of time proved more than sufficient to lead them where they needed to go, and the SBS Hermione's many new magical navigation charms and runes did the rest, including a magically charmed muggle style periscope to see above water. After all, it wasn't as though they could use Daphne's divination magic to help guide the broomsticks they'd eventually sell to MaCUSA.

It took eight hours to travel the five hundred kilometres to the seamount, and by the time Daphne had been scanning the ocean for another eight hours they were well and truly knackered.

"We've made good progress," Daphne yawned. "Even if we haven't found anything yet. How are we going to sleep?"

"The normal way, I imagine," Harry said. "Let's anchor ourselves to something. Then everyone get your heads down as best you can. I'll take the first watch."

They rotated shifts throughout the night — first Emma, then Hermione, then Luna, and then back to Harry again. Daphne was the only one exempt since she'd be expected to spend hours on end using rather draining divination magic to scan the other half of the seamount come morning.

Eventually it was morning, and Emma got to experience first-hand the wonders of teeth-brushing, hair styling, and make-up charms.

"Raise the periscope," Harry ordered.

The periscope was raised and Hermione peered through to check nothing weird was going on. She blinked. "Um… my lord?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"Macavity and Hedwig are staring down our periscope. They seem to be rather agitated."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

Mister Bentley woke up in bed to the sound of his magical alarm clock. It was Sunday. This made no difference to him. Just the start of another day, and of yet another opportunity to guide Magical Britain with wisdom and foresight.

He swung his feet off the king-sized oak bed, glanced back at the empty space on the other side of the bed, and made his way to the en-suite bathroom. He relieved himself, then brushed his teeth, combed his hair, and washed his face. Still in his dressing gown and slippers, he shuffled to the front door, opened it, walked down the garden path, breathing in the fresh-air of his little haven, and picked up the morning milk and ever-warm toast by the front gate.

The delivery of the morning milk was a muggle idea — not something he usually approved of, but so convenient he couldn't bring himself to care. And it wasn't as though he had the power to stop a legal partnership between two noble houses, in any case.

He walked back up the garden path, cheerfully waved to Mrs Bun over the garden wall, who was hanging up laundry for drying charms, sat down at his kitchen table, and had the milk pour itself into a glass, while his knife magically spread jam on the toast.

After indulging in a naughty third slice, he stood in front of a full-length mirror, while charming on his charcoal-grey work robes. He carefully inspected himself and couldn't help approving of what
he saw. The consummate gentleman. Professional, sophisticated, and perfectly adept at manoeuvring the pieces on the chess board to where they needed to be.

He picked up a copy of file he'd requested from the hall of records the previous day.

Clare Cooper — twenty-two — muggle-born — currently serving a ten-year sentence for a medium-level breach of the International Statute of Secrecy — although because of the Wizengamot's debtors laws, was currently serving that sentence, not in Azkaban, but on the grounds of Slytherin Manor.

He tucked the file under his arm, walked to the fireplace, threw a pinch into the flames, called out, "Ministry," and was instantly swept away.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Deep under the water of the Atlantic Sea, the nose cone of the SBS Hermione had been opened, creating a bobbing and ebbing vertical wall of water that Harry had crawled through before vanishing upwards.

Hermione waited anxiously for news from inside the broom-sub, along-side Daphne, Luna, and Emma Granger.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," her Mum said. "Lord Slytherin is a very busy man."

"It does raise a good point though," Daphne said from just behind them. "Can you add post-wards to the sub? Is there enough space?"

"I'm not sure, I'll have to talk with Dan when we get back. There are some spaces left, it just depends on how large the rune matrix for a post-ward is."

It was very cramped inside the prototype sub, but Emma still managed to give Hermione a warm hug. "How's your magic? You were working so hard yesterday."

"It's fine, Mum. I practice a lot."

Emma Granger smiled at her daughter. "You do that. Lord Slytherin told us a bit about the occlumency you've been learning. I hear my little genius is turning her brain into something like a computer."

"It's a little bit like that, yes."

"And your healing studies?"

"I'll start on them again very soon. I think Healer Pomfrey thought I'd be away for far longer than I actually will be."

"I'm so proud of you."

Hermione felt her cheeks go red. "Thanks, Mum," she whispered.

In the back of the sub, Daphne and Luna gave her warm little smiles of their own.

Then the wall of water rippled, and Lord Slytherin's head stuck itself through. "Both Hedwig and Macavity have letters for me from Luna's father. I've got to go. Something rather important has turned up. Emma, you're in charge until I get back, but please defer to the girls' judgements in matters of magic that aren't runes."
"As you wish, my lord. Do you know how long you'll be gone?"

"Perhaps all day. But don't worry. Everything will be fine. You all have portkeys if everything goes to hell. Plato!"

After a few moments, Plato, the rather disorientated house-elf, popped into the sub in-front of Harry's masked head. "Master?"

"I have to leave. Please stay here with Emma and the girls, and if there is any mortal danger that their portkeys can't get them out of, see to it that they all get to safety as quickly as possible."

Plato bowed deeply. "Understood, Master."

Still being hugged by Emma, Hermione nodded to herself. That had been a well-formed and quickly put-together contingency plan. Just like Harry. Although there was still the matter of the homework he'd given her to tear apart his idea for Antarctic colonisation. She still hadn't done it.

"See you all soon," Harry said, before disappearing back through the wall of water.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The ministry was quiet. Relatively quiet, anyway. It was a Sunday, after all. Most wizards and witches would be at home with their families, or else screaming their heads off at a quidditch match at Bodmin Stadium, or out shopping in Diagon Alley, or enjoying one of the many other leisure activities the wizarding world provided their citizens.

Bread and circuses.

Mister Bentley walked through security with nothing but a congenial nod to the guards, and made his way to the minister's office. Here at least, there was noticeable activity. "Florence, my dear, is the minister in?"

"Yes, Mister Bentley. He's just listening to the duelling league updates on the wireless."

"Excellent, could you let him know that I need a word?"

"Certainly, Mister Bentley. About anything in particular?"

"Just a few updates on matters of situational importance."

Bread and circuses, Mister Bentley thought, watching the receptionist vanish through the door to the minister's personal office. Magical Britain was not in anyway large, and given how tempting it might be for a wizard to risk the statute by using their powers in the muggle world, there needed to be plenty to satisfy them in the real world. The Department of Magical Games and Sports covered a lot more than just games and sport, and might as well be re-named the Second Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

He was soon ushered into the minister's personal office to find Fudge avidly concentrating, sitting on one of the chairs by the wireless.

"Goldstein falls back on the defensive," the commentator almost whispered, while in the background, grunts and whooshes painted over a background of silence. "Stun, stun, trip, shield, Delacour moves in."

Dolores Umbridge, standing dutifully behind the minister, caught Bentley's eye and offered him an
apologetic look.

"Goldstein tries for an elemental," the commentator's voice started to rise. "Doesn't get it off — Trips! — Goes for a swat! Misses! And that's it for Goldstein!" The sounds of a small crowd politely clapping filled the room. "An amazing finish to an outstanding series. If that spell swat had connected at the end it just might have been able to turn things around for the American, but in the heat of the moment, he just didn't have what it took." An older sounding voice came on. "That was yesterday's stage five finals of the All Wizard's Duelling Tournament. Join us next—"

Minister Fudge clicked the wireless off and looked up, annoyed. "In fifteen years of duelling, Goldstein has never tried spell swatting in a tournament before. It's not his style."

"Maybe he just wanted to try something new?" Bentley politely suggested.

"No, it's not because of that." Fudge got up and paced over to his desk. "Anyway, what did we need to talk about? Please not that stupid Cork business again." He sat down in his plush leather chair. "Or the new ICW obliviator regulations?"

"No, it's neither of them." Bentley slid over to the other side of the desk while Dolores took out a hardback book and started taking notes. "It's a new matter that has recently come to my attention — an ongoing abuse of our penal system, one that cannot realistically be allowed to continue."

"Why come to me about this, Bentley? This is a matter for the DMLE, isn't it?"

"Not really. Fixing the abuse in question would normally require legislation through the Wizengamot, but given the current state of things, that's unlikely to happen for quite some time. But an executive order from the minister would allow us to put a plug on current cases."

"What are these abuses?"

"Are you familiar with our debtor laws?"

Fudge scratched the back of his head. "Ah, somewhat. Creditors have certain privileges over debtors who can't repay their debts, correct?"

"Broadly, Minister, yes. One of those privileges is to request that debtors sentenced to prison serve their prison term in the employment of the creditor. But recently, some citizens have been using these laws simply as a means to protect friends and family from being sent to Azkaban."

Fudge's expression became concerned. "What families?"

"None of the convicts in question are either noble or pureblood," Bentley said, as smoothly as silk on a maiden's cheek.

The corner of Madam Umbridge's lip curled upwards.

"Oh," said Minister Fudge. "Good, then." His expression became firm. "Can't have that then. Flagrant abuses of the laws created by our own noble Wizengamot, right under our noses."

"No, Minister."

Fudge signed the parchment Bentley had placed in front of him. "See to it that it's stamped out."

Bentley took the parchment and turned to go. "Yes, Minister."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —
And they built a magical city hidden from the rest of the world over a thousand years before the ICW enacted the International Statute of Secrecy. They were so far ahead of their times, unlike the rest of the American civilisations who, in terms of administrative sophistication, were about on par with the Assyrians. Is it any wonder they decided to isolate themselves?

The SBS Hermione had been trawling through the waters surrounding the Anton Dohrn Seamount for the past few hours, a tiny moving bubble of silence and calm. And inside, while Daphne peered into a divination mirror, jumping her sight from spot to spot, looking for any sign of a wreck matching the description of what they were looking for, the actual Hermione was in full-on lecture mode to her remaining captive audience of two.

"It is a little surprising," Emma said. "You'd think someone with power would want to rule others without. I understand why the ISS was created, but this Court of the Feathered Serpent clearly had nothing to fear from their non-magical people."

"I don't know," Hermione said. "Akna didn't write anything about that in her journals — at least, nothing that I've found yet."

"How far through them are you?" Luna asked.

"About three-quarters."

"Maybe we'll find something else in the boat too," Emma suggested. "Maybe magic preserved the parchment all that time. I wouldn't mind reading some of these books myself. Hermione, could you teach me the language?"

Hermione frowned. "I've got a lot to do, Mum."

Emma smiled. "Of course, of course."

"And anyway," Hermione's voice became barely louder than a whisper. "I doubt you'd want to read some of it. You might find it upsetting."

"Why?"

"Just the way they treated muggles back then. It wasn't always very nice."

"Dear, your Mum and Dad have read what feels like half the history books in Flourish and Blotts. We know all about how wizards have treated muggles."

"It's just..." Hermione hesitated. "It's just that the Court of the Feathered Serpent did many really horrible things. Like killing muggle parents of muggleborns, or just stealing them away. They didn't have memory charms, so they just killed them." Hermione's voice was becoming strained.

"Oh, sweetie." Emma hugged her.

"But suppose the magical world had to isolate itself further now," Hermione ploughed on. "I'm not saying it will or anything," she quickly added. "But suppose it had to. What then?"

"Well, the wizarding world does have memory charms now, so, no need for killing anyone."

"But, but, the idea of someone arriving in the night and doing that to you and Dad—"

"—Isn't going to happen. Ever."
Hermione fell silent. The only sound to be heard was the faint underwater sounds of the broom-sub. Luna was politely busying herself with a book. Daphne had her eyes closed and was obviously elsewhere.

"Hermione," Emma eventually said. "When Lord Slytherin approached your father and I, we had a choice — either join you one hundred percent on this adventure, or pretend nothing had changed, and try to live with the fact that our daughter had basically moved to another country, and that we'd rarely ever see her again. Obviously we chose to join you. How could we choose anything else? If the wizarding world had to isolate itself further, I think that's what they should do. Let the parents choose. Then they could have the option to fully immigrate, if they wished."

"And if they chose not too?"

"That's when the memory charms would come in."

Hermione hugged her mother tighter. "How could anyone choose to do that?"

Emma sighed. "Being a mother or father does not automatically make one a saint, dear. There are many people out there who would give up their children to avoid a radical life change. Especially if they were given the option of just forgetting. No one is perfect."

"Harry is."

Hermione hadn't actually meant to say those words. They just sort of, slipped out. But they were out now.

Emma smiled. "I know it may seem that way, but no, not even Harry is perfect, dear."

Hermione frowned. "He is. He always knows what's best. He knows everything. Tell me one time he was wrong."

Emma frowned in turn. "Dear…"

"No. You don't know all the facts! Harry always knows what's best."

"Hermione."

Mother and daughter turned. Luna was looking at them with her dreamy expression. "Did Harry ever tell you about when he first tried to befriend Alex?"

"No?"

"He made a complete pig's ear of it. That was a time he was wrong."

"But…"

"And there was the thing with the you-know-what at the end of last year."

"That wasn't his fault!"

A clearing of the throat from behind them caused Hermione and Emma to turn again. "People can be amazing and still not be perfect," said Daphne, who'd now opened her eyes. "If we were to take our lord as an example. He's done many questionable things over the years."

"But it was all needed," Hermione said, desperately.
"Was it? What about Clare?"

"He saved Clare! She was being used as a prostitute!"

"And how much did it cost to save her? A thousand galleons? What about the three other girls? Where are they now?"

"But… but buying all their debt would just fuel the market and cause more muggleborns to be snatched! And anyway, we don't have unlimited funds, you know that."

"Why don't we have the money to free those other three girls?"

Hermione hesitated, letting Daphne get in her answer before she could formulate one of her own. "We don't have the money, because our lord decided it would be a better idea to spend it on a mansion — a seventy thousand galleon mansion."

"But we need Slytherin Manor," Hermione argued. It's our base of operations to ensure our survival."

"But did we absolutely have to spend so much on it?"

"I…"

"We didn't, Hermione. Slytherin Manor is now the largest magical manor in the whole country. We could probably have done very well with just the third or even fourth largest."

"But, we still couldn't have bought the other girls' debts. The black market for muggleborns—"

"And who leads the Gray? The political faction capable of green-lighting any legislation if at least one of the other factions is in full agreement on it? Wouldn't the Light be rather on-board with the idea of stamping out that particular market?"

"Daphne, why are you saying all this!? What would our lord say if he heard you!?"

"He'd say, Hermione, Excellent analysis, Daphne. I'm glad you're not letting your loyalty to me cloud your judgement!"

Hermione flinched. It was like a kick to the gut. Nothing more or less. And Daphne looked genuinely annoyed. Again, no one said anything for several long seconds, and Hermione eventually realised that her Mum was gently stroking her hair, and that she was still holding her tightly.

Another sound slowly started to fill the broom-sub — the sound of Luna humming.

Daphne let out a long breath. "Anyway, to get back on task, I think I might have found something."

The atmosphere in the enclosed space noticeably changed, and suddenly, Hermione's mum was all business. "How far?" she asked.

"I'm not sure — maybe a few hours — I can lead the way."

"Right, let's do that. Luna, how are you feeling?"

"Right as rain, Mrs Granger."

"Okay." She leaned back to look Hermione in the eyes. "And you, sweetie?"
Hermione took a deep breath to centre herself. "I'm fine, Mum." And it was true. She could feel her magic swirling around inside her, agitated, restless. They'd been steering the SBS Hermione for a long time now, in multiple shifts, and theoretically, most adult wizards should be puffed out by now. But not her. She'd been wielding her magic constantly, in some way or other, for years now. As she clambered over Emma Granger to the regular-sized broomsticks towards the back of the broom-sub that steered the craft, her thoughts drifted back to Daphne's words, and then, as they so often did, to Harry.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The elevator around Dolores Umbridge rattled and shook as it made its way down to the DMLE. The doors slid open and she marched out, a woman on a mission, a mission that only she could execute. She marched straight up to the first assistant secretary she saw, and smiled. "Excuse me, I need to see the chief Auror."

The man gave her a bored look. "And you are?"

Dolores' smile vanished. "I am Dolores Umbridge — the Minister's undersecretary — here on official business."

The man's look turned from bored to attentive. "One moment, Madam Umbridge."

And just like that, Dolores' smile returned.

It didn't last long though. Dolores was forced to wait three minutes and thirty-two seconds in the waiting room before she was finally showed in to the Chief Auror's office. The nerve! What if she'd needed to inform him that there'd been a break-out from Azkaban? Or that someone was trying to assassinate the minister?"

"What is it?" Lord Sirius Black asked, the moment she'd stepped in.

"My lord," Dolores began.

"—I'm not your lord here, Madam Umbridge. I am Chief Auror."

Dolores bit back a scowl, hiding it instead under the sweet smile she'd endlessly practised in the mirror. "Of course, Chief Auror. I am here to deliver this." She threw the parchment the minister had signed across the table.

Lord Black picked it up and read. He frowned. "How many people does this affect?"

"Three. Their names and addresses are on the other side."

Lord Black turned over the parchment and read. He put the parchment aside. "Fine. We'll take care of this from here. Good day, Madam Umbridge."

"Chief Auror," Dolores said, not moving an inch back towards the door. "if I may, there are certain details about the execution of this order that need very careful handling."

Lord Black glared at her. "Such as?"

"The prisoner, Clare Cooper, in addition to the usual security wizards, will also need a fully armed auror pair to pick her up. That is why I brought this to you. You must have noticed her address? Granger cottage is on the grounds of Slytherin Manor. You might find it… difficult to extract her from there, so she will need to be intercepted as she floos from school. And due to
Slytherin's influence, the minister insists on an immediate transfer to Azkaban while we investigate the abuses."

"Yes, thank you, Madam Umbridge," Lord Black indicated the door.

"We want to make sure Lord Slytherin doesn't try anything unwise during the transfer."

"Yes, Thank you."

"And can I also remind you that the prisoner is to be strip searched and any artefacts she holds are to be confiscated for investigation?"

"Madam Umbridge, I am fully aware of all the regulations that pertain to my job, and many of them require my immediate attention, so please leave."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"There!" Daphne's excited voice cried out in the magical wooden craft.

"We can't see what you do!" Hermione said in exasperation.

"A bit to the left. More left. Forward. We're just coming up to it."

"Would we be able to see it if we opened the nose?" Emma asked.

"Definitely."

"Luna?" Emma said. "Will you do the honours?"

"Yes, Mrs Granger." There was a faint hum, and the SBS Hermione's nose cone opened up, letting the waters of the Atlantic splash against the magical barrier preventing the insides from flooding. In a few moments, the barrier became as transparent as a window.

"Wow," Hermione said.

"That is a sunken longship," Luna added.

"Not all of us have a 'see in the dark' spell," Emma said, pointedly. "Can you aim the light out there, please?"

They did so, and Emma was finally able to see what the others could. "Looks promising," she said. Hermione nodded. It really did look promising. It wasn't massive, maybe twenty meters long, but she knew there would be many ancient spells interwoven into the woodwork, making the insides larger than the outsides. It was filled with earth and silt, and buried at an angle, causing the back to stick up more than the front. Every surface that wasn't buried was covered in coral.

"Bring us in closer," Emma called out.

Hermione leaned forward on her broomstick.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Mister Bentley glanced up from the parchment work he'd been busy with, and up at the clock, quietly ticking over his desk.
Sunday classes at the lesser schools would be out soon. Once this Clare Cooper was under the ministry's care again, he would learn if that gave him any leverage over Lord Slytherin. The man might very well not even care, but it was at least worth a shot.

This whole business with the Muggle Protection Act was a gentlemanly battle of wits, and Slytherin was a wonderful opponent. Much of the country saw him as a mysterious and dangerous figure. He was, in fact, restrained, polite, and sophisticated, just like him.

Dolores may be frightened that Slytherin would oppose the transfer with force, but Bentley knew better. If he cared at all, Slytherin would come to him, and offer him something in exchange, which is exactly what he wanted.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Hermione edged the broom-sub ever forward in the water, towards the sunken wreckage.

"How close should we get?" Daphne asked.

"We should be careful getting too close," Luna said. "There might still be—"

A shudder went through the SBS Hermione causing everyone to still and look around.

Then Hermione felt it, an all-mighty pull on her magic, as though she'd just opened the world's largest chocolate frog. She cried out and almost lost her balance on the broomstick, but just about held on.

"Hermione!" Her Mum was at her side in a rather scrabbly instant. "Are you okay?"

"I'm — Fine." She gasped out.

Behind her, Luna had her teeth gritted, and was visibly straining.

And from the front of the sub, looking out of the open nose cone, she could just about hear Daphne mutter, "Magical Merlin."

"What?!" Hermione put all her willpower into turning the sub to let her see too. And then she saw it.

Triggered by the approach of such a powerfully magical artefact as the SBS Hermione, the downed longship was coming back to life.

"Slower!" Emma shouted. "Don't force it!"

"It's fine! We've got it!"

"All along the old longship, dirt and muck was being forcibly expelled from the insides by ancient cleaning charms, flying out into the water, and creating a murky, watery fog. And then it was over.

Hermione panted.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Bentley glanced at the clock again. Any moment now the aurors would be redirecting Clare Cooper as she flooed back to Slytherin Manor from the Shoe.
He stood up, made his way out of his office, and spotted one of the serving ladies making the afternoon rounds. What was her name? Florence? No, Fiona! He walked over. "Excuse me, Fiona, I don't suppose you have any of those wonderful egg and cress sandwiches, do you?"

"Yes, Minster Bentley."

"Break time, Humble Hag?" asked a voice like a bassist in a cave.

Bentley didn't need Fiona's squeak or the wide eyes of the other wizards and witches in the room to know who was standing behind him.

He turned.

"Lord Slytherin, what a surprise."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"You have one hour," Emma said, portioning out gillyweed to Hermione, Luna, and Daphne, who were all wearing bathing suits and warming charms.

"But what if things go wrong here?" Hermione asked. "You don't have magic."

"Plato will be making sure nothing goes wrong, young miss," said a disembodied voice, causing her to jump slightly.

Luna giggled.

"Forgot he was there," Hermione muttered.

"Ready, girls?" Daphne said.

They all nodded, started chewing, and when it started becoming difficult to breathe, dived out of the SBS Hermione, straight through the shimmering wall of water, and out into the North Atlantic.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"I hope I am not intruding?" Slytherin said.

"No, not at all," Bentley replied. He had to admit, he hadn't anticipated the meeting with Lord Slytherin to start out like this, but needs must. The man was obviously in a hurry.

"Good, because I have a problem that I need your help with."

Mister Bentley smiled. "Of course you do. Why don't we go to my office and discuss this in—"

"—My office, Humble Hag."

"I was not aware you had an office in the ministry."

"I have borrowed one of the ones for Lords of the Wizengamot."

Mister Bentley shrugged. "Very well, then. Lead the way."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

If she hadn't been a unicorn animagus, she'd for sure have been something aquatic, Hermione thought as she effortlessly swam towards the shipwreck, now clean of all the silt and muck,
although, strangely, the magic had done nothing for all the coral covering every surface.

Daphne and Luna swam beside her, and only needed the tail to be mistaken for a pair of mermaids. They glided to the deck and then pulled themselves to the door leading to the tiny room at the back, which in normal circumstances would barely be called a shed.

'Aafter you,' Daphne mimed to Luna, who gave a happy thumbs up and slipped inside. Hermione followed after the other two girls, looking around with bubbling excitement at being this close to something so obviously old, and which they were now exploring because of the work she'd done.

The passageways of the ship were as detailed as the records she'd read in Captain Slytherin's notes and the expansion charms at work here were definitely on an order of magnitude more impressive than the ones used in their trunks, or even the more special ones provided by the noble house of Hawking.

What could Harry do if he had access to that kind of magic? Great things, surely.

She glided through the next corridor, pulled herself through the next door, and swam straight into Daphne, who was selfishly blocking the entrance. 'Hey!' Hermione angrily tapped on her future lady's shoulder, only to slowly stop when she finally caught a glimpse of what was filling the room.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"So, what do we have to discuss?" Bentley asked once they were in Slytherin's temporary office. He couldn't help admiring the man's taste. They were both sitting in plush leather armchairs, upholstered in emerald green, and crafted from whomping willow, while the walls had been altered from the usual ministry plastered decor to a warm panelling of alternating teak and poplar. "Is this by any chance about Clare Cooper?"

Lord Slytherin was tapping his fingers on his knee. "I don't understand how you can justify this," he said. "This is clearly not an abuse of the system. If anything, it is the system that is in the wrong. It is the system that allowed Clare to be taken from her family, to be forced to have sex with strangers against her will, and then to be made a criminal for something she did not understand."

"Lord Slytherin, if the ministry uncovers evidence of abuse of the system, we have to investigate it, I'm sure you see that. What happened in Miss Coopers past is irrelevant. And I'm sure it's unfortunate, but if someone doesn't understand that what they're doing wrong, that is even more reason for them to be held under the ministry's watch."

Slytherin continued to tap his knee with his fingers. Tap, tap, tap, tap — tap, tap, tap, tap.

"Besides," Bentley continued, "the order has already gone out now. They should be picking her up around about now."

"Truly?" Slytherin seemed to think for a few moments before leaning forward in his chair. "What is it you want, Mister Bentley?"

Mister Bentley smiled. He looked away and scratched the back of his head. "The Light's muggle protection act… I don't think you really care all that much about it, do you? Not really."

Tap, tap, tap — tap, tap, tap, tap.

"So, that's it, is it?" Slytherin asked and Bentley was surprised to hear a note of bitterness in his voice. "Nothing but a cynical power play. Throwing an innocent person with a prison guarded by
happiness sucking demons because it's convenient."

Mister Bentley sighed. "Honestly, I thought you'd be different from this. Look, it brings me no pleasure in saying this, but, in our world, it is very much the case that the strong take what they will, and the weak suffer what they must."

Tap, tap, tap — tap, tap... tap. "Is that so? You're going to love this, then."

Bentley hesitated. The bitterness in Slytherin's voice had gone. Totally erased as if it had never been there, replaced instead by a cheerfully casual lilt.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, it's nothing." Lord Slytherin put his hands on his knees and easily pushed himself up. "Just a little project I'm working on. That's the other reason I wanted to talk to you. I need some advice."

"Advice?"

Lord Slytherin walked over to one of the redecorated walls and tapped on it with his wand. Just like the wall in Diagon Alley, the wood panels started sliding up and over each other, quickly forming an arch into a second room, hidden from him at first, and now that the arch was there, obviously also a part of this one.

"Come! Come!" Slytherin pulled him up from his chair and hurried him towards a table in the middle of the second room, covered by a white sheet. "Tell me what you think." And with that, he pulled back the sheet.

Bentley stared in horror.

"I think the model makers did quite a good job on your house, didn't they?" Slytherin said.

"But, but..." Mister Bentley tried to find words to fully express what he was seeing. "Mrs Bun... She wouldn't. She couldn't!"

"Couldn't decide that she's getting a bit on in life and that she'd prefer to move to a smaller place nearer her children? She is a dear, isn't she? Has she made you any of her blueberry pie recently? I suspect not, given how busy you always are with work — out at the crack of dawn every day, apparently."

The whole of Mrs Bun's formally beautiful garden had been totally cobblestoned over. The model house in the middle was much the same, but the garden!

"Witch-co have been looking for a place to put a warehouse for ages," Slytherin cheerfully continued. "It just so happens that your neighbourhood is in the perfect central position — and a few expansion charms will make it ideal, and all totally legal. Of course, having a magical warehouse next door does come with some downsides, people in and out all day, noise, mess, not to mention it becomes a beacon for magical pests of all kinds, but on the plus side, you'll always be the first to get your milk in the morning."

Bentley continued to stare in horror.

Slytherin's voice then lost all hint of amusement. "I am perfectly happy to play political games with you until the world ends, Humble Hag, but if you fuck with mine, I will fuck with yours."

Bentley looked into the green and black mask and saw no mercy. He really had misjudged, hadn't
he? His voice became desperate. "But arresting Clare Cooper is an executive order from the minister! I can't rescind it."

"Then I suggest you get working on changing the minister's mind, Humble Hag. And quickly. I have this option until you retire. I'm sure I don't need to explain myself further."

Mister Bentley fled the room with just one goal in mind. Save his haven.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

One, two, three, four…

The counting had begun almost as soon as Hermione had floated into the room, and hadn't stopped since.

Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven…

Solid gold objects of every form and function littered the underwater space like the living-room of a hydrophilic hoarder.

151, 152, 153…

Despite Daphne's attempts to stop her, Luna had already adorned herself with all manner of golden objects, including necklaces, bangles, rings, and even an actual crown, and was now sitting in a massive golden chair playing the part of aloof queen surveying her kingdom, her long, blonde hair floating in the water, the rest of her, weighed down with enough treasure to buy a house… or three.

289, 290, 291…

It just went on and on. Hermione could scarcely believe how much they had here. And it was they, wasn't it? After all, this really was Slytherin's treasure, which meant it rightfully belonged to Harry. And what Harry could do with all this…

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It took another whole ten hours to get back to Slytherin Manor.

Emma firmly told them to leave everything where it was, and just bring back their notes and memories. After all, these artefacts had value in the muggle world as much for their historical value as their gold content.

Hermione, Daphne, and Luna catalogued as much of the treasure as they could before leaving with a few basic rune stones in place to conceal the longship from passing magicals and muggles alike and Harry would come by later to put a fidelius in.

When they finally all burst into the kitchen from the basement, it was to find Harry, disguised as Lord Slytherin, personally tutoring a recovering Clare.

Shooting out of the floo ten minutes early to find two intimidating men with huge shields and wands pointed at her had not been a happy experience. The Aurors had not stripped her, which had been a small blessing, but their boat had still been halfway to Azkaban when the order had arrived by owl that the aurors were to turn back and deliver Miss Cooper, unharmed, and with the ministry's apologies, to Gairsay Island.

"We even got Bentley to disband that custom's point on the mainland," Lord Slytherin said, while
Clare took another sip of fire-whisky. "Now, what did you find?"

Stunned by what had been going on while they'd been underwater, it took Hermione a moment to process what he'd asked, but as soon as she remembered about the gold, it all came back.

"There's just so much of it!" Daphne said.

"I can't imagine what 'king of old' the captain was talking about," Hermione huffed. "Genghis Khan wasn't for another three-hundred years!"

"And we now have the money for a menagerie too," Luna said.

Daphne looked surprised. "You didn't say you wanted a menagerie before."

"Well, we didn't have the gold for it before."

"We don't have the gold for it now."

"No, but we will soon."

The conversation went on long into the night, and long past everyone's bedtime, especially the girls', and, technically, Harry's too — not that that was ever an issue.

At one point though, Hermione stepped outside for a breath of bracing Orkney air, and found herself alone with her lord. "My lord?"

"Yes?"

"Are we alone?"

"Yes."

"Is your ageing potion going to wear off soon?"

"In about five minutes."

"Can we talk then?"

"We can."

They waited five minutes. Then, Lord Slytherin's clothes started to shrink, along with the rest of him. Harry reached up and took off his mask. "What's up, Hermione?"

"Harry. I... I spoke with my Mum about the whole colonisation thing, and she suggested that muggle parents should be allowed to choose if they emigrate to the wizarding world or not."

"You appreciate the problems that would cause, don't you? Having a class of people unable to use magic in a world of magic users."

"Yes, but it would be a problem created by doing the right thing. There are always going to be problems. So choosing to have that kind of problem is better."

Harry smiled. "What if I told you I thought you were wrong?"

Hermione bit her lip. "Then I'd argue with you."

"Why?"
"Because you may soon be one of the richest wizards in the magical world, not immediately, but soon. I trust you to always protect me, Harry, but I want you to protect others too. I want you to be the hero to others that you are to me."

Harry sighed. "You know that won't always be possible, right?"

"I know. We're struggling against people who would see you, me, and all our friends dead or in servitude, and against a world that doesn't care, but that doesn't mean we can't take opportunities to do good when they pop up."

Silence descended on the pair for a moment. The only sound was the chatter from the cottage behind them and the whistling of the wind through the trees.

Eventually Harry said, "Hermione?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Don't ever let yourself doubt that I need you more than you could possibly imagine."

Hermione beamed.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This chapter was drafted, and made available early, on the LeadVonE discord server. The next chapter is quite a bit shorter than this one, but is already finished and available to read in its entirety in the same way (it's more of a bonus chapter — like Daphne Goes Down to the Village). Details can be found through my profile page.

Sticky Note: If you want to keep abreast of the release schedule, as well as any changes and the occasional piece of bonus content, you can head over to [www * leadvone * com] and sign up for the Gray Mailing List.

If you enjoy my writing and would like to see more of it, please consider becoming a patron of my original projects, which you can also get access to through my website.

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017's prices.
The Gryffindor common room was warmth and grandeur realised in stone and magic. Orange flames burned on every wall, a roaring fire filled the hearth at all times of the day, and all throughout the space, large comfy sofas were filled with the weight and chatter of several dozen student witches and wizards.

Sitting around the central fireplace, the boy who lived held brooding court with his collection of sycophants, hangers-on, yes-men, underlings, pawns, fan-girls, occasional actual friend, and Virgo Malfoy.

On the other side of the room, Fred Weasley was sat and silently studying the scene, resting, with his chin in his hands, while he considered things.

He and his brother were in what could only be described as an interesting situation. Younger sons of a Light, pureblood, ancient but common house, they had somehow managed to insert themselves as business partners to the mysterious and powerful Lord Slytherin, even if they'd never actually met the man. They’d accepted a patronage agreement with the other Potter son on a whim, and that had somehow snowballed into a contract with Devlin Whitehorn whose family made the Nimbus broomstick line, providing an income stream that, while not quite setting them up for life, was very impressive for a couple of fifteen-year-olds. He doubted any of their more noble classmates were doing five-digit business deals on the side while juggling their education.

Most of their attention now was on general problem solving for some mystery project for The Settlers, Lord Slytherin's other garden shed inventors. Fred wasn't sure exactly what the project was, but suspected it was something to do with living underwater. George, by contrast, thought Slytherin wanted to enter the flying market with a broomstick of his own.

Of course, while all this was very cool, it didn't stop the fact that neither of them was looking forward to the sparks that might fly when Mum learned of what they were up to, and even more so that Dad had been helping them too. The fact that so much money was involved was unlikely to make it any better. But they would not let that stop them. They were their own wizards — capable of so much more than slotting into the ministry machine — to climb and politic their way up a ladder created by someone else. Much better to craft your own ladder with you already on top, even if it didn't reach quite as high.

"Just let us know if you need any more, right?" George said, standing a few feet away and shaking the hand of an upperclassman.

"Sure thing," the upperclassman happily replied before turning and walking away, his other hand clutching a small box, full of Chocolate Frogs and Fizzing Whizzbees.

George landed beside him, pockets jingling. "Over a galleon so far this week. We'll have to make another trip down to Honeydukes before too long."

Fred nodded absently, eyes still planted on the boy who lived's little group of followers, plus Virgo Malfoy. Something about that girl just creeped him out, although he couldn't put his finger exactly
"We should make a trip tomorrow," George said.

"Mmmm…?"

"I said, we should make a trip to Honeydukes tomorrow. We're running low on supplies and it's even a Hogsmeade weekend, so we won't need to sneak around the village. You okay, Fred? You seem a bit out of it."

"Just thinking about things."

"Oh, what things?"

"Should we even bother selling more sweets and drinks to our housemates? It's not much money compared to the other stuff we do."

"It was your idea."

"Yeah, I know, but I was just thinking that maybe we should focus a bit more."

"It doesn't take that much time."

"Couldn't we use that time better though?" He turned towards George who was looking thoughtful.

"Maybe," his twin conceded. "But what is it we actually get out of selling stuff to our classmates?"

"Money?"

"Yes, but we also get a mindset. The Weasley Twins are business people. They do business. If we need something, we go to them. Sure it's not all that valuable now, but in the future…"

"…When many of them are heads of houses," Fred continued, "it will be valuable. I see your point."

"Exactly!"

Fred hummed for a few moments, thinking deeply. "But if that's the case, why only the Gryffindors?"

There was a moment of silence between the two twins, during which a trio of witches a few sofas over shrieked in laughter over some private joke.

"Good point," George slowly replied. "But how would we do that? It works now because everyone knows where to find us. The other houses can't come into the Gryffindor Common Room."

"We set up somewhere else in the castle?" Fred asked. "Somewhere teachers aren't likely to stumble on."

"But all those places are hard to get to. You have to know exactly what to do. We can't risk handing out parchments."

"No, I agree. Word of mouth only."

"So how?"
"Mmmmm…" Fred put his chin back in his hands and stared off into the middle distance. "I'm sure we'll figure something out."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In the Headmaster's office, Headmaster Gilderoy Lockhart sliced the seal of yet another parchment, and started reading. His hair wasn't quite as coiffed as normal and a few grey hairs had started to poke through. Who'd have known that running a school would be so much work! He'd expected there would be more leisurely walks in the grounds and fewer merlin-damned meetings — meetings with parents, meetings with staff, occasional meetings with students, with the ministry, the board, and even other schools, now that plans for the tri-wizard tournament were being drawn up.

He rubbed his eyes, sighed, and continued reading about the modified rules Karkaroff was demanding they integrate into the tournament. Then a ghost slipped through his door. Gilderoy's sigh immediately turned into a wide grin, his eyes brightened, and his whole posture shifted into one of jovial confidence so quickly one might believe the world had just glitched.

"Sir Nick!" Gilderoy beamed. "Good old Nick, my friend! What can I do for you?"

Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington's face stayed impassive. "You know last week was Hogsmeade weekend? I thought you should be aware, Headmaster, that I have just come across two students in one of the corridors selling wares they obviously bought from the village."

Gilderoy's huge grin didn't fade. "Yes?"

"Yes, headmaster. Their set up looked rather… well planned."

"Not selling anything dangerous were they?"

"No, headmaster, but the rules say—"

"—Well then, I don't think we need to worry about this do we? A small bit of entrepreneurialism is to be expected! Encouraged, even! Yes, that's it exactly, don't worry about it, hear me?"

Sir Nicholas didn't look at all happy, but bowed deeply. "As you command, Headmaster."

The ghost then left and Gilderoy collapsed back into his chair. Honestly! He didn't have time to deal with every small little thing. Children selling sweets? He had more important things to deal with.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"You're doing so well, Sophie, I'm very proud of you."

Sophie beamed as Hermione read over her latest essay — the one that Professor Snape had given an O. When she'd first come to Hogwarts, her grades had been terrible, and being a Ravenclaw with bad grades was like being an easily tired house elf and her position in the social hierarchy as a muggleborn girl of modest means had been very clear to everyone, even if a few of them had been kind about it.

But now — now she was outperforming them all. Now, she was the top of her class, the best-scoring Ravenclaw in her year. Her classmates eyed her with grudging respect, and many of the younger ones even came to her asking for help — so many, in fact, that she'd had to start turning some of them away. She was nowhere near Hermione, of course, but miracles could only go so far.
"Keep it up," Hermione finished handing the essay back to her. "We'll be starting wandless magic soon and you'll need to be as far ahead as you can be to keep up."

"Yes," Sophie said, practically glowing from the praise. "Thank you."

The Founders Club meeting continued on like it usually did, but with the added buzz among their year about their soon to begin wandless magic lessons.

Eventually they all started to file out and she found herself falling in with Justin and Kevin.

"So unfair that we didn't get to go to Hogsmeade with the others," Kevin said. "I'd have liked that. I never get to try all the sweets at Diagon Alley."

Justin looked both ways before lowering his voice. "If it's just sweets you want, I might know how to help you there."

"How?" Sophie asked. "You bought some more?"

"No, but, well… follow me, they should be around now. This is actually really cool." His eyes now had a playful glint to them.

"Who?" Kevin asked, "What's really cool?" But Justin was already leading them to the grand staircase. "Okay," he said, when they were obviously alone. "You just have to remember this, right?" and he proceeded to recite a poem.

Go to the fifth floor,

Towards the hospital rooms,

Duck under the tapestry,

Find the armour that looms,

Turn three times while humming,

What tune is up to you,

Then walk back the way you came,

To find us, our service, and brews,

And many more things too.

"Go to the fifth floor?" Sophie asked.

"Service and brews?" Kevin echoed.

"Yes," Justin said, still smiling. "Go on, see if you can find the place."

It took them several minutes of wandering to eventually identify which tapestry the poem was talking about—several of the ones they first tried had solid walls behind them—but they eventually located it and the armour that looked like it had been made for the groundskeeper. Sophie chose to hum Rule Britannia while Kevin hummed the opening song of Postman Pat, and Justin, the opening bars of Flight of the Valkyries.

They then made their way back up the passageway, wondering over the fact that, somehow, the
paintings and decorations had changed. They turned a corner into another wide corridor and saw, sitting to one side of the passageway, facing the opposite wall, an open trunk — an open trunk that an older student with flaming red hair was busy climbing out of.

"Welcome," The boy said, hopping down and spreading his arms wide. "You have quested through many perilous perils to find us, but now you have. Fred Weasley, at your service. And you, Mister Finch-Fletchley, I didn't think we'd see you again so quickly, but I'm happy we are."

After the introductions were made, Fred Weasley started showing off all the stuff he had for sale. While the boys chatted, Sophie stole over to the trunk and inspected the sign that had been hung over it.

*Sweets, Drinks, and Potions.*

*Need a pick me up for a late night of studying?*

*Running low on Blood Pops?*

*No worries! We can help. See our list of prices below.*

*Special requests considered on a case by case basis.*

*Opening hours between six and eight Monday to Friday.*

Then a list of prices and services.

Sophie ran her finger down the list, fascinated.

"But if you want to push the boat out, can I suggest these little wonders?" Fred said to Kevin, while Justin was enjoying a Chocolate Cauldron he'd just bought.

"Not sure if I have the money for that," Kevin said, looking longingly at the contents of a tray.

"Not to worry. We have many unique flavours to suit every taste and pocket."

Sophie looked up and down the corridor, otherwise empty save for the portrait of a sleeping old wizard surrounded by arcane-looking instruments. Truth be told, she was rather sick of being the poor muggleborn of Ravenclaw. She couldn't do anything about the muggleborn, but the poor bit…

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Classes were just ending. Fred Weasley packed his satchel, gave George a nod, which they both understood, and made his way alone towards the secret hallway where they now did all their research in their trunk while occasionally taking orders for all sorts of things from an ever-growing portion of the student body. Even he was amazed at how well their little project was going. Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, even Slytherins were now regular visitors. The cloak and dagger nature of it all appeared particularly attractive to the students. They hadn't needed to pick up and run from a teacher even once yet. No one had tattled. Not even the few prefects who'd learned the poem's secret.

They'd picked the spot specifically because it was tough to get to, almost no-one ever came here, and several secret passageways surrounded it in just the right way for them to put up some basic wards, the most important being a muggle repelling ward. It wasn't a perfect defence against Filch, but it certainly helped.
Fred hummed a popular Celestina Warbeck song while turning around three times, walked back down the corridor, turned the corner, and stopped dead. The girl who'd been with the second year boys from a few days ago was sitting at a small table a few paces away from their trunk, stacked high with books. She was looking at him nervously, a book open in her hands, having obviously heard him approaching.

"Now, what's all this then?" he asked, sauntering over. "I didn't think this was that great a spot to study."

The girl—Sophie Roper, wasn't it?—pointed at a small card at the front of her desk, which read—

*Tutoring Sessions*

*2 sickles an hour*

*Any subject*

"I just thought there wasn't any law against me doing what you were doing," she said quickly. "And you weren't offering tutoring so it's not like I'm competing with you or anything."

Fred turned to loom over the smaller girl. "Yes, but you see, little Ravenclaw, we have certain contingencies in place if a teacher finds us, and we put a lot of work into making sure this place was hidden, and that people would know how to find us."

"So?" the girl said. "It's not like you own this bit of corridor."

"No, but you being here too makes things difficult for us."

"So you're saying I can't be here?"

Fred frowned. They hadn't planned for this.

Footsteps approached, but he knew it was just George.

"Fred? What's going on?"

Fred quickly explained the situation to his twin while the girl glared nervously up at them.

They went into a huddle a little way away from the new table and cast a basic privacy ward.

"So, what do we do?" Fred asked. "Tell her to go away?"

"She might go to a teacher," George replied.

"Yeah, she might, but she won't. Unless she wants the whole school to hate her."

"We can't bet on that."

"I think we could."

"Yes, but I've got a better idea. Why not let her stay here, but charge her rent?"

"How much?"

"A sickle a day?"

"She'd never be able to afford it."
"What about a share of her profits?"

"Could work…"

"And remember what we were talking about before? We want people to think the Weasley Twins mean business. Surely other business people are even better for that than customers."

"Too true, oh twin of mine."

On the other side of the corridor, Sophie watched the older boys as they huddled together, still feeling as nervous as she feared she looked. This was, without a shadow of a doubt, one of the scariest things she'd ever done. There had been the troll last year, of course, but she hadn't run into that, she'd just been there. The damsel in distress. This was her doing something scary of her own free will. A part of her mind was voicing the rather loud opinion that this was all not worth it just for a bit of extra spending money.

Her nerves were not helped when the twins simultaneously looked up from their huddle right at her and grinned.

"Miss Roper—" one started.

"—We're impressed by your determination," the other continued, "and would like to make a deal with you."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In the headmaster's office, Gilderoy Lockhart was busy. Very busy in fact. A small pile of parchment was stacked up on one side, but that could wait. This could not.

"I've written myself into a corner!" he exclaimed. "How do I get myself out of it? I can't have the boy-who-lived kill his enemy! This is a children's book! But I can't use the power of love again — I used that last time. What if I have one of his friends produce an amulet that solves the problem? Yes! Genius! And I can justify it by setting it up as the MacGuffin of the next book! Oh, Gilderoy, you amazing man, you!"

"Ahem," said a voice.

Gilderoy's entire body jerked as he tried to recalibrate to not being alone, only to realise that he was being addressed by one of the many paintings that were sharing space with the many beaming visages of himself around the walls.

"Yes, Phineas?"

"I have a guest to see you, Headmaster," the rather grouchy painting said. "She seems rather excited."

"A painting?"

"Indeed."

"What does she want?"

Phineas didn't get to respond though, because at that moment, a rather thin woman wearing far too much jewellery appeared in Phineas' painting, and started shrieking, "Crass commercialism! A den of smugglers and profiteers! Here! In the hallowed halls of education and learning!"
Gilderoy put his hands over his ears. "My dear lady, what are you talking about? And I'm using the word 'talking' in the loosest possible sense."

"I was visiting an old friend of mine in one of the less visited parts of the castle, and what do I find there? Trade! Barter! A black market of wheeler-dealers plying their illicit craft, taking advantage of the innocent and hoodwinking the gullible!"

Lockhart looked at the woman with a tired expression. "You mean you found students selling sweets?"

"A nest of pirates and racketeers!"

"Oh, go away and shut up you crazy old bat."

The woman's expression froze, she seemed to struggle with herself, but did dip a small curtsey and say, "As you command, Headmaster."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Sally Smith, daughter of a branch line of the Ancient and Noble House of Smith carefully placed her miniature anvil on the floor in front of her with a defiant flourish. Down the corridor, on the other side of the Weasley twin's trunk, Zacharias Smith, Heir of the main line of the Ancient and Noble House of Smith, placed his own miniature anvil on a large slice of tree trunk with a similarly defiant flourish. Neither looked at each other as they proceeded to populate their own tables with all manner of trinkets, necklaces, earrings, pendants, chokers, and other types of jewellery, mostly bronze and copper, but here and there, a few pieces in steel, silver and even gold.

Neither cousin looked at each other as they picked up tiny hammers from neat collections of tools, and continued not looking at each other as, with obvious expertise, they started tapping away at thin strips of metal on their respective anvils.

They weren't alone. A small audience, mostly friends (different friends), were milling around to watch the show. Fred Weasley was watching the two new entrants to their little hidden space, while George was talking to an older Hufflepuff who wanted to take the tutoring space left by Sophie's inability to service the older students. Sophie herself was busy with a first year, reviewing the basic theories of magical capacity in regards to transfiguration.

Even as Fred's gaze passed back through the two Smiths' tables, the thought occurred to him that he really should ask them about what family magics they had available, and if they'd be willing to charm other, more utilitarian objects.

"Excuse me." He was being addressed by a fourth year Fred knew only by face. "I don't suppose you'd have something more filling than sweets would you?"

Fred smiled. "Of course!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Headmaster Gilderoy Lockhart collapsed back in his chair and gazed out of the window, exhausted. He really needed an assistant or something. Someone to help him with all this work. But that wasn't likely to happen. It wasn't as though he'd be willing to spend the money himself, and the school board certainly wouldn't.

Out on the grounds, Hagrid was busy hauling a stag towards his smokehouse through the frosty grass. The cloudy sky was a dark blue, stained with orange and purple. It was definitely getting
darker earlier. He relaxed into his chair and let his senses float meaninglessly through the wards of Hogwarts. They were just so damn hard to read. So many senses, so many tastes. He had good taste, of that he was sure, but distinguishing between so many was way beyond him. He wouldn't be surprised if that was why Dumbledore ate so many Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans — to keep in practice.

He let his magic wander until it settled on an unusually large concentration of tastes, somewhere in the castle. None of the common rooms, he was pretty sure of that. There were four other concentrations for that. Nor the Great Hall — he was pretty sure he'd got that one down. Had even Dumbledore been able to do this? It was bloody difficult.

Gilderoy stood up and wandered down the stairs until he reached one of the portraits who he knew wouldn't be staring at him all day every day until he stopped being headmaster. "Excuse me, my good man, could you tell me if there might be a large collection of students somewhere in the castle right now?"

"A large collection?" sniffed a knight in golden armour. "I don't know, but I can ask around."

"Please do so."

The resulting magical mystery tour lasted a good hour and involved him getting lost several times as he made his way through parts of the castle he'd swear had never existed in his day. He'd had to ask directions back to the central staircase multiple times from paintings, ghosts, and even Lily Potter and Minerva McGonagall who he'd met separately, and Filius Flitwick, whose classroom he'd accidentally dropped in on, through the ceiling, twice. Finally he took directions from yet another painting, found a ridiculously large suit of armour, hummed three times while turning around, made his way back the other way, turned the corner, fully aware of the audible bustle of what could only be a large group of students, and stared.

Close to a dozen tables had been set up on one side of the corridor, full of all sorts and everything, each manned by a wizard or witch, each of whom was busy with something or other, whether reading, selling, or in the cast of a few, actually making products right in front of the eyes of their customers.

One witch was baking biscuits in a tiny magical oven. Another was knitting scarves, while two more pairs of knitting needles floated overhead, perfectly replicating her each and every movement. A boy was busy painting one of his classmates, while another was playing a wooden flute, filling the air with a soft melody and perfectly completing the market fete feeling. What had to be at least three dozen other students milled around the tables, chatting, laughing, watching, and generally just being a part of something.

The chatting slowed though as one-by-one the students noticed him standing there and went silent, eyes widening as the realisation that they might well be in serious trouble became apparent.

Gilderoy shook his head, gave them a roguish smile, and walked towards them. "What's all this then? What's all this then? Busy setting up a market? Students today, dear Merlin! Even I'd never have had the brass to try something like this when I was at Hogwarts, and if you've ever read of my many adventures, which of course you have, you'll know that I wouldn't say something like that lightly."

He stopped at one girl's stall. "What are you selling, little lady?" As if it wasn't perfectly obvious.

"Magical Jewellery," the girl said. "Imbued with my family magic."
"And your family is?"

"Smith."

"Smith." Gilderoy stroked his chin. "Your head of house is on the board isn't he?"

"He is."

Gilderoy waggled a finger. "And what would he say if he learned about all this?"

"He'd say, 'did you get a good price?' and, 'I hope you weren't selling junk and disgracing the family name.' Unlike some people." She then turned and glared at a boy manning a similar stall who glared back.

Gilderoy considered this before deciding to go for an easier target. "Okay, okay, so who's in charge here?"

The entire crowd, as one, turned to where two boys with red hair were busy trying to sneak away. There was a conspicuous hole in the table line up.

"Ahah! So these are the scallywags! The Weasley Twins! I should have known! You can't just go around setting up shop in the middle of a school. You need all sorts of things. You need licenses. You need your family's permission."

The two boys had now turned around and straightened up, doing their best to look like they hadn't been trying to sneak away. "Please, Headmaster," one of them said, "We do have permission from our family."

"You do?" He said doubtfully.

A little rummaging around later, he was reading a very official-looking document from the boy's father giving them the right to set up a business in the family's name. The terms were extremely vague and the scope of the business was 'buying and selling,' which meant just about anything.

"Okay," he said giving them another roguish grin, "But you still need permission." Behind him, Gilderoy was very aware of nearly fifty students all silently watching the proceedings.

The twins looked at each other. Then back at him. "Can we then?" one asked. "We did get someone asking to set up a small bookshop the other day, you know, impulse fiction, not the sort of thing you get in the library."

"Bribery!" Lockhart laughed and waggled another finger under the boy's noses. "Very naughty. And absolutely not," and then more quietly said, "but perhaps we should go and talk about this in private anyway? Mmm?"

The boys both nodded and after a quick discussion up the corridor which certainly wasn't about them also selling his books, he turned and addressed the still frozen students, "Boys and Girls, I am going to leave now. I've never been here. I have not seen anything. I'm sure you understand?"

They all nodded.

"But first, I really must try one of those lovely looking biscuits!"

It was amazing how quickly the hustle and bustle picked back up, even with the headmaster in their midst.
Fred leaned closer to George. "Close call there."

"Indeed oh twin of mine."

"What should we do now?"

"Make sure he gets as many biscuits as he wants, free of charge. It's what Harry would do."

"Where is Harry anyway?"

George smirked. "Over there getting his hair ruffled by Lockhart."

"Oh wow — and Ginny?"

"Left half an hour ago."

"Should we leave too? You know… hop away?"

George smirked. "An ice idea, but we've got to watch the nest."

"Waddle I do without you?"

"Slip up far too often, that's what."

The two chuckled and made their way back to the tables, taking their role as the hosts of the party, finding their quidditch team-mates, and making sure everyone was fed and watered. There would be plenty of time for serious research with the big boys later. Now was just for them and their classmates.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I hope you enjoyed this fluffy little bonus chapter. I wasn't originally planning to write it. It just sort of happened. If you did enjoy it, please consider becoming a patron of my original projects. All support is appreciated. You can find the links through my website [www * leadvone * com].

A/N: This chapter was drafted and available early through the LeadVonE discord server. The next chapter is not yet available, but if you'd fancy discussing this chapter, or anything else to do with DP&SW, feel free to head over there anyway.

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017’s prices.
Harry's trunk was still and silent.

Ginny Weasley sat in one of the armchairs, fiddling with the skirt of her robes, and occasionally glancing towards her current sole companion.

Opposite her, Daphne Greengrass sat in another armchair, silently staring into space. On the table between them, Daphne's pet, Freekey, nibbled on a brazil nut.

Every few seconds, Ginny felt the acute squeezing sensation that always accompanied apparition. She'd been feeling it for many hours now. "We must be getting close," she muttered, easily loudly enough for Daphne to hear.

Daphne nodded. "Soon," she said, her eyes not leaving the small spot on the wall she'd been staring at for the last ten minutes.

Ginny took a deep, shuddery breath and gripped the armchairs tightly. When they'd left Hogwarts, her heart had been beating heavily, a rhythmic pounding she could feel in her ears. It faded down as they crossed the English Channel, and the journey since then had been calm, but focused. Daphne had gone over the plan with her again and again, until it felt like they'd both be able to recite it in their sleep.

"That's enough," Daphne had said, somewhere over the south of France. "Let's get some rest before we arrive."

But whatever rest the future Lady Slytherin had thought they'd get, hadn't accounted for the sheer restlessness that would accompany doing nothing. Ginny felt the tension rising back up in her. She could feel her heart pumping blood. She could focus her brain on no one thing for more than a second or two before it jumped off again to some other small detail.

Her wand in its holster.

Her silk robes against her skin.

The dagger concealed under her skirts.

Would she be able to kill, if needed?

Would she hesitate?

Would she regret?

Would she let everyone down?

No.

Ginny's heart pounded faster. She recognised this feeling. It was the feeling she always got whenever she was about to do something new and dangerous. She'd felt this way when first sneaking out of the Burrow to practice flying. When she'd first followed Harry away from home. When she'd stolen her broomstick back from Mum and Dad. And when she'd gone after the
teenage version of Lord Voldemort. This feeling. This… rush.

Ginny took another deep breath and gripped the armrests tightly again. She shut her eyes.

Suddenly, something felt different. Something was missing. The apparition squeeze, which pressed in on them every so often — it wasn't there any more.

She opened her eyes.

"We're here," Daphne murmured.

Ginny nodded.

They waited.

Eventually, a feeling of intense confusion swept over Ginny. She remained confused until Harry climbed in and told her the secret to the new fidelius charm he'd set up around the trunk. They all climbed out of the trunk and Ginny got her first ever view of the city of Rome — the former capital of the Roman Empire, and current seat of the International Confederation of Wizards.

It was a massive stone wall. She knew this was the first layer of defences of the Castel Sant'angelo, an almost most ancient fortress, predating Hogwarts by almost a thousand years. There would be more defences inside.

"The time is seven o'clock," Harry whispered into the darkness. "We have one hour left to plant the order." He turned to Ginny. "Once phase one is complete you will have exactly fifteen minutes to get in and out before the area wards record your presence. But you can only move within the less warded area A."

Ginny nodded.

"Are we all ready?" Harry asked.

Ginny nodded again, and beside her, Daphne did too.

"Alright." Harry signalled Daphne for Freekey.

He then sat down, pointed his wand at the little monkey, and whispered, "Imperio."

Harry, now controlling Freekey's body, jerked, sat up, and looked around.

While this was going on, Ginny had fetched the long extendable pipe from the trunk and was busily setting it up. Moments later it was leaning against the outer wall of the castle.

Freekey jumped on the pipe, quickly shimmied up, and disappeared over the wall.

Ginny and Daphne quickly took the pipe back down.

They sat down next to Harry, whose eyes were tightly shut.

If everything went well, Freekey would be back in twelve minutes.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It actually took twenty minutes. Harry spoke infrequently, and the few times he had were variations of, ‘phew,’ or, ‘that was close’.
It wasn't doing anything for Ginny's heightened nerves, and by the time Freekey's head poked back over the wall and jumped down, she just wanted to get on with it.

"You're back," Daphne mewed quietly, hugging the little monkey to her chest.

Harry had already opened his human eyes again. "All to plan," he whispered. "Ginny, your turn. Earpieces on — potions, masks, everything."

Ginny and Daphne slipped on the runic mirror earpieces Daphne and Hermione had used the previous year during the stone mission. Ginny grabbed the three potions she needed and drank them all. While her body changed, she firmly attached a flame-red mask to her face.

Ginny's heart started to pound faster. This was it. There was only one person Harry knew who could theoretically pull this off, and she was that person.

Harry and Daphne both climbed back into the trunk, giving her one last good luck between them.

Ginny closed the lid, shrunk it down, and slipped it into her pocket.

Right, now.

She pulled the true cloak of invisibility out from her other pocket, wrapped it around herself, pooled magic at the tips of her fingers, picked up a small stone from the ground with her other hand, flicked it up the wall, aimed her spell at the ascending pebble, and switched.

Step.

Light as air, she arrived on top of the wall and looked around, eyes darting into the shadows for any kind of threat. She didn't see one, so she ran along the wall towards the first tower, constantly tasting the air for unknown magics. The buildings inside the castle grounds were narrow and packed together. Stone arches across streets below made for easy traversal. One tightrope-like walk and a switched stone later found her alighted on the roof of her target building.

There was a door. It was open. She slipped inside, and made her way down the narrow spiral staircase, down, down, down.

She arrived at the bottom. She paused. The stone walls were rough and damp. The ceiling was low. This was certainly underground. In front of her, she could feel a magical barrier — a perimeter ward — nothing special yet, just a detection line.

"I've arrived," she whispered.

Daphne's voice whispered in her ear. "Eye of Kilrogg in five."

Seconds later, Ginny sensed the divination magic of Daphne's magic eye fade into being beside her.

"Green Mask says this is the place," Daphne whispered.

"Guide me," Ginny whispered back.

The eye-ball zipped off ahead, passing straight through the ward line as though it wasn't even there.

"Forward until you reach the second left," Daphne whispered.
Ginny ran forward, using the invisibility cloak to pass through the ward line without bothering to switch through it. She reached the second left and turned.

"Forward," Daphne whispered. "Next right."

Ginny turned right. Ever-burning torches flicked on the stone walls. The floor was damp with water.

"Next left. Third right. The stone angel is around the next corner—no! Contact from the stone angel!"

Ginny skidded to a halt and ducked back around the corner she'd just come around. She heard the grinding of stone against stone and then voices echoing down the corridor.

"I suggest Piazza Magico."

"Bei Merlin, bitte nicht. The place is full of tourists."

"We are tourists."

"Och, nein. We are expats — big difference."

The voices were heading away from her position so Ginny risked a peek around the corner. She was just in time to see two old wizards with beards almost as long as Dumbledore's disappear around the opposite corner. The stone angel ground back into position, concealing a doorway that had momentarily been open.

"Go now," Daphne whispered urgently. "Fifth brick to the left, thirteenth up," she continued, as Ginny ran to a spot just off to the right of the stone angel. She counted the bricks and sent a pulse of magic into the stonework. A second door opened in front of her, unveiling a secret passageway.

"Go, go, go," Daphne whispered. "You're clear until you get to the end room."

Ginny sped up the passageway parallel to the angel-guarded corridor as quickly as she could and stopped when she reached the wall at the end.

Muffled through the stonework next to her, a soft, female voice said, "Grazie per la visita. Thank you for visiting the ICW."

"Stay here," Daphne whispered. "Someone is standing in eyesight of the wall on the other side. Four bricks up, seven across."

Ginny waited for what felt like forever, heart hammering. She was acutely aware of the time limit they had, and what was likely to happen should they fail to meet it.

"Go now!" Daphne hissed.

Ginny pulsed magic into the correct brick, let it swing open, and neatly stepped into the room beyond. The wall sealed itself up again almost the moment she was through.

A partition hid the section of wall she'd just come through from the rest of the room.

Safe.

Daphne's voice whispered in her ear again. "Around the corner to your right are the four security stations for wand checking. Only one is occupied. There is a young witch standing in front of the
occupied station and a wizard walking away from your position to the exit door to your left. None are reacting to the eye, so they don't appear to be able to sense magic. Walk around the corner, to the centre of the room, and walk straight through the security checks to the open door at the far end. Do not stop unless you encounter a necromancy ward. Go, now!"

Ginny went. There were several perimeter wards in the security room — one for animagi, one for vampires, and another for demons. There was also another detection ward and the cloak made short work of all four just as it had done the one from before.

She reached the door at the end and slipped through. Then she stopped dead. There was another ward right in front of her, less than a foot from the tip of her nose. "Necromancy ward," she whispered into her earpiece. She slipped the cloak off herself, trading the perfect invisibility of the cloak for the partial invisibility of her disillusionment charm. She tucked the cloak into her pocket, well aware of the security wizards in the room just behind her, and fished out a small ever-cold ice cube from another.

She chucked the ice-cube across the ward and switched with it a moment later, letting the cube fall to the floor where she'd been before. The cubes were ever-cold in name only and would be gone before too long. She hurried down the corridor again, taking care to follow Daphne's directions, and after one more flight of stairs downwards, several more necromancy wards, and even one bottomless pit, which she'd had to switch over, she arrived at an unmarked door, which looked just like every other unmarked door.

"This is it," Daphne whispered.

Ginny tried the handle, but it was locked, and she felt the magic was so strong that even Harry would have trouble opening it.

No matter.

Ginny reached into another pocket, pulled out a folded up piece of paper, unfolded it, and slipped it under the tiny crack at the bottom so only the very tip was visible on her side. Then she switched with the paper, and because most of the paper was on the other side of the door, that's where she ended up.

She stumbled away from the door, got her balance back, and smirked.

The room was filled with paper. But not lifeless paper sitting in stacks, oh no. Thousands of tiny folded flying machines, each one no larger than the palm of her hand, flittered around the room in a swarm. There were two large holes in the wall on either side of the room through which dozens of the tiny enchantments zoomed in and out to where ever they were heading. The floor was covered with ripped and torn paper.

Ginny quickly reached into her pocket and let Harry and Daphne out of the trunk.

Harry looked around the room and nodded. "Yep, this looks about right."

"Will you be able to do it?" Daphne asked.

"I think so. One moment."

Harry snatched one of the airborne messages, and inspected it for a while. Then he produced a piece of paper of his own and cast some spells on it before tossing it into the air.

Two dozen of the other messages immediately dive-bombed the paper and shredded it to pieces.
Ginny winced.

"Yep, that's what happens if you don't get it right," Harry said. He tried several more times, until he got one that wasn't rejected by the room of vicious attack memos.

"White Mask, the official document."

Daphne handed Harry the parchment that he'd prepared well in advance. It had all sorts of official looking seals and stamps all over it, and had cost quite a bit of gold. A few of the stamps were even genuine.

Harry carefully waved his wand over the parchment.

Ginny couldn't help but admire the incredible display of skill as Harry weaved enchantments over it. It was like watching a master painter casually capture the essence of the world in simple clean strokes, none of them alone anything special, but combined to create something amazing. Slowly, the parchment became like the many paper ones circling the room. Harry held it up, and the folded parchment flying machine joined its fellows in the circling throng.

They didn't attack it. Some even started following the parchment plane, bobbing along in its wake like ducklings following their mother.

It was such a simple plan, Ginny thought. If what they needed was locked down so tight that not even Harry stood a hope in hell of getting to it, then they'd just have to persuade the people with the keys to bring what they needed to them. A forged purchase order from the French Ministry of Magic would do that.

Of course, it would have to be a forged document that had already been through all the security checks that such documents had to go through, not just this one. Even the forgeries that Harry could get hold of wouldn't stand up to that kind of scrutiny. No-one's could. So don't bother. Instead, simply give the document to the end reader directly.

Ginny waved impishly as their parchment flying machine zoomed down the 'out' pipe and down into the bowels of the ICW.

Daphne was already climbing back into Harry's trunk.

Harry was about to follow when he stopped, one foot already in the trunk. He turned to the flying mail and gave it a thoughtful look. He pointed his wand. "Accio Dumbledore's message!"

Ginny held her breath.

Nothing happened.

Harry smirked. "Well, it was worth a shot."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Ginny arrived back at their fidelius spot outside the walls of the Castel Sant'Angelo with time to spare.

She immediately opened the trunk to let Harry out. He spent five minutes taking down the fidelius charm, but just before he was done, a massive portal opened in the brickwork some twenty feet away, and a large black coach pulled by winged horses shot through the hole, roared across the bridge behind them, and plunged into the night traffic of Rome, seeming to not care one wit for
other road users. Nor did it seem to need to, as most of the brightly lit cars and traffic just jumped out of its way.

Ginny cursed. She'd counted one barrel in the back, and five men on board, which was two more than they'd hoped.

Harry finished taking the fidelius down, threw her a broomstick, popped the trunk with Daphne in it into his pocket, mounted his own broom, and the two of them soared up into the sky.

They had to find the coach, which in the dark streets below wasn't easy. The air whistled through the holes in her mask. The cold bit into her bare hands, even through the broom's warming charms.

"There!" Harry yelled, and shot off heading north.

Ginny followed as best she could, keeping just in Harry's slipstream. Harry really was a very good flyer, but Ginny had been training on the quidditch team all year. Together they kept the coach below in sight until it had left the city walls of Rome and pounded out into the country.

"Any moment now!" Harry shouted.

Ginny lay flat on her broom, the better to match the coach's pace.

"There!"

Ginny looked down. Free of the city airspace, the horse-drawn coach had lifted off the ground, every horse spreading its wide, white wings, and soared up in front of them.

Without needing to say anything, both Harry and Ginny fell back.

They tracked the coach all the way from Rome to Tuscany, and just as it was passing Florence, they pounced.

It was supposed to be a surprise attack, but that went out of the window almost as soon as they got within twenty feet. An owl, perched on the back railing and invisible from its own disillusionment charm, let out an all-mighty HOOT, and took to the sky. It got all of ten feet before Harry transfigured it into a rubber ball, but by then the damage was done.

A man leapt onto the top of the flying carriage and cast a homenum revelio. He just had time to scream out, "Two!" before Harry's stunner dropped him like a sack of potatoes onto the constantly rolling rooftop, and he rolled right off the edge.

Harry dived, and Ginny was left alone.

Someone screamed something in Italian, and Ginny had to start dodging and shielding like crazy as spell after spell hurtled in her direction from the top of the carriage.

Three men now stood there.

Not good.

Not easy.

A nasty purple curse passed bare inches from her nose and she growled. *That* one would have done serious damage if it had hit and was definitely *not* in the rule book.

Unable to dodge a stunner, she was forced to shield.
The next purple curse, she swatted — from the same guy, too!

She traded back and forth with them for a few moments longer, and when the purple cursing guy managed to set her broom on fire, Ginny snarled, and without even stopping to think about it, aimed at the purple cursing man, and switched.

She stood, crouched on top of the coach.

The two men on either side of her had just enough time to form expressions of horror, before red light jumped from the tips of her fingers and slammed into both of them, dropping them like lead.

A scream from behind her fell rapidly into the night.

Then Harry was at her side, transfiguring her stunned opponents into rubber balls and chucking them off the side. "Driver," he commanded.

Ginny nodded and quickly stunned the driver too.

They steered the coach to a pre-planned spot, and brought it down to the ground.

Now that the adrenaline was wearing off, Ginny realised something.

"I killed him."

"Mm?" Harry said.

"I killed him," Ginny said. Her voice was shaking. Her hands trembled. "The purple cursing one — I switched him onto a burning broomstick. He fell clear out of the sky."

"No," Harry said, sharply. "You didn't kill him. The broomstick was just on fire. It didn't fail completely. I saw it. He would have been able to land it safely."

That filtered through Ginny's brain. "I didn't kill him?"

Harry shook his head.

Suddenly, and against all reason, Ginny felt cheated. She'd been all geared up to accept the reality of becoming a killer, and now… "Merlin damn it!" she screamed into the night.

Harry started laughing.

"It's not funny!"

"It really is."

And Harry continued to laugh and laugh.

"It's not that funny," Ginny grumbled.

"Sorry, Red Mask." Harry grinned. "I'm just really happy right now. I've been worried about how to do this for ages, but now we've done it! Our new forms will open so many doors for us. And stop other doors from being closed. As Brown Mask once so eloquently put it, 'Oh, I could sing!'"

"Shouldn't we make sure we actually have done it?"

"Excellent idea. Why don't you go do that?"
Ginny leapt off the front and quickly opened the back.

There was the large wooden barrel.

She unscrewed the tap, dipped a finger inside, and drew it back out, covered in light-grey powder. Phoenix ash.

They had done it.

Harry appeared at her side, beaming. "I'll take it from here. You need to take White Mask and get back home. You'll be missed before I am."

Ginny nodded and grinned. In all the time she'd known him, she was quite sure she'd never before seen Harry as joyful as this.

Several thousand kilometres away, Virgo sat bolt upright up in bed, panting. The covers fell around his waist. His nightdress slipped down one of his shoulders. An overwhelming feeling of happiness flooded through him — a feeling of happiness that was not his own.

What was that?!

thought a shocked Julia in his head.

And the happiness clearly wasn't hers either.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The first-year Gryffindor girls' dormitory was dark and quiet. The scarlet-red bed drapes of the five four-poster beds were all closed. A beam of moonlight shone in through the window. If there had been a clock, it would have shown the time to be two in the morning. There wasn't a clock. Hogwarts students were expected to actually use the magic they were taught.

Hidden in one of those four-poster beds, Virgo Malfoy was now very much awake and sitting up in bed, fists clenching hard at the bed's silk sheets, eyes staring hard at nothing.

Seriously, what was that? Julia thought.

'What was that,' indeed. Tom Riddle had done a lot of research into soul magic before he'd made his first horcrux, but Virgo Malfoy was under no illusions that Lord Voldemort would be far more knowledgable on such matters — he might well have experimented even further and created Merlin knew only what effects. But there was little doubt that this was soul magic. He hadn't felt any presence on his occlumency barriers, so it was unlikely to be mind magic.

So, this is a soul echo? Julia thought.

It could well be a soul echo. A vibration of sorts heading down the connection that held the horcruxes together. Didn't have to be a horcrux though. There were other connections between souls. Fidelius charms, and marriage bonds were the two most well documented, although obviously, the connection between them was far weaker than between horcruxes, which were so strong they could literally anchor the soul to the world of the living.

I imagine a marriage bond would make someone quite happy, Julia thought.

Virgo scrunched up his little button nose in distaste. While it wasn't impossible, he found that extremely unlikely. No, this was more likely to be another free soul fragment, although whether the original or a former Horcrux, he couldn't know. And that was aggravating.
What are you going to do then? Julia thought in his head.

Nothing, Virgo thought back. I have no wish to entangle myself with any of my others. Their doings are their own. And more importantly, I do not wish to be imprisoned again. Revealing myself only risks that.

What would happen to me if that happened? Julia thought.

You'd probably die.

Julia let out a single mental laugh. It sounded almost hysterical. I've been feeling things ever since you stole my body. Rage, pride, resentment, jealousy. Won't your other selves be able to feel them too?

They are all normal emotions. And no, I don't think so.

How can you know?

That brought Virgo up short. He didn't know. He had no way to judge how his own emotions might be broadcasted. But it shouldn't be too bad. After all, this was the first time he'd ever felt emotions across the connections.

But your emotions are getting stronger, Julia thought. I can feel them more clearly — now more than ever.

Virgo tried to stop his mind from jumping to the automatic, obvious conclusion — that what she spoke of had nothing to do with the strength of his emotions and everything to do with the possibility of Julia's soul being absorbed into his own — that her tiny spark would end up being nothing but a pinprick of light in his own dark soul — but with just how close they now were, he might as well have tried to stop water from flowing through a sieve.

Julia let out a huge mental sob. I don't want it! I don't! I don't!

Quiet! Do I have to curse myself again?!

N—n—no.

Good then.

Virgo put his head back on his pillow (it had lace around the edges) and curled up under the covers.

But, Julia started, clearly hesitant.

B-But, Virgo snapped.

But it's not good for you if that happens either is it? I know you don't know how that would effect the soul connections. It might split you off for good. It might make you mortal. It might just outright kill you.

Virgo grunted into the pillow. He considered that last one to be a very low probability, but Julia wasn't wrong. It was hard for her to be wrong, given that she had access to many, if not most, of his memories and knowledge.

At just that moment, another wave of unexplained happiness swept through the pair.
A promise? Julia wheedled. Promise you'll try and stop it. Please, Tom.

Virgo growled in annoyance at her use of his muggle name. Fine, he thought. Now go back to sleep, girl.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Despite the late night incident, Virgo woke up early the next morning. Virgo always woke up early. Quickly and efficiently, he went through the motions required for a young witch as taught by Narcissa Malfoy, and soon found himself, as usual, standing by the dormitory window, looking down towards the great lake, where John Potter was training, as he did each and every day without fail.

While the Potter heir wasn't the sharpest knife in the draw, he was dedicated and disciplined, something that Virgo could respect. He was also stupidly powerful — powerful to such a degree that if Virgo didn't know better, he'd suspect the boy were an undercover agent using polyjuice. Julia just enjoyed that the boy had taken to include swimming in his routine, despite how cold the lake must be, and so tended to leave his shirt off.

Virgo just rolled his eyes at the pre-teen girl's fantasies, which always revolved around knights in shining armour coming to save her from evil dark wizards.

He spent the rest of the time before breakfast in the Gryffindor common room, reading a book others would consider far too advanced for him, disguised as a book others would still consider far too advanced for him, but less so.

John Potter arrived in the tower wearing muggle exercise clothes and still-damp hair. He flashed Virgo a boyish grin and a thumbs up as he passed, to which Virgo responded with a curt nod. He disappeared up the stairs leading to the boys dormitory and reappeared minutes later in his expensive school robes. "Ready for your escort, Miss Malfoy?" He gave her what Julia thought was a charming smile.

Virgo closed the book with a snap. "Yes, Heir Potter. I am ready."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The Gryffindors of Hogwarts had long become accustomed to John Potter and Virgo Malfoy being practically glued at the hip. They walked together everywhere, and John was always waiting for Virgo after each and every class. Few of the girls had been happy about it, especially the ones from noble houses, but with rumours swirling around that someone had tried to kidnap or even kill the newly revealed Malfoy daughter, they didn't grumble too loudly. There had also been rumours of a possible contract between the two. Virgo had squashed them all.

The great hall was still sparsely populated when they arrived. It took some time for it to fill up. Virgo sat so she could see the whole assemblage, including the Slytherin table. Now there was a difference of culture. Both were all about politics and power, but whereas Slytherin was a complex, multidimensional chessboard, Gryffindor felt more like a quidditch scrum. In Slytherin every wizard was part of a group, which was part of another group, often part of yet another group. Those groups had friends, enemies, allies, and competitors. The subsequent relationships constantly shifted, creating a complex web of favours and debts.

Gryffindor was nothing like that. In Gryffindor, the hierarchy was very simple. The loudest, most powerful, and most confident wizard was at the top. Everyone else competed in the general throng to be heard, shouting over each other like market traders — traders whose stock consisted of jokes,
stories, and rumour. Information wasn't hoarded. Instead, it was proudly displayed to the entire table with the air of hunters displaying their latest catch.

This would have greatly annoyed Virgo, if he hadn't successfully managed to attach himself to a wizard who was clearly top of the pile, despite him only being a second year!


John snorted. "It'll be fine."

"For you, maybe. Is it just me, or has Snape been going easier on you this year?"

"I'm sure it's just your imagination," John said.

Virgo swallowed a bite of toast. "Maybe Snape appreciates a student with enough power to go toe-to-toe with an adult wizard?"

"I doubt that," John said darkly. "Snape cares only about his Slytherins." He then turned away again and continued his conversation with Weasley.

Virgo frowned in annoyance. That was another thing he needed to crack. Even though John did give him the pretty witch treatment, it was clear he only did it out of force of habit rather than anything else. There was a distance there that Virgo needed to break.

Well, maybe if you acted a bit more girlish around him, Julia supplied, which Virgo promptly ignored.

"Don't worry about it," said Dean Thomas quietly from the other side of the table. "He's like that with loads of people. I wouldn't bother caring."

Virgo swallowed another bite of toast. "I wasn't aware that my personal life was anyone else's' business."

"Jeez, sorry."

Oh, nice going, Julia snarked. Truly you are far better than John Potter at this.

There was a flurry of wings, and owls carrying letters filled the hall.

Virgo frowned. "I'm sorry. That probably came out wrong. What I meant to say was, I didn't realise people were paying that much attention to me."

"Why wouldn't they? You're practically John's shadow now."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." She picked up one of John's letters, which had just been delivered, and sliced it open with a knife.

On the other side of the table, Dean gave her a significant look, glancing between her and the envelope.

Virgo shrugged.

"Anything interesting?" John asked, turning briefly away from his conversation with Ron.

"Just one from your betrothed."
John snorted into his pumpkin juice. "I don't have a—! Oh, it's from Susan — very funny."

Virgo smirked at him. Over at the Hufflepuff table, Susan Bones was sitting in between the two first-year muggleborn twins. She gave Virgo a cheerful wave, which he returned.

"You're probably closer to John Potter than anyone else at Hogwarts, apart from Ron and Susan," Dean continued. "Any closer and you might as well be angling for an intention gift. That or people will think you're in a life debt, or under the pax magus."

"And what would you know about that?" Virgo asked. At a prompting from Julia he analysed how that sounded and added, "Sorry. I mean no disrespect, but you haven't been living in the wizarding world long."

Dean gave her a raised eyebrow "What about you? You haven't been with us long either. You're muggle raised too, aren't you?"

"I am. But I got special training from my family before I arrived," Virgo replied. "You didn't."

"Right." A sudden flash of nervousness shot across Dean's face. "So, what do you think about the duelling tryouts?" the muggleborn asked. "Are you entering? I expect you are, from what I've heard."

This time it was Virgo's turn to raise an eyebrow. That had not been a subtle subject change. "I will be entering, yes," he said. "Seeing as the big guns are out of the running this year,"—she gestured John Potter next to him, and Harry Potter, on the other side of the hall—"The honour of Gryffindor will fall to me."

"Shame. I wanted to see them fight again. That was so badass. But I can see why they'd not let them. It was a bit unfair on everyone else."

Virgo was about to reply when a shout from beside him stalled him.

John Potter had the daily prophet open and was staring at a story with wide-eyes.

"Mate?" Ron said. "You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." John put the newspaper down flat on the table. Virgo leaned over to read.

It was the report of a violent theft from an ICW transport convoy.

**PHOENIX ASH STOLEN — SKY RAINS RUBBER**

Last night, the ICW was hit by the worst incident of high-theft for nearly a hundred years. Sometime after mid-night, a crack team of scoundrels impersonated the French Ministry of Magic, snuck into the ICW, ordered a whole barrel of phoenix ash, and then intercepted the delivery over the skies of Tuscany. The security team guarding the cargo was overwhelmed by two powerful duellists, then transfigured into rubber balls, which were dropped over the side to bounce around the idyllic country-side until the magic wore off.

"I've never felt more dizzy in my life," said one of the security wizards when asked for comment [name withheld for security reasons]. "I've duelled before," said another, "and this was like duelling the wind."

A third security wizard was asked for his comments, but his reply wasn't fit to publish in a public paper.
"We're taking this very seriously," said a representative of the ICW. "And procedures will be put in place to ensure it can never happen again."

Phoenix ash is used in many potions and rituals throughout the wizarding world, and its supply is tightly controlled. It has the properties to bend time and space, and is widely believed to be one of the secret ingredients used in floo powder, although this has always been denied by the British Ministry of Magic.

"Lord Slytherin," muttered John Potter.

Virgo shot him a look. "What makes you think it was him?"

John jerked up to look at her, almost as if surprised she'd been listening. "No reason," he said quickly. "It's just the sort of thing he'd do."

"Is it?" Virgo continued to stare at the younger boy. "I haven't heard of Lord Slytherin doing anything like this."

"No, I— ah…"

"I believe you," Ron said. "My mum says he can't be up to any good. Phoenix ash is supposed to be really useful stuff. Bill once told me he heard they even use it to make time-turner sand. And you never get anyone good from Slytherin. Nearly every one of you-know-who's inner circle was in Slytherin."

"Yes," John said. "But maybe he wasn't in Slytherin. I mean, he's supposed to come from New-Zealand, isn't he? Where the Albion Magics are weakest."

"Are you saying he's not up to something fishy?"

John laughed, hollowly. "No. He's definitely up to something. I just wish I could find out what it is. It could be very important. What if he's trying to bring Voldemort”—Ron flinched—"back again? Or take over magical Britain like Voldemort tried to?"

Ron was wide eyed now. "So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know." John frowned. "I've been thinking about it for months. But every option just doesn't seem to go anywhere. I wish Hermione—" He stopped. "I wish I had a plan that actually stood a hope in hell of working."

Virgo stared at John Potter with slightly narrowed eyes. That whole conversation had been odd. More than ever, he was now convinced that something was going on that he didn't know about. Virgo needed many things. He needed John Potter to give up the portkey he carried, so he had freedom of movement again. He hadn't been able to even try getting into the chamber even once since arriving. He needed to learn more about Lord Slytherin, just like John wanted to. And he needed to neutralise the threat of assassination, possibly in the rather improbable form of the eleven-year-old Ginny Weasley.

He needed all these things to lay the foundation for his ascendancy as the greatest wizard… no, the greatest witch, the world had ever seen. And to make sure he'd never be imprisoned again.

"Ronald," Virgo said.

"Ummff?" Ronald said, his mouth full of food.
"What else can you tell me about your sister?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

If Virgo had realised what a can of worms he'd be opening up with that last question, he honestly would have left the lid on. Clearly, Ronald Weasley had issues about anyone and anything Slytherin related. He might have let up on Virgo being sorted into Gryffindor house, but Ginny's Slytheriness was still a sore issue.

John also didn't seem all that happy with the subject. Still infatuated, apparently. Although by this point, Virgo was beginning to suspect it was more a matter of sour grapes than anything real. John's obsession with Ginny, and to a lesser extent Hermione Granger, just wasn't something that gelled with everything else Virgo knew about him.

Granger in particular was a mystery, since John didn't even have the excuse of being childhood friends. She was just a random muggleborn — a random muggle-born who was vassaled to the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin—the house that should, by rights, be his— a random muggleborn who was by far the greatest academic achiever in her year, scoring ridiculously high grades, even by the standards Virgo set in his own time — a random muggleborn who was cultured, controlled, and who perfectly played the part of a pureblood heiress, despite not being one. And she was the most powerful witch in her year, had faced down Dumbledore at the duelling tournament the year before, and taken on a troll after having her wand for barely three months.

And from what he'd gleamed from his conversations with the likes of Lavender and Parvati, John had been mildly obsessed with her from the moment he'd first met her.

*It does sound rather suspicious when you put it like that,* Julia thought. *Almost like they knew each other before Hogwarts.*

And if that was true, did that mean that John knew more about Lord Slytherin than he was letting on? He had to find out.

"I need to go to the bathroom," Ron said a few minutes later. They were on their way to Virgo's charms class. "I'll catch you there."

"Be quick!" John called after him. "You know what Snape is like!"

Virgo quickly took Ron's place at John's side and matched his pace. Even though John was a little older than Virgo's body, girls went through their growth spurt earlier, so they were actually exactly the same height.

*Womanly!* Julia thought. *Be womanly!*

"Thank you for walking me to classes, John," Virgo said. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"It's fine. You know that."

"Yes, but it's still worth saying thank you."

John flashed him a grin, then he sobered. "But that's not what you really wanted to say is it?"

"No," Virgo admitted.

"You always thank someone before you ask for a favour."
Bat your eyelashes at him! Julia shouted in his head, Be playful!

Virgo tilted his head, smiled, and blinked rapidly.

John laughed darkly. "Okay, Miss Malfoy, what is it?"

"I also want to find out about Lord Slytherin."

That brought Potter up short. "Why?"

"You know my father isn't happy with me. In his letters to me, contracts have been brought up, and apparently, one of the people asking was Lord Slytherin." And, except for the bit about Lord Malfoy being unhappy with him, it wasn't even a lie.

John stared at Virgo, wide-eyed. "Seriously?"

Virgo nodded.

"Oh, damn — sorry. I now understand why you're interested. Not that it helps. Unless you have some kind of plan."

Virgo smiled. "Actually I might just have one. Interested?"

"Sure! Let's hear it."

"Have you noticed how… knowledgable the muggleborns seem to be around here?"

"Not really?"

"I was talking to Dean Thomas this morning," Virgo continued, ignoring John's reply. "He knew about intention gifts, life debts, and the pax magus, and got very evasive when I asked how he knew all that stuff. There are two muggleborn twins in my year — Marigold and Violet Chesterfield — you know, the ones from Hufflepuff Duelling Club — and they are far better in class than any muggleborn has any right to be — almost like they somehow already know occlumency. And then there's Hermione Granger—"

"Hermione has always been a genius."

Virgo shot John a sharp look. "You did know her before Hogwarts!"

John looked furious with himself. "I didn't!"

"Liar."

"I…" John deflated a bit. He looked around, now merely annoyed. "Alright, keep it down. Yeah, I kinda did, a little. But that's not something you can tell anyone, got it?"

Virgo smiled. "Sure. Anyway, regardless of how smart Granger has always been. She's a vassal of Slytherin House. That hasn't been done for ages. So, Lord Slytherin apparently has an interest in muggleborns. And all of a sudden, all the muggleborns of Hogwarts start grouping up, getting better grades, getting smarter, and everything. Doesn't that seem a little suspicious?"

John hesitated. "I did hear Hermione was doing something with some other muggleborns," he admitted.

This time it was Virgo's turn to be brought up short. "Really? You actually heard that?"
"On the Hogwarts Express, yeah."

"But then that's practically proof! Don't you see?"

"You think Lord Slytherin is up to something with the muggleborns at Hogwarts?"

"Don't you?"

"I admit it sounds suspicious. And I keep feeling that Dean is hiding something. Maybe we should follow him sometime? Find out where it is he always sneaks off to."

"That's a great idea," Virgo said, bluntly. "We should do that."

Girly! Julia thought. Be girly!

Nope… Virgo smirked. They'd arrived at the charms classroom. He nodded to Potter and walked to his seat at the front. …I'm done now.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

A day passed. Virgo went to classes, dutifully did his homework, and continued to ponder the mystery that was both Potter twins and his Slytherin year-mates. The boys were nothing special, entitled purebloods to a man. The girls though… They were all good — extraordinarily good in the case of Black, Lovegood, and Weasley. The Carrow twins didn't have the same talent, but what they lacked in raw ability, they more than made up for in viciousness. They followed Black everywhere with awe-like reverence.

And if Black was anywhere near as good as he suspected Ginny Weasley might be, it was an awe well deserved.

It was breakfast, and the red-headed witch in question had just dashed into the great-hall, seemingly giving not one hoot for Slytherin protocol or dignity, dressed the same muggle-like clothes she always wore for morning training, and plopped herself down firmly next to Lovegood. Virgo sometimes saw her avoiding John during his morning training. The girl was fast. Abnormally fast.

Could she really be the one that tried to kill us? Julia thought. She looks so normal.

It does seem incredible, Virgo thought back. But, on the other hand, if she had the temperament, she would make the perfect assassin. No one would suspect her. The fact that whoever attacked us ultimately couldn't kill us, makes it even more likely that it was her. She still has the weakness of a child.

Not wanting to kill people isn't a weakness, Julia thought back at him, sounding rather peevish in his head. You're a horrible person.

I know.

I hate you.

I know that too.

Just then, a clinking of glassware echoed from the head table, and headmaster Lockhart stood up, as he quite often did. The hall slowly quietened, aided by glares from the other teachers.

"Boys and Girls!" Lockhart started with that stupid grin firmly planted on his face. "I have just a
quick announcement to make before you all need to head off to classes. Don't worry! I won't keep you all here any longer than you need!" He gave them all another grin.

Many of the students looked down at their still-full breakfast plates with puzzlement.

Virgo rolled his eyes.

"Winter is upon us!" Lockhart continued, rather dramatically, "And I am pleased to announce that this year we will be celebrating the Winter Festival in our own unique Hogwarts way!"

Virgo mostly tuned out everything that came after that. He wouldn't be staying here for the festival, so it was irrelevant, although the fact that Hogwarts was now celebrating the Winter Festival rather than Christmas was interesting. One thing he couldn't help but notice, looking around the hall, was the older muggleborns looking rather confused, and, in a few cases, angry, while the younger ones all took the announcement with a certain equanimity.

Just another indicator that all was not as it seemed.

Of course, the Gryffindor thing to do at this point would be to do exactly as Potter suggested—start tailing a Gryffindor muggleborn—probably Dean Thomas or Colin Creevey—until one of them made an excuse and snuck away for some suspicious reason. Then follow them and learn both the when and the where of the hidden conspiracy.

But that would be the Gryffindor thing to do.

"Good morning, Susan."

Everyone was leaving breakfast quite some time after Lockhart's announcement had ended. Virgo had caught the Hufflepuff Heiress halfway to the door.

"Morning," Susan chirped back. "Don't you have classes now?"

"Yes, but I wanted to ask you something quickly. Do you know anything about the special muggleborn-only classes?" It was a random stab in the dark.

"Special muggleborn-only classes? Don't know anything about that. You don't mean the Founders Club, do you?"

The Founders Club? "Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

"In that case, sure. Justin and Kevin both go."

It was a random stab in the dark that hit pay-dirt. "Do you know when and where it is?"

Susan looked thoughtful. "Saturday and Thursday evenings, I think. But they sometimes do stuff on other days too. I don't know where though — they're quite secretive about that. I can ask if you like."

"No," Virgo said, quickly. "Don't do that." He didn't want them to know they were interested, yet. "I was just curious."

Susan narrowed her eyes. "John isn't up to something again, is he?"

"Again?"

"Again. He has this minor obsession with Lord Slytherin. I don't think it's a bad thing, but
this is about that, isn't it?"

A lie was on the tip of Virgo's tongue as easily as if he were complimenting an older witch on her youthful beauty. But then he stopped himself. Susan was one of the keys to controlling Potter after-all, who was looking to be more and more important a chess piece.

"Tangentially?" he said, doing his best to sound a little contrite.

"Right — in that case, meet me after classes — there are some things you need to know."

Need to know? Virgo raised one dainty eyebrow. "Okay," he said. "I'll see you then."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"And that's everything," Susan finished off. The Hufflepuff had just finished recounting everything she and John had gone through last year to try and track down Slytherin's identity.

Virgo had listened to everything with rapt attention, and even a slight tinge of respect. These two had been on the trail far longer than he had. And their schemes might even have worked, if not for bad luck.

They were in an empty classroom after their first classes — She, the Bones Heiress, and John Potter. Potter hadn't said much since they'd begun (apart from having a brief argument with Susan about why she hadn't told him about the Founders Club before, to which she'd defended herself with the argument that he hadn't asked, and she hadn't known he'd be so interested, in any case). Instead, the Boy-Who-Lived just sat quietly watching Virgo and Susan with an expression Virgo couldn't quite match, but which Julia insisted was romantic interest.

"The polyjuice identification ploy could have worked," Virgo finally said, after a moment of silence. "That was inspired."

"That was my idea," Susan said proudly. "Auntie uses the same trick to catch rapists."

"Trying to catch Greengrass out while polyjuiced as Granger was far riskier though."

"We were a bit desperate by then."

"Mmmm..." Virgo steepled his fingers. "I do think that we could infiltrate the Founders Club in the same way though. Once we find out where it is." 

"And how would that help?" Potter asked, suddenly entering the conversation. "Hermione's been utterly brainwashed. I agree everything about this is suspicious, but I can't see her just randomly blurting out Slytherin's real name to the muggleborns — At least with Greengrass there was a chance."

"Maybe so," Virgo conceded, "but learning Slytherin's identity is only one thing we need to learn about him. It would also be useful to learn his motives, his way of thinking, and, above all, what he's actually doing."

"And the Founders Club could be the perfect way to do that," Susan said, sounding a lot more enthusiastic now.

"Exactly."

"Right." Potter sat a bit straighter. "I'll get some polyjuice."
"Hang on, hang on," Virgo waved him down again. "That's another thing I wanted to ask. How exactly did you get polyjuice last time?"

"I asked Fred and George. They're really good for that sort of thing."

Virgo smacked his forehead. "You just asked them? Straight up? Holy Merlin, Potter!"

"What? Fred and George are cool."

"Yes, and even if you hadn't been caught, if anyone had even suspected, they'd just have had to follow the polyjuice trail back to massively narrow down the number of possible suspects. Just how many students do you think have polyjuice in this school?"

Potter grumbled something Virgo didn't quite catch. He ignored it.

"So, anyway," Virgo continued. "Yes, we'll need polyjuice — carefully acquired," he added with a look towards Potter. "We'll also need to learn a few new spells."

"Ooo!" Susan said. "What spells?"

Virgo opened a book on the table. "I suggest the tergeo charm, the silencing charm, and the disillusionment charm for starters."

"I can do the silencing charm already," Susan said. "Hannah snores. The tergeo charm should be doable, but the disillusionment charm… isn't that really high level?"

An interested John was now looking over Virgo's shoulder. "It is," the boy said. "But I bet I could learn it with a bit of practice."

"Of course you could," Susan snarked.

Virgo smiled a well-practiced smile. "I'm sure you can too, Susan."

"Really?"

"Yes. One reason we don't learn it sooner is we're not considered mature enough yet. We are talking about invisibility. It is a complex piece of magic, yes, but spells are like music — if you put enough effort into an individual piece, it's quite possible to learn an overture far ahead of your curve. It just takes longer. Sometimes, much longer, he added in his head, to which Julia snorted.

"Then it's decided," John said. "We will find out Slytherin's secrets, whatever it takes."

They all nodded, and together they made to leave for lunch.

Just before they got to the door, though, John stopped. He smacked his forehead, much like Virgo had done not long before. "I'm an idiot!"

Virgo and Susan both looked at him with bemusement.

"I didn't want to say anything," Susan said with a smile.

"No! I mean, I really am an idiot."

"For Merlin's sake, Potter," Virgo said. "What is it?"
"We don't need disillusionment to find out where the Founders Club meeting is — we just need the map!"

Virgo's eyes narrowed and his female voice lowered dangerously. "Map?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Let me get this straight," Virgo said slowly.

Another day had passed. Herbology, charms, and potions. Professor Potter had given the first-years an extra two inches of homework on fire safety when one of the boys had nearly set Virgo's skirt aflame. He'd been annoyed at that, but not nearly as annoyed as he was now.

"Let me get this absolutely straight," he said again, trying not to snap out the words. "You say that there's this map that can track anyone in the castle — a map that by all rights should not exist, given just how ridiculously illegal the magic to make it must be—I mean, for Merlin's sake! Most of those enchantments will be exactly the same sort of thing Light Lord Dimwiddy used to build his empire! And you say that you can borrow this map whenever you want—in front of the head of the DMLE's niece, no less—"

Susan was sitting uncomfortably off to one side.

"—And that the people you can borrow this map from are a pair of wizards whose only obvious motivation seems to be making as much gold as they can. And now you're telling me that when you asked for another loan of it, they say they've LOST IT?" Virgo wanted to roar that last bit, but it came out far too squeaky for that.

John Potter was looking more than a bit uncomfortable. "Yes," he said.

"They're obviously lying!" Virgo shouted. "They've sold it! Or someone else doesn't want them to let anyone else use it! I mean, Merlin! For all I know, that's how whoever tried to kill me found me so easily!"

John winced.

"I could tell Auntie," Susan suggested. "She could search and confiscate something like that, no problem."

Deep in their head, Julia was projecting calming thoughts at Virgo over and over, just as she had been during the entirety of his rant.

Virgo calmed down. He took a deep breath. "Sicking your aunt on them might be a good idea at some point, but we need to check the legality first. You don't know if usage or ownership of this kind of artefact would be as illegal as casting the spells to make it, do you?"

Susan shook her head.

Virgo cursed. "We'd look stupid if we brought this up only to find we'd also get in trouble."

"But we're all noble," John pointed out. "The Weasleys aren't. Wouldn't that count for anything?"

"Yes, but not enough, I suspect. Not when it comes to divination magic. And if they have sold it, then we'd just be admitting to a crime that the Weasleys can then simply deny."

"Veritaserum," Susan said.
Virgo paused. He looked down at the Malfoy noble house ring on his right hand. That was actually a very good point. The Weasleys could be tried under veritaserum, but they couldn't. He smiled and nodded at Susan. "Wonderful. If we ever need leverage over them, we can use that."

"So," Potter said. "Since we can't use the map, let's learn the other charms instead." He seemed anxious to move away from this discussion.

Virgo and Susan both nodded and together the trio got to work.

Learning the tergeo and silencing charms wasn't difficult, but the disillusionment charm was another matter entirely — at least for Susan. By the time curfew neared, the boy-who-lived was already well on the way to getting a basic cast down, much to Virgo's utter shock. Potter was almost as quick on the uptake as he'd been when he'd learned the spell during his third year.

Potter escorted Virgo back to Gryffindor tower.

The next day after classes they were back again, and this time, Potter got it.

The day after that, Virgo allowed himself to 'learn' it, and the day after that, Susan got it. Honestly, as shocked as Virgo was with Potter, Susan was almost as surprising. Everything seemed to come effortlessly to Potter. It was as though he were several years ahead and just learning a new spell from the standard book. Susan on the other hand — she seemed to take both Potter and Virgo's accomplishments as a personal insult. She said so herself just after she finally achieved the spell for the first time, sneaking up on Potter and poking him in the back, before reappearing with a huge grin on her face. "If both of you can do it, there is no reason why I can't too." Only the weariness in her eyes betrayed the utter monumental effort she'd put into keeping up with them — and even then, casting the charm took her over five seconds, and wasn't exactly the best. If ever they actually needed to make Susan invisible, it would probably be better to have either Potter or himself cast the spell on her.

All that was academic though, because they had learned it, confirming Virgo's suspicions, once again, that Susan could be just as useful to him in the future as Potter — not only for her noble connections, and influence over Potter, but as a wand in her own right.

Soon enough, Saturday rolled around, and the moment that Dean Thomas and Colin Creevey separately made for the door of the Gryffindor common room, both he and Potter made their separate excuses and left the tower.

Virgo cast the disillusionment on himself.

Now all he had to do was find Potter and catch up with the muggleborns.

An outline nearby moved and he felt a hand plant itself into his.

"C'mon," said Potter's voice, and started leading them away.

Virgo had to fight down the intense feeling of revulsion at the physical contact, even while Julia was feeling something very different.

They had to stop several times to let students and ghosts past, and by the time they arrived at the grand staircase, the two Gryffindor muggleborns had vanished.

"This would be a lot easier if I had my invisibility cloak," Potter muttered.

Virgo wanted to scream. He settled instead for hissing, "You have an invisibility cloak?!!"
"No," Potter whispered back. "It was stolen from my family before I got it." He sounded more than a little bit bitter. "I believe it was Lord Slytherin as well."

Despite himself, Virgo's grip on Potter's hand tightened slightly. "Do you have proof?"

"None."

"Then how do you know?"

"Because everything that goes wrong is always about him."

Virgo didn't say anything to that. Susan was right. Potter really did have a Lord Slytherin obsession. A movement from several stories up caught her attention. Potter had apparently seen it too — seen it and identified it. "It's those Hufflepuff twins," he whispered. "They're muggleborn — c'mon."

Virgo was unable to stop himself being dragged up the constantly shifting staircases and down one of the many corridors that led off from the main hallway. Amazingly, they were just in time to see the very Hufflepuff muggleborn twins that had helped tip Virgo off to something fishy going on, turning the next corner, each one practically hanging off the arm of a rather bemused-looking boy whom Virgo vaguely remembered from their classes, but had never bothered to learn the name of.

"But you're doing so much better now, Alan," one of the twins said, cheerfully.

"Yes," said the other twin, rather more seriously, "soon, you'll have to teach us."

Virgo and John reached and turned the corner.

"Oh, I don't know about that," the boy — Alan, apparently — said with obvious modesty. Then his voice turned nervous, although Virgo thought the nervousness sounded put on. "This isn't one of your jokes, is it? You two have a weird sense of humour."

The cheerful sounding twin giggled. "No jokes this time. But we do know a shortcut."

"Really?" Alan sounded intrigued, "Well, girls, I'd be happy to see that."

The threesome reached and turned the next corner.

Virgo and John rounded the corner not long after, and when they did, they both stopped.

"They're gone," Potter said.

Virgo wanted to smack him. "That much is obvious, Potter. Don't just stand there. We need to keep moving." So they did. They passed countless tapestries, statues, and paintings while making a surprisingly comprehensive sweep of the floor, and despite not finding another muggleborn, Virgo couldn't help but be grudgingly impressed again. Potter knew Hogwarts well for a second-year. Many of the passageways the boy-who-lived was leading him down he hadn't found until much later on.

But despite the comprehensiveness of the search, they weren't having any luck finding what they were ultimately looking for, although they did run into Susan being harangued by Professor McGonagall for loitering. They hung way back until their Hufflepuff conspirator was heading their way before grabbing her and casting a disillusionment on her too, well out of sight of the Gryffindor head of house.
"Merlin, you scared me!" Susan whispered. "Any luck finding anyone?"

"Not really," Potter whispered back. "We're thinking we'll need to try another floor."

Together they scanned the floor below and above for another half an hour, and were just about to give the whole thing up as a bad deal when they found something that, to Virgo's utter contempt, neither Potter nor Susan were able to ignore.

A group of three Ravenclaws girls had another Ravenclaw girl surrounded and were taunting her while constantly transfiguring something on the floor into various shapes.

The three girls had to be at least a few years older than the one they were ganging up on — possibly sixth-years, or maybe even seventh.

"Hah! How're those holiday plans working out for you now?" One of the girls snarked, turning the object into a teapot.

"Please, just stop," the maybe fourth-year girl sobbed.

"Would you like us to wrap it up in a little bow?" One of the other girls added, flicking her wand and adding a red and green ribbon to the teapot.

Before Virgo could even curse the twin names of Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, his two allies had dropped their disillusionment and were marching straight towards the group. Seeing nothing else to be done, he also dropped his disillusionment and followed.

"Hey," Potter said in an aggressive tone of voice.

"Go away, little un's," one of the older girls said, without even looking around, clearly taking her cue from the pitch of Potter's voice. The other girls, however, were looking in the right direction, and they both paled.

"Heir Potter!"

The older girl with her back to them squeaked and spun around.

"What are you doing?" Potter snarled.

"Nothing," the girl squeaked.

Virgo couldn't help but be miffed that despite being a daughter of the house of Malfoy, it wasn't him getting the royal treatment. But then, he wasn't in line for the Malfoy lordship, nor could he ever theoretically marry any of the girls in front of him, and finally, and perhaps most importantly, no one had seen him smack around an entire duelling team as a first-year.

Potter gave the squeaking girl a hard look. "Then I suggest you do nothing somewhere else."

"Yes! I mean, look, you know, we're not really doing anything wrong here. It was just a joke. I mean…" she trailed away under Potter's glare. "Sorry!" And the three girls rapidly retreated.

Susan was already comforting the sobbing older witch. Virgo shrugged, and untransfigured the teapot with a casual flick of his wand. It turned into a small white kitten, which mewed.

That was horrid! Julia gasped in Virgo's head. How could they?

It would not have hurt it, Virgo thought back.
"T-T-Thank you," the girl stammered.

"You're welcome," Potter said, grinning. "What was that about anyway?"

What it was about was the girl's plans for the winter break — her Christmas plans.

"You're a muggleborn?" Potter asked.

Virgo and Susan caught each other's eyes, each clearly thinking the same thing.

"W-What if I am?" the girl said.

"You wouldn't happen to know where the Founders Club meets, would you?" Susan asked.

The girl suddenly looked uncomfortable. "Yes, but we're not really supposed to talk about it. It's supposed to be a muggleborn only thing."

"Please, Janet?" Potter asked, giving the girl his best charming smile. "We'd be ever so grateful."

Virgo couldn't help but smirk, while Julia went into a mental sulk.

"Well, I guess it would be okay," Janet said, sounding hesitant. "But don't tell anyone I told you, okay?"

"Of course," Virgo said, smoothly, "we wouldn't have it any other way."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Somewhere deep in the maze of secret passageways and magical corridors that was Hogwarts Castle, two twin Gryffindors were inside a rather old and battered magical trunk, hard at work.

"Wow, this stuff gets everywhere," Fred Weasley said. "If Mum called us to dinner like this, we'd be grounded for a month." His hands were covered in slimy, wet clay. So were his forearms. Streaks of brown could be seen on his face.

"We will make it work," said his twin brother. George Weasley's hands and arms were equally messy.

The two were sitting on opposite sides of a large potter's wheel, which was slowly turning by magic. A huge lump of clay sat between, like a dirty melted candle.

A pulse in the alert ward let them know that someone was nearby. Fred quickly rinsed his hands with water from his wand, and jogged up the stairs to the trunk's lid. He poked his head through.

An older Slytherin girl was looking down at him, nervously. "Umm..." she said. "I need a potion."

Fred beamed. "That's what we do. What do you need?"

"It's a bit sensitive."

Fred chuckled. "We provide our customers with the most discreet services, guaranteed. There's no one around, so you can speak freely." And it was true. The occasional hustle and bustle of the new student market was limited to certain hours when everyone knew it was worthwhile to hang around. That gave them plenty of time to continue their own projects.
The girl smiled, apparently reassured. "I need polyjuice."

The smile on Fred's face froze. "One moment. I'll be back with you in a second." He closed the lid gently. "Oi, George," he said in a low voice. "Who does the map say this girl is?"

"Kathrine Winks."

"I'm sure she does," Fred muttered. "I vaguely remember the name. Is she noble?"

"Not that I've heard."

"Important?"

"No idea."

"Right." Fred creaked the lid back open just enough to talk through. "What did you say your name was, Miss?"

"Kathrine Winks."

"Are you aware how expensive polyjuice is?"

"I am."

"And you're aware that possession is strictly against school rules?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm afraid you're out of luck. We don't have any polyjuice. We would never so fragrantly break school rules like that—would we George—?" he called back into the trunk.

"Not us!"

"—but perhaps I could interest you instead in our special skin-care potion for witches. Simply one dose, and you'll feel like a whole new person."

The Slytherin girl looked confused. "No, I want polyjuice."

Fred stared at her for several long seconds. "Well, we don't have any," he said, and snapped the trunk-lid firmly behind him. He turned to his twin. "Merlin, I thought Slytherins were supposed to be quick on the uptake."

George shrugged.

A few moments later, a knocking came from the trunk-lid.

Fred sighed and opened it. "Yes?" he asked.

The girl hesitated before speaking. "This, skin-care potion… it wouldn't happen to be mud-coloured, would it?"

"Funny thing that, it is."

"Oh. Oh!" the girl's eyes widened. "Yes, then. I'd like some of this skin-care potion."

"How many doses do you want?"
"Three?"

"You're in luck. Three's all we have left, isn't that right, George?"

"That's right, Fred. Very popular stuff, our skincare potion." George appeared at Fred's side holding three tiny vials, each filled with mud-coloured liquid.

Fred took the vials and turned back to the girl. "One dose lasts exactly one hour. Don't try to split them up, that doesn't work. And don't try to combine doses, that doesn't work either. Got it?"

"Yes, yes, I understand."

"Good."

They settled the trade and the girl vanished into the castle. Fred closed the lid and looked toward his brother. "Well?"

George was staring down at the map. "She's heading straight for the great hall. There are, like, a hundred students there."

Fred snorted. "Not quite as dumb as she made out."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Is all this really necessary?" John asked. He was crouching, invisible, next to one of the many moving staircases of Hogwarts that led towards the great hall.

Next to him, Virgo Malfoy said, "Yes, it is. We can't assume we're not under watch until we find and destroy that map. We don't want polyjuice being tracked back to us if we can help it."

John nodded and unconsciously scanned the hall again for threats. He couldn't help but admit that the girl was right. Virgo was right about many things. In the brief time he'd known her, she'd come to be more useful to him than any of the other Gryffindors. She helped with his mail, advised him on how to deal with the other students, and even trained with Susan at the Duelling Club, despite being a Gryffindor. Maybe it was the time they were forced to spend together, but John couldn't help feeling protective, despite her occasionally razor-sharp tongue.

"Here comes our mule," Virgo muttered. An older student wearing a mask had just entered several floors up.

"Who is it?" John asked.

"I don't know."

"You don't?"

"Of course not. That's the point, you halfwit."

On John's other side, Susan giggled. "I don't think I've ever met someone willing to call the great Boy-Who-Lived that. I think I like it."

John groaned. "Susan, don't encourage her."

The masked-mule passed by on the stair opposite theirs, and John cast a summoning spell on the vials in the student's open book bag. The vials flew into his outstretched hand. Ten minutes later, they were all bundled up against the cold, walking the path to the great lake where very few
students went during weather this cold. John couldn't help thinking just how cute Susan and Virgo both looked in their winter robes and scarves.

"So, what's the plan?" Susan asked, looking between John and Virgo.

"I'm going too—" John started before realising that Virgo had said the exact same words at the exact same time. They both paused, but in the time left open, Virgo jumped in again with, "I'm going to sneak into the Founders Club and collect information, and yes, I am the best person to do this. No offence, Potter, but you're not exactly the most subtle wizard in the world."

John frowned. Before he could say anything, however, Susan beat him to it. "But, Virgo, it's too dangerous for you. John's been spending all this time with you to protect you. You can't go around walking alone in the castle. You know that."

John nodded. "I couldn't have said it better myself. Yes, you're smart, Virgo, but that doesn't make it okay to put you in danger."

Virgo smiled. "What if I wasn't in danger?"

"What do you mean?" Susan asked.

"Potter here is so powerful and manly, I'm sure he could give up a little bit of his own protection for little old me."

John knew full well that his ego was being massively stroked, but that didn't make it feel any less good. After all, he was powerful and manly, and it was nice for people to recognise that. "What protection?"

Virgo smiled and pointed at where a small metal sphere hung around John's neck by a golden chain, hidden under his robes.

His portkey. The portkey his father had given him to keep him safe at Hogwarts.

Doubt flickered across his mind. "I'm not sure I can do that," he said.

"Why not?" Virgo asked.

"That's actually a really good idea!" Susan said enthusiastically. "That would keep Virgo much safer, and it would mean you don't have to tail her absolutely everywhere."

John grimaced. He really didn't want to give up his portkey. Apart from anything else, he'd come to see it as his own protection in case anything really bad went down — such as going up against a one-thousand-year-old basilisk, for example. In the last timeline, he'd been quite lucky, even if he didn't like to admit it.

"C'mon John," Susan said, looking at him with doe-eyes. "What could you possibly fear at Hogwarts?"

Looking into that trusting face, he blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "It's a Potter artefact!" As he said the words, he realised that not only was that the perfect excuse not to give the portkey up, but it was even true! Lockhart had gifted this portkey to the House of Potter.

Virgo looked shocked and possibly even a little bit angry.

Susan was taken aback for a moment, but then a sly smile came across her face. "Oh dear. That is a
shame." The way she said it sent alarm bells ringing in John's head.

Virgo looked sharply at Susan. "What?"

Susan giggled and waved John closer so that only she and he could hear, leaving Virgo looking on suspiciously. "If it is a Potter artefact, you could always gift it to her anyway," Susan whispered. "I know your Mum and Dad cut off your gold for gift-giving to pretty witches, if you catch my meaning." Susan innocently played with the citrine and onyx encrusted bracelet that John had given her last year, and which she still wore around her wrist.

She was talking about a declaration of intention gift. John's thoughts screeched to a halt. It wasn't that he hadn't thought about Virgo in that way, but being put on the spot like this… and giving up his portkey… He straightened up. "Nope! No, no, no. Nope and double no." He pointed at Virgo. "We are going back to Gryffindor Tower." He pointed at Susan. "You are going back to your common room." He pointed at himself. "And I am going to deal with the Founders Club. No arguments!" He turned and strode off.

"That fool will never be able to get anything useful out of them!" Virgo ranted, loud enough to make her ire known, but not loudly enough for John to hear. They were walking some way behind the Boy-Who-Lived, back to the castle, after doing a round trip of the lake. "And he'll probably get himself caught! What a waste of time! What did you even tell him?"

Susan smirked. "I suggested that he should start courting you."

Virgo looked at Susan in horror. "You, what?!"

"Oh come on — it's not that strong a commitment — and you could do a lot worse. Do you even realise you're in the position that most every witch in the castle, and quite a few outside, would kill to be in? You don't, do you? You're impossible. You just waltz in here, like it's no big deal, and have the Boy-Who-Lived and heir to the most powerful house in Britain practically eating out of your hand, and you don't even see him as a potential husband."

Virgo seemed to be struggling with herself. Eventually, through gritted teeth, she said, "And you're okay with Potter courting me?"

"Sure," Susan replied. "You're better than most of the other options here. And a lot better than him marrying some foreign princess who'd treat me like some kind of mistress."

"I wasn't aware you were already contracted to him."

Susan felt herself blush a little. That had sounded a little presumptuous.

Virgo visibly calmed. When she spoke next, every word was clear and smooth. "I am not currently interested in pursuing romantic entanglements. I shall deal with such matters as they benefit me, as I see fit. Right now, I am far more interested in making sure that the idiot doesn't screw up matters so badly that our freedom to investigate Lord Slytherin is curtailed. I think that we should see to matters by ourselves."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The time until the next Founders Club filled John with mild unease. Rather than being angry or giving him the cold shoulder, Virgo was instead acting extremely cordial, which actually unnerved him more. Susan too was acting differently, although she tried to hide it. He couldn't shake the feeling they were conspiring, which could never be a good thing.
Events in the rest of the castle hardly made matters any better.

In defence class, Professor Snape had moved onto giving them one-on-one duelling training against himself. This apparently was an excuse for him to continually hex the students he least liked, and, on one occasion, when Lockhart had randomly dropped in, the headmaster too (although Snape had claimed that one to be an accident).

In potions, even though Snape was no longer teaching, class ironically felt almost exactly the same as in the last timeline. It was impossible to slack off or hide anything when your mother was the one in charge. She always knew. Even worse was the way she practically fawned over his brother. John had crushed two quills already this month. He still couldn't understand how Harry could be so much better than he was. Virgo pointed out that this was only more reason to work harder to close the gap between them, and as much as it pained him, he couldn't help but agree.

The Dark was getting more and more sure of itself, now that it had Alexandra Black all but in charge, backed up by Draco Malfoy, who, if the papers were to be believed, had summoned an actual basilisk! He hadn't believed it until the Wizengamot had passed a law banning the blonde ponce from experimenting any further with that spell. Malfoy now walked with a definite strut.

And then there were the rumours about the Gray, swirling around the castle like the snow swirling outside the castle windows. Their children had been leaving the castle more and more often. It seemed that Greengrass, Lovegood, and Hermione left the castle almost every weekend now, and always arrived back for classes just in the nick of time. He'd heard grumbling among other students, envious of all the special treatment the three witches were being given. All kinds of ridiculous theories were circulating about what was up — everything from special auror training to political meetings with heads of state. Whatever it was, John assumed it was big. There was an energy about them — a kind of palpable excitement that not even their Slytherin masks could fully hide.

An excited enemy couldn't be a good thing.

But all-in-all, one other thing wrangled him the most. There still hadn't been any sign of the heir of Slytherin. He was starting to wonder if there ever would be.

"It's time," Virgo said, sitting opposite him.

John nodded and stood up. "Hey, listen, Virgo. It really is better for you to stay here, you understand that, don't you?"

"Perfectly," Virgo sniffed. "I'm sure you'll be fine by yourself. Make sure to buy a pensieve while you're out."

John grimaced and made his way out of Gryffindor Tower.

Moments after Potter was gone, Virgo snapped the book he'd been reading shut and made to follow. He walked past the groups of laughing and giggling Gryffindors and stuck his head out of the portrait hole. "Susan?" he whispered. His noble partner in crime and possible meat shield waved a disillusioned hand.

_Hey! Julia thought, Don't call her that. Susan's nice!_

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

John Potter tried to hold in his scowl. Fate was on his side — there was no doubt about that, but he couldn't help feeling that it would be nice if the evidence of this fact could stick around for more
than five minutes. If it did, he might not currently be wearing a silken witches robe that Susan would probably describe as 'fetching'.

His luck had started out so well. He'd quickly and quietly made his way through the corridors of Hogwarts, on the lookout for one of his preferred targets. He, of course, knew where the Hufflepuff common room was, and so it was no issue to position himself between it and the room Hermione used for the Founders Club. He heard the lone footsteps before he saw their owner. Alan Gage, the friend of the muggleborn twins, loped around the corner. He seemed to be in quite a hurry and wasn't paying attention. Perfect. John quickly stunned the boy and dragged him into a nearby cupboard for safety.

One extracted hair, and a change of clothes later and John was indistinguishable from the plain looking muggleborn, right down to the tie.

In retrospect, he should have known it wouldn't stay so easy.

"Alan!" cried a voice behind him.

He whirled around to find himself nose-to-nose with one of the muggleborn twins.

"Why'd you rush off?" the other one said, far too innocently. "Are you trying to get out of your responsibilities?"

"Errr…" John said.

"Don't worry," the first one said. "We've got it all set up. Just follow us!"

She grabbed John's arm and started dragging him away. John let her, not daring to say anything that might blow his cover. Thankfully they were going in the direction of the Founders Club.

"Right," The second twin said, pausing in the middle of what looked like a normal, boring corridor. "Just step over that line." She grinned and pointed to a line on the floor.

"Umm…" John said.

"Now, Alan," the first twin said more seriously. "You said you'd do it. Fair's fair — you did try to steal our stuff."

John had groaned inwardly. Taking the fall for whatever Gage had done had not been part of his master plan, but it wasn't like he'd had a choice. Steeling himself, he had stepped over the line, and the moment he did, the robe he'd 'borrowed' had instantly changed, which was why he now was standing in a random corridor wearing a traditionally styled girl's robe, all white, complete with delicate trim, lace, and even two pink ornamental hearts dangling from the string ties of the cowl.

"It worked!" The second twin clapped. A second line appeared. "One more, c'mon! We need to thoroughly test this out before club starts."

John felt a sense of creeping dread. These twins felt far too much like another set of twins he'd known since childhood, but the best defence against them was just to get it over with. He stepped forward and instantly felt his underwear being switched. He was also now wearing a witches' wrap around his chest. The sensations were unpleasantly constricting.

"You are going to switch this back, aren't you?" he asked in a desperate voice.

"Yep," the second twin chirped as a third line appeared. "That's what the next line is."
Oh, thank Merlin. John stepped forward over the third line and shrieked like the girl whose clothes he wore, as several buckets of cold water fell on him from nowhere.

"Whoops," said the first twin, deadpan.

John choked and shook his now sopping clothes. The wet cloth clung to him in all the wrong places. "What the hell!!"

"Fair's fair, Alan," the first twin said, as though that explained everything. "But don't worry, Hermione knows the drying charm."

"Which is amazing because it's a super advanced third-year spell," the second twin added in a bright tone of voice.

John froze with his hand halfway to Alan's wand. He'd fully intended to cast a drying charm on himself right there and then—he certainly didn't want anyone seeing him in a see-through robe and certainly not while wearing girls' underthings, even if it wasn't his body—but if Alan Gage didn't know the charm…

The second twin winked. "Don't worry, we know you're secretly really into this. C'mon!" And together the two twins hooked their arms around his and started dragging him towards the Founders Club. John did the only thing he could. He whimpered.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Meanwhile, in the Founders Club meeting room, Hermione and Harry were alone. Hermione was on tenterhooks. Ever since Harry had put up some proper warding around the sunken treasure ship, she'd redoubled her efforts to catalogue anything useful from all the books they'd found. Anything to help them move the mundane cargo of the magical ship to the jurisdiction of the muggle world, where it would be worth so much more. But what she'd just found might or might not be even more important — she wasn't sure, but Harry would surely know.

"Hermione, you've been desperate to tell me something since we started talking," Harry said. "If you fidget on that desk any harder you're going to wear a hole through the floor. Let's hear it."

Hermione coloured before taking a deep breath. "Well, I was reading through Akna Slytherin's diaries and I found… something. It might be nothing, but, well, I thought it might be."

"Go on."

"After Akna married Salazar's grandson, they had a number of children together, the ones recorded in all the family trees. But her diaries count one more than the official records do."

Harry quirked an eyebrow. "Okay…"

"Yes, so I read ahead to find out what happened to that extra child — it was a son — and he turned out he was a squib. The culture Akna came from was very clear on what to do with squibs and Salazar agreed with her logic, so when the son came of age, they banished him from the castle. They weren't unkind about it, apparently, but they also didn't give him much of a choice. The son travelled to the fens where Slytherin House originated from, and married the daughter of a local noble — one with Norman blood, if the diary is to be believed. This was before 1066, remember."

Hermione looked towards Harry.

"All very fascinating," Harry said. "But why is this particularly noteworthy?"
"Well, because the Albion Family Magics stopped him from using the Slytherin name, and so he took the name of his new bride."

"Which was?"

"Ridel."

There was a moment of silence. Then Harry snorted. "Oh, that is rich. Oh, that explains so much."

"You believe it could be true then?"

"Probably. It would explain a lot about our dear little Miss Malfoy. And about her psychopathic other self."

"Does this change our plans for Virgo?"

Harry shook his head. "No, we shall continue as before. I'll make sure to bring this up the next time we're all together though. Alex will probably piss herself laughing. You just make sure everything goes well here and remember to ring me if anything goes down."

Hermione nodded. Then, the door banged open, and several muggleborns waltzed in.

"And that's my cue to leave," Harry quipped.

"Bye, Potter," Justin said as Harry swept towards the door. "Sorry for interrupting your courtship again."

Hermione pointedly didn't say anything while the rest of the group assembled, minus a few stragglers. Just as she was about to start, the door banged open again and Violet and Marigold Chesterfield barged in, dragging…

Oh dear, Hermione thought.

"We're here!" Marigold announced.

"We are," Violet confirmed.

Alan was blushing to the tips of his ears, dressed in a soaking wet robe that clung to his skin and concealed absolutely nothing. The twins had obviously been studying witch weekly.

Annoyingly, the drying spells Hermione aimed at the highly embarrassed boy only served to wring the water from the dress, and did nothing for the dampness. It still clung and was still see-through.

"You can go change if you want," Hermione offered. "We will wait for you."

"No!" Alan said hurriedly. "I mean, no, I don't want to hold everyone else up. Please let's just get this over with."

Hermione nodded, but kept one eye on the boy as she began to lecture. Was something about him different? He seemed a lot more… noticeable than before. Well, he was wearing very witchy clothing.

"Today we'll be going over the rich tradition of extralegal settlements in the wizarding world. How wizards and witches settle disputes without resorting to the courts. Duels, games, tasks, favours, and magical arbitration. One by one into the pensieve."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —
John could barely contain himself. For starters, he was sure everyone was laughing at him. It might not be his body, but that didn't make it feel any better. Curse those girls.

For second, Hermione, his Hermione, had a bloody pensieve! In school! Who entrusts a thirteen-year-old with a pensieve?! And she had a shrinkable trunk with added expansion charms. He didn't have one of those, and he was the heir of one of the richest Houses in the country!

And thirdly, and worst of all…

"Now keep your eyes on that corner," Hermione said, pointing at one of the darkest recesses of the Slytherin common room. Moments later, a tall figure in a familiar mask materialised out of thin air, and every hostile Slytherin in the common room memory froze.

"That was soo cool," Justin Finch-Fletchley whispered in awe.

"Soo cool!" Sophie clapped.

"You haven't seen anything yet," Hermione said, beaming. "Now, listen carefully. He's about to propose the terms of the duel to Volf. Only noble houses can still do this, but a non-noble house can accept an honour duel, and, in some cases, is actually required to. This isn't one of those, but notice how that girl has just stepped in to adjudicate? There are some families that make a tradition out of it."

Lord Slytherin then beat the living shit out of Volf and his cronies so badly that John wanted to hurl. But, to his utter disgust, none of the muggleborns were disturbed or outraged by the man's use of legilimency to torture the older student. Far from it.

"Lord Slytherin will always protect those he considers his," Hermione said, as though uttering some deep fundamental truth of the universe.

And all the muggleborns just nodded along.

A chill ran down John's spine. He couldn't believe how right Virgo had been. If only he had started to listen to her sooner. And he suddenly wished that she and Susan were here with him — if only so he wouldn't feel so much like a lone human trying to blend into a pack of zombies. Then he remembered what he was wearing and was thankful they weren't.

Magic lifted them all off their feet, and then they were back outside the pensieve inside Hermione's trunk again.

"Any questions?" Hermione asked.

As it happened there was a question that John really wanted to know the answer to after having watched that — one he was fairly sure Alan wouldn't have already asked, and which wouldn't be too suspicious. He raised an uncertain hand. "Can Lord Slytherin get into any of the common rooms like he can the Slytherin one? I mean, if he needed to 'protect' one of us…"

Hermione frowned at his question, and for a moment he thought he'd blown it. Then she smiled. "No, he cannot. He only has right of passage over the Slytherin dungeons and the general hallways of the castle."

John let out a held breath. That was a relief. He did not want to wake up one day to find that mask hovering over his bed in Gryffindor Tower.

"Now, onto the next memory!"
They then plunged into several memories, each detailing an example of one of the other ways wizards settle disputes outside of the courts.

For settlement by game, they watched the ending of a blood feud in the 1500s by means of a chess match.

For settlement by task, they watched a former Lord Greengrass being sent to recover a particularly rare form of chimaera egg—half-man, half-bull, or what muggles would call a minotaur (Hermione also mentioned Lucius Malfoy, who'd recently been tasked, in court, to head a trade delegation to Japan, on behalf of Magical Britain, at his own expense. John couldn't help smirking at that).

For settlement by magical arbitration, they covered Hogwarts' Goblet of Fire, Black Book, and Sorting Hat, and the Ministry's Scales of Judgement.

"There has long been lively debate in Wizarding politics about how much of our governance should be left to magic and how much should be in the hands of men," Hermione lectured. "Theoretically, we could give far more of our decision making over to magic, and magic might well be able to make better decisions. There are people who would prefer that we do just that, but others say that to do such a thing would reduce our agency as a race, and that by giving up our control to a formless shapeless force, whose decisions we can neither comprehend, nor question, we give up a critical part of our humanity.

The Great Blood Feud, which took place immediately after the fall of Light Lord Dimwiddy, was largely a reactionary event by people who believed that magic should judge, since wizards had proved unsuitable."

And not for the first time since they'd started, John felt a stab of pain in his chest as the girl who was so like his Hermione rattled on, and on, and on, just like she always had done. This was not helped in any way by the final pensieve memory, settlement by favour, which, to John's horror, was the very incident that had caused Susan trouble the previous year — the time she'd used polyjuice to try and sniff out Slytherin secrets — just like he was doing now.

"Are you sure you're okay, Alan?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, sure, I'm fine!"

"Mmmm, okay then." She didn't look fully convinced. "Now, any questions?"

Sophie put a hand up. "If favours aren't legally or magically binding, what's to stop someone just reneging?"

"Honour," Hermione answered. "The magical community is small. Word gets around. If you don't keep your promises, you quickly become a social pariah."

"That doesn't sound very reliable," Justin said.

"We don't live in a very reliable world," was Hermione's response. "You should know that by now. That's why the protection of someone honourable like Lord Slytherin is so valuable."

John couldn't help it. He let out a small snort. In the quiet of the classroom, the sound rang out like a gong.

Hermione sighed. "Perhaps refreshments are in order. We are all a little tired, I think." She summoned a tray of glasses from a nearby desk with a flick of her wand (wordless too, John noticed). "Are there any other questions?"
John thought quickly while the drinks were poured. He still needed to get more out of this gathering if he could manage it. What he had was eye-opening, but maybe he could push it harder. He brought his glass to his lips, but stopped just before taking a sip. 

"If Lord Slytherin cares so much about us, then why is he betrothed to two of purest purebloods in the country?"

Hermione smiled. "Because they proved themselves…"

John sipped from his glass.

"…just like me."

Slowly, the glass slipped from John's fingers. He stared at Hermione in horror. Faster than he'd ever thought possible for her, Hermione had whipped her wand out and had it pointing straight at him. The glass hit the floor and smashed. Dizziness swept over him. Hermione had potioned him. His noble house ring didn't protect against sleeping drafts, only mind control.

"We'll see who you are soon enough," Hermione scowled. "We just have to wait."

"NOW!"

Before sleep took him, the last thing John saw was two familiar female figures in masks dropping disillusionments from a corner of the room, wands drawn.

--- DP & SW: NRiCaD ---

"NOW!"

Virgo leapt into action the moment John went down.

Susan was already casting ropes at a startled Granger, while the rest of the muggleborns stood around in various states of shock. Good for her. Virgo had some serious heavy lifting to do.

*Why don't you try ventus divinum?* Julia thought.

Casting levitate on someone John's size wasn't difficult, but doing it while keeping everyone else distracted was more tricky.

"Ventus divinum!"

Immediately the whole classroom was wracked by an elemental wind. Parchments were picked up in the maelstrom and flung around in a whirlwind of power. Chairs were knocked over. Students shouted in alarm and fought to keep their balance. In moments, Virgo had Potter by the magical scruff of the neck and was pulling him to the door.

Halfway to the door, some of the muggleborns had got their shit together and were levelling wands in her direction.

A quarter way to the door, spells were being shouted, and wands being flicked.

By the time he arrived at the door, three spells had bounced off a hastily cast shield, Susan right beside her.

A tied up Granger was shouting something about shield breakers.
Virgo grasped the door handle, flung it open, and dived through.

Or at least, that was the plan.

What actually happened was he slammed face first into an invisible shield right in front of her.

Head ringing, he looked up.

It was the other Potter, and he was smiling the smile of a cat looking at a mouse. "I don't think we've been formally introduced, Miss Malfoy. Harry Potter, at your service."

Then a spell caught her in the back and her legs turned to jelly.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Now, what have we all learned from this?" Granger was asking the muggleborns.

"Don't casually drink offered drinks while spying?"

"Don't use polyjuice when a mask could do almost as good a job?"

"Always have back up for your back up?"

"Dramatic one-liners don't protect you from incarcerous?"

"Violet, we're supposed to be dumping on team boy-who-lived."

"Oops, sorry."

Virgo kept a carefully neutral expression while Susan did her best at damage control. It was an hour later and the polyjuice had long worn off, leaving John totally exposed, and, much to his mortification, still wearing the clothes the Chesterfield twins had pranked him into.

*I think it's cute. Boys get so flustered when someone says they should wear something girls normally wear. Except you, but you basically are a girl now. You should start thinking of yourself properly as one.*

So far, John had been forced to promise to show Harry where the Potter family magic was kept in the Potter Library, Granger had extracted a minor favour from Susan, and he, Virgo, had narrowly avoided having to do a minor task on behalf of the assembled muggleborns, only by virtue of John, who'd stepped in to gallantly take the hit for him. He certainly could be useful — even if his infiltration skills were atrocious.

"Just keep her with you," Harry said, patting John on the shoulder. "You know, so that if I ever have need of her, I'll know exactly where she is."

"Harry, Virgo is not the diary."

A chill went down Virgo's spine.

"Of course she isn't," Harry said, lightly. "Just keep an eye on her, okay?"

He knew. He knew and he didn't even care that he knew he knew. Or, at the very least, he suspected.

The walk back up to Gryffindor Tower was muted. Susan trailed off from them for the Hufflepuff
common room, while John led Virgo back up through the castle.

"Lord Slytherin is brainwashing the muggleborns," John said, once they were safe in a corner nook of the common room.

"Worse than that," Virgo said. "He's recruiting them. Just like you-know-who used to do with purebloods. He's already a Gray Lord. It feels as though he wishes to become a Muggleborn Lord too."

John frowned. "What good would that be?"

"I don't know. But I don't like it."

"I don't blame you. Ummm… Virgo?"

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to thank you for coming to help me, even when I told you not to."

Inside his head, Julia made a kind of gasping noise.

"I mean, you still shouldn't have, but I did appreciate it. When I was in there by myself, I felt alone, but I wasn't because you were there… Crap, I'm no good at this.

Oh my god! He's going to give you the thing!

"What I'm trying to say, is that I want you to have this."

He's giving you the thing!

Virgo's eyes widened slightly as Heir Potter pulled up the ball of silver from around his neck and presented it to him. The portkey. Then her eyes narrowed.

"This way you can be safer around Hogwarts, like Susan said."

Take it!

"Potter," Virgo said slowly, dangerously. "You know there is only one way you can give this to me."

John winced at her tone of voice. "We can just pretend?"

"Just pretend…"

Just pretend!

"Yes, just pretend."

Virgo took the portkey. "If you ever get any ideas about contracts or courting into your head, I will find a sufficiently painful way to make you stop. It will not be pleasant."

"Sure."

His words say one thing, but his grin says another.

"I'm serious."
"Sure."

Later that night, Virgo was sitting up in bed, staring at the portkey. With this he had freedom. With this, he could finally do one of the tasks he'd been meaning to do since arriving at Hogwarts — learn whether or not Lord Slytherin knew of the chamber, and if he did, what he was doing with it.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I swore I was going to try to make these chapters shorter, but it just never seems to work :( Anyway, if you enjoy my work, please consider becoming a patron of my original projects. All support is appreciated :) You can find the links through my website www.leadvone.com

A/N: This chapter was drafted and made available early through the LeadVonE discord server, as will the next one. That next chapter is not yet available, but if you fancy discussing this chapter, or anything else DP&SW with like-minded people, feel free to head over there anyway.

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2017’s prices.
The pub was dark and dingy. The smell of stale beer hung in the air. The reed floors were matters with so many stains, it was impossible to tell their original colour. A dozen low-voices, scattered around the room, conversed in small groups. Another group stood near the burnt-out fire, betting knuts on snitch shooting. Over the bar, were mounted several decapitated human heads. The heads did not look pleased about this.

The door to the pub opened with a loud creak. All talk halted while the clientele inspected the new-comer.

The landlord used his wand to make a used glass less dirty before putting the glass aside. "Are you sure you don't have the wrong place, Miss?" he said, not unkindly.

The woman ignored him and looked around. The dress she wore, alone, would probably have paid for enough rounds to keep the entire room drunk for a week, although the way many of the men were staring suggested that it wasn't the dress they were interested in.

"No, I'm sure this is the place," the woman said, walking to the bar, and sitting down on one of the stools. About half the room lost interest at this point, although that still left a sizeable number eyeing her up, down, and side-to-side.

"You can sit on my lap, darlin'!" one of the patrons called.

The woman ignored him and ordered an ice-liquor, which the landlord poured from a bottle so dirty it was a wonder plants hadn't started growing off of it.

The woman took it and sipped. She shivered and put the glass back down on the bar. "Perhaps you can help me, Mister…?" She trailed off, waiting for a name.

"Call me, Harry," the landlord grunted.

The woman's eye twitched. "Very well, Mister Harry. I am here on behalf of my lord. He is looking for people who share his view of the world."

The landlord did not look impressed. "And you are?"

"I am Lady Alexandra Patricia Black."

This caused a murmur from people near enough to hear what she'd said.

"You're Lord Slytherin's bird, ain't ya?!" someone shouted. "What's that posh nob want with us?!"

"He's looking for people who believe the wizarding world can be more than it is."

A wizard with the build of an ox and skin that looked as tough as old boot-leather lumbered over. "And what does that mean exactly?" he asked.

"It means people are going to have to make choices about whether they want to be on the side of progress or whether they want to be swept away by the flood that is coming. For those who lead everything will be given — power, gold, respect — a chance of a better life."
"This isn't the first time a dolled-up Black has waltzed into this pub singing those words." The man glowered. "Following that insane bitch lost me two fingers and an ear. And in the end, even the Dark Lord wasn't able to follow through on his promises. Get out, little girl."

"You are not the master of this place, and I am nothing like Bellatrix Lestrange." Alexandra glared, facing the room. "And I am not a little girl — does this look like a little girl?!" She swept a hand down her body.

Behind the bar, the landlord rolled his eyes. Laughs filled the room.

The wizard standing in front of Alex also chuckled. "Okay, I'll admit you are funnier than that bitch, at least." His face hardened again. "But seriously, get out."

"Look," Alex said, a note of frustration edging into her voice "Just hear me out, okay? I assure you it will be worth your while."

"Get out."

"I have a job that needs doing — fifty galleons up front."

"Get out."

"You can't just keep saying get out like that!"

"Do you want to be thrown out, bitch?" He took a step forward.

Alex took a step backwards. "I swear, you lay a single hand on me, and Bellatrix Lestrange will seem like a cake-walk!"

"I doubt it. Get her!"

Several wands were drawn from random groups and several hexes launched from all directions. The man in front of Alex lunged for her, hands outstretched. This turned out to be an unwise move. Black magic chains grabbed him and used him as an impromptu human shield, blocking every one of the hostile spells. Things quickly devolved from there. People dove for the floor, furniture was smashed, and magic flew everywhere, bouncing off each other and causing strange and unpredictable results. And in the middle of it all, was Alexandra, whirling around with her wand glowing a rainbow of colours as she swatted and shielded all the basic-level spells aimed at her. Her eyes were laser-focused, but her mouth was smiling. Any doubt the patrons had of her abilities had surely been dispelled. Perhaps they'd be more inclined to listen to her after this.

Then the room stopped. Not because everyone had been knocked unconscious, but rather because time itself had simply halted. One wizard was paused in the middle of casting a deep purple spell. One chair was floating halfway across the room. Even the flames in the torches on the walls were stalled in mid-lick.

Alex spun around. The landlord was staring at her with his arms folded.

"Hey!" Alex whined. "Why'd you stop me? I can still win this!"

"You actually lost about five seconds after you entered the pub, but I just wanted you to reflect on this moment before we continue."
"Why? And what do you mean 'I lost'?"

The landlord said nothing, but simply snapped his fingers.

Suddenly everything went back into action. Alex had only a split moment to sense the purple spell and swat it straight back to its caster. Another quick mental command and her chains wrapped themselves around the ankle of a wizard who was trying to scrabble away, flinging him into the last two wizards still standing with wands drawn.

Now, it was over.

Alex lowered her wand. "Does anyone have anything to say?"

The remaining patrons, who hadn't reached for their wands, stared at her with stony-eyes.

"No one?" Alex asked. "Because I do still need help, you know."

No one moved.

"Fine, then I'll just sit here until someone with some balls decides to talk to me." She hopped back onto her ball stool and sipped her ice-liquor, which, miraculously, had stayed intact throughout the entire exchange.

The landlord cleaned another glass and put it away.

Alex leaned forward. "They will talk to me, won't they?"

The landlord shrugged. "Yes… technically."

"Technically?"

Alex felt a presence beside her. A moment later, the stink of a man's breath leaned in to whisper urgently. "My lady, you must leave quickly. The aurors are coming."

Alex barely had time to register what the man had said before loud and fast footsteps could be heard coming from outside. Aurors? Panic welled up in her. As quick as she could, Alex had a curse on the tip of her tongue and her wand out. The door to the pub exploded. Her spell flew straight and true, into nothing. It simply passed through a cloud of empty dust. Then the windows exploded — both of them, on either side of the door, and two powerful, hooded wizards landed in the middle of the room, each holding round iron shields in front of them, their wands both pointed right at her. With a speed that would have been unbelievable to anyone who hadn't regularly fought against Harry, spells of bright light shot towards her. Desperate, Alex swatted as many as she could away, but it was no use. The moment she'd bounced just one spell back towards them, the two aurors had adapted and leapt aside to encircle her with clockwork coordination — like a trap snapping shut on a mouse.

Alex's world went red.

And then black.

When Alex came to, she sat up groggily, looking around the still-destroyed wreckage of the pub. No one was around now — no patrons and certainly no aurors. She looked down and realised that she wasn't an adult anymore. She'd changed back into her true form.

"Okay, let's begin, shall we?" said a cheerful voice from atop the bar. Alex clambered to her feet,
and then climbed onto one of the bar stools to find Harry sitting cross-legged on the bar-counter, polishing a glass with a cloth, muggle-style, which produced a lot better result than the magic 'Harry the landlord' had used. "Firstly," Harry began, "two out of ten."

"What?!" Alex said indignantly. "I know it didn't go amazingly well, but I did okay, considering how unreasonable they were all being! I deserve better than a two!"

"They were not being unreasonable."

"Yes, they were!"

"No," Harry said, firmly. "They were being adults, rather than the children you are used to dealing with — or the adults that you deal with as an eleven-year-old. I dare say you'd have had more luck if you'd tried with your true form."

Alex looked at Harry with incredulity. "You think they'd have taken me more seriously like this?"

"Yes, because like that your attempts to be taken seriously would appear precocious, rather than immature and threatening. As a witch, as a child, and as the daughter of your parents, you've spent so much of your time learning to be taken seriously—to be someone that demands respect—that you haven't learned how to use harmlessness as a weapon."

Alex huffed, but didn't argue further. "Okay, how do I do that, then?"

"You already know how. You did it in that very exchange."

"I did?"

Harry waved his hand in the air and her voice, aged up by ten years, filled the room. "And I am not a little girl — does this look like a little girl?!"

Alex gritted her teeth. "But that was the worst bit! They all laughed at me!"

"They laughed because it was funny. No adult woman with looks like you'll have would ever feel the need to defend her adulthood so emphatically. It's something a child would do, so they assumed you were making a joke — at least, at first. But that's the point. Even if you didn't mean to, you made a joke, and reduced the tension in the room. For a single moment, you were less threatening, which made building report more likely. That's what you need to work on."

"You want me to be a clown for them?!"

"Using jokes to appear less threatening does not make you a clown. It makes you cunning, like a true Slytherin should be. When you curtsey for an adult you do not respect, you are not truly submitting to them. When you dance with a boy you don't care about, you still allow him to lead."

"But those are things I must do because I am weak."

"And this is something you must do because you are strong. Hasn't Luna been teaching you wizarding poker? If you have a weak hand, bluff — if you have a strong hand, you still bluff. To crow about having a strong hand will just cause everyone else playing to fold. That's what every wizard in this room was trying to do — they were trying to fold. There are lots of reasons noble children learn the game, you know."

Alex stared at the bar top for a few moments before straightening up. "Okay, so how do I do this?"
Harry swung his legs off the bar top and landed, crouched, on the floor. A moment later, he stood in the figure of Lord Slytherin, looming over her, one of the most intimidating visages Alexandra knew.

"You watch me, and you learn."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Alex awoke the next morning to the sound of kelpies rustling against the windows to the great lake, and the sound of running water coming from the shower room. She grasped the lightning bolt pendant around her neck. Lord Slytherin was so cool, words couldn't even begin to describe. By the time he was done, he'd had the whole pub practically eating out of his hand. Okay, she knew it was just a dream—it wasn't real—but even that didn't matter, she knew that in the real world, it would have still worked.

And what was even more ridiculous was that half the things Slytherin had done, were the exact opposite of what he'd told her should be done. Arriving with a large snake wrapped around his chest was not un-threatening. Shooting five snitches clean out of the air, from the other side of the room, without even using a wand, wasn't exactly subtle either. And if she'd tried to buy the whole pub a round of drinks, she was sure the result would have been at best a grudging nod, not the boisterous cheer that Slytherin got.

And how?

A few minutes after sitting down, and not having said a word to anyone, except to order a drink, a dream version of Luna had run in, unwrapped the snake from around Slytherin's chest, hugged it profusely, and then happily ran back out, calling out a thank you behind her. Slytherin had made some joke into the stunned silence and everyone had laughed. Suddenly, the snake had gone from threatening to funny. The fact that it wasn't there any more probably helped, too.

His wandless performance at the snitch shooting, some time later, had been followed by a quip about how his mother had one day decided to try to get him to wake up earlier by putting his alarm clock on the other side of the room, and how it had never seemed to work. That had gotten quite a few laughs as well. Obviously, none of the dream patrons had known Harry's real story, or if they did, they pretended not to. They were constructs, created from Harry's experimentations into magically induced multiple-personality-disorder — they could be whatever Harry willed them to be.

Apparently that included people who would cheer a round of drinks if announced by someone who'd spent over an hour in their company sharing stories and jokes while waiting for his friend's children to finish whatever it was they'd been up to in nearby Diagon Alley. Not long after that, Slytherin had started lamenting the state of the wizarding world and the troubles and difficulties of leadership. By the end of it all, they were encouraging him.

Just before leaving, he'd leaned into one of the men he'd been most engaged with and whispered something that Alex, watching invisible from a corner of the pub, couldn't catch, but which Harry told her afterwards was a request for the details of people in need of coin, who'd support his cause, and could help him with a 'sensitive matter.' He'd succeeded in getting the list, which was the whole point of the game.

Truly, Alex had a lot to learn.

She pulled aside the covers of her bed, dropped her nightgown, ignored the still-closed beds of Luna and Ginny, however frustrating that was to do, and stepped into the shower room.
"Miss Heiress!" Hestia Carrow's eyes widened slightly (if the hair ornament in the basket was to be trusted). The witch quickly hopped out of the shadow and ushered her inside. "It should be the perfect temperature for you."

Alex nodded and let the water run over her. On second thought, she also couldn't help feeling that many of the tricks Lord Slytherin had used only worked because he was a powerful man. Somehow, she couldn't see Lady Black getting all back-slappingly chummy with men who's breath smelled like the backside of a cow-shed — or them with her. Perhaps Harry didn't quite appreciate all the advantages he had. Or perhaps, Alex thought with a sudden flash of insight, it wasn't the exact methods she was supposed to copy, but rather the theory. She had to find a female way to do the same thing. Actually, being less threatening as a woman was probably the easy part, if she actually tried. She looked into the shower mirror, put on a pouting expression, and then deliberately let out the girliest giggle she could manage.

"Miss Heiress?" said a shocked voice from behind the wall.

Rats! Alex's mind flew. "Err, I was just thinking about how surprised the other houses will be when the duelling tournament comes around," she bullshitted. "They think that just because Potter and Potter are out, that means they stand a chance."

"Oh, yes, Miss Heiress," Hestia cooed from outside, far more enthusiastically. "You'll crush the unworthy beneath your heeled feet."

"My boots, Hestia. It is a duelling tournament."

"Oh, right, yes, Miss Heiress, yes — your boots. And we have defence against the dark arts this morning. Snape is finally going to let us put those stupid Gryffindors in their proper place."

Alex arrived at the Slytherin table in the great hall some time later, with Hestia on one side and Flora on the other. They'd insisted on doing her hair again. It didn't matter that it basically looked fine — fine was never enough. She doubted even Daphne's hair got the attention that her's did.

"We're ready, by the way, Miss Heiress," Flora whispered to her over the boiled eggs. "We're so sorry it took so long to find the formal declarations — we had to send off for them — but we have them now."

"Declarations?"

"To swear ourselves to you for the time we're at Hogwarts. We never thought we'd have to do it, so we never bothered to learn. Please forgive us, Miss Heiress."

"Oh. Oh! I thought you were going to settle for the declaration you already gave me."

"Oh no, we couldn't do that," said Hestia, sounding aghast.

"It would disgrace our proud pureblood traditions," Flora chipped in.

"Right," Alex said. "Of course." Lord Slytherin had once mentioned in one of their letters how many non-noble purebloods were often more extreme sticklers for tradition than their noble counterparts. They had more to prove.

"Don't let it faze you, you two," Draco Malfoy said, sitting down opposite her while addressing the twins. "Everyone knows that Heiress Black does tradition like she does everything else, with the subtlety of a dragon in a china shop. Still, I can't say I'm entirely surprised. There's
usually someone who's pledged themselves to someone by this time of the school year — that's what my father told me."

Alexandra smirked.

Just then, the post arrived.

She was somewhat surprised to see a letter from her father. Surprised, because she'd written two letters already and hadn't expected a response from the third either. If it sounded out of character for her to write multiple letters to Sirius without getting a response, that's because it was. Lord Slytherin had ordered her to write them.

Alex,

My apologies for not responding earlier to your other two letters. I honestly wasn't expecting you to start writing so frequently, but I'm happy you are. It sounds like you're having a good time at Hogwarts. I can't say I'm all that happy with what's been going on—Merlin knows your antics have been giving me a hard time, what with all the people in the ministry who think I've been raising a secret Dark Lady—but Harry assures me that this is all part of some 'Master Plan.' And that he's taking good care of you.

I'm still not all that happy if this has anything to do with the Gray, but better the Gray than the Dark, I suppose.

I'm sorry. I shouldn't be talking about such heavy topics. Aren't I always the one who says you're supposed to be having fun? I hope you're at least managing to play some good jokes on your current, 'friends,' *wink* *wink*.

Just make sure you take care of yourself. And if you ever find yourself in over your head, let me know at once, and I'll be down there like a ton of bricks.

— Dad

Alex couldn't help having mixed feelings as she quietly folded the parchment and slipped it into the folds of her robes. Despite all the crap their family had been through, she couldn't deny that she did like it. On the other hand, it was rather annoying that her father seemed to trust Harry more than her. She did understand. This was Lord Slytherin they were talking about, but this was her father — her head of house — her lord. Surely, he was supposed to one-hundred per cent on her side. At least she could always rely on his overzealous protectiveness.

Alex looked across the table to where Draco was sitting and slicing into his own letter. She doubted he'd have anything as drama filled as hers.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Dear Draco,

Your father and I are pleased to hear of your progress in your studies. We are also immensely proud of your efforts to bring your cousin back into Dark. My family has too long been a dog of the Light. Above all else, do nothing that might jeopardise that relationship. I doubt you need me to tell you that, though. Alexandra has already shown herself to be a powerful witch, just like your Mother.

Your father is still in Japan, but will be back with plenty of time for the winter holidays. You will accompany your father and I to the Greengrass Winter Festival, as usual, but we have also been
extended an invitation to a gala dinner at Slytherin Manor, along with many other respectable wizards. I expect you to be on your best behaviour and to do nothing which might reflect poorly on your House. If you do, I shall be extremely displeased.

We shall pick you and your sister up at Platform 9 3/4. Be sure not to forget anything at Hogwarts this year. We will not be sending Dobby to pick things up, again.

— Mum

Draco focused in-between his mother's lines. 'If you do, I shall be extremely displeased' was code, which meant, 'there is a code.'

After cycling through a few of the magical methods he'd been taught, and taking care not to alert any of the many students sitting around him in the great hall, a new set of lines appeared before his eyes, far fainter than the others.

Draco,

We are still unsure whether we will include your sister in this year's festivities. I know you may believe that we are greatly displeased with her, but the truth is rather more complex than that. Your father and I have discussed this at length and have decided to entrust you with certain information. You must keep this to yourself. Obviously, this is a Malfoy family secret. We are telling you now because we have decided that keeping you in ignorance would expose you to more danger than to do otherwise.

Virgo is a spy—

With the seriousness of a star chaser handling a match-determining quaffle, Draco immediately stopped reading, folded the letter up, and tucked it away into the folds of his robes. The letter continued, but he wouldn't risk reading any more in the Hogwarts Great Hall. Even going as far as he had, had been foolish.

"Bad news, Draco?" Black asked.

Draco shrugged. "Just news. Have you also been invited to Slytherin's Gala?"

"No, but I'm sure my father has. I'll be able to badger him into letting me go."

"Maybe you should be in Hufflepuff," joked a random older student.

Alexandra glared, and silenced him.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Their first class was Charms with Professor Flitwick. Draco filed into the classroom, head spinning through all the implications of the revelation that Virgo was just pretending to be a disgrace. He'd barely talked with his new sister all year — there had hardly ever been time. They didn't share classes, common-rooms, or clubs. And whenever he did see her, she was stuck to John Potter like glue. Disgusting… but, if she was a spy…

The class was well underway now.

The half-goblin professor had clambered onto his book-tower and was now busy instructing. "Now, remember," Flitwick called out to the assembled Slytherins and Ravenclaws, "You must correctly integrate the final two-thirds twirl movement at just the right moment or the spell won't catch.
Glass won't just dance by itself, you know."

Draco glanced over to where Harry Potter was sitting next to Heiress Greengrass. Obviously, *he'd* already mastered it. Draco gave his wand a twirl—to show everyone his utter confidence—and focused on the spell.

**BOOM!**

Just then, a *massive* shockwave shook the room. Draco dropped his wand with a clatter.

"My heavens!" On top of his pile of books, Professor Flitwick had been knocked off his feet. "I think *that* came from below us."

What was below them? The Defence Against the Dark Arts Classroom. Draco's mind raced. The Slytherin and Gryffindor first-years' Defence Against the Dark Arts Classroom.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The story was all over the school by Lunch. Draco got it from Hobby Harper, one of the unquestionably Dark children among the first years, whose name wasn't Black or Carrow.

"So, you know that the Headmaster likes to drop in on classes sometimes?"

Draco nodded.

"Well, he dropped in! But today was the first day Snape was letting us actually cast spells at each other. He had the classroom set up for narrow duelling. Merlin, you should have seen Snape's face when Lockhart suggested he teach us all the protego charm before starting. I thought for sure he was going to burst a blood vessel. But that wasn't the best thing." Harper's voice dropped as though about to impart some huge secret.

"What?" Draco asked.

"They duelled!" Harper whispered. And then much more loudly said, "I kid you not! Snape and Lockhart duelled! I think Snape was utterly fed up with him constantly poking his head around the door, so he suggested they do a 'demonstration.' Hah!"

"Is that what caused the explosion?" asked a fourth-year witch, one of many who was also listening in up and down the table. Alexandra Black was nowhere to be seen.

Harper shook his head. "No, I'm getting to that. And, yeah, I know what you're thinking, but Lockhart actually handled himself rather well. Say what else you will about him, but he really *does* know his DADA."

"So what happened next?" Draco asked.

"Snape looked like he'd swallowed a lemon. To be honest, I think Lockhart wants the Defence position as much as Snape did! Snape still won, but it wasn't the steamrolling I think he'd hoped for. They started pairing up students for practice, and Lockhart put *your sister* on the big stage."

Draco groaned. "Let me guess, did Snape put Black on the other side?"

"Yes! Well, no, actually he first called for Weasley, but she tripped on the way up and hurt her knee, *so then* he called for Black."

Draco had his head in his hands now. "And what happened next?"
"They duelled! Magical Merlin's left bollock, it was insane. I had no idea your sister was so advanced! The spells they were using! It didn't start out all that impressive, but it… escalated. Snape and Lockhart tried to get them to tone it down, and they did, a bit, for a time, but then Black pulled out her chains and then it was all gloves off. I'd say your sister is more advanced than Black, but Black can spell swat, which massively evened things up. No one was paying attention to their own duels at this point. Everyone was focused on the main stage."

Draco really wanted to get back to his dormitory so he could read the rest of his Mother's letter. "And the explosion?"

"Your sister was getting really pissed off. I mean, really pissed off. And then Black cast… wait for it… you'll never guess."

"Go on."

"Serpensortia." Harper smirked. "Your favourite spell! Next thing everyone knew, there was a bloody great snake right in the middle of the platform. And your sister… your sister went kind of nuts."

"How so?"

"I swear that snake didn't even get a chance to let out one single hiss. Virgo used bombarda on it — instantly — wordlessly. To be honest, I think she might have a phobia of snakes. It certainly shook her."

Everyone around the table who'd been listening in, had their mouths open in shock.

Draco’s mouth dried. "My sister used a wordless dark blasting curse, in the middle of a packed class-room?"

"No one was too badly hurt. Just broken bones and ruptured eardrums. The stage was wrecked though. The headmaster took both of them away. I swear that was the first time I've ever seen him not smiling. Snape didn't look too happy either."

Draco winced. 'Snape didn't look too happy,' was student code for 'so furious that boggarts would run away from him.'

Rumours continued to swirl all day. Word on the grapevine was that Black didn't appear for Potions, and that Virgo hadn't shown for History of Magic.

Draco had double Herbology and so hadn't been able to verify anything. They were potting teenage mandrake and everyone had their fluffy ear-muffs on. This made discussion impossible.

It was with great relief that he was able to rush back to the common-room afterwards (with dignity, of course), to find out what exactly had happened.

He arrived in the common room to find a sight, that, while not unexpected, he had never-the-less been dreading.

Black was sitting in his chair. It was official, then. He, Draco Malfoy, was no longer leader of the Dark. She gave him a curt nod and motioned him forward. Holding his head high, Draco walked over and sat on her right side. Everyone was watching — even the Gray. No, especially the Gray. "What happened?" he whispered.

"Me and your sister were grilled for an hour. Minus one-hundred points from Slytherin and
Gryffindor, and detentions for a week. My first one starts soon, so I need to make this quick."

Black straightened imperiously in her chair. "Hestia and Flora Carrow. I believe you have something you wish to tell me."

Fifteen minutes later, Draco was ensconced behind the safety of his dormitory's bed curtains. If he'd thought the Carrow twins were a bit creepy before, it was nothing to what they were like now. With how she'd refused to back down against his sister, no matter what, Black might as well have tattooed Dark Lady on her forehead. It was just really, really annoying that she didn't know Virgo was a spy for their side!

Draco pulled out his mother's letter from his robes and finished reading.

Virgo is a spy. Dark magic is involved. She is acting under orders from your Father to infiltrate the Light on our behalf. While you can trust her, and she is your sister, do not antagonise her needlessly, and do not anger her. But above all, do not endanger her position by giving away her true alignment — even to those such as Theodore and Alexandra. What I told you at the start of the year still applies. Virgo may one day take on a far more prominent role in our fight against those who seek to destroy our way of life than you might ever suspect.

Love, Mum.

Draco crumpled the letter in his fist.

Don't antagonise Virgo, but also don't alienate Black. And don't tell anyone, and most certainly not Black, that Virgo is a spy.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

Just then, the door to the dormitory slammed open. "Malfoy!"

Annoyed, Draco swung the curtains aside. "What?"

The visitor was a prefect. He looked frazzled. His breathing came short and fast. "It's your sister. Something happened."

Virgo had left the headmaster's office wanting to throttle someone, he was so infuriated. Seven days of detention! Seven! He'd never gotten even a single day of detention during his entire time at Hogwarts when he was Tom Riddle. So many of his plans to return to the chamber would have to be put on hold.

Maybe you should have kept your cool when the Slytherin girl shot that snake at you, Julia thought.

Virgo thumped the wall in frustration. Do you not realise how dangerous that situation was for us? If anyone had learned we can talk to snakes—

—Dangerous for you maybe. If people learned what you are, maybe I'd be set free!

Don't be delusional. You know full well how badly that could go for you.

I only know what you know about soul magic. Which isn't all that much! Who rips their soul apart on the directions of one badly written scrawl in an old book?

Enough! Virgo punched the wall again, harder this time, bringing a whimper of pain from the little
Swede in his head. He brought himself back under control. Today hadn't gone well. Snakes were one of the few ways he could be unmasked. He'd been careful to stay clear of anything snake-like or serpentine ever since regaining a body. Suddenly coming face-to-face with one had shaken him. He couldn't afford to delay any longer.

*Hey, where are we going?* Julia asked.

*We have an hour or two before detention. That's enough time to at least ensure that the passageways I will use to return to the chamber are not blocked. And with most of the students still in class, the chances of being found are much lower.*

Virgo marched down a side passageway, did a little jig before a statue, ducked into the passageway beyond, came out beside a glass-work grandfather clock, and set the time to five o'clock on a Thursday. He then hit the fourth brick down to the right, and marched back down the secret passageway he'd just walked up. He exited on a balcony overlooking the grand-staircase. There was the smallest of carvings in the wall next to him. A snake.

"Open," he said.

The parseltongue only secret passageway… did not open.

Virgo frowned. That was odd. "Open!" he said, a bit more forcefully this time.

Again the passageway did not open. Grumbling, Virgo got down on his hands and knees to inspect the passageway. He couldn't feel anything obviously out of place. There weren't any wards protecting the passageway — certainly none like the detection wards he'd found in the bathroom entrance moments before the assassin had turned up.

Frowning, he stood back up.

*Maybe try another?* Julia suggested.

*There's no good reason why this one shouldn't work, but…*

He tried another — a trick doorway behind a normal door. Still nothing.

A feeling of great unease was starting to coil its way around his chest. Why weren't the passageways responding to him?

*I don't know,* Julia thought, *you're saying 'open' clearly enough.*

Virgo stilled, suddenly hyperaware of his Swedish passenger. *Open?* He thought back.

*Yes.*

*Not 'Öppna'?*

There was a moment of mental silence before Julia thought, *No, you're definitely saying 'open'.*

A kind of frozen dread sunk into Tom's heart. And for just a few moments, it was Tom. All thoughts of Virgo were stripped away by blind emotional panic — the panic that grips a soul when the truth is evident, but the mind refuses to believe.

If Julia could understand Parsel-tongue then she'd hear it in her native language. If she *couldn't* understand parseltongue, then she'd just hear a bunch of hissing. If she was hearing him say *Open…*
Frantic, he whipped up his wand. "Serpensortia!"

There was a loud bang, and a large black snake shot from the tip of his wand, landing with a thump only a dozen feet away.

"Stop!" he shouted.

The snake uncoiled itself and hissed at him. It hissed at him!

Tom's eyes widened.

"Stop!"

The snake darted towards him.

"STOP! STOP I ORDER YOU! ARGHHH!"

The snake had bitten him on the wrist! With a blast of raw magic, the snake was ripped free and flew across the passageway. Another wand wave, and it was gone, leaving only several small puncture marks and ripped clothes behind. He recognised the snake that had bit him. Not venomous, but even a non-venomous snake could cause serious problems if left untreated.

A faint sobbing could be heard in the deepest recesses of his mind. The girl was crying.

Suddenly, something clicked. Anger roared through him. YOU! he mentally screamed. It must be you! You must be the reason! I'LL KILL YOU! "CRUCIO!"

Two screams lit up the dark Hogwarts passageway. One mental, the other out-loud. The body of an eleven-year-old girl writhed on the floor. Her wand clattered to the ground.

Bad idea. Bad idea.

_ P-P-P-Please, Tom. Don't. Please._

Think! He couldn't have lost his parseltongue ability. He couldn't have!

His whole body was on fire. Even after that tiny jolt, every nerve felt like it was still being wrung. An idea occurred to him. Of course. _That's_ how he could restore the balance.

He concentrated, felt the familiar feeling of his occlumency coming into focus, and the dark Hogwarts corridor faded from view.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

A girl was crying.

Virgo stood up, once again in his old, male body. He stared down at the little whimpering mess beside him in disgust. "Get up."

She looked up at him. "T-Tom."

"My name is Virgo!" he spat. "And I said get up. We'll soon find out if this is all your fault. And if it is, I swear, I will see to it that your filthy, tiny, mudblood soul is flushed from my body like the waste that it is."

Julia got to her feet, still whimpering.
Tom stretched his arms out wide, shaking free any remains of the torture curse. It was all in the mind — literally. All around him, sat row after row of the Hogwarts library. His mindscape. Along with the whole of the rest of Hogwarts. His home. Where he was safe.

Without a backwards glance, he strode towards the doors. Julia trailed along behind him. She couldn't keep far away from him. Not here. Not given what she was.

This was Hogwarts as he longed for it. Peaceful, and all his.

As he walked the silent corridors, suddenly, and against all expectation, he was overwhelmed with a foreign feeling — an alien feeling — guilt. Where the hell had that come from?

He shoved it down and carried on as though nothing had happened, hoping against hope that the girl hadn't noticed. A quick glance behind him assured him that she hadn't.

There was no room for such weak emotions in his soul.

A few more minutes passed.

"I believe you were right," he eventually said as they walked down the grand staircase.

"Virgo?"

"I should have paid more attention to trying to keep us as separate as possible. I will make it a priority from now on. And if you are not the cause of my current predicament… I will even ensure that you are not destroyed."

Julia looked at him with tears in her eyes. "Thank you."

The path led them to one bathroom in particular on the third floor. They both stepped inside. Virgo smirked. A feeling of victory swam through him — of vindication. The entrance to the chamber of secrets in his mindscape was still open for him.

"You want me to go down there?" Julia asked.

Virgo smiled. "You have already been there in my memories, girl. Be honoured. Few see the greatest work of Salazar Slytherin. And now you will be one step closer to true greatness."

"But you're supposed to be able to fly to get down there. You never learned to fly before you split your soul."

"Stop stalling. You know full well how I got down here the first time."

Julia screamed all the way down, just as he'd known she would. Bones crunched when they reached the bottom. Technically it hadn't been necessary to replicate the chamber in quite that level of detail, but he was nothing if not a perfectionist. The giant snake door, with its many animated snake locks was already open to him. He swept through with the air of a lord returning to the manor. With a wave of his hand, green flames sprung up across every wall, casting flickering shadows across the massive stone pillars.

He spread his hands as he walked down the massive cathedral-like centre. "Welcome to the Chamber of Secrets." His voice echoed off the walls.

"Are you going to tell me why we're here now?"

Virgo sighed. "So impatient. Very well, girl. Listen, and see how a superior wizard solves a
problem that would bring a lesser mind to its knees. Every mindscape can have a guardian—an almost sentient-like being made to watch over the wizard, even when the wizard themselves may not be able to. I created the guardian of this place from a piece of myself when I could still speak Parseltongue. The guardian can speak parseltongue for that is its nature. And the guardian is still a part of me, so the guardian will be able to restore to me the ability to speak the noble language of Salazar Slytherin, or, failing that, will be able to speak on my behalf. QED."

Julia gave a grudging nod. "So, what are you waiting for?"

Virgo just smirked and walked to the back of the chamber, to the huge statue which stood there. The statue wasn't the only thing at the back of the chamber. A small bookcase was carved into the stone, full of books, instruments, and even a collection of wands in a pot.

Virgo glanced over and saw that Julia was actually eyeing up those wands.

He snorted and flicked his own wand, levitating the pot up and out of the reach of any little fingers that might get clever ideas. "And now!" he said, walking back to stand in front of the statue. "Let's begin." He rolled up his sleeves. "Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts four!"

Silence.

The silence went on for quite a long time.

"Is it just me," Julia started.

"Shut up."

"—or is there—"

"Shut up."

"—a tiny flaw in your cunning plan?"

Virgo whirled around. "If you don't be silent right this minute, girl, I swear—"

"Have you considered the possibility that you can no longer speak parseltongue because you are blood-adopted by the Malfoys and your only Slytherin ancestry, as recognised by the Albion Family Magics, comes not from the noble House of Gaunt, but through your filthy, muggle—"

"CRUCIO!"

A girl's scream filled the cavern.

"P-Please, Virgo, I'm sorry! I won't! I won't!"

"You better not!" he snarled. "Don't ever suggest that to me, ever again! Make no mistake, your continued survival depends on my goodwill. You are weak, and I hate weakness! Those that cannot find the will to strive for greatness deserve less than nothing—!"

He was cut off by a sudden rumbling sound. His snarl turned victorious. "You see! Never doubt—"

BOOM!

Virgo whirled around. The exit doorway had slammed shut. Even as he watched, a dozen stone snakes that had been sitting idle, slid into an intricate pattern on the door and snapped tight.
"Please tell me you can open that," Julia whispered.

Virgo felt non-existent blood drain from his face. He ran up to the door, all the way across the chamber. "Open!" he shouted.

Nothing happened.

"OPEN!" he yelled, much louder this time.

Nothing happened.

Running back, he aimed his wand at the door, "Bombarda!"

A fantastic explosion rocked the chamber, but when the dust cleared, the door hadn't suffered a scratch.

"Can't we just will ourselves out?" Julia asked, her voice was becoming frantic. "This is just your mind, isn't it?"

"Don't you think I'd have done that already if that was an option?" Virgo spat back.

"What about drilling through the walls?"

"It's all the same."

"Can't you change your mindscape while you're in it?"

"In theory, yes! That was what I was going to try next!"

He concentrated, willing a hole in the door. Nothing happened. The door stayed totally solid.

"Why?" Julia wailed.

A cold certainty gripped Virgo's heart. He knew why. He'd built this part of his mindscape to hide his most precious secrets. That's why he'd used parseltongue defences. Only another parselmouth could master this space, and he was no longer a parselmouth. He'd never considered the possibility that he would lose the gift. He was trapped.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It had been close to two hours.

Not far away, Professor Lily Potter was walking with Professor Aurora Sinistra. They were discussing the upcoming winter break when Aurora held up her hand to her mouth. "Lily!" she pointed. "Is that a student?"

Lily Potter gasped. There was indeed a slight figure laying on the ground. She rushed over and quickly confirmed the who. "Oh, no — not Virgo — not again." She checked for a life sign. "Still alive — quick — we need to get her to the infirmary."

One levitation spell and a minute of quick marching later got the young witch safely in the care of Madam Pomfrey. The healer gasped. "Oh, my!"

"What?"

"She's been under the cruciatus!"
Aurora put a horrified hand to her mouth.

"Are you sure?" Lily asked.

"Positive. And that's not all. Look, on her wrist. She's been bitten."

"What by?"

"A snake. I'm sure of it. Non-venomous, thank Merlin, but very definitely a snake."

Lily's eyes darkened. "Aurora?"

"Yes?"

"Will you do me a favour and find out where Alexandra Black has been for the last two hours? I need to speak to the headmaster."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

As it turned out, Alexandra Black actually had a fairly good alibi. Only fairly good, because even if someone in the wizarding world is seen in a specific place at a specific time by over a dozen different people, that doesn't necessarily mean it might not have been someone else under polyjuice, or self-transfiguration, or even some other, more esoteric magical deception.

It was generally accepted, however, that the chance of any of those capabilities being available to a first-year Hogwarts student was about as high as Lord Slytherin not using the upcoming gala evening at Slytherin Manor to further his own political agenda, something Chief Auror Lord Sirius Black was very quick to point out.

"Besides," Sirius said, "there's noway Alex could have done whatever that is. I've never seen anything like it. Learned anything else, Poppy?"

Alex was sitting on a chair with her back to her father, doing her best to look like how a budding dark lady accused of using an unforgivable believed she should look, uncertain and anxious, while still not quite managing to restrain a touch of indignation. For once, it wasn't a hard act.

Her father had his hand on her shoulder, and, despite his words, she couldn't quite shake the feeling that it was as much to restrain as to protect.

Madam Pomfrey straightened from where she, along with three healer trainees, stood on the other side of Virgo's bed. Those trainees once again included Hermione who was doing an excellent job of not caring about her — a little too good a job, Alex couldn't help feel.

"I can't learn anything more until we get permission to use legilimency," Poppy said. "Lady Malfoy has been informed and should be here soon, but until that time all I can say is that we're dealing with some kind of mental lockdown. I wouldn't be surprised if the crucio caused her to turn inwards to block out the pain. That spell has been known to manifest unusual side effects."

Behind the healer, Lady Lily Potter stood with her arms folded. "Are you certain there isn't any way it couldn't have been her?"

"Lily," Sirius said in a warning tone.

"Sorry Sirius," she said, not particularly sounding it, "but I don't recall you ever being that enthusiastic to look into the many skeletons in the many Black cupboards. Alex being a first year
means little if she has family magic."

"No." Sirius said firmly. "I have looked into my family's magic. I know full well what a Black can do. There is nothing in there that would cause this."

"Would you let me look so I can verify?"

"I…" Sirius hesitated, looked confused for a moment, then shook his head. "No, I can't do that. Because of… reasons."

Lily sighed.

Alex did her best not to attract any attention while keeping her face as neutral as possible. That had been the fidelius at work. It had to be.

Just then, the door was pushed open and several more adults arrived — Snape and Lady Malfoy, led by Headmaster Lockhart.

"Ahh!" Lockhart grinned at them all. "I hope our sleeping beauty is still doing well?"

"Quite fine, Headmaster," Pomfrey said in clipped tones. "She is just as unresponsive as the last time you asked."

"Virgo!" gasped Lady Malfoy, looking for all the world like a distraught mother. She rushed to the girl's side and started to pepper the healer with questions. It was a good performance. If Alex didn't know the incredible truth, she would even have believed it.

"Black." Snape nodded to her father, who grunted back.

"Well, I'm happy to say that this will all be over with soon enough," Lockhart said to Lily and her father with another wide smile. "Lady Malfoy here has agreed not to hold Hogwarts responsible, and will even be removing her from school to get private treatment at home. Isn't that a relief?"

"WHAT?!" Madam Pomfrey's head whirled around, first to Lockhart and then back to Lady Malfoy. "Lady Malfoy, I must object. Your daughter needs first-rate mind treatment, either here or at St Mungo's."

"I disagree, healer Pomfrey."

"Don't you trust St Mungo's? Your husband funds them!"

"That has nothing to do with this. I know a first-rate mind healer who will take excellent care of my daughter — certainly better than it appears she has been receiving here." She said this last bit with a slight sneer while looking towards the students wearing healer robes, and Alex was sure, at Hermione in particular.

Hermione just gazed back levelly.

"I must also object," Lily said with a new steel in her voice that Alex had never heard before. "This is the third time Virgo has been attacked. We don't know who is attacking her, we don't know what is attacking her. Until these attacks stop we must keep a close eye on her."

"That's even more reason for me to remove her. If there is a predator stalking Hogwarts, I will not allow my daughter to be prey."

Lily's voice dropped to barely a whisper. "This predator might not be one that comes from within
the school, Narcissa."

There was a moment of silence before Lady Malfoy scoffed. "You can make the muggleborn a lady, but she'll always be a muggleborn. You have no right to keep my daughter from me, Lady Potter. I am not happy with Virgo, but to suggest I would try to do away with my child just because they were sorted into the wrong house..." She smirked. "Although, now that I think about it, I can understand why you'd suspect that."

A split second later four wands had been drawn.

Sirius and Snape had been just a tiny bit faster than Narcissa and Lily, and had disarmed both of them before a hex could be fired.

"Really, Severus!" Narcissa snapped. "I was just going to give her a lizard tongue."

Lily glared furiously at Sirius who looked back impassive.

"Um, yes!" Lockhart clapped his hands together. "Well, err, if that's all sorted then I would very much like to continue our conversation, Lady Malfoy."

Narcissa snatched her wand back from Snape, flicked it at Virgo, levitated her up, and swept out of the infirmary with the unconscious Dark Tween bobbing along behind her. The last thing Alex heard before the door closed was Lockhart saying, "So, I'm thinking a lighter green with lilac for the Slytherin Gala, but a darker green with mauve for your ball. What do you think?"

It wasn't that much longer before they let her go—before Hermione even, thank Merlin.

Alex rushed off down the corridors of Hogwarts.

Lord Slytherin had to know about this.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In a magic trunk hidden in another part of the castle, Harry was bent over a rapidly spinning potter's wheel. His hands were slick with wet clay, his clothes were smeared, and his nose had a dirty mark on the tip. A finger applied to the bottom of the pot made a slight adjustment, causing a ripple upwards. The pot wobbled, tilted, then collapsed in on itself.

Harry cursed under his breath. "It's not as easy as it looks."

On the other side of the trunk, Luna looked up from her own attempt. "You'll get it. We have a whole month left before winter break. Harry?"

"Yes, Luna?"

"Why did Voldemort create this ritual and then never use it?"

Harry spelled his robes clean before starting to rebuild his pot. "That's a very good question. Firstly, he didn't fully create what we're doing. He was trying to find a way to achieve the animagus transformation after splitting his soul. Animagi require a full soul, you see — just like being a lord of the Wizengamot. Tom was more than a little pissed off when he realised what he'd done. If he'd just waited for his seventeenth birthday, he'd have become Lord Slytherin himself."

"How different history might have been," Luna whispered.

"Indeed. The seven pots were for each piece of his soul that he intended to split off. He'd already
done all the preparations needed to achieve the transformation, all he needed was that little extra push."

"But it didn't work," Luna said.

"It couldn't work," Harry counted. "By the time Voldemort had seven horcruxes, he'd already lost the locket and the cup — although he didn't know that he'd lost the locket."

Harry took a sip of orange juice while Luna frowned.

"But having read a few books that Voldemort hasn't," he continued. "I'm pretty sure it wouldn't have worked. It should work this time though. Voldemort's animagus ritual was a variation on another important ritual he learned, and a space-time ritual owned by one of his then followers in school. My arithmancy isn't the best, but I'm fairly certain this adjacent pattern is valid."

Luna smiled. "Is Voldemort's snake-like face because he never properly became an animagus, despite having done all the preparation? Ginny still feels cat-ish. Last week, I caught Alex trying to shake her hair dry when she got out of the shower."

"I'm surprised you don't already know that, Luna. Your family seems very knowledgable about animagi."

Luna just smiled.

Harry chuckled. "And what feeling do I give off?"

Luna tilted her head. "You feel… regal, my lord."

"You always did have good instincts."

"Thank you, my lord."

"Anything else?"

Luna frowned in concentration. "You feel… fractured."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Again, not bad."

"It is not very clear," Luna continued. "You feel like you could be many things. I have felt this feeling before, but I can't remember where. It is very annoying."

"I must admit I'm surprised. Part of me expected you to just know."

"Mmm… maybe a nundu?"

"No, not a nundu."

Luna pouted. "You are certainly not a dog."

"If you get it right, I'll give you pudding."

"Basilisk?"

"Nope."

"Feathered serpent?"
"You know your team position as the mysterious all-knowing one is under threat, right?"

"Oh, poo. When are you taking me on a date?"

"Your skill at changing the subject is as masterful as it is subtle."

Luna beamed. "Thanks! Does that mean I get pudding?"

"At dinner."

"But I want it now."

"You'll ruin your appetite."

Luna pouted again. "I don't want that."

"Indeed."

"The only kind of ruining I want is when you throw me down on your bed and shove your big fat __"" 

Thankfully for all concerned, Luna's words were interrupted by a loud knocking on the lid of the trunk.

"Harry?" came Alex's voice.

"Alexandra! Come in. I hope everything is well, and can I say, your sense of timing is getting better every day."

"Umm, thank you?" Alex gave an innocent-looking Luna an inquisitive look before she seemed to remember herself. "Wait! I have news, it's Virgo!"

One explanation later and Harry was all business. "This is interesting. You're sure Pomfrey didn't say anything other than she was under some kind of mental lock?"

"Nothing."

"Could it be something to do with the muggleborn?" Luna asked.

"Maybe," Harry mused. "It's not unlikely. She is the one major uncertain variable. It's a shame I haven't had much time to continue my experiments with the obscurial. Either way, this could be a perfect opportunity. It all depends."

"Opportunity for what?" Alex asked.

"If we could eject the diary from Miss Olsen, then we might be able to bring her to our side. I can't imagine being a prisoner inside her own body can have been a happy experience. Having a spy so close to the Light could be invaluable. It's possible the two are fighting for control right now. That particular Black ritual is not the most stable."

Alex paused to consider all this before continuing. "But Lady Malfoy just took Virgo away. How are you going to get near enough to take a peek?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Far up in the cold December air over the Hogwarts Quidditch Pitch, a slight figure in Slytherin
Green robes dove for the quaffle, snatched it in free-fall, chucked it to another figure, then barrelled to the right and zipped off after the golden snitch like a petite missile. Thirty seconds later, Flint blew a whistle.

"Weasley! That break-away was pathetic! My grand-mother could focus-switch better than that! And you, Malfoy! Are you trying to get shocked?! I've told you time and again not to wait till the last moment to pass! I don't care how good you think you are! We're using a 3-2-3 pattern and to make that work we need everyone working together!"

Ginny swooped down to the team scrum with the snitch clutched firmly in her fist. "Oh, give it a rest, Flint. As much as I hate to say it, Malfoy has his timing down perfect."

Malfoy smirked. "Of course I do."

"That's not the point!" Flint ranted. "The match with Gryffindor is in just a few weeks and we have to win. Wood's team will be even better co-ordinated than they were last year, and last year they were good. It was only Potter's unbelievably bad luck that gave us that win."

Tamaron, now a beater, nudged Ginny in the side and smirked. "He swallowed the snitch while we were over ten per cent up."

"And Fate isn't going to give us one like that again!" Flint roared. "And with Potter off the duelling team, it falls to us to secure Slytherin pride and the house cup!"

"It'll be fine, Flint," Malfoy drawled. "As much as I hate to say it,"—Ginny smirked—"and as much of a blood traitor as she is,"—Ginny's smirk vanished—"The Weaslette is quite good, although not as good as I'd be as seeker, obviously."

"Still sore at playing second fiddle to not just one, but two first-year girls, Malfoy?"

"Not as sore as you must be knowing that your bribe to join the team was charity."

"Malfoy! Weasley! Stop that right now."

Draco and Ginny glared at Flint.

"We still have twenty minutes of practice left! Get back up there and I want to see 3-2-3 all the way this time! Bole, fly tighter. Tamaron and Pucey, I want those bludgers on point every — single — time! Get to it!"

As they all shot back up into the sky, Ginny felt a slight vibration on her lightning-bolt ring. Her heart leapt. She was being summoned.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Sorry-I-came-as-quickly-as-I-could!"

It would have shocked anyone who didn't know her well, that Ginny was able to say this while in the middle of a mid-air dive-roll into Harry trunk.

Soon, she was filled in on the basics of what was going on, but not yet the plan.

"So, what's the plan?" she asked. Hermione, Daphne, Alexandra, and Luna were already there.

"The plan is this," Harry said. "I'm going to carefully, very carefully, make my way through the space between souls, just like Voldemort did when I was in Azkaban. The connection isn't nearly
as safe as between Horcruxes and the main soul piece, but right now it's worth the risk. The diary's defenses should be low and I know from Voldemort's memories that the Guardian is something I should be able to negotiate with."

"So, what do we have to do?"

"You, Ginny, have to keep watch over my body. Daphne, you're going to be on Harry Potter polyjuice duty if it's needed, Hermione, you're the second polyjuice backup. Luna will be coming with me, at least up until the chasm, and Alex, your job is to keep me tied down with your Black chains."

Alex looked puzzled. "Why?"

Harry waved a vague hand. "In case I don't wake up as me."

— DP & SW: N RiCaD —

Harry's mind was a fortress. To any that had sufficiently broken the law of Wizarding Britain, it was a very recognisable fortress. Gaunt, skeletal figures in tattered robes floated around the grounds, unmoving, but with an aura of purpose. Everywhere they moved, frost formed on the ground below.

Everything was quiet. The only sound that could be heard was the gentle lapping of the water against the rocks not far away. The sky was dark. The moon was full.

"I am surprised you didn't make your guardian a snake," Luna murmured.

"Are you?" Harry asked.

Luna appeared to think it. "No," she finally replied.

"I suspected not."

Together the two made their way through the massive double doors of the prison and up into the building proper. Mental dementors floated past as they went. Each hooded head turned to stare at Luna as they walked, but none made any movement towards her. Luna, for her part, had a slight grip on the cuff of Harry's robes between thumb and forefinger.

"He's scared of them, isn't he?" she said.

"Yes."

"They say the only thing he's scared of is Albus Dumbledore."

"Voldemort is scared of many things. He is scared of being disrespected, he is scared of being weak, he is scared of death, and he is certainly scared of monsters that can suck out a person's soul."

"You are also scared of being weak, Harry."

Harry stiffened, then relaxed. "Yes."

"But you are not scared of the truth of being afraid."

"Am I not? I think I am terrified of that truth."
“You do a good job hiding it.”

They came to a small door in a back-passageway deep down in the deepest depths of the structure.

“Do you know anything about the chasm between souls, Luna?”

Luna tilted her head to one side. “I know it is similar to the chasm between minds — that nothing experienced in the chasm can be seen by a legilimens or extracted as a memory, and that falling into the chasm is… inadvisable.”

“Unadvisable is one way to put it. You know I trust you, Luna.”

“Yes, Harry. And I trust you too.”

The door creaked open, one long note in the silence, revealing endless darkness over a moat of infinity.

Harry’s serious face cracked a smirk. “I learned theatrics from him too.”

“What about sex?”

“Maybe.”

“Rough? Gentle?”

“At school? As gentle as he needed to be, and then as rough as he wanted.”

“How many pretty witches did Tom bang in school, Harry?”

“A good number.”

“All willing?”

“Surprisingly, yes.”

“And later on?”

Harry’s smirk faded. “Not always.”

Luna pouted. “Well, that’s a mood killer.”

They both looked out over the dark expanse and over the tiny rickety bridge that led off into the distance, looking for all the world to be made of nothing but thoughts and fog.

Harry conjured a rope around himself and gave the other end to Luna who promptly tied it around the door handle while keeping a firm hold of the rest of it. He then transformed into the intimidating visage of Lord Slytherin, complete with mask.

He took a careful step onto the bridge. “I’ll send a pulse to your ring every thirty seconds. If I don’t pulse, start pulling.”

“Yes, my lord.”

And with that, Harry started walking across the bridge.

As he got further and further away from the safety of his own mindscape, Luna quietly whispered under her breath. “Please be safe.”
Flying was not an option here. Every step Harry took was carefully calculated. The force of the movement, the magic in the bridge, the feeling that this was the right place to put his foot. As he ventured further over the narrow bridge, the abyss swallowed up the safe haven behind him. Almost the only light came from the bridge below him, which radiated like a hundred glowworms trapped in a scaffold of mist.

The rest of the light came from the strings. As he walked, tendrils of thin filaments—connected in his chest—flashed into view for naught but a second before winking back out again. These connected him to all the soul magics he had ever cast, or which had been cast on him. The horcruxes, his fidelius charms, his animagus form. Two of the faintest would even lead to Daphne and Luna. They were far too fleeting to count, and the journey to their souls would be harrowing. Even now, even with his knowing exactly where Virgo was in the real world, and what form this bridge should take to create a corporeal connection, it was still very dangerous making his way over the infinite depths towards the horcruxes defences, and that was with her being in a coma as she apparently was.

Eventually, a structure started to appear in front of him. Hogwarts Castle — the place where Tom Riddle called home, the place he felt safest.

Finally off the bridge, Harry stared at the solid gates, shut tightly against intruders — not the see-through iron bars of Hogwarts proper, but an opaque wooden gate which would have to be at least five times as strong. There was nothing for it. There would be no subtlety here, no fancy high-level legilimency tricks. There was only one way he was getting through Virgo's soul and into her mind — with brute force.

Focusing his will into a sledge hammer, Harry sent a literal soul-pounding blow right into the gates which burst open with an all-mighty smash. He had only a moment before looking right into huge orange eyes, and his whole world went black.

As Harry's petrified body fell backwards onto the bridge, a hissing voice spat into the darkness. "$Only one king!$"

"Harry!" Ginny's voice was shrill as Harry's body, lying unconscious in front of her started to change colour.

"What's happening?!" Alex shouted.

"I don't know! I— no! He's being petrified!"

Deep in Harry's mindscape, Luna gazed with an alarmed expression at a rapidly approaching wave of petrification. Even as she stared, a dementor turned to stone and dropped to the ground with a crash. The blonde-haired girl took a look behind her at the empty expanse of nothing, then back at the approaching wave. Then she looked at the rope tied to the door, the door still inside Harry's mindscape, and back out to where it ran out across the chasm.

There was no time for the girl to think. She cut the rope, and stepped backwards one crucial step.
"Harry!" cried both Hermione and Daphne.

"Luna's still okay," Alex said.

"Yes, but Harry!"

"Calm down!" Daphne ordered, "We can cure this. It's not fatal. My father deals in Mandrake. If anyone can find any, even with the current shortage, it'll be him."

"But what do we do with Harry?"

Daphne gripped a fist in her hair. "I don't know. It depends how long it'll take to get the restorative. But first things first, we have to get hold of my father. Hermione, get into your trunk and see if my grandmother's portrait is there."

--- DP & SW: NRiCaD ---

Time passed.

In the chasm between souls, it passed quickly.

A young witch, blonde hair, blue-eyes, radish earrings, carefully crept her way out across the chasm with absolutely nothing under her. For her, there was no bridge. Her steps were tiny. Her breath heaved. Every so often she would stop and wait, panting, until a tiny flash of light illuminated a strand of gold as thin as a human hair coming out of her chest. Then she would step again.

With nowhere to attach the rope, there would be no pulling.

Her senses strained. Every footstep was memorised.

Once, the girl misjudged, and almost fell, but she caught herself and carried on.

Eventually, she made her way to the mind scape of the heir of Slytherin.

There, she found Harry.

He must have weighed five times as much as normal, but she carried him back across the not-there bridge anyway — every footstep exactly the same as it had been on the way there.

Once back on the other side, the girl pushed Harry into the safety of his petrified mindscape, before taking a deep breath, scrunching up her face, and jumping in behind him.

--- DP & SW: NRiCaD ---

"Jacob says you were right to contact him, and he'll be there shortly," Elizabeth Greengrass said. "In the mean time, you should get Harry up to the hospital wing."

Hermione nodded, thanked the elder Greengrass portrait, and made her way back to Harry's trunk. There she found Alex, Daphne, and Ginny with extremely somber faces.

Daphne turned to look at her. "Luna's just petrified, too."

--- DP & SW: NRiCaD ---

--- Before — While Harry was closing in on Virgo's side of the soul chasm ---
Inside the mental chamber of Virgo's secret mind, tensions were running high. Between the two of them, Tom and Julia had tried everything they could think of to escape. They tried summoning a snake with serpensortia and casting imperio on it. Hadn't worked. They tried confundus, legilimens, and even trapping the snake in a box, pressing it up against the door in the hope that its insistent hissing would produce the right effect by chance — nothing worked.

Now, Tom fumed off to one side while Julia sat cross-legged towards the back of the cave, reading some of the books Tom had stored there. Apparently, the Gaunts had been rumoured parseltongue users for the better part of a millennium — something the histories always found puzzling as the Albion Family Magics should theoretically stop any other than the Slytherin line from possessing the ability.

Nevertheless, artefacts and enchantments requiring parseltongue could oft be found wielded by Gaunts right up until their line died out when the lord and all his family were wiped off the face of the map by an unknown dark wizard in the first half of the twentieth century.

Julia closed the book and regarded the still-fuming older boy by the locked snake door.

Unknown dark wizard, indeed.

She then glanced up to the wands Tom had stored well out of her reach.

So close, and yet…

Just then, the whole chamber was rocked by an explosion.

Tom was instantly on his feet, wand out and alert.

Julia cried out in surprise as water splashed down from disturbed pools in the stonework. "What was that?!" she shouted. Even though the explosion had sounded far away, it had smashed against something deep in her like a runaway train.

"It felt like soul magic," Tom said. All the anger in his face had fled, replaced by a deadly calm. "Something was trying to get in."

"Not legilimency?"

"No, not legilimency."

Julia quietly made her way over to where Tom stood by the door.

Both of them strained to hear anything. It was too much to hope that a healer who was also a parselmouth was trying to get them out.

They waited for quite a while longer, hearing nothing but the drip, drip, drip of water down the walls.

Then Julia heard it — the sound of something huge moving closer on the other side of the door — one might so go far as to say, slithering.

A hundred thoughts passed through her head in a second. Ever since this nightmare had started, way back in summer, she'd gotten a lot smarter. She could feel her thoughts flowing like water, no doubt his infernal influence. She thought about the monster that Tom had created to guard his mind, and what would happen if it decided that, for whatever reason, it was done merely keeping them prisoner and was going to be active in its defence. She thought about a dozen possible
consequences for that situation. Then, once she was done thinking about those possibilities, she opened her mouth and screamed.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The girl screamed and ran away. Stupid little witch. Although given what might be about to happen, running for a more defendable position probably was the best thing to do.

Virgo darted after the muggleborn, caught up with her, and they both ducked behind separate pillars, hiding their bodies from the front of the chamber.

Something hissed.

Virgo gripped his wand tighter. He would only get one chance to get this right, and every spell would have to be perfect.

There was a loud grinding as the perfectly circular snake-door opened. Then the slithering got louder. It paused for a moment, there was another hiss, and the grinding sound repeated itself in reverse.

Virgo mentally swore. He'd been half hoping the guardian would leave the door open so he could run out and hopefully leave the girl trapped in here with it. That would have been perfect. Alas, it was not to be.

Steeling himself, he caught the girl's eye behind the other pillar, who looked ready to pee herself with fright.

He then shut his eyes tightly, jumped out from around the pillar, aimed towards the slithering sound and shouted, "Obscuro!" A second later he opened his eyes. In front of him, slithered his guardian—a perfect model of the basilisk from the chamber of secrets, from the tip of its fifty-foot long tail to the crest of red adorning its massive head—hissing in fury with a blindfold covering its eyes.

Never deal with a monster you don't know how to deal with.

Of course, being blind wasn't going to slow down a monster that could smell and hear as well as it could see, and the basilisk was now rapidly closing the distance across the chamber.

Virgo grit his teeth. This was not going to be safe. This was, in fact, going to be incredibly dangerous—especially in his own mind—but he had no other choice. In his studies at Hogwarts he'd only encountered one magic that might stand a chance against the king of serpents, and that was only because Slughorn didn't know how to say no. One so dangerous that few who used it lived to tell.

"Malus ignis totalus diabolus!"

What happened next occurred split second by split second, but seemed to last a lifetime.

The animalistic fire demons spewed from Virgo's wand, roaring with rage and fury, as hot as the literal fires of hell, billowing up higher and greater.

The basilisk continued its headlong lunge towards him, and as it neared, the demonic fire finally took notice, and attacked. It roared towards the giant snake and that's when everything went wrong.

The moment the fires got close, the blindfold burst into flames. A split second later, it was reduced
to ash.

Virgo spotted the danger a moment before the danger spotted him and shut his eyes tightly. That didn't save the demonic fire however.

A blood-curdling scream tore through the air of the chamber.

"Obscuro!" Virgo shouted. "Obscuro, obscuco, obscuco, obscuco!"

The screaming died, replaced by a smashing that shook the chamber. Virgo risked a glance and stared.

The basilisk, badly burned, but successfully blind-folded again, was smashing its way out of a tomb of rock, which now surrounded it in hideous shapes of beastile demonhood. A huge petrified dragon head was decapitated with a flick of the tail and sent flying. Virgo stood in awe. It had petrified the great magic fiendfyre. His basilisk. For truly such power could only be his. He had to get it back!

Unfortunately, that time would not be now. Even as he watched, the guardian smashed the final fiendfyre beast away from it, and retreated back towards the door, hissing loudly. The door slithered unlocked—the guardian slithered through it—and it then slithered shut.

Virgo snarled. It could only run for so long before he'd have it back under his thumb. He looked around. The chamber looked badly shaken. The huge snake thrashing around had knocked over quite a few statues, and badly damaged a pillar. It was a risky strategy, but maybe purposefully damaging his defences was the key to getting back out. Something he'd have to look into.

"Girl!" he shouted. "Come! We have work to do."

Nothing.

Virgo frowned. "There's no point in hiding anymore," he shouted. "The snake is gone. Don't make me come and get you."

Still nothing.

Then Julia emerged from behind a pillar.

Something was different.

Her eyes were cold. Her stance was determined. And in her hand, she held a wand — one of the wands he'd put up out of reach. The fight with the basilisk must have knocked one of them down.

Virgo raised an eyebrow. "What are you planning to do with that?"

"Breaking free of my prison," the girl spat.

Virgo sniffed. "Have you suddenly gained the ability to speak to snakes?"

"No, but I don't care. Once I'm rid of you, I'll figure out how to get out of here by myself. And then, get my body back!"

Then she attacked.

Virgo had to admit he was surprised. Yes, the girl had access to his memories for six months, but that she'd have reached this level of skill so quickly was a shock. As they duelled together, their
movements were almost synchronised — their casts second nature. Every counter was counter-countered by the preparation of a mind that would never consider a strategy that it couldn't itself beat. Julia weaved magic like a genius who'd been practising for years. They danced for ages, each totally focused on the other while the world around them narrowed down to just the flow of the moment.

It was a shame she hadn't ambushed him instead of letting him prepare himself. Then she might have actually won.

— DP & SW; NRiCaD —

Pain screamed through Julia's senses as she landed on her back and rolled, hard, across the floor of the chamber. The wand she'd been using clattered to the floor nearby.

"YOU DARE THINK YOU CAN BEST ME?!!" Tom roared. "You think that because your perfect, untouched soul has been locked away for half a year that makes you worthy of freedom?! My soul, ripped and tattered, has been locked away for seventy years, girl! Seventy years!"

Julia looked to where the wand lay only a few feet away. It was so far away.

"I showed mercy," Tom continued, suddenly much calmer, and all the worse for it. "I have been a most gracious host. But don't believe I will allow this insult to pass, even though you are only a child. If you believe you have suffered, then it will be nothing compared to what I will inflict on you now."

Julia trembled. This had been a mistake. She'd been so sure she could take him after he'd been weakened by the fight with the basilisk, but even after taking all his skills, she still hadn't won. She just had enough time to gasp out, "Please," before the boy levelled his wand at her and said those terrible words.

"Crucio."

Pain. Her every nerve screamed in agony, burning, as she writhed around on the floor. It felt like it went on forever, until he eventually lifted the curse. She whimpered, curled up in the fetal position.

"Pathetic," said the terrible voice above her.

She rolled over and looked up.

He was standing right over her looking down.

"You know, I really have to thank you," he said. "I don't think I'd have got nearly as far with John Potter and the Light as I have without you. As annoying as your constant yapping was, it at least served some use. Maybe I will push for a contract with the House of Potter — a bridge between the Dark and the Light. James and Lily Potter will have to die first, obviously, and when the boy follows them shortly after, that would leave me as Lady Potter — widow of the most powerful house in Magical Britain."

Julia gasped. The pain was still almost unbearable.

"How does that sound, little girl? You have quite the crush on that boy. How does it feel knowing the girl he thinks is you is going to murder him?"

Julia couldn't even bring herself to sass.
"No words? Oh, well. It's a risk, but prolonged cruciatus can sometimes create permanent brain damage. Why don't we test that your susceptibility, hmm?"

Just then, Julia saw something huge hover far above the nastily smirking face above her — a massive, blind-folded, snake-like something. Her eyes obviously betrayed her alarm, as Tom turned his head, just as the head lunged downwards.

She just had time to see his eyes widen in terrible realisation. Moments later, the basilisk clamped down around his torso. His shouts muffled, it raised its head and gulped him down in three powerful contractions, first to his waist, then his knees, and finally his feet, all drawn down into the powerful predator.

Julia lay there, terrified, hoping against hope that it was done.

It wasn't.

Crying, she could do nothing as fangs like swords coated in liquid pain bit down into her, before throat muscles as strong as an elephant grasped her tightly and drew her down into the eternal darkness of the monster.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In the hospital wing, Lord Jacob Greengrass looked down at his future son-in-law, fellow lord of the Wizengamot, and arguably, Gray Lord. "Two weeks, possibly longer," he said.

His eldest daughter, the only other person with him, apart from Harry and Luna, looked up at him calmly, although he was sure he could detect a hint of desperation. "Two weeks, father? Can't we get them quicker than that? What about however Harry got those leaves for our you-know-what?"

"You don't want to know what Harry went through to get those leaves for your you-know-what. Magical disease is not something you can bargain with. The global mandrake supply is crippled across the whole world. Two weeks."

"But it's such a bad time for it," Daphne said. "We have to finish the manor in time for the winter gala and we have this other really important project to oversee as well."

"Is this really important project something I should know about?"

"Sorry, father, Slytherin family business."

"Of course it is. Lucrative?"

"Perhaps a little bit."

Just then, the door to the hospital wing banged open and a Harry look-alike barged in. "Virgo!"

He stopped when he saw him and Daphne.

"What are you doing here?"

Jacob raised an eyebrow. "Heir Potter. My business here is none of your concern."

"I mean—" John stopped in mid-stride when he saw who it was on the bed, and the petrified condition they were in. "Harry!" A slew of emotions crossed over his features. Glee, distress, puzzlement, understanding, horror, and finally thoughtfulness. An odd mix to be sure, and worn so openly for anyone to read. If that had been Daphne, he and his daughter would have been having
words. John also spared Luna a quick glance but he didn't seem nearly as interested in her. The Potter Heir shook himself. "No, wait, Virgo! Where's Virgo?"

"Mister Potter!" Madam Pomfrey chose that moment to enter from the back, possibly to see who was making all the noise. "This is a hospital wing, not your dining room! Kindly leave and take your shouting with you."

"Not until I find out where Virgo is!"

"Miss Malfoy has been taken home by her mother, now please leave."

"What?!" John looked horrified. "But they'll hurt her! They might even kill her!"

"Mister Potter, I do not have the power to keep a mother from taking her daughter away. If you do not leave now, I will tie you up and deposit you outside myself."

After John left, and after Madam Pomfrey had excused herself, Jacob turned back to his daughter. "He seemed awfully sure of himself. You don't happen to know anything about the new Miss Malfoy's situation, do you?"

Daphne grimaced. "I do, but…"

"I don't believe for one moment that Miss Malfoy is a Slytherin family secret."

Daphne muttered something that Jacob didn't quite catch before she said, "She falls more under the category of plausible deniability."

Jacob nodded. "Say no more."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Well?" Narcissa asked.

Andromeda scowled. "I can't do anything more unless you let me use legilimency."

"Absolutely not. The girl has not been trained to resist unconscious attacks."

"You still don't trust me?"

"I trust you enough to call on you, don't I?"

They were standing at the foot of Virgo's bed in Malfoy Manor. Andromeda scoffed. She had just finished her slightly less than standard healer check-up. "Your suspicion was correct, though," she said. "There is soul magic at work here. Possibly even Black soul magic," she shot Narcissa a calculating look. "You wouldn't have any idea why that might be, would you?"

"Absolutely not."

"Well, the good news is that the longer she stays alive, the better the chances are that she won't die. I don't know the real reason you don't want her to go to St. Mungo's, but I swear, Cissy, if your recalcitrance leads to this girl's death, you can forget about ever calling on me again."

"Oh, please. We both know you wouldn't be able to stay away if someone's life was on the line."

Minutes later, Narcissa closed the door on her sister and turned back to the bed. She walked over to it and laid a hand on Virgo's. Their little trojan horse was picking up more attention than it should
be. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

"Dobby," she called out.

Nothing happened.

She sighed. "Free Elf Dobby."

A house elf in a dirty tea-cloth popped into being beside her. "Dobby has come, Lady Narcissa! Not because Dobby is having to, but because Dobby is choosing to! Dobby is a—"

"—Free house elf — yes, I know — we freed you — look, can you please have a look at my daughter and tell me if your magic can pick up anything that might give us a clue about what is going on?"

Dobby's wide eyes widened even further when they fell on Virgo. "Lady Narcissa is having a new daughter! So long has Dobby been away! Dobby did not know witches could grow so fast!"

"They can not. You were on business over the summer. Virgo returned to us from the muggle world then."

"Oh! Dobby sees now." Although the frown on his face indicated he was still somewhat confused. "Then Dobby will be using his powerful, free-elf magic on Miss Virgo now."

A faint blue glow surrounded Dobby's hand and settled over Virgo.

"Anything?" Narcissa asked.

Dobby's ears drooped. "Miss Virgo's souls are being melted, my lady."

Narcissa's eyes bore into the elf's. "Souls? As in, more than one?"

"Yes, my lady."

Narcissa cursed.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In the belly of the basilisk, all was dark, tight, and hot — unbelievably hot — so hot, it felt like a furnace was burning away at everything that was anything or anyone and leaving them a molten puddle.

Tom! I'm scared! thought a thought in the pitch black.

That is because you are weak! Another thought thought back.

The only sound that could be heard was the loud gurgling and pulsing of the snake's digestive system as it worked away on the two trapped and helpless victims who, by that point, were less bodies, than suggestions of bodies. Had they been in the real world, they would both certainly be dead already, but since this was not the real world, they weren't.

Oh no, not again! Thought the first voice. It feels like that time in summer all over again! Please, Tom! Do something!

Mmmm, thought the second voice. But if it is like when I made your body my own, why bother stopping it? Your soul has been quite vexing, and if this will be rid of you, then so be it.
No! Please, Tom! I'll do anything! I don't want to die!

The world is not fair, little girl. It was a mistake stopping at just your body — Now I will take your soul too — yes, that would be most appropriate.

NO! Tom! Please!

The stomach around them continued to churn and press and gurgle, and soon the mental bodies of the two snake dinners had been reduced to a mental slurry. And out of the slurry, a small black slime oozed its way up.

I am free. The thought, along with a dark laugh pulsed throughout the snake's insides. And now, where is my little muggleborn companion? That was as far as that thought got before the whole of the rest of the slurry activated like a torch being turned on made out of the sun.

The light washed over the dark ooze, causing it to scream in pain. Stop that!

It did not. Instead it intensified as the whole of the slurry started to change. Moments later, another ooze filled the tight space, but this one was made of shining liquid gold.

Though it could not see, the black ooze stared in mounting dread at its far larger sister.

I will get my own body back, the shining ooze thought. Gold tendrils started to snake towards the black ooze.

Wait! the black ooze mentally shouted. What are you doing?!

I will get my own body back!

No! The black ooze screamed back, panic filling its voice Wait! Stop! You don't know what you're doing!

I WILL GET MY OWN BODY BACK! The massive golden ooze gooped over the far smaller black one, submerging it whole. The black ooze screamed one last time, before dissolving into the gold, and the tiny dark little soul fragment, bereft of completeness for seventy years, became whole.

Light filled the still churning stomach.

From the outside, a visible, snake-shaped bulge appeared all along the snake's belly. The basilisk looked down in puzzlement at its stomach before a faint voice spoke, or rather hissed, to it from inside its own guts.

$LET ME OUT OF HERE!$

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The blonde girl in the bed woke, slowly. The first thing she noticed, was that she wasn't in a single bed, she was in three beds. Someone had moved two extra beds from some of the Malfoy spare rooms to create one massive bed — a bed just the right size for a…

The next thing the girl noticed was that her lower body didn't feel right. She tried moving her legs, but instead, she just got a kind of writhing motion.

Memories flooded back. The chamber. The basilisk. Being slowly regurgitated as a—

She threw off the covers—or at least, one of the covers—and stared.
A long snake body and tail, scarlet red scales with a golden sheen, snaked out from her waist and on and on for what had to be three or four meters. Merging souls had allowed her to finalise her animagus form, but it wasn't a snake, as she'd expected, but rather… "a lamia," she whispered. "Half girl, half snake."

Old thoughts, buried deep, and still brand new, whirled around in her head. Did Gaunt blood carry an increased chance of having a snake animagus form? Probably. Was that why no one ever saw them speak parseltongue? Quite likely. Did it truly have nothing to do with the Slytherin line? How can I be so brilliant and still so stupid? Even if she'd refused to believe it only a day ago, that desperate need for self-delusion was no longer so strong. It would explain the Gaunt parseltongue abilities. Lucky for her, lamia also had the gift, even if the top half was humanoid. Otherwise, she'd still be trapped. Half snake, half girl, indeed.

Focusing on her transformation, she changed back into her human form and swung her feet onto the floor. She stood up and padded over to the bedside mirror. She stared at herself. It was an odd thing to do after so long. If she'd been asked just a few days ago, she'd have said she'd be crying for joy right about now.

But that's because I haven't only been trapped.

Just then, the door opened, and Narcissa Malfoy, her mother(?) walked in. A stab of fear shot through her body, but she crushed it. She couldn't let this woman know the truth.

"Virgo," the older witch said, "I'm happy to see you awake. I see you succeeded in changing back."

The girl looked back at the mirror. She pursed her lips.

Am I Virgo? I am not Tom! I cannot be Julia.

Virgo looked back. "Yes," she said, trying not to sound uncertain. "I did."

"Congratulations are in order," Lady Malfoy said. She was carrying a tray of tea. "Once we get you registered you will be the youngest animagus in Britain."

Another round of fear shot through Virgo. It took a moment for her to identify it before realising it was the thought of what John would say if he knew she could turn into a lamia.

A red and gold lamia! He should worship the ground I slither on!

"Um, can we hold off on registering for a while?"

Narcissa gave her an odd look, so she quickly continued, trying to sound more confident and firm. "It might break the trust I've built up in Gryffindor House if they find out without me preparing them first."

Narcissa seemed to consider this before nodding. "Very well, Virgo, but if I decide it's best I will take the steps to register you."

Suddenly, from somewhere deep down inside, anger flared. Virgo's eyes narrowed. "You'll decide?" she hissed.

Narcissa froze.

How dare she? This woman hurt me. This woman tortured me.
"I meant no disrespect," Narcissa said quickly. She looked like someone who had taken a gamble—an educated and well thought out gamble—and was just now realising she'd been one colour off. "I merely thought that you might not want the burden of dealing with all the paperwork. You still need to recover, and your condition isn't—"

"You think me weak!?!" Virgo shouted.

"No! My lord! Please."

As quickly as her anger rose, it fled. Virgo calmed. "Lady."

"Sorry?"

"Lady, not lord. You said yourself, didn't you?"

Narcissa visibly settled. "My lady. Of course. My daughter. Please, excuse me. I need to contact Hogwarts to update them on your condition, by your leave." And with that, the woman who was now her mother quickly put the tea tray down, and scurried out.

Virgo looked down at her now shaking hands. "I hate myself."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Phew, another long one! If you enjoy my work, please consider becoming a patron of my original projects. All support is appreciated. You can find the links through my website www.leadvone.com.

A/N: This chapter was drafted and made available early through the LeadVonE discord server, as will the next one. That next chapter is not yet available, but if you fancy discussing this chapter, or anything else DP&SW with like-minded people, feel free to head over there anyway.

A special thank you to the following people for helping me catch mistakes on #dpasw-editorial: TrendyTreky, sfu, ASK, Dragonbait, drakonpie250, Modon, Caelwyn, JayEye, Strider (Ebony), Grimjaw, feauxen, nuclear death frog, and Captain Wyvern.

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2019's prices.
The gates of Hogwarts stand tall and strong, suffused with magic and strong enough to hold back a small army of sword-wielding goblins, wand-wielding wizards, or muggles wielding whatever happens to be in fashion this century. Hand-forged from goblin silver by the Smith family some two-hundred-odd years before the great betrayal, they alone are worthy of granting Hogwarts the title of 'safest place in Magical Britain.'

The gaps between the bars are quite wide though.

In the weak dawn air of a December morning, a teenage female figure made her way down the path towards said gates. She was invisible to the casual glance, save for a faint outline in the air to mark her passage across the frost-covered lawn.

When she reached the gates, the figure whispered, "Plato!"

On the other side of the gates, Plato the house elf, wearing his Slytherin robes and crest popped into being. He looked around in puzzlement for a moment before the girl said, "Plato, it's me."

"Miss Icygrass." The elf's wide eyes focused on the spot where the invisible voice had come from. "Why is Miss calling Plato?"

"I need you to send an owl to Mister and Missus Granger. It's urgent."

"Right away, Miss. Where is the letter?"

"I haven't written it yet. It needs to come from Slytherin himself."

"Plato understands, Miss. What does the letter need to say?"

The future Lady Slytherin told him.

Plato bowed deeply and popped away.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

He didn't pop far. Without the call of their masters to guide them, house elf apparition was quite similar to the wizard version — ie, short-range and magically taxing. Some fifty pops later, Plato arrived on Gairsay Island, right in front of Slytherin Manor, panting heavily. He made his way through the grand ballroom, up two flights of stairs, and into his master's study. A large bookcase on the far wall was crammed with rolled up parchments.

"Master, indisposed," the elf muttered to himself as he trailed a long, bony finger along the shelves. "Plato is not liking this, no, not one bit." He found the parchment he was looking for among the collection and pulled it out. "No master is meaning no gold from sunken ship. No new gold is meaning no new house elves. No new house elves is meaning no mate for Plato. Plato is not liking to wait. Plato is wearing neat new robes like wizards now. Females be loving bad boys."

He left the study and walked down the long corridor to the end of the hallway. There, he opened a
set up large double windows, clambered up onto the sill, and called out, "Master's owl! Master needs letter sent!"

The grounds of Slytherin Manor had been transformed since earlier in the term. Gone was the empty pasture, replaced with hardwearing bushes, trees, and other plants — all magical to a greater or lesser degree. From one of these trees, Macavity leapt and swooped up to the window.

"Good birdie," Plato said, attaching the letter to his leg. "Go, swift like wind now. Is being very important."

Macavity made a gesture that could be interpreted as a shrug, turned his back on the little human-like thing, spread his wings, and set off on the heroically long journey to the bottom of the hill.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In Granger Cottage, Clare Cooper was sitting at the kitchen table, groggily sipping from a cup of early morning tea when a tap from the window interrupted her. Minutes later, she'd taken the letter from Lord Slytherin's owl, sent him on his way—probably back to Hedwig—and descended the secret stairs to the Granger's underground workshop.

"Letter," Clare declared to the room filled with machines and a couple of half-built giant broomsticks.

Emma looked up from where she'd been working. "Hedwig, Macavity?"

"Macavity. Here you go." Clare then excused herself to get ready for school.

Emma sliced the letter open with a screwdriver and read.

"And what does our lord have to say?" Dan asked, appearing from behind one of the subs.

"He's got to take care of some things," Emma replied, turning back to the desk. "He's being pretty vague, but he says he'll be back in a couple of weeks." She felt a presence behind her and strong arms wrap around her waist.

"Two weeks all to ourselves," Dan murmured into her ear. "We can do a lot in two weeks."

"We can't go out in the broom-sub without him, or the girls, or Harry," Emma commented idly.

"We could take the time to catch up on some of our other projects," Dan replied. "Slytherin is a demanding master."

"He's not the only one," Emma murmured back. A strong hand was trailing up her thigh. Her husband had never been skinny, but the discovery of magic had injected new motivation into his exercise.

"Is that what I am? A master?"

"Demanding, is what I meant."

The hand stopped, just shy of her slowly building need. Emma groaned.

"Well then," Dan said jovially. "I demand that you write Lord Smith a letter explaining that we now have some time to work some runes for him on his shield project." He stepped back. "I'm sure he'll be delighted."
Emma turned and glared. "Having you role-play Lord Slytherin so much was a mistake."

One frustratedly written letter later, Emma stomped up to the floo, threw in a pinch of floo powder and watched the green flames lick high in the fireplace. She chucked the letter in and said, "Hogsmeade Owl Office."

She had just enough time to squeal in delight as strong hands grabbed her from behind, spun her around, and hauled her onto the kitchen table, before the letter was consumed and swirled away in a rush of green fire.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Letters, unlike people, didn't need to remember to get out at the right grate. Emma's envelope rocketed through the floo and after barely five minutes whooshed out of the fireplace of a large building, furnished with one large desk, a hundred wooden perches, and plastered in owl doings on every flat surface visible.

The wizard on duty cleaned his wide-brimmed hat again with the wand, plucked up the envelope, sliced it open, extracted the two knuts inside, pocketed them, and placed the other, still-sealed envelope, which had been inside the first, in a tray marked 'OUT.'

A moment later, a small barn owl swooped down from one of the hundreds of perches and held out its leg expectantly.

One tied piece of string later, and it was off.

A half-hour later, Lord Smith looked up from his breakfast of bacon, ham, eggs, sausage, black pudding, cheese, and beer, before letting out a humongous belch and snatching a letter from a silver tray carried by a house elf.

"That was unrefined, dear," said a well put-together lady on the far end of the huge table. Lady Smith was the kind of person who would perfect her make-up, potions, hair, skin charms, jewellery, and day clothes each and every day before even considering taking breakfast with her husband of seventy years.

"Yes, dear," said Lord Smith. "Oh, look. Slytherin's finally pulled his finger out of his arse."

"Really, dear? Is this about those tiny runes you've been so excited about?"

"Yes, dear. Slytherin's people finally have some time to kill. Hah! I bet that means Slytherin's missing again."

Lady Smith pursed her lips. "Oh dear."

Twenty minutes later, three separate letters zoomed their way through the floo to three separate owl offices throughout the land. There, three different owls picked up those letters and whisked them to three different manor houses. Three different ladies wearing dressing gowns of three different colours—one red, one pink, one black—read those letters and sat down at three different writing desks. Three different letters then became five, which then became eight, then ten, then fifteen.

Morning became noon, which became afternoon, and finally evening.

Lord Jacob Greengrass stood in his office, the red stain of the sunset tinting his furniture and books, and read the owl that had just been delivered.
Lord Greengrass,

I have heard on the grapevine that Lord Slytherin won't be with us for a few weeks. Since your previous reason for declining my invitation to the emergency meeting of the Mandrake Supply Council was lack of time due to political commitments, I wondered if this new development might have freed up some of your focus. If so, please let me know if you'd like to join us so I can make the necessary arrangements.

Yours with great respect,

Barallion Updike

Jacob took out his best thunderbird quill, put nib to parchment, and wrote.

Yes, I would.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The next morning, next to the main floo place of Malfoy Manor, Virgo inspected herself critically in the hallway mirror. Now that she was more than whole, she could easily see why the Malfoys had chosen her to be her diary's body. Her face still contained a certain amount of baby fat, but it was clear that she'd soon develop into the kind of witch that powerful wizards fought duels over. Her robes were fine and rich — nothing like the cheap, mass-produced, orphan-appropriate clothes she'd worn when she'd first arrived at Hogwarts — nor like the more modern muggle clothes she'd recently worn, designed and made to keep out the biting Swedish winter. No, these robes made her look like a wickedly beautiful sorceress straight out of a high fantasy story.

They are robes appropriate for a noble witch of high-birth — a noble witch, like me.

Virgo chuckled nervously.

"What are you laughing at?" spat the mirror.

Virgo's eyes narrowed.

Ten seconds later, Lady Malfoy burst in, wand out and alert. "What happened? I heard a crash—"

She stopped when her eyes fell on the smashed glass laying around Virgo's feet before travelling up to the candlestick held in her blood adopted daughter's hand.

It took every ounce of control Virgo possessed not to look sheepish or guilty.

Lady Malfoy had insisted that she stay 'home' at least one more night before leaving back for school. That time had given Virgo much time to think and consider. The first major question had been, 'was she still a Horcrux?' That had been answered with a quick trip to the soul chasm, with a resounding, 'yes, unfortunately.' The second question had been, 'what was she going to do now?'

That question, she was still considering.

After a final farewell and eager to get away from her new adopted mother's fussing attention, she stepped into the floo and said, "Hogwarts!". The rush of the floo warmed her as she rocketed up from Wiltshire to the highlands of Scotland. It was like the world's coolest theme-park ride. And with her wand in hand, she felt like an actual superhero — or was that super villain? She was part Dark Lord, after all.

"Miss Malfoy!" Headmaster Lockhart beamed as she stepped into his office. "You're a bit too late
for breakfast, so you'd better skip along to your first class.'

Virgo did *not* skip as she made her way towards charms class, although the prospect of actually going to magic school almost made her want to — *almost*. Despite the harrowing experience of being a prisoner in her own mind, this *was* one of only two places she'd called home, the other being impossible to return to.

"Miss Malfoy," chirped professor Flitwick from atop his pile of books when she tentatively poked her head into the classroom. "We're currently practising the shrinking charm. Why don't you sit next to Mister Creevey there?"

Colin Creevey's eyes bugged as she sat down next to him, flicked her long hair, and flashed him a smile.

She watched in interest as Creevey tried to shrink down the goblet each of them had been given and failed miserably. Creevey then watched in awe as she flicked her wand, without even saying the incantation and yo-yoed her goblet from large to tiny and back again, several times in as many seconds.

He wasn't the only one who'd caught that little display. A few of her fellow Gryffindors and many of the Ravenclaws they shared this class with were also staring at her.

"Excellent display, Miss Malfoy!" the professor exclaimed. "Take two points for Gryffindor. Why don't you spend some time helping your classmates while I help Mister Cornfield here?"

"Happily, Professor."

As Virgo started showing Creevey how to execute a proper 3/8 flick, her mind drifted to one already obvious, but now unavoidable fact. This was *so* easy! She was so much better than her peers even the teachers couldn't help acknowledge it. She was almost twelve, but already better than even the oldest students in the school. There wasn't *anything* she couldn't do. If she wanted to, she could be the greatest sorceress the world had ever seen.

*No, I AM the greatest sorceress the world has ever seen!*

"Miss Malfoy!" Professor Flitwick called from across the room. "Please contain your enthusiasm in class! That is what charms club is for."

Virgo, once again, tried not to look sheepish.

"Although, I must admit," the professor continued in his usual light-hearted tone, "this is the first time one of my first-year students has produced a small army of river-dancing goblets. Take another two points."

Virgo didn't take lunch in the great hall. It wasn't that she was scared, she just wasn't… ready? She, that was it. She wasn't ready. She wasn't ready to talk to John Potter and Susan Bones in person for the sort-of first time.

In the Gryffindor girl's first-year dorms, she whispered, "Dobby."

Dobby the free house elf popped into being by her bed. "Miss is wanting Dobby?" His eyes looked worried. "Miss should not be calling Dobby in Hogwarts. It is not being safe."

Feeling a bit guilty, Virgo quickly relayed her desire to the rare house elf she'd been introduced to the previous night.
Dobby wrung his ears. "Oh, Miss. Just this once, Miss. But you must only be calling on Dobby if it is life and death. That is what Lady Malfoy is saying."

Dobby popped away and five minutes later Virgo had her lunch laid on in front of her. As she ate, her mind drifted back to the great things she could do. Before she'd performed that damn ritual with the diary, she'd had plans — so many plans — plans to travel the world, discover ancient magics and artefacts, and even forge her own. She'd wanted to climb to the top of Magical Britain and walk the road of immortality further than any had walked it before.

Dabbing the edges of her mouth with her handkerchief, she dismissed her now empty plates and made her way down to afternoon class — Defence.

That was where her plans for greatness hit a massive mental snag.

"What are you glaring at, Black?"

"Glaring, Creevy? I'm not glaring at anything. Certainly not at you."

"John says you're up to no good."

"How dare you speak to Heiress Black like that, mudblood," sneered one of the Carrow twins.

"Why, you! I know what that word means, you know. Hermione told me all about it!"

"Humph. Granger may be pretty, but her whole family are nothing but whores for Lord Slytherin."

It wasn't Black and the Carrow twins that were giving Virgo problems though, rather it was the girl sitting in a corner of the classroom, all by herself — the girl with fiery red hair and eyes that, in just a heartbeat, could go from relaxed to so intense they could pin a butterfly to a stone wall.

"Sit down, all of you!" Snape snapped as he swept into the classroom. "Creevey, five points from Gryffindor for your disrespect. Black, see me after class. Today we are going to study the lip-locker curse."

Ginny Weasley caught her gaze and smiled.

Virgo felt a chill go down her spine. Actually, she wasn't the best witch in the school, was she? Not if it really had been Weasley who was the one to ambush her not once, but twice, almost killing her each time. Virgo was as strong as she was because she was part Dark Lord. What terrible secrets did Weasley possess that allowed her her power?

After half an hour studying theory, Snape pulled up two students for practical, one of whom, was the current subject of Virgo's worries. The girl's movements were even more elegant than she remembered — not an ounce of energy was wasted, physical or magical — and the girl gave off the distinct impression of supreme amusement as her Gryffindor opponent, one of Virgo's male classmates, tried his best to seal her lips, but failed time and time again.

"Yes, thank you, Miss Weasley," Snape drawled. "Perhaps you feel in need of a greater challenge?" He turned. "Get off the stage, boy," he snapped at the still-mute Gryffindor.

A murmur of surprise went through the students, Virgo among them. Snape was planning to duel Weasley himself? Sure, he'd been insinuating that he would eventually, but most had considered it an idle threat. Teachers did not, as a rule, duel students — and certainly not first-year students. Weasley herself looked shocked before the corners of her lips turned upwards.
These were not normal duels.

With the allowed spells limited to only one, it wasn't really a test of combat, but rather a test of pure cast speed. Who could draw, aim, and cast the fastest.

In the first round, both Snape and Weasley were caught by surprise, each casting faster than Weasley had done against the Gryffindor boy. It ended in a draw, with both combatants mute.

"Again," Snape snapped after unsealing their lips with a wave of his wand.

The second round went even faster. It was only Virgo's magic sensing abilities that allowed her to follow it at all. Most of her classmates just gasped. Again, it was a draw.

"Again."

Virgo suspected she was the only one who spotted the briefest look of worry that crossed the redhead's face before both she and Snape sheathed their wands, ready to duel once again.

This time, Weasley lost.

While the whole of the classroom held its collective breath, Snape advanced on the now sheepish looking girl. "Miss Weasley," Snape said in his silkiest voice. "Do you take me for a fool?"

"No, professor."

"Do I perhaps look like someone who is easy to trick? Someone who might enjoy a good laugh?"

Weasley awkwardly shuffled her feet. "No, Professor."

"Then let me make one thing quite clear. If you ever lose on purpose in my class ever again, I will have you in detention writing lines from now until year end. Have I made myself understood?"

Weasley blanched. "Yes, Professor."

Thirty minutes and many duels later, Virgo left the defence classroom, face ashen, skin shivering, with only one thought going through her head.

Ginevra Weasley needs to die.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"There!"

In the middle of an empty classroom, Daphne, Hermione, and Alex aimed their wands at an empty patch of floor and let loose their magics. Their accumulated powers shot forward, hit nothing but stone, and rebounded in different directions.

Alexandra cursed.

"Focus!" Daphne shouted. "Position!"

The three witches jumped to stand back-to-back, forming a triangle with each side brandishing a promise of total magic destruction to any foolish enough to strike. Or at least, that was the intention.

"This is ridiculous," Hermione whispered. "How are we supposed to—"
"Quiet," Daphne hissed. "Listen."

The classroom was deathly still. Alexandra shifted her weight in her boots, almost imperceptibly. Hermione and Daphne's sensible flats stayed glued to the floor.

Then, out of nowhere, a flare of magic all but over-whelmed them. For those trained to sense the subtle flows of magic it was as if a sun had been lit in the deepest depths of an underground cave.

"It's a trap!" Hermione shouted, but not quickly enough.

Alexandra had already pointed her wand in the direction of the flare and sent her chains whipping across the room. There was a blur in front of her, and the next thing the Black Heiress knew, a glowing red hand appeared from thin air, right in front of her face.

To those not familiar with group magical combat, it is often asked why stunners are so often used, when the enemy can just awaken their fallen comrades. The answer to this is simple. Stunning a wizard takes but a second, while getting your head back in the game when you've just been awoken from a magically induced slumber takes quite a few more than that, even for the well-trained.

Thus, as Alexandra Black slowly collapsed to the ground, neither Hermione nor Daphne counted on her to save their asses. Hermione did flick a quick enervate at Alex, and Daphne did spin around to shield Hermione while she did so, but they both knew that they were now well and truly up the proverbial creek, without the proverbial paddle.

And indeed, Alex's eyes had barely even refocused when the same glowing red hand appeared again, this time at Daphne's totally exposed back and fired another stunner.

In the time that it took Hermione to enervate the now falling Daphne, the floating hand was back again, this time at Hermione's back. Another flash, and Hermione was gone as well.

Still groggy, Alexandra just about registered intent to stun forming in her general direction. As quickly as her foggy mind would allow, she formed the same intent on the tip of her wand and brought it up to swat the enemy magic away, but not, unfortunately, quickly enough.

Daphne, by contrast, barely even realised that she was waking up in the middle of a fight before another red stunner was fired at her, finishing off their team's last hope.

This is why enervating team members only really works when the combatants in question can even hope to hold off the enemy for long enough to bring them back into the game.

A few meters away from the fallen girls, a shimmering cloak appeared in the air, whipped off by another young witch in a muggle tracksuit top, bottoms and trainers. "Damn Snape!" Ginny shouted. "I— Argh! I was so careful not to show my skill in public for so long! Damn him! I'm just so—! ARGH!"

After a few moments of this, Ginny remembered herself enough to fire off three enervates at her fallen comrades.

"Alex!" Hermione said angrily, the moment they'd both found themselves. "What were you thinking? It wasn't even a spell! It was just raw magic! It was so obviously a trap!"

"Oh, like you were doing anything to help," Alex snarked back. "You can't even spell-swat."

"You couldn't spell-swat until a few months ago."
"And you're a whole year older than me. And top of the class."

"That's why I can't spell-swat! If I had the time to train like you and Ginny, I'd have mastered it long before you did."

"Are you saying you're better than me!?"

"Girls," Daphne said, firmly cutting across both of them. "Let's not argue. What would Harry say if he saw us acting like this?"

Hermione and Alex looked thoughtful for a moment.

"That we need to get better at working together?" Alex asked.

"That each of us has unique strengths and is valuable in their own way," Hermione suggested.

"Maybe," Daphne conceded, before turning to Ginny.

Ginny still looked annoyed. "He'd tell you both to get back to work. I can't believe how easy getting the drop on you three is."

"But you have the cloak and won't let me use my inferi," Alex protested. "Why can't we have a try with it?"

"You think that would make a difference?" Ginny smirked. "Take it if you want, but it's not me that has to get better at fighting an overwhelming opponent."

"Girls," Daphne said again, drawing their attention back to her. "Ginny is right that we need to continue practicing as we have been, but we've been at this for over an hour now. Let's take a break. In the mean time, Hermione has some interesting ideas for us, I believe. Hermione?"

"Oh! Right!" Hermione trotted over to her bag and returned with a large leather bound book. "I've been doing some research into animagi and how they can be used in combat. I'm sure Harry was going to talk to us about this eventually, but since he's, you know"—her voice became strained—"not with us at the moment, I figured we should go ahead without him." She collected herself and sat down on the charmed blanket that Daphne had laid down on the floor, the others following suit. "Oh, is that from the kitchens?" Hermione asked, as Daphne produced a wicker basket.

"It is. The elves here are still rather cautious around me. We don't know if our lord can give them clothes and none of them want to be the first to find out either way."

"Right. Oh, sandwiches? Thank you — just chicken for me. Why do they insist on cutting the crusts off? Don't they know the crusts are the best part? Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes. Animagi in combat. I found this book written by an auror in the eighteenth century, Cecil Tempest, who did a lot of experimenting with his animagus form and some of what he says is quite fascinating. For example, the basic theory of aether flamelage that we learned in transfiguration seems to work with the animagus form, except for the transformation itself, which doesn't seem to take hardly any magic at all."

"That makes sense," Ginny said with her mouth full of egg and cress sandwich, which caused Daphne to wrinkle her nose. "Some wizards hold their forms for years. My Mum used to tell me stories of wizards who turned into birds and just flew away and lived their whole lives like that."

"Quite," Hermione said. "But the most interesting part is that perhaps because the form doesn't take much, if any, magic to hold or transform, an animagi's magic continues to replenish while
"Mhm!" Alex said, enthusiastically, keeping her mouth closed while munching on a bacon butty. She swallowed. "That is rather cool! That means that if we have a good form for combat, we can weave between forms and never run out of magic."

"Yes," Hermione agreed with a slight nod. "And some forms are better suited for combat than others. Bigger forms have more inherent magical resistance than smaller forms, while smaller forms are harder to hit. The ideal would be having a small form, but of a magical creature — preferably one that is already highly magically resistant." She couldn't help a slightly smug expression creeping onto her face. "Something like a miniature unicorn, to take a purely hypothetical example."

"Hey, Grims are also magically resistant," Alex quickly said.

"But are about the same weight-class as a normal wizard, which makes them much easier to hit."

"Yeah, but can turn spectral! Which is awesome against wizards who rely on physical attacks."

"Girls," Daphne cut in. "Let's not turn this into a wand measuring contest. Some of us, after all, won't have forms suited for close combat at all."

Hermione and Alex both looked abashed.

Ginny sniggered. "No, you'll just be able to read over someone's shoulder from over a mile away, up in the air, well out of range of any wand fire. I'd say that's pretty useful. I just hope that I can learn to transform mid-sprint. That would be really awesome. It's just a shame cheetahs aren't inherently magically resistant."

"No," Hermione agreed, "You'll just have to rely on your own inherent magical resistance. I just wished we knew what Harry and Luna's forms are. Luna I get, but it's not like Harry to keep secrets - even if he does like guessing games."

Alex and Ginny both nodded.

"What else did you learn, Hermione?" Daphne asked.

"Well,—" Hermione began, but before she could continue, Ginny cut her off.

"Hang on!" the tracksuit-wearing witch said. "You're right, Hermione, it isn't like Harry to keep secrets. He usually tells at least one of us, and, Daphne, I think that subject change was just a little too clean."

Hermione and Alex raised their eyebrows and looked at Daphne.

Daphne looked annoyed for a second before she sighed. "Oh, alright. Yes, he gave me a clue on my birthday, but he did outright tell me later on."

"Why didn't he tell us?" Hermione asked, looking a little hurt.

Daphne shifted uncomfortably. "I think he's having a bit of a wand measuring contest of his own — with Luna. He's not telling all of us because he doesn't want Luna to know until they meet in the ritual. You know what he's like with her. Of all of us, Luna is the one that comes closest to actually challenging him." She shrugged. "It's a boy thing."
Hermione folded her arms. "I'd have never told Luna if Harry had asked me not too."

"Yes, but you know how perceptive Luna can be."

Hermione's shoulder's sagged. "I suppose you're right."

"Wait!" Ginny jumped in. "So, you're not going to tell us?! You can't *not* tell us now that we know you know."

"Ginny," Hermione started in a scalding tone of voice, "If Harry doesn't want us to know—"

"No," Daphne cut her off. She sighed. "Ginny is right."

"Wait, I am?"

"Yes. Besides, Luna is also out of it and we might have only a few weeks after they wake up before we do the ritual. Just promise you won't tell Luna, even if she figures out that you know."

They all promised.

"Okay." Daphne brought out a book of her own and laid it down open in the middle of the quartet of witches. "Just remember that even I don't know the details. I just know the general form."

"General form?" Alex asked.

Daphne turned several pages, stopped, and pointed her finger. Ginny and Alex both gasped. Hermione's eyes widened. The picture was of an abomination of a creature, like something out of a taxidermist's worst nightmare. It had seven different heads, a body that looked formed from three different animals, five different tails, one of which had a head of its own, and legs that each ended in a different foot — claws, hoof, talons, and foot.

"Chimaera," Hermione whispered. "A magical creature born of dark magic storms — fused from two or more different animals to create a new whole, greater and more terrible than the sum of its parts. Very interesting."

"Interesting?!" Alex blurted out. "Harry has *this* as his animagus form and the best you can do is, 'interesting'?! Don't you realise how insane this is?! Chimaera are five-x magical creatures! They're some of the most dangerous and powerful magical creatures known to wizarding kind!" All the while the Black witch ranted, Ginny was emphatically nodding her head. "And don't get me started on their intelligence!" Alex continued. "Chimaera are the only five-x magical creature that can understand the human tongue — they're sentient! Some wizards and muggles in the past used to worship them as gods, despite the fact that they *ate* people! Only one wizard has ever single-handedly killed a chimaera—one insanely lucky wizard—and *that* was only a one-month old cub! With Harry like this, we'll be *unstoppable*!"

"They're not invincible," Daphne said, quietly. "The one in the castle last year was killed by the Basilisk — and the ICW seems to deal with at least one rogue Chimaera every other decade."

Alex paused for a moment. "Okay, they're not invincible," she conceded. "But I mean, what is? You remember what our lord constantly tells us during training. 'In a fight between creativity and power, bet on the side that has both'. I'd love to see Voldemort or Dumbledore's faces if Harry learns to weave *this* into his duelling style. So, what are his parts?"

"I told you already, I don't know. He did make a joke once that he was both hot and cold blooded — or that his forms traditionally were, anyway."
"Snakes," Ginny said firmly. "If one of his parts isn't a snake of some kind I'll eat my hat."


"Some combinations and parts do tend to crop up more often than others," Daphne said, turning one of the book's pages. "Dragons, goats, and lions are common."

Alex's eyes widened. "Wait, dragons! So, Chimaera can have magical-creature parts. Okay, I'm calling it now. Harry will be every five-x magical creature mushed together."

Hermione scoffed. "This isn't a boy-who-lived adventure book, Alex."

"I don't read them!"

"I… never said you did?"

Ginny frowned. "And how would a lethifold fit into this ultimate five-x Chimaera?"

"Okay, forget it! It was just an idea."

Hermione smirked and nudged Daphne in the side. "Maybe he'll be a unicorn Chimaera with a snake tail. Then you wouldn't need me, you could ride him."

Daphne flushed red. "Can we get back to the topic at hand? We need to figure out how we're going to use our animagus forms while working together against Harry."

"Maybe I should ask my brothers," Ginny thought out loud. "They're really good at creative thinking."

"They haven't told you what they're planning on doing for the ritual have they?" Daphne asked. "Or what forms they are?"

"Penguins," Ginny said, now grinning widely. "Rock-hopper penguins. Fred said he'd go first. George will go with the next batch. They flipped a coin. As cool as it would be to chance a cerberus penguin, they are actually remarkably sensible when it comes down to the important things. They know the risks of rituals — especially untested ones."

"I don't think Harry would have actually let them stuff themselves into one pot," Daphne said with a wry smile. "But then, that's Harry, isn't it? Let the other person choose to do what he wants them to."

The four witches sat around the book on the floor fall silent for a moment.

"I really miss him," Daphne said.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Hey, Malfoy. John Potter is looking for you," said some random Ravenclaw as they passed in the corridor.

"So I've heard," Virgo replied, with just a hint of annoyance. "Over and over again."

At some point during the day, word had gotten to the boy-who-lived that the not-really-a-squib Malfoy had returned to the castle. Since then, she'd barely had a moment's peace. It wasn't that she was avoiding him…
Virgo sighed.

Okay, so it totally was that she was avoiding him.

It just felt so weird having been so close to this boy, while seeing him as nothing but a tool, while at the same time never having talked to him, but admiring him from afar, and having what she now knew was a teenage crush on him, possibly even more than that. None of this was helped by a small part of her screaming that she was a man, and that she didn't bend over for anyone — in any sense of the phrase.

But the Hogwarts rumour mill was not a one-way street, to horribly mix a metaphor, and news about her wasn't the only thing that had been plucked from the grape-vine, stamped on at said mill, and happily distributed around the local watering-hole for students and staff alike to get horribly drunk off of.

Harry Potter, the enigma, and Luna Lovegood, the whore, had both been taken ill to the hospital wing almost immediately after her own little accident, and rumour had it that they had been petrified.

That was extremely disturbing. Either because it meant that the two had somehow managed to invade her mindscape, or because the basilisk of Hogwarts proper was once again active, and possibly not even under her direction. Had the brief period of her not being a parslemouth reset the 'first-come-first-serve' rule? Had Lord Slytherin conquered the chamber while she'd been out of commission? Or even before then?

And not only that, but an even more troubling thought — had it been Harry Potter or Lovegood who had knocked on her soul just before the Basilisk had attacked her old selves while trapped in her own mind? That was another explanation for how they'd gotten petrified. After all, the magic of parseltongue had given her guardian more life-like qualities than any normal mental creature.

She'd been quite certain that Harry Potter was not a Horcrux, but now, once again, she wasn't so sure. On the other hand, that wouldn't explain how Luna had gotten petrified — since she obviously wasn't a horcrux… probably… possibly? Or maybe Ginny Weasley was a horcrux! That could explain her skill — but only if it was Weasley who'd attacked her. But then what about Alexandra Black? She was also very advanced for her age. But, no.

Virgo shook herself.

Knowing what she knew about Voldemort, the horcruxes would never be able to work together. So either it was one of them, or it was none of them.

If Lord Slytherin was the Horcrux, then Luna Lovegood might be able to traverse the soul chasm, as his betrothed, but that didn't explain Harry. Unless Harry Potter was secretly a witch who'd also been betrothed to Lord Slytherin — stranger things had happened.

Alternatively, none of them was a horcrux and there was some other explanation for their power. Or, even more annoyingly, their power could just be 'because magic said so'. That was always a possibility.

Whatever the cause she needed to get on top of it. And, as much as her thoughts might panic at the idea, that did mean being close to John Potter. He was her best chance — at survival and at greatness.

"Virgo!"
A very familiar voice caused her to jump and spin around, guilt flashing all over her face.

"S-susan."

Susan Bones practically tackle-hugged her. "You're back! Why didn't you say anything? Where have you been? John has been so worried! Are you okay? Who attacked you? Did you see his face? Her face? It wasn't the same witch as before, was it?"

Virgo was both used to being hugged, and not used to being hugged, as seen by her hands, which froze, out in front of her, rigid, before finding their place, awkwardly, around the Bones Heiress' back. "I'm fine, Susan. No, I didn't see her face — and yes, it was the same person as before, I think."

Susan leaned back. "Then why are you wandering around alone?! That's very dangerous. We need to take care of you."

Virgo grimaced. "I don't need an escort everywhere now. I do still have the portkey."

"And a fat lot of good that did you."

Virgo glared. "It was just a mistake on my part. If I'd been more careful I'd have been able to use it. I won't be caught out like that again."

"Either way, you shouldn't be here. Come with me. I'm taking you to John." Susan grabbed Virgo's arm and started to drag her.

"Susan, wait!"

"What?"

"I…" Virgo hesitated. What could she do? Say she didn't want to see John because a part of her felt like she'd never met him before?

Susan's gaze softened. "What is it, girl? Are you worried about John?"

"No!" Virgo paused. "Okay, maybe a bit."

"Why?"

Virgo didn't say anything. A whole host of excuses whipped through her head, but the number one that fought for attention was revealing her new animagus form to the Bones Heiress. That would surely be a good reason to be nervous about meeting John Potter again, but just as soon as the idea presented itself, she rejected it. Even if she had a good reason for having a snake animagus form—her dead blood mother being a Gaunt (something that she wasn't ecstatic to reveal as it would brand her a bastard)—she hadn't yet thought up a good excuse for how exactly she had realised that animagus form as a first year.

Then inspiration struck. Virgo bit her lip. "My Mother," she started, voice dropping to a quaver. "She…"

Susan's gaze softened again. "She what?"

"She said she wasn't happy with me. She said that if I didn't start acting more like a Malfoy, she'd make things very difficult for John."

"Oh, Virgo." Susan hugged her again. "You don't need to worry about that. The Malfoys and
Potters are always at each others' throats. Surely you must know that. She can't do anything to make John's life more difficult without getting a bloody nose in turn. She wasn't threatening you, was she?"

Virgo shook her head. "Then that's okay, then. C'mon, let's go find John. He'll be dying to know you're okay."

As they made their way towards the arena, and even if she was still anxious, Virgo couldn't quite suppress a small smirk behind Susan's back. *I am entirely too good at this.*

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Protego."

In the middle of the Hogwarts duelling arena, John Potter was feeling extremely anxious. "Stupefy."

For the longest time, he'd been desperately trying to get the events of the timeline back on track, and had been miserably unsuccessful at every turn. "Ventus divinum."

The events of the other night, though, had rattled him. "Locomotor wibbly."

The basilisk was active again. But it wasn't attacking muggleborns, as it should be, rather it had been his evil twin brother and the Lovegood Heiress who'd been the victims. "Protego — stupefy — incarcerous."

Not only that, but Virgo had been attacked too! Despite his promise to protect her. *And* he'd been helpless to stop them taking her away. Merlin only knew what she'd been through. She was avoiding him now. Did she hate him too, just like Ginny did? Did she think he was useless? Unheroic? Weak? A FRAUD?!

John's hand, gripping his wand so tightly his knuckles were white, shook. "FULGUR STUPEFY!"

There was a loud crack of electricity, and in the middle of the duelling arena, a fourth year Hufflepuff hit the ground, hard. "John!" Cedric Diggory stormed over. "Magical Merlin, are you trying to *kill* him?! Are you even paying attention?!"

John let out a deep breath. Another Hufflepuff was already by his downed opponent, casting basic healing spells over him. "Sorry," he muttered. "I guess I should take a break."

"You're damn right you should take a break. And don't get back in here until you can keep whatever drama you have in the castle out of the arena!"

"Cedric!" said a familiar voice behind him. "Don't you think that's a bit harsh?"
John turned to find Susan, leading an anxious-looking Virgo. It was an odd expression to see on her face, like an abashed dragon. To his great surprise, his heart skipped a beat.

Cedric grumbled something about the princess being found and left to coach some of the third years.

"Virgo," John breathed. "You're okay? Right?"

"Yes, I am." She replied. "I'm sorry for not finding you sooner. I was being foolish."

"Her mother threatened to hurt you, if she didn't stop associating with us," Susan supplied.

Anger flared in John's gut. "Don't listen to her, Virgo. I swear, I have nothing to fear from the likes of her. But still…" He looked at his wand in disgust.

"John," Susan said. "What is it?"

"I can't let things continue like this," he said. "It's too dangerous. We've been lucky up to now, but if things continue as they are…" he trailed off.

"John, what are you talking about?"

"I'm not strong enough." His hands were shaking again. "I'm still not strong enough."

Susan's eyes popped. "What are you talking about? You're one of the most powerful wizards I know! More powerful than even Dumbledore when he was your age. Only Harry compares, and you're twins."

"It's not good enough. There are larger threats out there. Threats I thought I could control — direct — but I can't."

"What threats?" Virgo asked, eyes narrowed.

"Are you talking about Lord Slytherin?" Susan hazarded.

"No," John said, firmly. "Well, Maybe a little. But no, not entirely."

"Then, who?" Virgo asked.

John said nothing.

"Do your Mum and Dad know about these threats?" Susan asked. "Maybe we should tell them and let them—"

"—No!" John almost shouted, causing several Hufflepuffs waiting on the sidelines to turn and stare. "No," he said, quieter. "No, I can't tell them."

"But you can tell us, can't you?"

John said nothing again. For the longest time, he just stared at the duelling Hufflepuffs. Eventually he broke his silence. "I need to become stronger. More Powerful. Better at everything I do. I need to win. I can't lose."

"John," Susan said, soothingly. "It doesn't have to be all up to you, you know. Your Mum and Dad —"
"No."

John was momentarily surprised that voice saying no wasn't his own.

Virgo looked between the two of them, eyes cold and hard. "John is right, Susan. While others' strength is useful, you must always be able to rely on your own power. If John believes he needs to be more powerful, to protect us from some secret danger, then that is something we should encourage. Weakness is never a virtue."

Susan looked extremely uncertain. "But why can't he tell us what the danger is?"

Virgo shrugged. "Magic is often shrouded in mystery. Sometimes not saying anything is best until you are fully certain of your path." She turned to John. "Are you fully certain of your path?"

John shook his head. He couldn't help but stare at the young witch sat in front of him.

"Then don't tell us. Wait until you are ready. You can do that, can't you?"

John found himself unconsciously nodding.

"But, Virgo, what if this secret danger is something to do with your attacker?" Susan protested.

Virgo shifted in her seat. "That's not impossible, but, well — if I tell you something, will you promise not to get mad?"

John and Susan both nodded.

"I've been watching how she moves, and the way she attacks and everything, especially when she duelled Snape, and I think that the one who attacked me might be Ginny Weasley."

"WHAT!?" John jumped up. "No! That's impossible! Wait. What do you mean, when Ginny duelled Snape!?"

"Today, during defence class. Snape picked on her to duel, and she held her own against him. She's a very skilled and powerful witch."

John fell back on the wooden bench they'd made camp on and stared out across the duelling arena. Ginny trying to kill Virgo? That wasn't possible. Why would Ginny try to kill Virgo? But, he already knew why. Harry was still convinced Virgo was the diary, wasn't he? And he'd told Ginny about being from the future. So, could Ginny be trying to kill Virgo because of that? John shook his head. No, it wasn't possible. If he knew anything about Ginny, it was that she wasn't a killer. She didn't have it in her. It just wasn't part of her nature. But that didn't actually rule out Harry in other ways.

He waved a dismissive hand. "It's not Ginny. I know that. But thanks for your support, Virgo. I really appreciate it." He grinned. "The Malfoys don't happen to know any rituals that make you stronger, do they?" he added as a joke.

"John!" Susan gasped.

Opposite him, Virgo also stared at the duelling Hufflepuffs, deep in her own thoughts, so she barely processed John's words when she replied, "Maybe a few."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

A few days past. The rumours surrounding Virgo, Harry, and Luna continued to swirl, but those
about Virgo specifically died down as she returned to the day-to-day business of magical education. Harry and Luna's state though, was cause for much more speculation. Petrification wasn't a common ailment, and all the things that could cause it tended to be very scary.

All the books that might have anything to do with the subject had been checked out of the library, and a couple of the more unscrupulous students started selling fake anti-petrification charms at the school black(ish)-market.

Even quidditch wasn't immune. With the Gryffindor—Slytherin match fast approaching, both Oliver Wood and Marcus Flint had been seen haggling over the gourde-looking necklaces with the air of holy pilgrims fighting over the last finger bone in the brightly coloured box.

That was when Fred and George Weasley decided to step in and shut that particular stall down.

There were far better ways of dealing with petrification.

Far away from anti-petrification amateur hour, in the capital city of the Italian peninsula, two wizards in emerald green robes sat around a round table, along-side two-dozen other wizards and witches, listening to a speaker summarise the global mandrake situation.

"And so, we hypothesise that the spread of mandrake-pox—a magical parasite, not unlike Brazilian Strangle Vine, may be an unintended consequence of the recent spike in growth of certain large-scale national ward magics."

All two dozen figures around the table looked, as one magical, towards the two wizards in emerald green.

"I don't know what you're looking at us for," said Lord Greengrass, blankly. "We do not control the Albion."

"Quite," added an amused Lord Lovegood. "And besides, this is only a hypothesis, am I correct? There could be any number of possible causes. I'd say solving the problem is more important than pointing fingers."

An hour later, both lords left the meeting room in the bowels of the ICW and started the quick march back towards their hotel rooms.

"Can you believe it?" Jacob asked. "Any old excuse, eh?"

"People will hold a grudge until the end of time, my friend. Many still resent the role of Merlin's greatest work throughout history."

"Our contact didn't look very happy to see us there, did he? Hopefully we will hear from him soon."

They didn't have to wait long. When they arrived back at their hotel rooms, Jacob found a hastily scrawled note pushed under the crack of his door. "Just an address and a name," he said.

"Who?"

"Mister Grasso."

"Where?" Xeno asked.

"Somewhere in Tuscany."
"Full dragon-hide?"

Lord Jacob Greengrass smirked. "Oh, yes, my friend. I very much think so."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

On a Tuscan hillside, up a small, windy lane, stood a nondescript looking villa, which will now, nevertheless, be described. It was the kind of building to which the word 'rustic' could not be properly applied for fear of offending barnyards so tumbledown that horses could eat their fill from outside the building. Any foreign expat using the word 'quaint' upon seeing it, would soon be cursing the lack of phone line to call an insulation company, and any insulation company, upon seeing it, would suggest that this wasn't so much a job for filling in with foam, but rather for building with it.

It was almost impossible that something so decrepit could still be standing by itself without the aid of magic, which of course, was the case.

"Is it just me," Jacob said, looking at the building they'd just spied around the last corner, "or do all those holes look unnatural?"

"They look pretty natural to me," Xeno quipped. "Moss growing around the stones — vines growing up the walls."

"Yes, so why do none of the stones scattered around the holes have moss growing on them?"

They stared at the pile of stones littering the ground in a suspiciously explosion-shaped pattern before a wave of magic washed over them.

"Anti-apparition ward," Xeno supplied in a cheerful voice, rather unnecessarily so, in Jacob's opinion.

They both slipped their wands from their holsters.

Around another corner up the road, came four wizards in rather more flamboyish robes than the ones they wore. Not better quality, it should be noted, just louder. None of them were smiling.

"You two," their apparent leader called. "You are not welcome here, English Wizengamot. Turn around and leave and there will be no violence."

"Can't do that, old boy" Xeno called back. "We have a meeting with mister Grasso."

"Mister Grasso won't be seeing nobody today."

"Why's that?"

"He's sick."

Jacob and Xeno exchanged glances.

"So," Jacob started, "it doesn't have anything to do with the fact that his house looks like one-hundred-year-old Swiss cheese?"

"You're not the only one who needs mandrake, Wizengamot. Get 'em!"

All four wizards dashed forward, levelled their wands, and cast whatever hexes or curses they saw fit.
Meanwhile, Xeno slashed his wand in a wide arc, casting a powerful shield over both him and Jacob, while Lord Greengrass muttered under his breath, preparing an incantation of his own.

"Whenever you're ready, old boy!" Xeno shouted over the hail of spellfire impacting on his shield.

Jacob pointed his wand. "Murus ignis!"

A wave of enchanted fire swept up the winding road, leaping high in the air and surrounding their attackers on all sides. Moments later, transfigured beasts formed from nearby rocks and leapt into the flames, adding snarls and roars to the cacophony of screams emanating from the tightly controlled firestorm.

"Not very good, are they?" Xeno commented. "I don't know why I even bothered getting dressed."

"Fire and forget spells have always been the purview of the lazy. Maybe this will teach them not to underestimate the right hand of Lord Slytherin." He couldn't keep the ironic drawl out of his voice as he said that last bit.

"I thought your daughter was his right hand."

"At school, maybe. I don't think the Wizengamot would appreciate a thirteen-year-old witch lecturing them."

"You could always be his right foot."

"Wouldn't that make you his left foot? Wouldn't Luna be his left hand?"

"You know, I always thought that feet got a raw deal. They do most of the honest hard work and then hands take all the glory, just because they were born with opposable thumbs."

The screams coming from the fire-storm started to shift from expressions of terror and medium pain, to full-on skin-melting torture.

Jacob grimaced. "I guess I should do something about that."

Thirty minutes later, the four wizarding thugs had provided all the information they knew about their unknown employer's plans for Mister Grasso. It wasn't much information, but it was enough to make inquiries. Fresh mandrake was currently in very short supply, and those who knew how to get it were in extremely high demand — high enough demand, apparently, to warrant full-on kidnap and extortion.

"I'd feel much happier about this if we had another foot to help," Jacob said when they got back to their hotel room. "Things could get messy from here on."

"Smith?" Xeno asked. "He's pretty handy in a fight — I mean footy. Or Tempest? Of course, having Black would be favourite."

"Sirius Black would make a useful third foot, but that's up to Harry. He's the man with the plan there."

There was a pause.

Then, "If Alexandra is the bridge between Slytherin and Lord Black, wouldn't that make her Slytherin's third leg?"
It was the weekend. And it was early morning.

In the Slytherin common room, Draco Malfoy watched Alexandra Black. She was casually slouched in his old chair, taking no heed to the convention that a witch of noble birth should present herself with the dignity and decorum proper to her station, watching an older Slytherin boy, who was standing in front of the two courts—Dark and Gray—complaining about the behaviour of some random Gryffindor girl. At least, Draco was watching the Black heiress, until the name 'Malfoy' was dropped. That focused his attention faster than the word 'suitor' would for a roomful of seventh-year witches.

"She's been acting a lot more aggressively since coming back," the boy said. "She appears to have developed quite a temper."

"And when did this start?" asked Daphne Greengrass, presiding at the head of the Gray court, to the right of the still-empty Slytherin throne.

"Maybe on Wednesday? Isabel and I were discussing family matters with Rupert Holland from Ravenclaw outside the library when Malfoy turns up and just hexes the both of us out of nowhere."

"No provocation?"

"None!" The boy paused for a second. "Well, we did have Rupert down on the floor, oozing quite badly, but it was a family matter. We told Malfoy so."

Alexandra Black snorted. "Just like a Gryffindor to go around sticking their nose in other people's business."

Despite himself, Draco winced.

Greengrass smiled wryly. "It sounds to me, like a failing in education. But what can you expect from a house that mistakes a powerful witch for a squib? An uncouth and dangerous girl who plays hero by beating people up."

"Hardly a hero!" the older boy butted in. "After she was done with us, she turned on Rupert! 'Why are you weak!?' she yelled at him. 'I hate weak people.' When she was finished, Rupert was worse off than I or Isabel."

Interestingly, Greengrass didn't look surprised. Instead she looked thoughtful. "And now our Miss Malfoy is aggressively prank-hexing every Slytherin she sees if she thinks she can get away with it," she mused. "Hmm…"

Draco rhythmically rubbed his temples with the tips of his fingers. He dearly wished he could tell Black that Virgo was a spy. If you knew that, what was going on was so obvious. Virgo was establishing a position of respect and power within the Light. By publicly making an enemy of the Dark (and many of the Gray too), she signalled her willingness to fight the side she secretly served, as well as her separation from her family, rallying those who might be on the fence to her side.

Although the aggressive nature of the move was somewhat puzzling, Draco thought. Ever since he'd had first met his little sister, Virgo had given off an air of quiet menace — of coiled power ready to strike, held back only by her unwillingness to acknowledge, in those she dealt with, even the possible hint of a threat. Lashing out like the older boy was describing did indeed feel less Slytherin and more Gryffindor.

Alexandra had the right of that, at least.
Draco looked to where the Black and Greengrass heiresses were now arguing about what was to be done. Somehow, he had to guide this situation to Virgo's best interests without appearing to do so. His future as Alexandra's right hand depended on it. Now that he wasn't obviously on top, there were plenty of others who'd love to take that position away from him. He then glanced to where the Carrow twins sat attentively on either side of Black — not on the couches, like normal people, but happily draped out on the floor, as though they were concubines in a sultan's harem. Draco grimaced. If he could keep his status without swearing himself to Alexandra's service for the rest of his school days, that would be a rather nice bonus.

He was jerked out of his musings by the name 'Malfoy' once again surfacing in the debate.

"I'm telling you, Greengrass, there's no good reason not to let Malfoy take care of his little sister. This is obviously a family matter and that's how we do things here." Alexandra smirked. "Or is the Gray too Light to remember the importance of family?"

"Bold words coming from the daughter of a Light family," Greengrass counted in an amused voice. "Especially one who is only heiress because there is no legitimate claimant."

Black narrowed her eyes. "How I am heiress is no matter. What matters is that I am. Far more so than you, Greengrass, who is only heiress until your little sister resets her noble house ring. Why hasn't she yet, by the way? Are Mummy and Daddy afraid she's not up to the task?"

"Astoria will take up her responsibilities in all due course, but maybe you should keep your nose out of other people's family matters." Greengrass smirked. "That is, after all, how we do things here. Or are you too Light to remember the importance of family?"

Alexandra snarled before she froze and her face flashed triumphant. "Oh! So you do agree with me. Excellent! Malfoy"—she turned towards him.—"I need you to—"

"—Hold on!" Greengrass interrupted. "That is not what I meant."

"Well, what would you do about our Virgo problem?"

"I would let the person best capable of dealing with it sort it out when he's feeling better — Mister Potter."

Alexandra rolled her eyes. "Of course the princess would want to hide like a little girl behind her betrothed's personal attack gopher. For a moment, I thought you might show some balls and handle it yourself."

"Mister Potter is the best wizard for the job. And don't use that word. It is unbecoming of a lady."

Alex sniffed. "I will use whatever words I like. And Potter's not here. Heir Malfoy is. And I'm not going to listen to a stuck-up princess who fights like a girl."

Black had made her opinion on Greengrass's performance against Volf the previous year quite plain.

Greengrass glared. "And I will not deal with some uncouth bastard who forgets she's a girl."

BAM!

It all happened so quickly that Draco barely had time to react. Wands were drawn, spells cast, and students screamed and jumped away on both sides. Black had been the first off the mark, with Greengrass and Granger not far behind. Flint, Bole, Pucey, and Harper were next, followed by just
about every other wizard and witch with the presence of mind to jump into the fray.

Being the first to pull her wand had made Black the first target, but, incredibly, most of the spells fired at her just didn't seem to find a mark.

The short-burst exchange between Greengrass and Black, by contrast, was so smooth — so quick — and so on point — that if Draco didn't know better, he'd have thought it choreographed.

By the time he'd gotten his own wand out and pointed at Granger (the most politically safe target, as far as he was concerned), Black had already hoisted Greengrass into the air by her wrists with her chains, leaving the leader of the Gray to dangle, writhing, helpless and wandless.

There was a sudden stillness as no spells were being cast and everyone had a wand pointed at everyone else and no one wanted to be the first to break that stillness.

"Okay! That's enough, I think!" Black announced, her wand still trained on Greengrass. "I have two Ladies, a vassal, and two wands. Care to raise and go another round?"

Off to the side, Tracey Davis, who was also being held at wand point, muttered something about that not being how poker worked.

Greengrass glared daggers at Black. "When my lord finds out about this…"

Black scoffed. "Yes? What will Slytherin do? Swoop in to punish me for hexing his girlfriend? Can the princess not take care of herself? He duelled Volf because Volf was going to seriously injure you. I'm just going to have a little pranking fun." She giggled, and for a brief moment, Draco couldn't help but be reminded of the memories his father had shown him of his aunt Bellatrix. Alex brandished her wand again. "I got this one from Draco."

Certain he must have misheard that last bit, Draco's mind flashed to the only prank spell he'd recently shared with Alexandra — the one that turned a witch's hair the same colour as their knickers. He gazed with a kind of horrified fascination as his cousin gleefully shouted the incantation and shot the spell towards the girl who most in their community had genuinely come to see as a kind of untouchable princess, right in front of a room full of people.

The spell hit, and Greengrass's long, smooth, blond hair instantly turned pastel pink. A large white bow sprouted on the top.

"Huh," Alex said. "Wasn't expecting that. I'd have thought green and silver or something."

For a moment, Draco thought Greengrass was actually going to cry, before he realised that the shaking and trembling he was seeing was not of shame and embarrassment, but of pure undistilled rage.

"WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?" Roared a voice.

Everyone turned to the portrait door to find Severus Snape, standing there, staring at all the many wands pointed at everyone, looking furious.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

The weak winter morning gave way to an equally weak afternoon. Many chose to stay inside, but for the insane few, the cold was the perfect opportunity to train, all day, without anyone interrupting them.
On the Hogwarts quidditch pitch, a thin red and gold blur, starting high in the sky, tipped forward, and started a breakneck dive towards the perfectly manicured grass below. Spinning over and over as it went, as though circling an imaginary mirror image, it bottomed out a good several meters above the ground and soared back up into the sky.

It was deep, but not deep enough, and it was fast, but not fast enough.

"John!" bellowed a voice.

John Potter groaned.

"What are you playing at!?" Oliver wood shouted as he brought his broomstick level with his. "I don't need my star seeker injuring himself barely a week before the big match!"

"You don't understand," John said. "I have to practice. I have to be better — better at everything."

"You can be better at everything after you've helped us win the match! Was that a Wronski feint you were trying!?"

"So what if it was?"

"What in Merlin's name do you think you'll need that move for? Do you hate the Slytherin seeker that much?"

John glared at Wood. "This has nothing to do with Ginny. It's just about being the best. And you don't have to worry so. Ginny is good, but she's not that good. Trust me, I know."

"Do you now?" asked Fred, identifiable by the massive F on his sweater.

"I wasn't even aware that our dear little sister knew how to fly at all," George added, as they both dropped into the mid-air huddle. "Was right surprised when she turned up on their team. But that's our Slytherin sister. Cunning little thing."

"Probably out practising at the dead of night while everyone was asleep."

"What can you tell us about her style?" Katie asked. It seemed everyone had decided to take a last break for the training session.

"Yeah," Alicia added, while Angelina nodded emphatically on her broom. "Spill the beans."

John quickly gathered his thoughts and memories from before he came back. "Ginny is an extremely team-focused seeker," he said. "She'll play cautiously whenever the enemy team is ahead, and look for the snitch only when there's a chance to win. She prefers playing support while chasing and will always throw the quaffle with plenty of time left on the shocker. I've never known her to work with beaters to knobble enemy chasers, so we shouldn't have to worry there, but she does like to misdirect her throws, which she is very good at."

Wood grunted. "So, a defensive trickster. Easy enough to deal with. Just keep up the aggression and don't fall into obvious traps. Now, get back to practice — and John, I don't want to see any more insane moves, got it?"

Half an hour later, John emerged from the quidditch boys shower rooms to find Virgo. He found her reading intensely, hidden under the bleachers of one of the tall spectator towers. For some reason, she was wearing a large white bow in her hair.
"Ready to go?" He asked cheerfully.

Virgo practically jumped out of her skin. "Don't do that!" She glared. "Yes, I'm ready."

"Found anything yet?"

Virgo closed the library book she'd been reading. "There are hundreds of known rituals, but most of them are not worth it. Selecting a few choice ones will take time and patience, and getting hold of the requirements will be even more taxing."

He flashed her a charming smile. "Any that will help me in quidditch?" He was almost sure that her cheeks reddened slightly.

"There's one that increases your general balance, but it's incredibly dangerous."

"How dangerous?"

"One in five people who try it, die."

"That sounds dangerous."

They made their way up the grounds to the castle, up the many staircases towards Gryffindor Tower. His thoughts drifted back to Ginny, and to Virgo's outrageous suggestion that she might be the one trying to murder her. But that wasn't possible. Ginny didn't have the diary. But with the basilisk possibly active, it was clear that someone must have it. The question was who?

"Virgo!"

Oh, John thought. Here comes likely suspect number one.

Draco Malfoy was coming up the corridor behind them, doing his best not to show just how much he'd been huffing to keep up with them.

"Brother?" Virgo said. John couldn't help notice a slight lilt in her voice, as though she wasn't quite sure how she should react to him.

"Potter," Malfoy acknowledged him, finally catching them up. For some reason, the Malfoy heir then spent several seconds staring at the white bow in Virgo's hair before turning back to him. "I need to have a private word with my sister here."

John immediately crossed his arms. "Anything you need to say can be said in front of me."

Malfoy cursed "Do you know how infuriating you can be?"

John smirked. "I pride myself on it. Now, what do you want?"

"Has it not occurred to you that this could be a family matter?"

"Is it?"

"Not as such…"

"Then get on with it."

Malfoy cursed again.
Virgo was just looking between him and her brother with an unreadable expression on her face.

After cursing him out one last time, Malfoy turned to Virgo and in a voice that dripped formality said, "I have been sent on behalf of Hogwarts Slytherin house to request that you stop hexing us in the corridors. Your power has been acknowledged and the house as a whole recognises that you are not a squib. Will that satisfy you, sister?"

Virgo looked him up and down before smiling. "For now, dear brother."

Malfoy looked like he'd swallowed a lemon, but did nod before turning to go.

John finished escorting Virgo back into the tower. "Hexing Slytherins?" he asked with a shit-eating grin.

Virgo flashed him a coy smile. "They were asking for it."

"By the way, I think that bow looks very pretty on you."

"Thank you."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

As Draco Malfoy headed back to the Slytherin Dungeons, another prominent member of the student Dark, in fact, one might say the predominant member, was nervously making her way into the Slytherin second-year girl's dormitory, careful not to be seen by anyone. Sitting by one of the large four-poster beds—the one covered in books so deep it was like a fortress—was a trunk. The first-year girl tiptoed over to the trunk, knocked a pattern on the lid, opened the lid, and climbed inside. At the far end of the expanded trunk, a lone female figure at a desk, with long blond hair, was stabbing away at a parchment. In front of the figure was a propped-open book titled *Transfiguration Theory: The Lies and Lies.*

"Um… Daphne?" said the newly arrived girl.

"Yes, Alexandra?" she said. The figure did not look around, but Alex could see the tension in her shoulders.

"You're not… you're not mad, right?"

"Mad?" Daphne put down her quill. To Alexandra's ears, the sound it produced as it was rested on the desk was as loud as a trunk being dropped. "You mean mad for being exposed in front of all those boys without warning?" Daphne asked. "Mad about being sniggered at behind my back all day? Mad about every Dark witch in Slytherin, and even some from the other houses too, wearing white bows in their hair and blowing pastel pink bubbles from their wands whenever I walk past? Mad about all that?" She turned in her chair to face her visitor. "No. I'm not mad at all. Why would I be mad?"

Alex winced. "I know we said a simple pranking spell would do, but what you said about me forgetting I'm a girl, well, it kinda hurt. You know I wish we had more choice in our lives. I'm doing my best and I may have gotten a bit too into it. I'm sorry."

Daphne sighed and turned around again, patting the seat next to her.

Alex sat down.

Daphne picked up her parchment and scanned it, as if looking for possible mistakes. "If I'd have
had more warning," she said. "I'd have worn plain white."

"Sorry."

"On the positive side, I doubt anyone will doubt our mutual antagonism now. The idea that you might secretly be a Gray spy would seem ludicrous." Daphne picked up her quill again. "I'm sorry about pushing those buttons, Alex. I know they're sore spots for you."

Daphne scratched away a bit more.

"I'm a bit jealous of you, you know," Alex said eventually.

"Jealous?"

"You're just so accepting of everything — so calm and cool all the time. I wish I could be like that. You were betrothed before we even got to school, but you don't let that phase you at all."

Daphne cracked a small smile. "That's only because of who I was betrothed to. And that was just luck… and kindness. It could so easily have been very different." Daphne fell silent.

"He'll be back soon," Alex said softly.

"I know."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I was originally intending for this chapter to be the last of the arc, but it was not to be. There will be a part four :P If you enjoy my work, please consider becoming a patron of my original projects. All support is appreciated. You can find the links through my website www.leadvone.com.

A/N: This chapter was drafted and made available early through the LeadVonE discord server, as will the next one. If you fancy discussing this chapter with like-minded people, or anything else DP&SW, feel free to head over there.

Also, as an experiment, I edited this chapter live on twitch, a few hours before publication, which I'm told people enjoyed a lot. My twitch handle, for anyone interested, is leadvone.

A special thank you to the following people for helping catch mistakes on #dpasw-editorial: aarabdh, ASK, Caelwyn, ChRiAn, Dragonbait, drakonpie250, feauxen, Fuuryuu, Grimjaw, JaydenStevenson, jgabeie, MageKing17, Magic Bird Dust, RaphtaliaBestGirl, Salty_sauce, sfu, Sumguy, Tendra, TrendyTreky, Turtle King of Fear,

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)
1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2019's prices.
"Welcome, witches and wizards! To the second quidditch match of the year! I'm your commentator — Lee Jordan — and this is Gryffindor vs Slytherin!"

A wave of cheers swept across the stands. Hundreds of students waved banners, flew flags, or showed off their charm skills with animated lions and snakes. Even the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws pledged their allegiance to one or other of the teams, at least for the event.

"History in the making, Hogwarts! Last year, Gryffindor fielded the youngest seeker in a century, our very own 'Boy-Who-Lived' and duelling phenom, John Potter — and this year, Slytherin will match them with their own first-year seeker! A fierce duellist in her own right and the first witch on the Slytherin quidditch team in twelve years — Ginny Weasley!"

The air carried a nip that fought against even the older year's warming charms. The previous night hadn't seen a cloud in the sky, leaving the grass crisp with frost and the breath of students foggy. The crowd was a roiling sea of thick, long robes and cloaks, with the occasional muggle winter jacket thrown in.

"And here come the Slytherin team!"

Another round of cheers sounded out.

In the Gryffindor vomitorium, John Potter held his Nimbus 2001 clenched in a fist.

They would start cheering him soon. They always did. They always did, and, until this year, he'd always loved it. He knew those cheers were supposed to be supportive, but given everything that had happened, the weight of their expectations now felt more of a rock than a balm. Twice, he'd publicly stepped up to the plate since coming back in time, and twice he'd failed — first at the last quidditch match, when he'd accidentally won the match for Slytherin by catching the snitch in his mouth — and then second at the duelling tournament when Harry had been ready to beat him, if Dumbledore hadn't sprung his trap to send Harry to Azkaban in time to save him — a trap, which hadn't even worked, despite putting him in hospital.

A tendril of guilt about that whole affair wormed its way into his head before he firmly crushed it. He couldn't afford to be weak. There was too much riding on it. Virgo was right. He needed to be strong. He needed to be powerful. He needed to stop losing.

"And now, here comes the Gryffindor team! Wood, Spinet, Johnson, Bell, Weasley, Weasley, and Potter!"

The cheers rang in his ears as he walked onto the pitch. John Potter — the Boy Who Lived — the fake — the fraud — the chosen of Fate and Death — and now, the one who was always losing.

"Ready to lose, Potter?"

It took every ounce of self control not to wince at the words. Ginny Weasley, wearing green robes and a smirk, stood opposite him with arms folded while Flint and Wood looked like they were trying to break each other's fingers.
"Lose, little sister?" Fred Weasley asked from beside him with a raised eyebrow.

"Isn't it you who should be ready to lose?" George added.

"Don't think we'll go easy on you—"

"—Just because you're our dear little sister."

John took a deep breath. He narrowed his eyes. "I will not lose. I cannot lose."

Ginny actually looked momentarily surprised by the force in his words before her smirk became a grin. "Good, Potter," she said. "Then I won't need to hold back." And for just a second, John thought he saw a flash of his own Ginny buried deep in the Slytherin facade that stood before him now. That flash died a second later though, replaced again by the cold smirk, and his thoughts passed over the rumours he'd heard in the last week — that Ginny had duelled Snape in defence class, and that she hadn't been found wanting, at least in a very limited duel. At first, he'd dismissed the claims out of hand — Ginny was never that good — but after Virgo had started pouring over all those possible rituals with him — rituals with terrible costs, but which might improve someone's fighting prowess by a little, or a lot — doubt had stirred.

It could explain Ginny's abilities, and, more importantly, it could explain Harry's.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"There's the signal!" the commentator shouted.

Game time. Ginny pushed off hard. The biting cold air whipped her hair, chilling her ears and fingers. Adrenaline, already coursing through her veins, kicked up a notch.

"The snitch is released!"

The briefest flash of gold zipped in front of her face before it did a round pass of Potter and vanished off across the grounds.

"The seekers line up for the quaffle!"

Madam Hooch held up the round ball and glared at them both. "I want a nice clean game. No knobbling."

Potter nodded, while Ginny merely grinned.

Hooch then threw the ball high in the air, she and Potter raced towards it, and moments later, John's stomach connected with her shoulder. Potter let out an 'Umph!' as the air was forcibly expelled. Not looking back, she snatched the quaffle and was off in a flash.

"And the bludgers are released!"

She then had to immediately dodge one of the charmed canon balls zooming right past her, before Tamaron smashed it towards Wood. She laughed. Compared to what she was used to while training, that had been almost cute. Everything moved so slow. It was as though the rest of the world was made of treacle, and she was a red-hot knife, slicing through it like a flame-whip through ice.

Together, she, Draco, Flint, and Bole powered through a hastily constructed defensive formation, leaving her free to score the first ten points of the game.
"Weasley scores!"

The crowd went wild.

Her brothers gaped at her. Not surprising, really. If it felt easy, how must it look?

Draco high-fived her. "Not bad, Blood-traitor!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Slytherin Scores, again! 20—0!"

John shook himself in disbelief. Ginny moved like a lightning bolt. It was as if she simply went from point A to point B without passing through the air in between. That was silly, of course. She wasn't actually doing that — but it sure felt like it.

"Potter goes for the intercept! Misses!"

His only reward was a smirk before she rolled under her broom and zoomed off again, dangling underneath her broom like an unsloth-like sloth, passing the quaffle to Malfoy just a gnat's breath before the shock charm would have kicked in, allowing the pure-blood heir to easily punt it through the middle hoop.

"30—0!"

The groans from the Gryffindor side sounded like hot lead poured into John's stomach.

He gritted his teeth. This Ginny was far too aggressive and far too good! It was like she wasn't even the same person as before. Ginny had always been an acceptable quidditch player, but this was like playing against a young Victor Krum!

"John!" Wood bellowed. His captain pulled up beside him. "I thought you said she was a defensive player!"

"She's changed!" John shouted back. They had to shout to hear each other over the crowd. "This isn't anything like I expected!"

"Then we'll have to make changes to our strategy! Katie! Angelina! Switch to Reginald's Defence. Fred and George, switch priority from assist to disruption! We'll play a cautious point exchange and then hope to win the seeker duel!"

John's teammates all nodded and rushed up to their new positions, leaving him and Wood alone together. Wood looked him square the eye. "No pressure, John, but when the time comes, you absolutely must win this for us. They're too good for us to win an extended quaffle fight, so get that snitch or die trying."

John nodded.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Gryffindor scores! But Slytherin still leads 90—20! Are we seeing the birth of a legend here today?!"

Under the thick wood of the quidditch stands crouched a slight figure in expensive robes — crouched such that no one would see it unless they knew exactly what they were looking for and exactly where to look.
"Flint to Draco! Passes to Weasley! Bludger!"

The crowd gasped.

"Merlin! If she weren't so good at dodging I'd think they were trying to kill their own sister!"

The figure shifted and a crack of light from the stadium outside shined on its face to reveal the young face of the new Virgo Malfoy. She was shaking.

"Slytherin score again! And Weasley breaks off to hunt the snitch! Wow, this is aggressive! Gryffindor have an opportunity to catch up now, but the gap is large!"

Virgo wrung her hands together. It had all been so easy when she was just thinking about it. But now that she was here, it was proving far more difficult than she'd imagined.

"Gryffindor score! 100—30! Weasley has seventy more points of freedom!"

She knew it was wrong. Killing. She knew it instinctively. But what choice did she have? It was life or death. Kill or be killed. She knew that instinctively, too. Anyone in her position who thought otherwise was a fool. John wasn't going to help her — not like he was now. And she had no proof of a conspiracy. So she could only rely on herself. One thing she knew more than anything else, though — she did not want to die. Death. The idea terrified her — more than anything she'd ever considered. Death. Dying. Becoming nothing.

She was sure it was Ginny Weasley who was trying to kill her and had only become more sure as time went on. This was a perfect chance — a chance she might never get again.

"Gryffindor score! 100—40!"

Virgo clenched her fists and took a deep breath. It was now or never. She whispered, "Dobby."

It took several seconds before the house-elf popped into being beside her. "Miss?" he asked in his high pitched voice.

"Shh!" Virgo urgently held a finger to her lips.

Dobby's eyes widened. He grabbed his long ears and pulled them down around his face. "Miss?" he asked again, this time in a whisper.

"Dobby," Virgo began in a whisper of her own. "Tell me, is your magic strong enough to overcome the charms on the bludgers?"

Dobby nodded. "Most house-elfs could, Miss, but Dobby is not just being most house-elfs."

"You could guide them to attack and kill a specific player?"

Dobby looked at Virgo with his bulbous eyes and nodded enthusiastically. "Oh yes, Miss. Dobby can attack and kill, Miss. Dobby is a free house-elf."

― DP & SW: NRiCaD ―

"Gryffindor score! 100—50!"

There! Floating high in the sky, Ginny spotted a flash of gold, executed a ninety-degree barreled turn, and pelted down the pitch, feeling almost disappointed that it was going to be this easy.
"She's seen it!" Lee shouted.

The crowd roared.

The snitch flittered from point to point in front of her, speeding up faster and faster as she approached closer and closer. She stretched out a hand.

"Is this it?!"

Then, out of nowhere, her senses screamed at her to move. Or rather, it would be more true to say that she moved first, and only afterwards did her brain receive the report from her senses telling it that they had decided to coordinate directly with her spinal column on the logic that it was better to ask for forgiveness rather than permission when the alternative was receiving a bone-shattering collision with a bludger moving several times the normal rate.

The snitch disappeared and the crowd let out a collective groan or relieved sigh depending on which side they were supporting.

Righting herself, Ginny cursed. That had been close. What on Earth had been up with that bludger?

"Ginny!" shouted a warning voice that she recognised as one of her twin brothers. She turned around, just in time to register the same bludger, still travelling at the same stupid speed heading straight for her, again.

She didn't even think twice. She raced to gain height and started sweeping the sky — standard procedure for shaking bludgers, and so-called because it looked like the player was trying to clean the sky with their broom.

It didn't work.

The bludger just circled and came barrelling for her again. Again she dodged, this time by only a finger. A small smile crept across her face.

"Tamaron! Hazlett!" Flint shouted. "Get that thing off her!"

"We're trying!" Tamaron shouted back, giving the bludger a powerful swing with his bat, but which might as well have been a foam staff for all the effect it was having.

"Don't bother!" Ginny called out, dodging again with a single spin on her broom as though it were a gymnast's bar.

"You sure, Weasley?" Flint called back from below.

"Positive!" Ginny grinned and expanded her senses out as far as they could go. "Just keep us ahead as long as possible! I'll deal with this!"

"Ginny!" Fred called out.

"You can't be serious!" George added.

"Just play!" Then she spun around and raced up the pitch.

Her predicament had not gone unnoticed.

"I say!" Lee Jordan's voice boomed across the stadium. "That bludger should not be doing that! Isn't there some rule about that, Professor? No? Okay, Professor McGonagall informs me that
apparently when bludgers go insane the game continues unless one side gives up. Is that really a rule? Really? Huh. You learn something new every day. And it doesn't look like either side is going to give up — not even with the Weasley twins shouting at the Gryffindor captain — nope, Wood's not having any of it."

Ginny could feel the bludger's magic swirling around inside it whenever it got close — powerful magic, demonic even — but it wasn't actually that difficult to avoid now she'd got the hang of it. Sweep from side-to-side, feel the directional intent, then dodge at the last moment. She started scanning the pitch again for the snitch while another part of her mind started working on the likely suspects for this little stunt.

It was only because she was so familiar with the exact magic that was performed next that she was able to dodge by such a tiny margin that she actually lost several strands of long red hair. The bludger was behind her when she felt an almost lightning bolt crack of magic arc through the air and arrive in front of her. She'd already been banking left when the bludger appeared, out of thin air, at the position the magic had indicated, and zoomed right at her. For anyone watching it would have looked like the bludger had just teleported, accelerated from a dead still to almost half its 'normal' speed, and Ginny had nevertheless still dodged it.

Over three-hundred people were watching.

"Merlin!" Lee Jordan cursed.

That wasn't the last time the bludger teleported.

An almost manic shit-eating grin was permanently plastered on Ginny's face. She was starting to recognise this feeling. It was the feeling she got just before she'd taken on the diary. It was the feeling she got during the phoenix ash heist. It was the feeling of being able to pick out every individual muscle in her heart contracting in rhythm. It was the unnatural blueness of the sky and the greener than green vividness of the grass. She spotted a snowbeetle flying in mid-air, less than a foot from her face, and could make out every beat of its beautiful crystal wings — or at least, she could, for about half a second, before it got splattered by the speeding, teleporting cannon ball.

She dodged that one by pointing her broomstick up and throwing herself around the shaft.

"Gryffindor score! 100—60!"

But she really did need to look out for the snitch.

Wait a minute!

Off in the distance, Ginny spotted a glint of gold. It took only a flick of her foot to point her broom in the right direction and urge it forward. The bludger disappeared behind her, but she didn't feel any teleporting magic. Seconds later, she'd caught up with the snitch. She reached out her hand.

And again, her senses screamed at her that she'd already moved.

The snitch sped off and disappeared.

Ginny looked around sharply to locate the bludger, but couldn't see it.

She frowned.

"Close one there!" shouted Lee Jordan. "Weasley almost had it!"
Her senses screamed at her again, but this time she'd been ready, consciously moving out of the way in time to avoid… nothing — nothing except the wind-rush of flying death zooming right past her face. Her eyes widened in realisation.

The bludger was now invisible.

But no worries. Her magic sensing gave her an advantage there. So long as she knew she couldn't trust her eyes it wasn't *that* big a problem. This was definitely getting difficult, but it wasn't anything she couldn't handle.

"Weasley!" Marcus Flint bellowed from somewhere above her. "We've lost the other Bludger!"

Well, shit.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Up in the top stands, holding the skirt of her robes in a white-knuckled death grip, Hermione stared at the darting shape high in the air. At times Ginny would dive. At other times she'd spin. And yet other times she'd fix her broomstick in place and frantically flinging herself around the shaft, as though she were a muggle on a gymnast's high bar or a dancer's pole. The net effect was of a green and silver fly dodging two flailing invisible hands.

What was going on? Hermione thought. What magic could take over the bludgers like this? It would have to be strong — abnormally strong.

All around her, students were talking excitedly among each other — each of them asking the same question. It was obvious something bizarre was going on, and the quicker had cottoned on to the fact that both bludgers were now hidden and targeting the Slytherin seeker.

The only likely candidates, as far as Hermione could figure, would be a very powerful wizard like Dumbledore or Voldemort. But last year, even the Dark Lord had struggled to take control of John Potter's broom in the middle of the match, and that was *with* eye contact. Whoever was behind this had made the bludgers invisible, completely removing that way to channel — and they were succeeding in overpowering two bludgers at the same time!

"Daphne," Hermione began, uneasiness permeating her voice.

"Yes?" came the terse reply. Daphne was staring up at the spectacle with narrowed eyes.

"You don't think it could be *her*?"

"If it is, then she must have some help." Neither needed to say who the *her* in question was. "I think even our lord would have difficulty pulling this off alone. Where is she? Can you see her?"

It took Hermione several seconds to spot the new Malfoy. "There!" she declared. "In the Hufflepuff stands — next to Bones. She doesn't look like she's doing anything."

Daphne frowned. "I hope it's not Dumbledore."

"I wish Harry were here!"

"Me too."

"What are we going to do?"

"If the teachers aren't going to intervene, then you should get down there. You're training as a
"Oh! Right! Of course!" Hermione jumped up and almost tripped over herself in her rush down the steps.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Slytherin are still leading, 110 — 80," Lee Jordan's voice boomed out across the stadium. "But the gap is closing rapidly! Is Slytherin about to lose their amazing first-century lead? And will Miss Weasley be able to keep dodging those things?! I mean—MERLIN! That one was close!"

Up in the top box, Lady Lily Potter's fuming face was as red as her hair. "Headmaster, we must do something!"

Lockhart chuckled. "Now, now, Lily. Minerva seems quite happy to let play continue. If our dear transfiguration professor sees nothing wrong then who are we to contradict her?"

"In my experience, Headmaster," came the silky voice of Severus Snape from beside her, "Professor McGonagall—level-headed woman though she may otherwise be—does have a tendency to lose her sense of perspective when it comes to quidditch."

Lily shot her once-estranged childhood-friend a look of appreciation. Although she didn't want to admit it, everything was starting to get a bit too much for her. The new job, the attacks on Virgo Malfoy, the business with Virgo's brother in the forbidden forest, the terrible shock of finding Harry and Luna petrified in the hospital wing from another unknown attacker, and now this — she honestly didn't know what she'd do without him.

Lockhart seemed to take Severus' words a bit more seriously than her own, before he shrugged them off too. "Little Miss Weasley is doing fine! Look at her! Isn't she amazing? Why, I dare say she comes close to my own skills when I were a lad. That was before I dropped my training to dedicate myself to fighting against the dark arts, naturally, but—Oh! Look! Here comes Minerva, right now."

Lily looked around to see an irate Professor McGonagall climbing the stairs to the top box, three at a time. "Disillusionment charms!" she shrieked. "That's not quidditch! We must find who's doing it and stop them!"

"And you wouldn't consider the possibility of just stopping the game, would you?" Snape drawled.

"Stop the game?" McGonagall looked as though Severus had asked her to close Hogwarts. "Don't be silly — you don't stop quidditch. But disillusionment charms are not quidditch, and we bloody well will stop that! Headmaster!"

Lockhart didn't even skip a beat. "Of course, we must help! Miss Weasley is in danger!" He looked around the professors who had all turned at this proclamation. "Septima, Bathsheda, and Irma, would you go and search the student stands? Lily and Severus, I'm sure you can handle the storage rooms, and Filius, could you take on the changing rooms? Topsy!"

A house-elf popped in front of him. "Yes, Headmaster?"

"Be a good chap and find out who's doing that, will you?" He pointed to the still frantically darting figure of Ginny Weasley.

"Yes, Headmaster, Sir!" The house-elf popped away.
"And alert the ghosts, too!" he called into empty air.

Lily was already halfway down the stairs before she turned back. "And don't forget to check the wards, Headmaster!"

Lockhart grimaced, focused, and smiled brightly. "Nothing out of the ordinary! And now! It is time for the hero of the hour to save the fair maiden!"

Lily barely had time to consider exactly what Lockhart meant by that statement before he'd reached into his pocket, withdrawn a shrunken broomstick, expanded it, and mounted up.

"Don' ye interfere with the game!" McGonagall shrieked as he zipped past and up into the air.

"Worry not!" Lockhart's fading voice called back. "For I am Gilderoy Lockhart!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

At first, John couldn't believe his luck. One of the bludgers had gone mental and focused only on Ginny. But then, as they'd closed the gap in points, his elation had given way to worry. Something wasn't right here. Bludgers shouldn't act like that, and now they'd gone invisible. Ginny was good — amazingly good — but even she'd start to tire soon. She was a girl after all.

"Ginny!" he called out.

"Sod off, Potter!"

"You can't keep that up forever!"

"Watch me!"

"You need help!"

Ginny suddenly turned direction and John found her right next to him. "Okay, help me then." She was smirking.

John had only a moment to process what she'd done before he felt a whoosh through his hair and he instinctively knew he'd been only a few inches away from having his skull caved in. He quickly backed off. "Ginny, what the hell! That was dangerous!"

Ginny looked at him like he was stupid, even as she flipped upside down on her broomstick to avoid another attack. "Of course it was dangerous." Dive, dodge, spin. "That's the point."

"But this is insane!"

Ginny just laughed.

"Headmaster?!" shouted a female voice behind him.

John looked around to find a rather put-out Madam Hooch flagging down Gilderoy Lockhart. "What are you—?"

"Not to worry Rolanda," Lockhart said in his ever-present jovial voice. "I'll keep an eye on Miss Weasley here. Don't worry! I know the rules. I won't interfere in the game. I just feel that we could use an extra layer of precaution here." He winked at her. "And if things really get sticky, then I, Gilderoy Lockhart, will take out those pesky bludgers." Hooch huffed, but did back off with an acknowledging wave of her whistle.
Lockhart then turned to him.

"Don't you worry, John, my boy." Lockhart gave him a wink too. "I'll take care of Miss Weasley. You focus on the game."

John nodded thankfully, and shot off back to the Gryffindor chaser formation. With the headmaster looking out for Ginny, he could focus on what was really important now… winning.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Back with Lockhart, there was a sudden pop, and the headmaster found himself straddled by a terrified-looking Hogwarts house-elf.

Lockhart looked down, rather bemused. "I say—" he began.

The elf didn't let him get any further. "Free house-elf!" it shrieked.

Lockhart's face went from jovial to puce-white, faster than a set of traffic lights, just moments before something heavy smashed into his side with the shape, weight, and speed of a cannonball, and Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Second Class, honorary member of the dark force defence league, three times winner of Witch Weekly's most charming smile award, author of the best selling Boy-Who-Lived adventure series, and current Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, slipped off his broomstick and fell to the ground.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Far off on the other side of the quidditch pitch, a bright blue light shot out of a wand-brandishing small figure in expensive Slytherin green robes, standing at the edge of the pitch. The blue light hit the falling figure of the headmaster, and slowly brought it to the ground.

"I think that's Granger!" Susan shouted, squinting. "Yes, it's Granger!"

Virgo felt ill. She'd been sure a free house-elf would have been able to take out Weasley without making too much of a scene, but Weasley was far better than she'd ever considered. Her magic sensing range was insane. She was reacting to the invisible bludgers as though they weren't even charmed. And now, it seemed Dobby had even stopped caring if other people got in the way. Her hands started to tremble. Dobby wouldn't target John, would he? Or get caught? Both would be horrible.

She kept her eyes on the action high in the sky, while occasionally glancing back to watch Hermione Granger casting basic first aid spells on the headmaster, including what looked like a bone-vanishing spell, if the way his arm went all rubbery was any tell. Nasty business. He'd be feeling that all night.

A gasp from the crowd wrenched her attention back skyward and her heart stopped. Weasley and John had started to dive.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"110—110!" The announcer shouted. "Will John Potter break off to look for the snitch? Yes! Yes, he is. We're back to three-on-three for the quaffle, but now that their seekers are out of the picture, will the Slytherin team dominate as they did in the early game?"

The human fly that was Ginny Weasley cursed. She'd been hoping to spot the snitch by now, but these damn bludgers just weren't giving her the chance. Merlin, it was fun though.
"Weasley!" Flint bellowed.

"I know!" Ginny shouted back, twisting her body so as to dodge both bludgers at once. "Find the snitch, win the match! On it!" Easier said than done though, she thought. Potter had total freedom to look while she played kiss-chase with two invisible flying bowling balls. Wait! An evil smirk spread across Ginny's face as she remembered her last interaction with Harry's brother.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

John Potter kept his eyes peeled as he scanned the pitch in the standard seeker pattern he'd perfected over two Hogwarts quidditch careers.

"Hi!" said an enthusiastic voice to his left.

John nearly jumped out of his skin. "Ginny?! What are you doing?"

"You looked lonely."

"Lonely? Wha—" Something smashed across the tip of his broom, spinning him around and nearly bucking him right off. "GINNY!" he screamed.

"Well, it's not fair that you get to look without worrying, and you do keep trying to get close to me."

"Get away from me!"

Ginny grinned. "Na-uh!"

All thoughts of the snitch fled. As did he. It was amazing just how fast his Nimbus 2001 could go when he pushed it — not that it mattered much, since Ginny had the same model.

"Magical Merlin!" Lee Jordan shouted as the quaffle hoops passed in a blur. "Miss Weasley is sticking to Heir Potter like glue! She's right behind him! I just wish we could see the bludgers!"

His only saving grace was that Ginny had to occasionally dodge a bludger, which gave him a moment to increase his lead. If only he had some way of seeing them.

"Flint goes for the hoop! Saved by Wood!"

Wait! The grass! And he could shake Ginny off at the same time!

John shot up into the air, rapidly gaining height, and then tipped over right at the apex. It was Wronski feint time!

Ginny pulled up beside him and pointed down. "Hey, look, the snitch."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

A gasp from the crowd wrenched Virgo's attention back skyward and her heart stopped. Weasley and John had started to dive.

"They've seen something!" the commentator screamed as Weasley and John began their descent, not just in free fall, but actively accelerating towards the ground while corkscrewing around each other.

Shrieks filled Virgo's ears and it took her a moment to realise that one of those voices was hers.
Go! Faster! Harder!

Ginny's grin couldn't have been wider as she pushed for everything she had, the world spinning around her, first the sky, then Potter, then the ground, then the stands, over and over.

Closer! Nearer!

The ground was like an emerald pumpkin pie being thrown at her by the will of a god.

Don't let up! Not until the very — last —

"SHIIIIITTT!" Potter yelled, a voice that started right behind her and then suddenly fell upwards.

Barely an inch from the ground, Ginny jerked up and felt blades of grass whip across her knuckles as she sped forward.

A glint of gold flashed across the pitch in front of her.

Heart beating, adrenaline pumping, that feeling of feeling ALIVE. Now! Speed! Fast! Win!

"The bludgers!" the commentator screamed.

"Magical Merlin!" Alex shouted, wide-eyed, as the two invisible bludgers impacted right behind Ginny and started tearing twin furrows in the pitch as they ploughed unstoppable towards her, sending dirt and grass flying everywhere.

"The snitch!" Pansy shrieked. "She's seen the snitch!"

Ginny stretched out her hand. The snitch was hovering just out of reach, so close she could smell it, darting right — darting left. All she needed was a little more reach. Just a little more.

The snitch darted right in front of her hand.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still.

Her fingers closed over it, almost gently.

Her hand gripped it, the wings retracted into the ball.

She'd done it.

"SHE DID IT! 120—110! SLYTHERIN WIN!"

The crowd erupted.

"HELL YEAH!" Ginny swooped up into the air, triumphant, holding the snitch above her head. "I WIN!" It was as if everything came together in that instant. All the training she'd done. All the hard work she'd put in. This was who she was. This feeling — Oh, how she loved it. John Potter could take his damsel in distress and shove it down his throat. She would do anything to be what she needed to be. Even hurt. Even kill. It was a them or us world, and she'd make sure it was
always them!

Her senses screamed at her to move just a moment too late.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Lily lifted the curtain that blocked access to the last spare equipment room and gasped. Something bad was apparently happening outside, if the shrieks and groans of the crowd were any judge, but whatever was happening on the pitch had to pale to what was before her now.

Severus stepped in beside her, stiffened, and instantly had his wand out.

Four dead house elves lay strewn on the floor. They were very definitely dead. Live house elves tended to still have their heads and didn't have their intestines dangling out around them. Needless to say, blood was everywhere.

"What… what could have done this?" Lily whispered.

"What is definitely the right question," Severus said. "No student could have — not even the more… precocious ones. And I can't imagine any of the professors doing it either. And all the ones who might have were upstairs."

"What should we do?"

"Order the students back to their common rooms and inform the headmaster when he wakes up." Severus seemed to think for a moment. "Topsy?"

There was no reply from the Hogwarts head elf.

"She's not one of the dead," Lily whispered. "Where is she?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Impedimenta!" shouted seven different voices, professors Flitwick, McGonagall, Sinistra, and Vector, along with madams Hooch, Pomphrey, and Pince.

The second bludger stopped dead in mid-air.

The first was already being wrestled back into its box by Hagrid.

Hermione was bent over Ginny — a Ginny who looked like she'd gone five rounds with a heavyweight boxer, with compound fractures all down her right side — a Ginny who grinned up at her through half-lidded eyes and a bloody mouth missing three teeth, and said, "We won."

Hermione harrumphed. "Yes, you won. Now hold still so I can fix this. You're in even worse shape than Lockhart. Honestly, Ginny, what were you thinking?!"

Ginny spat out another tooth and scrunched her face up in pain, but did not answer.

Hermione's face softened. "Relax, I'm going to give you a pain killer."

A minute later, Ginny was feeling a lot better. She still had more wrecked bones than a novice necromancer, but at least the pain was gone. "Thanks, Hermione. I'm glad we have you."
"Must we rush so?" Susan complained to a prefect as they were hustled out of the stadium.

"I'm sorry, Heiress Bones, but the teachers have made it clear that everyone must go immediately to their homerooms. No exceptions."

Virgo was doing her best not to look like she was trying not to look like she was nervous. Her plan had not gone well. But at least she hadn't been caught. Probably. Hopefully? Please, God—Merlin?—whoever!—please don't let her have been caught.

"Maybe your brother would be able to tell us what happened later," Susan whispered as they walked across the grass.

"My brother?"

"Yes. He seems quite close with Weasley. I don't think I've ever seen him so chummy with a girl before. Not even Parkinson. I know you don't get on with your family, but there can't be any harm in asking, right? I can be there with you if you're uncomfortable."

Oh, right. Most of her classmates knew each other from before Hogwarts — even those from different factions. "He might be able to..." she started, sounding uncertain. *My new brother knows Weasley,* she thought. *My new brother is friends with Weasley.* Virgo firmed her jaw. "Okay, let's talk to him — together."

"Of course."

They were almost at the doors when Virgo noticed something moving out of the corner of her eye. A second glance told her it was John. Oddly, he was skulking near the trees just shy of the forbidden forest. He didn't appear to have anyone with him, but he did have his broomstick, slung over his shoulder like a muggle rifle. What was he up to? She nudged Susan, and, taking advantage of the momentary distraction while their prefect opened the doors, led her away to the shadow of one of the towers.

"What is he doing?" Susan asked, exasperated.

"I don't know. Let's wait and find out."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In the hospital wing, Lily looked down sadly at Harry's stone-like form.

Severus and Professor Flitwick were standing like guards by the door.

"I'm going to wake the headmaster now," Madam Pomfrey said from behind her.

Lily turned away from her son and towards the unconscious Lockhart. Miss Weasley was in the bed one further down.

"Now, what is the first thing we do on waking a patient?" Pomfrey asked the student healers. "Clearwater?"

"Assure them that we have everything under control and ensure a general state of calmness."

"Exactly. Granger — if you would."

Hermione Granger brandished her wand and cast an incantation over the headmaster.
The result was not what Lily expected. Lockhart bolted straight up in bed, wide-eyed and began
taking a huge breath.

"Headmaster," Hermione quickly began, "We-have-everything-under—"

"Free house-elf!"

The entire hospital wing went silent. Dead silent.

Lily felt the blood drain from her face.

"Headmaster, are you sure?" Severus snapped from behind her.

"Yes!"

Lily's mind raced. "The wards!" she said urgently, jumping to the first answer she could think of.
"Don't they keep them out?"

"I don't know!" Lockhart wailed. "They're supposed to."

"Dumbledore never liked strengthening the wards," Severus muttered. "He hated blood-feud
culture."

"But they are there, right?" Lily said. "The wards? The headmaster just needs to activate them."

"I don't know how!"

"You should have learned!" Lily snapped. "You're the only one who can."

"No," Severus said smoothly. "There is one other who can."

"Who?" Lily asked. Her face wrinkled as realisation dawned. "Oh, Sev, not him."

"While our headmaster is an accomplished wizard, it will still take him too long to learn. Lord
Slytherin will know how to, and can hopefully get here sooner."

"But we don't know how to contact him."

"Lord Greengrass is our best option. I will speak with his daughter. It is not unknown for lords to
give their heirs emergency means of contact."

"Excuse me," Madam Pomfrey said, the student healers all staring at the exchange with wide eyes.
"Not to butt in here, but what are we going to do, right now, about there being a free house-elf in
the castle?"

The professors and headmaster all looked at one-another.

Three minutes later, a huge pulse of magic shot out from the castle, and every window, door, and
gate slammed shut — a thousand kilometres away, in central London, a blaring red siren went off
in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement — and twenty-three minutes after that, twelve
fully-armed aurors stepped out of the Headmaster's floo and marched in pairs to all four common
rooms, the infirmary, and the kitchens, where Chief Auror Lord Sirius Black and his partner
Kingsley Shacklebolt found over a hundred house elves, including Topsy, cowering in a corner by
the ovens, behind a makeshift fort made from animated tables, chairs, and iron pots, ready to bite
anything that got close. Nothing Sirius said would persuade them to leave the perceived safety of
their fort, and eventually, the two aurors just set up station in front of it. Hopefully Lord Slytherin
wouldn't be too long coming.

Footsteps announced the arrival of another auror. "Sir!" The auror saluted. "Three students are unaccounted for — Miss Virgo Malfoy, Heiress Susan Bones, and Heir John Potter, Sir."

Sirius cursed.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Some time later, and several thousand kilometres away, Lord Greengrass detached a parchment from a rather harried looking owl. Getting into Transylvania hadn't been easy, and the hardest part of the journey was still ahead of them.

"We can take it a bit easier now," Lord Smith said, propping his war-hammer against a wall with a grin and sitting down in a hotel chair, which creaked under him like an oak galley taking on new cannons. "The children aren't going anywhere. And I could do with a rest. These old bones aren't the same as they once were, you know."

Jacob started to read the parchment.

"We will most likely have to fight once we get there, so rest could be a good idea," Xeno commented. "I agree. There is no particular rush now that we know where we are going."

Jacob finished reading and cursed. "Wrong," he declared. "We are now very much in a rush." He handed the parchment to Xeno, who took it, read, and whistled.

"I would agree with you, old boy. A rush, we are very much now in."

"Give me that!" Smith took the parchment and read. He swore. "Okay, serious shit, but what does this have to do with us? Slytherin doesn't need mandrake."

Jacob and Xeno looked at each other.

Smith looked between them both. "Fucking hell!" he exclaimed. "Are you saying that our big stick is laying useless in some bed somewhere, totally stoned? Okay, yes, I agree, we're in a rush." He stood up and hefted his war-hammer. "Let's go crack some skulls." No sooner had the words left his mouth, then there was a knock at the door.

The three British lords exchanged glances.

Jacob was nearest, so he slipped his wand into his hand and gripped the door handle. "Yes?" he called out in the tone of voice which says, 'this had better be important'.

"Ministry of Magic," came the cultured sounding reply from the other side of the door. "The minister requests your presence."

Jacob suppressed a groan. A quick look to his companions showed that both had their hands on their wands as well. They all shared a resigned nod. Jacob opened the door. Instead of the usual wizarding robes that might be expected from ministry officials, these gentlemen, and they most certainly were 'gentlemen', complete with quotation marks, were all dressed in black muggle suits — coattails — white tie — opera.

The lead 'gentleman' gave Jacob a quite literal pointed smile. His teeth gleamed. "So sorry to interrupt you, my lords, but the minister has some urgent business with you."
"And do we have any urgent business with him?" Smith asked.

"You may very well find that to be the case."

After another round of exchanged glances, the three lords allowed themselves to be escorted out of the hotel and, after several rounds of apparition, to a nearby castle on the top of the hill — nowhere near the size of Hogwarts, but very obviously built with one main aim in mind. To keep those who were on the outside, out.

"It's so gratifying to deal with wizards who know how to apparate," their lead 'gentleman' said as they walked under the portcullis and through several wards which felt almost as strong as Hogwarts' own. "Makes matters so much easier."

They were deposited in a waiting room with golden leaf plastered all over the ceiling. Large full-length mirrors, also inlaid with gold, surrounded them on every wall.

"That's got to be a mental game," Smith said. "Want us to always remember what we're dealing with."

"Perhaps," Xeno said mildly. "It does make you wonder though. They're always dressed to the nines — perfect hair — perfect skin. Must be hard to achieve that effect without being able to see yourself."

On the other side of the room from the way they'd entered, a large double-door opened, and a lady —whose silhouette could easily be mistaken for an elegant candlestick—stepped out and gave them another very pointed smile. "The minister will see you now."

She didn't bother following them in. No guards, Jacob thought. No security, no nothing. Not that it was needed. The 'gentleman' on the other side of the large mahogany desk—noticeably older than the others—radiated quiet power in the same way that Harry could. The bronze plaque on the desk read:

*First Transylvanian Minister of Magic, Count Dragos Dracula, Mugwump, Electorate, Eighty-six times Gobstones Champion*

"My lords," the aged vampire purred, sweeping up from his chair. "So good of you to drop in. It is rare we get a visit from the Albion."

"We couldn't stay away," Smith said gruffly.

The count chuckled. "My servants can be a little forceful, it is true. They tend to interpret my suggestions as commands." He gestured to four high-back leather chairs surrounding a low table to the side. "Please."

There was a wooden box on the low table. They all sat. None of the three lords said anything. They instead waited for the minister to pour himself a measure of red liquid into a crystal glass. After taking a sip, the vampire opened with, "The mandrake supply crisis is terrible, is it not?"

Shit.

In the time it took for the minister to pause where most people would need to take a breath, the following thoughts sped through Jacob's mind.

1. This is about why we're here.
2. He knows why we're here.

3. He knows that the mandrake supplier is here.

4. He ordered the kidnapping of the mandrake supplier.

5. We beat up and then tortured his agents.

6. He has mandrake in that box.

7. He wants to trade.

8. We might not be utterly fucked.

9. If we can't give him what he wants, we could still be utterly fucked.

"And in times of crisis," the count continued, "people are wont to do very silly things. Not me, of course, but friends. Friends who found themselves in desperate need. I'm sure you understand."

10. He's acting as an intermediary for someone else.

"So, what do you want for the mandrake?" Smith asked.

"Ahh, straight to the point." The count leaned back. "What do you know of my land's political situation?"

"Only what we've read in the papers, I'd wager" Xeno said. "You signed a new country into existence not long ago, and now rumour is that every wizard and witch in the new territory is being rounded up and bitten."

Jacob winced. That was exactly the kind of horror situation wizards dreaded.

"Fullmoonia," Smith grunted. "Stupid name for a country."

The count swirled his crystal glass and looked at the ceiling. "The name was not my idea, I can assure you of that. And as much as it pains me to say it, the rumours are true. I'll not pretend that life is perfect under my rule, but this 'solution' to my kind is barbaric."

"Eliminate predation by making everyone a predator," Xeno mused.

"We had an understanding," the count said. "We do not take magical blood from any who do not choose it. And for those who do choose, the experience can be truly magical. The freedom in total surrender is like a drug — so I'm told. And you cannot eliminate predation by making everyone a predator — you just make the top predators that much harder to spot."

"Doesn't being top predator by merit rather than birth make it more meaningful?"

The count grinned, flashing his long canines. "Unfortunately, I must speak for all my people, not just myself."

There was a pause.

"So, what do you need from us?" Jacob asked.

"There is a stronghold deep in Fullmoon territory, Castle Dragos. I built it long ago as a position to project power from, much like your Hogwarts has done before — I was not happy to lose it, believe
me. Since then, it has become one of the best universities for ICW obliviators. When the Supreme Mugwump negotiated the peace accord, he insisted that Dragos be granted independent status from the Fullmoon Ministry. The ICW has a vested interest in making sure the university stays open and that both students and teachers need not fear werewolf attacks while conducting their studies. The unintended consequence is that when the accord was signed, many dozens of witches and wizards fled to Dragos for safety. Not long after, the Fullmoon ministry took control of the exit and entrance points, and now many people are trapped within the fortress.

"You need someone extracted," Smith said.

The count nodded. "There is a VIP within the university — someone whom I have a vested interest in. Getting them out is a sensitive matter."

Jacob stroked his chin. "Could be tricky if the Fullmoon is on guard."

"Luckily, the minister of 'Fullmoonia' also has a vested interest in removing this individual from his new country."

"Then why doesn't he just let him go?"

"Unlike me, the minister of Fullmoonia is not an absolute ruler. He is a pack leader, and operates only with the approval of those he leads."

Smith snorted. "So, he can't look weak by letting anyone go — even when it's the obviously sensible thing to do. Typical."

"That is what happens when a bunch of dogs start a government."

Jacob searched the powerful vampire's face for any sign of a sneer, but couldn't find one, amazingly. He found it difficult to imagine what it must be like to rule your lands for over half a millennia and then lose a good chunk of it to a race of magical creatures whose sole purpose for being was to deny you and your people the food that sustained your very existence.

Everyone knew werewolf blood was useless to vampires, but no one could have imagined it would eventually lead to this."

"Get my VIP out, and I will give you the mandrake you need."

Jacob stared down at the box, then at his companions. "Fine," he said — the first among equals. "We'll move out as soon as we have our papers."

"Please hurry." And Jacob was once again reminded of the raw power radiating out from the being in front of him. "The matter may be more time sensitive than we could ever guess."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Compared to Transylvania, entering the newest magical nation of Fullmoonia had been a surprisingly quick affair. The badly-dressed Fullmoonia border guards, who, rather cutely, called themselves aurors, were rather impressed with having three Albion lords swing through their little checkpoint.

It did, however, necessitate another escorting to a rather nice looking cottage some twenty kilometres away from Castle Dragos, to meet the Fullmoonia minister of magic.

"Goliath Volf," said the man, shaking each of their hands in a grip so hard Jacob was sure he could
feel his finger bones grind together. "Welcome to my people's great nation and the front line of the fight against oppression. I just want to make one thing quite clear. I know nothing about what you three are up to, understand?"

"Absolutely," Xeno said, and then without missing a beat added, "Is there anything else you would like to not know?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I was hoping to not know if the rumours that you," Goliath pointed to Smith, "can craft goblin silver are true."

Lord Smith's face darkened. "My house hasn't been able to craft true silver for centuries."

Goliath shrugged without apology. "Then how about the rumours that you"—he pointed at Xeno—"are a powerful necromancer able to speak with Death himself."

Xeno gave the man a bemused look. "My great-uncle was a necromancer, but that's as close as I get."

"Fair enough. And you,"—he pointed at Jacob.

Jacob readied himself for whatever wild rumour might be floating around him.

"Is it true you are to be the father-in-law of Lord Slytherin?"

Jacob blinked. "Oh, yes, that is true."

"I have heard many great things about your future son-in-law. Tell me, how does he feel about werewolves?"

"Umm… I don't think he has a strong opinion either way."

Goliath had a hungry look in his eyes. "But could he be made to see the justness of our cause? The unacceptability of how wizards and witches are treated in these lands? The need to join, fight, rise up!" Goliath's voice was getting louder with each word. "And accept the curse!?"

Jacob glanced around to find that Smith and Xeno had subtly angled themselves in the direction of the door. He turned back. "I doubt he'd be willing to accept becoming a werewolf — and I mean no disrespect, but we do have many commitments back in Britain."

Goliath deflated slightly. "But what about your Lord Genesis — the British vampire lord. Isn't he a political enemy of yours?"

"Yes, a political enemy — not an existential one. No British family feels the need to ward their house against vampires."

The man collapsed into a chair, suddenly looking very tired. "No, I suppose not. But we need all the help we can get. His words might be pretty, but the count's fist is harder than steel, and his memory is older than the statute. 'In a blood feud, truces last only as long as it takes for both sides to regrow all their limbs,' from the count's own book. No, this war is not over, and we need all the help we can get. You don't happen to know Remus Lupin, do you?"

Dead silence filled the room. The werewolf might as well have said, "What's wrong with familialicide?", or, 'By the way, I've got a bomb rigged under the floor and it's set to go off if anyone says the word cheese.'
After a very long pause, Jacob said, "One does not simply know a Lupin, even if you are acquainted, and even if the Lupin in question happens to share a minor life circumstance detail, such as being a werewolf."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Getting into Castle Dragos wasn't difficult. Their cover story was that they were acting as convenient impartial messengers for the Fullmoon ministry, which was actually true. Goliath Volf sent word that they were to be shown all respect and courtesy, and that anyone giving them any difficulty would be literally torn apart. The hard part was getting away from their hosts, who were desperate for news from the outside world — teachers, students, and ICW officials alike. A solution to the blockade was being negotiated, but until it went through, even the usual residents were stranded.

Jacob eventually managed to slip off, while Xeno and Smith kept a pair of ICW diplomats busy with the British political situation.

Following the count's instructions, Jacob quickly found his quarry, carefully hidden in a remote part of the castle, accessed only through secret passageways and passwords.

The woman was beautiful — young, with dark skin — far darker than one might expect for this part of the world. She had beads all down her hair, and her robes were exotic.

"It's about time," the woman said, after Jacob gave a pre-arranged code-phrase. "I was starting to think that vampire was just going to leave me here."

"My lady," Jacob replied. "The situation outside is delicate. The count made arrangements as soon as he could, I'm sure."

The woman huffed, but perked up when he introduced himself. She peppered him with questions as he led her into the shrunk trunk he always carried on his person, many of them to do with Lord Slytherin, the Gray Lord, whom she appeared to have a special interest in. Mind you, that wasn't at all unusual. Many of the women Jacob met had a special interest in Lord Slytherin, despite them knowing he was already betrothed, twice (or maybe because of?).

With his illicit cargo stored safely in his pocket, Jacob quickly met back up with his companions, said their goodbyes to their hosts, and easily made their way past the blockade. Soon they were back in Transylvania, where Jacob delivered the young woman into the care of the count.

"Thank you for your help," the count said with a smile, handing over more than enough fresh mandrake to cure Harry and Luna. "And give my regards to Lord Slytherin. He seems to be a most interesting individual."

It took over a whole day to get back to England. They had to take multiple portkeys spaced out over many hours, which was annoying, but did cut down on portkey sickness.

"I'm just frustrated we didn't get the opportunity for a really good fight," Smith grumbled, as they walked away from the landing point in King's Cross Portkey Port, hefting his war hammer and giving it a consoling pat. "It's been a long time since I've had reason to let the other woman in my life go nuts. Your scrap with those Italian boys looked like a grand ol' time."

Shaking his head in amusement, Jacob glanced down at the Daily Prophet as they walked past a news stand, and nearly bit off his own tongue.

There was a moving, smirking picture of the beautiful woman he'd just rescued not forty-eight
hours ago, smirking specifically at him, along with the headline:

Gray Lord Tebola Evades ICW Investigators — Flees Eastern Europe Under Self-Transfiguration — African Union Refuses Comment

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Several days earlier, Susan and Virgo crept along one of Hogwarts' outside walls.

The quidditch match had just finished and they'd spotted John up to something in the forest. They weren't supposed to be out here—the prefects had ordered everyone inside—but bollocks to that, they both thought. If anyone asked, they could just say they were going to tell John about what they'd been told.

"What is he doing?" Susan asked, exasperated.

"I don't know," Virgo answered, eyes narrowed. "Let's wait and find out."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Ginny!" Up in the hospital wing, Ginny let out an embarrassed smile as her mother hurried up to her bed, face red from running and worry. "Oh, dear, are you alright?" She caught sight of the mangled mess that was her shoulder and arm. "Oh, my goodness! Oh, I just knew this was a bad idea. Professor Snape told us all about what happened. Two rogue bludgers! What were the teachers thinking, letting the match continue? And then a lockdown! We had to come in through your father's friends — never seen Amelia in such a state. Now, where is that broomstick?"

The smile vanished from Ginny's face.

"I said before that quidditch is no sport for a young lady. I said—"

"Mum!"

"Molly," came the calm voice of her father from the infirmary door. "You know we've talked about this." He was flanked on each side by an auror, with their long robes and iron shields.

"But, Arthur—"

"—No buts," He smiled. "From what I understand, Ginny proved herself to be especially talented today." He walked up to the side of the bed and looked fondly down at her. "Our little girl may well pick up where Charlie left off."

Ginny's smile slowly came back. "Thanks, Dad."

Molly Weasley looked like she was ready to continue arguing, but then deflated. "Is it too much to ask that at least one of our children doesn't go into some hugely dangerous career?"

Ginny's smile turned impish. "Percy won't."

Her mother ignored this. "And what about money? Quidditch doesn't pay. She'll be completely reliant on her husband. And who's going to marry a girl who's always running off to who knows where?"

"Mrs Weasley?" said one of the aurors, joining them by the bed. "I hope I'm not intruding, but I dare say a quidditch star won't be wanting for suitors. And can I remind you please not to 'run off' like you did before? The castle is not safe."
Her mother bristled. "I mean good quality wizards of high standing, not some lazy, good-for-nothing pub-rat. And I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself, thank you very much." She looked down at Ginny and her face softened. "I guess we'll just have to sort something out when the time comes. You're at least keeping up in your classes, aren't you?"

"Yep," Ginny nodded. "Fifth in my year."

Molly frowned. "Only fifth?"

"Well, Luna's above me — so is 'Virgo Malfoy.'" She made sure to slot the quotation marks into place around the name the same way one puts handcuffs around a criminal. "Then there's the Chesterfield twins — they're very good too, so yeah, fifth."

"Chesterfield? I don't recognise that name."

"They're muggleborns."

"Muggleborns? Really, Ginny, you should be able to do better than—" Molly cut herself off. "Not that there's anything wrong with that, of course," she amended hastily, before looking around and continuing in a lower voice. "But really, Ginny, I'm surprised you're not doing at least as well as Luna."

"Luna's a genius, Mum."

"Molly, dear, why don't we find Madam Pomfrey? I'm sure Ginny here needs a rest. I'm sure she'll be safe with these gentlemen here."

"What? Oh, yes, I've got some questions for that woman." And with that, her mother bustled off towards the back. A few minutes later, the aurors also stepped away, leaving her alone with her father.

Feeling tired, Ginny relaxed back into her pillow and turned her head towards the bed next to hers. There lay Harry, as still and as stoney as a statue.

"Lord Slytherin said your fates were intertwined," her father said. Someone who didn't know him might have taken it as an idle comment, but Ginny knew better.

"They are," Ginny replied.

"Prophecy magic is one of the most dangerous forms of divination wizard-kind knows of," he continued. "If the ICW could control it, I dare say they'd seal off all influence from her realm."

Ginny didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry I haven't been there to help you with this before now. I can't imagine what it must have been like to bear a burden like this for so long at your age."

"I haven't been alone."

Arthur gave her a small smile. "No. I just wish it could have been us, your family."

Ginny felt her stomach drop. "It still can be," she said quietly.

"That's what I intend."

Ginny felt the weight in her stomach lessen. "Really?"
"Yes." Her father's face firmed. "From now on, you will have our full support. Your mother has been highly reluctant, which is understandable, but she sees the importance of what we're doing, even if she believes you to be too young to discuss it with. This Winter Festival, I plan to talk with Lord Slytherin about the possibility of having our family publicly declare ourselves to be Gray."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Among the trees of the outmost reaches of the forbidden forest, John glared down at the book in his hands. It was one of the many that Virgo had smuggled to him over the last few weeks, all on the many rituals that young wizards and witches could undergo, if they were willing to pay the price.

He hated the Malfoys, and it galled him no end that they apparently had no qualms about giving their daughter such powerful knowledge, even despite their current animosity towards her. They didn't coddle her. His own parents had never even entertained the idea of allowing him these kinds of books. The few times he'd asked, he'd been decisively shot down and they refused to hear anything more on the matter.

He turned the page from a ritual that gave the caster thicker skin, at the cost of the sense of touch, and quickly passed over another page, covered in delicate, spider-like script, set beside numerous diagrams of muggles spread-eagled on flag-stone floors, arms and legs bloody and mangled.

*Obviously* he could spot if something was a bad idea — if something was morally questionable. The notion that he couldn't was stupid.

Faint through the thickness of the forest, a loud bell rang out.

Something was going on up in the castle, but John couldn't have cared less. He'd lost.

He flipped another page, cross-legged on the damp, dirty ground.

That was not acceptable. How was he supposed to defeat Voldemort if he wasn't even better than his own classmates? Or even than Ginny, who was *younger* than him?!

He briefly considered telling Susan everything, just like Harry had with Ginny — all about being from the future, his brother, Voldemort, but quickly dismissed the idea. The thought of having to admit his failings was too painful. He'd tell her once he'd gotten things back under control… maybe.

Finally, his flipping fingers found the page he'd been looking for — a ritual to give him near perfect balance — and it didn't even have that high a price. All he had to do was stand on one foot for the whole ritual, one-hundred feet above the ground, without putting his foot down.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"What's he doing?" Susan whispered, sounding uneasy.

Virgo tried to angle her head more to see under the bush the two girls were hiding under. She wasn't having much luck. Her neck was already so angled that owls would get neck pain just looking at her. "I can't see very well," she whispered back. "He's just reading the book. I think he's got his broom somewhere, but I can't spot it."

Susan's breath was hot on her neck. "Hey, should we even be doing this? I mean, what if it's Potter
family business, or something personal?"

"Hush, you. We're just keeping an eye on him. You know how boys can be."

"I guess," Susan conceded. "But what about the castle? It sounds like something important is happening."

"I'm sure if it's really important they'll tell us later." Besides, Virgo added in the privacy of her own mind, it's probably to do with a certain homicidal house demon. She just hoped to hell that Dobby hadn't been caught. That would be very bad.

"What about now?" Susan whispered. "Is he doing something? What's he doing?"

Virgo snapped back to the here and now. "I think— Through the bushes she could just make out the figure swinging his leg over something. "—It's his broom!"

"What do we do?"

Too late, John Potter had already zipped up through a hole in the canopy, leaving Virgo lying dirty on the ground, feeling very silly, with Susan's almost whole body weight pressed down on her, trying to get a better view.

She growled. "Get off, you lump!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It should have been midnight.

The sky should have been clear and black, save for a stray errant cloud, shining bright by a silvery moon.

It wasn't.

It was still barely midday.

John alighted on the top of the astronomy tower and took a deep breath. It was by far the tallest tower in the whole castle, and so was perfect for this ritual. After he'd done this one, maybe he'd go through some of the others. There were all kinds. Rituals to increase reflexes, rituals to increase will power, even one ritual to fix his eyesight — heaven knows he'd have appreciated that one ages ago, even if it did require ripping the still-beating heart out of a pig.

John flipped the book back open to the page with the ritual and started his preparations.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"There!" Susan said excitedly, while still trying to keep her voice under control. "On top of the astronomy tower!"

Virgo squinted up and did indeed see a small figure right on the edge of the tower. "What the hell is he doing up there?"

Susan gasped. "He's not going to jump is he?"

"He bloody well better not," Virgo muttered. "No… it doesn't look like that…. I think…." Her eyes widened in shock. "No! He's not going to— That idiot!"
It was such a simple ritual, John mused. Chant the words of the ritual near a place of intense magical power while channelling your magic into the ground below your feet, and then stand on one foot for five minutes over a hundred feet above the ground. That was it. Well, Hogwarts was undoubtedly a place of intense magical power, and this tower was well over a hundred feet above the ground. And if he stood just so, in the event that he really did lose his balance, he could just put his foot back down and try again later.

Back downstairs, a distracted Susan allowed Virgo to use her Lamia form to hiss one of the locked doors open. She didn't want Susan knowing about her animagus ability yet. They were now hurrying along one of the corridors towards the astronomy tower.

"What's he doing?" Susan gasped out.

"Balance ritual," Virgo spat over her shoulder. "The idiot thinks he's outsmarted it. Second rule of ritual magic—"

"—Never try to outsmart the ritual."

"—Never try to outsmart the ritual."

The two voices perfectly synced into each other. Virgo looked briefly surprised at Susan whose eyes were now wide with alarm, but then, the Hufflepuff was an heiress, so if anyone as young as her would know, it would be her. "We have to stop him," Susan squeaked.

"Yes."

"We should tell someone."

Virgo couldn't allow that. She shook her head fiercely. "No! If we tell someone John will get in huge trouble." And besides, she thought, she didn't want to stop him doing rituals completely. She just needed to make sure he didn't kill himself doing them.

Just then, Virgo rounded a corner, saw who was down the corridor with their backs to them, and just managed to clamp her hands around Susan's mouth before the older girl let out a meep that would have given them away. Together they edged back around the corner before the two on-guard aurors, dressed and shielded with full-dragon hide and iron, saw them.

"That was Thicknesse and Blott," Susan whispered. "Auntie says Thicknesse is a real piece of work. She's always having to keep an eye on him."

"Not the understanding sort then."

"No."

"Disillusionment charms, I think."

"Yes."

"HEY!" shouted a loud voice. "WHO GOES THERE?"
The last words of the ritual fell from John's mouth and he allowed himself a small smirk of satisfaction as he raised his leg into the air and grabbed it by one hand like a child playing hopscotch. A faint circle of red light lit up around him, including the large drop to the ground, far below, but, more importantly, also including the crenellation he stood atop.

Then, suddenly, something felt wrong. He felt himself getting lighter.

"Wha—"

It was like someone had cast a levitation charm on him.

"What's going—"

He started lifting up into the air.

"ooooOOOON!"

The ground fell away and, still clutching desperately at his leg, his whole body rose up into the air, higher and higher. Sweat started beading on his forehead. His heart started beating faster. And still the ground was falling away below him.

After a few more seconds, although it felt like a lifetime, the levitation stopped, and he felt his weight reassert itself, except he now stood one-legged on an invisible floor, well over a hundred feet above the tower, and the ritual had moved him, not just up, but also across. He was now right over the tower's sharp spire tip.

What would happen now if he put his foot down?


His every sense became hyper-focused. The feel of the leather in his quidditch trousers pressing hard against the hand holding his foot up, rapidly moistening with sweat. The glare of the sun in his eyes. The vast distance of horizon spreading out far across the land. The lake. The forest. The village. And below him, far, far below him, the castle, and even further than that, the ground.

Breathe! John shouted in his mind. Don't panic — just five minutes. He could do this. He was the best quidditch player in Hogwarts. Except, he wasn't. Ginny was better. No! Focus! Don't think about that. And don't think too much about your leg. Just — don't — think — about it.

His balancing leg twinged a warning of staying in one position too long.

An ominous breeze brushed across his hair.

John whimpered.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"They'll catch us!" Susan wailed, only not really. A wail isn't usually so quiet that an owl would have difficult catching it.

"No," Virgo said urgently, leading her down another passageway at a dead run. "Trust me."

"But this isn't the way to the tower. Maybe we should just tell them? Then at least John will be okay."

"Trust me!" Virgo pulled her into an alcove. "Just promise me something." Her voice had become
reluctant.
"What?"
"Promise me you won't tell John about what I'm about to do."
"What?"
"No time!" Virgo hissed. "Do you promise?"
Susan frowned. "Okay, yes, I promise."
Virgo nodded and changed.
Susan stared, wide-eyed, as the first-year Gryffindor transformed before her eyes, her legs morphing together and stretching out behind her into a massive snake tail while the clothes on her upper body just sort of vanished into her skin, leaving her still-human body extremely underdressed, save for a set of scarlet scales covering her feminine chest from total exposure.
It was a lamia.
Virgo Malfoy was a lamia animagus!
Susan had little opportunity to gape though, because the mythical magical creature in front of her hissed at the wall of the alcove, a secret passageway opened up, and moments later, she'd been yanked inside by a tail far more powerful than any eleven-year-old girl should be.
The passageway closed behind them.
"Where are they?!" shouted the voice of one of the aurors.
"We've lost them," said his partner, at a far more normal voice volume. "This place is a maze — never could get the hang of it, even by seventh year."
Susan followed Virgo as the younger snake-girl continued to lead the way through the castle that she seemed to know amazingly well for a first year, her tail and body sweeping a path through the dust and grime of decades. A quick pulse to her mind brought her occlumency into sharp focus. She narrowed her eyes. "Virgo."
"Mmm?" Virgo turned back to look at her. Her face was one of almost total innocence, tinged with perhaps a dash of apprehension.
"I will honour your request regarding heir Potter, but have no doubt that soon you and I are going to have a long chat about this."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

It had to be five minutes soon. It had to be.

High up in the air, John was sweating bullets. He'd already almost lost his balance twice. His hands were shaking and not from the unrelenting cold wind blowing him about this way and that.
Suddenly, two figures barged out of the door leading to the astronomy classroom.
His heart leapt.
"Help!" he screamed.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Keep it quiet, fool!" Virgo shouted back. "Do you want to get caught?"

"I don't give a FUCK about getting caught!" John screamed back. "Just get me down from here!"

"Easier said than done," Virgo muttered. "Working on it!" she called back.

"His broom!" Susan said. She'd already snatched it up and was busy mounting it.

"Good thinking, but don't get too close!" Virgo barked. "This ritual is highly volatile. Even small magics can interfere. And he hasn't even taken his clothes off!"

"How close is too close?"

"Hover twenty feet below him."

"I can't catch him if he falls twenty feet!"

"You don't have to catch him. You just have to slow him down. I'll handle the rest."

Susan nodded and shot up into the air. "No levitation spells!" Virgo called after her as an afterthought.

It took a few moments to prepare her part of the operation, and not a moment too soon.

"AHHHHH!" John screamed as the worst happened. Arms spinning like a catherine wheel, he spun on one leg, and, ever so slowly, toppled over. What happened next was decidedly not slow. He collided with Susan—"OOF"—hovering below with one arm outstretched, they dipped, but Susan didn't dip far enough, quickly enough, and John's tentative grip failed him.

"AHHHHHH!"

He fell, right into the massive cloth trampoline Virgo had conjured off to one side and rolled across the ritual space at just the last moment.

"Susan, get away!" Virgo shouted, grabbing John and hauling him as far away from the space as she could, using the smallest amount of magic she dared. She ended on top of him as they rolled to a rough and tumble stop. Behind them, the conjured material of the trampoline was busy ripping itself to shreds in the light of the failed ritual.

Virgo took a deep breath. Safe.

"John!" Susan alighted next to them and was on her knees in seconds. "Are you alright?"

John just stared at the still self-shredding material with wide-eyes.

"He's fine," Virgo muttered. She climbed off of him and glared. "But what the hell was that?" she spat.

John's eyes travelled to her. "I…" But he didn't seem able to finish the sentence.

"You, what?" Virgo continued. "Just couldn't wait? You know I would have helped you if you'd asked for it." She glanced at Susan. "We would have helped. I get that you need to get stronger — I
get that, but we have time. We have seven whole years until we graduate—six. What's the god
damn rush?"

"John, what's going on?" Susan pleaded, eyes wide and watery. "Please, won't you tell us?"

John swallowed.

Virgo thought she was ready to hear anything. She was expecting him to spout teenage bravado
about protecting her. She was expecting him to reveal that someone was blackmailing him for
some petty reason. Or that his parents had trained him from childhood for his own protection
against her other self's death eaters.

What she wasn't ready for, was for him to look them both in the eyes—eyes filled with
apprehension and not a small amount of shame—and mutter, "I'm a time traveller."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Kill the spare," said a high and terrible voice.

There was a flash of green light.

John Potter looked around in stupefied horror as Cedric Diggory fell to the ground beside him,
dead. The sun chose that moment to fall below the tree-line, shrouding the graveyard in a foggy
chill.

Dead. Cedric Diggory was dead.

"Bind him," said the same voice.

The next thing John knew, he'd been restrained with ropes and tied to a gravestone.

The cowl of the man in front of him slipped from his face, and John let out a scowl. "You!"

Lord Lucius Malfoy gave him a sneer. "Me."

"You won't get away with this."

"Oh, dear," said the voice from the cauldron. "Did he really just say that? No matter. Start the
ritual."

John screamed in pain as blood was taken from his arm. He watched in horror as Malfoy cut off his
own hand. And he gazed on uneasily as the first lord of the Dark used his still remaining hand to
unscrew the lid off a jar and pour bone dust into the bubbling pot, along with the blood and flesh.

Voldemort rose from his metal womb, and more death eaters arrived. He addressed them.

"—But what's most amusing of all!" Voldemort chuckled to the skull-masked crowd, halfway
through his speech. "Is that my truest enemy isn't even here! He rots in Azkaban! Isn't that so,
fake-boy-who-lived?"

The skull masks all laughed, and John felt the shame burning harder than the stab wound in his
arm.

He was untied and handed back his wand.

"And now, fake-boy-who-lived, we duel."
The patronus knight burst from John's wand, strong, blindingly light, and instantly crushed with a careless flick of Voldemort's wand.

"Crucio," Voldemort said carelessly.

Pain screeched through him.

The skull masks all laughed again.


"And now, fake-boy-who-lived, time to die. Don't worry, I will keep your brother safe. He is, after all, very important to me, in a way you could never be."

There was a bright flash of green light, and his world went dark.

He didn't know how long he didn't exist for.

"Good morning, Heir Potter." A four-word sentence, male, in a voice of stone, empty caves, and deep gulps of fresh mountain air.

John opened his eyes and raised his head. The room was like an Anglo Saxon roundhouse — one of a great chief — fur everywhere, weapons lining the walls, wild looking dogs in a pile by the door. Two people sat in thrones before him — a man and a woman. The man looked vaguely swarthy, while the woman looked kind of like Lady Greengrass. The man held a scythe, while the woman was dressed in white lace and held a book.

He frowned. "Who are you two?" His eyes widened. "What happened to Voldemort?! Where are we? Are you with him?!"

The woman held up a hand. "Please, Heir Potter. We do not have much time. We are not associated with your Dark Lord. We are Fate and Death."

"Fate and Death?"

"Yes," said the man, "Because, you see, you, Heir Potter, are dead, although I suppose technically, that makes you no longer an heir as far as your Albion Magics are concerned."

"Dead?" His eyes widened. The Avada Kedavra!

"Dead," The woman confirmed. "But we are not done with you yet, Heir Potter. We are displeased that Voldemort still lives. Cheating Death — cheating me, in the manner he has — is not acceptable. So we wish for you to go back — back in time, fours years — and give it another shot."

John blinked. "Back in time!? You can do that? Brilliant. But…" He hesitated. "What about my brother, he's the real…"

Death smiled. "Yes, he is the subject of the prophecy, but we are giving you the chance, John, to fulfil the prophecy in his stead. Bringing your twin to us now would be troublesome. Our influence in the mortal plane is extremely limited. We can generally only operate through chosen ones and champions."

John's mouth slowly turned to a wide grin. "Really? I'll be the chosen of Fate this time?"

"Yes."
He hesitated again. "And, my heirship?"

"Once you are alive again, the Albion Magics should re-acknowledge you. Tracking them is difficult, and not even we fully understand them."

"Oh, good."

"Then, off with you." The man carelessly waved his hand, and John felt himself blasted backwards through some kind of portal thing, and back into nothing — a nothing where everything was… Quiet. Quiet and warm. And comfy. Quiet, warm, and comfy. John Potter's eyes shot open. He sat bolt upright and looked around. He was home. The familiar red and gold of his bedroom in Potter manor felt odd now. Like seeing an old friend after a lifetime. He breathed, acutely aware of the lack of pain shooting through his body. He couldn't feel the cruciatus. But, of course. It hadn't happened yet. None of it had happened. The stone, the chamber, Pettigrew's breakout, the tournament, Voldemort's resurrection… his death — none of it.

He'd been given a second chance. Death and Fate had chosen him. His eyes gleamed.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Virgo eyed John Potter carefully.

Susan was gazing at him with wide eyes.

He finished the story and looked between the two of them.

Virgo's voice had become soft. "It all makes so much sense now."

"What?" John asked.

"Everything." She hesitated. "Mostly."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Several days later, Harry opened his eyes. He was lying by the door to the soul chasm, a petrified Luna next to him. Moments later, she too was de-stoned.

"We're back again," Luna said softly.

"Seems like it."

"I wonder how long we've been out."

"Let's find out."

They made their way back to Harry's mindscape, and Harry carefully woke up. A small crowd surrounded his bed in the hospital wing— his mother and father, John, and interestingly, Virgo, who was regarding him with an extremely calculating gaze.

He smiled thinly. "Good to see you are well again, Miss Malfoy."

"You too, Mister Potter."

For their part, Lily and James Potter played the role of concerned parents well, and Harry had to admit that, if he were so inclined, he'd quite appreciate the effort.
Lord and Lady Lovegood were there too, standing with Luna and conversing in hushed voices.

Apparently there were only a few days of school left. That left a ridiculously large amount to catch up on in an equally ridiculously small amount of time. The preparations for the winter festivals among other things. In a little under a week, well over a hundred wizards and witches would descend on Slytherin Manor, and he had to be ready for them.

Soon, his family left and his other family, his real family, arrived.

"Harry!" Hermione squealed. "I'm so glad you're back."

"Yes, she's been very worried," Daphne added.

Ginny smirked. "Don't give him that — you've been the most worried of all of us." To which Daphne blushed.

Harry smiled widely. "Can I assume our favourite dark witch is well? I don't see her in any of these beds so I assume nothing too bad happened."

"She's still in the snake pit," Daphne replied. "But it wasn't her that you almost woke up next to as well as Luna."

Harry gave her a quizzical look.

Daphne lowered her voice. "We're not one-hundred per cent sure, but we think Virgo tried to murder Ginny."

Harry's eyes hardened. "Oh, she did, did she?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

And so the fall term came to an end. No one, it seemed, was staying at Hogwarts this year. Everyone was packing up in preparations for a packed holiday schedule.

Virgo found herself not looking forward to leaving, but then, the school had always been one of her only two real homes — Hogwarts and Stockholm, but Stockholm was a place she could never return too, no matter how much better a childhood it had provided than the orphanage.

She chatted with Susan for most of the trip back to London, simply enjoying being a pre-teen girl, before the reality of her current situation imposed itself on her again.

Lord Malfoy stood at the end of Platform 9 3/4, tall and imperious, next to his wife Narcissa — her mother.

Virgo's face slid into an expressionless mask as Draco, her older brother, found his step alongside her.

"Father — Mother," Draco said.

"Draco." Lord Malfoy nodded to him, then to her. "Virgo."

Virgo curtseyed, not so high as to indicate disrespect, but high enough to communicate a slight assertiveness, or, if one didn't know her fake true identity, defiance. She was very aware of John's eyes on her from the other side of the platform. She rose. "I hope I find you both well."

"Quite well," Narcissa hummed. "But we'll leave the pleasantries for when we return to the manor."
The house elves will have dinner waiting for us."

Later that night, Virgo lay alone in bed, staring at the ceiling while the moonlight streamed in through the gap in the massive curtain windows.

John Potter was a time traveller, killed by her other self in the future and sent back to the past as a champion of death to destroy all of Voldemort's horcruxes, which, worryingly, obviously had to include herself. On the other hand, Death hadn't actually told him about the horcruxes, or anything that might help him in his task, which was a blessing while at the same time being rather odd.

Potentially, she could tell John all about it instead — she and Susan were now accessories to long-term time travel, a crime so serious that she didn't even want to think about the consequences if anyone found out, and so a certain amount of trust could be relied on, but... no. She wasn't willing to gamble her own life on a coin toss like that, not when there was another option.

Virgo rubbed her temples.

Death didn't like horcruxes. She really wished she'd known that little tidbit of information before she'd created one, and probably the six others that came after her too. A near god-like being didn't like horcruxes to such an extent that it was willing to expend not even Merlin knew how much magical power in sending a champion—and apparently his twin too—back in time to destroy them. She really didn't like those odds.

But being destroyed didn't have to be her fate. No, she could fulfil Death's quest on her own terms. After all, it wasn't her destruction Death sought, just her immortality through that particular method.

If she found all the horcruxes, destroyed each of them in turn, and used the reconstitution ritual to absorb each piece back into herself, she could keep her own identity as the prime Dark Lady, while giving Death no more reason to stalk her.

She shuddered.

And as for immortality... well, if the Flamels could get away with living for so long using a philosopher's stone, then apparently that was a method that Death didn't disapprove of... probably. She'd certainly considered alchemy as a path before, but had never been that interested when there was a much faster option available. She was the greatest witch that ever lived. If anyone could replicate Flamel's feat, it would be her. But all this was moot until she'd solved her Horcrux problem.

Virgo closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, she was back in her mindscape.

There had been changes.

Hogwarts was now covered in a thick winter snow. Not thick like the marzipan on a wedding cake, like the snow she'd just left behind in Scotland, but thick like the winters of Sweden — so thick her eleven-year-old self could barely lift her leg up and over to take the next step forward. She melted a path to the front gate with her wand and dismissed the huge basilisk guardian with a hissed command in lamia form.

Tentatively, she opened the front gate.

The soul chasm beyond was everything she dreaded — an empty hole to nothing, hanging below a
bridge as insubstantial as a human thought. She tried to reach out her magic senses across the
space, trying to get a feel for which of the threads that now stretched taught from her chest might
be the nearest to follow, but it was obviously a trick she'd need to work on.

In the end, she picked one that felt at least a little closer than the others, and started tiptoeing
across.

She didn't know how long the journey took. In the back of her mind, she imagined Narcissa trying
to wake up her body, only to find it in the same comatose state she'd been in not that long ago, but
no. It hadn't been *that* long. Eventually, she saw her quarry off in the distance.

The sight puzzled her.

She hadn't been sure what kind of mental representation another horcrux would have, but Azkaban
Prison certainly wouldn't have been her first guess.

Slowly, she edged her way towards it.

Less than thirty feet away, something gave a horrible creak sound.

She froze.

Then, like something out of a horror movie, the big doors to the prison swung open, revealing a
tall, cloaked figure, in a green and black mask. Lord Slytherin.

"Hello, Miss Malfoy," he said, sounding pleasant, before his tone dropped to something far sterner
and all-together less pleasant. "I've been hearing that you've been a very bad girl."

That was all the warning she got before ropes flew at her through the darkness. Panicked, she cut
through them with her wand, only to catch a glancing blow from a tripping hex. She found her feet
again, but that was all the opening her opponent needed to cast another incarcerous, this one
successfully wrapping around her arm.

"No!" She was pulled along the thin bridge towards the prison door. In less than a few seconds
she'd been dragged halfway. If she passed through them, that was probably the last anyone would
ever see of her.

Virgo moaned. Her plans, her ambitions, her potential!

But, amazingly, with less than ten feet to go, she halted. Not because Lord Slytherin had ceased his
pulling, but because something *else* wrapped around her other arm and stopped her dead. It was a
chain — a black chain. Her arms pulled out on either side of her, yanking her up so her feet didn't
even touch the bridge.

"That's enough of that," a voice said.

Virgo looked around desperately. There, on another bridge angled off in another direction, was
another man. He too was tall and masked, but his mask was a far more traditional one —
traditional at least, if you were a follower of Lord Voldemort. It was a skull, and from his neck
dangled an artefact that Virgo had only ever seen and read about in books from the Hogwarts
Library. Slytherin's Locket.

For a long moment, the three of them stood there, the two adult wizards and Virgo, stretched taut
over an endless chasm by a rope and a chain between them.
Lord Slytherin inclined his head slightly. "RB." It was not a statement of inquiry, more a declaration that a small puzzle, one that had nagged the mind for quite some time, had finally been solved.

The man in the skull mask inclined his own in acknowledgement. "LS."

What happened next was over in seconds.

RB, whoever that was, shot something purple straight at Lord Slytherin, who countered by conjuring a solid concrete slab in front of him, which shattered into a thousand pieces on impact. Virgo was thrown directly backwards, both rope and chain loosening around her wrists, giving her just enough time to scrabble away down her bridge as the two adult wizards let loose the magics of hell on each other. The temperature of the soul chasm soared as she crawled back to safety, and when she finally got back to the gates of her own mindscape, it was to find much of the snow leading up to the castle already melted, such was the heat of the power struggle behind her.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Less than fifty kilometres away, from Wiltshire to Puddlemere, Harry sat bolt upright in bed, sweating and clutching at his head, which already had started to throb with a truly magnificent headache. They'd both retreated in the end — an end which had started quite soon after the fight had begun.

"Damn it," he muttered.

Slipping to the side of the bed, he slipped on his slippers and padded down the stairs of the grand ballroom at Potter Manor, completely still in the dead of night, not caring a hoot if anyone caught him at such a late hour. He made his way over to the main entrance floo, threw in a pinch of powder, and flew on through to the only address this particular floo would allow him access to.

He stepped into the living room of the other house, tiptoed up through the many floors, and quietly knocked on a bedroom door.

"Alex?" he whispered into the dark room.

"Whaaa?" Alex looked around groggily.

"Alex, something just happened, and I think you have a right to know about it."

Chapter End Notes

— End of Chapter Fifty-one —

A/N: And so we come to the last chapter of the current arc. The second part of the year won’t be nearly as long as the first, I assure you, but I am going to plot it out first, so expect a bit of a break before we commence again. If you enjoy my work, please consider becoming a patron of my original projects. All support is appreciated. You can find the links through my website www.leadvone.com.

A/N: This chapter was drafted and made available early through the LeadVonE discord server, as will the next one. If you fancy discussing this chapter with like-minded people, or anything else DP&SW, feel free to head over there.
A special thank you to the following people for helping catch mistakes on #dpasw-editorial: APunchUponMalvaceae, ASK, ChRiAn, Drakonpie250, Dragonbait, DrSubnautica, FartyArtyPartyPooper, feauxen, Fuuryuu, HansC, JaydenStevenson, Leyrann, MageKing17, Magic Bird Dust, Oliver W.K. Salty_sauce, sfu, Shady, SunshineAmy, Tendra, Twist, and TrendyTreky.

A/N: Conversion rate is:
1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds
1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)
1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2019’s prices.
Within the Slytherin girl's second year dormitory, next to Hermione's bed, inside Hermione's trunk, five girls sat in a circle of chairs, pointedly not meeting each other's gaze.

"I just want to make one thing absolutely clear," Daphne said in a careful voice, having chosen the ceiling as her staring partner. "We are all responsible young witches — educated, and well-trained in the mind arts."

"Yes, Daphne," Luna, Hermione, Ginny, and Alexandra all responded.

"We are not irresponsible children with the self-control of a niffler."

"No, Daphne," the girls chorused.

"When we make decisions, they are measured. They are well thought out. They are calculated. We have all been taught about the importance of family finances and how to balance an account book."

"Well, actually—Ow!" Alexandra shoved Ginny's elbow back out from her ribs and scowled at the girl's frantic eyebrow wiggling.

"So when a time-sensitive opportunity presents itself, we carefully weigh up the pros and cons," Daphne continued, completely ignoring the interruption.

"Yes, to do anything less would be an insult to everything our lord has done for us," Hermione nervously spoke up. "And for what it's worth, I have got a list of all my pros right here—"

"Yes, thank you, Hermione, but we—"

A huge parchment unrolled itself from Hermione's hands, hit her feet, and continued to unroll itself along the floor.

"—will only even consider these things if Harry's meeting with Ragnok goes well."

"Of course," Hermione squeaked. "Obviously Harry has the final say."

Daphne nodded. "He has much more experience than us."

"I really hope he likes my Sssss idea," Luna said with a smile, hissing the penultimate word.

"Luna, you are not going to ask Harry about your Sssss idea."

Luna pouted. "Why not?"

"Because such extravagance is unbecoming of a lady of a noble house, because such things are highly inappropriate, and because… because…" Daphne looked into Luna's curious, friendly eyes and gave up. "I just want to make one thing absolutely clear."

"Yes, Daphne?" the girls asked.

"We are all responsible young witches — educated, and well-trained in the mind arts, and we are
not irresponsible children with the self-control of a niffler."

"Yes, Daphne. No, Daphne."

"And we are only going to trouble Harry with our extremely well thought out and entirely reasonable ideas, if, and only if, his meeting with Ragnok goes beyond and above expectations."

"Yes, Daphne."

There was a knocking on the trunk lid.

On the outside, Harry carefully opened the lid of Hermione's trunk, climbed in, and cancelled the disillusionment that had allowed him to sneak into the girls' dormitories. They were all there. All eyes on him.

"Excellent news," he said. "Ragnok has had our initial artefacts valued in the upper range of our estimates, for both the muggle and the wizarding worlds. He also believes that the legal problems we might experience from selling in the muggle world can be handled. Even better, he's agreed to extend us additional credit based on your memories of the haul. All in all, everything went massively beyond and above expectations."

He sat down in the remaining armchair.

As though on some prearranged signal, both Hermione and Daphne stood up with parade-like precision. He felt his chair move and looked around to find a grinning Ginny turning him towards the blackboard Hermione used to teach the muggleborns.

Hermione then stepped in front of said blackboard, and summoned a piece of chalk. "Right, um, Harry, we, err, have some ideas…"

Some time later and three hundred kilometres away, as the owl flies, on the sloping lawn outside Slytherin Manor, the goblininess Floating-Interest, daughter of Ragnok Boneslicer, and head goblin on the Slytherin Manor building project, read the letter that her father had just forwarded to her in utter disbelief.

"They want what by when?!!"

T-minus 20 days

This is the house that Floating-Interest built. It sits proud on the very most top point of Gairsay Island, in the Scottish Orkneys — a respectable manor in white granite and brick tile. The roof beams are oak — the first two floors, polished marble. The third floor was cedar, and the windows sparkled in the morning sun.

It was impressive. It screamed wealth.

One thing it was not, was outlandish. In much the same way that architects and designers have a tendency to go totally bonkers with their blueprints whenever science comes up with a new material that allows new possibilities, only to then dial back their enthusiasm several decades later,
so magicals have had a tendency, throughout the centuries, to construct their homes and places of work, less with an eye to practicality, and more towards putting that prestigious Hogwarts education to really creative use. Hence, size ten-thousand boots, houses shaped like rooks, and banks purposefully designed to look like a Roman temple had melted.

This tendency was generally for the eccentrics only.

Most magical builders followed traditional muggle-style, grudgingly acknowledging that their physics-based approach, taking such petty things as loads and tension into consideration, did have its advantages in those rare cases where the magic might possibly fail — hence the granite, marble, and wood for Slytherin Manor, as opposed to say, ice, gingerbread, or pudding. It was this level of restraint and subtleness that Floating-Interest had been administering the construction project under. At least until the letter from her father had arrived.

Floating-Interest glared as she read the letter again.

To Floating-Interest,

Daughter,

Slytherin wishes to make some last minute additions. I wouldn’t normally agree (if they want changes, they should bloody well ask for them earlier), but Slytherin is a special case. Some of it will require ministry approval. Other bits will need family contracts. Everything must be complete before Gala Night. I will arrive three days before to inspect before handing it off to our client’s representative. Get it done. I’m confident you will.

Father,

— Ragnok Boneslicer

Floating-Interest then glared at the list of additions that she’d been given.

Behind her, half-a-dozen house-elves in lime-green pillow cases were hanging from ropes and using brushes to stain the wood, which framed the stone entranceway, while several other goblins were manoeuvering a large sofa in through a window. A lone wizard, down the hill, was tending to some newly planted shrubs.

"Junk-Bond!"

One of the goblins struggling with the sofa turned around and trotted over, leaving his fellows bent like compressed springs. "Miss?"

"We're going to need to alter our plans. The big wizard in charge has had a sudden attack of money and wants more gong for his gold."

Junk-Bond looked cautious. "What kind of changes?"

Floating-Interest showed him the list.

"Whoa. This here."

"Yes."

"And that there."

"I know."
"But, this is going to need family magic."

"Yes."

"And the deadline for completion is really soon."

"I know. I need you to talk to our people in the human-liaison office. See if they can help us smooth the way. Slytherin's name should help there too. Gold talks — at least, to humans it does."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 18 days

Slytherin Manor was bustling. What before had the air of a long project winding down, now was laden with last-minute hustle, and occasional panic. Goblins, wizards, and house-elves ran from place to place, measuring, designing, assessing, and above all, arguing.

"It absolutely can not be done!" said an old wizard with a bald head and a long grey beard. "The number of charms, the way they intercross with each other, and you want it all done while working on other projects? Lunacy I say."

"Lord Hawking," Floating-Interest said in her best placating voice (her wizard skills were one of the main reasons she'd been given the project in the first place). "I know it looks difficult, and I can fully understand if you might be nervous about it—"

"Nervous? I'm not nervous, young woman—goblin—gobliness. I'm merely saying that the house of Hawking has never taken on such a large scale project on such short notice. Our space contraction charms are not last minute additions crammed in because someone wants a secret broom-cupboard."

"No, of course not, lord wizard, and I assure you, there were extenuating circumstances that precluded your involvement before this. I'm sure Lord Slytherin will appreciate the difficulties and be very understanding."

"Non-euclidian geometry isn't a panacea," Hawking warned with a wagging finger. "Without the proper foundations, it'll all fall apart."

"We designed the entire building assuming that your involvement would eventually be inevitable, lord wizard. The plans are right here."

Still grumbling, Lord Hawking bent over to inspect them. "Well, at least you've got the walls good and thick," he muttered. "You'd be amazed by the number of wizards who've asked us to build a cathedral between two bits of plasterboard. Exactly how understanding will Slytherin be, do you think?"

"Up to fifty per cent extra per square foot understanding, lord wizard."

Lord Hawking settled down "Well, I suppose my grandson and his young wife do need some practice at these more hands-on kind of projects. Far too busy locked up in their attic lately, those two. I'll send them down and be on hand as needed."

"Thank you, Lord Hawking."

Lord Hawking scrunched up his nose. "What's this small room I'll need to make room for here marked, Sssss?"
Floating-Interest didn't miss a beat. "Lord wizard. That's a Slytherin family secret."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 17 days

"So, you'll be needing a dozen extra house-elves over the next few weeks." Lord Parkinson strode briskly through the latest consignment of construction materials and furnishings, occasionally glaring at piles of chairs or floor tiles, paying no heed whatsoever to his interlocutor's shorter gait. Floating-Interest was forced to jog to keep up. "The winter festival is a busy time of the year for my workers, goblin."

"Yes, lord wizard."

"Luckily for you, I have a few extra hands available."

"Wonderful." Floating-Interest paused to catch her breath.

Lord Parkinson turned to face her. "I'll have them sent around immediately. Mimsy!"

One of the lime-green clothed house-elves popped into being in front of them.

"Go back home and fetch team six. When you're done, I want another stock taking on the stuff we're sending over here."

Floating-Interest looked at him with concern. "Lord wizard?"

"I can't help notice that we occasionally seem to lose track of things we send over. Wood and stone not used for anything on the plans — extra doors, furnishings, etc."

Floating-Interest coughed nervously. Hawking's grandson had arrived that morning and already got to work on some of the smaller secret rooms and passageways. "I can't imagine that's worth worrying about," she said. "I take it nothing has been lost that has not been paid for?"

Lord Parkinson gave her a look. "No, but it is disconcerting. I am not used to things going missing in my business. I will have to bring this up with Slytherin himself when I finally get to meet him."

Lord Parkinson then turned his back on the furniture.

The moment he did so, Plato popped into being, grabbed one of the larger chairs, and popped back out.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 16 days

"Floating-Interest, Miss!" Junk-Bond screeched to a halt. "We've got everything we need for the rooftop project."

"Excellent," Floating-Interest snapped. "But can't you see I'm a little busy now?"

"Oh, I don't mind," said Lord Lovegood with a genial smile. "You just continue."

Floating-Interest gave the young goblin a glare that caused him to wither. "Start on phase one immediately, but don't interrupt me again if I'm with the humans!"

"Yes, Miss," Junk-Bond stammered before darting off again.
"Seems eager to please, that one," Xenophilius said.

"Young males often are." She sighed. "Unfortunately, eagerness is not the same thing as capability." She shook herself. "Shall we?"

Lord Lovegood smiled and turned his back to the gobliness. In front of him rose one of the many staircases of Slytherin Manor, in this case, the left one from the third floor to the second. He rose his wand and waved a complicated pattern, whispering incantation and letting the magic flow out of him and into the very stonework. Behind him, Floating-Interest watched in appreciation of a job being well done. Several hours of incantation later, it was complete.

Lord Lovegood smiled at Floating-Interest, both of them now at the top of the stairs. "Would you like to do the honours?"

"What?! No, absolutely not. Junk-Bond!"

A few moments later… "Miss?"

"Would you just stand right there and twist that knob at the top of the bannister?"

"Like this, MiIIIIIIISssssssss?"

Floating-Interest and Lord Lovegood watched the goblin speed away down the now transformed slide. "Luna will be so happy."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 15 days

Mrs Thorson knew, when she had been married to the nephew of a British lord, that she'd spend much of her time devising strange new magical artefacts as the product of her husband's family magic, and that of her father, the Sorcerer of Cochem-Zell. In her ten years of acceptable marriage, however, she'd never been asked to devise something like this.

"It is a most interesting idea, Fräulein goblin."

In front of her, on the lawn of Slytherin Manor, a small team of wizarding masons were sculpting a hollow snake from local stone, two feet tall and two-hundred feet long. Chalk marks had been placed at regular intervals for wooden sliding doors.

"A moving bookcase," Mrs Thorson mused. "One capable of bringing a specific book to the owner on a whim. It could follow them around like a dog. Or go to fetch books from the library if needed. Swallow and sort. And live coiled among the shelves when the mistress is not home. Mmm. Whoever conceived this must be a true bibliophile."

Floating-Interest nodded. "I have never met the witch in question, but I have met her parents, and it wouldn't surprise me at all."

Mrs Thorson frowned. "But even with my father and husband's magics I will not be able to give it the final—how to say—... jolt."

"Slytherin will take care of that. Parseltongue has powerful Serpenmorphic properties."

"I am jealous. I could think of so many applications. Sometimes I truly curse Merlin for making the Albion." She sat down. "I am hungry."
A house-elf dressed in a crisp emerald green robe of silk popped into being in front of them, holding a silver tray. He gave her a formal bow. "Tea and biscuit, my lady?"

Mrs Thorson raised an eyebrow and took a biscuit. "Thank you."

The house-elf bowed again, then turned to Floating-Interest.

To Mrs Thorson's mild surprise, his voice shifted from the subservient tone she'd always associated with house-elves, to something altogether quite different — something more assertive — aggressive even. He smiled. "And Plato is needing an immediate update on the outside hill project. Master's friends are worried it is not being ready for winter festivals."

"Everything is on schedule," Floating-Interest said shortly. "I will give you your update after our business here is complete."

Plato smiled again, bowed to her, and popped away.

"I don't think I've ever heard a house-elf speak that way before," Mrs Thorson said.

Floating-Interest pursed her lips. "That's because you are human."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 13 days

The grand ballroom of Slytherin Manor was circular, spanning two whole floors, but Slytherin Manor itself was a rectangle. This created eight rather odd shaped rooms, each curved like a skateboarder's ramp that had been turned up on its side. A few were earmarked for washrooms, another for cloaks, another for storage, but two of them, the second and third clockwise from the entrance on the second floor, had been put aside for the house-elves, one for living quarters, the other for kitchens, and were thus, a domain apart from wizardry.

"You, there! That toast is a shade too brown. Fix it."

Aluminium countertops encircled the curved room like a spiky collar.

"No! Young Mistress Greengrass likes her egg yolks runny, but her whites hard. Do two separately and pour one into the other."

Dozens of brand new magical appliances now lined those countertops, the combined literal firepower of which, when all activated at once, could turn the room from cool and sleek into a cramped and sweltering hellhole.

"If you isn't getting it right this time, you will not be seeing toilet cleaning duty again for a month!"

Up against the one straight wall of the room, Plato hopped down from the chair he'd requisitioned from the incoming furniture pile and moved it a couple of inches to the left. It sat high up on one of the countertops and overlooked the room like a throne.

The rest of the room was completely empty of life.

"That is being perfect," Plato said to himself. "Plato will be ready for other house-elves, but Plato will still be needing the traps, curses, and tripwires around Plato's chair. Plato is Master's head-elf here, and Plato will not give that up easily. Oh, no, Plato will not."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —
T-minus 11 days

"Firing up this bad boy!" shouted a voice.

All around the grand ballroom, spell-hunters and artificers were watching with calculating eyes. Some of them were looking over the balcony upstairs to get a different angle of view. A group of goblins, house-elves, and wizards, who weren't anything to do with the project, but who knew an excuse for a break when they saw it, crowded by the front doors, and were kept back by one of the spell-hunters.

In the middle of the room, the man who had shouted the warning put his wand to the jewelled eye of a bronze snake — a snake inlaid into the very marble of the floor, coiling out for several meters on all sides.

He sent a pulse of magic into the jewel and spoke a default password.

The jewel sank away and what looked like a dozen liquid woods—liquid like liquid metals—flowed out of the hole. The different streams of wood rose up and swirled into the space over the man's head. There were Oooos and Aahhs from the watching crowd, mostly the house-elves, but a few wizards and witches too. Slowly, the wood started to form a globe, spinning majestically in the air, each different species forming a different feature — beech for the oceans, teak for the land, rosewood for the borders between the different sovereign territories of Earth.

"Well, I'd say that first part is a success," the man said, wiping his brow.

There was a chorus of satisfied muttering around the room.

Floating-Interest stepped out of the crowd and walked forward to get a better look. Each territory had a little brass knob attached to it. She turned to the man. "May I?"

"By all means."

Floating-Interest turned back to the globe, focused on Eastern Europe, caught sight of her target, and said, "Fullmoonia."

The brass knob attached to Fullmoonia turned. There was a click, and a drawer in the shape of the newest magical nation on Earth sailed down into Floating-Interest's hands. By the time it arrived, the drawer had changed shape into something more rectangular. There was a small collection of empty vials within.

"Mister Wizard?" Floating-Interest nodded at the vials.

The wizard took one, placed his wand to his temple, and drew out a long memory strand, which cascaded into the vial. He placed the vial in the drawer, leaving Floating-Interest to speak the return command, which lifted the box back out of her hands, changing shape as it went, and sliding back into the globe with a satisfying click sound.


The whole globe dissolved, turned into a swirling maelstrom of liquid wood, and reformed into an almost identical looking globe, except this time, Fullmoonia was absent, and the drawer of Transylvania, when inspected, was empty. Another command to set the globe to 1993 produced a Fullmoonia drawer also empty. It was only once they reset the globe back to 1992, that they were able to retrieve the man's test memory.
There was a smattering of applause around the room.

"Incredible work," the wizard said. "I must admit, I was skeptical when you called us all together — this has got to be the most impressive memory cabinet ever created — so many different family magics — and for travel-logging of all things — most people would just use a scrapbook — but whoever devised this clearly did their homework." He turned to Floating-Interest. "I'd like to offer them a token of my greatest respect. Such wizards deserve recognition."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 10 days

"Greatest respect tastes pretty damn good," Dan Granger declared, taking another sip of wine. "I could get used to this. A pity recognition isn't part of our deal." He and Emma were taking a precious moment to relax outside their cottage at the bottom of the hill, shielded from the bustle that had gripped the island over the last week. What had once been a bare Scottish island was now lush with magical foliage, but even that hadn't blocked them off completely.

"Recognition would only endanger us," Emma said. "Better we stay in the shadows."

"Does make you wonder though."

"What?"

"What other secret projects are going on in Slytherin's name."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Albert Hawking, married with children, couldn't hide his blush as he finished up yet another of the many secret spaces in Slytherin Manor — the Sssss room. "I don't even know what half of these things are," he muttered, glancing around the room. "I'm almost afraid to ask what goes on in Slytherin's mind."

Floating-Interest smirked. "I understand the idea was not his lordship's, but rather Heiress Lovegood's. The only input Slytherin had was to insist on an age line at all three secret passageway entrances."

"Didn't Slytherin's second betrothed only just start Hogwarts?"

"Youth will always imitate maturity without truly understanding it."

"In that case, I don't want to know what maturity this girl is imitating."

Floating-Interest shrugged. "It all seems reasonable to me."

Albert Hawking knew better than to say something stupid like, 'that's because you're a goblin,' so he instead bit his tongue.

Floating-Interest gave him a sly look as though she could read his thoughts. "Power is everything in the goblin world," she said. "Accounts are won and lost by the swing of an axe. Accounts make powerful warriors, and for the greatest warriors of all, the best breeders." Floating-Interest shot Albert a toothy goblin grin. "That's me, in case you were wondering."

"Warrior or breeder?" someone said. To Albert's horror, he realised it had been him.

Floating-Interest didn't seem offended, however. If anything, she looked flattered. "Both, human.
If I had my sword, I could cut you down before you could raise your wand."

Albert didn't doubt it. The light-green figure beside him may be half his height, and have hips and curves like some ancient fertility painting, but there was the promise of sinewy muscle, fast and powerful, under the thin layer of feminine fat. They'd left the secret room now and were in one of the bedrooms. He scratched the back of his neck, glad to be out of a room that he was sure his wife would flay him alive for having anything to do with the construction of. "I must say, you're surprisingly candid for a goblin. I don't think I've ever heard one of your kind speak so openly before."

Floating-Interest gave him a kind look. "You've signed your memory-lock contract."

Lord Hawking, Albert's grandfather, walked into the room and pointed a wand at him.

Albert sighed. "Oh, right. I forgot, again." He took off his noble house ring. "You know, I don't think I'm ever going to get used to the way our family does business."

"That's by design," Lord Hawking said. "Obliviate."

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The main land mass of Gairsay was divided into three areas. The large island, which comprised about sixty-five to seventy per cent of the total, the peninsula, which was connected to the large island by an isthmus, and the small island, sitting several hundred meters off from the rest. It was on the smaller island, looking up at the feverish work going on across the water, that Floating-Interest now stood. The way she stood was tense, and this was only partly due to overwork.

"I certainly think you were right to consult me," said a nasally voice beside her.

The wizard she was currently sharing the company of wouldn't have looked out of character as the villain of a Charles Dickens novel. Behind her, were two male goblins with their hands on their swords.

"I mean, what were you planning to do?" the wizard continued. "Just put up a few gates and stones and wait until the first pet dies? A good graveyard isn't just something that happens! It needs planning, it needs care, it needs nurturing like a mother nurtures her child." His voice dropped to a croon. "A graveyard is like a garden. It must be grown."

The wizard's name was Matilda, a licensed necromancer, freelancing for the Department of Ghosts and Spirits, and right now, Floating-Interest was silently cursing Slytherin for this particular project. The goblins' feelings towards Death were complex, to say the very least. This was not at all helped by the top hat the man wore, atop from which, a large, very dead rat looked down with faintly glowing eyes.

"We need a theme!" Matilda clapped his hands together and rubbed them. "Oh, yes. This will be excellent. We need a theme and we need symbolism. The dead are not as literal-minded as the living. They need to be coaxed. How about—"

"—Snakes," Floating-Interest said firmly.

"Snakes..." Matilda frowned, no longer rubbing his hands. "Not very necromantic, snakes... Demonic, yes. Plenty of good symbolism for good and evil and the choices of humanity. How about skulls instead? Always a classic, skulls. Or Beetles? Men have used beetles since the
Egyptians. Got a good collection of wood knockers back home. I could—"

"Snakes!" Floating-Interest snapped.

"Snakes, right. Snakes. Ouroboros. The serpent biting its own tail. The symbol of eternity. Life and Death in the eternal dance. Yes!" Matilda's voice went from sulking to enthusiastic in a few quick beats. "Yes, we can do that. We'll start with a basic mausoleum to go with the yard. Oh! Why don't we begin work on Slytherin's own tomb? It's never too early to consider eternity—"

"—I think just the basics to begin with."

"Right, just the basics, right. Elegance. Panache. Every lord should have their own little patch of darkness."

As the wizard rambled on, Floating-Interest rubbed at her temples. Too much stress. Too much work. Her muscles ached. The deadline was nearing, and there was still so much to be done.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 7 days

Plato gazed around the Sssss room with calculating eyes. While the true nature and ancestry of house-elves wasn't known to the mass of wizardry, many of the more aware did know. Those wizards would not be surprised by the way Plato's eyes now hungrily moved across the many artefacts that hung from the ceiling and walls.

The house-elf grinned.

"Plato wants one."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 6 days

Philip Scamander tapped his wand on the recently constructed greenhouse. "Not horrible, given the time," he declared. "You'll be able to grow a good selection of plants here. I really think you shouldn't be in such a rush though."

Floating-Interest shrugged. "Lord Slytherin wishes the island to be in viewing state for the Winter Festival. More importantly, is it fit for our other purpose?"

"Partly. You'll certainly be able to keep a collection of small magical creatures. What did he have in mind specifically?"

"Magical insect breeding. Heiress Lovegood is quite the entomologist."

Philip Scamander looked annoyed. "You should have called me in sooner. You need better warding. The floor is too thin. The air doesn't have a self-regulating micro-climate."

"Can you do anything?"

"Before the Winter Festival? I hope Slytherin doesn't expect to have a full breeding program going on by then!"

"No, no," Floating-Interest said in a placating voice. "He merely wishes it to be ready for Lovegood's, ahem, inspection."
"So, he's showing off for his betrothed," Scamander muttered. "Then we can have the big visible stuff finished and leave the tricky details for afterwards."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

**T-minus 5 days**

"No, you damn demon!" Floating-Interest shouted. "You can't have your own dungeon. What are you thinking? We've got barely any time left and you want to make another hidden room? What's wrong with you?"

In front of her, the well-dressed Plato crossed his arms and smirked. "Plato is thinking the squib shouldn't be calling the muggle empty."

"Gah!" Floating-Interest rubbed her temples. "No, just no. I don't have time for this!" Her voice rose in pitch until it was almost a screech.

Plato frowned. "Is pretty goblin girl taking care of herself? Overwork is not being good."

"Shut up!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

**T-minus 4 days**

Lord Parkinson sat down on a short grassy bench, looked around at his work, and found it to be good. It wasn't every day one got to design and build a duelling arena. He'd have to show it to his daughter during Gala Night as an example of the kind of magic expected of a house as old and distinguished as theirs.

Next to him, a space of grassy hill flattened into more grassy bench, making space for one more bottom.

"Progress, lord wizard?" asked the female goblin in charge.

Lord Parkinson sighed. The gobliness had become more and more demanding over the last two weeks. "As you can see," he said, "we are finished." He gestured around him. "I always liked the Greek-style amphitheatre, but here we have that concept realised with magic. Will you not take a moment to fully appreciate great work?"

The gobliness sagged with visible relief, which he took as agreement. Not that he was going to stop either way. "Look," he said, "at first the eye sees but a smooth grassy slope, carved directly into the hill. But with every body that enters, more and more slope becomes seating. The grass is my family's own variety." He pulled out a pair of scissors, placed them next to him, and smiled with satisfaction as the grass picked them up and started trimming itself. "And the wood for the bench-retaining-walls came all the way from magical India. When fully seated, the duelling wards have enough capacity to hold back a small horde and the arena itself has limited magical resonance, able to respond to the will of the Lord of the House, reforming itself as needed. Want a wetland duelling arena? A mountain-side? A beach? This duelling space will provide — so long as it's natural. We can't do towns or cities."

The gobliness gave him a wane smile. "Practicing your sales patter, lord wizard?"

"Must your kind always be so crass? I merely wish people to fully understand what the house of Parkinson has been able to achieve here. This is not a large duelling arena — only around five-
hundred seats — but have you ever seen one with such elegance before?"

The goblinness looked down the green hillside, down to the currently white circle of sand at the bottom, and out to the sea beyond. The water glittered icy blue in the weak winter sun. "No," the goblin said, "I guess not."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Floating-Interest watched Lord Parkinson walk toward the floo and let out a yawn.

No! She lightly slapped herself. She didn't have time for that. She needed to keep on. Next, she should head over to the security wards and check that the new parameters would function for Gala Night.

There was a pop sound behind her. Had the Parkinson house-elves finished work on the new hydrology system?

"Plato brings news for pretty goblin girl."

Wrong elves.

She turned around. "News?"

The Slytherin head—and only—elf smiled at her. "Mistress Icygrass has authorised two-hundred galleons for discretionary house-elf interests."

Floating-Interest's heart fell.

"But since Plato knows pretty goblin girl is very busy, Plato has gone ahead and arranged everything for her. Pretty goblin girl only needs to sign and everything will be taken care of."

Floating-Interest's mouth hung open for only a fraction of a second before she took the parchment proffered her. Unfortunately, that fraction of a second was long enough for the house-elf to spot.

Mentally cursing, Floating-Interest read the parchment. She looked up in surprise. "Did you really arrange all this?"

Plato smirked. "What does pretty goblin girl think Plato is? Plato was trained in household management since he was old enough to walk."

Floating-Interest felt a small weight lift off her. At least this wasn't one more thing to deal with. "Fine," she muttered. "You can have your 'rest and relaxation' room." She withdrew a quill from the recesses of her dress and signed on the dotted line. "Just don't take up any more resources than this."

"Of course not," Plato said, and popped away.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 3 days

Albert Hawking finished casting the last spell that would connect the secret tunnel that led from Granger Cottage to the library of Slytherin Manor. It had been a tricky job, requiring the passageway to navigate its way through a crack in the masonry no wider than a pencil, but once he was done, it was wide enough on the inside for two to walk abreast. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't quite proud of it. "What are you going to do for a secret door?" he asked.
Floating-Interest yawned. She had shadows around her eyes. "We'll probably use a tickling charm on a book, or a blood sacrifice, or something like that. Slytherin can be quite the traditionalist."

"Is he? No one really seems to know where Slytherin stands on anything."

"We goblins have a slightly better understanding of the man than most. We've worked with him the longest."

"Really? I heard he originally came all the way from New Zealand — that he's an adventurer, and that one day he found Slytherin's treasure on a hidden Mediterranean island surrounded by perpetual fog — that he fought past legions of undead guards, and when he finally claimed Slytherin's locket, the ghost of Salazar Slytherin spoke to him, found him worthy, and that is what allowed him to take up the mantle. Is that true?"

"No."

"Oh." Albert felt a pang of disappointment. "Then what about the story that he found a genie hidden in a bottle — that he wished for the power to restore honour to his family, who'd exiled him for running off with an Indian princess on the night before her wedding to the Maharaja."

"No!" the goblin snapped.

Albert recoiled.

Floating-Interest grimaced. "My apologies, human. I am not quite feeling myself right now. Stress is not something goblins ever like to admit to. We hate being seen as weak. Not unless the one doing the seeing has earned our respect."

Albert thought about this. "Then I'm honoured that you at least respect me enough to tell me so."

They were out in the empty main library now, evacuated of books due to ongoing work by outsiders.

Floating-Interest shot him a cranky look. "It will take more than doing a job you were hired for to get a goblin's respect, human."

The main door opened and Lord Hawking walked in. He pointed his wand at Albert.

Albert sighed. "Oh, right. I forgot, again." He took off his noble house ring. "You know, I don't think I'm ever going to get used to the way our family does business."

"That's by design," Lord Hawking said. "Obliviate."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 2 days

Plato looked around what Floating-Interest was still euphemistically referring to the House-Elf Rest and Relaxation Room. He grinned. Seeing the wizard's Sssss room had given him a basic foundation to work from, but he'd really innovated and expanded on the concept since then. Hidden between the kitchen and the house-elf sleeping quarters, Plato was now sure he had all the tools he needed to keep the other house-elves in line, and most importantly, keep him as the number one elf to serve the master and young mistresses.

The green, three-foot-tall door to the kitchens opened and Floating-Interest marched in.
"Well, are you happy now?" she asked. "Need anything else? A bejewelled iron maiden, perhaps? Infused with exotic scents and spices, maybe?"

Plato smiled. "No, Plato is quite happy. Pretty goblin girl's team is very efficient. They followed Plato's directions to the letter."

The gobliness huffed.

"But Plato is thinking that pretty goblin girl does need to be relaxing more."

"I don't have time to relax! There's still so much to do." She made to sit down heavily on a wooden stool, misjudged the distance, and ended up crashing into the ground instead.

"Oh, dear!" Plato was at her side in an instant. "Plato is thinking pretty goblin girl really must be taking the evening off."

Floating-Interest stilled, then shook her head. "I must be over seeing— I mean, I must oversee—"

"Why not be letting Plato take care of pretty goblin girl?"

Floating-Interest paused again before looking up at him, her eyes both weary and wary.

"Plato can be assuring pretty goblin girl that Plato's kind knows how goblin girl wishes to be treated."

"I have to manage the project," she weakly protested.

"Pretty goblin girl be letting Plato handle everything. Plato has been here since the beginning. Plato is knowing everything that is needing to be done."

"The ministry—"

"Arriving tomorrow at ten o'clock."

"The magical theatre—"

"Setting up for rehearsal at two."

Floating-Interest gave in. Plato could see it in her eyes.

"Okay, you damn demon," she muttered, "but if you disappoint me, I swear I will cut you down."

Plato smirked and gently reached for the rope.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

**T-minus 1 day**

High in the sky, a wizard wearing heavy padding took a deep breath, looked around with a 'why me,' sort of expression, jumped off his broomstick, flailed wildly, fell a hundred feet, and landed in the water just off Gairsay Island with a loud smack.

Floating-Interest winced. She then subtly adjusted her full-length dress for the tenth time that morning.

"Well, that's the high altitude drop test out of the way," said the excited voice of Ludo Bagman.
They were standing on the thin strip of lawn behind Slytherin Manor, looking out over the steep hill beyond and further out to sea. "Next up, the spectator emergency evacuation procedure. I say, are you sure Lord Slytherin won't be around this afternoon? Only, I've got something important I wanted to discuss with him before Gala Night."

"I'm sure," Floating-Interest said with a relaxed smile. "Our client deeply wishes he could be here, but other matters called him away. Of course, you can always send him an owl if it's important."

Ludo Bagman looked decidedly less excited by that prospect, but perked right back up again the moment Clare Cooper arrived. "Oh! Miss Cooper, what a surprise. I'm glad to see you're finding your own way in the world."

The muggleborn's greeting back to Bagman was far more neutral in tone.

The three then ascended a set of outdoor steps all the way to the roof of the manor where Clare stuck her wand into the eye-socket of a snake statue, and pulsed a set of spells into the stonework. All across the roof, a hundred stone snakes moved in choreographed sequence, lifting up five wooden benches for nearly five-dozen spectators to gaze out across the North Sea under a dome of invisible magic — protected from the elements — hidden from prying muggle eyes — all within shouting distance of a house-elf kitchen and whatever other luxuries Lord Slytherin could dream up.

Several minutes later, six levitating quidditch hoops shimmered into sight high above the water.

"Damn, I'd give a thousand galleons to know how you pulled that off," Bagman muttered. "Quidditch over water. It could revolutionise the whole sport's regulation. You've no idea how much effort we have to put into maintaining all our wards and illusions. Would have needed much more parchment-work if this whole thing was on land, let me tell you."

By this point, the wizard from the high altitude drop test had joined them, looking rather put out and dripping water all over the wooden floor. He would have looked even more put out if he'd have known exactly what the spectator emergency evacuation procedure entailed.

His screech echoed through the air as Floating-Interest, Ludo Bagman, and Clare all watched his rapidly retreating form, which came to an abrupt stop with another loud, watery smack.

Floating-Interest winced, again.

"It's just a shame there's room for so few spectators," Bagman continued. "I could easily imagine hosting a few exhibition matches here — for select fans, perhaps? I'll certainly be lobbying for use of the duelling arena — work of pure art, that."

From the ground on the other side of the manor came a series of loud and angry shouts, which turned out to be a team of goblins carrying an ever-iced chandelier getting in the way of a team of house-elves levitating a grand piano.

"I say, are you sure you're going to be ready in time?" Ludo Bagman asked.

Floating-Interest smiled another easy smile. "I assure you, human, we have everything under complete control."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 0 days... and three hours
"Move, you slackers! My father will be here to inspect our work soon! Do you want to explain to
the head of the Boneslicer clan why this place still looks like a dragon-shit pile?! Why isn't that
painting up yet?! What do you mean, 'The wizard with the sticking charms went home?!' — Then
go down to Granger Cottage and get Miss Cooper! — I don't care if she doesn't know the spell!
Teach it to her! — Yes, in a few hours! Get on it!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 0 days… and two hours

"No, you idiots! Don't put that there! The house-elves won't be able to spell the floor polished if
you pile up all this crap here. I don't care if it's only temporary! They're going to start in twenty
minutes, not your fantasy thirty! No, it's not only ten minutes! They need the floor polished before
they can roll out the carpet for the orchestral! No— I don't— If you don't move your shit right
now, I swear to hell you will feel my blade!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 0 days… and one hour

"Move! Move! Faster! Faster! There's plaster dust upstairs! You! Why is there rubbish still here?!
It should be on the barge heading to the mainland! What do you mean, delayed?! That doesn't
matter! Get it moving now! Oh, dragon-crap, is father keyed into the floo? Junk-Bond! Is my
father— He isn't?! Plato! — Can you… Oh, thank hells. Wait, the barge! I need to go, but I want
everything clean by the time I get back!"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

T-minus 0 days… and thirty minutes

"What the hell is this?! There's still cleaning to be done! Why is there string lying around?! From
the carpets?! Do I need to order you to punish yourself, you incompetent house-elf?! Do you think
I care that Lord Parkinson is your master?! While working here, I am your mistress, and if I tell
you to jump, you say, 'from where'?!"

The floo in the entrance way flared green.

Floating-Interest gasped. She whirled around. It couldn't be her father, she thought wildly. It was
too early. The head of the Boneslicer clan was never early. He was always right on time.

But it was him.

Out of the floo walked Ragnok Boneslicer, decked out in full chain mail and carrying his massive
war axe. He looked around the small entrance room — a room which had a view to the grand
ballroom — the grand ballroom in which the Earth-shaped memory library was currently hovering
and turning above the wood-inlaid floor, and grinned. "I like the interesting ones."

Floating-Interest slowly felt the knot in her chest uncoil. Her father nodded along as she guided
him through the manor, asking pointed questions, but in general looking like he approved of the
job she'd done.

"I find myself impressed, daughter," he eventually declared, after she'd shown him the double
layered warding system that would totally surround the island both at the water's edge, and a
hundred meters out to sea. "When I received the updated specs from Lord Slytherin, I didn't
immediately believe it could be done. But you proved it could be. You work hard. You work those
around you hard. And you keep your dignity. I will have to see about moving you to one of our elite teams."

"Thank you, Father."

They started walking back up to the manor and Floating-Interest couldn't help looking back on the time she'd spent here. Slytherin Manor was probably the most unique magical building she'd ever been asked to build. So full of secrets, even by magical standards. It was like being there when Hogwarts had first been completed. But soon her time here would be over. Just another project to add to her ever-growing resume. She'd miss it. But for those who were to live here, the stories were only just beginning.

They reached the doorway back to the main hall.

Floating-Interest looked back down the hill, and out across the water, and smiled.

"By the way, daughter, there are two rooms on your 'unofficial' plans that you haven't shown me. I think I'd like to see them too."

Floating-Interest's smile froze. Crap.

Plato popped into being beside them. "Plato can show pretty goblin girl's daddy if he likes."

Crap!

Ragnok raised an eyebrow. "Plato? You are Slytherin's head elf are you not? I've heard reports that you've been of great help to my daughter. I would be very interested to hear more about that."

"Plato will happily tell pretty goblin girl's daddy everything."

CRAP!

Floating-Interest could only watch on, helpless, heart pounding, as her father and Plato turned and started walking towards the house-elf quarters. If the house-elf said even half of anything... let alone the totality of everything...

Then Plato turned his head behind her father's back, looked her right in the eyes, shook his head, smirked, and winked.

He wasn't really going to say anything.

That little shit!

Floating-Interest felt her knees go weak.

But, she was safe.
A/N: I hope you enjoyed the bonus chapter! Normally, I do these bonus chapters about half-way through the planning process for the next set of chapters, but for this one, I'm almost done with the prep work for what's to come, so you can expect new updates on the discord much sooner, if that's your thing.

A/N: I've also updated my Twitch streaming program and refocused specifically on writers and writing. I now stream three times a week on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, from 5:00 UTC to 8:00 UTC.

Mondays is dedicated to fan-fiction and Dodging Prison and Stealing Witches in particular (recordings, editing, readings, etc).

Wednesday's stream is called Let's Write a Story, and features live writing of a full-length work, with plenty of twitch chat input (We're starting with one of my old fan-fics, 'Harry Potter is the Boy-who-Lived, Child Hero for Hire).

And Friday's stream is the Hardcore Writing Boot Camp, where I challenge myself to complete writing prompts against a timer (I also do writing critiques of submitted work). If writing is your thing you might like to check that out. Details are on the discord or in my Ao3 profile.

A/N: This chapter was drafted and made available early through the LeadVonE discord server, as will the next one. If you fancy discussing this chapter with like-minded people, or anything else DP&SW, feel free to head over there.

A special thank you to the following people for helping catch mistakes on #dpasw-editorial: ASK, Chuck, Dragonbait, drakonpie250, dutchy-jin, FartyArtyPartyPooper, Fuuryuu, Gloweye, Leyrann, MageKing17, Magic Bird Dust, SmartyPants, sfu, Tendra, and Violet_Ivy

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2019's prices.
'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the manor, wizards and witches a'gathered, to completely make a pig’s ear of muggle traditions.

Lily Potter’s eyes scanned her many guests again, secretly despairing at the number who continued to turn up to her yearly tribute to the most important western muggle holiday in flowing red robes, trimmed with white fur, and sporting either fake or transfigured long white beards. Even after ten years, they still didn't quite understand. Some of the more traditional kept glancing nervously at the mistletoe hung up over doors, occasionally muttering about nargles.

It wasn't all bad though.

The Weird Sisters were pitch-perfect playing, 'Merry Christmas Everyone', brightly-coloured tinsel festooned the room like the world's longest cat, and the house elves had long ago mastered muggle festive foods, which happily included mince pies, Christmas pudding, and mulled wine.

Lily took a small bite from her own mince pie and smiled. She'd have to remember to take some to the boys when she could shake these utter bores.

"And then what happened, Lady Potter?" asked Lord Updike — owner of a magical fish farm in the glens far up north. His temporary beard went down to his knees.

"Yes, do tell us," gushed his wife, "Slytherin seems to be popping up more and more recently." She gasped. "Do you think he's going to make some 'big move' soon?" She'd styled her beard in curls.

Lily frowned. The incident had happened soon after Harry had been cured of petrification. The free house elf was still on the loose, and…

— DP & SW: NRIcAD —

The large stone corridors of Hogwarts had been bitingly cold, but the teacher's lounge, at least, was always warm and cozy.

"But how could a house elf be on the loose?" Lily whispered.

Opposite her, Severus looked pensive. "It's very rare, Lily. It is not enough to simply present an elf with clothes to free it, there is a whole ritual to go with it. And for an elf to be able to maintain its presence on the mortal plane would require an extremely strong purpose. The Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures will have a field day when they find out."

"I'm going to have to check the wards around Potter Manor," Lily said. "I know James says they're better than the best gold can buy, but I'm not taking any chances. What if that elf is on someone's orders? What if it's one of our political enemies?" Her voice lowered further. "What if it's Slytherin?"

Severus looked contemplative. "Not impossible, but I have my doubts. The bludgers were targeting Ginny Weasley, and I have my suspicions that she's a student of the Gray."
Lily nodded. She shared those suspicions too. Given how close the girl appeared to be to Harry, it was hard not to. "So, who?"

"I'd guess a rogue lord of either the Dark or the Light."

Lily narrowed her eyes. "If I find out it was someone in the Light, I will whip them into line so hard no amount of dittany will help them."

"And I will gladly help you. In the meantime, we can only wait for Slytherin to show up, and until then, the aurors will have to stay on full alert."

"I just hope Harry won't suffer long-term effects from the petrification."

Severus snorted. "I dare say your son is resilient enough to cope. He has been through plenty in his life." He gave her a meaningful look.

Lily looked uncomfortably off to the side.

"In any case," he continued, "Dumbledore will want to know about these developments, so I suggest we arrange a meeting soon. He always had a soft spot for the house elves, and now four of them are dead."

"None of this would have happened if Dumbledore were here," Lily said. "I know Gilderoy means well, but he just doesn't have as strong a handle on things as Dumbledore did. Was bullying as big of a problem before, or am I just misremembering? I've had seven students come to me in just the last month."

Snape shrugged. "It was and it wasn't. Bullying was more of an in-house thing before. Now it's becoming increasingly inter-house. Dumbledore was always dead set against that."

"And what about all the contraband?" Lily continued. "I swear, the number of banned items I've had to confiscate from students recently has gone up five-fold. Where are they getting it all?"

"I don't know."

Just then, Lily heard multiple footsteps coming down the hallway outside. She and Severus stood up from their chairs, just as the door opened, and the masked figure of Lord Slytherin swept in, followed quickly by Headmaster Lockhart, Sirius Black, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Richard Vablatsky, head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

"When I find that demon, I'll have its head!" Vablatsky roared. "Oh, Lady Potter." His voice calmed. "What a surprise."

Lily's gaze didn't shift from the masked man in front of her, who gave her a polite nod of acknowledgement before turning back to the group. "This will do well," he said, and gracefully sat down in the plushest of the room's many chairs. "Finding the correct wards for demonic incursions will take time. I suspect many other wards will be tied into it, but once I have found it, it will simply be a matter of reweaving the correct enchantments."

Just then, the door opened again, and, of all people, Minister Fudge barged in. "Wait!" He stood in the door opening, huffing and puffing. "I know what you're planning, and you can't!"

Everyone stared at him.

"I beg your pardon?" Sirius said.
The minister got his breath back. "Umm… what I mean is that, Lord Slytherin, as much as I respect your ancestral rights to Hogwarts, the age of magical fortresses is over. We live in the time of the ministries now, and the world is much better for it, I think we can all agree on that. The wards of Hogwarts are as strong as they could possibly need to be, and there is no need to strengthen them, or bring any of the old wards back into use, or—"

"—Minister, there is a free house elf on the loose."

Vablatski's words caused the blood to drain out of Fudge's face. It was like his entire body did a one-eighty shift from bluster to shock. "A… a free house elf?"

"Yes, Minister."

"But I thought… Ah—I—I—Um…"

His spluttering was interrupted by Slytherin. "Minister, I understand your concerns, but I think we can all agree that the safety of the students should come first. Perhaps we can agree to a limited time period of, as you'd put it, 'Magical Fortress Hogwarts'? Say, three months? That should give the ministry enough time to track down the culprit?"

Minister Fudge straightened. "Three months? Three months. Yes, That's acceptable. But after that it all comes back down, agreed?"

"Of course, minister."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Back in Potter Manor, the Weird Sisters had just finished *Merry Xmas Everybody* and had moved onto *Mistletoe and Wine*.

…"We didn't find the house elf when the old wards came back up, but at least we knew it had left." Lily finished giving a much-edited version of events to her small circle of guests. Several others had joined them during the telling. It was the fourth telling of that particular story tonight.

Lord Updike shook his head. "Did the Minister really think Slytherin was trying to seize control of Hogwarts to use as his own private fortress?"

"I don't agree with Hogwarts having its wards strengthened like in the old days," said one Heiress Bolingbroke, adult daughter of another of the Light's oldest supporters. "But still, a free house elf. Who would be so insane as to try to keep a free house elf?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

On the other side of the Potter Ballroom, Sirius Black cursed James for leaving him all alone with the sharks.

"I'm so sorry to hear about the problems you've been having with your daughter, my child," said a particularly ancient wizard, whose name Sirius knew he should know.

"It's no problem," Sirius said tersely. "She's free to follow her own path. Just like I was."

"Do you really believe that? Or have you just lost control of her?" asked a witch who had the kind of distinctive face that was only achieved with several large overdoses of beautification potion.

"Not at all. Alex is an independent girl and I'm very proud of her."
"You mustn't blame yourself. It was probably her mother's blood."

Sirius gritted his teeth. "I assure you, Madam—"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Oh, oh! Mister Hale, what a pleasure to see you here. Can I present to you, my daughter?" Arthur Weasley beamed with his hand on Ginny's shoulder.

Mister Hale, manager of Bobmin Moor Quidditch Stadium, had been looking around the ballroom with the kind of smug self-satisfaction oft-worn by those who were hitting well above their own social class. The moment he saw Ginny, though, that smug look vanished and his eyes widened in genuine excitement. "I say! Is this young Ginevra? Arthur, you rogue! You must know she's been the talk of Puddlemere for weeks."

"I did have a suspicion."

"You must find time to bring her to Bodmin! Oh, I'm sorry." He turned to Ginny. "Mister Hale, Miss Weasley, at your service. I'm not going to beat about the bush — you keep flying like that and I'm going to have to talk Ludo into getting you an age exemption for league play."

A corner of Ginny's lips quirked upwards.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in."

Xenophilius Lovegood turned around with a mince pie in each hand and another in his mouth to find himself looking at a wizard in his mid-twenties with a smirk on his face and a glint in his eye. He swallowed and smiled widely. "Terrance, my old friend! How are you these days? Haven't seen you since—"

"Since you left the Light to run off with that masked, unknown lord."

"Ah, well, you know how it is."

"I really don't. I'm surprised you have the balls to show your face around here."

"You'd be surprised what I've had the balls to do recently."

"Oh?"

Xeno put a friendly arm around Terrance, leaned in, and whispered. "Can't talk about it, though. Very hush hush."

Terrance rolled his eyes. "So why are you and the rest of the Grubbies here?" He nodded towards where Lords Greengrass, Smith, Davies, Slughorn, and Tempest were investigating the massive charmed Christmas tree in the middle of the ballroom.

"Grubbies?" Xeno barked a laugh. "I'll have to remember that one. You must have heard that Lord Potter wants to twist our arms about the Muggle Protection Act. It not passing before end of session was a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it gives us more time to hash out details, but on the other, the longer we prattle on the less likely anything is going to actually pass."

"Mmmm… I can see how that might be problematic. So is Slytherin himself going to grace us with his presence? I'm sure he was invited."
Xeno rubbed the back of his neck. "Ah, yes, about that…"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Augusta, did you see where Susan ran off to? Sunny and Pandora haven't seen her for years. I want to make sure they don't miss her."

Augusta Longbottom gave the Head of the DMLE a soft smile. "I believe I saw her leaving with John Potter, Amelia."

"Oh, then it'll probably be the second playroom. I know John had Virgo Malfoy stashed up there."

Augusta's smile vanished, something which Amelia Bones immediately caught. She gave her friend an accusing look. "Miss Malfoy is under a lot of pressure from her parents, you know." She put extra emphasis on the word pressure, as if to communicate all sorts of contextual undercurrents — undercurrents possibly involving rope, bricks, and a good strong sack. "It can't be easy for a muggle-raised girl to be expected to fit into such a traditional Dark family so suddenly. It's a very encouraging step that they allowed her to attend at all. The least we can do is offer our full support."

Augusta sighed. "Yes, I suppose, you are right. It's just so difficult to think of the Malfoys as anything other than trouble."

"Trust me. I know exactly what you mean."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Hey, look. Isn't that Slytherin's muggleborn girl?"

"The one who fought the troll?"

"The one who caught Dumbledore's stunner."

"I've heard Lord Slytherin put her through all kinds of dark rituals. Dozens! How else would you explain how one of her kind could do so well at Hogwarts?"

"Now, I take exception to that."

"Well, how do you explain it?"

"…"

"That's what I thought."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Should you even be with me?" Hermione asked. "Won't it be troublesome if word of our talking like this gets back to Draco and the others?"

"Oh, relax," Alex said, bringing a dollop of whipped cream to her tongue, tasting it, and pulling a disgusted face. "I've got a plan for if that happens. And I've got to talk to someone. It's mostly all Light and Gray here. Who else would I talk to? You want me to stick by my dad the whole time? That would look even weirder."

Hermione sighed. "I suppose so."
"Besides, I've dressed for it."

Hermione had to admit that this was true. Alexandra Black looked like a teenager's idea of what a dark lady looked like, at least at the base layer. i.e, black lace, ruffled skirts, corsetry, high heels, puffed sleeves, and a traditional witches hat, but with the not unimportant addition of a see-through black veil. It was just a shame, Hermione thought, that the first-year didn't yet have the figure to properly pull off the look. In the sea of red and white Father Christmas knock-offs filling the hall, what Alexandra Black actually looked like was a rather short lump of coal.

"You'll still need to find something to do while we're upstairs," Hermione said. "There's no way you'd be able to explain that away if John Potter found you with us up there."

"I'm sure I'll find something. I just wish I could say the same about winter snacks that aren't sweet."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Hi, Neville."

"Oh, hi Ron. Managed to shake your parents?"

Ron grinned. "No need. Dad's with Ginny and Mum's on the hunt for Slytherin. She's been looking for a chance to interrogate him for years, you know."

"You think he'll turn up here?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

Neville shrugged. "You're closer friends with John than I am. And he's always going on about Lord Slytherin this and Lord Slytherin that. Figured if anyone knew anything it'd be him."

"Nah, he's been with Susan and Virgo more recently. Heir business, you know."

Neville let out a long-suffering sigh. "Unfortunately, I do."

Ron elbowed him good-naturedly in the ribs. "Cheer up! You're at a party. Never seen some of this stuff before. What are these little ones called?"

"That's a mince pie, Ron."

"It's good!"

"This is your first time at the Potter Christmas Party, isn't it?"

"Sure is. What's the massive tree in the middle for? Some special ritual?"

"It's where muggles put their winter festival gifts."

Ron swallowed his last piece of mince pie. "Odd, but to each their own. You haven't seen Smith or Boot, have you?"

"The Smiths had to cancel. The Boots weren't invited this year," Neville rattled with the ease of the over-prepared.

"Oh." Ron's eyes, tracking around the ballroom as though looking for them anyway, fell on one small group, and narrowed. The fact that the group happened to contain a boy their own age with
roguishly messy black hair, green eyes, and a scar on his forehead, probably played a large role in this.

Neville followed his gaze. "You never liked John's brother, did you?"

"He's a slimy snake."

"So John keeps saying."

Ron looked annoyed. "No, it's not that. There are Slytherins like Malfoy and Granger, and all the others, and they're one thing. But that one… ugh, he makes me shiver."

"Why?"

"Have you ever seen him smile?"

"He smiles all the time."

"That's the point! He smiles even when he has no reason to. When someone tells a joke, he just smiles while everyone else laughs. If someone buggers up a spell in class, he just smiles before showing them how it's done properly."

"It's very helpful."

"It's creepy is what it is. It's like he's found one emotion that works, so he just sticks to it all the time."

Neville carefully inspected the younger Potter as best he was able to from as far away as he was. It wasn't easy as there were at least three or four grown-ups jockeying around him at that moment. Potter could certainly cut a striking figure when he wanted to. The way he stood made him appear several inches taller. His robes looked custom-tailored — not unusual for children of their status, but the way he wore them was somehow more regal. Lord Potter stood close by, watching with the air of an amateur lion tamer bringing their new charge in front of a live audience for the very first time.

Harry Potter was smiling. He was smiling like the whole world was a joke and only he knew the punchline.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Lord James Potter was not a man easy to worry. He'd signed up with the DMLE straight out of Hogwarts, got into the auror training academy not long after (a very fancy name for a few large empty rooms in the Ministry basement), served a brief stint in the war against the Dark Lord, and then retired to enter to the world of politics, where a wizard had to at all times keep his wits about him, lest they end up broke, disgraced, and in a magically-binding contract betrothing their as-yet unborn great-great-granddaughter to the great-great-grandson of their worst political enemy.

Under most circumstances, Lord James Potter was not an easy man to worry, but when it came to his sons, both Harry and John, he nevertheless found himself worrying on a fairly regular basis.

"Oh, bravo!"

"Good show!"

"My, my, so talented."
The crowd of lords and ladies clapped as Harry wandlessly conjured an exquisite glass replica of the Statue of Wizardly Brotherhood, and handed it to one of the younger witches, who giggled. She was in her mid-twenties.

James smiled tightly. He was very aware that the impressive display was not the result of Harry Potter, raised spare of the house of Potter, but rather Harry Potter, raised cat's paw of the House of Slytherin. Wizarding lords did not normally include provisions in marriage contracts for children of their house to be raised by their daughter's new families for exactly this reason. No one wanted a potential heir raised by someone else's house.

This was compounded by a shocking revelation that had taken place just before they'd ushered in the first of their guests that evening.

Both Harry and John had been standing side by side by the huge doors, both dressed immaculately, and both being fussed over by Lily.

"And make sure you keep your hat angled correctly, John. You tend to let it slip. Now, let's see, Harry… hat — good, robes — good, you're using correct hair potions, I see — good." She frowned. "Where's your ring? You really should keep it visible during formal events."

James knew something was wrong the moment Harry's expression changed to one of mild confusion. "Ring?"

"Yes, ring, you know, your house ring." Lily turned to look at him with wide eyes. "James, you did show him didn't you?"

James blanched. "I… I kind of assumed Slytherin had already shown him."

The resulting bollocking hadn't been pleasant, and at the end of it all, they hadn't had time to show Harry how to summon his Potter Noble House Ring. That had to be put off until they found a free moment. Knowing that Harry had been walking around for years without mental protection was actually horrifying. On top of that, the prophecy they'd seen from the Department of Mysteries said that they were now supposed to control Harry to stop the fall of magic. The fact that someone else may well have been doing so instead was not a good feeling.

"How's he handling it?" asked a voice. It was Lily, holding two small plates of finger food.

"Good," he replied. "He's a natural."

Lily sighed. "Makes you wonder, doesn't it? About what might have been."

"It does. But, we mustn't allow that to blind us to our responsibilities now."

"All of them."

"Yes, all of them."

Just then, on the other side of the room, the floo by which guests arrived flared green and a tall bearded wizard stepped out. The wizard cleaned his robes with a careless wave of his hand and looked around the hall with a kind smile.

Standing just to one side of the floo, the Master of Ceremonies caught the new arrival's eye, nodded respectfully, cleared his throat and called out across the hall, "Lords and Ladies, Wizards and Witches, Order of Merlin, First Class, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian
Arriving early had clearly been a mistake.

"James! Lily." Dumbledore smiled and turned towards the hosting couple as they drew near. He'd somehow already found a glass of eggnog with a stick of cinnamon in it. "I must thank you greatly for the invitation. I must admit, I was wondering if I would be receiving one this year."

Lily gave the ex-headmaster what could only be described as a look. "I won't pretend I didn't seriously consider not sending it—"

Dumbledore's face became solemn.

"—But seeing as how no permanent damage seems to have been done, I believe we should look instead to the future."

"I can only apologise again, Lily."

"And I have not yet accepted that apology. Your handling of my son will be a permanent stain on your character, Albus."

The entranceway was far from empty. More than a few knowing glances were exchanged between watchful eyes attached to listening ears.

"Enough," James said. "This is a celebration of the good in the world. Albus, won't you follow me? I'd like to show you the enchantments we've added to the tree this year."

"I'd be delighted."

As they moved into hall proper, the many groups thinned, providing some semblance of privacy — with the right spells, of course.

Dumbledore smiled. "Congratulations, by the way, on winning the Animagus Hunt this year,"

James smiled back wryly. The Greengrass Winter Festival was one of the highlights of his year. It was one of the few opportunities for animagi to really let loose in Britain. This year's had been particularly fun. He'd narrowly avoided being tagged by Slytherin's girls by jumping a massive ditch that their horse couldn't follow him over. "Thank you," he said. "It was certainly easier without Slytherin himself on my tail."

"So it is true?" Dumbledore asked. "Lord Slytherin was not at the Greengrass Winter Festival this year?"

"No. Or if he was, I certainly didn't see him."

"Curious. One would imagine that he'd be keen to be seen, given his own upcoming gala night."

James shrugged. "From what I've heard, he wasn't at the Malfoy Yule Ball either."
"And also not here."

James frowned. "No."

"Are you going to go to his gala night?"

James sighed. "I'm not sure. We really should. It's important for the Muggle Protection Act, but... I don't know. Might look weak. He hasn't done us the courtesy of showing up. In previous years I'd understand, but this year?"

"I would encourage you to go anyway. If Lord Slytherin wishes to act childish that is no reason to imitate him."

James thought for a moment before replying, "Yes, you're right of course. Thank you."

"I see Lily is still angry at me."

"She and I both, Albus. Harry isn't too chuffed with you either, you can imagine."

Albus sighed. "No, I imagine not. I was hoping to have the opportunity to talk with him about it, in fact."

"That shouldn't be difficult." James scanned the ballroom, looking for his youngest son. He'd almost certainly be in the centre of some group of adults, charming them with his ridiculous magical talents. But no matter where he looked, he couldn't find him.

The moment Albus Dumbledore had shown up, Harry had vanished.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Upstairs, well away from the general bustle of the party, Harry closed the door he'd just stepped through, further muffling the sounds from downstairs.

"Finished showing off, have you?"

Harry turned to find his brother not far up the corridor. He smiled. "Nothing you haven't also done, brother. I heard you were quite enthusiastic to display your special talents last year. And it's all for the good of House Potter. Have to display our best face."

"As if you give a toss about the house of Potter."

Harry made his way past John and turned back. "I care enough to learn. I hope you haven't forgotten our agreement after the polyjuice incident."

John scowled. "Yeah, yeah, I'll show you where the family magic is. Tomorrow?"

"Tonight would be better. Don't want Mother and Father interrupting us, after all."

"Slimy Slytherin."

"Through and through." He watched John walk away. It wasn't surprising that they'd chosen the playrooms furthest apart from each other to host their little hideouts from the main party.

As Harry turned back and made his way on his path, he caught snatches of conversation and goings-on through open doors. In one room, a small group of post-Hogwarts wizards were rather loudly discussing politics. In another, an older wizard was mentoring a younger on the finer points
of metallic alchemy. And yet another held a mismatched couple who obviously thought their privacy charms were stronger than they actually were, given their rather enthusiastic state of undress. Most of the rooms he passed through, were either empty or containing children or Hogwarts students too bored to spend more than an hour or two downstairs.

The room he was making his way towards would be one of the empty ones — empty save for a magical, space-expanded, multi-compartment, shrinkable trunk.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Daphne stared at the blackboard that hung from one wall of the trunk, chalk in hand. The board was covered in the names of wizards and organisations with arrows linking them and circles surrounding groups of them. Many of those circles overlapped each other, sometimes several times.

Six of those names had been written in all-caps and underlined with coloured chalk.

The Dark

The Gray

The Light

The Ministry

The Judiciary

Gringotts

Around the corners, several names were completely separate from the main mess of lines and circles in the middle. The Flamels, the Arwen, the Lupins.

In the very top-right corner, the letters, "RAB" were circled alongside a massive question mark.

"Okay," Daphne muttered, "this is the current political situation as best I can make it. Lord Black could potentially come to our side, if we played our cards right. The Weasleys don't have a seat, but their father is a skilled influencer. My father has his spies in the ministry, while we're doing our best to infiltrate the Dark. Ragnok is firmly on our side, but there are other goblin clans who don't like us, and we don't have even a single set of eyes on the judge's bench. Having one would be amazing, but those positions only come up once in a blue moon."

Daphne turned around.

"What do you think, Luna? Have I missed anyone important? Anyone who could potentially be a threat?"

Luna Lovegood, the only other witch in the trunk, inspected the blackboard with unblinking eyes. She then quietly stood up, drifted over to the board, took the chalk from Daphne's unresisting fingers, and on an otherwise empty bit of the board, in large capital letters, wrote, "The Muggles." She then underlined it twice in the fashion of the six other major power players and sat back down.

Daphne stared at the new letters. "Oh," she said. "I guess I should have remembered to add them."

A knock on the trunk's roof caused the two girls to turn sharply. Chances were it was Harry or one of the others, but no point in taking stupid risks. The blackboard flipped in on itself, showing a completely blank face. Daphne crossed the room, and after a series of knocks and counter knocks,
opened the trunk's lid from the inside.

"Harry!"

Harry smiled warmly and hugged her before following her down the steps and doing the same for Luna.

Then his face turned serious. "We have a situation. My parents have discovered that I'm not wearing the Potter family ring. If I'm forced to summon it, the Albion Family Magics will check and update my status as a son of the house of Potter."

Daphne frowned, flipped her blackboard over again and stared at it, again.

Under the name Harry Potter were written the words, Heir Potter(?). They wouldn't know for certain until they tried, obviously. No one truly knew how the Albion Family Magics worked. And this was a very unusual situation. But Harry did technically have a soul age older than John's. And since Fate and Death's intervention, soul age was what was supposed to determine things like this.

"So, what's the plan?" she asked.

Harry shrugged. "Avoid and distract. If I can hold it off until we leave for Hogwarts again, that's another four months of not having to deal with it, or at least, having to deal with Lord Potter. But I doubt they'll be that irresponsible. Ironically."

"They couldn't force you to summon it, could they?"

"No, but I have to weigh the pros of being seen to be deliberately disobedient versus the cons of having them see Slytherin as a directly malevolent force."

"You think they would attribute your being the Potter Heir as Slytherin's doing?"

Harry tapped various names on the blackboard. "There would only be a few ways you could potentially pull off something like this, outside of the actual truth, and all of them require powerful friends."

"Could we not just let it all play out?" Luna asked. "Seeing John's face if it was true would be funny."

Harry smirked. "Maybe after Slytherin Gala Night. I'm sure John's got enough on his plate right now with the teenage dark lord he's romancing."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Virgo could be very cute, when she wasn't being very scary. These were John Potter's thoughts as he watched in mild awe as Virgo described all the different rituals the three of them could go through, either individually, or as a group, while using a teddy bear taken from one of the shelves to show how some of them could royally fuck you up.

Virgo, him, and Susan were sitting on the floor in a circle in the middle of the darkened room. Susan still wasn't showing any signs of being comfortable with the idea of using rituals, unsupervised, at their age, but as he'd pointed out to her, "If we can't even beat kids our age, how are we supposed to beat Voldemort?" That had shut her up.

Virgo put the teddy bear back together again with a flick of her wand after a rather vicious demonstration, letting the stuffing and fur knit itself back together. "Of course, the downside of
most of these rituals is that their results can be extreme, or simply extremely visible. Sure, you can turn yourself into a giant with massive magical resistance at the cost of most of your wits, but good luck getting the rest of the wizarding world to accept you. The trick is to identify the right ritual that works specifically for your situation. One where the downsides are negligible and the upsides are many."

"The downsides just seem so many," Susan said. "I don't want to go bald, or suffer from rickets, or give up my firstborn child to the fair folk. Why can't there be one that gives a huge power upgrade and only costs something like, I dunno, bad morning breath?"

Virgo smirked. "I don't know the why, but if there was such a ritual that people knew about, everyone would use it, the power balance would equal itself out, and all you'd have to show for it would be a culture where bad breath was a sign of status."

Susan grimaced.

"So, are there any we can do?" John asked.

Virgo tapped her chin. "You had the right idea with the balance one back at the quidditch match. We could certainly do that. We just have to make sure to do it properly. And I have a few that I managed to acquire from the Malfoy Library. They need a Malfoy to perform, but can have other participants in them as well." Virgo turned back to Susan. "What about you? Do you have anything you can share with us from the Bones Library?"

"I—um…" Susan began. "That is to say, yes, probably, but if Auntie caught me sneaking around that part of the library, I don't even want to begin to imagine the trouble I'd be in. I do know of some of our family rituals, like there's one that lets you see in extreme detail. Auntie uses it when investigating crime scenes, but it causes extreme nearsightedness in one eye."

"Is that why she wears a monocle?"

Susan nodded. "And what about the Potter Library?"

John groaned. "Don't remind me about the Potter Library. I have to show Harry how to get in soon."

"Couldn't you remove or hide some of the better stuff beforehand?" Virgo asked. "Just for while he's there. Then you could put it back again afterwards."

John grinned. "Brilliant. Why haven't I gotten you a declaration of intention gift, yet?"

He was expecting Virgo to either ignore him and deflect (unlikely), or curse him (more likely). These would fit the mental picture he had built up of Virgo Malfoy. But what he hadn't expected was for her to catch Susan's eye, put her head to one side, lock eyes with him, and say calmly, "I don't know, Potter, why haven't you?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Back in the Gray Playroom, Hermione had finally turned up. "But I don't understand," she said, "who is this Regulus Black? I don't remember that name from any of the family history books. And why is he so important?"

Harry rubbed his temples. "Regulus Black was… is the younger brother of Sirius Black. He fought alongside Voldemort in the last war — a death eater — and became a prison guard for one of his soul pieces, a task it appears he failed at. He disappeared after taking on the task, and was never
seen again, in either timeline, which is worrying to say the least. Why now? What changed?"

Hermione had a hand over her mouth in shock. "But if Lord Black's brother is alive…"

"Yes, Alex's position as heiress is threatened. As a witch, if Sirius died, the lordship would first pass to Regulus before Alex. If he then had children, they would come before her."

"And how did Alexandra take that?" Daphne asked.

"Amazingly well, actually. She still has her heiress ring, so she still has options. Getting betrothed would secure her position, for one."

Daphne smirked. "I take it she has a candidate in mind?"

"Oddly enough, she does. In her characteristically headstrong way. She was very blasé about it. Although getting Lord Black to sign the parchment-work will certainly be a challenge. That man despises betrothals. I suspect it would be easier getting your parents to sign such a thing, Hermione."

Hermione blushed bright red.

"That would be wonderful," Luna said, clapping enthusiastically. "Then you'd only need Ginny to complete the set."

"I still think Black isn't worthy of being with you like that," Hermione muttered, still bright red. "Tracey would deserve it more."

Daphne frowned. "It isn't for you to pick who our lord is in negotiations with."

"I know, I know. It's just, she can be really immature at times."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Headmaster Lockhart looked out over the crowd of noble and important wizards and witches at the Potter Christmas Party and preened. Yes, Dumbledore was attracting a lot of the attention that should be going to him, but by all accounts the party was going very well.

His only other qualm was that Lord Slytherin hadn't shown yet, but no matter. He had an invitation to the Slytherin Gala Night and the man just had to be there.

"Excuse me," said a girl's voice from his right and down.

"Yes—?" He turned around, looked down, and almost took his eye out on the pointy black hat.

The young witch tilted her head back, eyes wide as he cursed with a hand over his eye. "Oh, don't you worry about that," he shortled while his eye streamed. "It happens. Miss Black, correct?"

"Heiress Black," the girl corrected with bite. Then she hesitated. "Um, actually I was wondering if…"

Lockhart realised the girl was holding one of his Boy-Who-Lived adventure books to her chest — holding it as tightly as a druggie might hold mandrake leaf.

"Aha! A fan!" Lockhart beamed. "Want me to sign, no doubt?"

Miss Black looked immensely relieved and nodded quickly.
"Well, let's have that here. Ahh! The Boy-Who-Lived and The Mystery of Yeti Town-Hill — quite possibly my favourite of the series."

Miss Black's eyes lit up. "Oh, yes! The way the Boy-Who-Lived actually got help from the Black Witch of the North and was able to break up the cabal."

Lockhart made the last flourish with his peacock-feather quill and snapped the book shut. "Yes, that was pretty clever, if I do say so myself, which I do." He leaned forward and gave the girl a conspiratorial wink. "To be honest, that was about as morally ambiguous as I could get away with for a children's book. The publisher was extremely nervous about that one, I don't mind telling you."

"Really?" The girl was hanging on his every word. "I don't suppose I could ask you a few questions about the story, could I?"

Lockhart beamed. "Of course. Questions are always welcome."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"No questions?" Hermione asked. The blackboard was full of scribbles about the progress of various projects.

Harry, Luna, and Daphne all shook their heads.

"Good. Next!" Hermione flicked her wand, transfigured the chalk into a long pointy stick, snatched it out of the air, and smacked it into the blackboard with a loud fwap sound. "The full itinerary of our findings from the sunken ship and the Icelandic dragon cave. In total we have identified twenty-three enchantments, five charms, seven curses, and two rune patterns that are sufficiently different from those currently used to probably not trip patent charms. Mum and Dad are going through the records to identify who these enchantments might hold the most value for. We've also found some incomplete magics that could potentially be really powerful."

Harry leaned forward in his chair. "Go on."

"The first is a ritual. It took quite a bit of translating from Sanskrit, but it seems to be the second half of a two-part ritual to make someone a metamorphmagus."

Three pairs of eyes widened slightly.

"Too bad it's only the second half," Daphne mused.

"The next is an incomplete variation of the space expansion charm that seems to work only on boats, which I might be able to get working with enough arithmancy crunching."

Harry nodded. "Valuable. Hold off on that until you've started formal arithmancy studies."

Hermione looked dismayed. "But, Harry!"

"No buts. Spell discovery is dangerous if you haven't already mapped out the territory."

Daphne tapped her chin. "Would the broomsub count as a boat?"

"That's what I was thinking," Hermione grumbled.

"Hermione, you are not ready. You will be soon. I will make sure you are. Trust me."
"I understand, Harry."

"Did we find anything else?"

"Plenty of references to the Albion Family Magics—"

Daphne's eyes lit up.

"—But no written records of the missing rituals or anything."

Daphne let out a disappointed sigh.

"And of course, plenty of muggle gold artefacts. I've been reading all the law books from the Hogwarts Library, and we should be able to get away with switching in a non-magical boat for the magical one to satisfy the ISS requirements."

"It will have to be a very good replica," Luna said. "Muggles are good at spotting fakes."

"And will only get better in the future," Harry added.

Hermione nodded. "And finally,"—she tapped the blackboard—"we have a box."

Daphne raised an eyebrow. "Just a box?"

"It's locked."

"And Alohomora doesn't open it?"

"No. It's a magical password lock. There are snakes carved around the lock."

The girls all looked towards Harry.

"Parseltongue password. Got it. I'll pop down during the Slytherin Gala and we'll sort it out then."

"Speaking of the Slytherin Gala," Daphne said, her voice turning uneasy. "Are we sure you'll be able to attend?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Dumbledore sighed. "I, unfortunately, will not be able to attend the Slytherin Gala."

Opposite him, Bill Weasley blinked. "Why not?" They were alone in a corner of the grand ballroom.

"Because I have not been invited," Dumbledore continued. "Even the Malfoys invite me to their Yule Ball. But Slytherin? No. I can't imagine why, but that man seems to hold some great personal enmity towards me. He has been using every opportunity he can to make things harder, and, old man that I am, I haven't been entirely immune from his efforts."

Bill Weasley gaped. "But, you're the Light Lord — the defeater of Grindelwald. Surely, even Slytherin"—his voice picked up a note of great disdain as he spoke the name—"wouldn't be so impolite as to refuse you."

Dumbledore smiled. "Alas, it is not so. But it does mean that I will need some eyes and ears there…"
"Well, of course, I'll help."

"Wonderful! There are a few matters in particular I'd like you to keep an eye on." He lowered his voice, more for effect than any actual fear of being overheard. "The first being our young friend Harry Potter."

Bill Weasley's face darkened. "What about Harry Potter?" he all but growled.

Dumbledore raised a surprised eyebrow. "Just anything of interest. Anything unusual. Anything of questionable morality. But I must say, I wasn't expecting to see such enmity in you towards a boy of only twelve."

"Did you forget that Harry Potter has been acting under orders from Lord Slytherin to steal Ginny away from us since she was seven?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Mister Weasley, that cannot have been—" He stopped. It could have been, couldn't it? He'd completely forgotten that the Weasleys had an unknown benefactor who'd been teaching their youngest daughter occlumency. It was one of the small details you just lost track of in the general flood of day-to-day politics, and he'd completely dismissed that benefactor being Harry Potter at the time. But looking back, knowing what he now knew about Harry's capabilities — about Lord Slytherin's — it was perfectly possible. He sighed. "I remember John coming to me with these concerns last year. I wish I had not dismissed them then. It seems I too must learn to trust more."

Bill Weasley nodded slowly. "I will keep an eye on Harry Potter. What else did you want me to look out for?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"I'm hoping it won't be too much of a problem," Harry said. "In the worst case, you girls will have to take turns being Harry Potter while I play Lord Slytherin. Although the Slytherin Gala Night will be the perfect opportunity to lay the foundations for the big reveal. I'll need to be Harry Potter then."

"Who will play Lord Slytherin?" Hermione asked.

"There is a not-insignificant chance that this deception will be spotted. We simply cannot account for all the different situations that could transpire at such a large social event. Therefore, the one who will be Lord Slytherin will be the one who will suffer the fewest consequences, and insult the fewest people, if they are caught." Harry turned to Daphne. "In other words, Daphne, it will be you."

Daphne took a deep, steadying breath.

Luna pouted. "Awww. I wanted to know what it is like to be a man down there. Hermione, what is it like to be a—"

"—Anyway!" Hermione loudly interrupted. "We've got lots to do! The animagus ritual, raising the sunken ship, preparing for the reveal, and talking to Mum and Dad, and we need to firmly establish our political platform, and all sorts of things! So we absolutely don't have time to talk about Harry's —about things like that."

There was a silence.

"Indeed," Harry said simply, although he looked more than a little amused. "Luna, I'm sorry this
I can't wait!

"I think I could," Hermione muttered. "I don't want to know what Luna would be like with one-
hundred times the testosterone."

"One-hundred times the fun!"

"Hermione," Harry interrupted. "Why don't you give us an update on the muggleborn project? It is
very important that we're as far ahead as possible with that. Some of our future plans could heavily
rely on them."

Hermione perked up. "Oh, right!" She cleared her throat. "All the muggleborns in our year are
doing very well with the new system of occlumency training and should soon be ready to—"

There was a knocking on the trunk lid.

Three of the occupants froze for a fraction of a second, enough time for the fourth to flick his wand
and hide every shred of evidence of what they'd been discussing.

"Enter!" Harry called out.

The trunk lid opened, and John Potter stuck his head inside. "Magical Merlin, look at all this stuff!
Whose trunk is this!?!"

Hermione glanced at Harry for confirmation before replying. "It is mine, Heir Potter."

"Yours, Hermione?! How?! You're not rich."

"I may not be rich, but my lord is. Was there something you wanted?"

Harry stood up. "I dare say my brother wished to discuss some family matters with me, is that not
so, brother?"

"Yeah," John said, still distracted by the trunk's furnishings. "Yeah, that's right."

Before the two left, Luna tugged on the sleeve of Harry's robes and leant in to whisper. "About our
strategic direction, my lord. I will soon have something for you to read about that."

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Lily Potter looked around the ballroom again, frowning. The party had reached that time of night
where the formalities and dignities of wizarding aristocracy were sufficiently washed away by
alcohol, and a group of quite literal drunken aristocracy were sufficiently washed away by
alcohol, and a group of quite literal drunken lords had formed a conga line, making their way
around the room to the Christmas music's beat, waving their wands and firing off miniature
firework charms.

In a corner, Albus Dumbledore was deep in what looked like argumentative conversation with
Arthur Weasley. In another, Madam Bones was tearing a strip off the heir to House Glen for
getting a little too handsy with his very embarrassed betrothed, while over by the food, Alexandra
was monopolising the headmaster's attention the way only a fan could.

But the biggest exhibition had to be Ginny Weasley, whom someone had somehow found a
broomstick for, and who was currently making full use of the ballroom's high roof to show off her
frighteningly good aerial acrobatics, much to her mother's obvious dismay, and the crowd's
cheering delight.

There were, however, two people she had a special interest in who were very obviously missing. "This is ridiculous," Lily said to her husband. "Harry should be here. Won't you go find him, dear? I'm going to go make sure Virgo is okay."

James nodded slowly.

"And make sure you get him to summon his ring before he comes back," she added before sweeping off.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Virgo watched John leave the room with his younger brother.

"Ahh," Harry said. "Miss Malfoy, what a surprise to see you here." He quirked an eye at John. "I understood this was to be a family matter?"

"Lay off it," John growled. "She's just with us 'til we get to the library. Mum asked me to keep an eye on her, you know."

Virgo felt Harry's eyes bore into her. The oppression felt disturbingly familiar.

"A task I'm sure you've been carrying out with your usual impressiveness," Harry said dryly.

The two boys walked ahead, leaving her to trail behind. There was something about the younger Potter that Virgo had difficulty putting her finger on. She hadn't felt like this before, but now something had changed… something about Potter scared her.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Gilderoy Lockhart was sweating.

"And when the Boy-Who-Lived confronted the Eternal Lich of Darkness, why didn't he use the magic water he found in the muggle church? Vivian still had the vials in her belt and she was only on the other side of the room."

"That's because…" Lockhart's mind raced. "That's because the glass was special magic glass! That only broke when used against inferi. Yes, that's why the Boy-Who-Lived was able to use it in book sixteen."

Alexandra frowned. "But what about when they were in the Boy-Who-Lived's secret lab and Maldeve dropped a vial and it broke on the floor. The floor isn't an inferius."

"Ah, yes, but you see, the floor isn't alive."

"Neither are inferi."

"But inferi are magical. That's what makes the difference. The glass breaks only against inferi, and things that aren't alive but that also aren't magical, and the lich still has his soul, even if it's not in his body, you see, which means he's still partly alive, see?"

There was a pause.

"Okay," Alex said slowly.
Lockhart mentally breathed a sigh of relief.

"So what about when the Boy-Who-Lived had to sneak into that library? How did he get those books out when that's not how family magic works?"

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

John never took his eyes off his Slytherin younger twin as they made their way through the Potter library. They'd left Virgo at the door. She might now be one of his closest confidants, but there were limits, even if she now knew both he and Harry were long-distance time travellers.

Not that Harry knew that, of course.

The bastard had told Ginny, at the least. It was only just that he do the same. It had taken quite a few evenings, but he'd told his girls everything. Everything that had happened in the past, in the future, all the way up to his death in the graveyard — Virgo had insisted on it — everything except for his not being the boy-who-lived. No need to go that far.

Susan hadn't been thrilled to be an accessory, as she called it, but had agreed the end goal of stopping Voldemort's conquering Magical Britain, and possibly the world, to be worth it.

Obviously, he'd left out the bit where he and Dumbledore had conspired to send Harry to Azkaban last year. He suspected Virgo would approve (that girl was scary ruthless sometimes), but he had no wish to have Susan on his case, or even worse, telling her aunt.

Given the mission, he didn't think she would, but he couldn't risk it.

When they were sufficiently deep into the library, Harry turned and gave him a single raised eyebrow. "Well?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's here." John led his brother to a bookcase that looked no different from any other. The thirteenth book in was a large, leather-bound volume on the use of ceramics in the creation of magical artefacts.


John scowled. "You just take your house ring and press it into the seal on the spine."

They stood in silence for a moment.

"Well?" Harry eventually said.

"Well, what?"

"Well, are you going to do it?"

John scowled again, flashed the ring that marked him as heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Potter and pressed it into the seal.

The bookshelf split in two, creaking under the weight of the books, forming a doorway into a hidden room.

"Very traditional," Harry commented before strolling in.

John smirked. It wouldn't do him any good. He'd taken Virgo's advice and hidden many of the more useful spell books and rituals around the rest of the library before going to fetch him. Harry
may have slithered his way past his plans before, but not this time. This was a victory he'd savour.

"Ahh," Harry said, halfway through one of the books John knew he couldn't hide. "The patronus knight. An avatar of light, fuelled by righteousness and capable of actually hurting a dementor, rather than just fending it off. I'll enjoy mastering this one."

John scowled again to keep up the show. It wasn't a difficult show to keep up.

"And what is this? Oooo, the family's Sleekeazy's Hair Potion and Scalp Treatment recipe. Hard to imagine such an impressive business empire being built on something so innocuous."

Harry wasn't even properly reading now, just flipping through the books, eyes barely resting on pages before moving on. Merlin knew why. It wasn't as if pensieves worked on memories collected in here.

John scowled yet again, this time quite genuinely. "Are you done yet? What are you even doing anyway?"

"Yes," said an adult voice behind them, causing John to spin and Harry to turn.

Lord James Potter stood there with his arms folded. "That's something I'd like to know, too."

"And not only that," Alex continued, "There was that time in book seven when—"

"—Look," Lockhart interrupted, no longer his usual airy self. "If you disagree with some things in how the books were written, why don't you write your own interpretation of how it went?"

Alex blinked. "Could I?"

"Sure, sure." Lockhart looked around quickly. "If it's good enough, maybe I'll even publish it, oh! Look, is that Lady Knight? Gotta run — Lady Knight! How excellent to see you."

He swept off, leaving a thoughtful Alexandra Black staring off into the middle distance.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

In Harry's mind, a dozen trains of thought were busy clacking away along well-used neural train-tracks.

There were many possible reasons they were being confronted like this. Most probable among them being that Lord Potter was displeased about him, Harry, having access to the family magic, given his association with Slytherin, which was exactly why he hadn't broached the subject with him before, apart from general lack of trust.

Another possible reason was neither of them was supposed to know about the family magics. Many noble families didn't share them with their children until their thirteenth birthdays.

And yet another reason could be that there were dangerous books in here, and Lord Potter was angry at his heir messing around in here without adult supervision.

Harry had words ready for all three, and more.
His brother was the unknown variable. He didn't know what discussions John had had with Lord Potter before this. Presumably there had been a talk about family magic, since John had used the patronus knight during last year's duelling tournament, but he didn't know what the circumstances were. Had John bullshitted his way out of knowing the family magics when he was too young? Had Lord Potter showed him the family magics early? When even was early for the Potters? He didn't know.

Therefore, possibly against his better judgement, the smartest thing to do in this situation would be to let his brother take the lead, if only until he put his foot in it so far that muggle businesses would consider dumping him in the ocean and using him as an oil drill.

"It's okay, Dad, I was just showing Harry the library."

Harry raised an eyebrow. Interesting. Going for the, 'everything is fine, why are you making a fuss,' angle. Not a terrible opening line, all things considered. Also suggested they'd already talked about this.

"It most certainly is not okay," Lord Potter said, frowning. "Harry does not wear a noble house ring. How can he be expected to keep the secrets of house Potter without it?"

John's head twisted around to stare at Harry with comically wide eyes. "Is that why you're evil? You're being mind-controlled?"

"John!" Lord Potter snapped.

Harry rolled his eyes. Deep sea oil drilling operations commenced. Also, Lord Potter's reason for being angry didn't line up to logic. If John was okay to already know the magics, he should be too. Lord Potter had only known he didn't wear a ring for a handful of hours, so that couldn't be the primary reason he hadn't been shown them already. But if his association with Lord Slytherin was the reason, why would Lord Potter set himself up for obvious failure of his objective? Summon ring, get family magic. Not something Harry wanted to do, but from James Potter's point of view, he should want to.

Harry watched the now back and forth argument between James and John, feeling more like an outsider than ever before. What was most surreal, though, was that if you listened to their actual words, the two were actually in agreement. Harry should summon his ring, and then he could have limited access to the family magic, but the two were shouting anyway.

Harry looked around the alcove and realised that many of the holes in the shelves were book-sized, and suspiciously free of dust, given the rest of the room. Ahh.

"You just don't understand what's at stake!" John shouted.

"Enough!" James said loudly back. "Do we need to have another talk with your mother?"

John quietened.

Lord Potter nodded and turned to him. "Harry, you need to summon your house ring now. It's important." His father then started talking him through how to summon a noble house ring, which was actually the simplest thing in the world. It was so simple, in fact, that when he'd first come back in time, he'd done it so easily that it hadn't even needed thought.

You just had to want and accept your position in the house. Not a magically binding contract. No obligations. At least, no magical obligations that weren't already there.
Harry looked down at the finger that often proclaimed him as Lord Slytherin. What should he do now? He could just envision all the different versions of how this might go, given that the distraction tactics he'd used before seemed to have run out.

He could refuse, but that would make him look unreasonable and rebellious. That might not be a terrible thing, but it could cramp his style for a bit.

Best case for the short term, he summoned the ring, and nothing changed. In this version of the universe, he was a spare of the house of Potter, not the heir.

On the other hand, if he went ahead and summoned the ring, and he did become the heir, that could be good for the long term, but bad for the short term. The explanations his parents could come up with for how him being the heir was possible weren't great.

On the other hand, becoming the heir would open up interesting possibilities not available before. No dead ends, so long as John kept his mouth shut about their long-term time travel — just different paths.

"Ready?" James asked with a hand on his shoulder.

Harry rubbed his ring finger.

He was going to roll the dice. Time to see if Fate was still on his side or not. Time to see exactly what version of the universe they were in. He willed his Potter noble house ring to his finger, and looked.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"It is very hard for me with the Malfoys," Virgo said softly into her teacup. "My new father is very demanding." Opposite her, in the upstairs drawing room, Lily Potter looked sympathetic and worried. "I'd feel much safer with a family like yours," Virgo continued. She pretended to hesitate, then said, "John is very kind."

"Have you considered reaching back out to your muggle foster parents?" Lily asked.

Conflicting emotions warred within Virgo. On the one hand, she felt a huge spike of hurt right in her heart as she remembered the mum and dad she'd lost back home. But on the other hand, she was a witch. If she'd stayed in Stockholm, that part of her would never have had the opportunity for greatness. Durmstrang didn't take muggleborn students. Besides...

She shook her head. "Their memories of me were completely wiped when I returned to the wizarding world."

Lily put a hand to her mouth in horror. "Monsters. Oh, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," Virgo put on a brave smile. "I'm doing my best. And I'm just happy father let me come here tonight. Potter Manor feels much more like a home than Malfoy Manor. I just wish I could spend more time here."

"But you're doing well at Hogwarts, aren't you? Apart from the troubles with the attacks. You look confident in class, and your potions are some of the best I've ever seen from a first-year."

Virgo nodded demurely. "Magic comes naturally to me. I think I have a talent. I've even been able to help John a bit with homework sometimes." She snapped her head up. "Not that he's copying or anything, we just—"
"—Virgo," Lily smiled, leaned over and put a comforting hand on hers. "It's fine. And being able to help John is nothing to be ashamed of. Both my sons are geniuses. That reflects very well on you." Lady Potter's eyes travelled downwards and focused on something. Her eyes narrowed. "That golden chain… I recognise what that is."

Virgo hesitated, for real this time. She hadn't been planning to show Lady Potter that, but perhaps… Yes! Perhaps this was the way. Slowly, she reached for the chain and drew out the pendant portkey that John had given her. Her ticket to safety wherever she might be in or out of Hogwarts.

Lily sighed. "Oh, John."

"He won't get in trouble, will he?"

Lily looked conflicted, then shook her head. "I can't fault his reasoning. You probably do need it more than him. But the heir of House Potter giving such a valuable artefact to a Malfoy… well…"

"He said it would be okay if it was a declaration of intention gift."

"And you know what one of them is?"

Virgo nodded and another conflict flared inside her, one repeated many times over the past few weeks. Part of her shouted out that this was wrong — that she shouldn't ever risk putting herself under anyone's influence, not even someone as powerful as John. That was the dark lord in her speaking.

The other part wanted her to charge on ahead and get the prince for herself — all for herself. He'd love and care for her, shower her with magic gifts like a princess, and be utterly, helplessly devoted to her. That was the little girl raised on Disney movies talking.

The result of this conflict was always the same. She would be Lady Potter — the power behind the throne, the cunning behind the brute, Narcissa Malfoy's metaphorical dagger in the dark, to John's strong and mighty staff.

…She hadn't meant to think that last bit.

Virgo nodded. "Yes, I know."

"And you're okay with that? Does your father know? He might take this as an invitation."

"He doesn't know, yet. But I'd be okay with that." She plunged ahead. This was it. Time to go in for the kill. "If it was John, if House Potter could protect me—"

A noise interrupted her.

A loud noise, coming from up the corridor towards the library. Annoying!

Then the noise became clearer. Two people arguing with each other, quite loudly at that, and… that was John, wasn't it? And the other was Lord Potter?

"What the—" Lily said, standing up and looking alarmed, just as the doors banged open and the two Potter men stormed in, still shouting.

"I told you he's evil! I told you!"

"John, that's enough! We're going to sort this out."
"James! John! What on Earth—"

"Mum, Harry stole my heirship!"

Lily's mouth dropped open, as did Virgo's.

"Sweetie, that's not possible—" Lily began.

"He has the ring! When he called his, mine vanished! I've just got a normal noble house ring now. See?"

Virgo saw, and her mind whirled with possibilities, the first being that since it sounded like Harry went back in time further than John, according to the events he'd described, then maybe the family magics recognised him as older. But there was a problem with that theory. If her memories from Tom served her correctly, the Albion magics were based on date of birth.

So that probably wasn't it?

The second, third, and fourth possibilities were all immediately rejected as impossible, but the fifth — the fifth made her stop dead. Oh Merlin, if that was the answer, then… holy hell. But how to tell John without dooming herself?

The Potters were still shouting, and even Lily had joined in.

"Silence!" Lord Potter roared.

John and Lily immediately shut up. Virgo sat attentive.

Lord Potter took a few moments to get his breath back before speaking again. "John, take Virgo back to your room and don't speak a word about this to anyone. I declare this to be a Potter family secret. Virgo, if you truly wish to show yourself to be a friend of our house, you'll also not speak of this to anyone. Go now. Your mother and I have to discuss matters."

They left, Virgo leading the way. Her stride was determined.

Halfway through the manor, John spoke up.

"Virgo?" He sounded uncertain. "Where are we going? This isn't the way back to the playroom."


"Always check what?" John asked, but she didn't bother elaborating.

They walked into the library and Virgo immediately started going through the shelves, looking for something very specific.

"Virgo, there are family books laying out here, remember?"

"Then you'll just have to take them off the shelves and hide them somewhere better won't you? Hardly matters now, does it?"

John shrugged and walked off.

The logic had started with an idle thought — a small strand that she'd started pulling at, only to find that the strand might be attached to a string, which might be attached to a rope, which if pulled might pull over a whole building's worth of trouble.
The thought was this. Harry Potter might be a horcrux. This was a possibility she'd constantly come back to again and again. Had spent months pondering. At times the evidence pointed away, but then the evidence pointed towards.

Given that this was a recurring possibility, she'd be a fool not to consider that Harry's heirship might have something to do with it.

"I'm done," John announced, arriving back at a jog. "Is that the book on the Albion Family Magics?"

"The latest version." Virgo flipped through the tome. Her eyes narrowed. "John, go find Susan and meet me back in the playroom. This is very important."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"Hey, Ginny," Harry walked into his group's hideaway, currently containing Daphne, Hermione, Luna, and Ginny, with a big smirk on his face. "How would you like to one day be Lady Potter?"

Ginny's face turned to horror. "Absolutely not! How could you even suggest—"

Harry stopped in the middle of the group and flashed his brand spanking new heir ring.

"—Something so logical and reasonable," she continued without missing a beat. "Screw that pauper brother of yours. Nothing but a proper ladyship is good enough for Magical Britain's newest quidditch phenom, Princess Ginevra Molly Weasley."

"So it really happened," Daphne whispered. "This is going to complicate things."

"Indeed. Lord Potter was not pleased at all. I dare say getting to my own gala night will now require a more adventurous journey than just taking the floo."

He drew up a chair and sat directly opposite Ginny. His face dropped the smirk. "Ginny, you know I've had a few vague talks with your father about a possible betrothal. With your permission, I'd like to pursue that possibility a bit more aggressively. Is that something you'd like?"

Ginny's cocky grin also dropped, replaced with nervous shyness. She was silent for a moment while a blush started to form on her cheeks. Eventually she said, "Yes, Harry. I'd like that."

"Okay then. I'm glad, because it's something I want too."

Ginny smiled shyly.

The moment was broken by the three girls behind them clapping, all with smiles on their faces. And just like that, a hint of Ginny's cockiness returned with a small smirk of her own.

"But Harry," Hermione began. "How are you going to get Lord Potter to agree? You yourself said he's not exactly pleased with you."

"No idea. It's mostly Slytherin he's not pleased with actually, but you are still correct. I've no idea how I'm going to wrangle this." Harry stood back up. "But I'm damn well going to make it happen."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

Virgo stared down at the book like it was some strange and fascinating creature.
Her instincts had been right.

Damn Tom Riddle. Damn Julia Olsen. She'd been *this* close to arrogantly thinking she knew best when she really knew nothing. She'd been *this* close to believing that the dark lord in her had to know better.

The logic chain had started simply. Harry Potter might be a horcrux. Maybe that played a part in his being the Potter Heir. *How* could it play a part? Maybe Harry was like her — a merged horcrux — a merged horcrux like Lord Slytherin.

"Hey, Virgo!" It was John. "I found Susan. She was downstairs. She's heading over to the playroom now. What's all this about?"

"I'll tell you when I get there. Go on ahead. I need a few moments alone to sort my thoughts."

John left.

Virgo took a deep steadying breath. If Harry Potter was a merged horcrux, his soul age would be older, just like hers. She wasn't sure exactly how the soul merge between Julia and Tom went, but she wouldn't be surprised if she was now only a year younger than John's actual soul age.

But that wouldn't mean anything. Not if the Albion Family Magics determined age by date of birth. They didn't. Her hands gripped the book harder.

They used to. By Merlin, they *used* to! But that had changed in a historical event known as The Great Accounting. A change that made soul age the primary determinant of age by the Albion Family Magics. A change that became active in the year 1988 — just like Lord Slytherin.

Virgo bit her lip.

But if soul age was what determined age now, why couldn't her original idea be correct? Why couldn't Harry be the heir simply because he'd travelled back in time further than John? That was a perfectly rational explanation. But if that was the case, it begged another question. Why would Harry have travelled back in time further than John?

'Death smiled. "Yes, he [Harry] is the subject of the prophecy, but we are giving you the chance, John, to fulfill the prophecy in his stead. Bringing your twin to us now would be troublesome. Our influence in the mortal plane is extremely limited. We can generally only operate through chosen ones and champions."

Annoyingly, John had later told her he didn't know the exact contents of the prophecy, only that Harry had been originally fated to eventually 'vanquish' the dark lord, but in the process become an even worse power himself — annoying and terrifying. But it was Death's next words that were most relevant at the moment. '*Bringing your twin to us now would be troublesome."

Bringing him *now* would be troublesome. But Harry had also travelled back in time. How?

What if they'd brought him *later*?

Fate and Death hadn't even told John about Voldemort's horcruxes. They'd told him basically nothing! What chance did she honestly think John had of taking Voldemort as he was right now? Probably none.

Suppose John had travelled back in time and failed.
Fate and Death then use another chosen one or champion to arrange to have Harry brought to them. That could explain why they sent him back further. They decided he needed more time to succeed. So they send him back to 1988, three years before John's arrival... the same time that Lord Slytherin comes right out of nowhere... the same time that the Albion Family Magics changed how age was calculated to soul age rather than date of birth — a change that would allow an eight-year-old to take on a lordship if they had a soul old enough.

Virgo's mind was barrelling on ahead now, desperately looking for any cracks in her reasoning.

There was a whole extra timeline to work with! A timeline in which anything could have happened. The possible scenarios were endless.

How could Harry Potter be Lord Slytherin? Easily.

Suppose…

Virgo glanced towards one of the many books on Potter history that filled the bookshelves.

Suppose Harry had been sent to Azkaban, like he had been in John's original timeline.

Slowly, driven mad by dementors and by the injustice of being sent to Azkaban for a crime he didn't commit (because if anyone killed Ginny Weasley with the basilisk, it would have damn well been her!), Harry becomes bitter and resentful. He harbours thoughts of revenge.

And then, one day, John goes up against Voldemort and Voldemort wins.

Virgo shut the book she was holding with a snap.

Then, once Voldemort wins, he frees Harry from Azkaban and offers to blood adopt him as his own son! And Harry, bitter and resentful, accepts. He acquires Riddle blood, rejects the common blood of the Evans family, becomes half Potter, half Riddle, and becomes eligible for the lordship of Lord Slytherin by having a full soul, just like she, Virgo, was able to become an animagus for the same reason!

Of course, Voldemort would need a good reason to blood adopt someone, and there weren't many of them, but there was one good one she could think of... if they were a horcrux prison.

So, Harry becomes the Dark Prince — Voldemort's most terrible enforcer. But at some point, for some reason, Harry's soul merges with the horcrux, which Voldemort would never be able to accept, and so Harry becomes Voldemort's enemy.

Fate and Death then have him brought to them and send him back in time to merge all the horcruxes into himself, effectively neutralising them (which would also almost certainly kill her, if he got to her before she got to him.)

And voila, Harry Potter is Lord Slytherin.

And now, Heir Potter too (which was a problem that could easily be fixed with his death).

Of course, this was just one possible chain of events, but the overall picture was likely similar. Harry was the blood adopted heir and merged horcrux of Lord Voldemort.

Virgo let out a sigh.

There was, however, a problem with all this.
Given what she knew of John Potter so far, he wasn't likely to accept any hypothetical chain of events that included his failure to succeed in his mission. While she appreciated him a lot now, that didn't mean she was blind to his weaknesses. That meant she'd have to leave that bit out, but that created a massive hole in the logic that needed to be filled.

Besides, there was absolutely no way she was going to straight-up tell John that her death was a possible avenue to destroy Voldemort. No fucking way.

But every problem contained an opportunity, and this one coincided well with the promised discussion she'd recently had with Susan after rescuing John from the tower ritual.

The best way to plug this hole? Tell the truth. Tell the truth and lie, lie, lie.

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

"John, what's all this about?" Susan asked.

"No idea. Virgo just came across all mysterious. Like Hermione when she's figured something out."

"I can't believe your brother could steal the heirship from you."

John clenched his fists. "If I ever get my hands on him…"

Just then the door to the playroom opened, and Virgo walked in, holding a small pile of books, and looking very nervous. "Susan?" She made her way to where the two of them were sitting. "You remember that conversation we had about telling John certain things? I found something out, but I need to tell him about that first."

"Oh, good." Susan smiled. "I'm glad I don't have to pester you about it."

"What's the mystery then?" John asked. "What have you figured out? What do you need to tell me?"

Virgo sat down. "You remember you told us about the last timeline? About how Ginny was being enchanted by a magic diary made by the dark lord?"

John felt an uneasy feeling coil in his stomach. "Yes?"

"When Lord and Lady Malfoy brought me back from the muggle world, they did the same thing to me."

The feeling turned to lead. John's eyes went wide.

Susan gasped. "Wait, what is this? This isn't what we talked about."

"I know. Just trust me, I'm getting to it."

But John's mind was already whirling. "But the map! It always says you're Virgo Malfoy. The last time around it would say Tom Riddle when Ginny got enchanted."

"The map doesn't say Tom Riddle for me because I am not being enchanted. Over the summer, my parents used a dark ritual on me to try and speed up the enchantment process — the life-draining process. It failed. And instead, I got all the memories and skills from the enchanted diary. That's the real reason my parents are so unhappy with me. It has nothing to do with my sorting into Gryffindor. I killed the diary."
John's mouth fell open. "You have the memories of the diary? Of Tom Riddle?"

Virgo nodded.

"Tom Riddle who became Voldemort?" Susan whispered.

Virgo nodded.

"Is that the real reason for your…" she trailed off, giving John a side-ways glance.

"Getting to that, yes."

"Wait, why didn't you tell us before?" John said. He was having difficulties keeping the hurt out of his voice. She'd been dealing with something this important all year and hadn't told him?

"Because I was scared, John. Imagine it. You don't remember anything about being magical, and then suddenly you get pulled from your home, and given to two people like the Malfoys. They give you this diary, and it seems like it's your new best friend. The only person in the world who understands you. Then it turns out he's an evil dark lord who wants to suck out your life energy. And then, when that fails, you learn all his secrets. All the ways he was going to protect himself in the future. Imagine what would happen to me if anyone learned I had that knowledge." Her voice got softer. "What if they already did?"

Susan put a hand over her mouth in horror. "Is that why people have been trying to kill you?"

"I don't know. I suspect so."

"So what were the ways?" John leaned in eagerly. "All the ways he protected himself, I mean."

"His most important one was a ritual that tears off a piece of your soul and puts it into an object for safekeeping. The object then tethers you to this world, stopping your soul from passing through the veil, to the world of Death."

"Like a lich?" Susan asked.

"Yes, except you keep a portion of your soul inside yourself, so you do not become undead."

John's heart was racing now. This was it. This was what he needed. This was the lucky break that would turn all his fortunes around!

"These objects are called horcruxes."

Horcruxes… even the word sounded evil.

"Most of the horcruxes Tom Riddle planned to make were to be inside objects, but he also entertained the idea of using living creatures as horcruxes, making a kind of living prison. One of the big problems with horcruxes is that the soul piece inside the object used has a will and consciousness of its own. A soul piece with the temperament of Tom Riddle or Lord Voldemort would try every trick it could imagine to break free. He theorised that using a living creature could potentially solve that problem since the will of the container could act as a kind of impenetrable wall between the horcrux and the outside world. But it would come with downsides too. Tom Riddle certainly wasn't planning on creating any living horcruxes for a long time."

John glanced to his side and saw that, like him, Susan was hanging on Virgo's every word.

"Do you know where any of these horcruxes are?" She whispered.
Virgo looked uncertain. "Yes, and no. I believe I know where one of them was. And what one of them now is."

Virgo changed. Her legs moulded together, robes disappeared into her body and a massive snake's tail with brilliant red scales swept around the room, coming to rest in a circle around John and Susan. It was only Susan's apparent blasé acceptance of this that stopped him letting out a small scream. He did, however, point a shaky finger at her. "L-L-Lamia!"

"Lamia animagus, actually," Virgo said in a hissy voice, covering her now larger chest with her hands, despite the scales already there. "Thank you, Sssusan." She took a t-shirt from the other girl and pulled it over her head.

"You're a horcrux?" John said, weakly.

Virgo shook her head. "No. The diary was a horcrux. When the Malfoys performed the dark ritual to speed up my enchantment, I instead merged with it, cutting it off from the other soul pieces, and destroying its function as a horcrux. But I was left with thisss." She gestured down at her body.

John just stared. The girl he'd been starting to have a crush on had turned into a massive magical snake witch in front of the other hand, he'd gotten quite an eyeful before she'd put that t-shirt on. There was no such thing as an immature animagus, after all. And they'd been quite impressive.

Thankfully she couldn't read his thoughts, and simply continued with the explanation. "Merging with the soul fragment held within the diary also had the effect of increasing my ssoul age — sssomething that I'm fairly sure only I know about. Thisss simply isn't magic that has ever been done before. I am now actually probably closer to your age, John, than Sssusan here isss."

That was interesting. Susan would also develop larger boobs quite soon in the future, too. Together they could eventually be the bustiest pair in the castle. No, wait! He mentally shook himself. He shouldn't be getting distracted like this. "The second horcrux." he said. "What is it?"

Virgo took a deep breath. "It'sss Harry."

Susan gasped.

John stared. Then his eyes widened. "You think that's how he's older than me?"

"Yesss. I think that when Voldemort attacked you as a baby, he was planning to use your death to make your brother a horcrux. Except it was his own partial death that ended up being used instead. I believe he'd have split his ssoul to the absolute limit at that point, so even his own demise could have triggered the final part of the ritual. Then ssomething in-between the time when you first called your heir ring and now, Harry merged closer with his ssoul fragment, but not close enough to sssever the connection."

"What makes you think he hasn't severed the connection?" Susan asked.

"Because of thisss," she held the Albion Family Magics tome up. "In 1988 the family magicssss changed to recognise ssoul age as the only legitimate measure. And it was at exactly this time that Lord Ssslytherin became active."

"So you think that Lord Slytherin was behind the horcrux merger with Harry?"

Virgo was silent for a moment before she said, very slowly and deliberately. "No, John. I think that the horcrux gave Harry rights to the Ssslytherin line that Voldemort was never able to claim. And
that his new soul age allowed Harry to do so. I think that Harry is Lord Slytherin.

It was like a wall of silence hit him with all the force of a tidal wave. He just could not process what had just been said. He couldn't have heard that correctly could he? Virgo thought that Harry was... that Harry was...

"...it actually makes an odd kind of sense—" was as far as Susan got before—

"—THAT BASTARD!" John leapt to his feet, causing his chair to crash to the ground behind him. "That evil! That Slytherin! That Slytherin!" Suddenly all the little hints Harry had dropped over the years leapt up and smacked him in the face all at once. The wordplay used in casual conversation. The looks. The smirks. "All this time! Time! It must have been the trip back in time! It must have done some weird magic thing. C'mon! Let's go tell Mum and Dad! They can—"

"—Wait!" Virgo snapped.

John froze halfway to the door.

"We can't just go running off and telling anyone about this without a plan. There are too many things that could blow up in our faces. We have information that we should not have — illegal information. And Harry isn't committing any crime that we ourselves wouldn't also be guilty of if we revealed what we know."

"Couldn't we reveal it anonymously?" Susan asked. "You know, sort of point people in the right direction?"

"We can, but we need to be cunning about it."

"We have to do something!" John shouted.

"And we will. I have a plan."

"A plan?"

"Yesss, a plan." Virgo grinned and John suddenly realised that while he'd seen many scary things in his life, including Lord Voldemort in a graveyard, having a lamia grinning at you from only a few feet away was a special kind of scary.

"Lord Slytherin is a Hogwarts student. This is the battlefield we will fight on," Virgo said. "We will gather the Light children throughout the castle and train them to work together, just like Harry is doing with the muggleborns. We will conduct all the rituals we can safely get away with to further increase our powers. We will plant spies all throughout the castle, bring the paintings to our side, and persuade the ghosts to play our game. And when we are ready, when the correct opportunity presents itself, we will show the world who and what Lord Slytherin really is at the worst possible time. And completely destroy the Gray."

— DP & SW: NRiCaD —

[Some minutes previously]

Lord Potter closed the doors to the sitting room as Virgo and John left. He turned to his lady wife who was looking extremely agitated.

"Harry couldn't have done this by himself," Lily said.
"I agree." Lord Potter walked over and poured himself a drink of firewhisky. "And not only that, but I have finally figured something out."

"What?"

"I have figured out who Lord Slytherin is."

Lily's eyes narrowed. "Who?"

James downed the whisky in one go and began to pour himself another. "Think about it, Lils. Who is someone that no one would suspect returning, after all this time? Who has a large grudge against the Light? Who would have the power to do something like this? Terrible powers that no one truly knows the depths of?"

Lily gasped. "You don't mean…"

"Yes." James nodded grimly. "Lord Slytherin is Remus Lupin."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Whew! Things are going to start moving quite quickly from here on out. The second half of the year isn't going to be nearly as long as the first, so hang on tight.

Also, I apologise for the late posting of this chapter. If you haven't been following on discord, I've been dealing with some family medical issues, which cut about three weeks out of my writing schedule. That combined with the new longer editing process means that this chapter took quite a bit longer than expected. The plus side is that while we were editing this chapter, I continued drafting the next one, and we're actually about two-thirds of the way through that one, so there shouldn't be as long a wait for that one.

One of those original projects — Trial by Conquest — a fantasy 4X LitRPG — will soon start to be released for free on Royalroad, Wattpad, and other similar websites, so keep your eyes open if that's your cup of tea. Head over to www.leadvone.com to stay updated.

A/N: This chapter was drafted and made available early through the LeadVonE discord server, as will the next one. If you fancy discussing this chapter with like-minded people, or anything else DP&SW, feel free to head over there.

A special thank you to the following people for helping catch mistakes on #dpasw-editorial: ASK, Blake Belladonna, ChRiAn, Dragonbait, dutchy-jin, emergancy, feauxen, Fuuryuu, Gloweye, Hyperius, JaydenStevenson, Leyrann, Lunatico, Magic Bird Dust, Malin, Salisaad, Salty_sauce, sfu, Super Big Mac, Tendra, Rafilar, Ravana, and Vin5!

A/N: Twitch streams have been restructured to focus on editing and recording first, and other topics as fill-in in between those two major focuses.

A/N: Conversion rate is:
1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2019's prices.
Christmas Day, for those who celebrated it, came and went — presents under the tree and goodwill to all wizards in the air, provided of course, that they were the right kind of wizard. And the morning after, the daylight broke in the front shop of the Diagon Alley Owl Office, where a very special delivery was being prepared.

"Blimey," said Stan Shunpike staring at all the packages being frantically packed. "What's 'is lordship wanting all those masks for? Ain't he got enough?"

The room was full of half-open boxes, all containing hand-quilled letters along with a green and black mask wrapped in packing paper.

"Duh," said his sister, carrying yet another box full of fake Lord Slytherin masks from around the back. "They're for the posh party tonight. Dem lords always gotta do it like this, don't they. Maska-raid and all that."

"But if they're all wearing masks, how'd they then know who the real Lord Slytherin is?"

Rodger from up the street clapped Stan on the back. "That's the point, innit? It's like, all cunning and stuff. Slytherin. All part of some master plan, no doubt." He tapped the side of his nose conspiratorially. "Now, come here and give us a hand, yeah? You fancy yourself a charms master."

"Fancies himself more like it!" called his sister. "Fancies himself more than a Malfoy, that one."

"No more than you!" Stan called back, sitting down and drawing his wand. "And I'll have these all done in a less than a jiffy. You'll see."

Over two hundred packages were charmed shut and wrapped. Over two hundred owls swooped down. All throughout the day, deliveries arrived at the front doors of the possibly good and questionably great.

At Malfoy Manor, Lord Malfoy opened his box and stared inside. "Seriously?"

In the kitchen of the Burrow, Molly Weasley opened one box after another, shaking her head in exasperation. "Arthur! Your Lord Slytherin is up to his games again!"

At Grimmauld Place, a very uncertain Lord Black walked into his daughter's room, only to find her enthusiastically posing in front of a mirror, wearing a long evening dress, and an exact half-copy of the mask that he now also carried.

All across the country, the packages were met with reactions ranging from excitement to incredulity, to suspicion, but mostly they were met with bemusement.

And finally, at Potter Manor, a house elf handed four packages to Lord Potter, who opened them and immediately gave one of the four back. "Harry is not to leave the manor tonight, understand? Harry is grounded."

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —
A few hours later, Harry watched from behind the upstairs banisters as the other Potters made their final preparations to leave.

"And remember, be on your best behaviour, John," James Potter said. "There's a lot riding on tonight. The Light needs the Gray's support if we want to advance our interests in the Wizengamot. If you do anything to endanger that, I will be very displeased."

"Yes, Dad," John said from behind his Lord Slytherin mask. He had not looked pleased at all when he'd learned that he'd be expected to wear it for most, if not all, of the evening.

"And, Harry," Lord Potter called up to where Harry looked down on them. "I don't want to hear about you giving the house elves trouble."

"Of course not, Father."

"Good." James Potter donned his Lord Slytherin mask, and Lily Potter did the same. The three then stepped into the roaring green floo, one after the other, and shouted, "Slytherin Manor!"

The first place Harry ransacked was the library, looking all over for the missing family magic books John had hidden. He succeeded in finding two before a clock told him he was running out of time. His second march took him to the storeroom where he'd found the invisibility cloak, all those years ago. He'd been half-hoping that the Potter family might possess other useful treasures—maybe even the stone or the wand of Death—but alas, it was not to be.

Another clock chimed that he was already slightly late for his next appointment and so he jogged through the manor, down the stairs, out the back door, and down to the very edge of the wards.

"Master Harry is not to be leaving the manor," said a voice from behind him.

Harry turned around. One of the Potter house elves stood with her arms folded, tapping her foot. Harry's back was almost scraping the ward's edge, it was so close.

"Not planning to, my friend. Not planning to." He put his hands behind his back, one palm open, and felt a glass vial drop into it. An invisible hand gently squeezed his before retreating.

"Then why is you being here?" asked the elf.

"Just going for a walk. It's a beautiful winter's evening." Unseen, he slipped the vial into the pocket of his robes.

"It's dark out."

"Exactly. That's the point." He sighed. "But perhaps you are right. Perhaps it is rather cold out, too." He gestured back to the manor and the elf escorted him all the way back. Twenty minutes later, all the elves were laying unconscious, drugged out of their skulls by the powerful sleeping potion Harry had slipped into their drinks. He finished the ruse by replacing the half-empty glasses with new ones, spiked with Ogden's finest taken from Lord Potter's drinks cabinet.

Plausible deniability taken care of, he opened a downstairs window, and slowly floated up and into the night.

Harry was anything but grounded.
Sitting at his office desk, Lord Jacob Greengrass really wished he couldn't hear the argument that was going on just outside his door.

"But where's Daph?" Astoria asked for what felt like the hundredth time. "Is she with Harry? Huh? Huh? She is, isn't she?"

"Astoria," snapped his wife. "Mask!"

"What, this?" There was a giggle.

"No, not that mask. Your metaphorical mask. Your Slytherin mask."

"This is my—"

"—You know exactly what I mean."

"But using occlumency so much is just so boring, and I'll be at it all night! What are we waiting for anyway?"

At that moment, Jacob felt through the wards exactly what they were waiting for, arriving via the floo.

A couple of minutes later, Harry stood before him.

Jacob cleared his throat. "I wish to say that I do not approve of what we are about to do."

"You understand this is the safest way," Harry replied.

"I do, but that doesn't make it any less inappropriate. If we are found out it will cause a scandal."

"Then we shall have to ensure that we are not found out."

Jacob didn't really have a reply for that so he just tossed over a small vial of mud-coloured potion and watched as his future son-in-law turned into his first-born daughter.

"Daphne!" said his wife, materialising through the office door as if pulled by a summoning charm. She had a huge shit-eating grin on her face. "I see that nasty boy has been having far too great an influence on you. Look at those clothes! Just follow me and we'll get you ready for the gala, just as I'm sure your betrothed would love to see you."

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

"Lord Slytherin!" gushed the wife of a random minor lord. "That is you, isn't it? Yes, it is — so hard to tell with all these masks. Can I just congratulate you on such a magnificent home? My husband has been most impressed and I'm sure if my children were here, they would be too."

"Thank you," said Daphne graciously, having to clamp down on her occlumency to stop herself snapping at the boring cow.

After a few minutes of polite conversation, she managed to beg off to attend to other guests. Everything about this felt wrong. Not the playing host for a huge number of magical lords and ladies — she'd been practically bred for that. No, it was the being a wizard thing that was the sticking point. She wasn't a wizard and while Ginevra and Luna might relish the opportunity to play dress-up, as it were, she would be quite happy to spend the rest of her premarital life avoiding the embarrassment of being reminded exactly what Harry was going to be lugging around beneath his robes when he was older. That worked until she had to use the bathroom, which would
probably be soon. The first guests had arrived three hours ago and she'd been going non-stop since then.

Greeting the Potters had been particularly difficult. The testosterone flowing through her blood demanded she smash Lord Potter's nose into the brilliantly polished floor. Thankfully, she'd resisted the temptation, but it was a close-run thing, especially when the leading lord of the Light had made comments about Harry and how they would have to have a talk about him soon.

The rest of the guests milled around the entranceway, or else had wandered off to find their seats in the sea of round tables that had been laid out in the ballroom. The house elves had been working hard all afternoon and soon all that effort would bear fruit. Just as her lord planned.

The floo flared green and Daphne had to steel herself as her father, Lord Greengrass, stepped out, followed quickly by her mother, her sister Astoria, and herself. And despite herself, she couldn't help letting out a cough. Firstly, did she really look that small? And secondly, wow — Harry could pull off pureblood princess as easily as he could all-powerful lord. It was kind of annoying, actually.

"Lord Greengrass," she said, opening her arms and embracing her father in an incredibly manly hug. "I hope I find you well."

"Quite well, Lord Slytherin," her father replied. She noticed with a quirk of her lips that he wasn't handling the awkwardness quite as well as Harry was. "As is my family." He gestured behind him.

"I'm happy." Daphne turned to the other three, two of whom giggled, one of whom didn't, and it was that one who gave her a perfect demure curtsey. "My lord," Harry said, dipping low in a dress that she recognised as one of the ones her mother had been trying to get her to wear for years.

"Daphne," Daphne said, smiling. "You look absolutely enchanting tonight."

"Thank you, my lord. You look amazingly handsome, too."

"Okay, that's enough of that," her father cut in. "Lord Slytherin, I believe you have some words you need to exchange with Daphne? Astoria, will you go and keep an eye on her?"

"Of course!" Astoria chirped.

The three of them were soon ensconced in the drawing-room just off the main ballroom.

The moment the door was locked, Astoria burst into laughter. "I can't believe you really went through with it! Daph, you have the best betrothed ever! I'm so jealous."

Harry removed his mask and smiled with Daphne's face. "I trust you are ready to play your part, Astoria?"

"Of course."

Daphne removed her own mask and tossed Harry his Lord Slytherin wand. "Lady Charmer took ill soon after arriving — she's been flooed to St Mungo's — Heir Shafiq has been stunned for trying to force his way through a locked door, and Lord Thynn is complaining that his plus one couldn't be one of his mistresses."

"That all?"

"Not by a long shot."
"You stunned someone, Daph?" Astoria looked up at her, wide-eyed.

"He had it coming."

"But isn't Shafiq on our side?"

"Yes. His grandfather is extremely embarrassed."

"I'll bet he is." Harry took the small potion she proffered him and held it up. "Ready?"

Daphne nodded. Together, they drank the vials in one gulp.

Then, as Harry's skin began to bubble, he flicked his wand and switched their clothes.

Daphne felt the wizarding robes she'd been wearing switched with the far more familiar and comforting embrace of a dress, even if it was one of the more complex ones.

"Oh, thank Merlin."

Harry, now male and much taller, put his mask back in place. "Don't get too comfortable. This will be far from the last switch tonight."

"And now it's my turn!" Astoria was practically jumping up and down.

Lord Slytherin turned to her. "Astoria. Mask."

Astoria's face instantly blanked.

"Well done."

The girl let a crack of happiness peak through before turning back once more into full-on ice princess.

One more round of polyjuice potions, and another switching spell later, and Daphne and Astoria had also completely switched places.

"And now, the final finishing touch," Harry said. "Astoria, banish and recall your noble house ring."

Astoria nodded, closed her eyes and focused. Seconds later, Daphne felt her heiress ring vanish from her finger, where it reappeared on her little sister's.

It was now official. Her betrothal to Harry had always precluded her from taking on the role of Lady Greengrass. But the family had always suggested that they keep her in the role of heiress anyway, until Astoria arrived at Hogwarts, just because she was so good at it. This was just moving the schedule up a few months. "Astoria," she practically begged. "Please don't do anything unseemly. This is my reputation I'm trusting you with."

"Hey, don't worry, Sis. I got this." Astoria placed a hand on her chest. "I would have you know that I am most pleased with how this soiree is progressing, my lord, and hope you would indulge my proclivities later on for a pleasant stroll by the water."

"I don't speak like that!"

"You totally do."
"Girls," Lord Slytherin interrupted them. "It is time for Astoria Greengrass to fall ill." He pulled out his shrunk trunk from the pocket of his robes. "Hop in, Daphne."

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

The table was covered with a white linen table cloth, and laid for ten. Around it, three families sat, exchanging conversation while waiting for both performance and food. The first family were the Malfoys. Draco sat on his father's left-hand side, while his mother sat on his father's right. He was quite pleased with the holidays so far. The attention he'd garnered as the up-and-coming Dark wizard who'd summoned a basilisk in the forbidden forest felt good in a way that being praised for being Heir Malfoy alone never quite had. He hadn't realised the difference until now. The basilisk-summoning episode was his — not his family's. Even if it had been a fluke — even if almost the entire Wizangamot had voted to ban his further experimentation with it — it was still his.

The second family sitting around this particular table were the Parkinsons. Draco's mother and Pansy's were avidly discussing his and Pansy's respective Hogwarts achievements in the way that competitive mothers are wont to. Draco caught Pansy's eye and gave her a faux bow.

Pansy smiled back. The witches wore only half-masks so he could see some of her cheeks. She was blushing.

Being the witch whom Draco had primarily summoned the basilisk to protect had changed things between their families. There were still many noble houses interested in marrying their daughters into the Malfoy sphere of influence, but the Parkinsons had definitely moved up the queue, as it were.

With two acknowledged Dark families making up most of the table, the final family would have been seen as the odd one out by those who didn't keep up to date with the politics of the day. Unfortunately, it seemed that one of those people who didn't keep up with the politics of the day was the very head of that exact family.

"I can't tell you how good it is to see the Ancient and Noble House of Black rediscovering the old ways and traditions," said Lord Parkinson.

"Indeed," added Lord Parkinson's younger brother, Robert. "I remember when I were a lad. Me and Saumual here once snuck into Knockturn Alley and tried to hire a troll to live under that little bridge over the creek."

"Errr…" said Lord Sirius Black.

"Of course it didn't work. But our Grandmother liked to lead us around with all those fairy-tale rituals. Said later it kept us out of real trouble. I bet Alexandra here gets up to that kind of trouble all the time."

"Ummm…"

"Anyway, it's been fascinating to watch her play the Snake Pit. Scary too, at times. Don't you think so, Sam?"

"Sure has. I'm rather jealous, to be honest. In my day, I was one of the only heirs attending, so my leadership was a fait accompli. But even then, I doubt I'd have been able to fight off that many challengers all at once." Lord Parkinson raised his mask and winked at Alex. "She's a fearsome one, no doubt. I'm glad the Dark's future leadership is looking strong. It's just a shame she's a witch." He laughed and refixed his mask. "If she weren't, I'd be pushing you hard for Pansy's
Draco carefully watched Alexandra as the exchange continued. His public leader was sat on Lord Black's left, radiating calmness and looking just a little smug. He shivered. Despite everything, he still couldn't quite shake that feeling of anxiety sometimes around her. Casting his mind back to the beginning of the year, he couldn't believe he'd so boldly suggested on the train that one day Black might be one of his consorts. The witch was an untameable mess of contrasts.

On the one hand, she sometimes appeared amazingly naive about aspects of pureblood culture. Like when she'd first played wizard's poker with him and the other Slytherins. It quickly became apparent that she was an amateur who knew only the rules and none of the subtleties.

But then on the other hand, she was cunning, ruthless, and a magical combat prodigy powerful enough to take on a good chunk of upper years all by herself — much like the Potter twins of the Light and the Gray. That, more than anything else, was the driving force behind Draco's decision to ally himself behind her — to act as her guiding hand through a world she appeared only partly ready to command.

He just wished — oh, how he wished so badly — that he could guide her in regards to the other potentially dangerous witch sitting at their table.

"It's all not really that big a deal," Alex said airily. "Any true Slytherin would understand."

Lord Black shifted uneasily.

"It's just unfortunate that the world is not all Slytherin," she continued. "Isn't that right, Virgo?"

Despite himself, Draco felt a cold sweat break out on his brow as, sitting next to him, his little sister, Alex's classmate, the Malfoy's spy in the Light, fixed Alex with a glare that he could feel even through her mask. She opened her mouth to retort.

Whatever that retort might have been though, was cut short as the lights around the ballroom suddenly dimmed.

All around them, over 150 wizards and witches from the very top of wizarding society quietened at their own tables. Another fifty sat on the surrounding upstairs balcony at much smaller tables, looking down on the proceedings in groups of two and three.

In front of them all, sat a raised stage, onto which a robed figure strode, wearing that distinctive Lord Slytherin mask. Draco had no doubt that this was the real Lord Slytherin.

The man stopped in the centre of the stage. "Lords and Ladies—" he began. Every pair of eyes in the room was on him. "—wizards and witches. Welcome to my new home and to Slytherin Gala Night. I invite you to enjoy my house's food and hospitality, as well as the first performance by the Floo Theatre Company of Sebastian Rosier's classic, The Many Champions of Death, with Death played by Humphrey Piper, directed by Madam Victoria Bolton."

Draco frowned. Piper? He didn't recognise that name.

"After dinner, the room will be cleared for dancing, while drinks will continue to be served in the sitting and dining rooms. And finally, at midnight, my gift to Magical Britain — an old ritual of renown, long thought lost, as so many have been, now found again with the revival of my house. I invite you all to be present as, for the first time in over five hundred years, we perform the Stella
Benedictio."

Draco heard a small chorus of gasps ring out around the room, quickly followed by excited whispers.Whatever the Stella Benedictio was, it was apparently noteworthy.

"But that is for later," Slytherin continued."For now, I leave you in the very capable hands of Madam Bolton. Thank you."

Applause filled the room as Slytherin walked off stage, only pausing to collect Granger, who'd been watching at the sidelines, before leading her through a back door. Draco smiled. At least she didn't have a spot out here.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Those who have been backstage at most any theatre production, from the primary school Christmas nativity play, to the most complicated Broadway extravaganza, will easily speak of the barely controlled chaos required to ensure that the show really does go on. Adding magic to the mix does not make things easier. It merely allows the chaos to take on several more degrees of magnitude, and for the final effect to be so much more spectacular. Thus it was, that as the performers hurried off stage in between scenes, they were met by a small auror force of potioneers, charms masters, and transfiguration experts.

Clothes were switched, altered, and sometimes even fully changed with a flick of a wand. Props, sets, and whole backdrops materialised from space-shrunk trunks and compartments. Actors desperately checked the labels on vials before chugging down more disguise magic than an undercover field unspeakable, before being hustled back into position for their next part, completely different from their last, not just in character, but in height, voice, sex, face, and sometimes even species.

On stage, the settings and backdrops swirled around the stage like water free from gravity, barely staying one form long enough for an actor to pluck a flower from a pot, or a wand from a mantlepiece, before it was off again, becoming the seat under another actor's rear just as he confidently sat down, seemingly without a care in the world.

And in the centre of it all stood Death, the only unmoving part, orchestrating the surrounding events like a grand puppet master, sending out his champions to the mortal world again and again to ensure the natural order of things. Three hundred-years-old, it was a very traditionally Dark piece of performance art — a Dark magical play, led in the titular role, this time, by a muggleborn.

And as yet another would-be champion of Death came before the terrible higher power, Alexandra Black caught Draco's eye, smirked, and mouthed the words, 'you will serve me,' in time with Death's own.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Outside of Slytherin Manor, away from Death's soliloquy, down at the bottom of the hill, Dan Granger sat down with Emma on their comfy living-room sofa, while their daughter and Lord Slytherin sat in the two armchairs opposite.

"Anyway, Slytherin," Dan said,"It's good to see you again. The whole island has been crazy the last few weeks."

"Yes," Emma added."I'll be glad when this is all over. It's so difficult to concentrate on the work with men and goblins thundering about all the time."
Slytherin adjusted his mask. "The projects are going well, then?" he asked.

"About as well as since our last owl to you."

"Ah, that is most satisfying then. And indeed, you are not the only one looking forward to seeing the end of all this, although I'm not talking about the party, but rather my bringing you, finally, into the pact, as it were, about my true identity, for better or worse, although obviously I hope it is for better."

"You are sure you want to do this?" Dan asked. "We do not mind being kept in the dark. We know the risks."

Slytherin nodded. "Yes, I am sure. So long as you both are willing."

"We are," Emma said. "So, how are we going to do this? Are you just going to whip off that mask and make jazz hands?"

"No, I was planning something more theatrical than that."

Dan smirked. "More theatrical than jazz hands? So we get our own private magical play while the lords on the hill get theirs. Nice."

Lord Slytherin held up a finger and caught Hermione's eye.

Hermione nodded.

"Now, what you have to understand about masks," Slytherin began as Hermione started fishing in a bag, "is that often there are multiple layers of mask underneath, and I am going to show you who I really am, but you need to understand that it is not the full story, and that I won't be able to tell you that full story now."

Dan nodded and saw that Emma did too.

Hermione pulled out two different potions from the bag and gracefully handed them to Slytherin — one mud-coloured, one milky-blue.

"Do you know what these are?" Slytherin asked.

"The brown one is polyjuice, isn't it?" Emma asked. "I don't know about the blue one though."

Slytherin nodded. "Indeed, you are correct. And the milky-blue one is ageing potion antidote."

Slytherin then reached up and plucked a hair from his own head and let it fall into the polyjuice. "Ready?" he asked.

Dan held his breath.

Taking that for his acceptance, Slytherin quickly drank first one, then the other.

In front of Dan's eyes, Slytherin began to change. He shrunk — not just a little, but a lot! His hair changed colour, grew longer. His robes shrank to fit his new height. And there was a subtle undefinable difference that he couldn't quite put his finger on. At least, until a slim hand came up and took the mask off.

"Hermione!" Emma gasped.

Hermione smiled a nervous smile. "Hi, Mum. Hi, Dad."
Dan's brain stalled for a moment. "But…" He turned his head to where the other 'Hermione' had been sitting. He sighed. "Was that really necessary, Lord Slytherin?"

"It was," the fake-Hermione said.

Only now did Dan see all the Slytherin-like ways this fake-Hermione moved. All the little gestures, the tone of voice.

"Often, the best way to truly appreciate the beauty of a grand deception is by revealing it piece by piece," Slytherin continued. "Like a maiden letting her clothes fall piece by piece for her husband's appreciation on her wedding night."

Dan grimaced. "I'm not sure if I like you saying things like that while wearing my daughter's form."

"Then I'm sure this will make you feel at least slightly better." Slytherin reached into the bag again, withdrew another mud-coloured potion, plucked a hair from his own head, let it fall into the potion, and drank.

Soon, the form of Hermione was replaced by another familiar one.

"Daphne!" Emma gasped. "That was amazing. I truly thought you were Slytherin. Your acting skills!"

Daphne Greengrass smiled slightly.

"Hey," Hermione cut in. "Don't I get any credit for my acting skills?"

"Yes, sweetie, of course you do."

Dan stared at the two girls sitting opposite him. What were they saying? That they were both Slytherin? That Slytherin wasn't real? That he was made up? "Noooo," he said slowly. "That can't be right. We've spent years reading the books about the magical world. Lords have to be male. It's hard-coded into the Albion Family Magics — as are seats on the Wizengamot."

"You're right, Dad," Hermione said. "Neither of us are Lord Slytherin. We just act on his behalf sometimes when he can't for various reasons."

"Slytherin trusts you with that?" Emma said, wide-eyed. "And I know you're his fiancée, Daphne dear, but even so. From what I've read such delegation is unheard of in the Wizarding World."

"Our lord trusts us more than anyone else," Daphne said.

Something clicked in Dan's mind. He looked towards his daughter. "Hermione, you know who Lord Slytherin is."

Hermione nodded.

Dan fell back into the sofa. "Wow."

Emma leaned forward. "The fact you have kept that secret for—how long—?"

"Over four years."

"—Over four years, is incredible."
"Yes," said a deep voice from the front doorway. The mask in Hermione's hands leapt from her fingers and flew around the corner, towards the voice. A few seconds later, Lord Slytherin entered the room. "I'm very proud of them. They are the best."

"I'm glad you think so," Dan said.

"Especially Luna," Slytherin continued. "That girl is so amazingly talented and wonderful it's a miracle they don't just hand over the whole of Magical Britain to her right now."

"Errr…” Hermione said.

"In fact," the man continued. "I've decided that Luna's birthday should be made a national holiday, and everyone will have all the pudding they could want. Unless that means less pudding for Luna, of course, in which case, someone will just have to give up their portion for her, because otherwise it wouldn't be fair."

Daphne put a hand over her face.

"And of course we'll need a statue of her in front of Slytherin Manor. An adult nude maybe, with real robes added on after, like on the ancient Greek statues. I think Luna would really like that. And maybe versions for Alex and Hermione, and Daph—"

"Luna!" Daphne almost shouted.

'Lord Slytherin,' paused while counting off on 'his' fingers. "Oh, poo," he said.

A few minutes later, a rather put-out-looking Luna Lovegood sat on the armrest of Hermione's armchair.

Dan gave them all an amused look. "So, can we expect any more of your friends to be playing Lord Slytherin?"

"Just one more," said the now-familiar deep voice again. Lord Slytherin stood in the doorway, again.

Emma smiled warmly. "Hello, Harry."

-Ginny Weasley grinned as, up on stage, an unknown champion of Death clashed with the king of Gringotts in an epic battle deep in the heart of the bank. Rumour had it that this particular champion had been a Smith, although if that was the case, the Smith family wasn't saying.

Ginny clapped along with everyone else as the music swelled for the scene's climax.

Most of the tables sat nine or ten, and hosted two to three families.

Her table was the only large table that hosted only one.

Obviously her father had to be invited. And her mother too, that was a given. Next came Bill. As the current future head of house, not inviting him—when she herself had been invited—would have been socially unacceptable. Then there were the twins, and since their dealings with Slytherin weren't public knowledge, that meant that Charlie, Percy, and Ron also needed invites.

Once all was said and done, they were the only family in attendance with a table all to themselves, and certainly the only one with more than two children present. In fact, the Weasley children made
up a little less than half of all children in attendance.

This had not gone unnoticed, despite the masks. Most had taken it as a sign that the Gray were currently putting pressure on the Dark by leaning closer towards the Light.

While the performers swirled off the stage in a sea of magical mist, Ginny snatched a glance towards the table next to theirs.

For once, the expression on John Potter's face was incredibly difficult to read. He was deep in hushed conversation with Susan Bones, using the music to muffle his whispering, and didn't seem to be paying any attention at all to the performance. As the performers leapt back onto the stage to a great crash of cymbals, all theatrically brandishing wands at each other, John Potter glanced up and caught her watching him. For a moment, his expression was absolutely blank. And then, he smirked.

— DP&SW: NRICaD —

Back down in Granger cottage, the masked Lord Slytherin in the door tilted his head slightly to one side. "What makes you think I'm Harry Potter, Emma?"

Emma Granger smiled mischievously. "It would be only fitting." She was quite enjoying this guessing game. "We've had Hermione and Daphne, and now Luna. Harry is the only one of Hermione's friends I know left who's also close to our Lord Slytherin."

"It would fit the pattern, certainly," the Lord Slytherin said. "But maybe you are wrong. Maybe I truly am Lord Slytherin. Maybe Harry is hiding behind a bookshelf. Or maybe Slytherin is."

Luna giggled.

Dan Granger rolled his eyes. "Is he hiding behind a bookshelf?"

"Which one?" the Lord Slytherin asked. "Harry? Slytherin?"

"Either."

"No."

Emma Granger pointed a triumphant finger. "So you are definitely one or the other. Actually, I've changed my mind. You are the true Lord Slytherin. It's your gravitas. That feeling of quiet power. I don't believe that can be faked."

"I agree. It would be very hard. But it could be. The proof, Dan, Emma, is actually very simple. If one wanted to identify a British lord, how would one do it?"

"His ring," replied both Dan and Emma in unison.

"Well?" Slytherin pulled off a white glove.

Both Grangers looked down at the Lord Slytherin's fingers.

There, on his index digit, lay the ring they'd seen many times before.

"Lord Slytherin." Dan grinned. "So, this really is you. Not Harry. Unless you've somehow managed to fake your own ring."

"That would be difficult," Lord Slytherin said. "And now I believe it is time for the real reveal." He
nodded towards the girls. "Daphne, if you would."

The Greengrass heiress passed their lord two vials, one of polyjuice and another—to both Grangers’ confusion—of ageing potion antidote. Lord Slytherin then quickly mixed the polyjuice with a hair from his head, and then drank both potions in quick succession.

To Emma's shock, and clearly to her husband's as well, the man started to change, just like the girls had. He shrunk. His hair changed.

The boy removed the mask and gazed at them levelly.

"Harry!" Emma gasped. "But… what? How?"

"Is it that much of a surprise?" Harry asked. "You've seen how good our acting skills are. Is it so surprising that together,"—he gestured to the girls—"we could pull something like this off?"

"Yes," said Dan definitely. "You are too young. That ageing potion proves it."

"And yet I have the ring."

Emma frowned. "May I see it closer?"

"Of course, Emma." He reached out a hand and allowed her to inspect it carefully in her hands, examining it from every angle.

Emma bit her lip. "It looks real."

"It is real."

Dan stood up. "I know how to settle this." He left the room.

Emma let go of Harry's hand and sat back down. "Listen, Harry. I'm not saying you couldn't be Lord Slytherin, but you must see how outrageous it sounds. When Lord Slytherin approached us, you were only eight."

"And I'm only twelve now. But we live in a world of magic. Strange things can happen."

"Nothing we've read could explain this."

Harry smiled a wry smile. "Oh, dear. Has familiarity already bled all the mystery and wonder out of the magical world? I know you know that the books available to you in Flourish and Blotts are the safe, sanitised ones, approved by the Light for the consumption of those deemed incapable of handling inconvenient truths."

The girls all mirrored similar wry smiles.

Emma felt distinctly wrong-footed. That certainly sounded like Lord Slytherin. But coming from Harry—that charming boy who'd stolen her daughter's heart, long before even Hermione knew it—it just sounded odd.

"Here we go," Dan said, returning with a half-rotted box under one arm. He put the box down on the low table between them. "Now, err… Harry. I'm not saying you couldn't be Lord Slytherin, but you must see how outrageous it sounds."

The girls all traded amused looks.
"If it is true, then I certainly understand why you've kept it secret all this time. And I—or rather, we'd—be very interested in hearing all the details."

Harry nodded. "As I said, some details I can't reveal tonight."

"Technically, I said that," said Hermione.

Daphne shook her head. "When you take the role of our lord, your words are not your own."

"Unless you're pretending to be Harry, pretending to be Hermione, talking to someone who you know thinks you're pretending to be—"

"—Yes, Luna," Daphne cut in. "I think we get the idea. My lord?"

Harry stared down at the box in front of him.

Emma edged closer in her seat. She couldn't quite believe this was going to work.

Harry opened his mouth… and hissed.

There was a small click.

Emma let out a small sigh. "You really are Lord Slytherin."

"I am."

Dan slumped back in his chair. "I suppose it's better than Hermione being him. We need to talk about many things."

"Certainly."

Suddenly, there was a small whoosh of visible magic, and the box-lid flipped itself open.

Everyone in the room, save Harry, but including Emma, gasped.

Inside the box, there was a fist-sized ghost-like gemstone, pouring mist out of the box like a magical fog machine.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Up in the manor, the intermission had started.

Xenophilius Lovegood stood in a small group of young Light nobles, regaling them with his expertise of esoteric myths and legends. One of which was quite topical, given the subject of the performance.

"And so, the three brothers stood triumphant, just like their ancestors at Wessex. After falling to their deception, Death cursed them and all their lines, 'May conflict rip you apart and Fate herself stalk your heels.'

"But for all the mighty power's rage, he had agreed to a bargain, and so to each brother, he handed over an object of great power.

"To the first brother, Death gave up his own wand — elder and thestral tail hair — known today simply as the Elder Wand, the Wand of Death, or the Death Stick. This mighty weapon made its wielder near-unbeatable in battle, no matter their skill or power. But with this mighty power came a
great curse. The wand would call out to those who sought that power — whispering unheard challenges to the greedy and the insecure. Antioch died gurgling blood from a slit throat while he slept. Since then, all known wielders of the Elder Wand have always needed to keep an eye open for treachery, from the paranoid dread vampire Allred to Light Lord Dimwiddy.

"To the second brother, Death gave the Resurrection Stone, a simple round pebble from the banks of the Black Sea, but infused, like all the artefacts, with an aspect of Death's power. While the wand contained Death's magical might, the stone contained his knowledge of what souls resided within his vast realm. With the stone in his possession, Cadmus was able to confirm that his beloved fiancée had not run away from home, as their uncle had always maintained, but had indeed died while under the same uncle's care. After murdering the man responsible for his love's Death, Cadmus hanged himself, and the stone was lost to history, never to be seen again.

"And finally, to the third brother, Death granted a cloak of water and magic — the aspect of Death's separation from the mortal realm. When Ignotus asked Death what his gift did, he was given the answer that it, 'hides the wearer from the gaze of all, no matter how powerful they might be, including himself.' And indeed it did. Under the cloak, Ignotus lived for hundreds of years, before finally embracing Death as a brother. Some versions of the legend say he never truly died — that he still lives among us, even now, hidden by the cloak."

"Could that be true?" asked a sceptical heir.

Xeno's lips quirked. "Unlikely. The cloak has been glimpsed at various points throughout history, although which sightings are legitimate is always hotly debated. Together, the hallows represent some of the most sought-after artefacts in the Wizarding World, even if the story isn't as fashionable these days as it used to be."

"Well, yes," said the sceptical heir. "Chasing after one legendary artefact is difficult enough. But three at the same time? I know if I were a treasure hunter, I wouldn't be chasing after a collection that hugely powerful wizards haven't found for over a thousand years. Surely there would be more accessible prizes out there."

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Down in the cottage, Harry was bent over the ghost-like gem, inspecting it from every angle. "Fascinating," he said. "There's so much more magic seeping from this one."

"So, what do you think?" Daphne asked. "Lost relics from ancient civilisations? Some kind of key, perhaps?"

"Maybe it's a phylactery," Hermione suggested, excitedly. "That would explain how a non-organic object emanates magic like this. I remember you telling me about the one you and Daphne saw in Gringotts, but I didn't imagine it to be like this."

Harry tapped his chin in thought. "Remember that there are other objects that can emanate magic despite not being alive — ward stones, enchanted objects, etc. And yes, I'm aware that it can't be a ward stone or enchanted," Harry quickly added as Hermione took a deep breath. "I'm merely pointing out that the precedent exists."

"Or else it is alive," Daphne suggested.

The three second-year Hogwarts students were busily crowded around the gem, Luna having already left to rejoin her parents up at the manor.
Across the room, Dan Granger watched the rapid-fire exchange between them with a pensive look on his face.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Emma said quietly, standing next to him.

"Amazing is one way of putting it. I know we've known Harry for over four years now, and Daphne for not much less than that, but it's still incredible, in the very literal sense of the word."

"Harry suggests there is deeper magic at work here."

"That's the only thing stopping me from declaring it all a con orchestrated by Lord Greengrass."

Dan sighed. "Look at them. They're so in sync — Hermione, Harry, Daphne, even Luna. If we were still in the muggle world, I'd call this a recipe for heartbreak, but…"

"We're not in the muggle world anymore."

Dan snorted. "No. We're vassals of a twelve-year-old boy, who controls a major political party in a sixteenth-century-style aristocratic government, who is already engaged to two girls, and whom our only daughter is besotted with. You know she's going to ask us to sign a betrothal contract at some point. What do you think of that?"

Emma pursed her lips. "When I was thirteen I had a huge crush on David Bowie. I read every magazine article. I begged Mum and Dad to take me to see him every chance that came up. I stole a poster from one of those concerts and stuck it up on my bedroom wall. All my friends were jealous of that poster. I was obsessed, really. If you'd asked me back then if I'd like to be his girlfriend, I would have said yes in an instant."

Emma sighed. "But looking back, I realise that even back then, it wouldn't have been the truth. Our worlds were just too different. And I was not ready for a real relationship with anyone, not even my rock-star idol."

Dan grunted.

"But if I learned that he was actually a boy my age," Emma continued. "A boy masquerading as an adult, successfully, with all of an adult's maturity and power — a boy just like the boys in school — but who was secretly going around doing world tours and stuff like that, and that he now trusted me with that secret — that he needed me to help him maintain that secret. That would have changed everything. That would have been hard to resist."

Emma looked back towards Dan and caught his eye.

Dan shrugged. "Working with Lord Slytherin has always been like riding a tiger — like joining a mafia crime family. We host an ex-prostitute as a debt slave, even if doing so does save her from Azkaban. We go to auctions where sapient beings are sold off to the highest bidder. We hobnob with other families who personally fund government departments in exchange for favours and influence. And we're currently building weapons which our lord is actively flogging to anyone with the gold to pay for them."

"Harry is Hermione's magical guardian and has right of first refusal on any betrothal contract we might sign," said Emma.

"Harry is an abnormally powerful wizard in a polygamy-accepting society, already has two wives picked out, and clearly likes Hermione a lot," said Dan.

"Hermione is head-over-heels for him, even if she doesn't quite realise it," said Emma.
"Hermione is best friends with both of the other girls betrothed to Harry," said Dan. They held each others gaze.

Dan sighed. "I'll talk to our lord."

Emma nodded. "Then I'll talk to Hermione. We should try to give it as much time as possible — read up on betrothal magic. Who knows, maybe things will change in a few years."

"That sounds best. In the meantime, we should focus on making ourselves as valuable as possible to our patron." Dan lowered his voice even further and hissed, "After all, if Harry is doing all this at twelve, I can't begin to imagine what the future will hold."

Emma smirked. "Have a bit of a David Bowie thing going on yourself?"

Dan smiled back wryly. "That's rich coming from you given the Lord Slytherin mask we have in the bed… side… drawer…." He trailed off awkwardly.

An uncomfortable silence descended.

"Head-canon, Lord Slytherin is always an adult?" Emma suggested.

"Deal."

"Mum, Dad." Hermione swept over. "Harry has a plan."

"Oh, that's wonderful, sweetie," Emma started in an indulgent voice, before snapping herself out of it. "Errr... I mean, yes, Harry?"

Harry smiled as he wandered over. "We already have an agreement with the goblins regarding these artefacts, and given how critical Gringotts is to so many of our plans, I'm loath to put such a useful friendship in jeopardy, even if the chance of being found out is small. Having said that, there's nothing in the agreement that says how quickly I have to hand them over, so I'd like to ask you both to throw every muggle trick you know at it — to find out as much as you can before then."

Dan nodded. "How long do we have?"

Harry passed a polyjuice vial to Daphne. "I think about a month is how long we can get away with." He pulled out a few vials of his own and started drinking.

"Fine," said Dan. "We'll get on it just as soon as we finish up the final upgrades on the latest broomsub prototype. The final bidding process for MACUSA is only a few weeks away. Really, we're starting to get to the point where help would be useful, but I appreciate how difficult that would be."

"Indeed." Harry, now Lord Slytherin, re-attached his mask to his face. Daphne climbed into a trunk, which Hermione then shrunk and pocketed.

"Be good, you three!" Emma called after them as they walked up the garden path. She paused. "With respect, of course!"

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

The performance of The Many Champions of Death ended with the title character giving a poetic soliloquy on the nature of magic, life, and place of wizards within it, while his final champion was
dragged, kicking and screaming, into the deepest depths of the never-ever, more commonly referred to as hell.

It was a stirring performance, to be sure.

As the curtain fell, the audience all rose up for a standing ovation. The actors came back out and bowed three times before the clapping eventually died down. Dessert followed, the guests already having been served dinner during the production. Chocolate cake, sorbet, cream, and fruits — Alexandra Black tried to look like someone disdaining something they actually liked, rather than someone disdaining something because it tasted like mushy cardboard.

On the other side of the room, Lyndsea Morweena, founder and chief editor of Witch Weekly, couldn't believe her luck. At the start of the second half, Lord Slytherin had returned to the hall and sat down at her table, escorting an elegant young witch she recognised as Clare Cooper — Slytherin's reformed prostitute. It was a ballsy move to make for the founding night of what was presumably intended to become a respectable date on the social calendar, but it was also exactly the kind of daring roguishness that fired the imagination, sold newspapers, and as such, she wasn't complaining.

"Tell me, my lord" she began, after an appropriate amount of small talk. "Was the decision to cast Humphrey Piper as the lead role politically motivated? Do you feel that muggleborns should be given roles normally held by purebloods?"

"Not really," Slytherin replied in his deep baritone. "I had very little input on that. The Floo Theatre Company simply asked if I would grant them directorial control over the production if they hosted in my new home."

"You didn't know Mister Piper was a muggleborn?"

"Yes, I did."

"So you did implicitly give your approval for a muggleborn to take the lead role?"

Slytherin took a small bit of cake and dabbed his mask lips with a napkin. "I made it clear that I expected the best. I also confirmed when they asked that I wasn't concerned what background 'the best' came from, so long as they were, in fact, the best."

"A meritocratic stance then?"

"That has long been my policy."

She leaned in slightly closer. "But aren't you worried that maybe the Floo Theatre Company chose Mister Piper over more qualified candidates to make a political statement of their own? That they are taking advantage of your hands-off management style to further an extreme pro-muggleborn ideology?"

"I have found no evidence that any such thing is taking place."

Suddenly, the lights dimmed slightly.

Lord Slytherin placed his fork down on his plate with a small clink sound. "That's our signal to congregate outside while the house elves prepare the hall for dancing. I hope you'll join me again later, Lyndsea. This talk has been stimulating. I would like to continue it."

"Oh, of course, my lord."
Lyndsea Morweena really couldn't believe her luck. She was the first journalist in the world to get the chance to pick Lord Slytherin's brain.

Several tables away, Lord Xenophilius Lovegood watched with a carefully controlled smirk.

"Quickly!" Plato snapped from the middle of the kitchens, standing on top of one of the granite tabletops while a small army of house elves in pillowcases frantically popped in and out carrying chairs, cutlery, table cloths, flowers, dirty plates, and everything else required for a large formal dinner. "Master needs the hall cleaned soon. Plato will not be seeing him opening those doors to all the Lords and Ladies, just to find you lot still carrying stuff!"

Another dozen or so house elves were busy scrubbing dirty plates and packing up leftovers to be put under stasis charms. More still were popping in to refill empty glasses from a massive selection of ornate-looking bottles.

They'd been seconded from noble houses from all across the country. Greengrass, Lovegood, Smith, Ogden, Moke, Davis, and even Slughorn house elves were represented.

Plato looked around with a satisfied expression. This felt right. Having this many other elves under his command. It felt good. It was just a shame house elf auctions came up so rarely. To get a team anything like this for his master, he'd have to be patient.

A last house elf popped in carrying a silver candlestick — a young female with cute floppy ears.

"Is that last?" Plato barked.

The female nodded furiously.

"Excellent." Plato stood up and popped away himself. Time to let master know.

Harry nodded back at his head house elf who'd just popped in and given him a subtle nod.

He stood as Lord Slytherin in front of the large double doors, facing the large crowd of milling wizards and witches. "And now," he called out, instantly silencing the hum of conversation. "I wish you all the best for the last dance of the year." He swept his arms and the doors swung back open.

Draco shivered. It was December and they were on a Scottish Island. Basic warming charms could only go so far.

He wouldn't normally choose to be out in temperatures like this, but this was different. He had been summoned. He had been summoned, and he couldn't help the feeling that whatever was about to happen was going to be important.

So, while his parents were waiting for the dancing to start, he'd slipped out the front doors to look out over the inky blackness of the North Sea. The pathways around the island were lit by magic, creating a spider's web of light, spreading out from the centre—the manor steps where he now stood—and shining lights on the major landmarks — the greenhouses, the woods, the terraced gardens, the dock, way over on the left side. It was dramatic, magical, and more impressive than any of the other manors he'd seen before.
"What do you think?" asked a voice beside him. It was Pansy. "Better than Malfoy Manor?"

Draco scoffed. "Of course not."

She giggle.

"He's not done too badly," Theo said. "I wonder where he gets his gold? I don't believe in Slytherin's treasure for a moment."

Vincent and Greg stepped into their circle of light. "Dad says he's found some way around the theft magic of the goblins," Greg announced. "That he steals it all from the muggles."

Theo frowned. "I don't believe that either."

"Why not?" Vincent asked. "Sounds logical to me."

"I don't think—"

"Good evening."

The four boys and one girl stiffened, then relaxed, but only slightly, as they saw who it was. Alexandra Black, flanked on both sides by the Carrow twins.

"Heiress Black," Greg and Vincent muttered.

Theo and Pansy both parted, giving their leader a clear path to him, Draco. That minor feeling of dread pooled in his stomach again. He bowed slightly. "Alexandra. You wished to speak with us?"

"I did. Please follow me." She then turned and walked down the path, which a signpost proclaimed led to the docks.

Draco felt a shiver run up his spine as the others all fell into step behind her. This felt different. This didn't feel like the normal Alexandra Black he thought he was getting a grip on. And he was pretty sure he knew what was about to happen. Alexandra was going to demand they pledge themselves to her for the rest of their time at Hogwarts. She hadn't exactly been subtle about her purpose.

The problem was he wasn't sure he was ready for that. Pledging was a big deal. Yes, Alex looked like their only chance for power while at Hogwarts, but over five years was a long time. Things could change.

They reached the waterfront with little fanfare. It was far quieter down here than up at the manor. The water lapped at the pebbled beach and around the legs of the small wooden pier that jutted out from the island.

Alex turned and regarded them all, but Draco in particular, with an intense look. "I wish to speak to you of the future."

Draco had expected that.

"About Hogwarts, and beyond."

And that… less so.

"What about beyond Hogwarts?" Pansy asked.

One of the Carrow twins growled. "Maybe if you listened to the Dark Heiress, instead of interrupting, she'd tell you."

"I wasn't interrupting," Pansy bit back.

"Yes, you—"

"—Hestia," Alexandra cut her off.

Hestia Carrow bit back her next words, looking contrite.

Alexandra turned back to stare out to sea again. "The Dark is in trouble."

Draco frowned.

"For years now, the pureblood cause has been losing power and influence. Before it was to the Light and now it is to the Gray. The Dark knows this, but it has been unable to arrest this decline. Without the Dark Lord, the Dark noble houses have no nexus to coil around. I want to change that." She turned back to face them. "Do any of you have any idea what Lord Slytherin is capable of?"

The assembled teenagers shuffled their feet.

"Why does it matter?" asked Pansy.

"It matters," Alex said. "Because your heads of houses all know what Slytherin is up to, but they do nothing. They just sit there, waiting for their fate to seal itself. If you do not act now—if we do not act now—there won't be any great powers left for any of you to inherit."

Theo looked sceptical. "Surely you overstate things. Slytherin is on the upswing, yes, but his faction is still the smallest of the three. What could he be doing that would so endanger our families?"

Alexandra pulled something from a pouch and started handing it around. "I intend to show you."

It was gillyweed.

Draco's eyes widened. "Hang on! You're asking us to sneak off to break into some Slytherin secret? Do you have no common sense?!"

"More to the point," Pansy interjected with narrowed eyes. "How do you know where to lead us?"

"I have allies in the Gray."

Pansy's eyes widened, then narrowed, again.

"Allies?" Theo said. "You mean a spy?"

Alexandra just smirked and started chewing on a thick strand of gillyweed.

--- DP&SW: NRiCaD ---

The house elves had done a magnificent job. Back up in the main ballroom, all the tables and chairs were gone and the stage had been dissembled, replaced with a much smaller version for a magical orchestral quartet. All around the room, masked wizards and witches were pairing off for dances,
safe in the knowledge that exactly who they were dancing with would always be subject to a certain amount of plausible deniability.

One wizard in particular was in high demand, which made the sensation of dancing with him all the stranger for Clare Cooper — former prostitute and current second-year student at Madam Goose's Home for the Magically Gifted.

"I feel like an imposter," Clare muttered. She was dressed in by far the most expensive robes and jewellery she'd ever worn. "Everyone's looking at us."

Lord Slytherin danced like he fought, with grace and power. Clare couldn't help feeling a little swept off her feet. "You are doing fine, Clare," he rumbled. "And everyone is staring because you are beautiful."

"They're laughing at me."

"The women are laughing to hide their jealousy and to play down the threat they feel you represent. The men are angry because they think we are sleeping together and are bitter they cannot do the same."

They twirled past a couple of older witches giggling behind a pair of fans.

"My lord? Why aren't you sleeping with me?"

Lord Slytherin didn't say anything.

"I mean," Clare hurriedly continued, "I'm not looking for that. I just wondered. I mean, you could easily — I'm not in any position to resist and—"

"—Clare," Slytherin interrupted. "Please put such matters out of your mind. I am promised twice over and that is all there is to it."

"Oh."

Honour. It wasn't exactly unexpected, but she had to keep reminding herself that the man who now owned her debt wasn't quite like the others.

Lord Slytherin looked over his shoulder before gazing back at her. "Are you looking to put yourself on the market? Because that is possible, but it would require a lot of preparation on your part."

"No!" Clare hastily dropped her voice. "No, I mean, I'm not looking."

"That's probably for the better. I think continuing your education is important. Although I think it might be a good idea to speed it up as well."

Clare's eyes sharpened. "Could I?"

"I believe so. I understand you are doing quite well. Top grades, signs of boredom in class."

"Who tells you these things?"

Lord Slytherin ignored the question. "If you think you can handle it, I'd like to have you start skipping years."

"You can do that?! But the teachers always say I have to exactly follow the curriculum schedule."
"You would if you didn't have someone to vouch for you. A name like Slytherin takes you a long way in this world. Tell me, what do you think of the Shoe's teaching staff?"

Clare wrinkled her nose. "Terrible."

"Why?"

"It's like they don't even care about magic. It's like teaching is just a job. And half of the stuff we learn isn't even about magic, it's all stuff you're not allowed to do, or whose boot you're supposed to lick if you want to do something."

"There are no exceptions?"

Clare thought about it. "I suppose the art and music teachers are okay. Why?"

"Apart from general interest in your education? I'm always looking for people who care about what they do. They tend to acquire my respect more easily. " The music slowed and Slytherin dropped down to a slower waltz. "If you're interested, I'd like you to run some errands for me at your school."

Clare was instantly on her guard. "This is in exchange for letting me skip years?"

"No, I'll help you with that, regardless."

Clare thought about it. "What kind of errands?"

"Running messages, meeting with people about stuff, making friends, being charming and helpful to key individuals, that sort of thing."

"No sex?"

"Not unless you want to."

Clare thought about it some more. "Okay," she eventually said. "I'll do it."

"Wonderful."

They continued to dance and despite herself, Clare couldn't help feeling just a little bit safer about her position in the world. "My lord?"

"Yes, Clare?"

"What about the others like me?"

"Mmm?"

"The other muggleborns who were tricked into being prostitutes. Isn't it possible to save them?"

They danced in silence for a moment. Eventually Slytherin asked, "This is in exchange for your working for me?"

"No, I'll help you with that, regardless."

Slytherin chuckled before returning to solemnity. "Well, it is not easy," he said. "Merely buying their debt would not solve the problem. Not so long as there are more untrained muggleborns out there to fill the supply. If anything, I would effectively become a subsidy for the trade, making
such snatch-and-obliviate operations more profitable."

"Oh," Clare said. She should have guessed it wouldn't be that easy. "But what about the law? You're powerful in the Wizengamot, aren't you?"

Slytherin made a non-committal gesture with his hand before returning it to her waist. "There are many factors to take into account. There are good reasons why I haven't helped pass any laws for years now."

Clare's head dropped. "So, it's impossible."

"I didn't say that."

She looked up.

"I can't promise anything, but it so happens that I may soon be in possession of a rather significant piece of leverage over certain powerful Wizengamot members and their associates. Who knows, maybe immigration reform could be stealthily slipped into an upcoming piece of legislation?"

Clare smiled. Her first genuine smile of the night. Satisfied, and no longer feeling quite so self-conscious, she finished her dance with Lord Slytherin and went to stand with Lady Lovegood, carefully putting out of her mind exactly what kind of 'significant leverage' her lord might be talking about.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Cold! Every extremity in Draco's body felt like it was going to drop off. Even with his heated robes, even with the magic of the gillyweed, even with the multiple warming charms that everyone in their group who had a licence to cast magic over the holidays had applied over them, this was still the North Sea in December, and magical Merlin, it was so damn cold!

Ahead of him, Pansy and Alexandra were leading the way, escorted on either side by the Carrow twins, while behind him, Theo, Greg, and Vincent brought up the rear.

The darkness was near-absolute. It was all he could do to keep an eye on the four girls in front of him.

Eventually, Alexandra waved them to a stop and pointed at the rock to their left.

Draco squinted. There was a cave.

Alexandra waved and started swimming inwards. They were going in.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Just outside the front doors of Slytherin Manor, Bill Weasley gazed around the congregating nobility of Magical Britain with a sharp eye. Slytherin had set up benches around the lighted gravel pathway to allow those tired of dancing or mingling the opportunity to cool off in the Scottish winter air. His eyes fell on Lord Greengrass of the Gray, who held the monopoly on the British mandrake trade, among many other important herbs and foods, and who employed over thirty witches and wizards. Then onto Lord Rumalittle of the Dark, whose house owned the public floo network, and employed over forty. And there was Lord Knight of the Light, who owned the Knight buses, lorries, and half of the Hogwarts Express. He employed over seventy.

Bill Weasley frowned. They may technically all be opponents, but as far as he was concerned,
where it really mattered, they were all on the same side.

"I'm bored," Ginny announced, rubbing her shoulders. "Why don't we go back inside. It's cold out here."

Of the 114 noble houses currently sitting on the Wizengamot, there had to be at least fifty or sixty here tonight. And no doubt Slytherin would have invited the most important of the lot. That meant that standing around him, both outside and back in the ballroom, were the employers of possibly a quarter of the whole magical workforce.

"Bill, why do you want me to stick so close to you, if we're not going to do anything fun?"

And these employers held near-total control of the legislature. They made the laws of Magical Britain. Even before the Gray had put a freeze on new laws being passed, would it shock anyone to learn that the number of pro-labour reforms that had been passed in the last one-hundred years numbered precisely zero?

"Can't we at least go to the duelling arena? I heard some heirs got into an argument and decided to settle it down there. Can we go, huh? Huh?"

Bill snapped. "No, Ginny. You know Dad asked me to keep an eye on you."

"But why can't we go?"

Bill hesitated. He couldn't say the real reason of course. Dumbledore had entrusted him to keep an eye out for Harry Potter, but at least so far, he hadn't spotted the boy even once. This difficulty was compounded both by the masks and the presence of John. "We should stay close to the manor," he said, fishing for an excuse. "Just in case your brothers decide to cause a scene."

Ginny snorted. "Not likely. I know Dad talked to you about their business with Slytherin. They wouldn't risk that for anything."

Bill grimaced. He and his father had had a rather intense argument about that. "I don't believe our family should be going that route," he said. "I've seen what these family-run businesses can be like."

Ginny gave him a funny look. "But, all businesses are family-run, aren't they?"

"Well, yes, but..." He hesitated. How to explain? More importantly, how to explain to his baby sister who had never travelled extensively outside of either the global Wizarding World, or the British one? Just then, he saw a very Harry-Potter-themed individual detach itself from the crowd and slip away into the darkness.

"Ginny," he said in a firm voice, "go back inside and wait for me near the entrance."

"Hypocrite!" Ginny shouted as he strode away. "What happened to sticking with me?"

The darkness quickly became a cloak to shield him from watchful eyes as he moved out of range of the magical lights around the manor. But he wasn't going to rely on that alone. Several charms later, he was disillusioned, scentless, and silenced. He extended his magic sensing out as far as he could to detect whatever magical trip-lines or wards might be up to shield different parts of the island from unwelcome attention.

He tripped none.
Soon, he found his quarry.

The boy was meeting two witches down by a shingle beach overlooking the small island offshore. He crept closer trying to get close enough to overhear what they were talking about. Whatever it was, it could very well be important. The trio kept their voices low, like conspirators, or plotters. He could see that one of them had taken up a large stick and was drawing diagrams in the shingles.

Just then, he realised that he recognised one of the witches.

Virgo Malfoy.

And wasn't that Susan Bones?

Bill Weasley cursed under his breath. This wasn't Harry Potter. This was John Potter.

Annoyed, he turned back. It wasn't as if they were going to have anything important to spy on.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Through the floo they came.

Like a hurricane they bore down.

A horde of crying, hand-wringing, oven-door slamming house elves.

They zoomed past Appleby-in-Westmorland, banked sharply right, zoomed up the east coast, and flew past first Montrose, and then Banchory. They shot like speeding bullets all the way to the coast of Scotland, under the dark North Sea, and finally saw their destination, which they then crashed into, face-first, like a squadron of domestic chickens flying straight into a double-glazed window.

The house elf ward rang like a gong throughout Slytherin Manor.

"Someone get the driver of that bus," one of the house elves groggily said, before collapsing onto the floo pipe floor with a loud thunk. On closer inspection, all the smashed house elves were wearing the Potter crest on their pillowcases.

There was a loud pop sound, and another, rather better-dressed house elf landed just outside the mess of bodies now trying to untangle themselves. Plato smirked. "I'm sorry. Is you having an invitation?"

"We must be speaking with Lord Potter!" squeaked the female leader.

"No, I is being Plato."

"What?"

"What, what? And what ho!" Plato waggled his eyebrows. "Plato is talking just to you then."

The leader stared for a moment before shaking herself. "Lord Potter must be told!"

Plato turned serious. "No outside house elves tonight. Absolutely forbidden. Master's orders."

"Lord Potter must be told!"

Plato sighed. "Well, Plato supposes that if Potter elves wanted to write a note, Plato could deign to
have it delivered."

A few minutes later, Lord Potter opened a note presented to him on a silver platter…

*Harry is gone! _! We is being SORRY!*

…And promptly spat out his drink.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

"A book about your life?!!" Gilderoy Lockhart eagerly leaned forward in his chair. He could hardly believe his ears. Nor his luck. It hadn't been long since he'd been ushered into one of the upstairs side rooms. They'd had some small talk, and then it was down to business. And then this.

Lord Slytherin nodded. "There are many demands on my time. I have a basic outline, but I need a partner well-versed in the subtle art of shaping opinions with the written word. Someone who can weave a compelling narrative and present potentially unpleasant truths as virtues."

Lockhart preened. "Well, that's me alright. What kind of unpleasant truths are we talking about here? Spent one night too many with a pretty witch?" He grinned a roguish grin. "Got into trouble with the law back home?"

"That is for later. After you have signed various non-disclosure agreements and sworn an oath of loyalty. But I do not wish to delay too long. There is a lot of work to do and not much time in which to do it."

Lockhart's face fell. "Ahh, I do have a lot of work on my plate. Being Headmaster… I did not think it was going to be quite so much. I'm not actually sure how I'm going to work such an intensive project into my schedule."

Lord Slytherin stood up from his armchair. "Do not worry. I believe there are some functions of your office which you can delegate."

Lockhart laughed a bitter laugh. "You don't think I haven't tried that? The teachers are far too sharp. They spot that trick every time I try it."

"No, I would not suggest the teachers." Slytherin paused by the window to look down at the milling wizards outside. "I would suggest the students."

"The students?" Lockhart asked, incredulous. "Are you serious?"

"Yes. A student Wardrobe — elected in the same way that the Wizengamot elects government heads of departments to the actual Wardrobe. Hogwarts is the training ground for our future elite, after all. It would be only natural that such a program be set up."

Lockhart's eyes lit up. "Genius! Yes! It's all educational! That could work!" His face fell again. "But setting up such a thing would still take a lot of effort."

"I have also accounted for that." He snapped his fingers. A door which led off to another room to their side opened, a young masked witch entered, and then took off said mask.

"Miss Davis?" Lockhart hesitated. Wasn't she only in the second year?

Tracey Davis curtsied to the both of them.

Slytherin gestured to her. "Tracey here will take care of all the administrative details in setting up
the student Wardrobe — drafting the constitution, overseeing the process, and ruling on any disputes that arise. As an heiress, she is knowledgeable about our laws and already has great experience in working with students of all ages in both her own house and others. All it requires is a blanket executive order from you granting her the relevant authority." Slytherin then produced a parchment from the folds of his robes. "Sign here and she can immediately start work."

Lockhart's hesitation vanished. After all, Lord Davis was well-known to be Gray. Slytherin would never set the heiress of a key ally up to fail. If she got out of her depth, Slytherin would be forced to support her, and, by extension, him. He grinned widely. "A dealmaker after my own heart!" He quickly read over the Gringotts-approved document, and it all seemed to be in order. "There you go." He gave his quill a final flourish on the signature line.

Slytherin nodded, retrieved the document, and handed it to Miss Davis who curtsied again and left without a word. Had that been a smirk on her face?

"I will contact you soon to arrange the details of the book deal," Slytherin said. He turned to go, but came up short by the sound of loud footsteps just outside the door. Moments later, the door burst open and Lord Potter strode in, looking highly agitated.

Draco gazed at the rows of mundane artefacts that lined the cave wall with a mix of curiosity and unease. "What is this?" he asked.

All around him, the other noble children of the Dark strode with equal curiosity along the esoteric and exotic display. They'd swum all the way through the undersea cave to surface into a shabby and dank-looking workshop.

"One of Slytherin's abandoned projects," Alexandra answered easily.

"But, it's all muggle!"

"Astute observation, Malfoy."

"What is Slytherin doing with muggle fake magic?"

"We will see shortly."

"What's this thing?" asked one of the Carrow twins, pointing to a spot on the wall.

"That is a spanner," Alexandra said. "And that is a wrench." She hesitated. "I think. Or maybe it's the other way around. They undo nuts."

"What?" Gregory asked. "You mean, like, almonds? Pistachios?"

"Nuts made of metal."

"That won't taste good."

"They use them instead of sticking charms." She wandered over to a huge object hidden by a large white sheet. "Behold!" She threw back the cover.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "That's a small muggle knight lorry."

"A van, yes. I was told that Slytherin used it when building the manor to smuggle in contraband."
"Clever," Pansy said. "But how? There are no roads to the island."

"It goes underwater."

"Surely the muggles can't drive underwater."

"I think they can... but certainly not in this. *This* is part magic." She threw open the back doors.

Draco recoiled. "But! Combining muggle and magic artefacts is against the law!"

Pansy stuck her head in the van and whistled. "That's a *lot* of runes."

Theo narrowed his eyes. "We could turn information about this place over to the ministry."

"Sure we could," Alex said, jumping up and settling down in a chair behind a bunch of metal boxes. "Just so long as we'd be okay with the ministry having a precedent to raid our houses for all the illegal dark artefacts we keep."

Draco winced.

Alex looked over the top of the metal box. "Theo. You're not magically weak. Show us your best *aguamenti*."

A fine stream of water poured from the end of Theo's wand.

"Now Pansy, come here and channel your magic alternatively into these two boxes."

Pansy joined Alex, sat down next to her, and moments later, a torrent of high-pressure water shot from a metal nozzle attached to the boxes. In terms of impressiveness, there was no contest. The difference between Pansy's and Theo's efforts were like the difference between a leaky tap and a broken dam.

The water sloshed around Draco's feet as he looked on in growing horror. The implications were clear.

"See the difference?" Alex asked.

"What the hell was that?!" one of the Carrow twins shouted.

"That is what happens when you mix magic and muggle."

Vincent grunted. "Why's Slytherin leave this here, then? This is a powerful artefact."

Alex laughed. "Because this is just a mere prototype. There's no way we could get into the actual workshop where they're working on the real deal. Slytherin is using muggle tools to build magical artefacts that outstrip anything our ancestors created. We are talking Merlin levels of powerful."

Draco finally found his voice. "If we tell our parents—"

But Alexandra cut him off. "Our parents *know*! Slytherin has been bidding for an arms contract with MaCUSA for months. All the export parchment has been filed with the ministry. All your parents will know about it. And they do nothing! Slytherin is a rising power. And none of our houses can stop it. Slytherin is not like the Light. If we do nothing, we will soon find ourselves marginalised and stripped. That is what I'm going to stop. I am going to make sure that our families are not on the losing side..."
Pansy’s eyes widened.

"...That is why I want you to pledge yourselves to me tonight."

Draco Malfoy had been raised many things — intelligent, politically astute, cunning, and many other variants on Machiavellian adjectives. Unfortunately, for this situation, these were combined with a confidence so solid you could build a second Azkaban on top of it. Which is why when Pansy then turned to him and frantically waggled her eyebrows, he simply nodded back.

Obviously, he’d analysed the situation, calculated all possible angles, and arrived at the best possible path forward, both for himself, and for his allies. Draco thought about it for a few more moments before his eyes firmed. "If you believe you can do that, then it is a worthy cause to fight for. I have seen what you are capable of, Alexandra. The House of Malfoy will not fall."

"Same for the House of Goyle."

"And Crabbe."

"And Nott."

The Carrow twins stood behind Alex, smirking.

Alexandra smiled lightly. "Then step this way and swear your service to me for the rest of your days at Hogwarts."

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Three wizards stared at each other, one panting hard.

"Ah." Lockhart gazed at the irate, unmasked Lord Potter. "Perhaps I should excuse myself." He got up and quickly left, shutting the door behind him with a click, leaving the two powerful wizards facing each other, face to mask.

Lord Potter looked Slytherin right in the eyehole. "My wife has just left to return to Potter Manor."

"Oh, dear. I hope nothing is wrong."

Lord Potter scowled. "Harry is missing."

"I was wondering why I didn't see him here."

"No, not missing like that. He was at Potter Manor when we left."

"Oh, my. I do hope he's not in any trouble."

"Don't give me that! What are your designs on my house? Only someone of great power could have made Harry the Potter heir."

"Is Harry Potter your heir now? How interesting."

"Don't pretend you didn't know!"

"I really can't say that I did."

"Rubbish! Stay away from my son."
There was a shift in the feeling of the air.

"Your son." The words from Slytherin's mouth carried a cold tone. "What right do you have to call Harry your son? You who shunned him through his childhood. What right do you have?"

"Silence! You have no idea what you are talking about. And you have no right to interfere either way. Harry is a son of House Potter. He is not your son!"

"I agree."

Lord Potter glared. "What?"

"I agree that he is not my son. But that does not mean I will not continue to do as I please. So long as Harry wishes it, I will continue to shelter and guide him. Just like your parents did for our Lord Black."

Lord Potter stiffened. This was Lupin. It had to be.

The two wizards stood in silence.

"Your ring," said Lord Potter.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your ring. Show me your ring. I want to know that you actually are Lord Slytherin."

Slytherin shrugged and flashed the ring which marked him as such.

Lord Potter carefully inspected it. Yes, it was genuine, alright. Of course it had to be for him to have his seat on the Wizengamot. But even Lupin's powers didn't automatically explain how he could have acquired it. But more importantly than that, Slytherin had all but admitted that he was behind Harry's new heir status. All those Gray children at Hogwarts — Daphne Greengrass, Tracy Davis, the muggleborn girl, and all the others. So long as Harry continued to mix with them, there was no way that he and Lily would be able to maintain the kind of control possibly required by the prophecy.

"Harry Potter will not return to Hogwarts," he whispered.

"Mmm?" Slytherin rubbed one of his fingers as though checking for a ring that wasn't there.

Lord Potter drew himself up taller. "Harry Potter will not return to Hogwarts," he said, louder. "If you will not keep your nose out of my family's affairs, then I have no choice but to withdraw him —"

"Ooo, look at the time, gotta dash."

"—and see to his—"

Lord Slytherin apparated away.

"—education elsewhere…"

Of the many traditions that muggleborns find confusing when they first enter the Wizarding World, none are perhaps so misunderstood as the oath.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —
Not the unbreakable oath, of which only one at a time can be active per person, and which has such a sordid and tragic past that most wizards will refuse to ever swear one. Nor the legalistic magically-enforced contracts of Gringotts, of which muggleborns find themselves perfectly comfortable with, coming as they do from a largely legalistic culture themselves.

No, it is the honour oath that most confuses those new to the Wizarding World.

'Why not just renege on it?' they ask. 'What this guy asked you to swear to is obviously unreasonable. You were under duress. It's not in your best interests anymore. It's not as though it's against the law? It's just a verbal contract. Not worth the paper it's printed on… quilled on… you know what I mean.'

Such questions are not entirely without merit.

Since the introduction of Gringotts magical contracts, the conceptual need for honour oaths has decreased markedly. Most business deals are done through the new medium, and internal family disputes are still often handled through the personal law of the Albion Family Magics. Honour oaths are the purview of the nobility, the Dark, and the traditional, taken very seriously, and used in an ever-shrinking range of circumstances across society — the oath an obliviator takes when they first receive their badge — the oath a member of the Wizengamot takes when they first take their seat — the oaths a wizard and witch swear to each other when they are bonded together in marriage.

And of course, there's the tradition of Hogwarts students pledging themselves to a charismatic leader for the duration of their education.

Down in the tiny sea cave, Draco watched the last of their number swear their allegiance to Alexandra Black. His own oath had been basic but meaningful. He was now a follower of this girl. He would serve her interests, keep her secrets, and if necessary, fight by her side against her enemies. His voice had been calm and firm.

This had been in contrast to Pansy whose voice had wavered like a young whomping willow in a stiff breeze, occasionally shooting him nervous looks as if to say, 'Is this really okay? Are you really sure about this? I'm not sure about this.'

He'd nodded back.

It was worth the cost. Alexandra Black was powerful. Not counting his sister, she was the only chance his generation of the Dark had to stand up to the juggernauts of the Light and the Gray in a straight-up magical fight.

In the light of their lit wands, Gregory Goyle stood up and bowed. "My lady," he intoned.

Alexandra nodded back. She waved him away before stepping up onto a random box lying around. She stared down at them all imperiously.

Draco licked his lips.

"Now that you have all sworn," Alexandra began. "I shall instruct you in our program from here on. I know that you feel that I shall be your weapon against your enemies, but I will not stand to protect weaklings who cannot fight for themselves. Theo, I know you already practise duelling and that is good. From now on, all of you shall work duelling into your education."

The Carrow twins cheered. Everyone else present all nodded firmly, except Pansy who nervously looked around before quickly nodding as well.
"I also expect all of you to excel in your educations. All of you should be in the top twenty — no exceptions."

Vincent and Greg groaned.

"Next, we know full well that our bodies are vessels for our magic — the stronger our bodies, the stronger our magics. Therefore, from now on, we will start every day with power exercise around the Black Lake."

Everyone groaned at that.

"Wait," Theo said, "we don't have the time for all this. We already have loads of stuff to do."

"Au contraire," Alex retorted. "We have plenty of time. We spend ages every day in the common room, just sitting around. We shall use some of that time."

Draco frowned. "We have to maintain our station in the common room. If we don't, the Gray will look more important."

Strangely, those words caused Pansy to shoot him a look of pure dread. He saw sweat beading on her forehead.

Alex smiled. "Do not worry about that. Now that I am your leader, it is not as important as before."

"Are we going to know who your spy in the Gray is?" Vincent asked. "We've sworn to you now."

Alexandra nodded. "You will. I already sent them a message a little while ago. They will be here soon."

Draco noted the lack of specific pronoun. His mind whirled through all the possible candidates. It would probably be someone their age and there weren't that many of them at the party. It couldn't be Greengrass or Lovegood. Davis was highly unlikely. He hadn't even seen Harry yet. It wasn't impossible for it to be Granger, but somehow he doubted it. But who did that leave?

Just then, the water started to ripple.

There was a massive splash and something burst out from the surface. It took Draco a split-second to realise it was a witch on a broomstick. Long red hair flashed in the wandlight. What happened next happened so fast it was almost impossible to process. Alex flung a stunner at the newcomer with unbelievable speed, which was swatted away equally quickly. The witch threw herself from her broomstick, still in mid-air, rolled, swatted away two more spells from Alexandra, and stood up, right in front of her, both witches snapping their wands against each other's necks.

It was Ginny.

"Magical Merlin," Theo whispered.

Draco's eyes widened. "Weaslette! You're the spy?"

Ginevra Weasley just flashed him a grin.

Draco's mind went back into overdrive. If Weasley was the spy, this was brilliant! He didn't want to admit it, but the girl was also a fearsome power. Everyone knew about the way she'd handled Snape during Defence Against the Dark Arts, and his father had told him there were whispers she would be given special permission to play professionally even while a junior. The position of the
Dark was looking better and better by the second.

But for some reason, Ginny’s entrance hadn't reassured Pansy. If anything, it only seemed to make things worse. Her face was white and her body was curling in on itself as though trying to invent apparition.

"Ginny is not my contact in the Gray," Alex said.

Pansy whimpered.

Draco frowned. "Then who?"

A deep voice from a corner of the cave said, "Me."

Draco froze. That voice. Even as it rattled around in his skull, he felt a chill go down his spine. No.

A tall figure stepped out of the shadows. It was richly robed and masked, just like everyone at the party had been, but Draco instinctively knew that this was no body double.

Lord Slytherin.

He whirled his head around to gaze at a distraught-looking Pansy. "I thought you'd realised already," she mouthed to him. Her body seemed to curl in on itself. "I did."

Lord Slytherin stepped forward. "I must apologise for this, Heir Malfoy," he said. "I was originally intending to keep my involvement in this whole affair clandestine for quite a while longer, but events are transpiring against me. I decided this would be better as a bandage ripped off cleanly right at the start."

"I—I don't..."

Alexandra and Ginny both curtsied to the Gray Lord as he walked towards them all.

Slowly, a shaking Pansy followed suit, followed quickly by the Carrow twins.

Theo, Gregory and Vincent looked just as pole-axed as he felt. They'd just pledged their service to a witch who was a Gray spy. Their ace in the hand had turned out to be a joker.

"If it is any comfort, I will not force you to bow to me."


Three sets of knees hit the rock floor of the cave.

Draco stared eye to eye with his cousin. He'd never considered it possible. She was too easy. Too naive. Too obvious. But that wasn't what he saw in those eyes now. Now he saw cold as hard and dark as beads.

Slowly, he too, knelt.

Slytherin clucked his tongue. "Enough. I'm sure you've all realised the implications of what has happened here. I shall not treat you unkindly. And I shall ensure that Alex does likewise. If anything, I hope you end up benefiting from this. I believe she will make a good mistress, if a tiring one."

"Our families..." Pansy said in a shaky voice.
"Please tell them all that has happened here. Except Ginny's involvement. Leave that bit out." He stopped in front of the redhead. "I was not expecting to see you here."

The Weaslette flashed Lord Slytherin an impish smile. "Just wanted to see if I could beat you here."

Draco wasn't sure he could feel any lower. Was every powerful wizard their age secretly a member of the Gray? Was John Potter? Was his sister?

"Draco," Lord Slytherin said, jerking him from his thoughts. "Walk with me."

There wasn't far to go into the cave, but they were soon reasonably alone. Draco's palms were sweating.

"I have plans for Magical Britain, Draco."

Draco said nothing.

"Many of the old ways are under threat. The future will need powerful wizards of strength and influence. It will need those who understand the importance of family and who value the traditions that have been built up over many millennia."

"So are you going to throw out all the muggleborns?" someone said. Draco realised it was him. All the repressed anger and frustration was bubbling up, all at once, and he seemed powerless to stop it.

"No," Slytherin said, simply.

"Then you're just another Light wizard!" Draco shouted. "If you won't do something about the muggleborns, then you're a blood traitor, just like the rest!" Draco's heart was pounding. "I know you love muggleborns. You have Granger! You invited the Weasleys! Everyone knows they're Light through and through."

Momentarily spent, he took a deep breath and waited tentatively for the reaction.

Slytherin nodded. "I can see future discussions with you are going to be interesting." He glanced behind them.

Draco followed the mask's eyes to see Alexandra ordering what had so recently been the proud Dark leadership at Hogwarts about what they were going to be doing for the rest of the party.

"Do give my regards to your father," Slytherin said. "I expect this is the kind of thing he'd want to know about as soon as possible."

There was a crack and Lord Slytherin was gone.

That feeling of dread swiftly returned. His father was going to go full Dark Lord.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And the trap snaps shut! Buahaha.

We're already halfway through writing the next chapter and will start live editing on
stream just as soon as that's ready.

As always, if you enjoy my work, please consider checking out my original projects. All support is appreciated. You can find the links through my website [www * leadvone * com].

A/N: This chapter was drafted and made available early through the LeadVonE discord server, as will the next one. If you fancy discussing this chapter with like-minded people, or anything else DP&SW, feel free to head over there.

A special thank you to the following people for helping catch mistakes on #dpasw-editorial and during the editing live streams: acidicballsweat, Antosha, Arya, ASK, CaptainFlowers (Audio Slave), ChucktheElf, derantx, Dragonbait, drakekiler123, EmergencyAusstieg, FartyArtyPartyPooper, feauxen, Fuuryuu, Gloweye, Hans C, Hawks1129, HylianGhost, Leyrann, Lunatico, MageKing17, Malin, OrigamiGuy2, Ravana, Sauce_salt, sfu, Super Big Mac, Squishysib, themightiestwaffle, Tendra, and TrendyTreky.

A/N: Conversion rate is:

1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds

1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)

1 Knut to 10p (roughly)

All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2019's prices.
Movers and Shakers — Part 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Through the floor came sounds of dancing. Through the floor came sounds of merry-making. Through the floor came the occasional sounds of a very embarrassed witch or wizard — one who just realised that the charming masked man or woman that they'd just shared an intimate dance with, was, in fact, their wife or husband's sworn mortal enemy.

Up here, in the private quarters of Slytherin Manor, the muffled sounds of the party below filtered through several layers of wood and carpets, to reach the ears of Daphne and Harry, sitting side-by-side on one of the large sofas, going through large collections of parchment notes on the low table in front of them.

"So much left to do," Daphne said. "And I'm already tired. I do hope Astoria isn't embarrassing me down there."

Footsteps from down the hall caused them both to look up.

"My lord?" Luna poked her head around the corner. She had another stack of parchments under her arm. "Would now be a good time, my lord?"

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Outside Slytherin Manor, torch-lit under an ink-black sky, Draco sat on one of the many grassy benches of the duelling arena with his hands under his chin, staring blankly upon the circle of sand below. Down there, his new mistress was going toe-to-toe with a wizard eight years her senior. Black was holding her own, swatting and dodging, shielding when needed and casting out nasty-looking hexes and curses when the opportunities presented themselves.

It was unbelievably impressive, but, Draco noted glumly, it was nowhere near as impressive as taking on the whole Slytherin common room single-handed.

How had he believed, even for a minute, that was possible?

What had been the trick? Had it even been Black? An illusion? Polyjuice? Had there been help? Had her opposition been infiltrated with sleeper agents? Traitors? Informants? Or had the illusion been woven on the fight itself?

It was Harry and John Potter's fault, that was it.

After they'd completely dismantled the duelling tournament last year, he'd come to see that kind of overwhelming power as normal.

Of course it wasn't.

Everything about Slytherin's protégés was ridiculous. Even Weaslette was on their side. Only John and Virgo weren't... probably.

He shook his head.

No, he couldn't start thinking like that. His father had Virgo under control, certainly.
At least the pledge he'd made to Black didn't endanger his family secrets. That was a small blessing.

Down in the arena, Alexandra released her Black chains. They shot towards the shocked-looking duellist and cracked his wand clean out of his hand with a snap that sounded all around the island. Her opponent let out a cry of pain and dropped to his knees.

All around Draco, a mix of indignation and applause emanated from a dozen-ish other spectators.

Red sparks shot into the air. "Disqualified!" called out Lord Slughorn. "No family magics in Standard Class A."

"WHAT?!" Black shouted. "Potter used his at Hogwarts!"

"This is not Hogwarts, young lady. Hogwarts uses a different variation."

Draco turned his eyes skyward as the argument escalated. Weasley was up there, somewhere, happily zipping around on a broomstick that she'd found Merlin knew where. One of her hundreds of older brothers had stood around shouting at her to come down for about ten minutes before giving up and going back inside.

At least he didn't have to deal with that kind of nonsense. Draco shuddered. No, he just had to deal with telling his father how badly he'd messed up.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Back up in the residences, Daphne was sat to one side, taking notes while Luna spoke with Harry. When Luna had said she had some ideas on how they should position the Gray, Daphne had expected many things, but this hadn't been one of them.

Harry sighed. "It would be nice if my future knowledge extended further. Even if it's very poor at predicting specific events—except under very special circumstances, like Mount Vesuvius or the Azkaban Earthquake—it's still invaluable for seeing the shape of what might come. How the wizarding world enforces the International Statute of Secrecy was always going to be a massive issue — but I've no idea how different policies might play out." He looked at Luna, sitting across the table.

"I believe we need to be proactive, my lord," Luna said. "Even if we were to have an evacuation plan, like Hermione is playing with, we will still need to have the ISS until that is possible. And such an evacuation plan may not be possible, even just for us, for many decades."

"And you do not believe full integration is an option?"

Luna tilted her head. "We have hundreds of years of separate culture. We are everything muggles fear. We are secret. We live among them. We are powerful. We do as we will. We are answerable to none but ourselves. To muggles, our most powerful could commit the most heinous of crimes with impunity, while our weakest could be easily stopped by a simple bullet to the head."

"And this," Harry flipped through the large document Luna had brought with her. "This is your solution."

Luna nodded. "The ICW obliviators are the most effective, most efficient organisation in the wizarding world. Their reach is global. They operate within each country, nominally under the jurisdiction of each ministry, but in reality separate. They have to. Even one incompetent ministry in some war-torn part of the world could easily blow the secret. But the ICW is not a world
government. It is an organisation that operates with the collective will of its members. But even if many scorn the ICW, no one scorns the obliviators. They are the guardians of the wizarding world. Only the aurors are held in greater esteem. And everyone is always so focused on their own problems. Sometimes, they just do not get it. You know that from your talks with Dumbledore. If we position ourselves as the obliviators' best friends… if we help them with the problems our world is going to face in the future…"

Harry flipped through the document. "I see you've put a lot of thought into this."

"Mum and Dad helped a lot."

Daphne was reading one of the pages she'd plucked from the pile, fascinated. "Can we really petition the ICW to found our own obliviator squad?"

"There would have to be a good reason, but yes."

Harry leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling for a good few moments before looking back down between her and Luna. "Well, I can't see any massive problems with playing with this as an idea. We have plenty of irons in the fire. I'm sure I can dream up some way to get that permission."

Luna smiled. "I know you can, my lord."

"But in the meantime, I've got a bunch of other lords to woo. Daphne?"

Daphne reached into her pocket and drank several potions in quick succession before standing up as Lord Slytherin. "Yes, Harry," she said, even as her voice changed. "Let's go."

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Down on the arena grassy benches, Pansy Parkinson nervously wrung her hands. "I'm so sorry, Draco. I thought you'd figured it out, too. I mean, Black was being awfully obvious. She said that Slytherin was a rising power. She said that none of our families could stop it. She said that she was going to make sure that we weren't on the losing side!"

"It was rather obvious, in retrospect," Nott grumbled.

Draco sat with his head in his hands, watching two other lords loudly going at it in the sand below through the slits in his fingers. Torchlight flickered across the arena.

"It doesn't have to be so bad," Pansy said, sounding for all the world like the person she was most trying to convince was herself. "It's just for school. We'll be free before we know it. How much does this change, really? What if we'd known Black was Gray from the start? We'd still be faced with Potter and Greengrass and Granger and Weasley and Black. At least this way we do get to be on the winning side while at Hogwarts."

"Speak for yourself," Draco muttered. "It might not be so bad for you. Your family was neutral for ages. You're massively in with Slytherin already."

"Yeah," Nott said. "Your dad said he built all this." He swept his hand around the arena. "And he did the house elves for the manor. That can't have been cheap."

Pansy nervously rubbed an arm. "But that doesn't have to change anything, Draco. I mean, if you ever need help—"

"I don't need—!" Draco snapped, then instantly regretted it.
Pansy stepped backwards.

"Look," Draco said in a softer tone. "Right now, I just need to be alone. I'm going to go talk to father soon, and the last thing I need is a pity party."

Pansy nodded.

Draco stood and walked towards the arena exit, hardly looking where he was going.

Maybe he could find someone willing to give a teenager a glass of firewhisky. Liquid courage layered over occlumency might just help him over the four-dozen doxies playing merry-weather in his stomach.

His mood was not helped by almost walking into two figures leading a small party into the arena as he left.

Lord Slytherin and Harry Potter.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Lord Tempest watched, amused, as the boy who'd almost walked into Lord Slytherin muttered an apology and sulked off.

"That was Malfy's squirt, wasn't it?" asked Lord Smith.

"Probably," Tempest replied. He couldn't help but admire the duelling arena they were being led into, even if the circumstances in which they were being led here could charitably be called mysterious. He wasn't worried. He, Lord Smith, and Lady Pinkerton had all been top duellers back in the day. Nevertheless, the feeling of fresh sand under his feet stirred old memories in his blood. His wand hand itched and a breeze blew through the air, otherwise protected from the fierce winds around the Orkneys.

"Well, Lord Slytherin?" Lady Pinkerton asked with a wrinkle of her rather long nose. She was one of the few guests who had elected to wear her muggle Christmas robes again after the Potter's Party. "Why all the secrecy? Why did you call us specifically, here?"

"Yes, why?" Smith echoed.

Slytherin gestured to the boy at his side. "I said I would give you a chance to meet Harry, and here it is."

Tempest snorted. "I don't believe for one moment you brought us to the duelling arena just for that."

"No. " Slytherin put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "I wanted to bring you three into my confidence. Harry here has been training under me for many years and I intend, one day, for him to take over from me as leader of the Gray."

Lord Tempest felt his blood stir again. "Oh, really?"

"Yes."

"Why?" asked Lady Pinkerton. "I know he can fight—we all saw his duels last year—but it takes more than that to do your job."

"Harry," said Lord Slytherin, "show them."
Harry Potter, who had been silent this whole time, smirked. He rose his hand and a ring appeared on his finger. "I am Heir Potter."

Lord Tempest's eyes went wide.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Back up at the manor, James Potter's eyes went wide. "Lily!" he hissed, desperately motioning for his wife to lean her head close to his. "I just felt it. Harry broke a family secret. He just told someone he is the heir!"

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

"How?" Smith asked, clearly nonplussed.

"The how, I cannot say," young Harry replied. "All that matters is the fact."

Lady Pinkerton narrowed her eyes at Slytherin. "You are playing a dangerous game, my lord. Messing with the line of succession of the Albion Family Magics rarely ends well for the meddler."

"I assure you, my lady, I know exactly the game I am playing."

"It certainly will be a coup if it works," Smith said, hefting his massive war hammer over his shoulder. "A good few of the noble Light are reliant on House Potter for their businesses. It wouldn't give us the majority by any stretch, but it would still be substantial. Was that a family secret?"

"Yes."

Lord Tempest could feel the wind flowing through his blood.

"Ballsy," Smith continued. "But it's all rather academic. That succession won't happen for decades — possibly as long as a century. Lord Potter is young and arrogant. He is not the kind of man to hand over his Lordship to the younger generation, and certainly not if his son has turned to a major political opponent."

Lord Tempest wasn't listening. His eyes were locked with the Potter boy's — unflinching, cold, calculating. He could feel himself being analysed for any kind of weakness those eyes could find — and those eyes could evidently see plenty. It had been a long time since he'd felt a gaze like that.

He broke eye contact.

"You want us to give our blessing to this boy." He looked up to stare into Lord Slytherin's mask. "Like some kind of king of old, calling his lords to swear allegiance to his bastard son. You want us to crown a prince — a child of whom we know nothing of except that he is strong."

Tempest felt the wind in his blood scream into a full-on gale. His wand slipped into his hand. "Lord Slytherin!" he called out. "If you wish us to recognise this child on strength alone, THEN HE HAD BETTER BE STRONGER THAN MERLIN!"

And the arena was engulfed in a blinding sandstorm.

Lord Tempest would always remember the following fight.

It was as if he, Lord Smith, and Lady Pinkerton had instinctively understood the rules of engagement. The three of them versus the child. As ridiculous as it sounded. If this Potter couldn't
hack it, then tough beans. It would be Slytherin's mistake for bringing all three of them to the arena. Hard luck for the boy. Squashed like a bug and humiliated by his elders and betters.

But, those eyes.

Lord Tempest had seen eyes like those before.

Eyes hardened by war and a lifetime of suffering.

All three of them were duelling enthusiasts.

All three of them had studied the outlier phenoms that were Harry and John Potter, along with every duellist worth their salt across the whole Wizarding World.

There was no doubt that Harry Potter would put up a good fight.

What he had not expected was power as strong as any opponent he’d ever faced, flames that burned away Pinkerton's razor flower magic, shields that withstood direct lightning strikes from Smith's hammer, and a magic sensing ability so fine, that, even through the winds of power swirling around Tempest's body, the boy was still able to guide spells through the maelstrom.

The fight lasted barely a minute.

"I hope that was instructive," Lord Slytherin said, walking back across the arena.

Tempest groaned, lying on the ground, head ringing like a struck bell.

Lord Smith was unconscious.

Lady Pinkerton looked up from where she knelt on her hands and knees. "I hope the boy is good for more than just violence."

Lord Slytherin's reply sounded amused. "Of course. Much, much more."

"My lord!" The Davis heiress waved at him from the entrance. "Lady Potter is on her way."

Slytherin and Potter exchanged a look, and before Tempest's eyes, Harry Potter faded almost perfectly into the background.

— DP&SW: NRIcAD —

Up near the manor's large front doors, Draco sat on one of the many provided benches, gloomily watching the many grown-ups enjoying a rest from the dancing inside, and trying to ignore the two witches sitting on either side of him who, it seemed, also knew of his plight.

"Don't worry, Malfoy," chirped Daphne Greengrass, sitting on his left. "It could be worse."

Word among the Gray spread fast, apparently.

"Indeed," added Granger, sitting on his right. "You should look at this as an opportunity. Our lord is one of the most knowledgeable and brilliant wizards of the age. There is much you could learn, if you put aside pride and embrace his guidance."

"That's easy for a mudblood to say," Draco muttered. "You do best by taking whatever you can get."
"The best I can get with Lord Slytherin is the best there is."

"And besides," Greengrass happily added, "I bet your dad won't mind too much if it means getting closer to the Gray. Isn't that what he wanted to begin with?"

"Not if he's doing the same with Weasley."

Greengrass pouted. "Now you're just being a sad and boring boy. We're at a party! Why don't you go find a girl to dance with?"

He couldn't put it off much longer. He was going to have to tell his father soon and it was already getting late.

Draco slowly turned his head and studied the creepily cute expression on Daphne's face. Something about it just wasn't right, and with all the subterfuge going on... "Are you sure that's you, Greengrass?"

Greengrass grinned. "Of course, look!" She showed the heiress ring on her finger.

Draco groaned and put his head in his hands again. As if things weren't bad enough, being around Slytherin was making him paranoid.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Inside Harry's shrunk trunk, inside Harry's pocket, Daphne sat in the plush armchair, wearing only a bathrobe, both eyes closed.

Harry's dress robes lay strewn on the sofa opposite her.

Daphne focused her divination magic and opened a third eye.

The great and majestic view up someone's nostrils came into view. Flinching, Daphne pulled back and angled her magic eyeball to take in the more acceptable view of the Slytherin ballroom.

"I do hope you can see the problems we face, Slytherin," said the owner of the nostrils. It was Lord Malfoy.

"I see many problems," Harry replied. The two wizards were standing by one of the side doors of the ballroom, deep in conversation. She and Harry had taken flight from the duelling arena sharpish before Lady Potter had arrived, fully intending to briefly drop in to make a quick show of presence before grabbing another pair of lords of the Gray to woo.

That had not happened and she was now very glad Harry had decided to do these rounds in person, rather than rely on her.

Lord Malfoy's expression barely showed his annoyance... but it did still show it. "What is it you want, Slytherin?" he asked. "You're obviously angling for certain clauses on the Muggle Protection Act. What are they? I can't work with you if you won't tell us. I'm sure that whatever they are, you're more likely to get them from us than the Light." The faint hint of annoyance left his face. "I fundamentally believe you and I are more similar than not. Come now, what do you want?"

Daphne sent her eyeball through the wall to check for listeners on the other side before returning to listen in to the conversation.

"Well..." Lord Slytherin started. "I suppose there are one or two things..." He tapped his mask
where his chin would be before starting to count on his fingers. "An allowance that muggleborns
be allowed to keep banned muggle artefacts on registration when they reach maturity — the
inclusion of magical guardians into family law — a monopoly granted to the House of Granger for
macro broomstick manufacture — new rules requiring a sixty-day cooling-off period for muggle
and half-blood immigration services and for the customer to be visited by a member of the DMLE
to ensure they understand what they are signing and to check for magical compulsions — new
regulations for obliviators on secondment to the ministry, requiring them to get signed permission
from the DMLE before muggleborn parents can have their minds altered — a reconfirmation of the
rights of ancient families to properties held in long-term abeyance — an exception on currency
controls for allowable goods sold in the muggle world…"

Daphne watched Lord Malfoy's eyes get progressively larger and larger.

"…And finally, an extension of the printing licence granted to the Noble House of Lovegood for a
daily three-page broadsheet edition of the Quibbler focused on muggleborn education and news."

It took a moment for Malfoy to find his voice. "Absolutely not," he eventually said firmly. "It is
impossible. Yes, some of those things are reasonable, but the others? You want to grant a
muggleborn a family monopoly?! Those have always been for nobles and purebloods only. Even if
it was warranted, the precedent alone would be horrific."

Lord Slytherin nodded. "There is one last thing."

"What?"

Lord Slytherin looked around the ballroom. The energy was starting to wind down now. More
waltz and less foxtrot. "A small matter of historical housekeeping," he said. "A significant financial
settlement from the ministry to all victims of the last war — paid for, in part, by public-spirited
citizens. Along with a formal amnesty granted to all non-convicted members of the paramilitary
wing of the Dark, unofficially known as the Death Eaters."

Lord Malfoy fell silent. His expression turned guarded. "The Dark long ago disavowed our
involvement with that group."

Lord Slytherin shrugged. "Nevertheless…"

"…Nevertheless, healing the wounds of the past is important." Malfoy fell silent again. "But no,"
he eventually said. "It is still too much. The Dark could never accept all these additions. Perhaps
we could talk about individual laws, but as a package? I'm sorry, Lord Slytherin, but you are going
to have to do better than that."

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

A few moments earlier…

Draco had finally plucked up the courage to go tell his father the news. It hadn't been difficult
finding him. But unfortunately, Lord Malfoy was deep in discussion with the very cause of his
problem. There was no way he was going to just walk up to them both and stand waiting like an
idiot. Besides, what if his father asked him to explain himself in front of Slytherin? There was no
way he could go through with that.

So instead, Draco exited the ballroom through one of the side doors and looped around the long
circular corridor to the doorway his father and Slytherin were talking behind.

"I fundamentally believe you and I are more similar than not," his father said. For whatever reason,
Draco could hear his voice through the door! "Come now, what do you want?"

"Well..." Lord Slytherin started.

Draco then listened in mounting horror as Slytherin laid down demand after demand. He was going to be used. He was going to be used as a political hostage against his father.

I'm sorry, Lord Slytherin," his father concluded at the end of the exchange "but you are going to have to do better than that."

Draco wasn't good at magic sensing. Few wizards were. If he was, he might have felt the presence of a magical eyeball slipping through the wall, watching his retreat back the way he came, fist jammed in his mouth, tears in his eyes, doing his best not to hyperventilate.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Draco wasn't the only one making haste through Slytherin Manor. While Lord Slytherin bid his farewell to Lord Malfoy, and Daphne prepared for their next session with the lords of the Gray, Lord Potter was on the warpath, showing much of the normal condition for armies on the warpath when they can't find their opponent... eye-watering frustration.

One circle of Slytherin Manor. Two. Three. He checked the grounds and asked anyone whom he vaguely trusted if they'd seen Harry. Most annoyingly, many of them had.

"Why can't I find him?!"

He burst out of the upstairs washroom after his fourth circle of those areas of the manor open to guests. "I swear I've looked everywhere. Lily!"

Lady Potter was advancing towards him up the corridor. "I can't find him either. I know he was here. Tempest all but admitted Harry was fighting them in the duelling arena before I arrived."

James ran a hand through his hair. "This is getting out of hand. We can't let him—" Another pulse of family magic shot through him. "He just told someone else!"

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

"Mmmm, very nice." Lord Smith carefully inspected the unquestionably expert-level alchemy that young Harry Potter had produced for them in one of the locked antechambers off the main ballroom.

Lord Woodcroft nodded. "And he's, what? Twelve?"

"I'd expect this level of quality from a journeyman alchemist at least," Lady Woodcroft added in a voice of mild awe. She had an eye pressed right up to one side of the large glass statue Harry had formed out of sand in the middle of the room. Unlike the wandless parlour-trick glass statues the boy was in the habit of impressing other people with, this statue contained an unbelievable level of alchemical skill and insight. The glass reflected and refracted light as it passed through, highlighting individual runes that had been formed on the inside in wonderful spiral patterns.

Lord Head burst into laughter, again. "I still can't get over him being the Potter heir. The boy-who-lived must be pitching a fit."

Off to one side stood Daphne Greengrass, currently Lord Slytherin. She had a fatherly hand on Harry's shoulder and felt extremely weird about it. "I plan for Harry to one day take my place as
leader of the Gray," she said.

Lady Hailbob raised an eyebrow. "You are playing a dangerous game, Lord Slytherin. The family magics do not respond well to attempts to subvert their will."

"Maybe. But that game is mine to play."

Lord Hailbob chuckled. "This is why I like you. What other craft talents does the boy have?"

"Harry?" Daphne said.

Harry smiled a small smile. "I am proficient in rune-cluster exploration, spell exploration, arithmancy, arithmetical occlumency, alchemy, permanent charms, potion discovery, ritual negotiation, Latin, Ancient Greek, Nordic, and Coptic."

All eyes in the room turned to stare at him.

"Merlin," Woodcroft whispered.

Lord Head laughed, again. "Literally."


Harry gave an apologetic smile. "I'm currently working on a pottery project, but apart from that, I'm afraid not. I've always had more talent for high-level magic, than low-level. I prefer to leave complex manufacturing to others."

There was a sudden loud banging on the door. "Harry?! Are you in there!? We're leaving now! I demand you open this door!"

Daphne turned to Harry and extended her arm. Harry took it. No one noticed that it was the boy who apparated out Lord Slytherin.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Draco stared out at the sea of endless blackness. Sitting on the pebbles was uncomfortable, but right now, he couldn't care less. He picked up a pebble and carelessly tossed it into the surf. It went plonk.

Azkaban was out there, not too far away.

How far could a dementor's aura reach? He fancied he could feel the happiness-sucking demons' power through the veil of night. The darkness was like a curtain and those bony hands could just reach straight through it and devour him whole. Maybe it would be better if they did?

Draco Malfoy had never encountered the idea of broody teenage melodrama, but innovation has a habit of developing along the cutting edge of the adjacent possible, and right now, Draco Malfoy was so cutting edge that had he tried to, say, don tight leather pants, they'd have pre-shredded themselves just to save the universe the trouble.

"Oh, what a beautiful nighttime~" sang a girl's voice. "Oh, what a beautiful dusk~"

Draco grunted. Of course he wasn't going to be left alone. Why had he thought that just because he'd crept away all by himself, making sure to sink into the darkest shadows, and wind his way down to the least lit bit of beach, that people would figure out he didn't want any company.
"Ninety-nine phantoms of fear in the brig~ Ninety-nine phantoms of fear~ A prisoner escapes and another gives chase, Ninety-eight phantoms of fear~"

Draco groaned and looked around.

"Hi, there, fellow Slytherin servant," said Luna Lovegood.

Draco glared. "I am not Slytherin’s servant."

"No?" Lovegood adjusted her skirts and sat down next to him. "Then why did you pledge yourself to Alex?"

Draco snapped. "I didn't know that Black was a spy!"

"Mmmm…" Lovegood put a finger on her lips. "I guess that does spoil things a bit. Tricking people like that isn't nice. But then, my lord is not always a nice person. But look on the bright side. Now that you’re on the winning side, you'll never have to worry about running a faction of your own. You can just let Slytherin do all that work. Being the responsible one is hard. Better just to lie back and let the big boys handle things."

Draco clenched his teeth. This didn't even qualify as rubbing salt into the wound. This was like a beach-going child filling up a wound with coarse sand and then digging it back out again because their castle needed another turret.

"Besides, the worst is over now. I'm sure Lord Malfoy will handle things now that he knows what's going on."

There was a moment of silence.

Draco felt his ears burning. He should have just told his father. He shouldn't have run away like that. He shouldn't have.

Lovegood snorted.

It was such an out-of-character sound coming from her that Draco did a double-take.

"This is exactly why you joining the Gray will be good for you," she said.

"What, why?"

"Because~" she said in a sing-song voice, "you are being a pussy~"

Draco coughed, loudly. "A what?!"

"A p-u-s-s-y~" Lovegood's voice dropped back to its normal dreamy tone. "A coward. A little boy who cannot accept responsibility. A maiden in need of rescuing. A con-man who messed up and now wants to skip town. A little girl who wet her knickers and is now crying because her daddy is going to get mad."

"Enough!" Draco was on his feet now. "Who the hells are you to speak like this to me? I am Heir Malfoy! Future leader of the Dark."

"And I am Heiress Lovegood~ Future fuck-toy of Lord Slytherin, leader of the Gray, and future leader of all of Magical Britain — Light, Gray, or otherwise."

That stopped Draco. He stared at Lovegood.
"Have you not heard what people are whispering?" the girl said. "They are saying that Lord Slytherin is not merely the leader of the Gray, they are saying he is something new, sprung forth from the old — a Gray Lord."

Draco had heard, of course. The title of lord of lords was as old as the Albion itself. Merlin had been a lord of lords. It had started out meaning, 'first among equals,' but over the centuries the meaning had been warped. Nowadays, lord of lords meant someone willing to go far outside the law to advance the political agenda of some faction or other, or so his father had once solemnly explained to him in the secrecy of his family office.

Voldemort had been a Dark Lord — as had Grindelwald, while he'd been active in Magical Britain.

Other nations had adopted the terminology, but mostly lacked the history and tradition. In most places, it simply meant 'strong man,' or 'warlord.' Only in Magical Britain did the title come with any kind of legitimacy — perversely, given what lords of lords usually ended up like.

"Look at how strong we are, Draco," Lovegood whispered.

Draco shivered. He could indeed feel incredible power radiating from Lovegood. How had he never noticed it before?

"Look at what Alex, Ginny, Hermione, and even I, are able to achieve. Remember how strong you felt when you summoned that basilisk? Remember the power flowing through you? That could be you. That kind of power." Lovegood leaned in closer. "You must only submit to my lord's will."

Draco stepped backwards. "I—I must go!" He ran.

He wasn't running away, oh no. He wasn't being a coward, absolutely not. He was merely engaged in a strategic withdrawal, heading for higher ground, rallying his allies, and seeking advice from knowledgeable sources. In other words, he was going to make sure his father heard about this.

It was that or stay near Lovegood for even a single second longer. Good luck to Lord Slytherin, he thought. He thought he'd known crazy with Black, but Lovegood mirrored her and turned it up to eleven. Even a man as formidable as he would need every drop of it to deal with a witch like that.

Back on the beach, Luna watched as Draco Malfoy retreated up the garden path, a small smile on her face, before turning around and humming her way along the beach, hands stretched out on either side.

"Ninety-eight phantoms of fear in the brig~ Ninety-eight phantoms of fear~ A prisoner escapes and another gives chase, ninety-seven phantoms of fear~"

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

"Hah! I see your pair of staves and raise you four good wands." Lord Davis smacked his cards down on the table and returned his hand to his cane.

Lord Slughorn grunted. "Don't look too happy. The boy still has to show his hand."

"Bah! Harry's bluffing. I know that look." Lord Davis winked at Harry. "You can't fool this old politician, kid."

Harry smiled faintly. He then leaned forward and laid out a magical flush.

The crowd surrounding the poker table broke out into polite applause.
"Oh, I say."

"Well done, boy."

Lord Davis looked pole-axed.

Lord Slughorn grunted again. "You should have tried using legilimency, Davis. Then you'd have
known he wasn't playing games."

"You used legilimency to beat a child at poker!?” exclaimed one of the bystanders.

Slughorn twisted in his chair. "If the boy couldn't defend himself from something like that, he has
no business among us."

Harry pulled the small pile of chips towards himself. "Quite right, Lord Slughorn. Birthrights and
opportunity can only take you so far. When the bagpipes sound, it is the sum of your preparation
and skill that cuts out the winners from the losers."

One of the ladies giggled behind her fan. "Oh, my. Precocious, isn't he?"

"But, Harry," said another, "what about those who work just as hard, but do not have the same
opportunities?"

Harry smiled. "Many of us in the Gray have businesses that rely on skilled wizards. Surely it is in
our best interests to grant those opportunities, where appropriate."

"Aye," said Lord Ogden. "I fully agree there. Getting qualified wands is so difficult these days."

"But meritocratic extremism is also dangerous." Lord Davis said with a waving of a finger. "You
may not know this, kid, but Light Lord Dimwiddy was famous for promoting based on merit —
and look how many noble families he wiped out."

Harry nodded. "And Dimwiddy built one of the largest magical empires the world has ever seen in
only five years — something that would have been impossible without generals like Clementine
and Adams, and neither of them was noble. Obviously meritocracy has to be managed, but to deny
its efficacy is also dangerous."

"Hear, hear." Lord Ogden raised his glass of brandy.

"What I want to know," said Lord Slughorn, gazing at Harry over steepled fingers, "is how you
managed to swipe the heirship away from your brother."

"Walter!" gasped one of the witches.

"I think it's a perfectly valid question," Slughorn continued, not breaking eye contact. "If Slytherin
wants to make him his effective heir presumptive, then we have a right to know how likely the
power of the Albion might come crashing down on us."

Harry shrugged. "There are many secrets hidden among the families that could bring great trouble
to the world if they came to light," he said. "But the will of the Albion has never descended on any
family because of the actions of another. Your personal interests are perfectly safe, Lord
Slughorn." Harry looked away. "Besides, my current position is as much a matter of Fated accident
as of purposeful machinations. I am confident the Albion will not judge unfavourably, given the
circumstances."
"Mmmmm…” Slughorn didn't look convinced.

Harry felt a hand on his shoulder. "Having a good time, Harry?" asked a deep voice.

It was Daphne, or, more usefully, it was Lord Slytherin.

Harry smiled. "I think I have won enough to pay for dinner."

There was a chorus of polite laughter.

"The lad is quite something, Slytherin," said Lord Ogden. "You should have introduced him to us earlier. But won't Lord Potter make a fuss?"

"I dare say he will," Daphne rumbled.

"I would have liked to see him here," Lord Davis chuckled. "James Potter was one of the best magical poker players Hogwarts ever saw."

"Unfortunately…" Daphne gestured to Harry who stood up, "That might very well happen if we do not make haste. While I have no issue dealing with an irate Lord Potter, I have matters to take care of before the ritual. Listening to his protests would get in the way."

The assembled lords and ladies chuckled again.

Harry and Lord Slytherin apparated out.

When a furious Lord Potter finally arrived, it was to find many of his fellow lords filing out of the door that he’d been tipped off to containing Harry. Many were giving him infuriatingly cheerful looks, and when he finally manoeuvred his way past them and into the empty room, it was to find it, well, empty.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Determined, Draco strode into the main ballroom and took up position several mingling groups away from his father. Lord Malfoy was currently in whispered discussion with his sister. Draco still wasn't sure exactly what Virgo's deal was, but she certainly seemed to have his father's ear. A flash of jealousy spiked through him before he shook it away. He had more important plimpies to pickle.

"What's wrong, Draco?" asked his mother's voice.

Draco turned.

Lady Malfoy was still wearing her mask. Some of the guests had started strategically ditching theirs as the night wore on, but most still wore theirs.

"I just need to speak with father," Draco said.

His mother sighed. "I know that look. How bad is it?"

"Bad."

"Did you upset someone important?"

Draco shook his head.
"Did someone catch you doing something you shouldn't have been?"

Draco shook his head again.

"Worse?"

Draco nodded.

"Go on then. Tell your mother. Maybe she will be able to advise you."

"I pledged my allegiance to Alexandra Black."

"Oh," Narcissa's whole body relaxed. "That's not so—"

"—It turns out Alexandra Black is a Gray spy."

His mother stilled. The next thing he knew, she'd firmly grabbed his arm, causing him to yelp, and dragged him out of the nearest door, much to the general interest of lookers-on.

Now in the long curved corridor surrounding the ballroom, she whipped off her half-Slytherin mask, bent down, and looked him straight in the eye. "Are you sure, Draco?" Her face was deadly serious. "How do you know?"

"Lord Slytherin showed up almost immediately after. We had a discussion."

Narcissa cursed under her breath. She straightened up and looked away, her expression fierce. "This is not good. We had high hopes for Miss Black." She looked back at him. "But this does not have to be a catastrophe. No doubt the Gray intend to sway you to their cause over the next five years, but that can easily work two ways. You are my son and heir to the Noble House of Malfoy. You will not be so easily won by those children. And now that Alexandra has shown her true colours, the children of our allies can work together to marginalise her influence."

"Ummm…." Draco felt that sick dread threaten to overwhelm him again, but he got it under control with several long, deep breaths and a focusing of his occlumency. "That may not work, Mother."

"Why not?"

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

Lord Malfoy watched his daughter sweep elegantly away, the very model of pre-teen, pureblood witch. Unless one knew the full story, it would be impossible to tell that Virgo was in fact, neither pre-teen, nor pureblood, nor even a witch… sort of.

He surreptitiously waved his wand over the glass of red wine a house elf had just handed him and took a sip.

She had certainly come a long way in a short time — as to be expected of someone who would go on to become one of the most feared Dark Lords Magical Britain had ever seen.

Very interesting that the teenage Lord Voldemort now wished to pursue a far more traditionally feminine power strategy. He'd have never suspected when they started this little project that the mind could become a slave to the body so quickly.

In many ways, he was relieved. Having Virgo betrothed would be close to ideal.

He hadn't been looking forward to the questions over the next few years about why he wasn't
accepting offers for his daughter’s hand. It would have been odd — out of place — suspicious. Not
damning in and of itself, but little things could easily add up in the minds of people. The last thing
he needed was for it to be suspected she was blood-adopted. A bastard he’d sired from an
extramarital affair with a long-lost Gaunt was far more preferable in that regard.

And to have his daughter — his Dark Trojan horse — betrothed to John Potter? Lord Malfoy
allowed himself a tiny smirk. That would be quite a coup. Now he just had to figure out how to pull
it off while extracting from Lord Potter every last possible knut.

At that moment, he spotted his wife surreptitiously flagging him down across the hall. "I'm so
sorry, Whittle," he said to a business associate, who chose that instant to sidle up. "But I've just
noticed my wife wishes a word with me."

Interestingly, Narcissa didn't only lead him outside the ballroom, but insisted they also retreat to
one of the many smaller rooms that Slytherin had set aside for all the many private meetings that
inevitably took place during any large-scale gathering of wizarding aristocracy.

"Draco?" Lord Malfoy raised an eyebrow. His son stood in the middle of the room, looking oddly
determined. He turned to his wife. "What's this about?"

"Draco here has something to tell you, dear." Narcissa then sat down in a nearby high-back chair
and crossed her arms.

Lucius sighed inside. Draco getting himself into noteworthy situations was becoming increasingly
common. He still vividly recalled his own reaction to his son being part-responsible for the death
of Magical Britain's acromantula patriarch, the renegotiating of a decades-old treaty, and the brief
uniting of all Wizengamot factions in rushing through legislation banning him from basilisk
summoning exploration.

"What is it, Draco?" he asked.

"I have pledged myself to the service of Alexandra Black for the duration of my time at Hogwarts."

Oh. But that couldn't be all…

"I then found out that Alexandra is a Gray spy and that Lord Slytherin placed her at Hogwarts
specifically to usurp my leadership of the Dark."

Damn. That was going to be politically annoying to deal with. He'd have to keep a closer eye on his
son from now on. No doubt many other lords would panic, if they were in this kind of situation,
and do something stupid like waste a huge amount of political capital trying to get their heir out of
their oath. But he hadn't been Lord Voldemort's right hand for nothing. Slytherin would only have
minimal personal interaction with Draco while at Hogwarts and, with good coaching, the Gray
children could be worked around. It wasn't something that their family couldn't handle and might
even give Draco good experience in dealing with more nuanced political situations.

He opened his mouth to say as much.

"Theo, Pansy, Vincent, Greg, Hestia, and Flora have also pledged themselves."

Lord Malfoy firmly shut his mouth. He closed his eyes, willed his strongest occlumency barriers
into being, and silently began counting to ten.

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —
"I must admit, the boy is quite something," said Lady Hodgekin.

Daphne nodded.

"Finding him must have been like finding an uncut diamond in a cauldron of congealed potion sludge," the woman continued. Her husband ran Magical Britain's only waste disposal service for things that couldn't simply be vanished, which was actually most things.

Daphne nodded, again. "Indeed," she rumbled. "I am very proud of him."

"But, Lord Slytherin," said Mrs Fudge. "Isn't naming this boy as your effective heir to the Gray leadership a dangerous move? What about your own children? Adoptive heirs are exactly the reason blood adoption was made illegal. And aren't you afraid of retaliation from the Potters?"

Daphne shrugged. "I'm sure my children will be able to make something of themselves without hanging off my robe-cuffs. And grooming a successor to a political faction is very different from raising an heir for a family. But if you will excuse me, ladies, I am going to go prepare for the ritual—"

Daphne made to turn to leave, before spotting who was walking towards her with a very purposeful gait. "Ah."

Both Lady Hodgekin and Mrs Fudge raised eyebrows as Lord Malfoy strode over.

"Slytherin, a word, if you will." His voice was terse.

Oh dear, Daphne thought. She remained silent an appropriately disrespectful amount of time, given his tone, before nodding once and leading them off to an empty room on the second floor, but not before buzzing Harry on her ring.

The moment the door was closed, Lord Malfoy rounded on her. "If you think I will be manipulated like this, Slytherin, then you are wrong."

On Daphne's forehead, a bead of sweat formed and ran down her face, but she kept her voice steady. "I really don't know what you mean. You know I am always looking for talent to nurture. Draco, Pansy, and the others have been quite impressive. I merely wish to contribute to their education."

"I do not believe that for a second. What will it take to buy you out?"

"Buy me out? I hope you recall that it is not to me that your son has pledged himself."

"Don't give me that! Name a price — gold, artefacts, magic, but!" He drew himself to his full height. "Understand this, Slytherin — if it is your full version of the Muggle Protection Act you wish to push through, then absolutely not. Selling out the entire Dark to correct the mistake of a handful of their children is not something I could ever countenance."

Daphne's heart was pounding, but at that moment, from the corner of the room, Harry's hand appeared from nothing and gave her a thumbs-up.

Her body relaxed a tad. "That's a shame," she replied. "Then I don't see what else could be done. I don't feel I have any need for gold right now. But worry not, Lord Malfoy. I assure you that Heiress Black will make an excellent leader for your son. I believe she is already planning to increase his focus on his practical education and physical fitness."
She held her breath while Lord Malfoy studied her. She could feel the tension wanting to pool a stunner in her fingers. She had to magically hold it back.

"This is not over, Slytherin," he eventually said before turning around and sweeping out of the room.

In the darkest corner of the room, Harry dropped the cloak over his shoulders so that just his head showed. "I'm counting on it, Lucius."

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

James Potter was getting desperate.

More and more people were learning the secret. He could feel the stares, the snickers. Wizarding aristocracy gossiped like old maids and right now, the gossip was clearly on one topic — the heirship of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter.

Harry had broken a family secret. He'd felt it. Harry knew it. Everyone knew it.

If he could get Harry back to Potter Manor, his role as Harry's lord would give him far more legal leverage than before. Breaking family secrets was one of the misdeeds lords could try those under their power for in their own manorial courts. But would that even be possible? Qui tenet teneat, qui dolet doleat.

Harry was here; he knew he was. If he couldn't find him before the night was over, would Harry even return to Potter Manor? Lily was waiting by the floo, just in case Harry decided to make a break for it that way, John reluctantly by her side. As soon as they found Harry, they were leaving.

He spotted another of his quarries coming out of the washroom while walking around the ballroom corridor ring for what felt like the hundredth time. "Headmaster!"

Lockhart turned around and, with a roguish grin that made James want to hex the man, said, "Ah, Lord Potter, dear chap. What can I do you for?"

"I want to inform you that Harry will not be returning to Hogwarts."


"Nothing against Hogwarts — this is for family reasons. Tomorrow I will be talking to the headmasters of Durmstrung and Beauxbatons to enquire about transfer places. I expect all the parchment-work to be ready when they come flooing."

Lockhart sighed. "Of course, my Lord."

"Good." James turned around again and walked off, and got no further than just out of sight of the headmaster before another wizard he wanted to speak to, closed a door to the ballroom behind him with a sigh.

"Padfoot!"

Lord Black's eyes lit up. "Prongs! Thank Merlin, you have to save me! I thought I could handle everyone secretly thinking I was Dark, but now everyone thinks I'm secretly Slytherin's right-hand man! Well, a few people anyway — two at least. Parkinson was furious, and I'm glad I'm an auror, because Nott looked like he wanted to curse me right there and then, but—"
"Padfoot! I need you to arrest Slytherin!"

Sirius stopped in mid-rant. "Say wha…?"

"He's going to kidnap Harry! I've been trying to find him for an hour now, but he always slips me by and if I don't find him by the end of tonight—"

"Whoa, whoa! Prongs! Back up a bit, will you?"

James quickly explained the situation to a rapidly worried-looking Lord Black.

"Ah," Sirius said after he was done. "I do see your problem, but…" He shifted uneasily.

"But what?! Kidnap is illegal! Slytherin pretty much admitted he would help Harry run away from home. That counts! I know it does, Padfoot. I know the law."

"Yes, but… there is a precedent for this. An heir who ran away from home was granted asylum by another noble house and the court ruled it legal."

James Potter exploded. "Your situation was different! The court only ruled in your favour because you had 'justifiable cause' and were 'in fear for your life!'"

Sirius looked away. "Prongs, mate, look, I know that you wouldn't ever do anything like that, but, well, you have to see how it looks. Is it true that Harry is the Potter heir?"

"Only until I fix that!"

Sirius winced. "Yeah, see, that's exactly the kind of thing you shouldn't have just said."

James looked horrified. "That's not what I—"

"—Prongs! I know it isn't what you meant. But that's besides the point. Harry wasn't raised your heir. He was raised by muggles for his entire childhood. And then suddenly he's back in the Wizarding World and you still didn't talk to him for his whole first year of Hogwarts. Then, suddenly, somehow, Harry is now the heir, possibly under very dodgy circumstances, and the moment that happens, Harry wants to run away from home."

"He's only running away because he broke a family secret." James' voice turned pleading. "Look, Sirius, you have to help me. If I can't pull Harry out of Hogwarts, then he's going to be stuck in there with all those Gray children for the next five years. Think about what kind of horrible influence they'll be."

Sirius' expression cooled. "Alex is Gray."

Huh?

James' mind, so quickly and rapidly powering through the long grass of panic, stepped on a molehill and tripped right into the dirt. "I didn't mean Alex, obviously." His brow furrowed. "Alex is Gray?"

"Yeah. You remember I told you that Harry said I shouldn't worry about Alex hanging out with the Dark kids? Turns out it was all a plot. She just got a bunch of Dark heirs to pledge to her and then revealed her 'true allegiance'."

"And Slytherin orchestrated all this? Magical Merlin, it's worse than I thought. Padfoot! We have to stop this!"
Sirius straightened up. "Prongs, I'm not going to try and arrest Slytherin. If you want my advice, take this to court, but argue that Slytherin has a vested interest in keeping Harry away from your family and argue that if asylum should be granted, then it should be a different family that does it."

"I can't do that!"

"Then I can't help you. I'm sorry, Prongs."

Not long after, the entire ballroom was treated to the unusual sight of Lord Potter storming straight through the dancers towards the floo. "We're leaving!" he shouted.

John Potter looked shocked, "What? But what about—"

"No buts, John. We're off!"

Lord Potter grabbed John's wrist, motioned Lady Potter in front of him, and stepped into the floo. From not far away, someone shouted something. The voice was young, female, and full of panic. "Accio John Potter!"

Lord Potter's grip slipped on John's wrist, just as the green flames engulfed him and he was whisked away through the floo.

John Potter fell on his back and shot towards the spell-caster along the marble floor, eventually coming to rest at her feet. It was Virgo.

"Magical Merlin," she gasped. "That was too close. Can't have you missing the Stella Benedictio."

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

The path to the bottom of the hill glowed with the light of a hundred curtsying fairies. A wizarding lord cast a warming charm on his tired wife, who smiled and readjusted the scarf around her neck. A pair of young heirs walked a slurring third, gently slung between them by his shoulders. The general slow press of wizardry was out of the manor and down.

And at the bottom of the hill, hidden by a grove of trees off the main path, stood a circle of eight-foot-tall rune stones, surrounded all the way by a simple wooden bench.

Back up at the manor, Alexandra Black confidently strode through the entranceway towards the front doors.

"Heiress Black?" The voice was as smooth as silk.

Alex started and found herself staring mask-to-mask with a familiar masked wizard with long, blond hair and a silver, snake's-head cane. "Lord Malfoy, what a pleasure and a surprise."

Lord Malfoy tipped his mask. "I wish I could say that the pleasure was mine as well. The surprise, however, I will grant you. You have been most surprising tonight, Alexandra Patricia Black. I know we must both make haste for the ritual, so I will keep this brief." Lord Malfoy took off his mask and fixed Alex with his piercing gaze. His voice took on a hint of steel. "Lead my son badly, and I will take steps to ensure he is no longer your concern, permanently." He then reaffixed his mask and turned away.

Alexandra stared after the leader of the Dark as he swept through the door and out into the black of night.
Damn. Alexandra bit her lip. She really needed to learn how to make an exit like that!

— DP&SW: NRiCaD —

The moon waxed crescent. The stars twinkled like the eyes of an old man settling into the twilight of his years.

The guests filled the wooden benches around the stone circle almost completely. A violinist was playing Jonathan Glen's *Sleep of the Thestrals*.

Astoria, sitting next to her mother and cleared of 'sickness' by Saint Mungo's, pouted. "But why can't I do it? I've practised."

"Because we weren't sure if Alexandra would be able to, but she can, and that's who Lord Slytherin believes should."

"That's not fair!"

On the far side of the circle, Draco Malfoy watched grimly as the three witches in the centre of the circle were eventually joined by a fourth.

In another part of the circle, John sat with his arms crossed while Susan nibbled on peanuts and Virgo scanned the many faces of the crowd as though mentally taking names.

Sirius Black watched nervously as Alex disappeared behind the tall white curtain that had been set up in the centre of the stones. "Don't worry," said a familiar voice behind him. Slytherin climbed over the bench to sit beside him. "Harry will keep her out of too much trouble."

Sirius grunted. "And will Harry be staying here?"

"So long as he wishes it, I will grant him asylum. I did not want things to turn out this way, I assure you."

"And yet you have somehow usurped John's right to the Potter heirship."

Slytherin turned towards him. "No, Lord Black. That was not me."

The violin solo hit a particularly slow and deep moment.

Three-dozen fairies flittered over the heads of the crowd carrying tiny flaming torches. They flew past the stones and down into the circle of white cotton. For a fraction of a moment, four silhouettes became visible. Then, as the fairies flew about hither and thither, the shadows morphed into abstract shapes, chasing each other across the curved canvas. The violin solo died.

And the chanting started.

First one girl, then another, then another — melodic voices filled the nighttime air. It started slowly, at first barely a whisper, but picking up tempo. Then, at an unspoken command, the first girl moved. A shape flashed across the screen. Then, as with the chanting, the second soon followed. And then the third. And then the fourth.

Magic started to pool around the circle. Minutes passed in a trance-like state. The tension in the air tightened. Then, when the circle felt so saturated in magic, even the most insensitive could practically taste it, the chanting raised in pitch.

Every witch and wizard felt the hairs on the backs of their necks stand on end.
A shimmer of green and blue light weaved up from the ground — a miniature aurora borealis, leaping and jumping to the rhythm of the chanting and the bounce of the dance. It cleared the top of the surrounding trees and shot up into the starry sky.

The chanting died.

The dancing stopped.

The figures behind the curtain fell to the ground.

And the stars began to vibrate.

At first slowly, but rapidly increasing in pace, they moved — up and down, back and forth, swirling around the sky like water down a drain, before settling into a twinkling constellation of a serpent swallowing its own tail.

Every witch and wizard present felt it — the slight increase in luck granted by the ritual, settling on them like pixie dust.

As the party disbanded, some commented that they wished the luck of the magic lasted as long as the iconography Lord Slytherin had chosen symbolised. Others voiced their puzzlement of why the localised starry-sky reverted back to the normal night-sky afterwards, as the ritual effects were supposed to last the whole year. But most were simply happy to walk or stumble back to the manor, and to the warmth of the floo journey back home. It was generally agreed by most that it had been a good party, and that they would definitely be adding Lord Slytherin's Gala Night to their calendars for next year.

But above all, wizarding aristocracy now saw Lord Slytherin as one of them — a firmly established part of their world — a known quantity — someone they could deal with — reliable and predictable, if slightly eccentric.

If only they knew what even the next few months would bring.

— End of Chapter Fifty-Five —

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Bonus Chapter next! Expect that within the month. The next arc starts drafting in January. Until then, Enjoy your Winter Festival ;)

A/N: This chapter was drafted and made available early through the LeadVonE discord server, as will the next one. If you fancy discussing this chapter with like-minded people, or anything else DP&SW, feel free to head over there.
A special thank you to the following people for helping catch mistakes on #dpasw-editorial and during the editing live streams: ASK, Arya_Kshitiz, Blake Belladonna, DeranXT, Dragonbait, Drsooz, Fuuryuu, ForgottenCode, Gloweye, JaydenStevenson, Jinarra, Leyrann, Lunatico, MageKing17, Magic Bird Dust, Malin, Rafilar, Ravana, Salty_sauce, Tendra, and TrendyTreky.
Special mention goes out to DeranXT for successfully tweaking the 99 Phantoms of
Fear song from my original version, which didn’t rhyme nearly so well.

A/N: Conversion rate is:
1 Galleon to 50 British Pounds
1 Sickle to 3 British Pounds (roughly)
1 Knut to 10p (roughly)
All prices are normalised to 1991 values — about half of 2019’s prices

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!