Summary

After the confrontation with Voldemort after the third task of the Triwizard Tournament, Harry doesn't get sad. He doesn't get mad. He gets even.

AU! This story is only partially canon compliant. It is fully canon compliant up to Dumbledore, Snape, Harry and Fudge's little ... chat at the end of Goblet of Fire. Beyond that point, it's hit and miss. NO HARRY HORCRUX! Proactive Harry, Intelligent Harry.
Decisions and Demarcations

Harry Potter and The Fate We Make

Chapter 1: Decisions and Demarcations

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Wrapped securely in the anonymity of his invisibility cloak, Harry Potter ghosted through the silent, darkened halls of Hogwarts. It was late ... or was that early? The sun would be up in an hour or two, at any rate. And Harry had not slept. He'd been released from the infirmary just after dinner, but his mind had been twisting around itself nonstop ever since.

Voldemort was back. Cedric Diggory was dead. 'Moody' had, in fact, been a Death Eater in disguise. Fudge was simply refusing to believe anything anyone said in regards to Voldemort. These and more facts kept twisting around in his head, making it impossible to sleep, so he'd gone for a wander hoping to clear his head. It both was and was not helping.

Fact: Voldemort wanted him dead. Fact: Voldemort had tried, on many occasions even /before/ he was fully corporeal to kill Harry. Fact: When he'd been on his first tear through the magical world, a whole ton of people had died or worse. Fact: a lot of Voldemort's followers had escaped Azkaban and spent the following decade doing Merlin-knew-what, but Harry was willing to bet that at least Malfoy was in a possition to cause some real damage.

So where did this leave him? Dumbledore would want him to stay safe, which probably meant staying with the Dursley's all summer. Harry gave a disgusted snort. Yeah. Safe. Sure. If they said so. And he was wholly unprepared to deal with ... well, much of anything, really. He'd very nearly died himself in that graveyard. Sheer dumb luck (as Professor McGonnagal would say) was the only thing that had saved his life. And damn it, that just wasn't good enough. But what the heck could he do about it?

His wanderings had taken him down near the kitchen, and since his stomach was rumbling (and he'd be on short rations soon enough!), he decided to get something to eat from the elves. He tickled the pear, and, almost the second the picture moved out of the way, nearly got taken out at the knees by a seriously over-excited house-elf.

"The great Harry Potter sir has come to see Dobby!" The little fellow squeaked, hugging Harry's leg tight enough to threaten the circulation.

Despite everything, Harry couldn't help but grin. Dobby tended to have that effect on him. "Hello, Dobby. Would you mind getting me a sandwich and a glass of pumpkin juice? I'm a little hungry."

"Of course, Harry Potter sir!" Dobby squeaked, then dove into the well-organized chaos that was the
kitchens even at this hour of the night, only to reappear a few moments later with a plate and goblet. A snap of his fingers created a table and chair.

And a light suddenly went on in Harry’s head. Actually, he very nearly slapped his forehead, only just managing to keep from doing it because he knew Dobby would misinterpret it. How could he be so /dense/? Really! It was so ... so ... so ... simple. Gah. He took a seat and a bite of sandwich.

"Thanks, Dobby." He grinned when Dobby's eyes started to fill with grateful tears. He took a deep breath. "Dobby, how's Winky doing these days?"

Dobby's ears sagged, and he looked sad. "She not be doing well, Harry Potter sir. She be missing her family. She be shamed to be free."

Hermione was going to kill him for this. Ah well. "Can you call her over?"

A few seconds later, Winky was there. Dobby hadn't been kidding. She looked /awful/. Worse even than Dobby had, the first time Harry had seen him. Filthy with dirt, wearing a stained, torn child's dress, ears sagging so far down the tips nearly touched her thin, sagging shoulders.

Harry took a deep breath. "Right, you two. I need your help." At this, Dobby straightened right up, eyes huge, and even Winky perked a bit. "How much do you know of what happened a few days back?" He wanted to know.

Dobby and Winky both shivered in terror. It was Dobby, though, who answered, voice shaking in fear. "We bes hearing most everything, Harry Potter sir. That He ... that He is back, and most awful things!" The little elf shivered.

Harry sighed, mostly in relief that he wouldn't have to explain everything. "He is. And that's why I need help. You-Know-Who has been trying to kill me since I was a baby. He was trying to kill me even when he wasn't completely alive. And now he's back, and he's got some of his followers back, and things are going to get bad again." He took a breath. "I want you two to work for me, if you're willing."

This got an ecstatic, ear-piercing squeal from Dobby, who started bouncing up and down like he had springs in his feet. Winky looked gobsmacked for a moment, then started to cry.

"Yous wants Winky to be yous house-elf? Even though she be a bad elf and failed her master and got clothes?"

Harry nodded. "I'm even willing to make it official, bind you to me or whatever it is. You'd have to tell me how, though ... I haven't a clue." Hermione was going to /slaughter/ him, but she had never understood this. The idea of freeing the elves wasn't necessarily a bad one ... she'd just gone about it all wrong, and with little or no information, which was very atypical of her. There might be a way to improve house-elf treatment, but right here and right now, most elves didn't /want/ freedom, and trying to force it on them ... well, look at Winky.

Because his offer to make her his elf officially had transformed the sad little elf. Though she was still dirty and in a stained and torn outfit, it wasn't really noticeable at the moment, because her face, her body language had transformed from grief and despair to utter joy. She squealed and hugged his leg even harder than Dobby had earlier.

"Yous just be saying yous takes Winky as yous house-elf. Then Winky bes saying she bes yous elf." She explained, her voice shaky.

Harry nodded, then looked over at Dobby. "It's your choice, Dobby. If you want to stay free, I'll be
more than happy to pay you a salary and all that."

Dobby's eyes filled, and he pranced from foot to foot, clearly debating the issue, looking from Harry to Winky and back again before finally saying, "Dobby still wants to be free, Harry Potter sir."

Harry nodded. "That's fine. I'll pay you ... what did you say Dumbledore was paying you? A galleon? Well, I'll pay you a galleon a month, and you get a day off every week." Dobby bounced in glee, and then Harry turned to Winky, and took a deep breath. "Winky, I take you as my house-elf." He said.

"Winky accepts being yours house-elf." Winky said, and they were surrounded, for a half-a-breath, by a golden glow. Winky's grin threatened to split her face in half.

Harry grinned too. "All right. First order of business. Neither of you are to punish yourselves /ever/ again. If you think you've done wrong, tell me, and I'll deal with it from there, ok?" Both elves nodded. "Secondly ... Winky, I'd like for you to clean up. Dobby ... just how much can you guys do? I don't know much of anything about the wizarding world, or house-elves. Can you take someone with you when you pop in and out? Can you make purchases for your master?"

Dobby grimaced. "Dobby be sorry, Harry Potter sir, but we's not being able to take wizards with us when we travel. But we's be able to buy things for our masters, yes."

Well, the not being able to travel was a bummer, but the buying things would help immensely. Harry rubbed his hands together. "Right, good. I just need to formulate a plan." He needed Hermione. And Ron. And the Twins. Better add Ginny, too, or she'd hex him for being the only Weasley at school to not be included in the War Council. And he needed to write Sirius and Remus.

"Dobby, would you go get me some parchment, a quill and ink?" He asked. Dobby popped off immediately, and returned a few seconds later.

Harry thought for a few moments, then bent to write.

Dear Sirius and Remus

I've been an idiot. We had a totally secure way to communicate all this year and I didn't even think of it until today. This is Dobby. He used to be Malfoy's (I'll tell you that story later. Sirius especially will enjoy it!), but he's totally loyal to me now. We can send letters back and forth with him.

I'm writing because I need your help. With HIM back, I can't sit on my hands. He's tried to kill me three years out of four here at Hogwarts, and I doubt it's going to stop anytime soon. I need to be able to defend myself. I need to be prepared. And before either of you get upset, no, I'm not looking to go after him. I just want to be able to stay alive when the inevitable happens. Any help either of you can supply would be great.

Harry

He folded the parchment, then looked over at Dobby. "Would you be willing to take this to Remus and Sirius?"

Dobby nodded. "Of course, Harry Potter sir!" He took the parchment and disappeared with a pop.

Harry glanced at Winky. "Winky ... would you go see if Hermione and the Weasleys ... all of them ... are awake yet? If they are, ask them to come down here, would you?"

Winky nodded so hard her ears flapped. "Yes Master Harry sir!" And popped out.
Which left Harry to contemplate the harder parts of the plan that was taking shape in his mind. To
whit, Dumbledore and Snape. This was not going to be easy ... but it had to be done. Harry planned
to harass Dumbledore until he got the answer to the question he'd asked clear back in first year. The
time to be coy and secretive was well and truly over. As for Snape ... Harry grimaced. He hated the
man. And the man hated him ... and something had to be done about that, one way or the other.
Harry sincerely doubted they'd ever truly get along, but a ceasefire between them would suit Harry
down to the ground.
Dobby returned before Winky did, which didn't surprise Harry one bit. He was holding a bit of parchment, which he handed over.

Harry

_Dobby is a brilliant idea. It'll be completely impossible for anyone to intercept letters you send with him ... although I don't want to be you when Hedwig finds out. And you'd BETTER tell me that story, pup. Anything that gets one over on Malfoy will make my day. Now, on to your request. As much as I'd love to argue, pup ... you're right. Volde's been after you from day one, and he's not going to stop anytime soon. And I would very much like you to live a very, very, very long time ... a sentiment Moony agrees with wholeheartedly. To that end, we're going to be getting some things together. Might take us a couple days to do it, but we'll get it done. Anything you think of on your end, let us know and we'll do what we can to help._

The writing changed at that point.

_Just a quick note ... I agree with Sirius. I don't quite know how we'll arrange anything yet, but we'll figure something out. Take care of yourself in the meantime._

_Sirius and Remus_


A few minutes later, Winky popped back into the kitchen. _"Mistress Grangy and the Wheezy's bes coming, Master Harry sir."_

Harry grinned. _"Great, thanks Winky."_

Winky ducked her head and squirmed, eyes filling with tears. She moved to leave, but Harry quickly stopped her.

"Stay, both of you. You might be able to help us."

This got him some very wide-eyed looks, but both Dobby and Winky stayed put. A few moments later, the kitchen door opened and the Weasley clan plus Hermione piled in.

"Harrikins, old buddy old pal." said one of the twins.

"To what do we owe the pleasure?" The other wanted to know.

"Yeah, mate. What's goin' on?" Ron asked.

Harry grinned. _"Take a seat everybody. We got some planning to do."_

That made Hermione frown a bit, but Ron, the twins and Ginny all promptly sat down.
"So, what's up?" Ginny wanted to know.

Harry took a deep breath. "We have a major problem. With Voldemort back ... well, as bad as things have been the last few years, they're about to get a lot worse. I don't know about you guys, but I'm not comfortable with sitting on my hands and waiting for him to get around to killing me. We need to be ready." Seeing the look on Hermione's face, he hurried on. "Not to go after him ourselves, Hermione, but to be able to stay alive when he comes after us. Which he will, and you know it." That deflated her a bit. "So, first thing's first ... Dobby and Winky are now working for me. They've agreed to carry mail back and forth, which will be a lot more secure than owls."

Harry nearly fell over laughing when both Ron and Hermione promptly smacked themselves upside the head.

"WHY DID WE NOT THINK OF THAT?" They both cried, almost in unison, both of them sounding exasperated.

Harry laughed. "I know, I know. I had the same reaction when it occurred to me about twenty minutes ago." He shook his head. "Now ... I already sent a letter to Sirius and Remus, and they agreed to help any way they can." He took a breath, and then looked over at the twins. "I'd like for you two to work with them. I don't think you'll mind." His grin widened to a smirk.

"And why." asked one twin.

"Would that be?" finished the other.

"Hmmm ... does the phrase 'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good' mean anything to you two?" Harry was enjoying this. It'd slipped his mind to tell the two of them about Sirius and Remus, and from their reactions, Ron and Hermione hadn't mentioned certain facts either.

Both twins gave him a look that was somewhere between disgust and intense curiosity.

"Of course it does." They said in unison.

Ron abruptly caught on, and started snickering. Hermione glanced from Harry to Ron to the twins before she figured it out, and then even she started grinning hugely.

"Well, because Sirius happens to be Padfoot, and Remus happens to be Moony, that's all." Harry said, then, grin widening to epic proportions. "Oh, and I happen to be the son of Prongs."

The twins' reaction to this bit of information had the Trio (and Ginny) laughing themselves silly. The twins' jaws were hanging down around their knees, their eyes wide, utterly incapable of speech for long moments.

"You mean to tell us."

"That we had a MARAUDER for a teacher for a YEAR?"

They looked at each other, then back to Harry.

"Fred, oh twin of mine ... "

"I am of the same mind, George old boy."

"What do you want us to do?" They said in unison.

Harry grinned. "Well, it kind of occured to me that the stuff you guys make could be useful in a fight
if a way could be found to get it in or on the bad guys during a fight. Between you two and Sirius
and Remus ... " He trailed off and shivered. He was not entirely sure that getting the twins together
with what remained of the Marauders was the best idea in the world ... the twins were frighteningly
inventive on their own. Giving them access to Marauder brains and knowhow ... the world might
never be the same. But on the other hand, it was the sort of thing that Voldemort would never even
consider as a possibility, and any advantage they could get their hands on was a good idea.

"Ron, Ginny, I need you both to help me with wizarding world stuff. Laws, traditions, all that stuff.
Stuff I should have learned growing up but didn't get a chance to." Both Ron and Ginny nodded.
"Hermione, you're on research. Sirius and Remus offered to help, but knowing what sort of help to
ask for would be a good idea." She nodded. Harry's expression went grim. "And I'm going to be
cornering Dumbledore. He's got questions to answer, whether he wants to or not."

"Harry!" Hermione scolded.

"Hermione, I asked him first year why Voldemort was after me. He's had years to explain it. Years to
help me learn stuff I need to know. And he hasn't. He's left me in the dark and that's just not good
enough. Not with Voldemort back. Whatever his reasons for what he's done, they went null and void
the second Voldie stepped out of that damned cauldron."

Hermione looked torn, but eventually subsided.

"Lemme write another letter to Sirius and Remus real fast, so they know about Fred and George."

Harry grabbed the parchment left over from his first letter.

Sirius and Remus

Thanks for being willing to help. I appreciate it. On that note, there's some guys I'd like you two to
put your heads together with. Fred and George Weasley. They're the ones that had the Map, and
gave it to me third year. They're absolutely brilliant when it comes to pranks and stuff, and kinda
hero-worship the Marauders. Might sound weird to want to incorporate pranks into dealing with
Voldie and his minions, but it's something they'd never think of, and it'd confuse the heck out of them,
I reckon, in a fight.

Harry

Harry sent the note off with Dobby, who soon returned, with two letters he handed to Fred and
George.

"Mister Lupin and Mister Black be telling Dobby to tell Harry Potter sir that they's be happy to work
with the twin Wheezy's, and Mister Lupin sir be telling Dobby to tell Harry Potter sir that He-Who-
Must-Not-Be-Named won't bes knowing what hit him."

This made Harry grin and the other all chuckle. Well, the others minus the twins, who were silently
perusing their letters with expression on their faces rather akin to what Harry would expect to see on
Hermione's face when gifted with an exceptionally rare book. They managed to get the twins to their
feet and herded them out the door and back towards the Tower. Harry split off from the group in
order to go beard a certain snake in his den. This ... was going to be difficult.
Thankfully, by this time, it was close to breakfast, and Snape would be awake. Hopefully, Harry'd be able to catch him in his office. Barring that, he'd beard the man at breakfast. Luck was (or was not, depending on who you asked) with him. When he knocked on the door, Snape's silky snarl greeted him.

"Come."

Harry opened the door and stepped in. Snape glared at him and sneered.

"Get out."

Harry winced at the venom in Snape's tone, but held his ground. "No."

Snape cocked an eyebrow at him. "No? Did the Dark Lord deprive you of what little intelligence you allegedly possessed, Potter, when he Cruciated you? You will leave this office immediately, before I ensure that Gryffindor loses all its points and you scrub cauldrons every night for the remainder of your time in this school."

Harry grimaced, but refused to leave. "I'm not going to leave, because you and I need to talk." He insisted, ignoring Snape's infuriated snarl. "Look, I know you hate my dad. I know you hate Sirius and Remus. I don't know why ... and I'm not asking why, so quit trying to kill me with a glare! From the day I got here, you decided I was my father reborn. Well I'm not. And right about now, I think we've got bigger problems to deal with than hating each other. Dumbledore's always told me he trusted you, and Merlin knows you've saved my life a few times in the last few years. I'm not asking you to like me, and Merlin knows I won't start liking you, but not actively sniping at each other all the time might be a good idea. Think about it."

And then Harry fled, leaving Snape to fuss, fume, and curse alone. He sincerely doubted it'd do much good, but he had to at least try. At the very least, his conscience would be clear. Though really, he had a feeling that the world could end and Snape would still refuse to do anything but snap, snarl, and sneer. Hmmm. Maybe he ought to tell Snape what the sorting hat told him? The contemplation of Snape's likely reaction to that bit of trivia kept Harry quite amused as he made his way to the Great Hall for breakfast. Fortunately, he wasn't the last one through the doors, though, to his surprise, Snape beat him there, somehow or other. Hermione and the Weasleys gave him slightly odd looks when he plopped down on the bench.

"Where'd you get to, mate?" Ron asked.
"Needed to deal with something real fast." Harry said.

This got them all curious, but then Ron spotted Snape, and gave a low whistle.

"Who spit in his food? I don't think I've ever seen him that mad, and that's saying something."

Harry took a better look at the head table and winced. Ron was right. Snape looked nigh-apoplectic, cheeks faintly flushed, spine almost painfully straight and the look in his eyes put a basilisk to shame. Ohhhhhhhhh. Hey. Wait. Harry blinked as that thought crossed his mind, and then wondered if the basilisk carcass was any good anymore, and if so ... hmmm. That might just sweeten Snape's demeanor a tad. He'd have to ask Dobby to go check after breakfast. In the meantime, Snape was giving the Gryffindor table in general and him in particular one of the nastiest looks he'd ever seen Snape give. Harry barely tasted what he ate in his hurry to eat so that he could catch Dumbledore as soon as possible. The moment Dumbledore left the head table, Harry scarpered off, heading for the gargoyle.

"Cockroach Cluster."

For a wonder, it worked. Evidently, Dumbledore hadn't had a chance to change it yet. He headed up to the office door and walked in at Dumbledore's prompting.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, sounding gently concerned. Harry ignored him just long enough to go over to Fawkes and pet him, then turned to the headmaster.

"We, sir, need to have a long and serious talk." Harry said, eyeing the man warily and trying to keep his temper under control, despite an urge to smack the man.

"Ahh, I see." Ok, that was beginning to get annoying, but Harry soldiered on.

"I asked you, sir, first year, why Voldemort was after me. You refused to answer. Second year, you evaded telling me much of anything. Respectfully, sir, the time for that is over. He's got a body. He's tried to kill me three years out of four here. He's got a body. He's tried to kill me three years out of four here. I need to know why. And I need to be doing more than sitting in normal classes. I don't want to have to confront him, but he's clearly out to get me, and I need to be able to do more than pray to Merlin that Fawkes shows up or you get there in time to keep me alive, or that my 'dumb luck' will strike."

Dumbledore looked grave and sad. "I had hoped to spare you, to allow you a normal childhood ... "

Harry interrupted with a disgruntled snort. "Fat lot of good that did. I was never a child, headmaster. I was worked like Malfoy worked Dobby for ten years. Shite, I barely knew my name before I went to school, and didn't even learn my parent's names until Hagrid showed up. And to be honest, headmaster, unless there is an earth-shatteringly important reason for me to return there? I'm not going to. I have way too much to do to waste two months locked in a room unable to do anything like last summer. Or the summer before that."

Dumbledore frowned. "It is vitally important that you return home, Harry. The wards ... "

"Are useless now, unless there's something you're not telling me ... or did you forget the part where I told you Pettigrew, damn him to hell, used my blood to ressurect snake-face? And that Voldemort touched me? Which is saying to me that whatever protection I had is completely useless now. I could, barely, accept that I had to go back there because of the wards. But now? No. I can stay with the Weasleys. Or Remus and Sirius, for that matter." And to hell with the fact that Sirius was on the run from the law. Actually ... add that to the growing list of things Harry needed to deal with. He refused to believe there was absolutely no way to see Sirius free. He'd have to sic Hermione on that
project. She'd done well finding things to try to help with Buckbeak. Or maybe he could find a solicitor or something. Did the wizarding world have them? They must, considering they held trials, right? Then again ... since when did the wizarding world make a lick of sense?

Dumbledore was looking very grave. Like he really had forgotten that tidbit of information.

Harry, though, was on a roll, and not overly inclined to stop. Part of it was being truly fed up with the way things had been the last four years. Part of it was being scared that if he did stop, he'd never get out what he really wanted to say. "So are you going to tell me? Seeing that I've fought that rat bastard three times in the last four years, are you finally going to tell me what I need to know? What I should have known at the end of first year?" Yeah, he'd been eleven ... but he'd never truly been a typical kid. A decade of systematic neglect, abuse, and bullying had ensured that he was far more mature than his years. It'd been either that or curl up and die, which really wasn't any kind of option as far as Harry had ever been concerned.

"Where would you stay, if not at the Dursley's?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry snorted. "Like I said, the Weasley's. Merlin knows that Mrs. Weasley has offered often enough. And Sirius'd take me in a heartbeat." He was pretty sure Remus was on that list too, but was honest enough to know that it'd be problematic, if for no other reason than he'd be unguarded and relatively defenseless two or three days out of every twenty-eight if it was just the two of them. Sirius, bless him, had offered to take him the self-same hour he'd made it clear he wasn't the mass-murderer everyone thought he was, and that memory had been more than enough to warm Harry despite his failure to help Sirius. That someone would care for him so much was a rather foreign concept. He cocked his head slightly. "Are you going to tell me what you should have three years ago?" He wanted to know, the 'or am I going to have to get creative' went unsaid but, from Dumbledore's expression, not entirely unheard. Harry did, after all, have a history of digging until he found out what he wanted to know, regardless the adults' attempts to shelter him or keep him in the dark.

They sat there for a moment more, and right about when Harry was getting exasperated enough to walk out and go get creative with finding out what he wanted to know, Dumbledore got to his feet and headed to a cabinet, opening the doors to expose a very strange looking bowl with odd designs along the outside.

"This is a pensieve, Harry. It holds one's memories, to allow one to see them a bit more clearly and at leisure." And then Dumbledore pointed his wand at his temple and extracted a long, thin silver strand. Harry blinked. "Come, and I will show you."

Harry took the proffered arm, and they touched the silvery surface. With a jerk not unlike the one he'd experienced with the diary (and that comparison did absolutely nothing at all for his nerves.) they landed in a small room that looked like it might be in the Leaky Cauldron or the Three Broomsticks. A slightly younger Dumbledore was sitting across from ... Trelawney?

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me." Harry whined. Her? The ultra-crazy bat that predicted death every two seconds? For the love of little baby wizards, if all this fuss was over something she said, Harry was going to hurt someone. Her by preference.

They had evidently come into the memory at a quiet spot. Trelawney was fidgeting, and then Dumbledore got to his feet. "I do apologize, Sybil, but I fear that ... " anything else he might've said got cut off, because Trelawney went stiff, and then, in the harsh, gutteral, deep voice that Harry remembered from that encounter early last year.

"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 ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ..."

Harry strongly resisted the temptation to bash his head against something. There was the sound of a scuffle by the door, and then the memory cut off and they were dumped back into Dumbledore's office.

"So you're telling me that the biggest fraud in Divination ... " Harry started, then sighed and sat down. "And you're buying that it means me? There have to be dozens of people it could be."

"There could have been, yes. But I fear that your scar means it is you." Dumbledore said. Harry had a bit of a harder time refuting that bit of logic, but still. Trelawney. Gawd, the others would never believe this.

"And this power Voldemort doesn't know?"

"I believe it is your capacity to love." Dumbledore stated.

Harry nearly fell out of his chair, he got to laughing so hard. "So, you, what?" He gasped out when he's calmed a bit. "Want me to hug him into defeat or something? Really? And because that had to be the answer, there was no reason to teach me how to fight, or survive or ... well, much of anything else, because all I'd have to do would be to hug him and pat him on the head and tell him I loved him and he'd give up? Are you for REAL?" By the end, Harry was bellowing in anger. "Of all the stupid ... three years! Three years! Time I could've ... god. And all because you were so sure I had to be coddled and protected and treated like I was five! Cedric DIED because I wasn't prepared. Because you, in your wisdom, decided I didn't need to be troubled with the facts until I was older, nevermind the fact that Voldemort clearly isn't interested in waiting until I'm a fully grown, fully trained adult wizard. What else are you hiding from me? What else haven't you told me?" Harry paced back and forth, hands waving as his anger built, unaware of the faint glimmer of power that was beginning to surround him as his anger affected his control of his magic. He whirled to face Dumbledore. "You know what? Forget it. I don't want to know. You've had three years to tell me and done precisely squat. I need that kind of help like I need an extra hole in my head. I'm out of here."

And without another word, he stomped out of Dumbledore's office. The moment he was clear of the gargoyle, he yelled for Dobby.

"Dobby, get the others. And do you know of anywhere we can meet in private?"

Dobby nodded enthusiastically. "We's be calling it the Come and Go Room, Harry Potter sir. Dobby be showing it to you. It be on the seventh floor by the tapestry of dancing trolls. Dobby go get the Grangy and the Wheezy's and bring them there." And he popped off.

Harry headed for where Dobby's sent him, stomping back and forth, fuming mentally, calling Dumbledore every nasty name he could think of. Damnit all to hell!

It didn't take long for the Weasley Brigade to show up, with Hermione right smack in the middle of them.

"Harry, what is it?" Hermione asked, looking concerned.

"Dobby, where's this room at?"

"Yous must call it, Harry Potter sir. Yous must be pacing back and forth three times, sir, thinking
what yous needs. The Come and Go room will provides it for you."

So, Harry did so, thinking furiously. *I need a place to plan. I need a place that can't be spied on. I need somewhere to figure out how to fight Voldemort.*

And at the end of the third lap, a large oak door appeared. Harry opened it, and blinked. Inside was a large room. On one side, there was a table and chairs, with enough quills, ink, and parchment for a major brainstorming session. Two whole walls were nothing but books. The other half of the room appeared to be some sort of dueling practice chamber with targets all along one wall.

"Harry, mate ... what's going on?"

"Take a seat and I'll tell you." Harry said.
Chapter 4: Cry Havok! And Let Slip the Dogs of War!

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

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The others exchanged worried looks, but all sat down at the table. Harry didn't. He paced, muttering under his breath for a few moments before turning to face them. "All right. We've got major problems. Even bigger ones than I thought." He rubbed at his face. "What I'm about to tell you guys, I don't want you telling anyone, or talking to anyone about, except for the people in here, Sirius, Remus, Dobby and Winky. Nobody else."

"But Harry, The Headmaster ..." Hermione started.

Harry growled. "The Headmaster can take a flying leap for all I care right about now, Hermione. He's royally screwed up."

Hermione looked mortally affronted, but then, Harry'd been expecting that. She still seemed to think that people in authority could do no wrong, though she was, he admitted, less strident about it than she had been.

"Let's take this step by step, ok? First and foremost ... Voldemort on the loose, doing as he pleased. Dumbledore's interviewing Trelawney of all people ... and she gives a prophecy."

This put Ron in stitches. "Trelawney, mate? And he believed that shite?"

Harry gave a grim nod, then repeated the prophecy. "Now, somehow or other, I'm betting Voldemort heard about it. He went after me and my parents. My folks went into hiding, using Pettigrew." He snarled the name. "As their Secret Keeper. We all know how that turned out." There were grim looks around the table.

"And then Dumbledore, in his infinite wisdom, decided I needed to be put with the Dursleys. Mind you, this was before Sirius went after Pettigrew. I get left there and see neither hide nor hair of anyone for the next decade, pretty much, except for a few very strange and very, very brief encounters on the few occasions the Dursleys took me with them somewhere. In the meantime, Sirius gets tossed in jail without so much as a by-your-leave. All because Dumbledore decided I'd be safer under blood wards, and away from the wizarding world so I didn't get a big head."

Harry turned and paced some more. "Then, Hagrid shows up. Don't get me wrong, I love the guy. He's great. But not exactly the best person to give me the lowdown on the wizarding world. He forgot to tell me how to get on the train, for crying out loud. If I hadn't run into you guys. He waved at the Weasley's. "Who knows what would've happened. And then ... well, we all know what happened first year. I can forgive him not telling me the minute I walked in the doors, I really can. But after everything was over, I asked him straight out why Voldemort was after me. He refused to tell me. He just patted me on the head and sent me back to the Dursley's. Same thing after second year. And again last year. 'Go be a kid, you're too little to understand', or whatever the heck was going through his mind. I really don't know. Never a thought of 'gee, Voldie's still after him. Might be a good idea to teach the kid a thing or two not on the usual curriculum, especially if I want him alive to beat Voldie'. The worst part? He just now told me to my face that he thinks the 'power he knows not' is love." Harry flailed his hands in the air. "What does he expect me to do, hug Voldie
into submission? He sat there and did nothing to prepare me! Cedric DIED because I barely know one end of a wand from the other!” He slapped the table with both palms, choking back anger and tears at the same time. Ginny, who happened to be closest, reached over and gripped his arm, expression sympathetic. Harry took a few deep breaths.

"So, since he's done absolutely nothing to help, I'm going to have to do this my way. Hermione? I want you back in the lawbooks. There has GOT to be a way to clear Sirius' name, one way or the other. Now that Dobby and Winky are working for me, I can get money from my trust vault anytime, so I could even pay a solicitor, if we can find one."

Hermione nodded grimly. Harry could tell she wasn't overly thrilled with him telling Dumbledore to go fly a kite, but it was kind of hard to refute the facts, even for her.

"Dobby, I want you to go down to the Chamber of Secrets. See if the basilisk down there is salvageable."

"Why you wanting to know that, mate?" Ron asked.

"Because, it might come in handy. Basilisk hide is as good as dragon hide for protection, for one thing ... and if it's salvageable, there's hide enough to outfit all of us and more besides. And giving Snape access to such rare potions ingredients might get him off my back a bit. I don't need more than one enemy, I really don't." And he needed to write Sirius and Remus again. See if Sirius would be willing to teach him to become an animagus. Even if it took him a while to learn, it might come in handy. Harry wasn't about to say no to any advantage he could get. For all he knew, being an animagus was the power Voldemort didn't 'know'.

Hmmm. Might be worth it to try to sound Professor Flitwick out. Hadn't Hermione said he was a Duelling Master, last year? Merlin knew Harry got on with Flitwick better than he got on with Snape. Sure, Snape could teach him a lot, but he had a feeling they'd be more inclined to getting each other mad and trying to kill each other than teaching and learning, at least as things stood right now.

Dobby popped away while Harry was busy running options through his mind, and a few moments later, popped back.

"It be looking like it be killed just this morning, Harry Potter sir." Dobby reported.

"Ohhh, that's good news." Harry said. Ok, so that was an option. He grabbed parchment and quill, and started writing, fast. The first was a list.

1) Tempt Snape with Basilisk
2) Get Basilisk rendered for parts
3) Find way to clear Sirius
4) GET TRAINED. (Flitwick? Animagus?)
5) Place to live? (Sirius and Remus dealing with this one?)

The second parchment was a letter to Sirius and Remus

Sirius and Remus

Hi guys, me again. Had a talk with Dumbledore. Sirius, if there is any possible way to do it (and the offer is still open), I'll take you up on that offer you made at the end of third year. Staying with the
Dursleys is a moot point now, and as much as I like the Weasley's ... they're not really my family. You are, both of you. Or, what's left of it anyway. There's so much I need to do. There's a prophecy. Basically, it says that I'm the only one that can deal with Voldemort. Dumbledore's known since before I was born. Makes me wonder why he's sat back and done nothing to ... nevermind, that's a rant for later, as I've already said it to him, and to my friends. It's going to be a while before I can talk to him civilly, though! Also, would you be willing to teach me to become an animagus, if that's possible?

Harry

The third was a short note to Snape.

Professor

If you are interested in acquiring some basilisk parts (which I have been assured are still in good condition) meet me in the third floor girls' bathroom tonight after dinner, and bring LOTS of containers and whatever supplies you need to render the thing. I will require half the hide for my share of the carcass, but aside from that, any parts useable for potions are yours.

Harry Potter

"Dobby, take this one to Snape first, then this one to Sirius and Remus, please."

Dobby nodded. "Right away Harry Potter sir!"

And he popped away.

While he'd been busy, there's been a low-voiced conference between the Weasleys (Hermione was already nose-deep in a book). Finally, they parted and Ron called over.

"Hey, mate? Y'might wanna talk to Neville. The Longbottom's one of the oldest families, a lot like the Potters were. He'd know ... or his gran would, at least ... most if not all what you're wanting to know when it comes to laws and customs and stuff, since it's a bit different for them than for most of the rest of us." Ron's ears were nearly as red as his hair and he wasn't looking at Harry.

Harry felt a bit bad. The Weasley's were good people, no three ways about it, but they were poor, and didn't exactly travel in the same circles as the Malfoys and that lot ... and that was who Harry was going to have to be dealing with and outsmarting, one way or another. He needed to know the rules that lot operated under (well, the rules they were supposed to operate under, at any rate!).

"And y'might wanna sound out Susan Bones, too. Her aunt's head of the DMLE. If anybody'd know how to help Sirius, it'd be her aunt. You'd just have to be careful and not let her know you know where Sirius is, at least until she knows all of what's going on."

Harry nodded. "That sounds like a good idea, though I'll probably hold off on Bones until I have a better idea of what to say." Somehow, he doubted that walking up to the head of the DMLE and saying 'Sirius is innocent, now quit hunting him down!' would do any good, even if it was the truth.

Dobby finally returned, with two notes, which he handed over to Harry. Harry decided to get the one from Snape over with first. To his surprise, there were precisely three words on the scrap of parchment, and none of them was an insult, though Harry fancied he could hear the sneer in Snape's voice if he'd been speaking.

I'll be there

"Probably thinks I'm full of shite." Harry muttered to himself, then opened the letter from Sirius and
Remus.

Harry

You're just lucky you're there and I'm here, or I'd thump you for thinking I wanted to go back on that offer, pup. As it stands, I'll just have to get even later. Believe it or not, there is a possibility of it happening. Seems that while my folks said I was disinherited when I got sorted into Gryffindor, they never got around to making it legal, and since I never had a trial, I inherited everything when they died, including the Black family house. I hate the place, and the house-elf is more than a little insane (in a bad way) and more than a bit nasty, but if Dobby and Winky are willing, we can do something about that. Dumbledore's already starting to get the old gang together that was working with him against Voldemort, and I offered the place as a headquarters. We've been by, and the place is a wreck, but salvageable. Remus says he's more than happy to pick you up at Hogwarts and bring you here once school's out. We should have the place secured by then ... Dumbledore's coming by this weekend to deal with the security issues.

Now, regarding the other bit of news in your note. I think Dumbledore's heart was in the right place. He screwed up massively, there's no question of that, but I don't really think he meant for things to happen the way they did. That said, they did happen the way they did, and we're stuck cleaning the mess. Don't worry, kiddo, Remus and I will do everything in our power to help you with this. The house has a rather extensive library, with books not found much of anywhere else. And while you'll be forbidden to get anywhere near some of them (I plan on destroying them, because they're that bad), there's bound to be books with information in them that's either not much known or has been lost to time. Just remind me to keep a stinging jinx handy to get Hermione out of there if she sees the library. And of COURSE I'll help you learn to become an animagus! It shouldn't take you as long as it took us, since you'll have the benefit of working with someone who's already an animagus, and won't have to do all the research and trial and error we went through.

Sirius (and Remus, of course)

Harry was more than a bit misty-eyed by the end of the letter. It never ceased to amaze him, having an adult he could depend on like this.

"Winky!" Winky popped in, and Harry blinked. He hadn't seen her since before breakfast, and since then ... well, she'd taken the whole 'clean up' directive to heart. She looked squeaky clean, and the little dress she'd been wearing had been mended and cleaned. Harry grinned. "You're looking much better, Winky. Dobby, Winky, Sirius said in this letter he's got a place for us to stay, but evidently it's in bad repair. School lets out next week ... would you two mind helping clean the place and putting it to rights?"

"Of course we's help, Master Harry!" Winky said. Beside her, Dobby was nodding so hard his ears were threatening to slap his head.

"That's great." Merlin. Living with Sirius and Remus. No more Dursley's. The idea was hard to credit, really. He just hoped that everything held together and it really happened. Merlin knew things tended to go to the dogs around him often enough for him to be wary.
The rest of the day passed quietly enough, though Harry was more than slightly disturbed by the grins on the twins' faces. He wondered, again, if introducing the Marauders and the Twins was the best idea he'd ever had. But then again, the look on Voldemort's face when he got pranked ought to be worth it. Or Malfoy, for that matter. Just the thought made him snicker, and he was quite sure Dobby would be more than willing to help slip something to the elder Malfoy in repayment for his treatment at the man's hands.

He didn't eat much supper, in anticipation of having to deal with a very large, very dead snake. Not to mention Snape. Snape, on the other hand, looked entirely normal, though Harry wasn't really surprised. He was pretty sure the school in its entirety (Slytherins included) would pass out in shock if Snape ever did something as radical as smile of his own free will, or act anything other than the grumpy git he was.

Dinner done, Harry hurried to Myrtle's bathroom. She, thankfully, seemed to be absent, or at least content to sulk in silence in a toilet. Snape arrived a few moments later, a crate about three feet on a side bobbing in his wake and a large leather package in his hands. For a miracle, the sneer was, while not absent, somewhat reduced.

"I hope that crate's shrunk, Professor." Harry said.

That got the sneer back to its customary levels, though Snape forebore to actually say anything ... probably thought it would be a waste of air. Harry turned to the sinks and hissed at them, then glanced over at Snape as the sink moved aside.

From the sudden blanking of his expression, Harry guessed that Dumbledore hadn't told Snape much, if anything, about this particular adventure. This ... had potential to be fun. Harry glanced at the tunnel as a thought occurred to him. Surely Salazar Slytherin would have thought it well beneath his dignity to slide down a pipe? Stairs! He hissed, and gave a pleased grin when the pipe twisted and changed, producing a spiral staircase rather like the one that led to the headmaster's office. He really should have thought of that the first time around, but things had been more than a bit crazy. And besides, it had been fun pushing that git Lockhart into the pipe.

They made their way down in silence, the crate following like an obedient puppy. Soon enough they were at the bottom, and Harry led the way towards the Chamber proper, until they got to the cave-in. Sadly, the rock had covered most of the sloughed-off skin, leaving only a few fragments visible.

"This is where Lockhart tried to Obliviate us. Thankfully, the idiot had grabbed Ron's wand, and it backfired."

Snape didn't comment, just dug his wand out of wherever it was hiding and flicked it at the mess, creating a rough but serviceable arch with the rubble. Once the way was cleared, they continued, and then the door to the Chamber was in front of them. Harry twisted to get a good look at Snape.

For once, the man seemed to be startled into an expression other than his usual grumpy sneer. He'd stopped just inside the Chamber, eyes glued to the basilisk's head. Most of the rest of it was hidden,
either behind statues or behind the bulk of the head and the first bit of neck, but the head was, really, impressive enough without having to see the rest. Snape's eyes had gone wide, and when he glanced at Harry, Harry fancied he saw something that might be kin to respect in the man's eyes for the first time. But then again, this was Snape, and he probably was imagining it.

Once he took his attention off Snape, Harry had to suppress a shiver. Everything was exactly as it had been when he and Ginny had left. The rubble from the basilisk's blind thrashings, the tooth. Even the amount of blood was the same, which Harry found strange. Considering the thing'd had a sword shoved through its brain, you'd think it would have continued to leak blood for quite some time, but there was no evidence of that.

Snape seemed to have recovered, and was now circling the basilisk's head, assessing it.

"There must be some sort of preservation spell on this Chamber, for the carcass to be so unchanged." He growled. "So much the better. I had ... underestimated ... the size of the creature. It will take a great deal of time to render it."

That made Harry smirk, as he was fairly sure Snape had thought the basilisk was only a few feet in length, because after all, Harry was an incompetent idiot, right? He left Snape to his rendering, and began to explore a bit, poking his nose in corners and hissing 'open'. Sadly, there did not seem to be anything else in the Chamber, just the statues and the snake.

"If you are quite done wasting time." Snape snapped. "You will assist me."

Harry grimaced, then shrugged and headed over.

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The weekend, and the last week of school that followed, were surprisingly quiet. Harry spent his evenings in the Chamber, helping Snape render the basilisk. With just the two of them, it was going to take a very long time to harvest everything that was useable, but the fact that the Chamber seemed to be frozen in time meant they had the time they needed.

Eventually, it was the last day. Harry felt more than a little odd, packing his things but knowing he'd not be going on the train. Still, the fact that he'd not have to so much as glimpse the Dursleys was more than compensation for missing the ride. Especially since Harry sincerely wanted to keep the Marauders as far away from the Dursleys as was humanly and magically possible. He did NOT want to know what the two of them would do if they ever found out the full extent of how the Dursleys had treated him.

Harry waited on the front steps, trunk and Hedwig's cage at his feet. She was, as Ron had predicted, currently not 'speaking' to him, giving him irate looks and snapping her beak at him. She'd have to deal.

And then Remus walked into sight, coming from the direction of the Whomping Willow, a very familiar black dog trotting alongside. Harry had to grin. Padfoot looked much better than he had third year. His coat was clean and at least somewhat groomed, and he looked like he'd filled out somewhat.

That was all the time he had to observe, though, as Padfoot took off at a dead run and pounced on him, sprawling him backwards and slobbering all over his face. Harry laughed as he tried to fend him off.

"Padfoot! That's gross! Gerroff!"
It took a few moments to wrestle Padfoot into submission, but Harry eventually succeeded, then gave Remus, who was standing nearby, grinning widely and chuckling, a jaundiced glare.

"Oh, you're a big help." Harry mock-groused.

"Ready to go?" Remus asked, ignoring the comment.

"Definitely."

Remus Leviosa'd Harry's trunk, while Harry grabbed Hedwig's cage. They walked towards the Willow, and Remus forced the tree to freeze long enough for them to scramble into the tunnel.

"Man, this brings back memories!" Harry said, getting an amused chuckle from Remus and a woof from Padfoot.

Once in the Shack, Sirius transformed. Harry was ... quite pleasantly surprised. Sirius looked loads better. His hair was clean and had been cut, though it was still a bit past his shoulders. He'd got some color, and had lost the gaunt, skeletal look, though it looked like he could still stand to gain a stone. And better yet, his eyes seemed to have lost some of the haunted, slightly mad look.

"It's so good to see you again, Harry!" Sirius said, pulling him into a hug. Even his voice had improved, having lost the harsh, rasping edge it'd had this time last year. Harry returned the hug, and they pulled apart.

"Now." Sirius said. "We'll be apparating to an alley near the house. I'll have to transform back to Padfoot once we're there, but once we're in the house we'll be fine. Albus put it under Fidelius, and he's the Secret Keeper."

That said, Sirius pulled Harry close, and ... and Harry was subjected to the worst method of wizarding travel yet. And he'd though portkeys were bad? He felt turned inside out and upside down when they got where they were going, and had to cling to Sirius to keep his feet under him as nausea threatened. Once he'd got his breath and managed to loose his deathgrip on Sirius' arm, Sirius transformed to Padfoot, and they walked out of the alley onto a street, and down it for a ways before they stopped. Remus held out a scrap of paper. "Read this and memorize it, then I'll destroy it."

The Order of the Phoenix's Headquarters is at 12 Grimmauld Place

Harry read it and memorized it, and when he looked up, he did a doubletake. Because there was a building there that hadn't been a few moments ago ... a building whose outside was dingy and dirty and in dire need of repair.

Sirius must have seen something in Harry's expression, because he grimaced. "It's not much, I know, but it's home for now."

They walked in, and Harry stopped in his tracks. The place was a wreck! It was clear that some attempt at cleaning had been made, since the entry hall was relatively free of dirt, dust, and grime, but the rooms he could see into from here looked like they hadn't been cleaned since the dawn of time.

"Oh my. I see why you were hoping Dobby and Winky would help. Why hasn't the existing house-elf ... ?"

"Because he's insane." Sirius supplied. "KREACHER!" He bellowed, and a few moments later, the house-elf's answer to Snape appeared. Dirtier than Winky had been in the wake of losing her Master, and muttering what had to be insults if the tone was anything to go by.
"The blood traitor master called Kreacher?" It snarled. That was, though, as far as it got, because Sirius' yell started something else yelling. Sirius cursed, and, before the painting could get out more than something about blood traitors and half-bloods, wrestled some curtains into place over the painting.

"What the ..." Harry asked.

Sirius grimaced. "My darling mother. We can't get the picture down, either. We've tried."

Harry winced. "Right. Dobby! Winky!"

Moments later, the two appeared. They took one look around and their eyes went wide in utter horror. Then, as one, and before anyone realized what they were about to do, they launched themselves at Kreacher, hurling imprecations and insults at him at high volume and high speed as the pair of them proceeded to thrash Kreacher. It took Harry a few moments to get over the surprise.

"Dobby, Winky! Stop!"

Instantly the pair obeyed. Sirius looked like he was trying very hard not to fall over laughing. Kreacher just looked seriously angry.

"Right, you two ... leave Kreacher be, ok? Do you two think you can help get this place to rights?"

"Of course we can, Harry Potter sir!" Dobby said, nodding emphatically.

"That's great. Oh, and, if you two can figure out how to get that. Harry pointed at the painting. "Down, you'll get a special treat of your choice."

This made Kreacher wail in horror, and Dobby and Winky both got scheming looks on their faces as they considered the portrait. Harry had a feeling its days were numbered, even if the pair of them had to vanish and rebuild the wall to get rid of it. Sirius and Remus got identical hell-raising grins on their faces.

Over the next hour, Harry got a rather up-close look at what a house-elf was capable of. A few snaps and pops, and who-knows-how-many-years worth of loose dust and grime vanished as if it had never been all through the first floor, yet Dobby and Winky hadn't moved from the front hall. There was still a lot of ground-in dirt, things were still dingy thanks to lack of care, and there were still doxies in the curtains, and if the banging was any indication, a boggart hidden somewhere. But there was a visible improvement after a grand total of five seconds of effort on the elves' parts.

Once that bit had been done, Dobby and Winky split up, heading into separate rooms. Harry followed Dobby, just to see what was up, and watched as Dobby glared at a particular piece of furniture for a moment before snapping his fingers. Between one blink and the next, the piece went from dull and dingy to looking like it was brand new. Dobby repeated the process on every individual piece of furniture, then tackled the walls, floor, ceiling and windows. The only thing, it appeared, that he couldn't handle, were the doxies. Since Harry had no idea how to deal with them, he called for Remus ... and got an impromptu lesson as Remus dealt with the things.

By the time the room was spotless and completely rejuvenated, Dobby looked like he'd run a marathon. When the little elf moved as if to head for the next room, Harry stopped him.

"Take a break, Dobby. You look worn out. Go find Winky and tell her the same thing, ok?"

Dobby nodded and popped out of sight without a word, which was all the evidence Harry needed that Dobby was more tired than he'd let on.
It wasn't until then that Harry investigated where Sirius had got to, and found him on the second floor. He had, evidently, been setting up Harry's room (the bedroom must have been cleaned before Harry arrived, as the elves hadn't dealt with the second floor at all, but the room was clean). Harry caught him standing in the middle of the room, holding one of Harry's hand-me-down shirts with a confounded look on his face.

"Harry ... what on earth is this?" Sirius asked. "Herbology smock, so you don't get your uniform filthy?"

Well, that wasn't such a bad idea, but it wasn't what it was, and Harry cringed internally. This was NOT going to go over well. "It's one of my shirts."

Sirius gave him an odd look, then looked at the ragged, dingy shirt (which was about ten sizes too big for Harry), then back at Harry. "Sleep shirt?" With a bit of a glitter that said 'it better be' in his eyes.

Uh oh. "Ummm ... " Harry tried valiantly to think of a way to break this to Sirius that wouldn't result in Sirius ending up in Azkaban again ... this time because he WAS guilty of killing someone. Unfortunately, nothing came to mind.

Not that it'd have helped, because Sirius was getting the picture all on his own, and his expression became thunderous. "You mean to tell me ... " He started, voice a nasty snarl.

"Sirius, it's over, ok? And I'm never going back. There's no point in getting fussed. I fully intend to forget they ever existed as soon as possible." Harry said, half afraid he'd go tearing off.

Sirius seemed to think this over, almost visibly deciding to shelve the issue for later. "Right. You, Remus, and a shopping trip, I think. And if you can get him to buy things for himself, so much the better."

That made Harry grinned in relief. "I'll try." He wasn't dumb enough to think this was actually over, but at least Sirius wasn't charging out the door with murder on his mind. It'd be that much worse for the Dursleys later, when Sirius finally got around to dealing with them (Harry had no illusions whatever of what Sirius, Remus, and the twins were capable of, nor did he think that Sirius would NOT bring them in on the revenge sooner or later), but Harry really couldn't care about that right now.

He peered around the room, grinning a bit. There were Gryffindor banners all over the walls, the drapes, bed curtains and duvet were all Gryffindor red and gold. There were a lot of pictures on the walls ... and some odd gaps where some pictures had been. Harry wandered over to the pictures and inhaled sharply when he recognized a teenaged Sirius waving at him from one of them, arms slung over the necks of two boys, one of whom looked like a clone of Harry, the other a nigh-unrecognizable younger Remus, looking far less scarred and far younger and more happy and carefree than the man Harry knew. All three were mugging for the camera like crazy.

"This used to be my room as a kid. I figured you'd be a bit more comfortable in here than in most of the other rooms. They're more dungeons than rooms, really. Slytherin colors everywhere." He wrinkled his nose in distaste. "I took down all the pictures with him in them." No need to clarify what him Sirius meant. "And a few things your young eyes weren't meant to see, but left the rest. I knew you'd enjoy them."

"This is brilliant, Sirius. You're sure you won't mind?" Harry's voice was suspiciously rough.

Sirius scoffed. "I don't mind a bit. I took the room next door, and Remus grabbed the one on the
other side of you."

This pleased Harry inordinately. Having them so close, and wanting to be that close ... ! After a
lifetime of the Dursleys, it'd take him a while to get used to it, but he liked it. He liked it a lot.

It didn't take long to unpack his trunk, and once it was done, there was hardly a sign someone lived
here now, except for the owl perch and the photo album on the bedside table, but then, Harry hadn't
exactly had the opportunity ... or desire ... to get a lot of belongings. Though he supposed he had that
option now.

They spent the rest of the day either getting settled, exploring (on Harry's part), or helping Dobby
and Winky deal with infestations of various critters as the elves continued their cleaning efforts (with
breaks enforced by Harry). By the time the three wizards headed for bed, the first floor was night-
unrecognizable from the filthy wreck it had been when Harry arrived. Sadly, the portrait remained,
for now. Dobby and Winky were far too busy trying to conquer the dirt and muck to worry about
renovations. For now. Harry had found the shell of what had once been a potions lab (now empty of
everything save a few rather sad looking cauldrons), the library (Just being near some of the books
gave him the willies), the kitchen, what looked like a dueling chamber (the walls, ceiling and floor
were made of an odd, matte-gray material that seemed to absorb light and sound), and a room whose
purpose Harry couldn't guess, but whose walls were covered in the Black family tree. There were
also a great many bedrooms and rooms to gather together in, with couches and chairs scattered
around, and a dining room for when there were more people than the kitchen could manage (or for
formal occasions, Harry supposed). By far the most disturbing find, back in a far corner of the
basement, was the cells. Harry had shuddered in horror when he'd found them, even if they would
now serve a kinder purpose (It was clear one had been renovated for Remus' use during the full
moon). The Blacks, Harry reflected, had been a rather disturbing bunch. It made him wonder how
Sirius had happened. Harry had not, he realized, seen Kreacher all day since he got beat up by
Dobby and Winky, and wondered what the sullen, ill-tempered elf was up to. It had all, Harry
reflected as he crawled into his new bed, added up to a long, interesting day. And they had a
gameplan to put together tomorrow, and shopping, and ... well, it didn't look like life was going to be
dull for quite some time.
Shocks and Shopping

Chapter 6: Shocks and Shopping

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

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July 1, 1995

It having been decreed that shopping was a must, Harry woke early. He feared a long day was ahead of him. He knew it was necessary, given that his supply of clothing was rather pitiful, but still. He hated shopping. Ok, he was lying. He just was not looking forward to being in public. The furor surrounding the Triwizard Cup and how it ended was nowhere near dying down yet, and Harry was sure he'd get inundated, harassed, and otherwise completely annoyed. He got up, showered, got dressed, and started downstairs only to turn right around and go digging in his trunk for his vault key, then traipsed downstairs.

Winky was just putting plates of eggs and bacon and toast on the table. Remus looked half asleep and half dead. Considering that tomorrow was the full moon, this did not overly surprise Harry ... Remus had always looked a bit rough the days before he disappeared during third year (and it chagrined Harry no end that he'd had to have Hermione point out the obvious regarding those absences. Really, sometimes he could be so dense!). Fortunately, between the food and some strong tea, he improved considerably. Still, Harry resolved to keep this as short as he could. Sirius finally stumbled down the stairs just as he and Remus were getting up. He blinked at them muzzily for a moment before collapsing in a chair and letting his forehead hit the table.

Remus looked highly amused by this. "Sirius never was a morning person. I guess that hasn't changed."

Harry eyed Sirius, trying not to snicker. "So noted. I'll try not to prank him before he's fully awake."

"Now where's the fun in that?" Remus wanted to know. "You ready to head out?" Harry nodded. "Excellent. And to make the day a lot more tolerable for you, since I know how much you adore being stared at and hounded ... " Remus pulled out his wand, waved it in Harry's face, and muttered a long incantation that Harry didn't quite catch. An odd, shivery sensation worked its way down Harry's spine, and then Remus nodded. "There, that ought to do the trick nicely." And he conjured a mirror.

Harry did a doubletake at the face in the mirror. He looked ... well, he rather looked like he could be Remus' son, rather than a Potter. Sandy brown hair, brown eyes, no scar anywhere in evidence. In short ... he was someone that no one would notice unduly.

"This. Is. Brilliant! Thanks, Remus!" Harry hugged him happily, then followed Remus into one of the ground-floor rooms that had a big fireplace (Harry supposed it qualified as a parlour, though there seemed to be more than one of those in the house). Remus grabbed a small container off the mantle, and started a fire in the grate. Moments later, they were both on their way to the Leaky Cauldron.

Harry grumbled under his breath as he picked himself up off the Leaky Cauldron's floor. He was never going to get the hang of that. Remus, bless him, ignored the fact Harry'd nearly bloodied his nose on the cobbles, and just headed for the entrance to the Alley.

It being the first serious shopping day of the summer, it was hardly surprising that the Alley was
busy, though it was nowhere near as insane as it was closer to the start of the school year. Harry stuck close to Remus, and had to actively stop himself from hunching in on himself every time someone glanced his way. Only the fact that their eyes slid over him without any spark of recognition kept him from trying to hide his (currently invisible) scar with his hair. By the time they'd got to the doors of Gringotts, he'd got over the worst of it and really started enjoying himself.

They headed up to a counter and Harry presented his key ... which started a bit of a kerfuffle. The goblin at the desk gave him a very sharp, very pointed, suspicious and almost angry look. It took Harry a few seconds to figure out why, and once it occurred to him, he really didn't blame the goblin. "I'm wearing a glamour." He said in a low voice, then glanced over at Remus. "Cancel it? Just for a minute?" Remus nodded, and cancelled the glamour. This seemed to appease the goblin, at least in part. At any rate, it looked less angry and suspicious.

"You have come to inspect your vaults and holdings, then?" It asked. Which question flummoxed Harry for a moment.

"Vaults? Plural?"

"Of course." The goblin said. "A few moments, and I shall escort you to the manager of your vaults."

A few minutes later found a rather bemused Harry in the office of a very elderly and snaggly-looking goblin. "I am Gorbsnank." The goblin said. "I was informed you did not know of your inheritance?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I had no idea. I thought the trust vault was it." He glanced over at Remus, who looked a bit abashed.

"I knew, sort of generally." He admitted. "But I thought Dumbledore'd told you." Harry grumbled. Yet another screwup to lay at the Headmaster's feet. This was getting seriously annoying. "So ... vaults?"

"Yes. There is one strictly for money, and a second that holds paperwork and family heirlooms. Both are high-security vaults."

Which probably meant they were only accessible by goblin, like the vault the Stone'd been in, first year. "And I can access those vaults?"

"Yes. As the last scion of an ancient and noble house, you should have had partial access starting on your thirteenth birthday. Full access begins on the fifteenth birthday, but given your participation in the Triwizard Cup, you are considered an adult insofar as Gringotts is concerned."

Ok, that was news. Not that it'd have been a long wait, seeing that his fifteenth birthday was at the end of the month anyway. And he was going to (metaphorically) kill Dumbledore for this. No. Wait. Better, sic the twins on him. That sounded like a plan. "I'd like to go down there, then."

"Of course."

So down they went, deeper, Harry was sure, than even the Stone's vault had been. The vaults were side-by-side. Harry peeked into the money vault first, and nearly fell over. As stunning as his trust vault had been, this was ... more. A lot more. His trust vault was maybe ... maybe ... a tenth the size of this one. And there was only a handful of Sickles and Knuts near the door. The rest of it was Galleons. As far as the eye could see.

"Whoah." Harry whispered, blinking. He gave his head a shake, then looked over at Remus. "Right. That does it. You're getting kitted out too." And when Remus, predictably, started to object. "Forget
it, Remus. You're not going to win this one. I may be younger, but I'm way more stubborn. I'll resort to early Christmas presents if I have to."

Remus subsided, but he still looked guilty and uncomfortable. Harry ignored that as he loaded up a pouch with probably way more money than he'd need, but better safe than sorry, since he didn't know exactly what the exchange rate was, or how much he'd need for the purchases he intended to make.

The next stop was the heirloom vault. This one was as large as the money vault, and packed with things. Furniture of every description, tapestries, portraits, jewels and jewelry, a scattering of weapons, some odd artifacts, and what looked like the entirety of a library, among other items. Remus peered around for a moment.

"Looks like they emptied Potter Manor as a precaution." He said. "That looks like most of the Potter Family library, if I'm not mistaken."

"Potter. Manor." Harry echoed, eyebrows heading for his hairline as he stared at Remus. "Manor. As in house. As in place to live. You're telling me ... " He let out an angry snarl and fought the urge to hit something. " ... Dumbledore and I are going to have words." He all but hissed the words.

Harry wandered around the vault, looking at things. He didn't touch much, and what he did touch, he doublechecked with Remus first. Not that he thought there'd be nasty Dark artifacts, given his family's allegiances, but it paid to be careful. He was tempted to bring some of the books out, but realized that he'd better check the Black library first. The one main find was in a box near the door ... the Potter family signet ring. Harry pocketed that, box and all.

Still grumbling under his breath about manipulative old codgers, Harry finally indicated they could head back to the surface. Remus reapplied the glamour, and they left the bank. Harry promptly dragged Remus to Madame Malkins, and they spent the next hour picking out robes and trousers and suchlike. Harry was tempted to bring some of the books out, but realized that he'd better check the Black library first. The one main find was in a box near the door ... the Potter family signet ring. Harry pocketed that, box and all.

Still grumbling under his breath about manipulative old codgers, Harry finally indicated they could head back to the surface. Remus reapplied the glamour, and they left the bank. Harry promptly dragged Remus to Madame Malkins, and they spent the next hour picking out robes and trousers and suchlike. Harry got a good snicker or three out of the fact that they both seemed to gravitate towards the less-expensive cloths and styles ... and even had fairly similar tastes in colors (neither of them approved of flamboyant colors or color combinations). That accomplished, Harry made a brief stop at the apothecary to stock up on potions ingredients ... he was determined to do well at potions, Snape be damned ... and at the Owl Emporium for treats for Hedwig.

That done, they stopped for lunch at the Leaky Cauldron before heading into Muggle London. Another hour picking out Muggle-style clothing, and then they stopped at an optometrist's. Much to Harry's pleasure, they left with contacts, both clear and colored. Harry had discovered, after a whimsical 'why-not' moment, that concealer, designed to camouflage all sorts of things, hid the scar quite nicely. Between that and the brown colored contacts, Harry'd be able to be out and about in the Wizarding world with minimal fuss without having to resort to spells that could be finite'd.

They both of them more or less collapsed when they staggered out of the floo at Grimmauld Place. Remus managed to stay upright just long enough to empty his pockets of shrunken-down bags before retreating to his room for the evening. Harry was tempted to follow suit, but his stomach was snarling enough that he detoured to the kitchen for something to eat. Food eaten, he dragged himself upstairs, and, hearing some noise from the library, went to investigate. And found Sirius, surrounded by books and crates of books. "Whatcha up to, Sirius?"

"Just sorting through this lot and getting rid of the booby-trapped books and books on subjects people really don't need to know anything about." Sirius gave one of the crates of books a jaundiced glare. "How'd the shopping go?"

"Went great. And I managed to get Remus kitted out without too much of a fuss. Pulled the 'early
Christmas presents' card on him, and he caved. I think he knew he'd get the stuff regardless."

Sirius grinned. "Good going." He finally looked up, and did a doubletake. "Hey! What happened to your glasses?"

Harry laughed. "I got contacts. They'll be a lot harder to get away from me. I've had my glasses knocked off my face way too often, and I'm pretty much blind without."

"Contacts?" Sirius echoed.

It was at times like this that Harry remembered that Sirius was a pureblood, raised in the Wizarding world, and therefore had remarkably little understanding of Muggle things (flying motorcycles notwithstanding). Also, his information was a decade or so out of date.

"Yeah. Basically, they're a thin film of plastic that conforms to the eyeball to correct your vision."

"Oh. Sounds ... painful."

"Nah. A bit disconcerting to put in, but not painful." Harry said, trying not to laugh. "I'll show you sometime." Harry offered, eliciting a shudder from Sirius. "No? Ok. I promise, it's nothing like Moody's eye." Harry had no idea how putting that in and out worked, or even if it was possible, but there was absolutely no way it could be comfortable. Or fun to watch happen. Eugh. "By the way, it's late, and I'm done in, so I'm heading for bed. Remus beat me to it already."

Sirius nodded. "See you in the morning, kiddo."
Organizing and Orders

Chapter Summary

Neither the Order nor Dumbledore approve of the new, improved Harry Potter. Not that this will stop him.

Chapter 7: Organizing and Orders.

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

July 4, 1995

That first full moon had been awful, in a lot of ways. Sirius had made Harry promise to stay on the second floor, in his room, and had warded the stairs as a secondary precaution. Still, despite them being in the basement, Harry'd been able to hear Remus transform. It'd been bad, that time at the end of third year, but Harry had kind of been distracted, what with time travel, Snape, Pettigrew and a host of other factors. Just sitting there that night and listening to Remus cry out in agonizing pain ... that had been bad. And Harry'd not seen hide nor hair of Remus until almost dinnertime next day, not that he blamed Remus.

This particular morning, Harry got rousted out of bed rather rudely by the sound of multiple voices, a huge crash and Mrs. Black screaming imprecations (Dobby and Winky hadn't managed to get rid of her yet. They were still cleaning and fixing.) The racket was such that Harry more or less catapulted out of bed and almost blasted his door off its hinges in his sleep-muddled confusion. Then, one of the voices penetrated his sleepy mind. It sounded an awful lot like Ron.

Harry pulled on some clothes, jammed his wand in his back pocket, and, still rubbing sleep from his eyes, shuffled down the stairs. He stopped halfway down and blinked. The front hall was a sea of redheads. It looked, as a matter of fact, like the entirety of the Weasley clan was here. Harry even spotted Bill in the melee.

"What ... are you guys ok? What happened?"

It was Ginny, who happened to be closest to the stairs, that answered. "Nothing. Everyone's fine. Mum just thought we could help clean and repair this place."

"Oh." Harry said, then gave his head a last shake to get rid of the sleepiness. "Does she know Dobby and Winky are here?"

"I think so, but I guess she thought they'd need help. Sirius said this place was a wreck."

"It was." Harry said. "You should have seen it. First floor and second're mostly ok now, thanks to Winky and Dobby, but the basement and third floor need working on yet."

It wasn't until the Weasleys had got themselves straightened out and organized that Harry realized more than the Weasleys had invaded the house. A woman about Bill's age with bright pink hair was standing near the front door, next to Moody and a tall black man. Moody gave him a nod before the
three of them disappeared into the kitchen.

They were not the only arrivals over the next half hour. Harry didn't know most of them, but he spotted Mrs. Figg at one point. Professors McGonagall, Flitwick and Snape all arrived together, though Snape rather looked like he was trying to pretend he hadn't arrived with them. About then, Sirius came down the stairs.

"What's going on?" Harry asked.

"Ahh, looks like the inaugual Order meeting," Sirius said, sneering at Snape's back.

"Order meeting?"

"Order of the Phoenix. Dumbledore put it together last time, to help deal with Voldemort. Now he's got a body again, Dumbledore's called the old gang together ... and recruited a few new faces along the way."

"Good thing I've nothing better to do today." Harry said, heading for the kitchen. He heard Sirius chuckle behind him. He was greeted by Molly.

"Good morning, dear. Sleep well?" She asked.

Harry grinned. "Yeah, at least until someone woke up the painting, anyway."

"Sorry about that!" This came from the pink-haired woman, who walked over. "M'name's Tonks. Sirius is my cousin." She said, offering a hand.

Harry shook it. "Nice to meet you." He grabbed a plate of food and plonked himself down at the table. While he ate, he listened to the chat, but it seemed to be largely inconsequential. Remus came in, and then Sirius, and a few minutes after that, Dumbledore walked in. Harry glowered at him.

Molly got to her feet and started clearing empty plates. "Harry dear, why don't you run along upstairs and catch up with Ron?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I'm staying for the meeting."

To say that put the kneazel among the snidgets was an understatement. Dumbledore frowned. So did many of the adults Harry didn't know. And most of them expressed their displeasure vocally. Molly? Molly fairly exploded. Harry took quiet note of who wasn't howling at him. Sirius and Remus of course, Tonks, Moody, and, oddly enough, Snape. A few others were keeping their mouths shut, but it seemed more because they were reluctant to get in the middle of things. McGonagall and Flitwick both looked torn.

"The cheek!"

"Begone, boy!"

"You're just a child!"

That last came from Molly, and Harry finally decided to put his two cents in. "ENOUGH!" He yelled at the top of his lungs. "Look, I'm not asking to be sent on missions or whatever. I just want to sit in on the meetings and know what's going on. I need to know. I may be young, but Voldemort really doesn't care. He's come after me all the same. He's made this my fight, whether I want it to be or not."
Dumbledore sighed. "Very well, Harry. But I must ask you not to ... "

Harry had a feeling he knew where that was going. "No. What I know, they know. Hermione, Ron and Ginny especially have earned the right. They've been there. They'll probably be there again. Thanks to the junior death eaters, he's bound to know they're my friends. They're targets the same as I am."

Molly looked less than pleased with that, but Dumbledore looked resigned.

"The boy has a point." Harry nearly fell off his chair when he realized that it was Snape, of all people, speaking in his defense. He gave the dour man a thankful nod.

It took a few minutes, but eventually the meeting got underway. Most of it was rather dry and uninteresting ... who they had where, who might be recruitable, which creatures they could sway to their side. There was no mention of any attacks ... yet. Harry had little hope that would last. The important information was the names of the people in the room. When the meeting broke up, Harry headed for the professors and the Headmaster, as they'd grouped together.

"Professor Snape?" Harry said. "Pettigrew used a potion to bring him back. I remember what he said as he was adding stuff. Could there be a way to slow him down or something, maybe, because of that?"

Snape glowered at him for a moment, before reluctantly nodding. "It might be possible." He allowed.

So Harry quoted the words he'd probably never forget as long as he lived, they'd got burned so deep into his brain, and told Snape what had been added at each step. Snape got a hooded look on his face and took off without another word. Harry took a deep breath and turned to Flitwick. "Professor? Back in third year, Hermione mentioned you were a Duelling Master. I was wondering if you'd be willing to teach me? I keep ending up having to fight for my life."

Flitwick fairly bounced. "Of course, Mr. Potter." He squeaked. "It would be my pleasure." He grinned. "I assume you would prefer your friends to join you?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, but I'm not entirely sure Mrs. Weasley will let them. Hermione at least will be able to."

Flitwick nodded. "I shall return tomorrow, and we can begin then." He said, and headed towards the parlour and the floo.

McGonagall gave Harry a rather amused look. "I dare say that some of my talents are, shall we say, redundant?" Harry grinned at her, knowing she meant becoming an animagus. She knew Sirius was likely to take care of that. "But I will be more than happy to give you extra tutelage this summer. Transfiguration can be used to good effect in a fight."

Harry nodded. "I really appreciate it, Professor." Then she too left. Leaving Harry with Dumbledore. For several long moments, there was silence while Harry debated what to say and how to say it. Finally, he opted for. "So. Anything else you haven't told me? Other than the prophecy, I mean."

Let's see if the old coot fesses up.

Which he didn't. Dumbledore shook his head. "Nothing comes immediately to mind."

Harry nearly exploded. "Nothing? Like, Potter Vaults nothing? Like 'Potter Manor' nothing? Who gave you the right ... " Harry flailed an arm, and jumped a mile when some of the plates by the sink went flying and shattered into a million pieces. He took a deep breath, fighting to get his temper under control, and leveled an arctic glare at Dumbledore. "I do not want your nose in any of my
personal business EVER again for any reason, I want you to turn over anything else you may oh-so-conveniently be 'holding' for me, like you had the cloak, and you'd better be a whole lot more forthcoming with information in general. Because if I didn't know better, I'd think you wanted Voldemort to win, the way you've been going."

Dumbledore reacted like he'd been suckerpunched. "I assure you Harry ... " He started, his voice as shaken as his expression.

"Assure all you want. Your actions don't exactly agree with your mouth." Harry snapped. "Get it through your head. I am not five years old. Shite, I was never five years old. I am also, apparently, the only one who can fix a little problem named Voldemort. Keeping me untrained and ignorant is kind of counterproductive to that cause."

That said, Harry stormed off, up the stairs. It wasn't until he got to his room that he started to shake from a combination of nerves and anger and adrenaline. A few moments later, there was a quiet knock on his door.

"You ok, pup? Heard most of your little chat with Dumbledore."

Harry glanced over at Sirius. "I'll be all right, Sirius. I'm just really mad."

Sirius walked over and sat next to him on the bed. "Merlin knows you've a right to be. Dumbledore's made a right hash of things. Just try not to run him off with his tail between his legs until after you've got what you want, right?"

Harry gave a shaky laugh. "You've got a point."

"Anyway, my visit has many purposes. Minerva and Filius said you'd asked for extra training?"

Harry nodded in confirmation. "Filius said he'd be here directly after breakfast tomorrow, and Minerva's laid claim to the afternoon. You're probably going to have to set up a schedule with them tomorrow."

"Yeah, I kind of figured. And I need to write Neville. Ron said he'd ... hey, wait. The Blacks were a big-name family. Can you teach me that stuff?"

"That stuff? Lordee, but my mother'd be rolling in her grave hearing it called that." Sirius said, collapsing backward on the bed as he laughed. After a few moments, he sat up. "Unfortunately, I can't. I mean, I know the rules and regs, well, most of them, as regards the Blacks, but you've got to remember, the Blacks were most definitely not on the side of the good guys, and their ... ways ... reflected that. Longbottom'd be a far better choice. Augusta, Neville's grandmother, is a force to be reckoned with. I can fill you in on the sneakier, Slytherin ploys that Malfoy and his ilk will be likely to pull, though."
July 5, 1995

Harry woke early the next morning, looking forward to learning from Professor Flitwick. It was odd, though, to hear so much activity in the house. The younger Weasleys were all still present, as was Molly, if the racket was anything to go by.

Breakfast was a chaotic and rather amusing affair, as Harry got to witness a highly entertaining ... discussion ... between Molly Weasley and Winky, both of whom seemed to think it their sole job to cook for all and sundry. Harry finally waded in after a few moments.

"Winky, let Mrs. Weasley cook breakfast. That'll give you more time to plan and cook lunch and dinner."

Winky pouted a bit, but acquiesced. Harry grinned and crouched down, patting one thin shoulder. "Mrs. Weasley likes taking care of people, I think, Winky. It makes her happy. And I'm sure there's more than enough to do around here that you won't be bored." He told her quietly. Winky still seemed mildly offended, but Harry had a feeling that she could understand wanting to take care of people, even if she didn't approve of 'masters' doing so.

Molly looked ... very pinched after breakfast, as Ron, Ginny, and the twins trooped into the dueling room with Harry. Flitwick arrived a few minutes later ... and then Sirius plodded in, still looking more asleep than awake.

"Sirius?" Harry called, looking slightly confused.

Sirius snorted. "It's been a while since I've been in a fight, pup. Figure I could use a refresher ... and your professor could probably do with a partner to demonstrate with. Or on."

This occasioned quite a bit of laughter, and then Flitwick got down to business. "Now, since the odds of you finding yourselves in an official duel where all the rules are observed are going to be next to none, considering who your attackers are likely to be." Flitwick said. "I will only be giving you a brief run-down of the rules for that sort of dueling. Instead, we will be concentrating on surviving a no-holds-barred firefight."

That made a lot of sense to Harry, and he could see the others nodding.

It took Flitwick less than five minutes to go through the general rules for 'proper' duels, and Harry was surprised to discover that between Draco's attempt first year, the dueling club second year, and
the mad scramble in the graveyard, he already knew almost all of it, though it'd never been explained to him all together in a logical manner until now.

Flitwick then ran each of them through their paces. The twins, to Harry's surprise, were lackluster duelists at best, though Harry caught Flitwick frowning at the twins' wands. Ron did better than his brothers, which pleased him no end. The real standout of the bunch was Ginny, though that wasn't saying much when going up against someone of Flitwick's caliber. She, at least, lasted the longest of the others.

And then it was his turn. At first, Harry choked, reluctant to attack a teacher (Snape notwithstanding) for no real reason. That lasted until Flitwick started tossing spells, and then Harry was just acting on instinct, ducking, diving, and throwing whatever spells came to mind as fast as he could say them. Still, he lasted all of about two minutes before Flitwick managed to hit him with a petrificus.

Once he'd been released from the spell, it was Sirius' turn ... and this bout proved to be ... well, everything the 'tests' with them hadn't been. This was spectacular. And more than a little scary, if in a good way. Flitwick clearly subscribed to the 'you can't hurt what you can't catch' school of fighting ... he was never still, never staying in one spot for more than a few seconds. And Flitwick's catalogue of spells was ... downright intimidating. Harry was fairly sure he didn't use the same spell twice.

Sirius, on the other hand ... well, his Marauder roots were showing. Creativity and near insanity seemed to be his stock in trade. Fully half the spells he used that Harry recognized were prank spells, and he used some spells in groups for effects that were ... rather interesting (like Aguamenti followed by a freezing spell, creating an ice-rink around Flitwick's part of the arena). Flitwick won, of course, and Sirius flopped down next to Harry, out of breath and grinning like a maniac.

"That was fun."

"You're nuts, Sirius, you do know that, right?" Harry said, grinning at him.

They spent the rest of the morning learning, not spells, but battlefield tactics. Things like being aware of your surroundings, using what was around you for cover, not letting yourself get cornered, and suchlike things. Flitwick stressed the use of debris as shields, considering that Death Eaters tended to rely heavily on the Unforgivables and other Dark spells with seriously deleterious effects, which either could not be blocked by magical means or required a very high-powered shield to fend them off. It was, he insisted, more economical energy-wise to float a chunk of stone into the spell's path if that option was available. Provided, of course, that ducking out of the way wasn't possible.

"You will not be facing honorable opponents who insist on following the rules of dueling." Flitwick said more than once. "And as such, you must not fall into the trap of treating such fights as proper duels, or you're going to be in considerable difficulties."

That was, Harry reflected, putting it rather mildly. Eventually, Flitwick took his leave, and they spent a bit talking things over. Lunch was a strained affair, with Molly eyeing all of them with a pinch-mouthed look and sniffing disapprovingly now and again. They were all rather relieved to escape to the parlour to wait for McGonagall.

They spent the rest of the day reviewing their first year of lessons.

"Using Transfiguration in a fight is a very useful tool." She told them. "But you must first be able to transfigure items with speed and accuracy ... it will do you little good if you have to stop and concentrate, or only manage a partial transfiguration. I know you can all do these tasks, but now you must work on being able to do them quickly."
Ron, it soon became clear, had improved drastically from first year, though he still had issues with pronunciation. The twins were the quickest, but that didn't surprise Harry in the least, given that most of their pranks involved transfiguration or potions of some sort, or both. He and Ginny lagged behind, and Harry sighed. He'd never been particularly strong at Transfiguration.

By dinnertime, they could barely drag themselves to the table, they were so worn out, and Harry crawled into bed and slept the night through.
Chapter 9: Animagi and Arrangements

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

July 6, 1995

The next day brough an unexpected surprise. Hermione arrived just before lunch. They spent lunch catching her up on everything, doing more talking than eating (well, except for Ron). After dinner, they all trooped up to Harry's room so they could talk without Molly overhearing them. She was having problems enough with her children learning offensive spells and being kept up on the news in the Order.

"Researching this 'power' is going to be tricky." Hermione said. "I looked at some things at school before we left, but I sincerely doubt that there'll be anything to find there ... he did go to school at Hogwarts, after all, which means he had access to those books."

Harry was mildly surprised that Hermione had admitted that a library didn't hold the answer. "Talk to Sirius. He'n Remus have been dealing with the library here, getting rid of hexed books and the like. They might be able to point you at some possibilities ... and us too for that matter."

Hermione nodded. "What did Neville say?"

"Neville?" Harry's face scrunched for a moment, and then he slapped his forehead. "I forgot! Things got so nuts ..." He headed for his desk and started scribbling on a scrap of parchment quickly. "Thanks for reminding me, Hermione."

"You're welcome." She said with a grin.

Note written, Harry called for Dobby. "Take this to Neville Longbottom, please, Dobby."

"Of course Harry Potter Sir!" Dobby squeaked, then popped away.

"So, we've got dueling practice, research ... what else?" Ron wanted to know.

"Well, Sirius offered to teach me to be an animagus." Harry said. "I'm sure he'd be just as happy to teach you guys."

Fred and George looked like they'd gotten their Christmas and birthday presents all in one go and early to boot. "SWEET!"

Ron and Ginny were only marginally less excited. Hermione, though, looked troubled. "But becoming an animagus is supposed to be frightfully difficult!" She pointed out.

Harry shrugged. "My dad and Sirius managed it when they were our age, and with no help at all. If they can do it, we can."

Insofar as Harry was concerned, Pettigrew did not exist as a Marauder, so he didn't mention him in conjunction with them. "Let's go see if they're busy."

And so the entire group trooped towards the library. Partway there, they heard Remus's voice, sounding amused, exasperated, and tolerant all at once. "Padfoot ... "
Harry poked his head in and snickered. Sirius had, evidently, gotten bored with book sorting, and opted to see how many of them he could juggle, by hand rather than magic, at once. "Was he like this in school?" He called to Remus, startling Sirius into dropping several of the books, which made Hermione cry out in protest. Remus just laughed.

"Worse, actually. What's up?"

"Looks like we showed up just in time. We were gonna steal Sirius if he wasn't busy."

Sirius, mock-grumbled as he put the books where he'd got them from. "You startle me like that and then expect me to go quietly?"

"Well, I was hoping we could work on the animagus thing, but if you're not interesting in teaching the next generation of Marauders ... " Harry said, and made as if to walk away. He was tempted to try and pout, but wasn't sure he could pull it off.

Sirius squawked. "Hey! I never said that! Where you want to do this?"

"My room? I really don't want to be interrupted, and I think we will be if we do this anywhere on the main floor." Harry said.

Sirius nodded. "Good point kiddo. All right, let's go."

Everyone trooped back to Harry's room and found spots to sit. Sirius looked bemused for a moment when the entire group filed in, then grinned hugely. "All of you? Brilliant!"

"Now." He said. "The first thing you need to know, is that you need to completely ignore everything you think you know about becoming an animagus. You've doubtlessly heard it's incredibly difficult, and that only a select few people have the capability to become one, right?" Everyone nodded.

"That's a bunch of hokum. Y'see, in the process of learning to do this ourselves, James and I got to thinking. If even the rat, who was completely pathetic at nearly everything, was able to learn this ... " Sirius shrugged. "After a while, James and I developed a theory ... that magic has more, much more, to do with intent and determination than with anything else. It's the only thing that makes sense. Considering that in most cases, witches and wizards can learn to cast spells without saying the incantations, it can't be the words themselves that accomplish the required result. Oh, the wand movements and words give us a framework to work with, but really, it's whether you want it bad enough or not that does the trick. And that explains why there aren't more animagi. Most folks don't have a burning need to become an animagus, so the process gets drawn out and complicated."

That made a certain amount of sense to Harry. He had, after all, pulled some rather incredible spells, like the patronus. Supposedly, a thirteen year old couldn't do it. But he'd had a real, driving need to be able to do that spell, and so he had. "But then, wouldn't everyone be able to do all spells?" He asked. "And why just you and dad coming up with this? Didn't Remus agree?"

Sirius grimaced. "Power does still have an effect." He admitted. "Some witches and wizards are unquestionably stronger than others, and so are able to pull off high-powered spells that their less-powerful fellows can't. But put those less-powerful wizards in a situation where doing the spell is vital to life and limb, and their chances of doing the spell increase exponentially." Then he chuckled. "Remus never really got into the debates, since they mostly happened when we were practicing, which we tried to hide from him as long as we could, so it would be a surprise for him."

"All that aside." Sirius said. "There is a definite process required to becoming an animagus. It involves a lot of meditating. You can't choose your animagus form, and before you ask, as far as I know, becoming a magical creature isn't a possibility. The first step is getting in touch with your
inner animal. You'll know when it makes itself known.” He grinned. “Once you've figured out what
you'll turn into, you have to start the process of actually becoming that animal ... which involved
getting rather intimate with your magic and magical core while concentrating on becoming the
animal. At some point, you'll start sprouting fur or feathers or whatnot, then paws, hooves, or wings
and then the final jump is the complete transformation. First couple of times twinges a bit, and feels
very strange, but after a half dozen or so transformations it's pretty much effortless and totally
painless, and stops feeling so bizarre. Now, I don't want any of you attempting the transformations
without me, Remus, or Professor McGonagall, once you get to school, in attendance. It's not
unknown to get stuck from time to time. James had problems with his antlers for weeks.” Sirius
grinned at the memory. "And we'll be able to force you back if that happens."

"So we meditate at night until we figure out what we'll be, and then go from there?” Harry clarified.

Sirius nodded. "Yep, that's the plan."

"Cool."

Just then, Dobby popped back in, a bit hunched, and his ears flattened against his head. Harry
frowned.

"Dobby? What's wrong? What happened?"

Dobby handed over a note. "Theys be lots of yelling, Harry Potter sir.” He said.

"At you?” Harry didn't think for a second that Neville would do such a thing, but he didn't know
Neville's grandmother to know if she would.

"No, Harry Potter sir. Just yellings."

"Huh.” Harry opened the letter.

Harry

Well, your letter certainly livened up the day! I showed it to Gran, and she’s not stopped yelling
since. She's not been overly fond of the Headmaster since the end of the first war, and finding out
that the last Potter has no idea of his station, duties, or privileges has her in quite the state. I'm half
expecting her to send him a Howler!

At any rate, she'll be more than happy to teach you everything, and you'll probably be getting an
official letter by owl to that effect tonight or tomorrow morning, once she calms down. I'll probably
be seeing you sometime in the next few days. Tell Ron and Hermione hi for me!

Harry snickered. "Apparently, Neville's grandmother is quite upset I never got the training I
should've.” He told Sirius.

Sirius grimaced. "Augusta Longbottom is a force to be reckoned with, pup. She's going to be on the
warpath about this, mark my words. She takes being from an ancient and noble house very
seriously."

Since there was nothing much else to do that day, they all helped sort and organize the rather
stunning array of junk that had accumulated in the house. There was always an adult with them,
Sirius mostly, though Molly and Arthur both took turns. Remus, it seemed, was quite content to
huddle amongst the books and deal with them, and everyone was happy to leave him to it. At first,
Kreacher, whom Harry hadn't even seen since the day they arrived, threw a tantrum at them 'getting
rid' of things, but Sirius snapped at him and sent him away. Less than ten minutes later, Dobby
caught Kreacher trying to smuggle things from another room into hiding. The resultant fight had everyone in the house converging on the room thinking they’d somehow been invaded.

By that point, Sirius was in a foul mood. They were caught between a rock and a hard place. They couldn’t free Kreacher, because they had absolutely no illusions as to what he’d do if they did that. On the other hand, Sirius refused point blank to kill the elf, both because he found doing so abhorrent (threats aside) and because the cretin would see it as a reward. Sirius finally resorted to sentencing Kreacher to his ‘room’, telling him he could only come out to get food when he got hungry. That made Harry cringe, as it was far, far, far too close to being locked in the broom cupboard for his comfort, but he admitted they really didn’t have a choice. Even Hermione couldn’t find anything redeemable about Kreacher.

By the time they got that straightened out, it was time for another Order meeting. This time, Harry was able to put more names to faces ... and it quickly became clear even to him that sides were being taken. Evidently his presence (and confrontation) at the last meeting had been talked about among the various members (or they’d stewed over it individually), because when Harry sat down, that side of the table quickly filled. Sirius, Remus, Moody, Tonks, McGonagall, and Flitwick all took places on his side of the table and greeted him with, at the very least, amiability. Arabella Figg and Snape seemed to be taking the middle ground along with a few others, like Kingsley Shacklebolt and Mundungus Fletcher (who reminded Harry very strongly of Pettigrew, and Harry resolved to keep a very sharp eye on the man). The rest of the Order seemed to dislike his presence, led by Molly (And Harry wasn’t about to pretend that that didn’t hurt, even if he did understand she wanted to protect him), who had a pinch-faced expression of disapproval on her face and frowned at Harry every time she glanced his way. Dumbledore, when he arrived ... well, who knew or cared what he thought. It was kind of a moot point. He needed Harry, and would therefore put up with Harry’s demands ... whether he liked it or not, though Harry suspected he’d try something at some future point. For now, he seemed content to let be.

It was another quiet meeting, spent discussing alliances, allies, and organizing duty rotas so that there would be Order members on standby in case of an attack. Which there hadn’t been yet, but everyone allowed as it was early days yet. Voldemort was still getting his feet under him ... possibly literally. He’d seemed ok during the whole resurrection fiasco, but who knew whether that would have lasted, especially given how the duel’d gone. He, apparently, hadn’t even called Snape to him yet. At least, not that Snape mentioned in the general meeting, though it was possible he had been called and Dumbledore informed privately. Given Dumbledore’s penchant for hoarding information, that scenario was entirely too likely.

When the meeting broke up, Harry told the others what little he’d learned that was any use.

"Frankly, this waiting is going to drive me crazy." Harry admitted to the others. "Much as I wish it would, the quiet won’t last for long, and I’m afraid that the longer it takes, the bigger the bang will be when he does do something."

That was a sentiment the others agreed with, and they all eventually broke up and headed for bed.
Harry meets Augusta Longbottom, and discovers some interesting things. Voldemort stages his first attacks.

Chapter 10: Instruction in the Proper Forms

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

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July 8, 1995

Neville had not exaggerated. A dignified, if elderly, tawny owl delivered a letter from Augusta Longbottom the next morning. The letter, despite being very formal, somehow managed to evade being stiff and unfriendly, and set up an appointment the next day at ten in the morning. Harry was more nervous than he'd expected to be as he prepared to meet Neville's grandmother, but then again, anyone that could cow Sirius even before he pulled something was deserving of a bout of nerves.

He arrived by floo a few minutes early ... and was utterly dismayed to discover that his new teacher had witnessed his ignominious tumble out of the fireplace. He was relieved to note (for his composure's sake) that the now-legendary vulture hat was nowhere in evidence. He wasn't sure if he'd have been able to keep from laughing if he saw it. Actually, Augusta reminded Harry more than a bit of McGonagall. Stern, serious, and most definitely not a woman to cross. Once he'd picked himself up, he glanced around.

If the room he was in was any indication, Longbottom Manor was as unlike Black Manor as was humanly possible. Where the Black Manor tended to claustrophobic rooms, dark colors and a distinct lack of illumination, this room was light and airy and quite pleasant.

"Well, I dare say that if that entrance is anything to go by, we shall be having to start at the very beginning," Augusta said. "I had hoped that Neville was mistaken, but clearly he is not. That you have been left ignorant is wholly unconscionable." She shook her head and motioned towards one of the couches. "Please be seated. If you could tell me in your own words what you know of your family, it will assist the process."

Harry fought back a grimace as he sat. "I really don't know much. Just my mom and dad's names ... and those I didn't even learn until I started Hogwarts. I look almost exactly like my dad, except for my eyes ... and I know he was a pureblood, and mum was a Muggleborn. And I only just found out this last week that there was more than my trust vault, and the fact I have a house. I don't even know where it is."

Augusta's face had gone exceedingly pale, and her eyes were blazing. "This is all you know?" When Harry cringed, she sighed. "I am not angry with you, child. It is not your fault you do not know."

"I shall start at the beginning, or as far back as we have recorded. Long ago, before Hogwarts was built, before the Wizengamot existed, wizards and witches banded together in small groups, swearing
allegiance to the strongest of the group, who then acted as leader and arbiter. Over time, certain families gained strength and influence. Some two dozen gained enough prominence to rally the vast majority of Britain’s known wizards and witches under one banner, forming the Wizengamot. The school founders ... oh yes, all four. It takes more than a desire to make a school to build a school such as Hogwarts, even back then. It required influence, and money, things the Four Founders had in plenty. Black, Crabbe, Crouch, Flint, Gaunt, Goyle, Greengrass, Lestrang, Longbottom, MacDougal, Macmillian, Nott, Peverell, Potter, Prewett, Prince, Rosier, Selwyn, Weasley, and Yaxley. All can trace their roots to when people started keeping track of such things. Some of the lines are dead, a few, like the Prewetts and Peverell’s, merged into another line through a daughter, and as such have, technically, not ceased to exist, though there may be none alive carrying the name.”

"You didn't mention Malfoy." Harry pointed out. "Draco's constantly rabbiting about being a pureblood ... is he lying?"

"No. Malfoy is an old name, but they cannot trace their history as far back as the others I mentioned. They are, therefore, not an Ancient and Noble House. That title rests only with those families that built our government so long ago. We hold power the likes of which the Malfoys can only aspire to attain. Each family has a hereditary seat in the Wizengamot in perpetuity. When you begin to attend the legislative sessions, you will see a number of empty seats. These belong to the families that no longer have a living member to carry the name and family ring. All families that can trace their lineage among wizardkind for at least five generations can claim a seat, though not all do, and if the family dies out, the seat ceases to exist. There are not all that many mixed-bloods for the simple reason that usually, the wizarding side of their heritage already has a seat, though some have attained a seat in their own right, usually because it was a daughter that married a Muggleborn and thus took his name, or, more rarely, because they were disowned. Muggleborns in the Wizengamot are exceedingly rare. They operate under a number of disadvantages, the least of them being the prejudice that exists in some circles. Muggleborns have first to become familiar enough with wizarding society and laws to navigate the political waters comfortably, and that takes time. Some Muggleborns never do succeed entirely. And once they have learned to play the political game, they must then attain enough influence to earn a seat, and to do so within one lifetime is not an easy undertaking. It has been done in the past, but such is quite rare."

Harry frowned. "But ... if we can do so much, how come so many of the families you named started playing tag-along minion to Voldemort? It doesn't make any sense."

"And indeed it should not." Augusta said stoutly. "I cannot speak to their reasons myself. Some may have done out of fear of Muggles. Some may have done out of greed for power. Beyond that, I have no knowledge, and no desire to fathom the depths of their depravity in following that abomination."

"A couple more questions ... if the Weasley name means so much, how come Malfoy ... senior and junior ... antagonize the Weasleys so much?"

"Because the Malfoys perceive only wealth to carry power." Augusta answered. "The Weasleys have not ever been over-blessed with material wealth. Their strength has always lain in the strength of their magics and their minds. Does not the current generation already boast a curse breaker and a dragon tamer? Neither career is for the weak or unintelligent, and I have heard that the twins, for all their preference for tomfoolery, possess formidable intelligence and capability. Their other great strength is their loyalty, both to friend and family, and their complete incorruptibility. Not many families can boast of never having a family member that fell to the Dark, but the Weasleys are one. Malfoy cannot perceive why they are more respected than he with his millions of galleons. It also does not help that Arthur is not the family head, nor is he likely to be anytime soon, as his father enjoys fine health. Malfoy is not fool enough to antagonize Septimus, I can tell you that much."
Augusta grinned a nearly feral grin.

"Ok ... next question. You mentioned something about me attending legislative sessions?"

"Indeed. In cases such as yours, when you become defacto head of the family prior to attaining your majority, it is customary for such heirs to begin attending legislative sessions after their sixteenth birthday, so they may become acquainted with the issues of the day, and ascertain with whom they may wish to ally themselves. Most young heirs in such a situation attend the meetings in the company of an adult whose counsel they trust. It's a step that is not necessary when the headship passes to the heir after they reach their majority ... by then, they will have, if they've been properly brought up, acquainted themselves with the proposed laws on the books and begun the process of forming alliances."

Harry nodded, a bit boggled by all the information. This was far beyond what he'd expected to be finding out.

"Now it is my turn to ask a question." Augusta said. "You said you visited your heirloom vault?"

"Yes ma'am." Harry said.

"You really should go again. James was, briefly, Head of House before his death. Your grandfather died shortly after James graduated. James ought to have set things up, given how dangerous the times were. There should be notes, somewhere. Also, I strongly advise you to retain a business manager. The Potters have considerable assets in the business sector, which have probably fallen into disarray thanks to Dumbledore. Someone trained to deal with such affairs would be a wise investment, at least until things have gotten straightened back out and you have learned to handle those matters yourself. Also, contact the Potter family barrister. I am unsure as to whom your grandfather and father retained for that purpose, but it was probably noted down somewhere. And see if you can find your parents' Wills. Given Dumbledore's known actions, it would not surprise me in the least to discover he directly abrogated their wills in some manner, and if he has, he can be brought to task legally."

Harry made due mental note, while also reflecting that this was going to be more complicated than he thought. And then a thought struck him. If the Ancient and Noble families were such a big deal ...

"Mrs. Longbottom? What if someone from one of those old families was thrown into Azkaban without a trial and left there?" He did not mention who, as she, like most of the rest of the world, thought Sirius a mass-murderer. Depending on what she said next, Harry would have to consider, carefully, breaking the news to her.

Augusta's eyes went wide. "There would be nigh-mutiny in the Wizengamot, I can assure you." She said. "For such a thing to happen to anyone is bad enough, but to one of our families? There would be an uproar the likes of which hasn't been seen in centuries." Then she peered closely at him. "That was not a hypothetical question, was it, boy?"

Oops. "Ummm ... no. But I'd rather not say anything further just now. It's ... complicated. And I think I've got enough to deal with just learning the ropes right now."

"I see. Very well. I shall not inquire further on the matter. Now, to begin your lessons. We shall, I believe, work on dealing with flooing. Not only will it save your nose and knees, but it will assist, subtly, with projecting the appropriate image. There are those who would insist on perceiving your difficulties with flooing as a sign of your overall weakness and incompetence."

Harry grimaced. "Yeah, like Malfoy."
"Indeed." Augusta said. "The trick to landing on your feet is rather simple, which may be why no one has thought to tell you ... it's one of those things that's so well known everyone will assume that everyone else knows about it. Just before you reach your intended destination, twist yourself in the direction opposite of what you were spinning. It will break your momentum, slowing you down and allowing you a chance to get your feet under you. It will also, if you are prone to such things, help with dizziness and nausea by giving you a few seconds to catch your breath before you arrive."

And yeah, Harry thought. That was something so ridiculously simple it wouldn't occur to anyone to tell him about it ... and it being so well-known explained why Hermione didn't have the problems with flooing Harry did. She probably read about it somewhere or heard about it.

"Now, we shall practice by flooing from this fireplace to the Grand Ballroom fireplace, which is on the other side of the house." Augusta led the way to the fireplace.

It took nearly an hour of flooing back and forth, but Harry eventually caught the rhythm, and was able to pop out of a fireplace five times in a row without so much as a stumble. This pleased him immensely, as he'd gotten well and truly tired of greeting the pavement with his face every time he flooed.

That task accomplished, Augusta began to correct Harry's posture, enjoining him to stand up to his inches, few as they were. Which resulted in another conversation.

"I truly do not understand why you are so short, child. Neither of your parents were, nor any of the Potters. I suppose it might be from your mother's side of the family?" Augusta inquired.

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so ... my aunt was pretty tall. I don't know about the rest, though."

"Hmmm. Indeed."

Harry, for his part, had a strong suspicion as to why he was so short. Blast the Dursleys. But perhaps something could be done about that? He'd have to find out. Maybe talk to Madame Pomphrey when he got back to school, as he was loathe to go to St. Mungo's unless there was no other choice.

"Another matter ... your attire. What you are currently wearing is quite appropriate for daily wear, or informal occasions among friends, but I advise you to invest in clothing befitting your station, as you will be beginning to attend social functions. Twillfit and Tattings is the best place to go for clothing of that caliber."

Harry mentally grimaced. He was going to HATE this, he just knew it. But if playing the game got him what he wanted, he'd do it.

They ate lunch together, and Augusta critiqued his table manners, in among the other talk. She was, Harry reflected, more than a bit scary, and he could understand why Neville was so intimidated by her. She was also a gold-mine of information. Following her son's incapacitation, she had taken up the reins of the family seat, acting as regent for Neville until he came of age. As such, she was right in the heart of the political scene, and knew a stunning array of information. Including the rather interesting factoid that Dumbledore had apparently been acting as regent for the Potter seat, voting for the Potter name. When he found that out, Harry had to close his eyes and count to ten a few dozen times.

"This is getting ridiculous." He told Augusta. "And I am definitely going hunting for my parents' will. How in the name of Merlin is Dumbledore getting away with all this?"
Quite simply? He was the man of the hour, years ago. Defeating Grindlewald made him a household name. A much-trusted household name. By the time Voldemort came to power, Dumbledore had parleyed that trust and influence into near-total control of wizarding government. He is Headmaster, Chief Warlock, and Supreme Mugwump. It has been long and long since his decisions have been questioned. Indeed, most find it heretical to even presume that Dumbledore might not be omniscient and benevolent. Even had the times been less chaotic, it would not have occurred to most to question Dumbledore's actions as relate to you." Augusta said with a sigh. "As things stood, he doubtlessly managed to get away with metaphorical murder simply because the government, and the populace in general, were in chaos for years after Voldemort's demise, and the days surrounding your parents' death were by far the worst, with everyone racing about like untutored hooligans."

The conversation certainly made her critiques of his manners more tolerable. Eventually, lunch ended, and Harry brought up another matter.

"Mrs. Longbottom ... I was wondering. Given that Voldemort has returned, and seems to have a desire to clash with me as often as possible, I've arranged for additional instruction in dueling and defense over the summer. Most of my friends have opted to join me, as we've all been targets of Voldemort or his followers at least once. If my teachers are willing, would it be possible for Neville to join us?"

Augusta regarded him for a long moment before nodding her acquiescence. "That would be a kindness."

Shortly thereafter, Harry took his leave. And returned to a Mansion in chaos. There were people everywhere. Harry nearly got knocked on his butt as someone ... Diggle, Harry belatedly realized ... rushed towards the floo and disappeared. Harry got out of the way as quick as he could, edging up the stairs, to discover the Weasleys and Hermione hovering on the landing, all of them grim-faced and frightened.

"What's going on?" He asked.

"There's been two attacks." Hermione looked stricken. "Four muggle families in two different places."

Harry cursed. "Are you all right?" She had to be frantic about her parents. "Look, if you want, I can talk to Sirius ... "

Hermione shook her head. "They're safe enough for now, I think. I just don't know how to tell them about this!"

"They don't know?" Harry asked.

Hermione sighed. "Harry, if they knew the half of what we've been through in the last four years ... oh, first year alone! They'd have refused to let me come back. I couldn't let that happen, I just couldn't!"

Harry grimaced. She had a point ... and he couldn't even begin to think of a way to deal with the situation that wouldn't result in Hermione being yanked out of the Wizarding world so fast her head spun.

Eventually, the furor died down, and Order members gathered in the dining room. Harry left his friends on the landing and headed into the dining room himself. He noticed that Snape was absent. Evidently, Voldemort had finally recalled him to his side. Harry spared a thought for Snape's safe
return. He might hate the man, but no one deserved to be killed or worse at the wand of Voldemort or his followers.

Dumbledore looked ... more than slightly ruffled. "So, Voldemort has made his first move, and we must now counter it. The time has come to act, rather than to debate." He then proceeded to assign quite a lot of people tasks, including asking Remus to contact the werewolves. He also mentioned having sent Hagrid to parley with the giants. Harry thought of something.

"Headmaster ... when Hagrid gets back? Ask him to speak to Aragog. If Hagrid can convince him, the acromantulas might prove to be a valuable defense in the Forest."

That got a surprised murmur in general, and a pleased expression from Dumbledore. "An excellent suggestion, Harry, and one I shall implement when Hagrid returns."

Shortly after that, the meeting broke up. Harry hurried to intercept Remus. "Remus? If it will help? Tell them about me and the others. You know none of us care a whit that you're a werewolf, and it wouldn't bother us about anyone else, either."

Remus smiled softly at him, and hugged him again. "I'll definitely pass on that message, Harry. It will help more than you know."

Harry snorted. "Oh, I have my suspicions. I may hate the whole boy-who-lived thing, but it does seem to have its uses."
Laws and Leverage

Chapter 11: Laws and Leverage

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

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July 10, 1995

Neville joined them the day after the Death Eater attack. Augusta Longbottom was no one's fool. Harry managed to prevail on Remus for a second visit to his heirloom vault, where they spent two hours rummaging around until they found James and Lily's wills, the Potter family business records, and, interestingly, a box with the label 'evidence'. Intrigued, Harry had glanced inside, to discover a whole bunch of parchment with names, dates, and notes that made no sense to him whatever ... at least until he spotted the name Malfoy. At that point, he supposed these scraps of parchment were what evidence James and Lily (and possibly his grandparents as well) had been able to amass as to Death Eater activities ... useful, if it proved to be true. He'd also found the names of the family barrister and business manager, both of whom, by some miracle, were alive and well. Harry sent them both letters. The barrister had returned his straight away, setting up an appointment for the next day.

The morning did not start well. Hermione corralled him just after breakfast, an armful of Prophets in hand. "Harry, I think you may have a problem." She told him.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"You better read some of these articles." Hermione said.

Harry did ... and didn't see what the problem was, other than Fudge hiding his head in the sand. He looked at Hermione. "So Fudge is being an idiot. I knew that already."

Hermione shook her head. "That's not the problem, Harry. It's pretty subtle ... I almost missed it myself. Look more closely at some of the smaller articles."

So Harry did ... and finally caught it. Subtle, snarky comments clearly aimed at him and his state of sanity or supposed lack thereof, even if they never came out and said 'Harry Potter is crazy', that was the definite tone of the comments, but they were done so offhandedly, you didn't really take much notice of it. Harry's sole comfort was that Dumbledore was being painted in as bad a light, and a bit more openly.

"Damn. You mind if I bring these with me to my lawyer?" Harry asked. Hermione was only too willing to hand them over. "Looks like I have even more to talk over with him than I thought." Harry said with a sigh.

To make matters worse, Dumbledore himself showed up just after breakfast. When he spotted the newspapers at Harry's elbow, he sighed.

"I see you have discovered Fudge's response to the truth." He said.

"Yeah. Though I'm willing to bet that Rita Skeeter has had a hand in it, too." Harry only belatedly realized that not one of the articles seemed to have been penned by Skeeter, which he found odd, considering how much she'd relished dragging his name through the mud during the school year. As
he was focused on Dumbledore, he missed Hermione's positively evil smug grin.

Things became very quiet and very tense for a few moments. Harry finally gave it up as a bad job and gathered everything together, heading towards the door, and the floo in the parlour. He didn't quite get to the kitchen door before there was a muffled BOOM that shook the house, followed, seconds later, by Sirius and two redheads crowding through the door that led to the basement and slamming it shut. Sirius gasped out a 'colloportus!', and then all three of them sagged against the wall, trying to catch their breaths. Harry blinked at them.

"Do I even want to know?" He asked.

Sirius just grinned at him. "Ah, nothing much. Just a potions mishap. I'm thinking we added too much ground gryphon talon." That last comment was more to the twins than Harry. The twins considered this, then nodded agreement.

Harry just shook his head and fought the urge to grin. It had, after all, been inevitable. Harry was, frankly, surprised that this hadn't started days ago. The Marauders. The Twins. Collaborating. Once again, Harry wondered if that had been his brightest idea. And again, he contemplated the sheer, unadulterated mayhem that ungodly collaboration was liable to unleash on the death eaters and Voldemort, and decided that it had, indeed, been a very good idea ... and he hoped someone had a camera to capture Voldemort's reaction for posterity when the first prank bomb (whatever the Marauders and the twins came up with!) hit him. It ought to be highly entertaining ... especially if there were only Death Eaters around. Maybe they could get Snape ...

Snape. Helping ... Harry blinked. He did not just think that. There was more likelihood of Voldemort turning over a new leaf and becoming a good guy than there was of Snape working with the Marauders.

Dumbledore seemed to be as entertained as Harry was by the mishap, if the twinkling in his eyes was any indication. Harry gave a last shake of his head. "Well, now you're up here, Remus hasn't left yet, has he?"

Sirius shook his head. "No, not until after lunch. He's probably still packing."

Harry nodded. "Good. I wanted to make sure I said goodbye to him before I headed out."

And there went the tension again. Dumbledore regarded Harry with a frown. "I am afraid." He said. "That for you to leave the house would be most unwise, Harry."

Harry glowered at him. "Actually, it's not, Headmaster. I'm not intending to prance around in public, and even if I was ... well, I doubt anyone would recognize me."

"Glamours can be easily cancelled." Dumbledore pointed out.

"Exactly. Which is why my disguise has nothing to do with magic whatever." Harry pointed out. He turned and headed upstairs. He'd not intended on going 'in disguise', given that he'd planned on flooing directly to his lawyers and back again, but he'd best make this point to Dumbledore now.

First, though, he knocked on Remus' door, hugged him goodbye and wished him luck. Then he went into his own room and switched to the colored contacts, then applied the concealer. A seriously healthy dollop of Muggle haircare products slicked his hair down ... and made him wonder how Snape could tolerate his hair ... Harry's was greasy and limp enough with the weight of the stuff needed to hold it down and camouflage its tendency to stick up at all angles. Despite doing it deliberately, he had to restrain the urge to go wash his hair immediately. But between the brown
eyes, apparent lack of scar, neater hair and better clothes, no one would have the faintest idea he was Harry Potter.

He walked downstairs and had the pleasure of seeing Dumbledore gobsmacked. Doubly so after Dumbledore tried a 'finite' and nothing changed. "Impressive, Harry. Quite impressive. Might I inquire as to how you have managed the feat?"

Harry grinned. "I took advantage of readily available Muggle products." He said. Which would make it none too clear to Dumbledore, but so much the better. Sirius, who hadn't seen Harry's disguise accoutrements, even if he had heard about them, was grinning hugely.

"Way to go, pup. Even I'd look straight past you, if I didn't know about all this and saw you in the street." He admitted. "You thought of a name, in case someone asks that you don't want knowing who you are?"

Whoops. Harry hadn't, actually, and it was definitely something he'd need to consider. He didn't want to give Neville's name again! "John Smith." He said after a few moments. Simple and easy to remember. He hoped.

Neither Dumbledore nor Sirius seemed to find fault with this, and Harry gathered up the stuff he'd planned on bringing with him and headed for the floo. From the expression on his face, Dumbledore clearly wanted to ask where Harry was going, but, for once, was bright enough to realize asking was a bad idea.

Harry was sent to his lawyer's office almost as soon as he arrived, the secretary only taking long enough to ensure he wasn't in a meeting with someone first. The office surprised Harry a bit. It was actually fairly small. Three of the walls were covered in bookshelves that groaned under the weight of innumerable tomes. The desk was a modest-looking affair ... as was the man who sat behind the desk. Jeremiah Fangler looked to be as old as Dumbledore. He was almost entirely bald, with only a thin rim of white hair. His face was wrinkled and lined with age, and he was dressed in plain-looking robes. He also gave off an air quite similar to Arthur Weasley ... that of a quiet, inoffensive, good-humored man who was difficult to rile. This was his family lawyer? Malfoy would eat him alive!

Jeremiah started to chuckle, making Harry frown. After a few moments, Jeremiah sobered. "I do apologize, Lord Potter, but you are hardly the first to be, shall we say, put out on first meeting me. I assure you I am far more formidable than I appear. I have simply found that being approachable makes meetings such as today's go more smoothly than they would otherwise."

And over the next half hour, Harry had to agree with that sentiment. Jeremiah proved to be very easy to talk to, letting the conversation go where it willed for quite some time before finally bringing the conversation back to why Harry had sought him out.

"Now, young sir, I do believe you feel you have several issues that need be addressed?" Jeremiah finally asked.

Harry nodded. "There's a lot going on." He admitted. The next hour was spent giving Jeremiah the lowdown on everything Harry knew in regards to his life and Dumbledore's parts in it. Jeremiah listened with a grave expression on his face, and took copious notes. The only thing Harry didn't bring up right off the bat was the whole Sirius/Petigrew situation.

"Well." He said when Harry finally wound down. "That is quite the tale. Our first step shall be examining the will. You said you brought it with you?"

Harry nodded and handed it over. Jeremiah read it over carefully, and sighed heavily. "Well, we can
definitely take him to task on who you were raised by." He turned the parchment so Harry could see. "Your parents made out quite the list of people with whom you were to be left."

Jeremiah wasn't kidding. It started with Sirius and went from there. Even Augusta and Professor McGonagall were listed. In fact, the only person NOT listed was Remus, and there was a note saying he would have been listed if the law allowed werewolves to be in sole custody of children. Clear down at the bottom was a note saying he was not to go to the Dursleys no matter what.

Unfortunately, there was nothing in the will about Pettigrew. Either the will had been made out prior to them going into hiding or they hadn't been able to reveal that Pettigrew was there Secret Keeper for some reason (or simply hadn't thought to do so, believing they would not be betrayed by a friend).

Harry took a breath. "There's one more thing I need to tell you about. And it's ... really important. It's about Sirius Black."

Jeremiah's expression went deadly intent. "What about him?"

"He's innocent. I know, I know, people say that all the time. But I've seen the proof. I've seen Peter Pettigrew. I've talked to him. I've touched him. I've seen the Dark Mark on his arm! And I'm not the only one who knows about him. Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley saw him too. Heard him confess. It was at the end of the school year, when Sirius escaped. We tried to tell Fudge, but he wouldn't listen, and Professor Snape didn't help. He claimed we were confounded. I told Fudge about him again at the end of the TriWiz, and again, he completely ignored me. Worse, since third year, I found out Sirius wasn't even given a trial! They just threw him in Azkaban and forgot about him, on the strength of it being blatantly obvious he was the Secret Keeper, because who else would my dad choose? That and some comments Pettigrew made when Sirius cornered and confronted him."

Jeremiah looked pole-axed. "No trial? Did they not even question the man?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so. Or at least, if they did, they didn't use Veritaserum. Otherwise he'd never have been thrown in Azkaban."

Jeremiah gave a sharp nod. "Right. I shall have to see if I can get my hands on the records pertaining to his capture and subsequent events ... if such even exists. If they do not ... well, it will be all the more damning. If Fudge is being so obstructionist, I shall have to be quite on my mettle to get at them, as he may attempt to keep them out of the public's hands by any number of means. But rest assured, Mr. Potter. I shall do all in my not inconsiderable power to clear your godfather's name."

Harry let out a relieved whoosh. "Thank you so much, sir."

Jeremiah gave him a sharp look, and Harry had the uncomfortable feeling that Jeremiah knew he'd interacted with Sirius, but wasn't going to ask. They discussed options as regarded Dumbledore for a while, with Harry eventually, somewhat reluctantly, opting to simply put Dumbledore on notice, legally, that any further shenanigans would not be tolerated. The man had been a menace in his life, but the public at large still viewed him as a leader of unassailable integrity, and trying to shake that was not a task Harry was willing to take on, for more than one reason. While unseating Dumbledore would be satisfying on a personal level, to do so would weaken and divide the wizarding world at a time that such could be ill afforded. Yes, dealing more firmly with Dumbledore would have to wait.

They moved on, then, to the bits of parchment. Harry's guess proved correct ... these were, evidently, a list of names, dates, and actions taken. In many cases, if the notes were proven correct, Jeremiah said, they would blow many a person's claim of being Imperioused. Unfortunately, none of them
could be acted on immediately, as they needed to be confirmed. Jeremiah promised to look into all of them.

"At the very least, Mr. Potter, if these prove true, you have at your fingertips a way to hamstring the political power and influence of certain families for generations. At worst, you can get quite a few people lifetime stays at Azkaban."

That was going to be something Harry would have to think about.

He returned to the manor to find it, again, a beehive of activity. It was Sirius, looking pale and grim-faced, that told Harry what was going on.

"The dementors have left Azkaban." He told Harry.

Harry immediately understood why Sirius looked so bad. After more than a decade in Azkaban, Sirius was rather painfully aware of just how much damage the things could do without resorting to sucking out your soul ... and on top of that, Harry would be rather surprised if Sirius could still produce a patronus, which meant Sirius would be doubly defenseless against the creatures.

"Looks like we need to practice." Harry said.
The next few days were incredibly tense. Harry, Hermione, Neville and the Weasleys took to spending every spare hour they could snatch practicing spells and learning to duel. Sirius joined them quite a bit, though he and the twins still spent a lot of time in the basement potions lab. Explosions of varying intensities became so commonplace that by the third day, no one bothered to do more than shake their head or cock an eyebrow when another explosion went off. By day five, Harry admitted to himself that he honestly found the long stretches of silence from the basement to be far more unnerving.

Their pool of instructors widened considerably. Moody, Shacklebolt and even Tonks took their turns teaching. Even Bill Weasley got into the act, teaching them how to recognize wards and what they did, since Death Eaters liked to deprive their prey of escape routes. Bill didn't teach them how to break wards. Not only was there no time, but it took a knowledge base that only Hermione was anywhere close to possessing. He did teach them about how large an area wards could cover, and the energy cost to the caster, both of which came in handy for getting out of the situation or finding the weak member of the enemy's attack force.

Reports of the escaped dementors attacking wizards and muggles alike were headline news, and the wizarding world was definitely starting to panic. Fudge was attempting to blame the dementor's defection on Sirius, and was claiming that the matter would be cleared up soon, and there was no need for worry. The Order (minus Snape, of course) treated these proclamations with the scorn they deserved, at least in the privacy of the manor.

Worse, there had been more Death Eater raids. Small ones, yet, but there.

Today, as Harry stumbled down the stairs, still half asleep, he heard a most welcome voice that banished the sleepiness. He hurried into the kitchen, to find Remus, looking a touch travel-worn but otherwise fine, talking to Molly. "Remus! You're back!" Harry hurried over and gave the man a hug, thrilled to see him again.

Remus looked quite pleased at the greeting. "Indeed I am. Molly tells me I've missed quite a bit in the last week."

Harry laughed. "No kidding. It's getting to the point where I start to worry when there hasn't been an explosion in the last hour. Whatever Sirius, Fred and George are up to, it's definitely keeping the rest of us on our toes." He told Remus, deliberately ignoring the more serious news.

Shortly thereafter, everyone descended on the kitchen for breakfast. Hermione, Neville and the Weasley gang all greeted Remus with delight and no small amount of relief. Sirius just gave Remus an almost evil grin that had everyone wondering what he was up to. Midway through breakfast, Tonks arrived, and leaned over Remus to grab some bacon and toast.

"So who got the painting off the wall?" She asked, which made Harry blink.
"It's gone?"

"Yep. Nothing but blank wall. So, who did it? 'cause whoever it was deserves a pat on the back at the very least."

Harry laughed. "Dobby! Winky!" A second later, the pair of elves popped in, looking a touch disconcerted at being among so many wizards. "Finally got it down, huh?"

Dobby gave the others a worried glance before nodding. "Yes sir, Harry Potter sir. We's be having to take out part of the wall to gets it done, but wes gets it down, sir. Then we's be putting the wall back together."

Dobby got the surprise of his life (and Harry did too) when Tonks swept the little elf up into a hug. "Thank you! That old biddy was driving everyone crazy with her caterwauling." And then Winky got a hug too.

Harry nearly broke a rib trying not to laugh at the expression on Dobby and Winky's faces. They were torn between shock that they'd been hugged, HUGGED! and tears of gratitude. "I promised you two a special reward if you managed it." He told them. "So you two decide what you want and let me know, all right?"

He got a pair of nods from the gobsmacked elves, and then they popped out. Sirius shook his head in amazement. "Those two are going to be wholly devoted to you, if they weren't already."

Harry chuckled. "Dobby's been attached to me since the summer after first year." He admitted. That made Sirius brighten.

"You never did get around to telling me that story." Sirius commented.

So Harry told the highly-edited version ... mostly Dobby's appearances and actions, and how he'd freed Dobby. Everyone seemed more than happy that Malfoy got a bit of comeuppance.

Breakfast broke up and everyone trooped to the dueling chamber, including, to Harry's slight surprise (but to his pleasure), Remus. He, Tonks, and Sirius put their heads together, then gathered the kids together.

"All right, you lot. Since there's three of us today, we're going to have a free-form battle, you guys against the three of us. You guys can use any spells you can manage. We'll be using stingers, stunners, and color-marking spells, in place of the stuff you'd see in a more serious fight." That said, the three adults split up and started conjuring random junk for everyone to hide behind or use as a weapon.

Harry blinked. There was seven of them. Seven! Granted that they didn't know any nasty spells yet, but still ... he glared at the trio. So they thought they could whip slightly better than two to one odds, did they? Well, he'd show them! And yes, some part of him was quite aware that the three of them had more skill, but when you've battled adult wizards more than once, that sort of thing loses its intimidation power.

Once the adults finished the conjuring, everyone scattered, and then Tonks started the count. At ten, the room lit up like crazy as Harry and company started yelling spells. The adults were quieter, but no less quick to start spitting spells, and the kids were forced into ducking and running and shielding themselves.

The twins were, predictably, working together, and seemed to be focusing on trying to take Tonks, the youngest and (well, technically) least trained of the three adults out of the fight. Sheer habit had
Harry, Hermione and Ron working together, while Neville and Ginny teamed up. Together, they were trying to keep the Marauders busy, which was not an easy task. It was rather quickly becoming evident that while Sirius and Remus had been separated for over a decade, they had not lost the ability to work as a team. And they were downright scary. It made Harry wonder just how scary the three men had been when his dad was alive. It must have been a sight to behold.

At the five minute mark, all of the kids were bruised and sore from diving for cover, out of breath and their concentration was suffering. One of the twins got a lucky shot in on Tonks, somehow managing to hit her with a petrificus totalis. Sirius came to her defense ... and fired off a green-colored color-marking spell.

Harry, ten feet away, saw it and reacted instinctively. Despite knowing it was a color-marking spell, despite the fact that the green wasn't even 'Avada Kedavra' green but a paler shade, for a split second Harry reacted as if that's exactly what it was. He flung a hand out and bellowed "NO!" at the top of his lungs.

A shield flared to life midway between the twins and Sirius. Almost wholly transparent and wobbling crazily, but a shield. The spell hit it and shattered it easily, splattering all over one of the twins' chest a moment later. Half a second after that, Harry sat down hard as his legs abruptly turned to jelly and his head started swimming. For a heartbeat, there was complete, startled silence from everyone in the room. It was Remus that regained his wits first, and hurried to Harry's side, followed quickly by Sirius and then the rest.

"Harry! Are you all right? You're rather pale." Remus asked worriedly. "Tonks! Fetch Madame Pomphrey, please!"

It took Harry a few moments to be able to answer. "I don't feel so good." He admitted. He felt, actually, rather like he had in the aftermath of the graveyard. Shaky, exhausted, and probably more than a bit shocky. Renus nodded, and then glanced over at Sirius. Together, they bundled him off to his room, and Madame Pomphrey showed up a few minutes later. She scowled at him. "Really, Mr. Potter. It's not enough that you insist on giving me fits during the school year? Decided to occupy my summers as well now, have you?" Despite the acerbity of her comments, there was an underlying tone of concern as she waved her wand at him, then tutted. "Whatever have you been doing, you silly boy?" Then she pulled some bottles out of the bag she'd brought with her and handed them to him with a sharp look. "Drink these. All of it." She commanded. Harry made a face of disgust but obeyed. Madame Pomphrey turned her attention to Remus and Sirius. "He's to rest the rest of the day. He's magically exhausted. Whatever has he been doing to get in such a state?"

"Learning dueling." Sirius said, though he didn't explain what, exactly, had got Harry so worn out. Once Pomphrey bustled out, Sirius sat down on the end of the bed. "So, pup ... " He sounded torn between worry, amusement, and a tinge of awe. "You remember me mentioning that will and intent had more to do with magic than most people think? I'm pretty sure you just proved my point, kiddo. But let's not do that again anytime soon, right? You look like something the hippogriff ran over."

Harry sighed as he shifted in the bed. "Feel like it, too."

Sirius chuckled. "Now, what you did was called wandless magic. It's a controlled version of the accidental stuff you did before Hogwarts. Wandless magic is very much governed by a witch or wizard's innate strength, since they're calling on nothing more than their native power, with no assist from a wand. So not everyone can do it, and most of the folks who can are limited to small things ... levitating books, snuffing out candles, that sort of thing. It takes real power to manage more than that ... and trust me pup, that shield, weak as it was, qualifies as 'more than that'. That you're not even full grown yet, and therefore don't yet have your full strength in magic ... " Sirius trailed off, and gave
Harry a somewhat misty, sad grin. "Your dad would be so proud, kiddo. I know Remus and I both are ... well, now we're getting over the surprise, anyway!" Sirius ruffled Harry's hair, despite Harry's attempts to evade him. "Though now I think of it, neither of us should really be surprised, not after you learning the patronus." Nevermind Harry chasing off so many dementors at once!

"Now, once you've recovered, say in a day or two, we'll try this again under more, shall we say, controlled circumstances. And with much more modest goals. In time, you might actually be able to form a serviceable shield ... at least in front of yourself. The odds of being able to shield someone at a distance from you ... well ... I'm not sure even Merlin himself ever managed such a thing. But that's not likely to happen until after you graduate, which is when your magical core matures fully. Still, any bit you can do without a wand will help."

Harry rather agreed with that sentiment, and nodded agreement to Sirius before yawning hugely. Sirius chuckled and ruffled his hair again, much to Harry's annoyance.

"Rest, pup. You've earned it."

A long nap put Harry mostly to rights, though he still felt a bit loggy and slow when he got up for dinner that evening. Molly fussed over him and Dumbledore, who had stopped by to make sure he was all right after finding out Pomphrey had been by, was looking more than a bit pleased. Harry didn't know why he was, and he was also sure he didn't want to know why.

He clambered into bed early. Too bad he wasn't going to get a good night's sleep.

_The street was quiet and calm, only a handful of porchlights gave evidence that someone might possibly be awake this late in the night. That quiet was shattered by numerous pops as ominous figured in black cloaks and silver masks popped in at one end of the street._

_"Kill them all." Voldemort hissed."

_The Death Eaters immediately fanned out, two and three to a house, blowing doors in. Within seconds, screams rang up and down the street. Voldemort ignored all this and marched down the street to one house in particular, blasting the door with a lazy flick of his wand. But before he could enter, the sounds of multiple apparations sounded once more, and Voldemort whirled. The Order had arrived._

_The street became a warzone as the Order frantically tried to drive the Death Eaters off, spells ricocheting in every direction. Voldemort barely paid this any mind, as all his attention was on one particular wizard. Dumbledore. Dumbledore shot a spell at Voldemort, who deflected it._

_"Why do you try, old man? You cannot save them all. They are not worth your protection. Weak, pathetic creatures. Fit only to be used as cattle." And then flicked an ugly-looking brown-red spell at Dumbledore._

_Dumbledore blocked the spell and shot one of his own. "Give up, Tom. You will not win." Voldemort blocked it almost lazily. "You are a fool, old man . You will die, and then who will save them? The boy? Do you really think some mewling child can succeed where even you have failed? No, old man. The world is mine to do with as I will, and all shall bow at my feet. But I tire of toying with you. Farewell for now, old man. And do give the boy my regards. I will deal with him soon enough."_

_Voldemort apparated away, followed swiftly by his minions, leaving a battered and bruised Order to clean up the mess they left behind._
July 16, 1995

Harry wrenched himself awake, almost falling out of the bed in the process, heart hammering and 
gasping for air like he'd run for miles, one hand clamped to his forehead, pressing against his scar, 
which was burning worse than it ever had, with the exception of when Voldemort had touched him. 
It took several long minutes for him to get his equilibrium back enough to be able to trust his legs, but 
once he was sure he could stand without collapsing, he tore out of his bedroom.

"Sirius! Remus!"

The manor was ominously silent. Well, for all of about a minute, and then Hermione and Ginny 
came tumbling out of their shared room, looking a tad wild-eyed and more than a bit worried.

"Harry! What is it?" Hermione wanted to know.

"Where is ... oh no." Harry's sleep-muddled and more than slightly panicky mind finally caught up 
with the situation a bit. "I saw ... everyone must have gone ... "

"Harry, what are you talking about?"

"Nevermind. C'mon! There's got to be someone downstairs!" And Harry turned and fled down the 
stairs. After a half a second, Hermione and Ginny followed.

"Harry, please!"

Harry ignored Hermione's rather strident voice as he headed for the kitchen. He heaved a sigh of 
relief when he spotted Molly and Sirius in the kitchen, for once united with identical grim, 
determined, anxious expressions on their faces. Sirius turned and blinked when he spotted Harry.

"Harry?" Sirius asked.

"They've gone, haven't they. Voldemort's attacked somewhere." Harry said.

"Yes, but how do you know, Harry? And what are you doing awake?" Sirius wanted to know, 
getting to his feet and fled down the stairs. After a half a second, Hermione and Ginny followed.

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"They've gone, haven't they. Voldemort's attacked somewhere." Harry said.

"Yes, but how do you know, Harry? And what are you doing awake?" Sirius wanted to know, 
getting to his feet and heading over to Harry, expression concerned.

Molly, for her part gave him a severe look, then glanced past him at Hermione and Ginny, "I 
suppose you two want to stay up as well?" She got a pair of nods, and gave an exasperated sigh. 
"All right then. Ginny, if you'd be a dear and help me with the soup. Hermione, could you set the 
table? They'll come back thirsty and hungry." There was an edge to her tone that said everyone had 
darn well better come back, or else!

Harry pulled Sirius aside, into the 'family tree' room. "Sirius ... I dunno. I ... I had this really weird 
dream. It was almost like I was seeing through Voldemort's eyes or something. It was really creepy. I 
Saw Dumbledore and the others, and ... it was just weird." Harry shuddered slightly. Weird in a bad
way. He sort of wanted to find out if there was such thing as a shower for your brain, because that
dream or whatever it had been rather disturbing.

Sirius tugged him into a hug, looking a bit grim-faced. "We'll get it sorted, kiddo, don't worry." He
promised.

The Order (minus Dumbledore) didn't show up until almost breakfast time, all of them looking worn
to a frazzle, and very grim. Most of them were also looking a touch bruised around the edges, but
they must have stopped by the school before coming back, because no one was sporting anything
worse than a few bruises. Either that or the Death Eaters had just been toying with them. But if
Voldemort really had been there, Harry somehow doubted the answer was 'toying with them'. Then
again ... Voldemort had been taunting Dumbledore in that dream, so who knew? Harry was pretty
sure that no one had a clue how Voldemort's mind worked. He wasn't sure Voldemort knew how his
mind worked. That's what happened when you were stark raving mad.

The adults were remarkably tight-lipped about what, exactly, had happened last night, so Harry
wasn't actually able to figure out if what he'd dreamed had happened or not, which aggravated him a
bit, as he'd been hoping to figure it out without having to resort to talking to Dumbledore first. Sadly,
it wasn't to be. The only interesting thing he learned was that Tonks was sticking rather close to
Remus, which (if his expression was anything to go by) amused Sirius no end. Harry wasn't quite
sure what was up with that ... he'd noticed that Tonks had a tendency to hang around Remus the last
couple weeks ... but Remus was either totally oblivious, didn't care, or was ignoring it.

Dumbledore didn't arrive until nearly lunchtime, and, for once, he looked as worn out as everyone
else had earlier this morning. Though given that Dumbledore had, doubtless, been having to deal
with Fudge and various other idiots on top of the fight (if it had happened that way), his tiredness
was rather understandable.

Everyone found seats, and Dumbledore started the meeting.

"Voldemort is clearly not content to let the wizarding world lie quietly." Dumbledore said. "Though
it would seem that the Minister is bound and determined to defy Voldemort's attempts to let the
wizarding world at large know of his return. Fudge is insisting that last night's raid was the work of
isolated malcontents." Harry was fairly sure Dumbledore was restraining the urge to roll his eyes, if
his tone was anything to go by. "Worse, I fear Voldemort's strike last night was not so random as it
first appeared. I have since been able to discover that a young Muggleborn resides on the street
Voldemort and his followers attacked. We need to ascertain who, precisely, brought the child to his
attention, since I discovered that accidental magic had been recorded in the area starting only a few
days ago."

Harry grimaced. This was bad. If Voldemort started targeting muggleborns not yet old enough to
attend Hogwarts ... he grimaced. The worst part was, not many people would want to put an effort
into stopping the attacks. After all, they were not, technically, part of the wizarding world, so why
should they put themselves out protecting them? Especially when trying to do so might shatter the
Statue of Secrecy?

"Is there any way to protect these children, Albus?" Asked a very concerned looking McGonagall.

Dumbledore looked more than a bit stricken. "I am afraid not, Minerva. Even if the Ministry was
cooperating, it would be all but impossible."

This occasioned quite a bit of muttering as everyone tried to figure out something. Nobody liked the
idea of leaving kids defenseless. It was, amusingly enough (at least as far as Harry was concerned)
Sirius who hit on a possibility.
"These kids are eventually going to, we hope, be coming to Hogwarts, right? So they'll find out about our world anyway. We just tell them a few years earlier than we normally would. Explain the situation, and offer them some way to communicate with us ... maybe have a house elf assigned to each family, if they're willing. We might lose a few out of fear, but our chances of being able to protect the ones that accept the offer will increase immensely."

And then Remus spoke up. "Or just skip the telling-them step, and have a Hogwarts elf assigned to each family, and have them pop over to check on them every couple of hours unseen. They get so much as a whiff of Death Eaters, they come get us immediately."

More than one person at the table was looking a tad gobsmacked at the idea, but no one could find a fault in the plan.

"A most excellent suggestion, gentlemen. I shall confer with the Hogwarts house-elves as soon as I return to the school." Dumbledore agreed.

Everyone else looked much relieved to have a way to protect innocent kids. Harry didn't blame them one bit. The meeting broke up shortly thereafter, and Harry headed for Dumbledore, albeit a bit reluctantly. "Headmaster, I need to talk to you about something."

Dumbledore looked mildly surprised that Harry would approach him, which Harry didn't blame him for. Things were very strained between them at the moment. "Of course, Harry." They headed off to an empty room, and once there Dumbledore gave Harry a curious look.

"Sir ... something happened last night. I don't know how to describe it. I ... I think I saw the fight last night, maybe."

That certainly got Dumbledore's attention. "Could you perhaps explain what you saw?"

Harry nodded, then told Dumbledore what he could remember of the dream/vision/whatever it had been.

"Most curious. If it happens again, let me know." Dumbledore said.

Harry nodded his agreement. "I will sir." After he told Sirius and Remus, of course.

Once Dumbledore and most of the Order had left the manor, Hermione and Ginny finally succeeded incornering Harry in the library, where he'd gone with the vague idea to do some research.

"Harry ... what happened last night?" Hermione wanted to know.

"Voldemort and his goons attacked some Muggles." Harry said, deliberately playing obtuse.

Hermione let out an exasperated noise, but Ginny reached over and whacked him on the arm, rather hard. "Harry! You know what she means! You came flying out of your room yelling for Sirius and Remus! And babbling something about them having gone. What happened?"

So Harry repeated, more or less word for word, what he'd told Dumbledore. Hermione looked deeply worried for a few moments before heading straight for the stacks of books in search of who-knew-what. Ginny, though, went very very pale and looked utterly horrified and concerned. Harry grimaced a bit, suspecting her reaction was so strong because of the whole diary mess.

"I'm fine, Ginny, honest." He told her. "It was weird, and not fun, but nothing bad happened to me. Whatever's going on, it's not the same as the diary, though I could really do without seeing things through his eyes. It's more than a bit creepy."
To that, Ginny could clearly agree wholeheartedly.

A bit after that, a rather familiar tawny owl arrived with a letter.

My Lord Potter

I had originally intended to write you this morning to ascertain if tomorrow at ten would suit for your next lesson. My letter was delayed, however, in light of last night's events.

However much the Minister may wish it were so, he is not fooling most of those in power with his insistence that all is well. Already, the beginnings of disquiet threaten. If we are to have any chance of a coherent defense against the abomination, we must have a proactive Minister in place, which Fudge most clearly is not. It would therefore behoove us to replace him, as quickly as is feasible.

To this end, with your permission, I wish to make known the obstruction of justice you informed me of in our first meeting. I am quite sure I know of whom you spoke, as there are few scions of Ancient and Noble Houses that are suffering the travails of Azkaban. While mentioning names, at this juncture, would do nothing to assist the wronged scion, making known the fact that an unspecified scion was thrown into Azkaban without benefit of trial will severely weaken Fudge's position, making it far easier to unseat him. If this course of action meets with your approval, inform me at your lesson tomorrow.

Augusta Longbottom

Harry grinned down at the letter. "Sirius, come here for a minute."

Sirius wandered over. "What's up, kiddo?"

"Sirius ... my first lesson with Mrs. Longbottom, she explained the whole hooplah of how the Wizengamot works. I asked her how people would react if they found out someone from one of those big-name houses got tossed into Azkaban without a trial, and she told me it'd create quite a stir. And I kind of mentioned to my lawyer about you." He admitted. "I haven't heard back from my lawyer yet, but Augusta's saying that introducing the concept of a scion of one of the Houses getting tossed into Azkaban without a trial would really kick Fudge in the teeth."

Sirius looked a bit ... odd. "And you're wanting to know if I'm ok with it?" He clarified. Harry nodded. "Definitely. If there's a chance it'll clear my name, she's got my blessing."

Harry grinned. "Excellent. I'll let her know tomorrow."
Augusta Longbottom and Septimus Weasley get the Wizengamot by the short hairs. And love every minute of it.

Chapter 14: To Usurp the Throne

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

July 19, 1995

Augusta Longbottom observed the gathering of the legislative branch of the Wizengamot with tightly-concealed amusement, predatory glee and anticipation. Too long had she stood aside and let others run roughshod over their laws and ways. Though, in her defense, she'd had the raising of her grandson to concern her. It had been prudent to keep a fairly low profile lest she suffer the same fate as her son, and leave Neville totally bereft. Beside her sat Septimus Weasley. And while neither of them was wearing the smugly anticipatory expressions they were feeling, something must be making itself known because more than one person was looking at the elderly pair with apprehension or speculative curiosity.

"You would think they had never seen us seated together." She commented to Septimus.

Septimus gave a shark-grin. "I do believe they scent blood in the air, my Lady Longbottom. Though Merlin knows it is far from before time. And I shall greatly enjoy putting that Malfoy whelp in his proper place once and for all, does he give me the opportunity." He had refrained from intervening in his son and heir's affairs, of course, but that tolerance ended when Ginny had become ensnared by that diary and Arthur had shared with him his suspicion that Malfoy had been responsible for Ginny obtaining the cursed book. Unfortunately, Malfoy was a slippery one, and had not done anything overt as of yet to allow Septimus to bring him to task, and without solid proof of Malfoy's perfidy, he could not be brought to heel for the diary. He had been more than happy to assist Lady Longbottom, when she had explained matters and proposed this course of action.

Eventually, everyone settled, and Fudge called the meeting to order. The upcoming elections were first discussed. Aside from the Minister's chair, several relatively minor Department Head seats were up for renewal, and the ambassador to France was seeking retirement, necessitating voting in a replacement. The myriad of committees were next, presenting their findings on issues presented at the spring session, recommendations for laws or amendments to same, and receiving orders for new avenues of inquiry, or permission to draft a law or amendment for vote either later in the summer session or in the fall session. Finally, Fudge opened the floor to new business.

Augusta immediately rose to her feet. "I have a matter I wish to address." She all but purred. There was a brief buzz from the rest of the Wizengamot. Considering that Augusta had not brought anything before the Wizengamot since taking her place as regent for Neville, she was not surprised at their discomfiture.
"It has been borne upon me that our citizens have found themselves under repeated attack in the last year. Worse, the dementors have abandoned their charge at Azkaban. Times, it seems, are quickly becoming perilous ... and I wonder what steps are being taken to insure the safety of the law-abiding populace. For I have heard no recommendation to increase spending for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement ... not for equipment nor personnel. Nor have I heard any other recommendation, should this body deem it unwise to safeguard what we are sworn to lead and protect." There was a twist of mocking censure in her voice as she said that last, as if she were scolding the entire assembly for even beginning to think of failing in their charge.

Fudge, of course, attempted to bluster. "There is no need for concern, Lady Longbottom. A few scattered incidents ..."

"Scattered incidents, you say? That is quite odd, Minister. I seem to recall that some two dozen or more individuals created havoc at the World Cup, causing the injury of a great many of our citizenry, and then having the effrontery to put that accursed symbol in the air. Worse, the young Lord Potter was scurrilously entered in that preposterous contest, and later portkeyed who-knows-where and viciously attacked."

That caused a murmur in the room, though even Augusta's well-tuned ear wasn't quite able to discern if dissent or concern was the primary cause. Fudge rallied. "Potter wasn't portkeyed anywhere. He was injured in the final task and thought to garner himself attention by claiming an attack."

Those nearest Augusta could be forgiven for drawing back in alarm at her expression. "You dare to accuse me of bearing false witness, Minister?" She all but purred. "My grandson was using omnioculars to watch the third task, as he was concerned for Lord Potter's welfare. He watched as Lord Potter and young Cedric Diggory reached the cup. Neither young man was visibly bleeding, much less in worse condition. They disappeared, for some minutes, I am given to understand, and when they did appear at the entrance of the maze, Cedric lay dead and Lord Potter was badly wounded. One wonders, Minister, how such a thing was accomplished, when the Cup itself was under Ministry control until it was placed in the maze."

Oh, she'd put the kneazel among the snidgets now. Most of the Wizengamot was muttering uneasily, neighbors discussing the matter among themselves. She dearly wish she dared openly state that Voldemort was the cause, but Fudge would throw too big a fit and, for now, was too firmly entrenched in his position. They'd have to rattle him a bit before Voldemort got brought up. "And rather than address this most serious crime, this body seems content to sit back and do nothing. Worse, to malign young Lord Potter. I confess myself deeply concerned that yet again, justice seems to be taking a back seat to convenience."

That occasioned an uneasy rumble. Fudge was nearly apoplectic. "Now see here!"

But Augusta ignored him as if he didn't exist. "I have long been disturbed." She purred. "At the slipshod manner in which the law has been upheld by this august body. I have seen those who have performed most heinous crimes walk free ... and more disturbing yet, word has reached my ears of witches and wizards, either guilty of no wrong or suspected on the flimsiest of evidence, being sentenced to Azkaban without benefit of trial."

Instantaneous uproar. Fully three-fourths of the Wizengamot was on its feet, either protesting innocence (Malfoy and most of his confederates) or reacting in outrage to the concept of innocents being subjected to the horrors of Azkaban. It took Fudge quite some time to get everyone quiet and in their seats once more. In the meantime, Augusta merely stood there, an island of calm in the storm.

"You have proof of which you speak?" Fudge finally asked, clearly expecting her to be blowing so much hot air.
Ahhh, the penultimate moment. It was too bad, really, that Black could not be mentioned. To do so now would see her howled out of the chamber, so strong was the belief of his guilt. Better to introduce them to the concept via a smaller, but quite alarming avenue, then urge that all cases be most stringently reviewed. To prove it had been done once would open the door to doubt in their minds.

"Indeed. A most alarming sequence of events two years ago comes to mind. It was said the legendary Chamber of Secrets was opened, and indeed several students were petrified. In the spring of the school year, I believe, the school's gamekeeper, Rubeus Hagrid, was summarily escorted to Azkaban, yet never saw trial. I am given to understand he was accused of opening the Chamber before, but insofar as I am aware, he was not tried then, either. The word of a single student proved sufficient for the snapping of the man's wand."

At that point, Augusta sat down. There was no further need for her to stand. The entirety of the Wizengamot was in uproar, some witches and wizards pounding their seats as they fought to make their opinion heard. It was a good twenty minutes before order was restored, and Augusta was hard put to keep the pleased smile from her face. When things finally calmed down, it was Septimus who finally stood.

"My granddaughter was one of the children affected by the incident my esteemed colleague has mentioned. Interestingly, after his release, Rubeus Hagrid was cleared of guilt. This means that the true perpetrator is still at large." Septimus couldn't quite resist a fulminating glare at Malfoy. "I find it most disturbing that such a vindictive, callous individual has not been sought with all the resources at our disposal. Our children are our legacy and our greatest treasure. That some dark wizard was able to bring them to harm and escape justice troubles me greatly. I strongly enjoin this body to fully pursue the matter, and what is more, to ensure that all who are in Azkaban truly belong there, as the thought of an innocent condemned to that place fills me with horror."

On that, the Wizengamot was united. Not even Malfoy and his cronies dared vote against the measure. It would paint them in an exceedingly bad light, making it appear as if they had no concern for the guilt or innocence of an accused party. Within the hour, a surprisingly short amount of time, a new committee was created, and Augusta and Septimus were heading it. Their charge: To go over the records of arrest for every individual currently residing in Azkaban, or who had been in Azkaban and then been released. It would not be a quick or easy task, but Septimus for one relished it. Further, Amelia Bones and her department had been enjoined to investigate the Chamber's opening more fully. The Ministerial purse strings had been unknotted enough to allot new equipment for the Aurors. Better still, Fudge looked more than a little green, and was sweating buckets. Overall, a very, very, very good day.

Septimus turned to Augusta. "I believe it might behoove us to begin alphabetically?" He proposed.

Augusta grinned. "Indeed it would, Lord Weasley. Indeed it would." And if they skipped a letter in the pursuit of justice, well then.
Chapter 15: Animagi (Take Two) and Antics

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

July 19, 1995 Grimmauld Place

Harry got rousted out of bed ... for the second day in a row ... by an excited shout from one of his friends.

"I saw it! I saw it!"

Harry, half-asleep, identified it as one of the twins. He shook off the sleepiness as the words penetrated. There could only be one thing that would have one of the twins in such transports of joy. Rubbing his eyes, he padded into the hallway ... and nearly fell over laughing.

One of the twins was capering up and down the hallway, dancing a demented jig, whooping and hollering in glee. The other twin was nowhere in sight, though how he could be asleep still with all this racket Harry would never know. Ron, Hermione and Ginny were standing in the doors of their rooms, watching the twin with amused exasperation. Remus poked his head out of his door, peered at the twin, then glanced at Harry with an amused grin before withdrawing again and leaving them to it.

Harry finally took his life into his hands and darted into the hall in an attempt to corral the twin. "Fred! George! Take a breath mate. You're killing us with the suspense!"

Fred, or was it George? Harry still couldn't tell without the aid of the map. Anyway, they finally settled just a bit. "I." He said, grinning hugely. "Am a ferret. Not like the one Malfoy got turned into last year, though. This one's got colored markings. All red, of course!"

Hermione grinned widely. "Ferrets are known as mischief-makers, so it is rather fitting." She said.

"Oi!" The twin objected, then rubbed his hands together. "This is going to be brilliant."

Harry snickered. It did not surprise him in the least that one of the twins was among the first to discover their animagus form, given their devotion to (and near worship of) the Marauders. The big surprise had been that Neville had been the first, just the night before, as a matter of fact. Especially given that he'd started a couple days after everyone else. Neville's form both had and had not been a surprise. He was a brown bear. Harry'd been half-expecting something smaller for Neville, honestly, given how shy he tended to be, and how much he tried to fade into the woodwork. Neville hadn't been able to figure out what the 'marking' was for his bear form, at least not from the dream-vision, but Sirius had said that sometimes the marking wasn't real obvious ... his was, apparently, the black fur of his dog form. Either that or his eye color.

Harry himself had had no luck discovering his form, but it didn't really surprise him. Disappoint him, oh yes. Surprise him, not so much. He'd had so much to do and so much on his mind aside from learning to duel and the animagus meditations (and in the case of the twins, inventing mayhem with the Marauders) that most nights he'd collapsed into bed and fallen straight to sleep without managing any meditating first. Together, they trooped into the twins' room and dragged the remaining twin (evidently it was George, but Harry was taking that with a grain of salt, given the twins' propensity
for answering to each other's name) out of bed and convened in the library amidst much laughter and chatter.

"So, so far we've got a big bruiser that'll really be able to bring the pain for anyone stupid enough to try to take him on." Ron said with an anticipatory grin and a mock-bow at Neville. "And something little that'll be able to get in practically anywhere."

There was a mass amount of anticipatory glee on Fred's face. "We need to think of names." He said. "I mean, the New Marauders is a no-brainer for the groups as a whole, but individually, we're gonna need names."

Harry sighed. "We'll have to wait for most of us, but I'm sure we can bounce ideas around for you and Neville."

"Squeaker!" Was Ron's contribution.

He immediately got tackled by the twins, who proceeded to try to tickle him and get him into a headlock. Laughing, Harry leapt to Ron's defense, and in very short order the floor of the library was a confusion of limbs and laughter that managed to drag even Hermione into its midst. It felt good to let loose for a bit ... to just goof around and be silly. For the moment, there was no Voldemort, no war. Just a group of teenagers in high spirits. Eventually, they wore themselves out and, sprawled about on the floor, returned to the original conversation.

"So we've a bear to name and a ferret." Harry said, contemplating. "I'm half-tempted to name the ferret Malfoy, just so we can say 'It was Malfoy!' with a straight face when teachers ask who was behind a prank."

This idea met with general hilarity, but was duly rejected on the strength of none of them wanting to be referred to by that name (which Harry completely understood).

"We should name Neville's form Baloo." Hermione proposed. This got her blank looks from everyone in the room, including Harry, whose exposure to children's books had been minimal at best. "It's a bear from a muggle book ... The Jungle Book, by Rudyard Kipling. I can get a hold of a copy easily enough, so you can read about him." This met with approval.

"The ferret's going to be a bit harder. I can't think of any ferrets in stories or movies, offhand." Hermione said. "And they don't really lend themselves to an obvious name, like Harry's dad's form."

There was quiet for a few minutes as everyone contemplated a name for Fred's form. Then Neville perked up. "Rascal!"

This idea met with general hilarity, but was duly rejected on the strength of none of them wanting to be referred to by that name (which Harry completely understood).

"Ok, that's settled. We just need to get the rest of us figured out." Harry sighed. "Thankfully, I think I'm going to be able to put more effort into it now ... there's been so much to deal with!" He sat forward. "Speaking of ... you find anything in the books, Hermione?"

Hermione sighed. "It's not whether I found anything or not, Harry ... it's figuring out what might be of use, that we can learn fast enough. I don't think we have the time to learn some of the more difficult or really esoteric magics."

To that, Harry agreed. Voldemort seemed to be anything but eager to keep a low profile. He'd taken about a two week break, and now seemed to have hit the ground running.

"The good news is that the Hogwarts elves have agreed to keep a watch on the known muggleborns
that aren't old enough for Hogwarts yet." Hermione said. "So at least they'll have a chance to make it to school, since Voldemort seems to want to wipe them all out."

Harry nodded. "Yeah. And Remus said that most of the werewolves were willing to hear him out, with the exception of somebody called Fenrir Greyback and the werewolves that run with him." Mention of Remus had a thought occurring to Harry and he got to his feet and peered out the door. After making sure no adults were in immediate evidence, Harry closed the door firmly, then returned to the others. "You know, a thought occurred to me. If we're really going to be the New Marauders ... we need to prank the old ones. Prove we have the stuff."

The twins' eyes glittered with an almost unholy light at the thought of competing with their idols, and Ron just grinned widely. Hermione and Neville were a bit less enthusiastic, but still willing.

"It'd have to be something really sneaky. I mean, Padfoot's not going to fall for easy stuff, and even if Moony's a bit quieter, he's still a Marauder." Ron said. "But what can we do?"

"Itching powder's always good." Ginny offered.

"Too predictable. This is the Marauders we're talking about." George pointed out. "Something in their food?"

"No, they'd be on their guard against that, since they know it's your preferred method of delivery."

Harry pointed out.

"But would they be on their guard if they thought the other Marauder had done it?" Hermione asked, her voice somewhat hesitant, like she was halfway to coming up with an idea but hadn't worked out the details yet.

"What do you mean?" That had Fred's undivided interest.

"Well." Hermione said. "They're pranksters themselves. And I sincerely doubt they never once pranked each other. So if we could manage to do something in such a way that it would look like one of the two had done it ..."

"That means targeting Remus." Harry said. "Sirius always seems to be the one to start trouble, in their stories."

There were nods around the room. "Right, ok, so we target Remus ... but how?"

"Well ... " Harry said slowly. "They did seem to favor pranks involving color changes."

"Something in his shampoo?" Fred immediately proposed. "Maybe something time-delayed or that gets triggered only under certain conditions?"

"If we could come up with something that uses Whimsies, it'd be based on his mood." Neville offered.

This started an intense discussion between the twins, who were by far the best potioneers among them. While they debated the finer points of the proposed potion, the rest of the group considered how to get the results into Remus' shampoo.

"It'll have to be me." Harry said. "I go into his room sometimes, looking for him or to get him for Sirius. Anyone else, and he might pick up on them." He tapped his nose, reminding them of Remus' enhanced senses.
"Oh, bollocks. We forgot about that!" the twins said in unison, and the discussion of the potion got even more heated as they considered how to achieve their aims and NOT have a potion that reeked to high heavens.

"You do realize, of course, that this is likely to start a prank war." Hermione pointed out.

Harry grinned. "Exactly. It'll give everyone a chance to blow off some steam. I just hope Snape drops by while it's going."

"I don't think the house would survive the results if he did, mate." Ron pointed out, though he was grinning hugely at the thought of watching Snape get pranked. It'd almost be worth the aftermath. Almost.

Harry considered that, and Snape's utter hatred for Sirius, and only marginally less so for Remus. "You have a point." He admitted. "And there's also the fact that I sincerely doubt he'd step foot in the house if he got wind of pranks happening. He /did/ go to school with the Marauders, after all."

"Point." Ron agreed, looking a bit sad at the lost opportunity.

The twins' discussion seemed to be winding down, not that Harry had understood the half of it. Though, in his defense, they were using a verbal shorthand that made it all but impossible to follow what they were saying. "Right. We think we know what to do." Fred said.

"But we're going to need a sample of Moony's shampoo to work with." George said. "To ensure there aren't any ... unforeseen ... reactions."

"Right. I can get that for you yet today." Harry said. "It'll have to be later, though, once he gets busy."

The others nodded at this. "And we're going to have to be careful to not look like we're up to no good." Hermione pointed out. "Otherwise, they'll pick up on it."

"Right. So. Research? That way if they pop in here wanting to know what we're up to ... " Harry proposed.

They immediately dragged a variety of books out ... and none too soon. Within ten minutes, Remus was poking his head in the door to see what was going on.

"Ah." He said. "Doing a bit of research this morning?"

Harry nodded. "We've kind of been letting it go by the wayside a bit, with all the dueling practice we've been doing." He glowered at the book in his hands. "The problem being, we can't even begin to figure out what this supposed power is. It's getting annoying."

Remus came in and sat down in the chair nearest Harry. "You may not figure it out ahead of time, Harry. It's entirely possible the power is something that only comes out under duress, and that you have little or no control over."

Harry made a face. "Maybe. With my luck, probably. But I can hope, can't I?"

Remus chuckled. "Of course you can. And even if you don't stumble across your 'power', you're bound to run across a thing or ten that might be good to know."

"Very true." Harry agreed. "As much as we've been finding in these books, it's kind of scary thinking that there's more ... and worse ... in the books you and Sirius destroyed."
Remus shuddered. "Don't remind me. Some of those books were downright horrific. And that's just the protections woven into them to keep them out of the hands of anyone not a Black, nevermind their actual contents."

"You should really study ancient runes, Harry." Hermione said. "That's something I could see Voldemort using. There's a lot of power in runes. There's nowhere near enough time to teach you to learn to read them properly, but if you could learn to spot key runes by sight, you'd be forewarned of trouble."

Harry nodded. "That's a good idea. At least that way I'd know something was set up, even if I didn't know exactly what. I'd just have to hope that if I saw them, I'd be in a situation I could yell for someone who can read them better."

Hermione glared at him. "You'd better not be off running around on your own!" She scolded.

Harry rolled his eyes. "It's not like I really want to, Hermione, but sometimes I don't have a choice about it!" Like the third task.

Hermione looked contrite. "Sorry, Harry. Let me go get my notes ... we can use those to study from." She hurried out, and came back a few moments later with her bookbag in hand.

Within minutes, Harry and Hermione were deep in learning runes. Hermione settled on a certain range ... anything that mentioned blood, death, or pain. That cut down on the sheer number of runes Harry would need to learn to recognize on sight (even if he didn't know what particular brand of rune they were, or what, exactly, the rune signified beyond 'you really don't want to mess with me'), but there were still quite a number.

Shortly after that, Remus left them to it, and just before lunch, Harry broke away from his studying with Hermione to sneak into Remus' room and snitch some of his shampoo for the twins to work with. They nodded their thanks.

"We'll start fussing with it tonight, in our room." They said. "Can't do it in the potions lab. Padfoot and Moony would see."

After lunch, they opted to do more dueling training. Flitwick greeted them with news.

"Since everyone seems to be doing quite well so far, I think it is time to introduce you all to silent casting. This means thinking the words in your mind, but not saying them. In a fight, it has the advantage of not advertising what you intend to do to your opponent. Virtually all spells can be done silently. The only ones I've ever known to not be performed silently are the Unforgivables, but considering I've heard those spells performed by perhaps a dozen witches and wizards, it's hardly a conclusive statement."

He started them working ... and almost immediately, there were problems. From the start, the twins and Neville (and to a lesser extent Ginny) had been lagging behind in learning to perform spells properly. Now, in the face of having to attempt to do the spells silently, they were completely stymied. By the end of the day, under Flitwick's intense tutelage, Harry, Hermione, and Ron had managed to make their feathers (he started them on Wingardium Leviosa) at least wobble in a way that was clearly not from a random gust of air. Hermione's had actually lifted an inch for a second or two.

Ginny managed to get her feather to move, maybe. It wasn't really clear if it was her or a gust of air. The twins and Neville ... not so much as a twitch, despite all three of them getting very red in the face repeatedly with the effort they put into getting the spell to work.
Flitwick finally called a halt to the session. "Misters and Miss Weasley and Mister Longbottom, might I see your wands, please?" The four of them showed him their wands, though all four looked mildly confused. Flitwick sighed. "It is as I thought. These wands are clearly old. I suppose they belonged to someone in your families?" Neville went pale, but nodded. The Weasleys just looked sheepish. "Then they are not, in fact, your wands. I really must encourage you all to get new wands, ones that choose you. While a witch or wizard can, at need, use any wand, you will not get as good of results as with a wand suited to you ... and in many cases, a non-fitting wand will prove incapable of performing some spells, simply because it cannot properly channel your magical energy."

The Weasleys were all starting to blush, well aware that three new wands were beyond their limited means. There was no lucky windfall to defray the cost this time, as there had been for Ron's new wand. Neville looked nervous, but then, he would have to tackle Augusta about a new wand, and given how intimidated Neville was of his grandmother, that was going to be a problem. Harry looked at the Weasleys.

"Guys, I'll loan you the money for the wands. You can pay me back later, when you get the chance." He told them. He had, of course, no intention of collecting the debt, but at least this way it would avoid sounding like charity.

"Nonsense!" Fred sputtered. "We can use some of our winnings from the World Cup."

"But I thought ... " Ron started.

"We got him to pay up." George explained.

This was, Harry knew, wholly a lie. He knew they meant to use the Triwiz money he'd given them. Well, so long as it got done, it hardly mattered how.

"Right, that works. So ... shopping trip tomorrow? For you guys, at least. Wouldn't be a good idea for me to tag along. I might be able to walk around Diagon Alley bold as brass in my disguise when I'm alone, but everyone knows I'm close to you guys, and some unknown guy hanging out with you would be given close scrutiny." Harry said.

The others agreed to that, and the shopping trip was planned. That it would allow the twins a chance to buy some supplies they needed for their pending prank was just so much gravy as far as everyone was concerned.

They proposed the trip at dinner, and, with a bit of well-timed sleight-of-hand, managed to get Molly to agree to the outing to the Alley, though she insisted they have adults with them. The twins immediately begged Tonks to go with them. Who turned to Remus and invited him along with. Which had Harry snickering. He'd noticed (as had the rest of the New Marauders) that Tonks was spending an inordinate amount of time in Remus' immediate vicinity. Very immediate. Pretty much every chance she got to invade his personal space, she took. At first, Remus had either been oblivious or was ignoring it, but he was starting to get a slightly hunted look in his eyes. He declined to attend the trip, much to the Weasley's relief. Having Remus with them would have complicated prank preparations no end.

For once not driven to exhaustion, Harry was able to settle in and attempt to meditate that night. He got a vision, all right. Just not the one he'd been hoping for.

The room was large and poorly lit. Death Eaters were gathered in a neat semi-circle, hooded and masked. Voldemort paced back and forth, his rage incandescent.
"How? How are they anticipating us? Everywhere we turn, that old fool and his followers arrive within seconds!" And then, in a voice filled with malice. "Severus, you have failed me. You are my spy in their midst. You claim the old fool trusts you. And yet, you do not bring me news of this change in their efforts? CRUCIO!"

Half a breath later, one of the Death Eaters closest to Voldemort went down, writhing in agony under the curse. Eventually, Voldemort let the curse lapse.

"Go, Severus. And when you return, you will have news for me."

Though the words were not said, it was rather clear that 'you will have the news I desire or you'd better not return at all unless you want to die an agonizing death' was tagged at the end of that sentence. Somehow, Snape got to his feet, though he looked none too steady. He gave Voldemort a shaky bow. "As you command, my lord." And then he slowly withdrew.
July 20, 1995

Harry woke a touch more quietly this time, in that he at least managed to get out of bed without nearly braining himself or breaking an ankle. "Crap, crap, crap, crap, CRAP!" He snarled, pacing around the room, fighting the urge to rub his scar as the pain faded. There was, really, not much he could do. Snape would either make it back to Hogwarts or not ... Harry had no idea where that meeting had taken place, other than a large, gloomy room. Worse, it was Snape. Harry was quite sure that any attempts at helping that man on his part would be rather violently rejected, even if Harry could come up with something to do. Harry ran his fingers through his hair, yanking on it a bit in frustration.

"Why am I seeing this stuff?" He asked the room at large. "First the attack on that street, now this. It makes no sense!" He huffed in aggravation and flung himself back onto the bed so hard he bounced. He stared at the ceiling for a long moment and sighed. "Guess this means another chat with Dumbledore." He muttered.

Eventually, he collapsed again into a far more uneasy sleep, and woke in a grumpy mood later in the morning to find the house invaded en masse by the Order. Evidently, Snape had made it back to Hogwarts and kicked over the hornet's nest, though Harry didn't see Snape himself right away. At least, not until he managed to get into the kitchen for some breakfast. He found Snape there, sitting in a chair in the corner with a cup of tea at his elbow. Despite the enmity between them, Harry couldn't help but feel bad for the man. As pale as he normally was, this morning Snape was positively bloodless, and he was sitting painfully rigidly, as if he was trying to stop himself from sagging or trembling by main force. At a complete loss as to what (if anything) to say, Harry opted for simply grabbing some food and sitting at the table, well away from Snape. Snape, for his part, seemed content to ignore Harry's existence rather than engage in a verbal attack.

The moment Harry heard Dumbledore's voice, he headed out of the kitchen, and forcibly dragged Dumbledore aside, though clearly Dumbledore wasn't entirely unwilling to be dragged, as Harry wasn't fool enough to think he could force the Headmaster to do something against his will.

"Sir ... I saw what happened last night." Harry kept his voice down. "To Snape, I mean."

Dumbledore looked very grave. "I see. I have attempted to do some research since the last time, but unfortunately, curse scars such as yours are quite rare, and information is exceedingly scarce. The only thing I have been able to come up with that might help is Occlumency, a mind art that allows you to defend your mind. I shall have to ask Professor Snape ...

At that point, Harry interrupted. "No. Not Snape. We can barely manage to be in the same room without insults flying. There's no way we'd manage to deal with each other civilly long enough for him to teach me Occlumency." At least he managed to say that without making it sound like Snape was wholly to fault, which Dumbledore would take issue with, despite the truth of it. Harry hadn't gotten grumpy with Snape until after Snape had got nasty with him. And while Harry was willing to at least try to let bygones be bygones, he sincerely doubted that Snape would be so inclined, which
would make the whole thing an exercise in futility. "Surely someone else in the Order knows how to
do it? Like Moody? As paranoid as he is, I really can't imagine him not knowing how to keep people
out of his mind." And while Harry was entirely convinced that Moody was nuts, they got along
worlds better than Harry and Snape ever had.

Dumbledore sighed, but admitted, if only to himself, that Harry had a point. Two, actually. "I shall
speak with Alastor, then."

By the time they got to the dining room and the meeting, Snape had managed to get there. The
meeting was mostly a quiet affair. Since there was absolutely nothing Voldemort could do about the
house elf warning system, Snape was given the information and allowed to pass it on. Hopefully,
knowing that the muggleborns were being watched, and the Order could arrive within seconds of the
Death Eaters no matter which of them they chose to target would keep Voldemort from attacking
them, at least for a little while.

It was a widely grinning Remus, though, who brought their attention to the morning paper. "Seems
the Lady Longbottom and Lord Weasley had entirely too much fun rattling the hornet's nest
yesterday." He said as he tossed a copy onto the table.

INNOCENTS IN AZKABAN?

The title screamed, splashed across the entire top of the paper. There was a picture of Azkaban under
the writing. Harry snatched it up before anyone else managed to. Moody, a few seats down, grinned
at him. "Well, lad, read it for us." He demanded. Harry grinned, and did so.

"This is the question that was raised at the start of the summer Wizengamot session, by none other
than the esteemed Lady Longbottom. In a stirring address, she called the Wizengamot at large to task
for their, in her own words 'slipshod manner in which the law has been upheld by this august body."

In particular, she brought forward the lack of funds for the DMLE, and then, in a revelation that
rocked the Wizengamot, revealed that at least one man, Hogwarts' own Rubeus Hagrid, had been
imprisoned without trial for a crime it was later proven that he did not commit. That he, in fact, had
been proclaimed guilty without benefit of a trial for this same crime once before, resulting in the
snapping of the man's wand.

If it can happen once, this reporter wonders just how many times it has happened. This same
question clearly occurred to the Lady Longbottom, as she asked the Wizengamot to examine the
cases of all inmates to ensure that proper legal procedure had been followed. Lady Longbottom and
Lord Weasley were chosen to lead the committee that was then formed to look into the matter."

Harry was jubilant. Step one of Augusta's plan had, clearly, gone off without a hitch. That this plan
had the power to give justice to two people Harry was deeply fond of just made him all the happier.
The only thing keeping him from bouncing in his seat like an overeager five year old was Snape's
presence.

The article caused a lot of chatter among the Order members. Some were worried that the committee
would end up giving truly guilty people a shot at getting free, but no one could argue to the necessity
of it. Both Hagrid and Sirius had fallen afoul of people not following the law ... there was no telling
how many other people had fallen victim. It was far and away time for their voices to be heard. The
only thing that troubled Harry, and deeply, was the fact it was necessary at all. Surely Dumbledore,
with all his titles, power, and influence, could have ensured that the right thing was done? Had it
really been so impossible a task? The implications of the question troubled him, and right now, he
just wanted to be gleeful that steps were being taken to right wrongs.
"Hagrid's going to be tickled pink about this." Harry finally said, ignoring the other person who'd be pleased if his name was cleared in the interest of not being treated to a Snape snark. Still, he grinned broadly in Sirius' direction. Sirius, for his part, looked torn between delight and not wanting to get his hopes up.

The meeting broke up a few minutes later. Dumbledore pulled Moody aside and spoke to him quietly, and the Weasley kids and Tonks headed for Diagon Alley and wand shopping. A few minutes later, Moody stumped over.

"Dumbledore says you need to learn Occlumency. I'll be here tomorrow at ten." And then he stumped off again, Dumbledore at his heels, leaving the house to just Harry, Remus, Sirius, the elder Weasleys, Ron and Hermione

Harry decided to use the relatively quiet time to attempt to mediate on his animagus form, and headed for his room. He didn't get much of anywhere, unfortunately, before the Weasleys returned, all three of them bouncing like they'd gone insane (or in the case of the twins, more insane) and brandishing their new wands at everyone with great glee. It was quickly and unanimously decided to head for the dueling room to practice.

The results were ... stunning. They decided to do some simpler spells, aiming at dummies. Good thing too. The first Expelliarmus that Fred shot at one of the dummies not only knocked the 'wand' out of its hand, but blasted the dummy backwards a good twenty feet and into the far wall.

"Whoah." Fred was staring at his wand like he thought it was going to reach up and bite him. "That was ..."

"Yeah." Harry agreed, staring at the mangled and broken dummy. The others were nodding in agreement. "Right. Somehow, I think you guys better start at the beginning."

The next hour was pure chaos. Even Wingardium Leviosa was going wrong, slamming the feathers into the ceiling or walls like it was a guided missile. By the time they called it quits, Ron was frowning.

"I didn't have this much trouble with my new wand." He commented.

"Yeah, mate, but you really only had your old wand for a year. It was busted all of second, remember?" Harry pointed out. "Fred and George had their old wands for six years. Ginny's had hers for three."

Ron made a face. "Yeah, guess that would make a difference, wouldn't it?"

They trooped into the kitchen for dinner, then immediately returned to the dueling room. By the time they called it a night, Ginny seemed to be getting a handle on tossing spells with her new wand, and the twins were, while not back in control, at least doing a bit less damage.

And again that night, Harry dreamed.

It was the same room, but this time, only an unmasked Pettigrew was in attendance. One long, bony hand stroked Nagini's head.

"So, Wormtail. The old fool it seems is not quite so much a fool as he would have us believe. He protects the mudbloods. Quite ingeniously, I will admit. So one target is denied us for now. Yet I wonder, Wormtail ... can the old fool protect everyone? A change of targets is required, Wormtail. I shall have to ponder where best to strike next."
"T-t-there are o-other mudb-bloods, my lord." Pettigrew offered.

"Do you think I am unaware of this?" The yew wand lifted threateningly, and Pettigrew flung himself at Voldemort's feet, gibbering for mercy. The wand lowered, unused. "The matter is not who to attack. It is when and how. These things must be done with a certain amount of style, Wormtail, in order to be remembered."

**Master, I am hungry.**

The long hand gave Nagini's head an extra pat. "Nagini is hungry, Wormtail. Fetch her something ... juicy."

Pettigrew scrambled to his feet with alacrity and fled. Voldemort's stroking of Nagini never faltered.

"He is a fool, a coward, and a weakling, but he does have his uses." Voldemort mused aloud.

**He smells of prey**

"You may not eat him. For now. But if he fails to be of use, he will make a fine meal for you."

Nagini hissed in pleasure, and when Pettigrew returned, dragging the freshly-dead body of a young woman, Nagini snapped playfully at him.

"Now now, Nagini. Manners." Voldemort scolded, but he sounded amused. Wormtail just cringed and got as far away from Nagini and her 'dinner' as he dared.
That set the tone for the next few days. A dream every night, seen from Voldemort's eyes. The only good news was that in the wake of being stymied in his attacks on the next generation or two of mudbloods, Voldemort was playing it cautious, attempting to wring information out of Snape (not that he got anything of use) and pondering his options while sending his minions out to ... encourage ... various parties to join him. Which meant Harry was spared seeing people die or be tortured, for which he was deeply grateful.

Harry spent every spare minute he could scrounge with Moody, attempting to learn occlumency. Thanks to the animagi meditations, Harry was at least familiar with trying to clear his mind, even if he didn't have much success at it. Some small progress was being made, Harry decided as he blearily stumbled down the stairs, only somewhat conscious of a worried Ginny and Hermione on his heels. At least this time his scar wasn't screaming in pain. No luck blocking the visions, but according to Moody it was early days yet.

Harry was, understandably, more than a bit frazzled by now, exhausted and edging into short-tempered. The Marauders, old and new alike, had closed ranks around him. He, quite simply, wasn't allowed to be alone. The one time someone in the Order said something about the state Harry was in (the only ones that knew of the visions were Dumbledore and Moody) they'd very nearly gotten themselves hexed into oblivion by an enraged Ginny and Hermione on his heels. At least this time his scar wasn't screaming in pain. No luck blocking the visions, but according to Moody it was early days yet.

Ginny. She'd stuck the closest to him, watching him worriedly. Harry could well understand why she'd be so worried, but he found himself vaguely amused that she seemed to be the most sensible of the lot, more so even than Remus. Sirius and Remus both tended to want to smother him, or mother-hen him to death, and while Harry appreciated the gesture, their coddling could get aggravating after a while. Ginny seemed to have a gift for knowing when everyone was getting to be a bit much and chased them off, though she refused point blank to leave him alone. When it was just the two of them, she would invariably retreat to the far side of the room and entertain herself with a book, giving him as much privacy as she could, which Harry appreciated. He collapsed into a chair and sighed.

"You didn't come flying out of bed last night." Ron commented from his spot on the other side of the table. It had been his turn to sleep in Harry's room.

"Scar didn't wake me up." Harry grumbled. "Still dreamed. Weird one, too. At first, it was like I was flying or something."

"Flying? That is weird. Normally he's in that room, yeah?" Ron asked.

"Yeah. This time though, at first, well, I couldn't see anything, but it felt like flying, you know? Only I don't think there was a broomstick involved."

Hermione regarded him for a few moments. "Harry." She said, her tone one of cautious excitement.
"You've still been doing the animagus meditations, right?"

"Yeah, but ... " Harry stopped, and blinked, then looked over at Hermione. "You think?"

"It's certainly possible." Hermione offered. "Especially if you weren't seeing anything at the time. Your visions have been remarkably consistent in most regards, and that's nothing like them. Of course, it could just be a completely normal-but-weird dream, but since it's you, the odds of that are slim." She grinned at him impudently.

"Hermione!" He scolded.

"You did see something from Voldemort, though?" Ginny asked.

Harry nodded. "The vampires are definitely on his side. I think Hagrid got to the acromantulas in time ... at least the ones Aragog can influence. He hasn't mentioned them since the second night." Harry yawned. "And I just realized I got a whole night's sleep last night. If I can manage one or two more, I ought to be fine." Well, insomuch as he'd no longer be in danger of falling over and hurting himself. The visions would, sadly, probably continue to be a problem.

After he'd had a bit of a chance to wake up, he followed the others to the dueling room. He'd insisted on practicing with them, despite his exhaustion, on the strength of the knowledge that a fight could happen anytime. When they got there, they had a surprise. Neville had finally talked Augusta into allowing him to get a new wand.

Now that everyone had proper wands, and everyone but Neville had had a chance to get used to them, Flitwick took Neville aside for some concentrated practice, in hopes of settling the inevitable issues quickly. He set Harry to attempting Wingardium Leviosa wandlessly, which resulted in Harry spending the next hour staring at a feather to no perceivable effect, unless you counted his red face. He at least got some entertainment watching Neville bury feathers in the ceiling repeatedly. Poor Neville seemed to be rather stunned at how strong the spells were now. Harry guessed the wand he'd been using had been a particularly bad fit.

That done. Harry met with Moody for more work on Occlumency. Now that Harry was beginning to have some luck 'clearing his mind', Moody was moving on to the actual defenses.

"It's your mind, lad. Use what you know and what you're most comfortable with to organize it. Something you can visualize quickly and easily. And don't be afraid to get creative. Most folks that try to learn this stop at making a wall, but having things with teeth and claws will make your mind that much safer."

Harry nodded, and Moody left him to his meditating. So of course things had to get weird on him.

_It was like he was in a cloud. Everywhere he looked, there was white. But despite not being able to see, he was somehow aware he was flying. And then, slowly, the white dimmed and changed, and he could see! And what a sight. He was, indeed flying. High, high above the ground. He could see for miles. Vaguely, he was aware there was something different about his sight, but the difference didn't trouble him. This was glorious. Nothing but the sun and wind and a whole sky to play in._

_He swooped and dived and did loop-the-loops and all sorts of aerial maneuvers, just for the sheer joy of flying. And then, as he was flying over a meadow, a small, darting movement a little below him caught his attention, and, acting on instinct, he dove._

_It wasn't until he was almost on top of the other bird, getting ready to strike, that he very belatedly realized he wasn't on a broom. When slender yellow bird's feet tipped with deadly-sharp black talons_
swung forward into his line-of-sight. The bird never stood a chance. Seconds later he was flying much straighter, burden tucked neatly under him, until he came to a lake. He caught a glimpse of himself, then ...

Harry jerked out of the meditation with an exultant whoop that brought the New Marauders thundering into the room.

"I'm a hawk!" Harry yelled, bouncing nearly as much as Fred had when he'd seen his animagus form.

"Wicked!" Ron breathed, then let out a laugh. "Though it's not much of a surprise. I kind of always figured you for something with wings, the way you are about flying."

From the grins on the others' faces, they'd been of much the same mind. Sirius and Remus came scrambling in then, having been a bit further away than their younger counterparts.

"A hawk!" Harry said, grinning hugely. Sirius gave a whoop and danced a jig, while Remus just grinned widely, shaking his head amusedly at Sirius' antics.

"Could you tell what kind of hawk?" Hermione wanted to know.

Harry sighed and shook his head. "I got a glimpse of myself, but it was really quick, at the end of the vision. I might recognize a picture of it, but I didn't know the name straight off."

Hermione leaped to her feet and rushed off, then came back a few moments later with a book on birds. Everyone crowded around as Harry flipped through to the hawk section. After a long few minutes, Harry pointed to a picture. "There, that's it! A peregrine falcon. And I know what my mark is. My eyes. I caught a glimpse of them in a lake I flew over. They were green, but in these pictures, they're all gold." He was just relieved beyond measure that the scar had not been in evidence, at least not in the quick glimpse he'd gotten.

Hermione hauled the book over so she could see, and read the excerpt, only to start laughing. "This is so you, Harry, listen to this. The Peregrine Falcon is generally considered as one of the fastest birds in the world, reaching speeds of nearly 200 miles per hour when diving after prey. They are a spectacular hunter, often flying very high, and then diving at extreme speed to strike prey in mid-air. They prey almost exclusively on other birds, only rarely hunting mammals."

"Blimey, it's like they wrote that with Seekers in mind!" Ron said, goggling at the book.

Harry just grinned hugely, enormously happy that his animagus form would let him fly whenever he wanted. He'd always loved flying, moreso even than quidditch.

"This." Sirius proclaimed. "Calls for a minor celebration. Let's go see what Winky and Dobby can whip up."

So they invaded the kitchen. "Now we have to figure out a name for you, too." Fred pointed out. "We've got mine sorted, and Neville's decided he likes Baloo. Naming you's gonna be tough, though."

Harry had to admit Fred had a point. This was going to be tricky. He'd have to think it over.

That, it turned out, was not to be the only good news of the day. They trooped in to lunch to find the Daily Prophet on the table, courtesy of whichever adult had brought it today (since they couldn't exactly have a subscription linked to the house). The front-page article ... was all about Hagrid. And this time, it wasn't a smear piece about his giant ancestry. It was all about the complete mess-up that
had been the first opening of the Chamber of Secrets, and the even bigger mess-up with the second opening.

It was kind of horrifying to find out (for sure, he was taking everything the diary told him with a bucketload of salt) that Tom Marvolo Riddle had, indeed, been the one to 'capture' Hagrid. That his word, and his word alone, was enough to see Hagrid's wand snapped, without even a token attempt to verify the accusation. Not to mention what Fudge had pulled the second time around, tossing Hagrid into Azkaban without even bothering to do ... well, much of anything.

Fudge was doing a massive tap-dance, trying to evade blame. He was crying foul on Dumbledore, saying Dumbledore should have acted sooner the second time, that he should have blocked off the area where Myrtle was killed, that he should have evacuated the school when the Chamber opened again. There wasn't anything in the paper about Dumbledore's response to the comments, but Harry was willing to bet he was or would be doing a massive tap-dance of his own to try to calm things down. The next few weeks ought to be really interesting.

At the very end of the article, though, were the words that produced much rejoicing amongst the New Marauders.

"Compensation for his wrongful imprisonment in the matter of the second opening of the Chamber has been offered Rubeus Hagrid, and, pending a verdict of innocent in an upcoming trial regarding the first opening, his expulsion may be reversed, and he be allowed to own and use a wand."

"Oh, Hagrid will be ecstatic!" Hermione said, all but bouncing.

"Ron and I can be witnesses! We talked to Aragog!" Harry realized. "He confirmed he wasn't the creature in the Chamber. And seeing as I fought the thing, and know darn good and well it was no acromantula down there ..." Not to mention, he knew how the Chamber opened, and unless Hagrid was a parselmouth, he'd not have been able.

Ron's eyes lit up. "Yeah! And Hermione can testify too, she's the one figured out what the thing was originally." He pointed out.

Harry grinned down at the paper. "One step closer. Seeing all this ..." He waved a hand at the paper. "Will at least make people want to give you a proper trial, Sirius, so that it's airtight that you're guilty. Or so they think. And that's all we need. You, a courtroom, and some Veritaserum."

Hermione and Ron nodded. Sirius looked a little shaky and a lot hopeful. "Would be nice, pup." He said. "Augusta's doing a bang-up job so far."

Harry hugged Sirius. "The second we get a whiff of them wanting to do the trial, I'll talk to my lawyer. Get things set up." He promised.

"Wouldn't that ... look odd? Your lawyer representing him?" Hermione asked, frowning.

"Yeah it would, if he did. But I can ask him for someone he knows that's good." Harry pointed out. Hermione got a look on her face that said 'D'oh, I knew that!'.

Winky was only too happy to ply them with all sorts of finger foods and as much butterbeer and pumpkin juice as they could handle. Eventually, lunch came to a close and they broke up again. Energized by the morning's successes, they decided to hit the books again, though with only limited success, as they kept getting side-tracked by discussions of animagi, judicial procedure as seen in the wizarding world, and rather intense speculation on what Fudge and Dumbledore would do to attempt to keep their respective fats out of the fire.
Trials and Tribulations Part 1

Chapter Summary

The first steps towards justice are taken, and Harry discovers that there's more to being Voldemort's equal than having more magical power than he knows what to do with.

Chapter 18: Trials and Tribulations, Part 1

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

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July 28, 1995

Harry spent the next few days mostly at Longbottom Manor, putting his head together with Augusta, Septimus, Ron, Hermione, Jeremiah ... and exceedingly nervous Hagrid. Jeremiah had recommended one of his partners for Hagrid, and since Hagrid's funds were as limited as the Weasleys', Harry had made it clear he'd pay the man's fees. Elbert Hartgrove looked, far and away, more the part of the lawyer than Jeremiah did. He was a touch on the portly side, and had the sharp, calculating look in his eyes Harry normally associated with Slytherins. That said, he, like Jeremiah, was honest and good-tempered.

On the other hand, Harry still wasn't quite sure what to make of Septimus Weasley. He was as unlike Arthur as two people could be and still be related. If Harry didn't know for a fact that every Weasley for uncountable generations had been a Gryffindor, Harry would have strongly suspected the man of being a Slytherin. The dangerous kind. The kind that truly embodied that House's standards. Ambition, cunning, determination, resourcefulness. Those traits coupled with Gryffindor courage and daring ... made Septimus Weasley a very, very, very scary man, and Harry made due mental note to never get on his bad side. Or Augusta's for that matter, though she was not quite as Slytherin as Septimus seemed to be. He kind of felt sorry for anyone who did, which was going to make the next few months as the pair went through the Wizengamot like a dose of salts all kinds of interesting. He wondered, idly, if Malfoy would survive the experience.

And so it was that a nigh-unrecognizable Hagrid walked into the courtroom the day of his much-delayed trial. His hair and beard were neatly combed and trimmed, and he was wearing, not the furry suit he'd used for Buckbeak's trial, but a set of plain black robes, shirt, and trousers. He looked almost nothing like the wild, rough gameskeeper ... which had been the point of the makeover.

Harry, Hermione and Ron, as potential witnesses for the defense, were sitting down in the row of seats closest to the floor and closest to where Hagrid and Hartgrove were sitting. Dumbledore was there as well, which pleased Harry. This particular screw-up, Harry did not place at Dumbledore's feet. Back then, he'd only been Transfiguration professor, and had not had any of his other titles ... yet. He'd not been able to do much of anything to help Hagrid the first time around. The only bad news in the trial was that Hagrid, being half-giant, was highly resistant to veritaserum, so there could be no quick cut-and-dry on the case.

Fudge called them to order, and then the trial began. It was, Harry quickly discovered, virtually identical to Muggle trials. Hartgrove and his opponent both got up and made their statements,
Hartgrove of course saying he'd prove Hagrid innocent, while the other guy, whom Jeremiah had identified as man by the name of Gulmeier, claimed he'd prove Hagrid guilty. Harry rather thought the Gulmeier's heart wasn't really in it. There was a certain ... energy ... that was lacking, it seemed. Of course, it was just the opening statements, so who knew.

Hagrid was called to the stand first. Hatgrove got straight to the heart of the matter.

"Did you, Rubeus Hagrid, open the Chamber of Secrets while you were a student?"

Hagrid shook his head vehemently. "I never! I wouldn'ta never done that!"

"How then did you come to be accused?" Hartgrove wanted to know.

"It were Aragog. He's an acromantula, y'see. Wonderful beast. I had him as a pet then. Kept him in a crate. Riddle ... he were a prefect then ... found out about him an' when Myrtle died, he said Aragog were the monster. But Aragog never left his crate, see? I brought him rats and such to eat. But once Riddle said Aragog were the beast, that was it. M'da'd died before then, y'see, so I didn't have nobody to stand fer me, nor money to get a lawyer. Professor Dumbledore believed I were innocent, an' tried ta help me, but Headmaster Dippet wouldn't listen, an' before I knew what was goin' on, me wand'd been snapped."

Hartgrove just smiled. "I have transcripts of the incidents at the time, as well as a report on the cause of young Myrtle's death. Students were being petrified ... a power that acromantula do not possess. Myrtle wholly unmarked at the time of her death. Given that acromantula must bite their victims in order to inject their venom, it is not possible for Hagrid's pet to have been the creature from the chamber, nor for it to have been responsible for Myrtle's death."

That, of course, rather neatly cut one leg out from under the prosecution. Aragog wasn't the monster. Of course, Gulmeier wasn't completely without something to pursue.

"So this Aragog, the creature you were caught with and accused of setting on everyone, was not the fabled creature from the Chamber. The question of whether or not you opened the chamber and let another creature out has not yet been settled."

From there, things got a touch sticky, but with Hermione and Ron testifying as to what the creature actually was, and Dumbledore's sworn insistence Hagrid hadn't opened the Chamber, they were definitely weakening the prosecution's case. But Harry had a feeling it wasn't enough, which was confirmed when Hartgrove caught his eye and nodded.

And then it was his turn on the stand. He fought down the urge to rub his suddenly sweaty hands on his robe. Hartgrove asked him the same questions he'd asked Ron about the visit to Aragog, and then Harry took a deep breath. This had already got into the papers thanks to Malfoy, but ...

"See, I know for a fact Hagrid couldn't have opened the Chamber, even if he'd wanted to. Ron and I figured out where the Chamber's opening was, and what was in there, pretty much the same day Ginny Weasley got dragged into the Chamber. We both ran to Lockhart, to tell him what we knew, but the git was completely useless. He was packing his stuff, getting ready to leave. So it was up to Ron and me to do something. We headed for the bathroom ... and that's when we found out that the Chamber could only be opened by a parslemouth."

There was more than a bit of an uproar. "So Hagrid couldn't've. And it was a good thing I could, because I managed to get in there, kill the bloody basilisk and saved Ginny's life in the bargain." He was, of course, omitting the whole 'Lockhart obliterated himself' drama. And Fawkes, and the sword. They really didn't need to know that.
In the end, Hagrid was cleared, and reinstated as a wizard, allowed to own and use a wand again. He broke down in floods of jubilant tears, and it took their combined effort to steer him out of the room for the newsbite with the reporters.

Of course, they weren't satisfied with swarming Hagrid. They went after Harry too.

"Yes." He said. "I am a parslemouth. No, I am not the next dark lord. Being able to talk to snakes, despite popular opinion, is not, in and of itself, evil. It's just plain bad luck that V-" He thought better of saying the name, not wanting to start a near-riot "You-Know-Who is one, and has given the skill a bad name."

Harry had no illusions as to how his skill would be painted in the papers. His only comfort was that the smear campaign had all but stopped in the face of far juicier targets. Reporters do love scandals, and the whole innocents-in-Azkaban thing was meat and drink to them. And considering that Harry knew who Augusta and Septimus were going to deal with next in that regard, he knew his confirming he was a parslemouth would disappear into the mists like it had never happened.

Hagrid was a bit too overcome to get a new wand that day. Instead, everyone congregated at Hogwarts for a huge party. Everyone was thrilled for Hagrid, and most of the teachers (bar Snape, of course) offered to help Hagrid learn what he'd never had a chance to fifty years ago. Poor Hagrid couldn't seem to stop crying, at least not completely, though there was no mistaking the tears for grief, not with a grin wide enough to threaten to split his head in half in place.

Eventually, the rather exultant members of the Marauders (old and new) traipsed back to the manor. Harry especially was gleeful.

"First stop Hagrid, next stop Sirius!" He whooped.

The special evening edition of the Prophet, though, put some brakes on the mood. It wasn't the snarky commentary about Harry's ability to talk to snakes that worried everyone.

It was the fact that Fudge was wanting to push through an initiative to review anything and everything to do with Hogwarts with a fine-toothed comb. That in and of itself wouldn't have been worrisome if it had been anyone other than Fudge, who was still pretending Voldemort was dead and Dumbledore was after the minister's chair, was behind the effort.

"This doesn't sound very good." Sirius admitted, eyeing the paper. "I mean, some stuff needs changing, but I sincerely doubt that Fudge, of all people, is going to be doing this in an effort to make Hogwarts better and safer. He's just wanting to hamstring Dumbledore."

Harry had to agree with that assessment. "And make himself look better in the bargain, but spearheading improvements to the school." He added. Sirius nodded his agreement with that.

And that night, the pattern of the dream-visions changed somewhat.

_The same dim room. A Death Eater meeting in progress. Not all of them. He had deliberately disincluded Severus from the meeting, suspicious of the man's loyalties after so long at Dumbledore's feet. If this raid went off as planned, with no interference, he would punish Severus as the traitor he clearly was. If the raid was intercepted again ... well, he would simply have to eliminate them one by one, would he not?_

"Everything is ready, my lord."

"Excellent. Tomorrow night, we strike. Ahhh, Dumbledore, you old fool. You cannot protect them all. Tomorrow four of your students die. Lucius, you, Crabbe and Goyle shall visit the Creeveys."
Avery and Wormtail shall pay a visit to the Dobbs, and Macnair and Nott shall visit the MacDonalds."

Somehow, Harry managed to jerk awake, despite the fact his scar hadn't so much as twinged. "Dumbledore. Gotta warn Dumbledore!" He gasped, and scrambled out of bed.

"Harry? Harry wait!"

Harry rushed down the stairs so fast he nearly ended up falling down them head over heels, heedless of the thunder of footsteps following him and Ron's strident demands for him to wait, to slow down, to answer him. Somehow, he got to the floo and yelled for Dumbledore's office. Too sleep-muddled and deeply rattled to remember how to floo properly, he sprawled all over the office floor in an ungainly heap. Half a second later, Ron came tumbling through as well. He'd finally stopped trying to get an answer out of Harry, and just helped him to his feet and pushed him into a chair.

A few moments later, Dumbledore, resplendent in pyjamas that were quite literally glowing in shades of blue, sleeping cap tucked down around his ears and his beard braided to keep it from getting tangled while he slept, walked in, looking startled and alarmed. "Harry?"

"Raid, tomorrow night. He kept Snape out of the meeting. Thinks he's spying. Going to kill some of last year's first-year muggleborns. Creevey, Dobbs, MacDonald." Harry all but chanted the information, his voice a horrified monotone. For just now, the chasm between them had ceased to exist. "I could hear what he was thinking!" There were not words enough to express Harry's horror. He wanted no part of seeing into Voldemort's depraved, maddened mind. No part at all.
Trials and Tribulations Part 2

Chapter Notes

Harry is not a Horcrux, so the connection between Harry and Voldemort is going to work differently. It exists to equalize them and make Harry truly Voldemort's equal. Harry might be able to be born with magical power to match Voldemort, but he can't be born with Voldemort's lifetime of experience and acquired knowledge.

Chapter 19: Trials and Tribulations, Part 2

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

July 29, 1995

To say Harry's words touched off a bit of activity is to vastly understate the case. Dumbledore instantly flicked his wand, sending off a silver ... something that shot straight through the nearest wall. "I've alerted the Order. Harry, I need you to tell me every detail." Dumbledore insisted. For once, Harry was entirely too happy to obey.

"It was that same windowless, poorly-lit room he uses. Everyone but Snape was there. I could hear him thinking things. Suspecting Snape of being the mole." Which he was, but Voldemort finding that out would be really, really, spectacularly bad for Snape's continued well-being and lifespan. "He figured if this raid went off without a hitch, Snape was the mole and he'd deal with him. If the raid ran into problems the same as the first ones he pulled, before you had the house-elves watching over the kids, it was someone else and he'd have to eliminate them one by one to figure out who it was." Harry said. "He said something about seeing if you could protect them all, and then split everyone into teams." Harry rubbed at his head for a moment, trying to remember. "Malfoy and his goons are headed for the Creeveys." He said after a moment. "Wormtail ... and Avery ... got sent to the Dobbs. Which means Nott and Macnair got the MacDonalds."

A few moments later, the majority of the Order had converged on Dumbledore's office, looking surprisingly put-together. But then Harry, who had been rather single-minded in his desire to get the information to Dumbledore, hadn't realized it was no longer the dead of night. Dawn was tinting the sky to the east.

"It seems Voldemort has chosen to begin targeting the muggleborns currently attending the school, since the ones too young to do so have been denied him."

McGonagall looked horrified. "Can we widen the net that far?" She wanted to know.

Dumbledore sighed. "Alas, there are not enough house-elves, however willing they may be, at our disposal to protect every muggleborn currently attending the school as well as the ones that do not yet know of its existence. I am afraid we shall have to come up with another plan to protect them. But that is something to contemplate a bit later. We have a far more serious matter to deal with. Voldemort plans to attack three different muggleborn families tonight."
This caused an uproar. And a very long debate. Most of the Order was all for moving the families involved. A few pointed out that if those three were taken out of reach, Voldemort might go after someone else, and they'd not find out in time to keep them alive. Some were trying to figure out how to guard the families without tipping the Death Eaters (or worse, Voldemort) off... and at more than one point, they were all trying to talk over each other. Harry and Ron sort of got forgotten in the melee.

Harry watched the whole thing quietly, dismayed at how scattered and divided even the supposedly unified Order was. The good guys were supposed to win, when things were like this? Honestly. With the Ministry at odds with itself and Dumbledore, and Dumbledore's Order at odds with themselves... no wonder Voldemort had such an easy time of it creating havok! Ron just looked gobsmacked at the whole thing, having never been in a meeting before. After a while, Harry decided to distract himself from the increasingly strident... discussions, and turned to Ron.

"Ok, mate." He challenged. "What would you do?"

Ron paled. "Me? With this mess? Are you kidding me? I wouldn't have the faintest idea!"

Harry scoffed. "Ron, mate, you're the best chess player I've ever seen. So pretend this..." He waved a hand at the meeting. "Is happening on a chessboard."

Ron's brow furled. "But how?"

Harry laughed. "I'm the king, mate. Dumbledore's the queen." That worked. Harry stayed put and stayed safe, at least in this particular mess. Dumbledore had the power to move where he wanted and do what was needed... and if he was lost, the game wouldn't end. It'd be crippled, but it wouldn't end. There'd come a time when Harry would have to be more maneuverable than the king, but that time wasn't yet. "Figure Moody, Kingsley, Remus, for King's side. McGonagall, Flitwick and Tonks for Queen's side." Well, at least they had more people to choose from than Voldemort did right now... Harry hadn't even named everyone in the room. "Voldie's got himself as king, Macnair, Avery, Nott, Malfoy, Pettigrew, Crabbe and Goyle. I figure those last three for pawns." He admitted. "And the kids we're trying to protect are the pawns on our side."

That's all it took to get Ron's mind ticking over as he considered things, then he sighed. "Well, if I had the faintest idea where the king was at, I'd fake a pass at him, make him pull his forces in to protect himself, but since I don't, I really don't know what to tell you, mate."

Ahh well, it had been worth the distraction anyway. Harry wasn't any more sure than Ron was how to approach the problem. Their little net was getting stretched to the breaking point with this strike.

Eventually, Dumbledore got them all to quiet down. "Tonks, Minerva, as we do not know precisely when, tonight, they plan to strike, I would ask the two of you to keep watch on the Creeveys and Dobbs, respectively. Remus, if you would watch over the MacDonalds. The rest of us shall divide into teams and wait for your signals to arrive."

Harry let out a snicker. "I hope McGonagall gets hungry in cat form and goes rat-hunting." He whispered to Ron. "Pettigrew's going after them." It was probably a mean thing to say, but considering that Harry hated Pettigrew as much as he hated Voldemort, maybe more, maybe it wasn't.

Ron looked revolted. "Mate, that's just cruel. Not only would she be resorting to cannibalism, but Pettigrew can't be good for the digestion."

Harry grimaced and nodded at that. "Point. I take it back." He agreed.
The meeting broke up, with almost everyone heading for the mansion, except those that had to work today. Once the room had emptied out, Dumbledore returned his attention to Harry and Ron. Harry noticed that for once, Dumbledore was not looking him in the eye.

"Thank you for the warning, Harry, though I must encourage you to work harder on the occlumency. This connection to Voldemort is very dangerous."

"I have been working hard." Harry said. "Moody says I'm doing pretty good, especially for someone my age." Harry couldn't help but scoff a bit mentally. Dumbledore was acting as if Harry was just lazing about doing nothing. His scar wasn't even hurting him anymore when it happened! And while he agreed wholeheartedly that the visions were more than a bit creepy, he was learning things that even Snape didn't know. Cripes, if he hadn't 'seen' this meeting, Snape would have been killed ... or worse ... as a spy. He had every intention of trying to block out the visions if he could, but so far he'd worked to absolutely no mitigating effect where the visions were concerned. The visions had actually gotten more detailed and involved, not less, much less them disappearing entirely. Harry wasn't quite sure what the deal with them was, at this point. Did his mind become more defenseless when he was in the middle of building his defenses, maybe? It didn't make any sense, but it wouldn't be the first time something made no sense in the magical world. He'd have to ask Moody later.

Dumbledore let them go after that, and they headed back to the mansion, which was a riled-up beehive of activity. The rest of the day was a complete loss. None of the New Marauders could concentrate on anything. Tensions were so thick they were all but visible. The adults were all grim-faced, most of them pacing about. Molly was cooking nonstop, and snapping at anyone that came any further into the kitchen than the table. Sirius and Snape got into a nose-to-nose, wands drawn standoff, snarling insults and accusations at one another, though Harry wasn't sure if that was the day's tension or just them being them. It did provide the day's only amusement, as Molly went after both of them with a ladle she'd had in hand when she came out of the kitchen to investigate the uproar in the corridor. It was rather amusing watching Snape, of all people, retreat with all haste and much lost dignity from an irate Molly Weasley. Sirius made haste to get away too, but it wasn't as amusing as seeing Snape discomfited.

And weirdly, it was as if that confrontation had been what everyone needed to get their game faces on, as the tension eased or shifted focus or something ... at any rate, it wasn't the oppressive can't-sit-still tension that'd had everyone so surly earlier in the day. Tonks, McGonagall and Remus left right after dinner, to ensure they were where they needed to be in plenty of time, and then it was back to waiting.

The darker it got out, the more Harry fretted, Until Ginny grabbed him, forced him into a chair and quite literally sat on him. He froze up more completely than if he'd been hit with a petrificus, and gave Ginny a completely gobsmacked look for quite some time before he found his voice. Alas, he didn't manage to find his voice before Ginny, Ron, and Hermione (who'd all been in the room) started laughing, though Ron looked as if he maybe wanted to scold Ginny too.

"Ginny, what ... " To his eternal mortification, his voice squeaked.

"You should see your face mate. I don't think I've ever seen you that startled." Ron hooted.

Harry just flailed, quite literally. He had no idea what to do with his hands. He was tempted to try to push her off, but he wasn't entirely sure that'd work, and even if it did, if the look on her face was any indication, she was liable to hex him. "Ginny!" His voice was more sure this time, and managed to even sound scolding.

Which had no effect on Ginny. She just gave him a look more suited to Fred or George in the midst of thinking up a prank than her. "Yes, Harry?"
"Gerroff!"

"Will you stay put?" She wanted to know. "You were starting to drive me mad with all that pacing."

Harry sighed, but agreed to staying put. Ginny removed herself to the cushion next to him and Harry relaxed finally. Less than two minutes later, there was a flash of something white, and Tonks' voice filled the house. "They're here."

Immediately, a group of the adults disappeared. Only moments later, two more white flashes, and McGonagall and Remus' voices supplied the same message. This time, Harry managed to actually see what the flash was all about. There was a white, ghostly tabby cat standing in the hallway. It looked like a patronus, but Harry'd never heard of a patronus being able to talk. "I have got to learn that spell." He told the others.

"Yeah, that spell's wicked." Fred agreed as he walked into the room. A few moments later, the only adults left in the house were Sirius, Molly, and Dumbledore, who'd decided to stay behind just in case Voldemort tried something while everyone else was away.

They tried to distract each other, they really did. It wasn't working all that well. Mostly, the Marauders sat in the dining room picking at food while Molly cooked up a storm.

Finally, in the wee hours of the morning, the first group returned ... Remus'. They were battered and bruised, but triumphant. Tonks' group returned about ten minutes later, equally battered and equally triumphant.

It was a nerve-wracking hour before McGonagall returned. Alone. Quite literally hissing in rage. Pettigrew had managed to sneak into the house via the sewer system while Avery distracted the Order members outside. By the time anyone realized what was going on, Mr. Dobbs had been killed. Worse, Daedelus Diggle had been badly wounded in the scuffle with Avery. The only bit of good news was that wife and child had escaped harm. McGonagall could move fast as a cat. Dumbledore immediately headed out.

It was a very quiet and solemn Order that packed up and headed for their homes that night.
The next morning, encouraged by Sirius and Remus, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick and a very reluctant Snape, Moody, Tonks, Kingsley and the New Marauders all met in the dueling room. There was a fair-sized crate by the door.

"We thought after yesterday." George said.

"You might want to see this." Fred finished.

To keep everyone else from getting whiplash by the time Fred and George finished the presentation, Remus took over. "You've all been dealing with the rather explosive results of our trial and error all month, so we thought you might want to see what we've been coming up with."

To their surprise, Remus and Sirius then conjured a chest-high wall. "You lot might want to stay behind the wall ... and keep your heads down." He pried the lid off the crate and picked something up out of it. It was a ball, a bit bigger than his hand, colored a plain silver. Remus, Fred and George quickly joined everyone else behind the wall.

"This one is designed for use against magical creatures with thick or magic-resistant hides." He explained, then joined them behind the wall before tossing the ball as hard as he could away from them and promptly ducking behind the wall so that only his eyes and the very top of his head was peeking over. Everyone else followed suit.

The moment the ball hit the floor on the other side of the room, it exploded. Silver colored spikes, each half the length of a finger and about half as thick, shot out in all directions very fast. Whatever propelled them lost steam after about five or ten feet, and they clattered to the floor, sliding a few more feet.

"We got the idea from a muggle weapon." Fred admitted.

"It's not got as much oomph as we'd like yet." George complained.

"As you saw, the spikes don't go far. But if we can work the bugs out, we'll have a way to at least do some serious damage to things that are resistant to spells," Remus finished.

McGonagall and Flitwick looked impressed. It was harder to tell with Dumbledore. The rest of the New Marauders thought it was brilliant.

George came out from behind the wall and dug around in the box, pulling out another ball. This one was about the size of a snitch, and a bright yellow color. "And then there's this one. We won't show you this one." George said, grinning widely.

"It works, but I doubt we'd get a willing volunteer." Fred said. His grin was as wide as George's.

"It's based on their Canary Cremes." Remus said. "A more distilled, specialized form of the potion
used to force the transformation. This one transforms only the person. Their clothes and anything else they're holding or carrying, like a wand or portkey, don't transform with them. It has to get on skin to work, and so far we've only gotten it to last about five or ten seconds, but if nothing else, it'll be a rather effective distracter."

Harry eyed the ball. And shuddered. "Right. Mental note." He said out loud. "Do NOT throw that at Voldemort. There are just some things no one is meant to see."

Everyone but Dumbledore, Snape, and Moody reacted to that. Everyone but those three cringed, and almost everyone was more than a little green in the face. The ones that weren't were actively choking back bile.

"Mate, you have a very disturbing mind. You know that, right?" Ron asked, sounding completely horrified and rather sickened.

"We've got another that's based on the canary cremes, too, but this one is meant for allies." Remus said. He pulled a bright green bite-sized square out of the crate. "They force the transformation, and you keep your clothes and other things, but the canary is smaller, closer to the size of a real one, which would give an ally in trouble a way to escape, or get in somewhere when it's not possible to do so as a person. They'll have to move fast, though, because it still only lasts about a minute, same as the cremes. We made a pellet that creates a fog, too, so you toss the fog pellet, and while no one can see what's going on, eat the creme and get clear. The Death Eaters'll be left scratching their heads."

"Our next offering is this girl." Remus said, pulling another good-sized ball out of the crate. This one was white. "We've worked the hardest on this one, and it's our pride and joy, really. It's designed for use when we get somewhere first and have a few moments to set up. Watch." Remus walked to the far side of the room, conjured a stone plinth about chest high, and then tapped the ball once. It started scrolling through colors, one every few seconds. When it got to green, he tapped it again. The ball immediately went clear. Remus set the ball on the plinth, tapped it once more, and then hustled back towards them. Then he conjured a bit of stone and floated it past the ball.

They all jumped a mile when an Avada Kedavra green bolt shot out of the ball at the chunk of stone.

"Holy ... " Harry sputtered. He wasn't alone. That had looked exactly like the curse!

"It's not the actual curse." Remus said. "It's a simple color spell, and will have no effect if it hits. In the heat of a fight, no one is going to want to take that chance when they see a spell coming at them. The balls have a very rudimentary tracking charm built in ... anything that moves within a certain range of them gets targeted and aimed at, using the colored bolt. We managed to get a good range of colors with a color-change spell, so you can pick what you want the Death Eaters to think is being cast at them. It also has a time delay ... that's what that last tap was for ... that allows whoever sets it up to get out of its range before it starts tracking movement and shooting at people."

"This is brilliant, you guys!" Harry said, eyeing the ball. Even Moody looked impressed at this one.

"Next on the menu." Remus said, pulling out a palm-sized black-colored ball. "Is this one." He and the others retreated to behind the wall again, and Remus tossed the ball, rather gently, over the wall. It hit the ground ... and grew feet. It immediately hustled forward, and started multiplying until there was about six of them. When they'd jammed themselves into corners, they stopped and hunkered down. Seconds later, they exploded. Quite respectable explosions at that.

"They're meant for diversions, though they can cause quite a bit of damage. Basically, you toss these, and they find some remote corner to go off in ... and hopefully draw any Death Eaters inside away
from where you are."

"We're also working." George said.

"On concentrated versions of the Puking Pastille." Fred said.

"And the Ton-Tongue Toffee." George said.

"On the strength of if they can't speak, they're at the very least going to be deprived of their favorite spells." Remus said. "And if they're busy puking their guts out, they're not going to be in any shape to cast at all. We're also working on something stronger than the fog pellets, and a way to imitate invisibility cloaks, but none of that's ready yet."

"This is quite an astounding display, gentlemen." Dumbledore said, eyeing the box. "My most sincere congratulations. If you need any assistance in the final stages of preparing your inventions, I would be most willing to assist."

"I would as well." Flitwick agreed. McGonagall nodded.

Snape, of course, just glowered and sneered, but he didn't actually say anything, which from him was as good as a compliment.

The crate was packed back up, and hand-carried (evidently he didn't want to risk the crate bumping into things if it was floating) out of the dueling room by Remus. Snape, McGonagall, Kingsley, Moody and Dumbledore all left, off to deal with the troubles of the day, but, perhaps, with a bit more hope than they'd had earlier this morning. Remus returned a few moments later.

"All right, everyone. We're going to be having another battle. Tonks, Sirius and I against you guys."

It had been a while since the last time they'd done this, Harry thought as everyone scattered while Flitwick started conjuring things for them to hide behind. Since before the dreams had started in earnest. Actually, now that Harry thought about it, the last time, Neville had still had his old wand. Since then, they'd all improved individually. The twins had transformed from lackluster duelists into a rather scary duo. The closeness that allowed them to finish each other's sentences and bamboozle everyone as to who was who meant that they worked as a seamless unit in a fight. Hermione, predictably, knew the most spells. Her catalogue was beginning to give Flitwick's a run for its money. She, however, remained a mediocre dueler, not because she didn't know spells, but because she simply wasn't good at thinking and acting fast in a crunch. If she had a few moments and some space, she was downright scary, but when the spells flew thick and fast, she had a tendency to flounder. Ginny and Neville were proving to be powerhouses, thanks to a combination of having had secondhand wands for years and innate power. Interestingly, while Neville was still shy and hesitant, he was beginning to show glimmers of self-confidence. Discovering he was not the near-squib he'd always thought himself to be was doing wonders for his self-esteem.

As for Harry, well, he wasn't quite as strong as Ginny and Neville, or at least it seemed so to him. On the other hand, neither of them had proven to be capable of wandless magic. At least not yet. Not that Harry was having much luck with it himself. Granted he'd been more than a bit distracted recently, but learning to cast wandlessly was still problematic. Since that first, wholly unexpected shield, Harry had managed to pull something out of his hat twice in individual duels with Flitwick, but both times he'd been in quite a jam. Anytime he tried to do something wandlessly under calm, relaxed conditions nothing happened. Not so much as a twitch.

Flitwick had concentrated on teaching them to work as a team, as it was the only way they'd have a
chance of surviving against far-better-trained adult wizards until they had a chance to catch up. Fred and George were planning on heading to the Ministry later today to get their apparation licenses, which would open an avenue of fighting for them unavailable to the younger Marauders. Not for lack of them asking, certainly, but there were lines that even Sirius and Remus were unwilling to cross, and learning to apperate two years early was one of them. The dangers, evidently, outweighed the benefits. After learning about splinching, Harry had been inclined to agree. Harry shook off the thoughts and concentrated on the fight, ducking behind a chunk of stone, a spell whizzing past his elbow as he did, only just missing him.

After that, the spells flew thick and fast. The adults had graduated to using stingers, stunners, and other low-powered spells instead of just color-marking spells, which added a definite sense of urgency to the whole thing. Worse, Tonks seemed to have been absorbed into the Marauder collective, working almost seamlessly with Sirius and Remus, rather than being mostly on her own. It made tackling them harder. Before this, Tonks had always been the weak point.

"Ginny, Fred, George, Sirius is yours. Ron, Hermione, you've got Remus. Neville, you and me're going for Tonks." Harry called.

Everyone nodded and split into their groups, diving for cover in different spots. They concentrated their spell-fire on their assigned targets. Harry did not at all envy the twins and Ginny. Sirius was bouncing around the room like a demented house-elf. He wasn't apparating, but he seemed to be taking an unholy glee in diving from place to place as fast as he could, firing off spells as he went. Remus and Tonks were both opting for a somewhat less frenetic style of dueling, and were slightly easier targets for it. Slightly.

Hermione and Ron actually managed to get Remus down with a Jelly-Legs early on, but he was back up quickly. Tonks was proving more elusive, managing to evade his and Neville's spells by a whisker. Harry had completely lost track of Sirius by the three minute mark, and had to trust the twins and Ginny to keep him busy and unable to hex them from behind. Remus and Tonks, though, were sticking fairly close to each other, so Harry was able to keep at least one Marauder in his sight-line.

And then there was a shout of triumph from one corner of the room. Harry tossed an Expelliarmus at Tonks before chancing a look, and let out a whoop when he spotted Sirius flat on the floor, victim of a petrificus totalus. It looked like the twins and Ginny had somehow been able to herd Sirius into the corner, where he hadn't been able to get away from them, and somehow managed to nail him with the spell, which marked the first time any of them had managed to hit Sirius so far in the practice duels. They'd gotten both Remus and Tonks a couple times each, but Sirius' completely unpredictable style of dueling made him really, really hard to hit. At least as far as the New Marauders were concerned.

Of course, the distraction cost them. A few moments later, Remus shot a finite at Sirius and Sirius managed to nail one of the twins with a petrificus before they could dive for cover. Tonks got Hermione, who'd made the mistake of standing up to see what was going on. Very shortly after that, all of the New Marauders were needing a finite incantatem, caught in a flurry of spells from the three adults.

"Right." Flitwick, who'd been staying out of it near the door. "What did we learn from that?"

"Don't get distracted." Harry said.

"Precisely. Other than that, you have done quite well today. We shall be doing this every week this next month, as you've all graduated to the point of learning some truly damaging dueling spells, and will need the practice before school begins. I will unfortunately not be able to do much tutoring after
that."

Everyone headed out. Fred intercepted Harry at the door, and handed him a small vial. Harry gave it a confused look, then peered at Fred. Fred grinned, glanced over his shoulder at the Marauders, and then mouthed 'shampoo' at Harry. Harry blinked in confusion for a few moments before it clicked.

Shampoo. The Prank. In all the furor over the visions, and his resultant lack of sleep several nights running, Harry had completely forgotten about it. Clearly, Fred and George had not. Harry grinned and nodded, then pocketed the vial. He hurried upstairs. With luck, Remus would be distracted just long enough ...

He was. If only barely. Harry just managed to get the contents of the vial into Remus' shampoo and get to the library before Remus came upstairs. Fortunately, he didn't head straight for his room. Instead, he joined Harry in the library.
July 31, 1995

All things considered, Harry could have been forgiven for forgetting that the day before had been Neville's birthday. That said, the day started out with quite the bang.

They got awakened at dawn by excited whooping ... in stereo ... from George and Ginny. Harry dragged himself out into the hallway to see what was going on, blinking blearily at them in confusion. They were both in the hall, doing triumphant dances. It took a few moments for the probable reason why to filter through Harry's sleepy head, but once it did, he grinned.

"So, what are you?" He asked. By then, all the other Marauders were out in the hallway too, curious looks on their faces.

George answered first. "I." He said. "Am a raccoon." This occasioned much laughter from everyone, as it was very, very fitting.

Ginny's face was nearly as red as her hair, even though she was grinning hugely. "I'm a tiger." She said.

"Wicked!" Ron breathed, then sighed. "I've still not had any luck." He admitted. "You, Hermione?" He asked. Hermione shook her head.

"Now we really need to think up names." Harry pointed out. "I still haven't got one for mine, and we need ones for you two."

"Well, if Fred is Rascal, what about Rogue for George?" Ginny asked.

The twins looked at each other for a moment, then grinned. "We like it!" They said in stereo.

"Right, that's settled. Now I'm for a bit more sleep. We can figure out Ginny's and mine later." Harry said, and retreated to his room for an hour or two's extra sleep. He was just grateful he'd not had a vision last night.

Once he'd slept a bit more, he cleaned up and headed downstairs for breakfast. Harry was surprised to find that Molly and Winky were working side-by-side for once, rather than competing for the kitchen. The New Marauders had all made it down for breakfast by the time Remus and Sirius arrived. Remus' hair was still its gray-tinged brown, so either he'd used a different bottle of shampoo, the potion wasn't working, or it wasn't working yet. Fred, after all, hadn't been able to tell Harry what exactly they'd done.

They found out a minute or two later. Tonks stumbled (literally) into the room, falling into Remus, who grabbed her to keep her from cracking her skull open on the table. Half a second later, his hair went a shade of red that not even a Weasley could manage. So did his hands, his forehead, and most of his neck. Snickering broke out around the table. Remus looked at his hands and then looked around the room before he locked eyes with a highly amused Sirius. He changed color again, this
time to a brilliant yellow. He opened his mouth to say something, but Tonks beat him to it.

"Oh Remus, that's so sweet! You should have told me you liked me so much you wanted to be just like me!" She gave Remus a wicked, mischievous grin. Remus' hair flashed red again, and he looked completely flummoxed.

Not that Harry or much of anyone else actually saw it. They were all too busy laughing hysterically. One of the twins was quite literally rolling about on the floor, clutching at his stomach. Harry had tears in his eyes he was laughing so hard, and the others were no better. It took a couple of minutes for everyone to calm down, though there were lingering sniggers. Whichever twin had collapsed onto the floor was at least able to regain (and stay in) his seat.

"You do realize, Padfoot, that this means war." Remus pointed out. And then he eyed Tonks. "And that goes for you, too." He was trying for a bit of dignity and getting nowhere.

"I had no idea Tonks could be that wicked." Harry murmured to Ron.

Ron, still grinning widely, nodded. "I know mate, that was brilliant timing."

Neville arrived from his grandmother's just after breakfast. He regarded Remus, whose hair had shifted to a pea-green, with confusion. "Do I want to know what's going on?" He asked. Then he spotted Harry. "Hey Harry. Gran sent something along for you." He handed over a folded bit of parchment, then pulled a bown-paper-wrapped package from a pocket in his robes.

Harry took the note and opened it.

My Lord Potter

I hope your fifteenth birthday finds you well. I've sent along a small token with Neville, but my real present to you will not be ready until tomorrow. The Daily Prophet ought to be quite edifying. Also, you should know that Fudge has managed to push through that measure he proposed, to audit the goings-on at Hogwarts. He's sending someone who will both fill the vacant DADA position and look into matters. Her name is Dolores Umbridge. A more unfortunate person I've rarely met. You would do well to be cautious in her presence.

Augusta Longbottom

Harry blinked down at the note. Birthday? "Blimey, I forgot!" He almost smacked his forehead. "Yesterday was your birthday. Sorry mate!" He told Neville.

Neville waved away the apology. "It's all right, Harry. We've all been a bit scattered. You more than most."

"Still, Neville. I'm a fairly poor friend when I can't remember your birthday." Harry pointed out. "I'll have to double up come Christmas."

Molly eventually chased them out of the kitchen, and they spent an enjoyable hour just hanging out talking about not much of anything. That is, the New Marauders did. Sirius and Remus both had disappeared upstairs, which boded well for imminent pranking. Then they reappeared, and Molly joined them, carrying a picnic basket.

"Right, everyone. We're spending the day at Hogwarts, as it's easier to have everyone there."

So they all trooped to the floo. They were greeted by Dumbledore on the other side, and ushered into the Great Hall, where they were met by a jubilant Hagrid, who had finally got his wand. He hugged
Harry hard enough to threaten Harry's ribs, and blubbered more than a bit.

"Yeh got me this, 'arry. I'll never ferget it!"

With Snape nowhere in evidence, the day progressed more than pleasantly. There was a lot of talk followed by an excellent lunch (cooked by Molly). Then Sirius and Remus revealed that they'd brought everyone's brooms, and there was a mass exodus to the Quidditch pitch.

four Weasleys, Harry, Remus, Sirius McG Flitwick Arthur

It took a good few minutes to figure out teams. Eventually, the twins teamed up with Harry against Ginny, Sirius and Remus in a three-on-three match, with the twins doing service as both Beaters and Chasers, and Harry playing Keeper while keeping an eye out for the snitch. Sirius and Remus were the Beater/Chasers for their side, with Ginny as Seeker/Keeper.

For not having played in who-knew-how-long, Sirius and Remus did well. They were behind, but managed to keep it within twenty or thirty points, so that it finally came down to who got the snitch ... and since both he and Ginny were mostly stuck by the hoops defending them, they had equal chances at the snitch unless it popped up right in their faces. Which it didn't. It appeared near midfield, closer to Ginny than Harry ... and thus Ginny got to it first, despite the Firebolt's speed.

Sirius and Remus then started trying to get some of the other adults to play. Catching on to that, and quite willing for a kids vs. adults game, Harry and the others were only too willing to help wheedle. Still, Harry was surprised when they managed to convince McGonagall, Flitwick and Arthur to play.

With five to a side now, they had enough for a Keeper, a Seeker, a Beater and two Chasers. Harry stayed as Seeker, while Ginny and one of the twins acted as Chasers. Ron played Keeper while the other twin played Beater. For the adults, Flitwick was Seeker, Arthur played Keeper, McGonagall and Remus played Chaser while Sirius was Beater.

This was a far more hard-fought game. McGonagall was pretty good, and while Arthur wasn't particularly spectacular on a broom, you didn't really need to be as Keeper. Flitwick was downright scary as a Seeker. At half Harry's size and weight, he had the sort of advantage Harry usually had against the other House Seekers during the school year (except for Malfoy, who was close to his size), and was incredibly nimble on a broom. Worse, his eye was nearly as good as Harry's. Twice they both spotted the snitch at almost the same moment. And twice, the Beaters interrupted their attempts to get at it. The third time proved to be the charm. Harry spotted the snitch near the adults' hoops, and flattened himself against the Firebolt, urging every ounce of speed he could out of it. Flitwick, despite his older, slower broom, was but a heartbeat behind. Harry's hand closed over the snitch a half a heartbeat before Flitwick's hand crashed into his, missing grabbing the snitch by millimeters.

After that, they put the brooms away, and it was time for dinner, cake, and presents. Molly outdid herself with the dinner ... it was nearly the equal of Hogwarts feasts in quantity and though Harry would never say as much to the elves, outdid them in quality. Finally, it was time for him to open his presents, and he chose Augusta's first. It proved to be an elegant, silver cloak clasp fashioned into the Potter family crest.

Hagrid gave him some rock cakes and, to his surprise, a whole bunch of photographs to add to his album. These, though, had him, Ron, and Hermione in them. "Got 'em from tha' Creevey boy."
Hagrid said. "Knew yeh had some of yer folks, but didn't know if yeh had any of the three of yeh."

"This is brilliant, Hagrid. Thanks!"
Ron gave him the usual assortment of sweets from Honeydukes, as did Ginny. Given he now knew what they’d been working on, he eyed the twins' gift with great misgiving for a minute, which caused a good bit of good-natured laughter, before risking opening it. Sure enough, it was an assortment of their creations, both the stuff they'd originally created for their future joke shop and the stuff they'd worked on with Sirius and Remus that was working as it should.

Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Flitwick had gone together to get Harry a wand holster that was charmed to be invisible when worn, to not be summonable itself, and to keep a wand that was put in it from being summoned away. They also got him a pair of self-adjusting dragonhide boots that would grow as his feet did.

Sirius and Remus' present, though, brought him to tears. It was a plain brown box, with a depression on one side. When he pushed it, he nearly dropped it, because a feminine voice he'd only ever heard when Dementors were close (and then only in tones of great distress) echoed around the room, filled with laughter and joy.

"Don't mind James. He's still trying to get his mind wrapped around the fact he's going to be a father."

And then, wonder of wonders, his father's voice, somewhere between pride and astonishment. "You make it sound like such a thing happens every day, Lily!"

Every adult in the room had tears in their eyes, or were outright crying. Hermione was suspiciously shiny-eyed, while the rest of them seemed to be settling for being utterly gobsmacked. Harry's hands were shaking as he held the priceless box.

"I started working on that your third year, after you told me you heard your mother when the Dementors were close." Remus said, his voice shaking. "I thought it was a crime you only had that memory of her, and none of your father, so I started trying to figure a way to give you something more."

"We worked on it together after my escape." Sirius said, his voice shaking as badly as Remus' had. "All last year, trying to get it to work right, and then putting in copies of conversations we'd had with them, but without our voices in the mix. We managed to get about a dozen phrases in there."

Harry very carefully set the box on the table, then went over and hugged both men half to death, completely speechless. It was a good bit before he managed to get himself under control. Fortunately, at that point, a nervous-but-excited Dobby popped in, distracting him and giving him something to focus on so he didn't go getting all weepy again. when he sat back down in his seat. Dobby had his head down, scuffing the floor with one foot, both hands behind his back.

"Hi Dobby." Harry said, then frowned slightly. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh no, Harry Potter sir. It is just that ... Dobby was hoping ... and then, moving quickly, he deposited a small, soft, lumpy present in plain brown paper into Harry's lap. "Happy Birthday, Harry Potter sir."

Harry blinked. "You got me a present Dobby?" He only barely stopped himself from saying 'you shouldn't have' in time. Dobby would have taken that entirely the wrong way. "Thank you!" He managed instead, and then tore off the paper. It was socks. What had to be the world's ugliest and most mismatched socks. Harry blinked at them in confusion for a minute before he managed to find his voice again. "Thank you, Dobby, they're brilliant." And then he reached down and gave the little elf a hug. Dobby squeaked happily and promptly fled.
Shortly thereafter, everyone headed back to the manor. Harry fell asleep that night listening to the sound of his mother's voice, for once not filled with fear and panic, and his father's ... and thinking that this had been the best birthday he'd ever had.
Trials and Tribulations, Part 3

Chapter 22: Trials and Tribulations, Part 3

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter. I am aware that in canon, Veritaserum is not foolproof. In my happy little world ... it is.

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August 5, 1995

To say the next few days were eventful is to vastly understate the case. For one thing, Remus began the anticipated prank-war with Sirius at about two in the morning the next morning. For another, well ... Augusta hadn't been kidding about the paper. Having given all and sundry a few days to let it soak into their minds that not only had proper legal procedure not been followed in one case, a man's wand had been snapped, Augusta moved in for the kill, and the Prophet headlines were screaming about Sirius.

The articles themselves were a blistering, vicious denouncement ... not of Sirius, but of the legal system that tossed the scion of an Ancient and Noble family into Azkaban without a trial. Without even doing a 'priori incantatem' on Sirius' wand. And while the article did say something about demanding a trial so that 'the Potter's betrayer can get his just deserts' it was immediately followed by 'if he is indeed guilty of the crime of which he is accused.', followed by the reporter speculating if there might not be an untold story there somewhere, since it made no sense to NOT have taken proper steps in such a huge case. The evening paper had carried an article by none other than Amelia Bones, the director of the DMLE, promising to investigate the matter fully, and publicly guaranteeing Sirius protection if he turned himself in for a trial. They found out later that between the morning and evening editions, the Prophet and the Ministry both had got snowed under by letters and howlers demanding a trial and ripping Ministry officials new orifices over the lack of proper legal procedure.

The next few days had alternated between owls being sent back and forth (they were using post office owls, so Sirius' correspondence with Amelia couldn't be tracked), pranks, and ever-increasing, nearly unbearable tension. Harry was fairly sure that the only thing that kept Sirius from snapping like a high-tension wire that's been cut was the pranks, which allowed him to let off steam. At the very least, everyone was being rather tolerant of the sudden transformations, color changes, random soakings and other pranks that were hitting everyone in the house. And thankfully for everyone's sanity, Snape had, indeed, refused to so much as set foot in the house when he discovered pranks were being played.

Today, if all went well ... Sirius would finally be free. Harry's stomach was tied in knots of anxiety. Sirius was a nervous wreck, Remus was pacing frantically ... it was insane. Hartgrove was sitting in a corner watching them as they waited for the time Sirius had arranged to meet Amelia. None of them were any too sure she actually believed the story about Peter, but she had promised to come only with those aurors she knew could be trusted. And she had contacted Remus, Harry, Hermione, and Ron, asking if they would be willing to attend the trial, in case it was proven their testimony was relevant and needed, since Sirius was claiming they'd all seen Pettigrew.

Finally, it was time. Sirius and Hartgrove left. Harry joined Remus in his frantic, worried pacing. The next fifteen minutes were the longest of Harry's life. Then, finally, a regal eagle owl soared in, landing on the table, and extended a leg burdened with three letters. Harry hurried over and untied the letters.
They were all the same, saying that Sirius had, in fact, presented himself for trial, and that it had been set for three hours hence, and they were all required to come as potential witnesses.

Two hours later, they were in the ministry. The courtroom was, astoundingly, already filling. Evidently, word had spread that Sirius had turned himself in. Fudge was already in his seat, looking less than pleased but faintly smug at the same time, which worried Harry.

By five minutes to three, the courtroom was packed to the rafters with people from every walk of wizarding life, and the room was alive with chatter. Finally, Fudge called everyone to order, and with a smug little grin, called for the accused to be brought in.

Harry, along with the others who'd been called as potential witnesses, were sitting close to where the lawyers sat. Two doors opened at almost the same time ... and a cold, pervasive chill soaked into Harry's bones, followed almost instantly by the indistinct murmurs of his mother's voice. Harry's head snapped around. Where in the name of everything had Fudge got his hands on a dementor? They'd defected weeks ago! Anger replaced shock, and it took every ounce of self-control Harry possessed (and Hermione clamping her hand on his wand-arm) to keep from setting Prongs on the thing. The entire courtroom had gone very quiet, and everyone looked more than slightly shaky.

Half a second after that, a square-jawed witch with a monocle strode in, with Sirius just behind her, surrounded on both sides by none other than Kingsley and Moody, and behind him was Tonks. Dementor or no, Harry almost fell over laughing at that. As far as he knew, Amelia had no knowledge of the Order, nor any idea that the three people she'd picked as trustworthy just happened to be three people who not only knew Sirius was innocent beyond any shadow of a doubt, but had been hanging around him nearly every day for the last month.

If Harry had thought he reacted negatively to the dementor's presence, he had nothing on Amelia. She spotted the thing standing in a corner, whirled on Fudge, and started yelling.

"What is the meaning of this? I assured Mr. Black he would remain unharmed until the end of the trial, and you bring that foul creature in here? Even before they abandoned their post at Azkaban, they proved uncontrollable, or did you miss the bit where they tried to suck the souls out of a schoolful of children ... TWICE! Get it out of here at once! Before it decides to feed on the spectators!"

Behind her, Sirius had gone deadly pale and was shaking almost uncontrollably, eyes wide as he stared at the dementor in horror. Fudge hemmed and hawed, but finally had the thing removed. Harry took a deep breath, sighing in relief and mentally promising to find a way to end Fudge's career for good for that stunt.

Amelia turned back to Sirius and muttered something under her breath. Sirius managed to get the shaking mostly under control and squared his shoulders. His eyes flicked around the room, and Harry knew the moment he spotted them, because some of the tension in his body faded, and he walked to the chain-wrapped chair and sat down with a remarkable amount of equanimity. The chains secured him to the chair, and then Amelia and the others withdrew to the side until they might be needed again.

At that point, Hartgrove stepped forward. "Considering the gravity of this case, the horrific miscarriage of law and justice that has occurred, and to ensure that in future there can be no question as to my client's innocence in these matters, I request that veritaserum be used."

There was a rumble of sound at Hartgrove's assurance of Sirius' innocence around the room, but the request for veritaserum was granted. A small vial was produced, and Sirius was more than willing to stick out his tongue for it to be administered. A few moments later, his expression became dreamy
and relaxed.

"For this question, please attempt to lie to me. What is your name?"

Sirius' lips parted, but that's as far as he got. Then, in a tone that was rather disturbingly reminiscent of Trelawney. "Sirius Orion Black."

Hartgrove nodded. "Excellent. The veritaserum has taken full effect. Mr. Black, when James and Lily Potter went into hiding, did they make you their Secret Keeper?"

"No."

There was an instant rumble of sound from the audience.

"I see." Said Hartgrove. Harry could see an almost-amused look in his eyes. "Are you a Death Eater?"

"No."

"Did you knowingly and willfully betray James and Lily Potter to Lord Voldemort?"

"No."

Harry grinned widely as chaos reigned for a few moments. Right about then, Voldemort could have apparated into the middle of the room and no one would have noticed. Fudge eventually managed to shout everyone down.

"Did you kill Peter Pettigrew?"

"No."

More chaos as people reacted to this bit of news.

"Did you kill the twelve muggles that were found dead at the scene of Petter Pettigrew's supposed death?"

"No."

Less of a reaction this time, either because it was just muggles (which thought rather disgusted Harry) or because people were beginning to be dulled to the shocks.

"Who did kill those twelve muggles?"

"Peter Pettigrew."

Angry mutters.

"Do you know who the Potters' Secret Keeper was?"

"Yes."

Harry braced himself. If they'd been howling over Sirius being innocent, they were going to have a collective apoplexy when they found out it had all been Peter.

"Who was it?"

"Peter Pettigrew."
The roof very nearly got blown off as people reacted. Most of them looked beyond angry, shaking their fists and looking like they wanted to go out, find Peter, and wring his neck. Harry was more than willing to let them. Finally, eventually, Fudge got them calmed down.

"There is still the matter of his escape." Fudge tried.

Hartgrove gave Fudge a truly evil look. "Since my client was never tried, much less found guilty of any crime, he was merely ... leaving his current accommodations. No crime was committed in his leaving the premises."

Fudge subsided, and Hartgrove administered the antidote to Sirius. Once he'd sat up and looked with it, Fudge spoke again, looking like he's gotten a hold of something particularly foul-tasting. "It having been proven that you are guiltless of the crimes of which you have been accused, I, Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic do hereby decree that you are henceforth declared innocent, your name and all rights as a wizard in good standing restored. Further, for your wrongful imprisonment, 120,000 galleons in reparations shall be paid. Court adjourned."

The chains on the seat fell off Sirius immediately. It was a very good thing he was sitting. He started to shake again, looking stunned and more than slightly shell-shocked, like he couldn't quite believe this was real.

Harry, not caring a whit what it looked like, vaulted over the low wall that separated the spectators from the courtroom floor and covered the distance between himself and Sirius at a dead run, vaguely aware that Remus and the New Marauders were hard on his heels. Harry hugged Sirius as hard as he could, hauling him out of the chair in the process, wanting to get him away from it and the chains. The moment he had a mostly-unresponsive Sirius clear of the chair, they were surrounded by exultant Weasleys (the twins in particular were dancing a jig and shouting 'Sirius is free!' at the top of their lungs.) and an only marginally calmer Hermione and Neville. It took a minute or two, but Sirius finally managed to seem to get his legs back under him, blinking around the room like he was coming out of a dream. He looked down at Harry.

"I didn't imagine that?" He asked. "It's really over?"

Harry's grin threatened to split his face in half. "We did it, Sirius. You're free!"

Remus, who'd been standing as close as he could get, reached over and gripped Sirius' shoulder, grinning like a madman. In that moment, Remus truly resembled the far more carefree teenager he had once been, graying hair be damned. "It's done, Padfoot." He said quietly. "We did it."

That seemed to do it, as Sirius finally returned the hug Harry was still giving him, a grin starting to spread across his face.

The first Harry knew of anyone approaching was the sudden lessening of the racket from the twins. He turned to look, and smiled. Augusta and Septimus were both standing just beyond the knot of celebrants. Augusta had the faintest of smiles on her face.

"My Lord Black. It is good to finally make your acquaintance." She said, offering a hand.

Sirius took it and kissed the knuckles. "My Lady Longbottom, Lord Weasley. Thank you for your assistance with this." He waved his free hand, indicating the courtroom (which was still quite full ... evidently, everyone was too interested in watching the floor show to leave right away, except maybe the reporters). "I am in your debt."

Augusta made a rude noise. "Nonsense, Lord Black. To quote an old codger who needs to practice
what he preaches, we did what was right."

Septimus nodded firmly. "If you're going to insist on seeing it as a debt, Black, it's been paid in full and then some. The Weasleys still owe Harry for saving Ginny."

Augusta's expression turned crafty. "Though we wouldn't say no to your backing in future." She looked over at Harry. "I'm quite sure we're both on the same side in this."

Sirius glanced over at Harry as well. "Yeah, we are." He agreed. "But we'll talk about that later. The natives are getting restless."

Septimus chuckled as he glanced around. "Indeed they are. Let's give them a show, shall we?"

And that was how Sirius came to leave the courtroom flanked by Augusta and Septimus, smiling and talking like they were the oldest of friends. Harry was right on their heels.

The press went completely insane when they were spotted. A hundred and one questions got fired at them in what seemed like less than a second in a rush of sound that defied Harry's attempts to hear anything clearly. He stood close and watched in awe as Augusta and Septimus worked the reporters. Finally, one of them shot a question at him.

"Mr. Potter, how do you feel about this?" One of them wanted to know.

"I'm really angry that Sirius got thrown into jail without a trial." Harry said. "And relieved he's innocent. It'll be nice to have family in the wizarding world, since I've heard that Sirius and my dad were as close as brothers."

Eventually, they got away from the news hounds, and escaped to the manor. Everyone collapsed into chairs for a bit, Harry snagging the spot next to Sirius, catching their breaths. Then Fred (or was it George?) let out an exultant whoop.

"Weeeeeeeeedid it!" He cheered.

That got a round of delighted laughter. "It's going to take a while to really sink in, I think." Sirius admitted. "But it does feel good."
Trials and Tribulations, Part 4

Chapter 23: Trials and Tribulations, Part 4

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter. Ok, gang! Suggestions needed for Marauder names for Harry (peregrine falcon), Ginny (tigress), Ron (badger) and Hermione (Red-tailed fox). Neville is Baloo (Brown bear), Fred is Rascal (Black-footed ferret) and George is Rogue (Raccoon).

August 7, 1995

As if to celebrate their victory, that night Hermione and Ron finally had their animagus forms revealed, a red-tailed fox and a badger respectively. Ron had not been wholly pleased, complaining he'd be turning into a 'bloody Hufflepuff', but his grumbling and growling had just made everyone laugh and point out that badgers had a reputation for being surly creatures. Now that they all knew what they'd be turning into, they began trying to get themselves to change, which got them nowhere fast.

In the wee hours of the morning of the seventh, a vision struck.

_He was at the edge of the sea, surrounded by his Death Eaters, one of whom was carrying a brown sack. Wands, for the inmates. Roughly a dozen very thin, very pale men and women, dressed in a variety of robes and unmasked were also present. Vampires. Before them was a rough boat dock and a small four-or-five man boat._

"_The time has come." Voldemort fairly purred. "For too long have my true faithful been locked away, unable to return to their master. Now we shall set them free. Tonight, Azkaban falls._"

Harry woke with a shout and scrambled out of the bed. "AZKABAN!" He bellowed. "HE'S RAIDING AZKABAN RIGHT NOW!"

His shouting roused all the Marauders and the hallway was shortly full of people. Molly and Arthur weren't far behind.

"You're sure, pup?" Sirius asked.

Harry nodded. "Him, his death eaters, and about a dozen vampires. They've got extra wands for the people they break out with them."

That's all Sirius and Remus needed to hear. They both bolted downstairs, Remus firing off the patronus-alike spell as he went, probably to warn Dumbledore.

All the rest of them could do was pace, and fret. Or, at least, that's what Harry thought. A grim-faced Molly, though, marshaled them towards the fireplace. "The wounded will be brought to Hogwarts. Poppy will need every extra pair of hands she can get."

So they all flooed to the school, and hustled to the infirmary. Poppy was only too happy to see them, and set them to work hauling beds, vials of potions and all sorts of other bits and bobs down to the Great Hall, so the injured (or those carrying them) wouldn't have to climb stairs.

Harry was rather grateful for the hustle and bustle of that first hour. While they were busy getting set up, he didn't really have time to fret. But after the first hour, when things were set up so that even the
least Healer-inclined among them could grab the right bottle to hand off to Poppy without fumbling about, then the fretting began in earnest, and Harry paced uneasily. So did several of the others. Everyone else just looked stressed and worried.

Finally, people started straggling in, in twos and threes. Most of the groups, it was hard to tell who was supporting who as they staggered in. Dumbledore must have scrambled everyone he knew, because Harry was seeing people he hadn't met before. Once they started arriving, it became a mad scramble. Fetching and holding and trying not to lose his non-existent breakfast at some of the injuries. Kingsley came in missing a great chunk of flesh from his side, ribs visible in the wreckage. Tonks, when she arrived, looked like someone had taken a sword to her, covered in slashes nearly from head to foot, though none, thankfully, were deep. Remus came in with her, and Harry, for the first time, was actually afraid of the man. Remus' eyes were pure gold, his expression twisted to one of frothing rage as he helped Tonks to a bed. He didn't even seem to realize he was injured himself, turning to head for the door. Harry had a feeling that Remus had recognized whoever hurt Tonks, and was wanting some paybacks, though Harry wasn't too sure why Remus was quite as angry as he was.

"Remus! Remus!" No answer. It took Poppy bodily grabbing him to stop him, and Harry was grateful, for once, for the mediwitch's stubborn personality as she manhandled Remus into a bed beside Tonks. Tonks, injured as she was, reached over and grabbed hold of Remus' arm, giving him a dirty look.

"You are not running off to get revenge, do you hear me?" She snapped as Poppy worked frantically to stem the tide of blood.

Remus did not look best pleased at being thwarted, but he did finally subside, allowing Poppy to deal with the cuts on his face and scalp (probably from falling wreckage, from the look of them, and the goose-egg he was sporting).

Shortly after that, a bruised and exhausted but otherwise uninjured Sirius arrived. He got one good look at Remus and Tonks and hustled over. Shortly after that, the remains of the Order arrived more or less en masse to have their (fortunately minor) wounds tended once the mad rush had ended.

Twenty minutes after that, a bloodless-looking Snape arrived. Remus snarled and charged at him, but Sirius, who'd been sticking close, managed to tackle him to the ground before he got to Snape. Harry did a double-take when Snape didn't even attempt to raise his wand, instead turning to a remarkably rumpled but otherwise uninjured Dumbledore, who'd beaten him there by less than five minutes.

"I did not find out about the attack until he had brought us to the boat dock, Headmaster. I had no choice." Dumbledore looked grave, but nodded. Snape walked over to Tonks, who, despite Poppy's best efforts, was still bleeding. Remus tried to come up off the floor, but Sirius, well used to restraining an infuriated werewolf, wasn't budging an inch, even though he was giving Snape a look that could kill. Snape pulled his wand and looked at Poppy. "I know the counter-curse."

"Because it's your spell!" Remus all but roared.

Snape whirled on him. "Despite what you may think, Lupin, I took no joy from attacking anyone here." He snapped.

Then he turned his wand on Tonks. Harry had to restrain the urge to do what Remus couldn't and tackle the man, outraged. Snape's assurances aside, Harry was quite sure that Snape's target had been deliberate. Everyone knew that Tonks fancied Remus by this point, and anyone who spent a lot of time around the two of them knew that the feelings were mutual, Remus' protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. And Snape had an axe to grind with both of the Marauders. So no, Harry was not
at all sure that Snape was as regretful as he claimed to be. Clearly, Remus was of the same mind, given how utterly infuriated he was. Snape started muttering words Harry couldn't catch, moving his wand over Tonks' body, and the slashes, finally, started to close. After a few minutes, he put away his wand. "Dittany will ensure her vanity." He growled, then whirled on his heel, and, cloak flaring wildly, stormed out.

It took another hour to get everyone sorted and stabilized. Once those who were able had all gathered at the Head Table, Dumbledore held a very quick meeting. Harry was exceedingly annoyed to notice Dumbledore spoke to him without once looking at him.

"Your warning saved, Harry. Without it, I fear that all the aurors stationed at Azkaban would have been killed. As it stands, there were no deaths tonight. There were, unfortunately, a great many severe injuries, but everyone survived."

Harry sagged in relief, then sighed. "How many did he get out?"

"Nearly everyone, I'm afraid." Dumbledore admitted. "Some few of his lesser followers remained in their cells, but he was able to fetch out his most lethal and loyal followers."

Harry made a face at that, sighing. Great, just great. Voldemort gets more big guns. That thought made Harry consider actual guns, only to near-instantaneously nix it. Attempting to teach pureblood wizards who, bar a few examples, thought ekeltrikity was a new Muggle invention how to use a gun was a recipe for complete, total, and utter chaos, not to mention disaster. If Arthur Weasley, who was fascinated by Muggles, didn't have a clue what a rubber duck was for ... yeesh. Harry really didn't want to see what he'd make of a gun.

Harry's expression went even darker when Dumbledore quickly made his excuses and hurried out, still without looking at Harry. Granted, their relationship was strained, but Harry didn't think it was that bad. Or maybe the old coot was trying to guilt Harry back into doing things his way? Who knew. Whatever was going on, it was more than slightly annoying.

Despite the best efforts of Sirius, Harry and Tonks, Remus refused to leave Tonks' side until she was cleared to head back to either her home or the manor. Despite the circumstances, Harry couldn't quite help but snicker.

"So much for him not liking her. Not that he was fooling much of anyone when he said that, but still." He muttered to Ron. Though, that said, Harry had a feeling Remus wasn't staying so much because he liked Tonks as because he wasn't about to leave her undefended in the same castle as her attacker. Harry couldn't really blame him for that. It wasn't until he got to talking to Tonks that he found out Dumbledore had managed to get a warning off to Amelia Bones, and the Order had been augmented by every auror she could scramble. Evidently, the recent acquisition of new armor and other materials had saved more than one life, for which Harry was immensely glad.

To make matters worse, sometime after lunch, a good chunk of the newly freed and existing Death Eaters decided to make some noise, and proceeded to trash most of a small village. They'd probably been aware that the aurors and the Order would have been licking their collective wounds and unable to meet them in sufficient force to stop them. The only good news was that the two raids got splashed all over the Daily Prophet's evening edition, and however much Fudge wanted to deny it, it was rather impossible to ignore the fact that Voldemort was very much alive, well, and back to his old tricks. Though Fudge was giving it his best shot, insisting that the attacks were the actions of the Death Eaters minus their leader. That Voldemort was dead and moldering somewhere. Harry had a feeling that Fudge would deny the truth even if Voldemort walked up to him, introduced himself, and crucio'd the man.
The wounded were floated to the infirmary proper, now that they were all stabilized, and then everyone but Remus headed for the manor. Once there, Molly actually let Winky fix them dinner without so much as a token objection. They ate with little energy and even less talk. Sirius considered for a while before sighing and heading for the floo.

"On further consideration, I think I'd better head back to the school. I don't entirely trust Moony and Snivellus together in the same building right about now."

No one could argue against that, considering how angry Remus had been even when they'd left, though he'd at least seemed to be content to stay by Tonks.

Harry sighed as he watched Sirius head for the floo. "I hate this." He told the others. "I hate having to sit here and do nothing, knowing he'll keep going until I stop him. I hate it!"
School Daze

Chapter 24: School Daze

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter. Underlined and italics is a direct quote from Order of the Phoenix. I am slightly changing the sequence of events at the Sorting Feast, but nothing too major.

September 1, 1995

The next three weeks had been ... pure chaos. The Marauders put everything they had into dueling practice, getting their animagus forms started, and pitching in to help with the myriad of really bonkers inventions Remus, Sirius, and the twins were coming up with. Harry worked on his wandless casting every chance he got, and eventually began to have some success in casting when he was calm and not in a jam, which was a major accomplishment, even if he wasn't doing much more than floating feathers yet. He'd also been working on his occlumency ... to no effect. As a matter of fact, the better he got at occlumency, the more he saw, both through Voldemort's eyes and in his mind. It was more than slightly disturbing, and the fact he had a vision pretty much every night really didn't help. Weirdly, his scar had completely stopped hurting ... he never got so much as a twinge anymore. The why of it remained a mystery. Not even Dumbledore seemed to be able to figure it out ... not that Harry was seeing much of the man. Harry knew their relationship had become strained, but really, there was no need for Dumbledore to actively avoid him.

They got their letters later than normal ... probably because of the Ministry teacher being appointed so late. Ron and Hermione had made Prefect, much to Hermione's delight and Ron's stunned confusion. The twins ragged him mercilessly, much as they had Percy. The Marauders got one good look at the book they were required to get for DADA and gave a collective groan. Clearly, the woman was of Lockhart's stripe ... that is to say, utterly useless. Even poor, possessed Quirrel had imparted some information of value. It didn't look like Umbridge would, if the book she was using was any indication. The yearly school shopping trip also marked the first time Sirius went out in public. He'd been more than a bit nervous about it for a good while, and Harry could understand the sentiment. He'd been forced to hide for two years, and while he was cleared now, none of them were overly confident that everyone would be ok with him now. Fortunately, it went off without a hitch. Diagon Alley had been ... oddly unpopulated, and everyone had been twitchy, jumpy, and glancing over their shoulders every few seconds. No one had seemed to want to cosy up to their group in order to gawk at either Sirius or Harry. Given that the Death Eaters and the other members of Voldemort's growing army had been raiding up and down the country pretty much at will, Harry didn't blame them.

The morning of the first was more than slightly insane. Everyone was running around like headless chickens, shouting and complaining and scrambling to get ready to head to King's Cross. Harry combed his room for the fourth time, ensuring he hadn't forgotten anything, then finally closed his own trunk, and, after a moment's consideration, added a jinx to the lock that would make anyone trying to get into it without the password quite a bit more colorful than they started out.

Eventually, they all got sorted out and piled into a pair of Ministry cars that had been provided for them. The ride was noisy and boisterous. At King's Cross, they garnered more than the usual amount of attention ... but then, it was a rather large group. Six adults (the Weasleys, Remus, Sirius, a fully-healed Kingsley and Tonks) and seven kids, carting seven trunks, two owls (one of them tiny and hyper and noisy) and a cat was bound to attract attention. It wasn't until they were on the Hogwarts train side of the barrier and Harry noticed that they were still being stared at that he realized the New
Marauders had fallen into a sort of formation, with him at the head, Ron and Hermione just behind and to either side of him, Ginny and Neville behind them, and the twins bracketing them ... all of them with their wand-hands free and ready for trouble.

It was a natural consequence of their training over the summer. They'd drilled, constantly, on being able to act as a group, to help overcome the gap in magical strength and knowledge that would be inevitable when they tangled with an adult witch or wizard. It hadn't been all that obvious at the manor, but the training had tied them all closely together, and here, where they'd be on their own soon enough, away from most adult help (because let's face it, it's not like Harry'd had much teacher assistance at Hogwarts when it came to trouble), they were closing ranks and keeping a careful eye out.

While the station was alive with kids and parents, Harry noticed that there was not a single green and silver scarf in the mix. It made him wonder where all the Slytherins were. They headed for their usual compartment out of habit, and everyone piled in. It was a tight fit, and Ron and Hermione sat closest to the door, since they'd be in and out, but they all made it in there.

Ron and Hermione left for the prefect's meeting, and the rest of them spent the next hour or so chatting happily. Then Ron hustled back in, red-faced and rather angry looking.

"Mate, you are never going to believe who got made a prefect."

"Malfoy." Harry guessed. There was really only the one choice, after all. "You mean, the Slytherins are on the train?"

"Yeah. They're in the front car of the train, the whole lot of them, huddling together and whispering, most of them. What was Dumbledore thinking, making that git a prefect?" Ron wanted to know.

"I expect he was thinking Slytherin had to have prefects, and since Crabbe and Goyle have one brain cell between them, it can't be them. Slytherins seem to only come in three varieties. Stupid, gits, or stupid gits." Harry said with a sigh.

Things were quiet for a good while. Hermione only poked her head in every now and again, too busy doing her prefect duties to stay for more than a minute or two. Ron, predictably, took a much more laid-back approach to the whole prefect thing.

"There is no way I'm turning into Percy." He proclaimed. "For one, I'd never survive them." He pointed at the twins, who were grinning at him in a rather disturbing fashion. "And for another, if by some chance I did survive them, the rest of you would have at me."

"Too right, mate." Harry agreed with a grin.

At about the halfway point of the train ride, Malfoy decided to show up for his semi-annual taunt-and-hex. Really, Harry thought when the pale, pointy face poked into the compartment, Crabbe and Goyle at his back, it wouldn't be a proper train ride without the git's posturing.

Malfoy sneered at everyone in the compartment before focusing on Harry. "Going to have to watch yourself this year, Potter." He taunted. "I'm going to enjoy giving you detentions."

Harry eyed Malfoy. There was something ... different ... about Draco. Something Harry couldn't quite put his finger on. An extra dollop of menace, perhaps, that was not explained by his status as a prefect. After a few moments, Harry dismissed the thought, deciding Malfoy was strutting because Voldemort was back and his father was more or less Voldemort's right hand man. "Go away, Malfoy."
Malfy sneered a bit more, but without Hermione in the compartment to fuel his usual mudblood taunts, and with everyone else refusing to rise to his bait, he finally left, his goons in his wake. Once he was gone, Harry let out a whoosh of air and sagged in his seat. "I am very much going to look forward to hexing him into oblivion, if he keeps that up." He told the others. "And is it just me, or was something different with him?"

The others considered that. "Hmmm. You may not be wrong." Ginny said at length. "There was something ... " She trailed off and gave an apologetic shrug. "Something off about him. More than usual, I mean."

The others looked less certain, but were willing to take Harry and Ginny's word for it. It was Malfoy they were talking about after all. Given who his father was and what they'd got up to in the last four years, it was rather easy to accept that Malfoy was, once again, up to something.

The rest of the train ride and the carriage ride to the school went uneventfully, though Harry noticed the Slytherins seemed to be travelling in even tighter and larger knots than usual. He frowned at them. The upper years especially seemed to be travelling almost as a single unit, and there was something predatory and malicious in more than one pair of Slytherin eyes, moreso than in years previous. It seemed that the rebirth of Voldemort had given the House of Snakes new resolve. Or something.

He, Ron and Hermione took their usual seats at the table, the twins and Ginny sitting across from them, while Neville sat next to Hermione. Harry glanced up at the Head table. He almost didn't see the new teacher at first ... she was nearly as short as Flitwick. But once he had spotted her, he wondered how he could have missed her. Augusta's warning, mostly forgotten in the intervening weeks, flashed through his mind again. 'A more unfortunate person' rather fit Professor Umbridge. Short and squat and more than slightly ugly, and dressed in the most hideous pink cardigan Harry had ever seen.

And things just got more interesting when McGonagall brought the Sorting Hat out. The 'song' was ... distinctly disturbing, and about as clear a warning as you could get. Harry glanced over at the Slytherin table and sighed. Unfortunately, the chances of school unity were nil. Oh, the Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs would have little trouble uniting, but then that had never really been the problem, had it? It always came down to the Slytherins. It'd take something ... well, Harry had no idea, actually, what it would take to fully unite the school. Certainly something beyond the troubles they already had, that was for sure.

Dumbledore got to his feet and introduced Umbridge, then started to go on with his usual start of term notices. Mid-sentence, Umbridge let out a high-pitched little "Hem-hem." Dumbledore turned to look, and blinked. So did Harry. Umbridge had gotten to her feet, and, evidently, intended to make a speech. That she had interrupted Dumbledore was ... rather stunning. Insofar as Harry knew, no one had ever done such a thing. Dumbledore sat down quickly and gave her his full attention, somehow managing to make it appear that had been his plan all along. The rest of the staff weren't quite as good at hiding their surprise. Sprout's eyebrows had disappeared into her hairline, and McGonagall's mouth had gone a thin and pale that Harry hadn't seen since the dragon incident first year.

"Thank you, Headmaster," Professor Umbridge simpered. "For those kind words of welcome." Her voice was high-pitched, breathy, and little-girlish. She also, Harry noticed, had the sort of expression on his face that Harry normally saw only secondhand, usually at the playground near Privet Drive, from the odd parent watching their kids and the kids of others running about. It was a sort of indulgent, condescending look. She gave another little throat-clearing cough. "Hem-hem," and continued. "Well, isn't it lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say." She smiled, revealing very
pointy teeth. "And to see such happy little faces looking up at me."

Harry gave a mental snort as he glanced around. No one he could see looked happy. Most of them looked a bit stunned, others confused, and the Slytherin table, almost en masse, had gone stony-faced, as if they were doing their utmost to not react visibly. Some of the kids were already starting to not pay attention, leaning in towards their friends and whispering quietly.

*Professor Umbridge cleared her throat again. "Hem-hem." But when she continued, some of the breathiness had vanished from her voice, and she sounded much more businesslike, and now her words had a dull, learned-by-heart sound to them. "The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the wizarding community must be passed down the generations lest we lose them forever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished, and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching."*

She turned a bit and bowed to the other teachers. None of them returned the gesture. On the contrary, most of them looked to have been hit by a confundus, with faintly confused and baffled expressions on their faces. McGonagall was eyeing Sprout significantly, but the real prize was Snape. His expression had frozen into a look of disdain and dislike normally reserved for Harry himself, and he was eyeing Umbridge warily.

*Umbridge gave another little "Hem-hem," and went on with her speech. "Every Headmaster and Headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something new to the weighty task of governing this historic school, and that is as it should be. Without progress, there will be stagnation and decay. There again, progress for progress' sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation."

Harry decided that if Umbridge 'hem-hem'd' one more time, she was going to be the victim of the first prank of the year, because that little noise was getting seriously irritating. It was, though, about the only think keeping him from falling asleep during her speech, so he spared some thanks for it, because otherwise he'd be missing what she was saying, and what she was saying was not at all comforting. He'd have to talk to Hermione about it later. She was paying as close attention to Umbridge as he was ... probably closer. Everyone else had pretty much given up, talking and giggling to their neighbors and friends. Some of the Ravenclaws had even dragged out their books. Umbridge didn't seem to notice. Harry got the feeling a riot could break out and she'd keep right on going. The teachers were the only other ones obviously paying attention, and Harry had never seen McGongall's expression so severe. Even jolly Flitwick had gone rather stony-faced. Hagrid, bless him, was actually frowning.

"Because some changes will be for the better, while others will come in the fullness of time to be recognized as errors of judgement. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward then into a new era of openness, effectiveness, and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected and pruning back wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited." She sat down.

Harry blinked, and the rest of the Hall stirred a bit. Dumbledore got to his feet, finished the notices, and started the feast. The quiet sussurrus of talk became a near-roar as everyone turned to their neighbors to talk. Harry immediately turned to Hermione. "What do you make of that speech, Hermione?"
She frowned. "I didn't much like it, to be honest. She's up to no good."

Harry snorted. "Of course she is. She's the DADA teacher. Every single one we've had has had something up their sleeve, even Remus. Though at least he was competent for the job."

Hermione sighed. "Too true." She admitted. "Though this one's going to be even more trouble than the rest. I've just got a bad feeling."

"Right there with you. Looks like the year just got a whole lot more interesting." Harry said with a sigh. "Not that we needed or wanted that. What do the rest of you say? Do we have our first target of the year?" They'd been planning to prank Malfoy, but this promised to be a far juicier target.

Fred and George nodded firmly. "She's just asking for it she is." Fred grumbled.

"Talking to us like we're five." George huffed.

That decided, they got down to the business of eating, and then Ron and Hermione hurried the first years to the dorm. Harry was sort of relishing the fact that no one was paying him all that much mind. Everyone seemed to have far better things to gossip about after the summer they'd all had, and Harry was glad of the break from being the center of everyone's attention. He'd never been comfortable with it!

He, Neville, the twins and Ginny headed up to the dorm en mass, keeping a wary eye on the Slytherins until the two groups parted ways. Finally, though, they were at the dorm, and he and Neville headed for their room. Dobby was waiting, standing beside Harry's closed trunk. Harry grinned. Dobby had been quite pleased to be returning to Hogwarts with them, both as added security and, like during the last weeks of school last year, as an ultra-secure method of communication.

"Good evening Dobby. Sorry about the trunk. Didn't want any Slytherins to 'accidentally' get into it somehow when I wasn't around and you weren't either." He removed the jinx he'd put on it earlier, and Dobby immediately emptied the trunk of his things, hustling about to set them up. Dean and Seamus came in about then, and blinked a bit at Dobby.

"Guys, this is Dobby. He's a free elf that works for me, and my friend." Harry introduced them. Dobby's eyes went absolutely huge and teared up, but he managed to not start bawling.

"It is a great pleasure to meet more of the Great Harry Potter's friends." Dobby said, bowing. Neither Dean nor Seamus seemed to quite know what to do, and so settled for a rather rushed and offhand "Hi." each, though that was more than enough to please Dobby immensely.

They spent the next hour or so catching up with each other, and then finally collapsed into bed to sleep. And, of course, in Harry's case, to dream.
October 7, 1995

Things, it seemed, were both better and worse than Harry and the Marauders had feared. The Slytherins continued to move in packs, though it became clear early on that the firsties and second years, at least, were doing it for self-protection. The verdict was still out on the motives of the third years. The rest ... well, there was little doubt. It varied from person to person, but it became clear early on that the older Slytherins were changing. The verbal sparring that had always been such a part of Slytherin/Gryffindor interaction (regardless of year) had taken on a more vicious, yet more ... subtle ... edge. As if the Slytherins were poking at the Gryffindor ranks to find the true weak spots. Neville had, predictably, come in for a lot of heat the first couple days, but the Slytherins figured out fast that he'd not only become part of Harry's group and therefore had backup, but that Neville had begun to grow a spine over the summer. The boy who had been forced to bunnyhop up to Gryffindor tower thanks to a leg-locker curse in years past was fast disappearing, and a far more self-confident young man was taking his place.

The New Marauders were, by and large, unaffected by the nastier edge to the Slytherins, except for the wear and tear on their tempers. Especially Harry's year. It helped that there were four of them, and that after a summer of training together, they moved and reacted to things as a unit, which lessened the Slytherin's chances of taking them by surprise or picking one of them off. Harry made sure Dobby kept an eye on Ginny in the halls, as she was the only Marauder who didn't have a Marauder classmate to walk the halls with as backup ... though she really didn't much need the help. A few Bat Bogey hexes had the Slytherins a touch more respectful of Ginny's person ... or at least more wary of retaliation, at any rate. Anyone stupid enough to try to tackle the twins deserved what they got, both immediately in terms of return fire and later in terms of pranks.

But that did not mean that everyone was so lucky. The Creeveys, in particular, came in for a lot of trouble, and Harry and company had to rescue Colin and his brother Dennis from bullying more than once. Other kids, especially the muggleborns, were coming in for trouble too. Malfoy, of course, was not only not stopping it, he was encouraging it. Hermione and Ron did all they could as prefects to protect the muggleborns, but they were undermined at every turn by Malfoy and his fellow prefect Parkinson. The Slytherins essentially had carte blanche to do as they pleased, as far as their prefects were concerned.

And speaking of Malfoy ... that boy was definitely up to no good. What, Harry had yet to discover. Malfoy'd taken to disappearing for long periods of time ... he was the lone exception to the Slytherins traveling in packs. He invariably arrived at any class after a break alone, and almost late. He also ate quickly at meals and left early. Harry had taken to trying to watch the Marauder's map whenever he could, and finally got lucky in mid-September, catching Malfoy appearing out of nowhere on the seventh floor corridor ... by the Room of Requirement. What Malfoy was doing in there, Harry had no idea. He'd asked Dobby to try to spy on Malfoy, but only if he could do so without getting caught. So far, no luck. Malfoy was being exceptionally cagey about what he was doing, and keeping a sharp eye on his surroundings. Dobby'd not so much as gotten a peek into the room, and without that, he couldn't risk popping in, lest there be nothing to hide behind.
And beyond the Slytherins there was yet more trouble, by the name of Umbridge. Firstly, her classes were utterly useless. They were forbidden to talk, ask questions, or use their wands. They simply read chapters in the world's most boring and useless book ever. She also was auditing classes. Harry was the first to admit he'd found the audit of Snape particularly hilarious, though he'd had to work hard to conceal it lest Snape disembowel him with his paring knife. Likewise with Trelawney, the useless, crazy old bat. The audit of Binns had been laugh-worthy, but for a different reason, as Binns seemed to think Umbridge was a student and treated her as such, essentially ignoring her as he droned on nonstop. The audits, however, became less amusing when it was McGonagall and Flitwick and worse, Hagrid on the line. Especially Flitwick and Hagrid. McGonagall took no guff from anyone, so she not only didn't rise to Umbridge's bait, she gave as good as she got. But Umbridge was downright vicious with Flitwick and doubly so with Hagrid. It had taken all Harry's self-control (and a very hard foot-stomp from Hermione) to not jump to Hagrid's defense.

And that was the other issue. Umbridge seemed to go out of her way to get Harry's goat. She made snide little comments in DADA class, on a range of subjects, all in the name of 'teaching'. And spent the entire time eyeing him, as if waiting for him to say the wrong thing. It had been an exercise in self-restraint (and his growing skill with occlumency) to keep calm and avoid rising to her bait, and even then, Harry had had reason to be grateful Hermione or Ron or Neville always sat next to him in that class, as they'd all had to elbow him or stomp on his foot more than once to distract him.

Add to this the fact that Harry's Voldemort-visions were now an almost daily event. Daily. They'd ceased to come only at night, which stressed him out, though the during-the-day visions provided a wealth of information, now that Snape had to be at school teaching and could therefore only attend 'meetings' on weekends. Dobby spent a lot of time ferrying notes to Dumbledore. Though at least the good news there was that Snape was wholly cleared of being the spy-leak. He'd not been around to hear the majority of the information that Dumbledore had passed on to the Order to act on. The continued information leak was infuriating Voldemort, which was also good news, though Harry found it a bit disconcerting to watch as he spent half or more of every meeting crucio'ing his own people as his mood deteriorated. And Harry was getting more and more frustrated by and worried about Dumbledore. Harry realized he was having problems dealing with Umbridge and such, but to go from talking to him fairly frequently to not seeing hide nor hair of the man except at meals ... and even then, Dumbledore avoided his eye ... was troubling. It made Harry wonder, just a bit, if Dumbledore was punishing him for daring to do things his way, rather than Dumbledore's.

School itself, of course, was hectic, save for DADA and History of Magic. Umbridge's insistence on using that book and nothing else made the DADA class itself a breeze, and History was the snorefest it always was, but every other class (and doubly so for Potions) was piling on the work and the homework at insane levels in preparation for their OWLs. And Hermione had them revising every night of the week ... and for once Ron wasn't arguing. Much. For once, Quidditch was taking a distant second place in both boys' lives. The twins, despite having only three classes each, were in even worse shape, since this was their NEWT year. The Marauders aside, most of the fifth, sixth, and seventh year students were panicking more than a bit over DADA, since they'd had several years of less-than-ideal tutelage, and Umbridge was certainly not helping.

It was Lee Jordan who'd done something about it. Long a friend of the twins, he'd noticed just how much better they were doing in DADA, noticed that they were thick as thieves with Harry and company, noticed that Harry and company were just as good as the twins, and put two and two together. He'd approached the twins about joining their drills ... and things had snowballed from there. Before Harry quite knew what had hit him, they had virtually the entirety of Gryffindor Tower wanting in on the fun ... and then it had spread to Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff.

They'd had to time things right, waiting for Malfoy to not be using the Room, since that was the only place Harry knew of that they could meet to organize things. Fortune had smiled on them today, as
Malfoy had headed into town for the Hogsmeade trip, and seemed content to stick to the Slytherin dungeon thereafter. So, now, after dinner, the Room was filling up with people.

It wasn't the entirety of the other three Houses, but it sure felt like it to Harry, who was more than slightly intimidated by having to talk to and organize this lot. He wondered, not for the first time, how it had all got so out of control, and glanced over at Hermione. She grinned at him while she and the rest of the Marauders waited for the last arrivals. Eventually, everyone that was going to come was, evidently, there.

Harry got to his feet and grimaced awkwardly before calling out for attention. Gradually, everyone settled. "Right, so ... Umbridge is paying no nevermind to teaching us anything, and except for R ... Professor Lupin, our last few years worth of professors have been less than worthless." Harry glanced over at the twins. "I've heard the professors prior to Quirrell were no joy either. So most of us are in a bit of a jam when it comes to defending ourselves ... and it's rather obvious the Slytherins are gearing up for Merlin-knows-what, which means most of us are pretty defenseless. After the Cup last year, I took steps to correct that. So did the Weasleys and Neville and Hermione. So we're at least better prepared, though we're probably not as well off as we ought to be."

"And you think you can teach us?" Someone asked, their tone disbelieving.

"I can try. We can try." Harry said, motioning towards the rest of the Marauders. "We certainly can't be worse than the nothing you've all got now, and the truth of the matter is that we've all of us been in scrapes of varying levels." Harry sighed. "And whether Fudge wants to admit it or not, the Death Eaters are not causing trouble for no reason. Voldemort's back."

"Says you."

"Yes, says me." Harry snapped. "I've seen him. I was there when he came back! He bloody well touched me, so I am not inventing things or crazy or whatever. He's back, and he's up to his old tricks, and the Slytherins are cozying up to him, which explains why they're trying to terrorize the school all of a sudden. And if most of us go out there right now, and Death Eaters show up, we're going to be in a world of hurt. We need to be ready ... or readier than we are now. We need to be able to protect ourselves."

There was a lot of muttering and rumbling about that, but no one voiced an objection. Evidently, the raids and general problems had been such that not even the most oblivious could pretend there wasn't big trouble, even if they didn't agree about the whole Voldemort thing.

It took the best part of an hour to organize everyone (there were at least two people from every year from each of the three Houses) and figure out what they knew and didn't know, but eventually, they managed it and Harry gratefully headed for the Tower and what sleep he could count on getting at night these days. It was a rather sad comment on the state of affairs he was in that he'd managed to adapt to only three or four hours of sleep a night. He just wished things were not so dire. Something was coming. He could feel it in his bones. But what, and when, he hadn't been able to discover, not even during his Voldemort-visions. If it was something Voldemort was up to (and let's face it, the odds on that were strong), he wasn't thinking about it or talking about it, though that was hardly surprising with his tantrums over the 'leak' he still couldn't find a source for. It was a rather sad state of affairs when Harry found Voldemort's growing rage about that amusing.
Blood and Beatings

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter. I'm baaaaaaaaaack! Finally figured out how to get myself unstuck! Yay!

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October 21, 1995

It was fairly late in the evening, and Harry was sitting in the Common Room with Neville and Ginny, studying while they waited for Hermione and Ron to finish their Prefect rounds when Colin and his little brother Dennis came in. Dennis was crying quietly, and Colin's eyes were red, like he'd been fighting crying (and losing).

"Colin, Dennis! Are you all right? What happened? I thought you had detention with Umbridge tonight?" Harry asked, concerned.

"We did." Colin choked out.

"Someone get you on the way back then?" Neville asked, apparently thinking the same thing Harry was.

Colin shook his head. "It was her. Her detention. She made us *sniff* write lines. With a quill that ... " He held out a hand, the back of which was a raw, angry red.

Harry snarled. "Writes in your own blood." Rage nearly blinded him. What the *hell*? That tore it. "DOBBY!"

Dobby popped in. "Yes, Harry Potter sir?"

"Get all the Gryffindors in here. Pop them here if you have to. House meeting. Then go tell Sirius that Umbridge's pulled something she can get nail for, and tell him to contact Augusta and Septimus, and that they'll get more details by morning."

Dobby nodded and popped out.

Within minutes, people were thundering down the stairs. Harry was surprised that Dobby didn't have to pop anyone down here, but then again, practically the entirety of Gryffindor had joined the 'DADA study group' that they were keeping secret from Umbridge, much to Umbridge's increasing ire.

"Harry? What's going on? You're looking ... really angry." Ron asked. He was one of the first down the stairs.

"Tell you in a minute, Ron. Don't want to have to say it twice." Harry told him.

"Fair enough." Ron agreed.

Finally, Dobby popped in. "That bes all of them, Harry Potter sir." He said.

"Excellent. When you're done with the other assignment, come on back here, you're going to be a part of this, too."
Dobby nodded enthusiastically, and popped out again. He came back less than two minutes later, smiling evilly. "Theys be told, Master Harry sir. They's be waiting to find out what happened."

Harry nodded and grinned, then clambered up on a table where he could be seen. "Sorry about rousing everyone out of their rooms, gang, but we've got something we need to deal with, and fast. How many of you've had detentions with Umbridge?"

A lot of hands were raised. Harry blinked when he realized that every last one of them that he recognized from fourth year and up was a Muggleborn (The only reason he knew their blood status was thanks to the damn Chamber of Secrets). "And how many of you were required to write lines with a particularly nasty quill that writes with your own blood?" That question had every pureblood in the room inhaling sharply. Harry nearly exploded when every hand stayed up.

"Damn it. This is worse than I thought. All right. Listen up. For those of you that don't know ... quills that gouge blood out of your hand in order to write are illegal as hell. And it's pretty damn clear it's not going to stop, so we're going to have to do something about this our damn selves."

"But she's a teacher!"

"Are we Gryffindors or not?" Harry demanded. "And it's about more than the bloody damn toad. It's about the damn Slytherins, too. They're more or less taking over the damn school, and it's well past time we started fighting back! Start spreading the word. Have everyone that's had a detention with the toad talk to either me or Neville. Colin, would you be willing to take pictures, for evidence?"

Colin nodded emphatically.

"What good's that going to do?" Someone asked.

"Let's just say that between the names Potter, Longbottom, Weasley and Black ... " Harry smirked. "We'll be able to do damn near anything that needs doing." He looked over at the twins. "Rascal, Rogue? You have free reign. Ask Dobby or Winky if they want to help you, if you need it for deliveries."

The twins were wearing identical evil grins as they nodded. Harry grinned back at them before continuing. "The rest of you ... start taking the damn war to the bloody Slytherins. We've had over two weeks of practice and you all have learned quite a few hexes and jinxes. And if nothing else, just bloody well punch them in the nose! Stop going to detentions. And ignore the damn points system. If these assholes are going to trample all over the rules and get away with it, I see no reason why we have to let them, because we're 'supposed' to play by the rules. It's time the Slytherins got a dose of their own medicine ... and discover why it's a *really* bad idea to piss off a lion."

That announcement got a near-deafening roar of approval from his fellow Gryffindors, and Harry hopped down. The Gryffindors immediately started breaking up into groups, talking animatedly as they plotted and planned. Harry grabbed a piece of parchment and wrote down what had happened, and what he'd arranged to do about it, then handed it to Dobby. "To Padfoot and Moony, Dobby."

He said with a grin.

The next morning, the Great Hall was alive with talk as Gryffindors with good friends in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff passed the word, both about the quill, and about the rebellion. By lunchtime, the entire castle was in chaos. Hufflepuff had evidently held an emergency House meeting of their own immediately after breakfast, because the entire House boycotted Umbridge's class, refusing to attend, which, of course, got them all in major trouble. And by lunch, Harry and Neville had quite a list of names of people who'd been subjected to the quills, every last one of them a Muggleborn who wouldn't know about the quills. Almost all of them were from Hufflepuff and Gryffindor, as
evidently Umbridge wasn't willing to risk whether or not a Ravenclaw Muggleborn would either already know about the quills or find out fast, and wasn't (unfortunately) stupid enough to go after Slytherins.

As for the Slytherins ... they couldn't move for being hexed, jinxed, tripped, elbowed, and generally harassed to death. It wasn't until later that evening that another very disturbing issue (that Harry had been completely oblivious to, thanks to using Dobby as a totally secure method of communication) came to light ... owls were being intercepted. Where, by who, and why was unclear, but most of the outgoing mail was not making it to the recipients.

The final list of kids subjected to the quill, pictures of their mangled hands, and the information that owls were being intercepted, was sent off to Sirius and company by Dobby, along with a request for ... materiel ... by the twins very late that night. They'd been dangerously quiet all day, their heads together as they came up with a plan for Umbridge. Harry did *not* envy her in the slightest. Dobby returned about a half hour later, carrying a big box of god-knows-what, and he and the twins disappeared for the night.

Next morning, when everyone had arrived for breakfast, Dumbledore stood up. After he had everyone's attention, he began to speak. "It has come to my attention that yesterday, quite a few students missed one of their classes. I am afraid that each person who has done so has lost their House five points, and will be required to attend detention tonight here in the Geat Hall."

There was a low, warning growl of outrage from all three 'rebel' tables, and Harry shot Dumbledore a death glare before turning to the New Marauders, who'd sat down around him. "Nobody goes to DADA. Nobody goes to detention. To hell with House points. Pass it on." Expressions angry, they passed the word to those nearest them. Not that it really seemed to be needed. Most of Gryffindor looked severely pissed off and ready for open, all-out rebellion.

Shortly after that, breakfast was served, and seconds later, Umbridge let out a horrified-sounding scream that had Harry's head snapping around to see what had happened. He couldn't get a really good look, but from what he could see, her breakfast was, apparently, alive. And very slimy looking, too. He couldn't be sure at that distance and angle, but he thought he saw a tentacle wave about. At any rate, Umbridge shoved the plate aside with a revolted look and tried to drink from her goblet, only to spew it out all over everything. Whatever it was, it *looked* like pumpkin juice, but clearly wasn't, from her reaction. Harry glanced over at the twins.

"Transfiguration charm for the food." One said.

"And concentrated essence of the most foul-tasting thing we could get our hands on in the drink." The other said. "Rather tame for a first shot, we admit, but we didn't have much time to get everything set up."

Harry grinned. "I have no doubt you'll pick up the pace from here. And from the looks of things, the teachers appreciate the effort." Indeed, most of the teachers were either openly amused or wearing expressions that were clearly attempts to look disapproving (and failing). Only Dumbledore, Filch and Snape (other than Umbridge herself, obviously) looked honestly displeased.

The next few hours were utter, complete, and total chaos. There were three different fights in the corridors of Slytherins versus ... well, whoever caught them bullying someone. Interestingly, Malfoy had disappeared sometime the day before and refused to come out. Harry had a feeling he was in the Room of Requirement, waiting out the mayhem because he had to know damn good and well he'd be a top target. On top of that, literally three-fourths of the DADA classes were empty, as only Slytherins were still attending class, and by lunch, only Slytherin had any House points. The other three would probably be in the negatives, if the counters allowed for such a thing. Even better, the
corridors had been ringing with Umbridge's screams of fear, horror, and rage all day ... yet no one had seen her. Whatever the twins were doing to her, on top of three-quarters of the castle refusing to attend her class, must be a beaut.

She finally appeared at lunch, looking harried and hunted, her hair in disarray and her sweater shredded by who-knew-what. Shortly after everyone had sat down to eat, the Great Hall's doors banged open, and what seemed like half the Wizengamot and the Aurors swept in, with an apoplectic Augusta, enraged Amelia Bones and frantic Fudge in the lead. Fudge was bleating about being the Minister and being in charge and trying to stop Augusta and Amelia, but it was rather like watching a worm try to stop a pair of elephants. Just not happening. Amelia in particular was reading Fudge the riot act, if her expression was anything to go by. Augusta seemed to be saving her ire for a different target. Harry spotted Sirius and Septimus, both looking every bit as pissed off as Augusta and Amelia. Sirius was bellowing in rage at Fudge, loud enough that his voice carried a bit over everyone else's.

"You're corrupt Fudge! You always have been and you always will be, and so help me if you try to shield that ugly hellspawn, I will make sure this is your last day as Minister, instead of giving you a week to clear your bloody desk!" Sirius roared.

From the way Fudge went a pasty, horrified gray, Harry wasn't the only one to pick up on the implications of Sirius' threat, that Sirius was about ten seconds from demanding an honor duel with Fudge. A duel there was no way in hell Fudge would ever win, if he was as competent at dueling as he was at being Minister, which was to say not at all. That threat finally shut Fudge up, and Amelia strode out of the pack, looking straight at Umbridge. "Dolores Jane Umbridge, you are hereby placed under arrest for the crime of using an illegal torture device on minors."

Umbridge blinked, and then in a syrupy-sweet voice said. "I'm sorry, but I'm quite sure there's a mistake. I would never break the law."

"Nevertheless, you have been accused, and evidence gathered. We have been presented with pictures of thirty individuals who have been subjected to a blood quill, along with written testimony that the device was used in detentions under you."

And dear, sweet Merlin, but McGonagall looked like she wanted to kill the toad, eyes slitted in rage, one hand white-knuckled on a half-drawn wand. "A blood quill?" She snarled, enraged. "A blood quill? On students?"

Umbridge, of course, kept trying to claim innocence, and evade getting arrested. In the end, it took four Aurors and an immobilization charm of some kind (it looked like a Petrificus Totalis, but whoever had cast it hadn't spoken aloud, so Harry wasn't certain) to finally get a completely unwilling Umbridge out the door under heavy guard. Once she was out, there was a huge cheer from the majority of the school.

Sirius threw Harry a gleeful, triumphant look, and Harry couldn't resist jumping up to give him a hug. "Wasn't expecting you guys this fast!" He told Sirius, grinning like a madman. "I think you've disappointed the twins. They were so looking forward to pranking her for a few days!"

"I'll make it up to them." Sirius promised. "You should have been there, Harry. It was a thing of beauty."

Harry knew Sirius meant the mayhem the news of blocked owls and blood quills had brought to the Wizengamot, and he grinned. "I'm sure we can find a pensieve somewhere and you can share the memory of it with me, Sirius. Ought to be a blast!"
Sirius grinned hugely. "It's a date." He promised, then headed out with the rest of the adults. It took Dumbledore the best part of an hour to regain control of the students, since most of them were capering up and down the aisles between the tables, laughing and celebrating their victory, but eventually, they all got sent off to their classes. Of course, it wasn't a complete win, because the Slytherins were still up to their tricks, but at least they'd got rid of Umbridge.

The very next morning, Harry 'earned' a detention in Potions. That night, when he arrived for it, Snape regarded him for long moments before finally leaning back in his chair. "I seem to remember." He growled. "A rather rash Gryffindor storming into my office at the end of term last year in order to make a rather ... odd ... statement, only to immediately leave."

Harry blinked. Ok, so ... not really a detention, clearly. "I remember the same thing."

"You seem to have ... changed ... in the last few months, Mr. Potter."

"Not as much as you might think, sir." Harry said. "I'm not my father, and never have been. That said ... watching Voldemort get re-bodied is enough to make anyone change a bit."

"Quite so. I believe that ... truce ... you sought might be possible after all. However, I cannot be seen to favor you in the slightest." Snape growled.

"Because of Malfoy and company." Harry wasn't stupid. "He's up to something, you know."

"I'm quite aware Mr. Malfoy is up to something, Mr. Potter. He is a Slytherin, after all." Snape grumped. "In the interests of this ... truce ... I shall reduce the number of points taken, and replace them with detentions. These detentions will be arranged such that you and your cohorts then have a free few hours to practice what you may, and if any of you desire so, I may be convinced to provide additional tutelage."

Harry blinked mentally. Snape, offering to teach them extra-curricularly? Not that he was going to take Snape up on the offer, but he rather thought the twins might, given that they worked with potions a lot for their stuff. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate that." And he honestly did. One less enemy was something to celebrate.

He got to spend the rest of the detention finishing his homework. Not another word was said between them, but Harry was fine with that. It would be a long time before he and Snape could do more than coexist less-than-antagonistically.
The Beating of a New Drum

The Beating of a New Drum

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter. This, folks, is where things *really* start to heat up. Hang on to your hats!

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October 24, 1995

Wizengamot Chambers

Augusta, clad in a conservatively cut charcoal gray robe of finest silk, the Longbottom crest embroidered over her heart, strode into the Wizengamot chambers with Septimus Weasley, garbed in a somewhat less conservatively cut robe of sapphire blue with the Weasley crest and Sirius Black, garbed in a robe identical to Septimus' in cut, with the Black crest ... and done in Gryffindor red and gold (which had amused Augusta to no end, given the 'old' Black party line and allegiances).

Despite the chamber being in chaos as people shouted and fought and argued, their entrance was noted, and everyone's voices began to modulate somewhat as they became aware of the shift in power in the room. No longer was Augusta hiding behind her slightly dotty persona and oddball choice in clothing, not that anyone should really be all that surprised given the last few months, but sometimes it took something blatantly obvious to convince people that things had changed.

Three of the oldest families arriving together like this, especially these three, was making people take notice. Only fools crossed Septimus twice, but there were many who persisted in believing the man to be of little influence, despite his standing as Head of an Ancient and Noble House because of his lack of wealth. Augusta had, of course, been keeping her thoughts behind her teeth for years in an effort to allow her grandson and heir to grow into himself. The Blacks, of course, had gone unrepresented since the death of Orion over a decade before.

Three Houses, visibly represented. And only a great fool would fail to realize that a fourth House was also represented by proxy, since everyone knew Sirius was Harry's godfather. Yet another House that had gone unrepresented for a very long time, as James had never had a chance to exercise his rights as Head of House before his death due to having to go into hiding. Augusta could see Malfoy and his cohorts giving the three of them disdainful but thoughtful looks as they took their seats. A few minutes later, the temporary leader of the Wizengamot called them to order, and brought forth the first issue of the emergency session.

The furor over Umbridge and Fudge amused Augusta to no end as people reacted in outrage and anger to their presumption. Their gooses were well and truly cooked when it was discovered (under Veritaserum) that Fudge was completely aware of and fully supported Umbridge's actions ... up to and including the blood quill ... and the interception of owls. It took remarkably little time for a vote of no confidence to be cast and Fudge to be ousted, and for both of them to be tried and sentenced to Azkaban for a good, long time.

Arguments were made for interim Minister (a post that lasted no more than three months, just long enough to arrange for a full vote of the populace). After much wrangling and arguing, Amelia Bones was elected to the post, much to Augusta's pleasure. Rufus Scrimgeour, the next most possible contestant, while a good man, was a bit too ... militant ... for Augusta's taste. Amelia was reknowned for her fairness and complete incorruptibility, and a good choice for interim. Augusta sincerely hoped
she got the job on a permanent basis.

Hogwarts

If Dumbledore had assumed that the open rebellion and near-warfare would cease the moment Umbridge exited the castle, he was rapidly disabused of that notion. The Slytherins were still under concerted attack, though after Blaise Zabini approached Harry the night Umbridge was removed under a flag of truce, the reciprocal attacks were limited to specific Slytherins (and Harry found it not at all amusing that every last Slytherin on the list had parents who were Death Eaters). Malfoy, unable to continue hiding any longer, had finally emerged, and, in his usual style, ended up getting hexed halfway to hell and back within fifteen minutes.

It helped immensely that Snape was staying out of it, for the most part. He penalized them for disruptions in the classroom, but more than once he'd been seen swooping by Slytherins getting their butts handed to them by people from other Houses and had neither penalized the other Houses nor assisted the Slytherins under attack. This had given everyone more courage. While they were all ignoring point deductions and detentions, Snape was a master at reducing even the sturdiest seventh year to a crying, shivering wreck with a few well-chosen phrases.

At dinner, Dumbledore finally tried to put his foot down, rising at the start of the meal, before the food appeared, and staring down at the student body.

"The last few days." He began. "Have been filled with less than exemplary behavior by virtually the entirety of the student body. I have been most distressed to see such actions taking place. You should have brought your grievances to your Head of House or any one of the other teachers, rather than lashing out yourselves."

Harry couldn't quite prevent a near-hysterical laugh. "Yeah, right, Headmaster. Tell that to someone who hasn't already tried that, why don't you?" He called out. "I've *tried* applying to teachers for help, and justice, and gotten precisely nowhere."

McGonagall, at least, had the grace to blush a bit and look ashamed, reminded of Harry's first year and Harry, Hermione and Ron trying to tell her the Stone was in trouble. Lockhart, of course, wasn't there to be ashamed, was still completely obliviated and thus couldn't remember what he'd done, and even if he could remember, and had been there, Harry was fairly sure the idiot wouldn't have felt sorry for his lack of action.

Before Dumbledore could rally, Harry continued. "For the last four years, and, I've been reliably informed, longer than that, certain ... individuals." He shot a scornful look at the Slytherin table in general and Draco in particular. "Have run roughshod over the entire school, doing as they please, while no one stops them. It's far past time they got a taste of their own medicine. If they don't like it, they can choke on it." That sentiment got a roar of approval from the Gryffindors, and an only slightly less vociferous agreement from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff.

"You should not condemn all for the actions of a few, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore said, sounding deeply sad.

Harry snorted. "I don't. The only Slytherins being targeted are, funnily enough, the ones that have been doing the bullying in the past, and keep trying to bully people despite knowing they'll pay for it later. I've got no beef with the Slytherins that are willing to just let be, and I don't think anyone else does, either."

There was a general rumble of agreement to that. Dumbledore eyed them all with disapproval, but Harry noticed that McGonagall, oddly enough, looked proud enough to burst, despite her inherent
disapproval of the shenaniganry they'd all gotten up to over the last few days. Most of the other teachers also looked at least mildly approving. Harry sat back down and after a moment the food appeared.

Of course, that wasn't the end of it. After dinner, McGonagall approached Harry and told him the Headmaster wanted to see him in his office. Harry rolled his eyes, sighed, and got to his feet.

He was rather unsurprised to find Snape there when he arrived, though he *was* surprised when McGonagall stayed.

"Harry, I am quite disappointed with you. Your actions these last few days ... " Dumbledore started.

"I have only done what needed to be done, and that you and the other teachers refuse to do, sir. If the lot of you acted like responsible adults for once, it wouldn't be left to me to fix your screw-ups and problems!" Harry snapped heatedly. "Certain of the Slytherins have been way out of control for a lot longer than I've been here ... and don't even start with the whole 'Snape's a spy' thing. I get that. It put him in a tricky spot. That didn't bloody well stop you or anyone else from slapping the Slytherins down hard when they got up to tricks. Instead, they strut about the school like they own the place, and make everyone's lives hell. And we're all supposed to turn the other cheek and let them. I don't think so. The way things are going, it's only a matter of time before some enterprising Slytherin rapes someone, mind or body ... if it hasn't already happened ... or puts them in hospital with permanent injuries. And to what purpose?" Harry waved a hand in disgust. "When they stop, we'll stop. Until then ... live with it. And since we know the lot of you will try to punish us for protecting ourselves ... go ahead and give the House Cup to Slytherin. We. Don't. Care."

He turned on his heel and stormed out of the room.

**HPHPHP**

McGonagall watched Harry go, then turned on Dumbledore. "Harry's got a point." She growled. "I've complained for years about the biased treatment in this school. I know there was a time I was as guilty as any." She shot Severus an apologetic look. "But at least I learned my lesson from that catastrophe! It's clear you haven't, Albus, and are content to let things continue. Mark my words, Headmaster, Harry wasn't mistaken about the turn things could take if the worst of the Slytherins continue. And the horrible part of it is that none of us will ever find out because the students have learned that it's completely useless to complain because nothing will be done! And Merlin alone knows we've failed that poor boy time and again in the last four years. I will kick myself for the rest of my days for not listening to him when he tried to warn me about the stone, if for no other reason than that he seems to think, now, that bringing anything to my attention is a useless gesture, and honestly, I can't blame him!"

"Loathe as I am to agree with a Gryffindor, much less a Potter, the boy does have a point." Severus growled. "Certain of my Slytherins have been all but impossible for me to control with the constraints *you* have put me under, lest I 'reveal' my true loyalties. I think the time is now long past where we can afford such games, Headmaster. Unless you *want* a student to be murdered in cold blood on your watch?"

That comment made both McGonagall and Dumbledore wince, knowing just how close they'd come to having that happen to Severus, a bit over twenty years ago.

"And when those children with Death Eater parents report you, Severus?" Dumbledore wanted to know.

"Then they report me. They will find it ... less than easy ... to do anything to me. I may have been
dependent upon your magnanimity fifteen years ago, but such is no longer the case. Should things go ill, I can quite easily disappear to a place where none can find me, not even you." Severus relished the startled, less-than-pleased look on Dumbledore's face. It had taken him a long, long time to arrange for his safehouse, but he'd finally managed it. He was the only one alive that knew the place existed, or what protective measures had been taken to hide it, and he had no plans to reveal any of it to anyone. He just hoped he never had cause to use the place, as it was most definitely a port of last resort ... a place to go when nowhere else was safe, and might never be.

Dumbledore gave a much-put-upon sigh. "Very well. I suppose condemning children to cruel fates must be done to salve other people's consciences."

Severus scoffed. "Headmaster, the children that will be affected by a rule crackdown are, and have been, lost for a very long time. The rest of the students will not suffer for their absence." He shook his head. "You give entirely too many chances to too many people who neither deserve nor want them, to the detriment of everyone around them." Severus knew, better than most, that some people were simply ... unsalvageable. Too steeped in evil and hatred to ever be brought back to the 'light'. Giving such people repeated second chances in the hopes they would come to see the error of their ways simply allowed more people to be hurt.

And yes, he was aware of being something of a hypocrite, when it came to his opinion of Dumbledore's stance on second chances. But then, he was one of the few who had truly seen his error and wanted out of the bed he'd made for himself. Draco and his cohorts did not see that they were wrong, and probably never would.
First Blood


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October 31, 1995

Much as Dumbledore may not have liked it, over the next week, the rule crackdown and increased patrols and intervention by the professors (supported by the myriad of portraits around the castle, who had begun to report to the professors when they spotted something) bore remarkable fruit. Within days, the antagonistic Slytherins had ceased their bullying, mostly for lack of time and opportunity. The New Marauders learned from Blaise that whatever punishment got levied by the other professors was doubled by Snape, for 'getting caught' or some variation on that theme. The end result was that most of the troublesome Slytherins simply did not have time to run around bullying people, because every spare second they had was taken up with either homework or a myriad of punishments.

The neutral Slytherins were more than a bit surprised to find themselves cautiously welcomed by the other Houses. Oh, there was suspicion still, but most of the school seemed to have adopted a 'live and let live' policy where the neutral Slytherins were concerned, and they seemed to be content to spend a lot of time away from the Slytherin Common Room.

The only exception to the rule seemed to be Malfoy. True to his slimy, sneaky nature, he managed to avoid getting detentions or points lost once the crackdown started. He sneered at everyone and made it clear he thought they were all less than the dung he scraped off his boots, but he did it without actually saying anything, or actively bullying anyone. And he still disappeared into the Room of Requirement every chance he got. And today? The bastard seemed to be especially smug. And anticipatory. He kept giving everyone these ... looks ... that defied Harry's attempts to decipher, but whatever they were, they weren't good.

It really didn't help that the last few days, Harry's Voldie-visions had been full of impatient anticipation and planning as well. Frustratingly vague planning, much to Harry's annoyance. All he knew was that the Death Eaters were poised to strike somewhere, and Voldemort was waiting for some last piece to fall into place before he struck.

In the quiet after dinner, when everyone had settled down for a last bit of studying before retiring to their common rooms and eventually, bed, Harry found out exactly what Malfoy and Voldemort had been anticipating.

Bangs and terrified screaming announced the trouble. Harry and the rest of the New Marauders, sitting in the library, looked at each other and raced out to see what was going on.

Harry desperately wished they hadn't.

Death Eaters were pouring down the stairs, from the direction of the seventh floor. The students that were out and about were screaming and fleeing in terror, many of them falling to hexes and curses, though Harry saw no green bolts, at least not yet, so he had hope that they were still alive.

"DOBBY, WINKY!" He shrieked.
Both elves popped in, got one good look, and swung around to Harry, utterly horrified. "Mobilize the elves. Get the kids out of here. Guard them! Got get Sirius, Remus, and every Order member you can find, and tell Amelia Bones that the school's under attack!"

He didn't have to tell them twice. They both disappeared and seconds later, the place was up to its eyeballs in house-elves. Pissed-off house elves that were slamming the Death Eaters around like toys while trying to herd the frightened students to safety. Half a second after that, the professors poured into the corridors and onto the stairs, and things really lit up.

"We have got to get out of here. We're going to get killed in the crossfire." Harry called over the mayhem. "We'll head for the kitchen." Away from the Death Eaters pouring down the stairs.

The group closed ranks and began hustling that direction, keeping shields up as they tried to get away. Unfortunately for them, it wasn't going to be that easy. They'd barely gotten fifteen or twenty feet when their group was spotted, and they became the focus of a hail of spellfire.

The long summer of training as a group paid off. Neville, Ginny and Harry, the powerhouses, concentrated on returning fire while the others alternated between shooting off every prank jinx they knew to slow, surprise, and distract and shielding the heavy hitters so they didn't have to waste energy. It worked to a degree that surprised Harry. But then again, it was death eaters they were talking about, wasn't it?

McGonagall and Flitwick had been the first to respond to the alarm, as their classrooms were closest, and they made for a truly frightening pair. Even having seen them in action over the summer, Harry was stunned. Flitwick seemed to be everywhere at once, and McGonagall was animating everything not nailed down and siccing it on the Death Eaters with grim determination. Spells, the various animated things, and Death Eaters were all knocking holes in walls and ceilings as they got thrown about, causing a rain of rubble.

Dumbledore popped into play right in front of Harry's group, temporarily shielding them from the heavy fire they'd come under. The Death Eaters started to waver and hesitate a bit, unnerved by having to cross wands with the old man, but they kept coming, and it was becoming clear they weren't alone, because Harry could swear he saw a couple vampires.

"You need to get to safety, Harry." Dumbledore called over his shoulder.

"Yeah, I know. We're headed for the kitchen. Just got pinned down." Harry told him.

"Go. They're concentrating on me, now. You should be able to reach the corridor unmolested."

"Thanks. And good luck."

With Dumbledore's assistance, they did indeed manage to make it to the corridor, and far enough down and around the corner to be out of the line of fire. They hustled to reach the kitchens, and were greeted by quite a chunk of Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, the eldest standing side by side with about a dozen elves, guarding the youngest.

"Harry! Thank goodness you're all right!" Dean and Seamus hurried up, looking relieved. "God, can you believe it? What can we do?"

"Stay put." Harry said, not much liking the idea. "They're playing for keeps out there. The professors don't need to be worried about students getting caught in the crossfire."

It was something that was easier said than done. The bangs, tremblers, screams of pain and shouting were impossible to ignore, and Harry in particular had to fight down the urge to run out and help.
Everyone watched the kitchen door, wands leveled, as the sounds got closer.

Then, there was a multi-voiced wail, both outside the kitchen and from the house-elves within, followed by a split second of silence before Hagrid (his voice carried even through stone, and was readily recognizable) roared in rage. Instantly, the sounds of battle trebled, what seemed like the whole of the castle shaking with it. Harry, wide-eyed, wondered what in hell had caused it. Gradually, there was more and more shouting, less and less (audible, at any rate) spellfire, until finally there was a long, ominous silence.

A bloody and battered Dobby popped in. "It bes over, Master Harry sir. They be chased away, dead or caught now. Misters Padfoot and Moony is on their way. They wanted yous to know theys be ok."

Harry let out a shaky, relieved whoosh, and sagged against one of the tables in relief. A minute later, Sirius and Remus, both of them bloody and worn and, to Harry's concern, looking grief-stricken and seriously pissed, came through the kitchen door. The New Marauders all hurried over, crowding around. Harry hugged both men, carefully at first as he was leery of hurting them, but once he realized their injuries weren't as bad as all that, he hugged more firmly, relieved they'd both survived the fight.

"You lot will need to stay here for a while yet ... we're searching the castle to make sure no Death Eaters managed to hide themselves away." Sirius said.

Harry blinked. "I can get that done quick. Dobby!" Dobby hurried over. "You got enough energy to go get me the Map?"

Dobby nodded determinedly. "Dobby will get it, Harry Potter sir!" He popped out, then returned a few seconds later, and handed Harry the Map.

Harry tapped it, then spread it out on one of the tables. "Ravenclaw, Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Slytherin and here, bunch of folks running around in the main part of the castle, nothing in any oddball corners. You guys know all the names involved?" He asked.

"Enough to spot trouble." Sirius confirmed as the two of them approached to check the Map. It took a few minutes, but they finally straightened up. "All gone, it seems. Head for the Great Hall, will you? They're going to be sending everyone there."

"No problem." Harry said. Once the two men left, Harry glanced at the New Marauders. "Something bad happened."

"You mean other than the Death Eaters managing to get into the castle?" Ron shot back.

"Well, yeah, besides that. I can't be the only one that recognized Hagrid bellowing."

The collection of shaking heads told him they'd all recognized Hagrid as well. Harry looked at Dobby. "And something made the elves in here react. But what?"

Dobby whimpered, and tugged at his ears a bit, shuffling from foot to foot, his eyes filling with tears. "Dobby's old masters are very, very, very bad, Harry Potter sir. They ... " Dobby cut himself off, visibly fighting the old compulsion to whack his head on something for speaking ill of the Malfoys. "Very bad. Headmaster Whiskers is ... he is being gone, Harry Potter sir. And it is being all bad little master's fault!" Again, he seemed to fight the compulsion to smack his head on something.

Harry blinked. Head ... Dumbledore? Gone? As in ... dead? And somehow Draco's doing? Well, clearly Draco somehow figured out a way to get the death eaters into the castle, so if Dumbledore
was killed, it would be his fault. That must be what Dobby had meant. If Dumbledore was actually
dead. Somehow, it didn't really seem possible. From the looks on the others' faces, they were finding
it as impossible to consider Dumbledore dead as he was.

"We better get to the Great Hall." Harry dimly realized his voice sounded strange, but no one called
him on it as the sober, thoughtful group headed out of the kitchens.

The central part of the castle was a mess. Two whole sections of staircase had been completely
blown away, and the rest were moving stiffly as they tried to compensate for the loss. There was
rubble everywhere, and most of the windows had been broken. Every adult Harry could see was
showing signs of the pitched battle, and all of them looked more than a little haunted and lost. Hagrid
was nowhere to be seen, but they could hear him, crying brokenly.

It was getting harder to believe that Dobby had been mistaken as to Dumbledore's fate. They made it
into the Great Hall (which seemed to have escaped real damage, though there were a few pockmarks
and smears from ricochets.

The other students arrived in a slow stream, talking in low, frightened voices and clumping together.
The worry got stronger when a bare handful of teachers arrived. Sprout was the only Head of House
in evidence, Vector, Babbling and Hooch just behind her, followed (to Harry's shock) by Binns.

"Please be seated." Sprout called out.

It took a few moments for everyone to obey. It wasn't until then, when everyone was seated, that
Harry realized something. There were Slytherins missing. Over half a dozen of them. Malfoy,
Crabbe, Goyle Parkinson, Bulstrode, and three seventh years he knew by face but not by name for
sure. Maybe one or two others ... he wasn't familiar enough with the Slytherins from other years to
know for sure. Not good. Very, very not good. There were also faces missing from the other three
tables, well over a dozen all told. That was even worse.

"As you are all aware, the castle was just under attack by Death Eaters. We have, fortunately, been
able to repel the attack, thanks to the assistance of the Aurors and quite a number of ... concerned
citizens." Sprout said. "Unfortunately, we were not able to do so without losses. Four students were
lost in the initial moments of the attack." She named them. Two were from Gryffindor, two from
Ravenclaw, the two Houses whose Common Rooms were on the upper floors. Harry recognized
both of the Gryffindors as first year students. "Two professors were also lost, Professor Burbage and
Professor Sinistra." Sprout seemed to be girding her loins as she took a breath. She'd been
remarkably calm thus far, despite being visibly upset, but now she looked as if she really, truly did
not want to say what she had to say. "Headmaster Dumbledore was also killed."

There was instant mayhem as most of the students cried out in horror and loss. Harry clenched his
jaw and stared mutely at the table, fighting inexplicable tears.

Sprout let the worst of the reaction run its course before calling them to order again. "Due to these
heavy and deeply felt losses, and the fact that most of the remaining professors are badly wounded
and will be unable to teach for some weeks, it has been decided that Hogwarts will close until the
new year. The Express will be leaving at noon tomorrow, so please ensure you pack. Your parents
are being informed of events as we speak."

She didn't dismiss them, leaving them to sit and talk and head out when they were ready. Harry
almost immediately headed for the Slytherin table, grim-faced. "Blaise? Can I talk to you for a
minute?"

Blaise, looking more than a bit wary, nodded agreement, and the pulled away from the tables.
"Look, most of you guys stayed out of this mess, and I appreciate that. I need to know if any of you are going to be ... well, in danger, if you go home. You know what I mean."

Blaise grimaced, but nodded. "Some of us might be, but most of the ones with that problem ... well ...

"Already left. Yeah, I get it." Harry said. "Spread the word for me, will you? Anyone that wants sanctuary will be accommodated. All I'll ask in return is a vow not to support him."

Blaise nodded. "I'll let everyone else know. And Potter? Thanks." He headed for his table, and Harry returned to the Gryffindor one.

"Guys, I'm heading for the infirmary. I need to check on Sirius and Remus, and the others. Maybe find out exactly what happened." Harry told the New Marauders.

"Sounds like a plan to me, mate. Let's go." Ron grumbled. "Besides, I bet Pomphrey is swamped and could use another few pairs of hands."

"No kidding." Hermione said quietly.

So the group, drawn and quiet, headed for the infirmary.

They were right. The place was utter chaos. The dead must have been put in the side room, as there had been no bodies lying about on the trip to the infirmary, and no sign of the dead in the main infirmary, either. Instead, every bed was filled, and there were Aurors everywhere, some of the least injured trying to help with triage until backup medical help arrived. The New Marauders very nearly got chased back out before Pomphrey spoke up and said they could stay, provided they helped.

It was awful. One of McGonagall's legs was badly mangled, and Flitwick's wand hand looked like raw hamburger. Snape looked like he'd been pulled through a particularly bloodthirsty rosebush backwards. Hagrid ... Harry very nearly started crying when he saw Hagrid. Hagrid had been all but torn apart. About the only way Harry could figure the man was still alive was because of his part-giant makeup, because he had great chunks of flesh missing everywhere, and he was the one that seemed to be taking every ounce of Pomphrey's ability to keep stable. There were at least another dozen people as bad off as McGonagall, Flitwick and Snape, and something like twice that many 'walking wounded', folks who were bruised, battered, and a little cut up, but not in critical condition.

Fortunately, about five minutes after the New Marauders arrived, what looked like half of St. Mungo's staff stormed the room and split up amongst the wounded. The New Marauders quickly retreated up against one of the walls, out of the way. Eventually, everyone was stabilized and Hagrid, two other badly injured Order members and all the Aurors were transferred to St. Mungo's. The surviving teachers and all but the worst-off of the Order were staying.

The survivors huddled around McGonagall's bed, as she was the only one currently unable to stand and walk thanks to her leg. Beds and chair both served as sitting places.

"What ... what happened?" Harry asked.

"Malfoy happened." Snape snarled. Harry blinked. The last time he'd heard that much venom in the man's voice had been when Sirius escaped at the end of third year. "He discovered a vanishing cabinet in the castle, and found its counterpart."

"Vanishing cabinet?"

"A quick way to escape from Death Eaters back in the first war, Harry." Arthur said from his spot by
a shaken-looking Molly. "You jump in and close the door and you're somewhere else. There's no wards that can stop it, unlike with portkeys or apparation."

"So he dragged the thing into the Room of Requirement?"

"It was already there, broken, from the looks of it." Snape growled. "He had to have fixed it, as it looked rather worse for the wear."

"So they just hopped in the partner cabinet, wherever it was, and there you have it." Harry said, grimacing. "Damn."

It was Hermione who finally got up the courage to ask the question Harry wanted an answer to, but couldn't voice. "How ... what happened to the Headmaster?" She asked, her voice hesitant and raw.

"Malfoy again. Avada Kedavra to the back. Dumbledore was busy fending off half the Death Eaters and never realized he was there. Neither did we, until it was too late." It was McGonagall who answered, her voice shaking with emotion.

Harry eyed Snape. "Don't take this the wrong way, but ... won't you get in trouble for not going back with the others?"

Snape sneered at him, but to Harry's surprise answered honestly. "Perhaps. It will depend on just how happy he is about the Headmaster's demise and the success of the attack."

Clearly, Snape was willing to take the risk, so Harry let it be. They were going to need all the help they could get, now.
Painful Days

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

November 1, 1995 Hogwarts

Harry had never seen the school so silent as it was in the hours between the end of the battle and when the bulk of the students left for home. Outside of the sounds of feet slapping stone and the odd, muffled whimper or cry, Hogwarts was eerily silent. A traumatized Filch was the only one who seemed to have any energy, working with an almost blindly focused determination to clean up the mess, like he thought he had to do it all himself, despite there being more than any one man could handle. The house elves, grieving and despondent, were everywhere, working to fix what damage they could.

In the end, none of the Slytherins had sought sanctuary, and Harry honestly couldn't decide whether he was grateful or worried. At any rate, it was something to obsess over rather than the fact that so many had died. Harry found it odd that he felt relieved that the last words between himself and Dumbledore hadn't been angry ones. Things between them had been far, far from settled, but at least they'd not been openly at war with each other right then.

Just a few minutes after noon, Hogwarts was hauntingly empty. Only the injured in the infirmary, the relatively uninjured teachers and Order members and the New Marauders remained. The eerie silence lasted for all of an hour before what felt like the entirety of the Auror's corps showed up, led by none other than Amelia Bones herself.

The rest of the day was spent with the aurors crawling over every inch of the castle and grounds, seeking every weak spot in the wards and every possible entry point. Remus, Sirius and the twins were in the thick of it, as they were the most familiar with the castle and grounds of those that were mobile, not to mention how to operate the map. The Board showed up about dinnertime, and confirmed McGonagall as Headmistress. McGonagall, determined (much to Pomfrey's disgust and frustration) to be mobile and getting things done had commandeered a chair and enchanted it to move so she could get about, as her leg was nowhere near able to support her.

Augusta and Septimus arrived the next morning, looking grim and angry. The Wizengamot was, apparently, up in arms about the attack (rather understandably, Harry thought). That some dozen members (most of them lesser ones, but Malfoy was particularly notable for his absence, the slimy snake) had failed to show up just made it worse. It would seem that open war had once again been declared, though it would seem that Voldemort was busy celebrating his triumph for the moment. Either that or content to let be for a few days for whatever capricious reason.

November 4, 1995 Hogwarts

By the morning of Dumbledore's funeral, all the access points to Hogwarts had been plugged and warded to a fare thee well. People started arriving at dawn, in a steady stream. By one in the afternoon, the time for the service, Harry was willing to entertain the notion that the entire law-abiding British magical community was on Hogwarts' grounds. The funeral itself was ... beyond irritating for Harry, because while a great many people's grief seemed quite genuine, for some folks it seemed to have become a 'who knew the most about Dumbledore' competition, which was rather
grating. Especially when Harry's feelings about the man were so unsettled. He spent as much time as he could get away with with Remus, who was not obligated to make rounds of the various high society folk who'd come to the funeral like poor Sirius was. Harry did not envy Sirius at all. He also did not envy a few of the more objectionable attendees, as he was fairly sure he caught Sirius hexing at least one of them on the sly.

The worst part about the whole thing was Voldemort's gloating. He was gleefully triumphant and reveling in the demise of the only wizard other than Harry to ever stand against him and live to tell the tale. The triumphant Death Eaters seemed to be having something of a party, if the glimpses Harry caught were anything to go by. The only good news was that Voldemort didn't even seem to have noticed, yet, that Severus wasn't present for the fun. Or, at least, there was no clear 'where the hell is Snape' thoughts coming through.

November 5-11, 1995 Hogwarts

The next week was ... odd, to say the least. The Order, the professor and the elves spent a lot of time repairing the battle damage done to the interior of the school. The New Marauders concentrated on their wandwork in the Room of Requirement, taking their mixed emotions out on hapless dummies. Well, most of them did. By the third day, Harry was pretty much a wreck, thanks to the visions and thoughts from good old Voldie. Finally, thoroughly desperate, he sought out Snape in his dungeon lair. Snape did not look best pleased to have Harry in his office, but he didn't snap and snarl, which was a relief.

"Sir, I need to talk to you." Harry said. He only hoped Snape could (and would) help. "About occlumency. Moody's been teaching me, but ... " He sighed. "I don't know what's going on, if I'm not doing something right or just not good enough at it yet or what, but it's really, really not working. Not even close to it."

Snape eyed him for a long moment, then finally motioned Harry to the chair in front of his desk. "You are hoping I have an answer where Alastor will not."

Harry didn't even bother to deny it as he sat down. "You were first choice to teach me." Harry couldn't quite bring himself to say Dumbledore's name. He was still trying to sort out how he felt about the man, and his loss was more than slightly raw yet. "But the way we tend to get on, I figured someone else would be a better choice."

"Quite." Snape agreed. He might be willing to tolerate the boy, but teaching occlumency required something more than grudging tolerance. "Prepare yourself."

There was little need for Harry to do so, as he'd kept the barriers he'd built up pretty much from the word go in an effort (futile as it had so far been) to block out Voldemort.

Snape brandished his wand. "Legimimens!"

He fully expected to tear through the brat's defenses like they were tissue paper, but he was in for a surprise. He fetched up against what were, given the short amount of time Harry had been practicing and the multitude of other things the boy'd been spending time on, quite respectable barriers. Oh, they wouldn't stand up to a concerted attack for more than a minute or two, but they were more than enough to stop a casual perusal or hurried probe, and Severus could perceive no weak spots or gaps in the shields. He broke off.

"Adequate, Mr. Potter, considering you've had a bare six months to construct them." Severus contemplated Harry's complaint. "You say your shields are not working against the Dark Lord?"
"Not at all." Harry said with a sigh.

"Are the visions you perceive accompanied by headaches?" Snape forbore to ask about nausea, as considering it was the Dark Lord's mind involved, the boy would likely be nauseated by what he was seeing, and unable to tell if the nausea was from the mental attack or the events witnessed.

"No sir. At least, not since the first week or so of summer." Harry said. "And it's weird, because ever since I started the occlumency, what I've seen and heard seems ... sharper, clearer. More detailed. Like the occlumency is making the visions easier to watch instead of blocking them. And I know for a fact he doesn't realize I'm listening in ... the 'information leak' has been driving him insane, but he's never once twigged that the leak is him."

Snape frowned. "Whatever is occurring, Potter, it is not a form of long-distance mental attack. Once you possessed even the most rudimentary of shields, any successful bypass of them would register as a headache ... the stronger your shields, the greater the headache."

That made Harry frown. "Damn. So what the heck's going on?"

"That, I do not know." Severus admitted. "However, there may be a solution to the problem. Occlumency is a mental defense. Alastor has taught you the basic shields meant to repel external assault. It is possible for some Seers to use Occlumency to block off visions, and the same process might give you control of when you peruse the information on offer. Failing that, there are potions that suppress prophetic visions to allow particularly gifted Seers some peace. One of them might suit."

Harry let out a sigh of relief. "I'm willing to try pretty much anything at this point. It's not always as bad as it's been the last few days, but it's been like this in the past and if I can avoid the whole 'wasted wreck for lack of sleep' thing, I'll be thrilled. I can't afford to be that worn down when there's so much trouble brewing."

Snape gave a sharp nod. "I shall brew the potions. Fortunately, none of them require a great deal of time to prepare, so they will be ready late tomorrow. With luck, one of them will work and give you the time you will need to erect the modified barriers." He gave Harry a long look. "You do realize that I will be required to instruct you?"

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I kind of figured that out." He was just going to have to hope they could keep from trying to kill one another. "I can manage if you can."

Snape glowered, but nodded. "Very well. Come back tomorrow evening, and I will administer the first potion."

"Right, see you then."

Harry was quite pleased to discover the first potion made the visions fuzzy, like they'd been before he'd started learning occlumency. It didn't stop them, but it gave him hope that a stronger potion might. Snape clearly agreed, because next morning he dosed Harry with the strongest vision-blocker. And for the first time since Voldemort rose, Harry had a day alone in his own head. No visions, thoughts or feelings from snake-face. He spent most of the time sleeping.

HPHPHP

The Ministry

Amelia, Augusta, Septimus and Sirius were far from idle in the Wizengamot. They were rattling
every cage in reach and then some. The Aurors were authorized to use 'any means necessary' to stop the Death Eaters. Their budget was quadrupled, wages increased and incentives offered for new hires, and armor (considered a waste of galleons by Fudge and Crouch) purchased for every one of them. Workshops were offered, so that the average citizen could brush up on (or learn) shielding, offensive spells and wards. Lethal force was permitted in the defense of home and family, and every Warder in the Ministry's employ was sent to set wards on Muggleborn houses, all of which had been, up to this point, left undefended.

The handful of conservatives who had not run to Voldemort in the wake of the attack on Hogwarts screamed bloody murder, but they were too few to stop the raft of decrees and laws Amelia and Augusta and company were ramming through. Though, they stopped screaming after a few days, because it became painfully clear that Voldemort was on the march.

Voldemort and the Death Eaters might have spent a few days partying and celebrating their victory, but all too soon they'd got down to business again. There were a dozen attacks spread over three days, leaving some forty dead, most of them innocent muggle bystanders.

Three muggleborn families lost their homes, and at least one family member each, though thanks to the Hogwarts house-elves, they’d not been completely helpless, even with most of the Order out of commission. The elves had evidently taken the attack on the school and the death of the Headmaster, two teachers and four students as a mortal insult, and were quite willing to knock the Death Eaters into the next millennium even without being asked to.

November 12, 1995 Hogwarts.

Of course, the potion was really only a temporary fix ... while he was taking it, he would not see what Voldemort was up to, period. If he could manage to build the modified Occlumency barriers, he’d be able to peek in at need, and given that Harry had gotten a great deal of vital information from Voldemort, he was understandably unwilling to shut the visions down entirely. That he’d be spending more time with Snape was the only fly in the ointment.

It was not the most pleasant of days. Snape somehow managed to keep his snapping and snarling to a minimum, and Harry did his best to do as Snape asked as they started on the modified barriers, but it was a very tense and uncomfortable lesson. Harry could only imagine how much worse it would have been trying to learn the fundamentals from the man. Talk about a disaster in the making. Fortunately, it would be much, much faster going than the several months it had taken to create his occlumency barriers. Harry was quite pleased to see measurable progress at the end of the session. With any luck, he’d have rudimentary shields up inside of a week, and from there it would only be a matter of strengthening them and tailoring them to his purposes.

The bright spot in a long day spent in Snape's company was Hagrid's return. He was weak and shaky and still recovering, but he was back. He moved, temporarily, into a long-abandoned classroom that had been refitted as a room for him, since he was in no shape to traipse from his hut to the school and back all the time, and no one was comfortable with the idea of him just staying in his hut while he was still recovering. He'd be moving back to his hut before school restarted, of course, but in the meantime, Harry rather enjoyed having Hagrid living in the castle.
Discoveries and Damnations

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

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November 13 - 30, 1995 Hogwarts

In the end, it took two full weeks for Hogwarts to be fully repaired and for anyone to have time to attend to Dumbledore's affairs. Harry had found it somewhat sad that the Headmaster apparently had no family to do it, and had instead left it to McGonagall.

No one was quite prepared for what she found in the Headmaster's effects.

There was what amounted to an autobiography of Tom Riddle. Who his parents were, speculation on how they'd gotten together, his life at an orphanage. Notes about occurrences during his Hogwarts years.

That last had utterly enraged pretty much everyone. Because Tommy boy had opened the Chamber, and Dumbledore had known it ... and made no attempt to see true justice done for poor Hagrid. Nor had he made any attempt, once he became Headmaster, to safeguard the area he knew the entrance to be in.

It was a bitter, bitter blow for Hagrid, who had all but worshipped Dumbledore for 'believing' in Hagrid's innocence and 'giving' him the job as groundskeeper so he was not left without a knut to his name. McGonagall had gone on a ten or fifteen minute rant. After that, McGonagall had gone on an unholy tear with the classes. Some of it would not start until the next school year, as mid-year was a bad place to make drastic changes, but other parts of it were taking place immediately.

Binns was sacked, the class moved, and another teacher hired on. DADA was dropped from the syllabus in an effort to break the curse on the position. A new class, Dueling, was created, placed in an entirely different classroom, and a teacher hired. The class syllabus had changed drastically as well, at least in the short term, focusing on actual dueling, in light of the war waging. The more children that could defend themselves, the better, and they'd still be learning vital information about 'dark' beasts in the process ... it would just be done in an entirely different format. If it worked, the class would, once the war was over, essentially become DADA, without being called DADA. Muggle Studies was filled, not with a pureblood who'd seldom stepped into the Muggle world, but a young Muggleborn who'd graduated only a few years prior.

Divination would continue for OWL and NEWT students this year, but after that would not be offered as a class. Trelawney would stay on, in the event of a student enrolling who was a Seer and needed training, but as McGonagall pointed out, "You either are a seer, or you're not, and if you're not, not all the teaching in the world will make you one." After due deliberation, Astronomy was dropped, as its applications had more to do with Divination than anything else, though a teacher was found to finish out the year for OWL and NEWT students. In its place, not one, but two different classes were created. One, called 'Magical Cultures' was an in-depth study of the cultures of various sentient magical species like goblins and centaurs. The second class, 'Wizarding Culture' was Muggle Studies' counterpart, a class for muggleborns and raiseds to find out all the ins and outs of the wizarding world. They would not be offered until the coming year, however.
While McGonagall was having a fine old time restructuring Hogwarts' academics, the rest of them were still sifting through the raft of information on Tom. After Hogwarts, the information was more than a bit sketchy, rumors and possibilities only, though Dumbledore was sure he'd travelled rather extensively before returning to Britain as Lord Voldemort and beginning his campaign.

Interspersed through all the reading was, of course, dueling practice with the increasingly mobile teachers and Order members. Given how badly things were starting to go, everyone was wanting to get back into (or get into in the first place) fighting trim as quickly as possible, and a great many of them were willing to teach the New Marauders whatever tricks they knew. Good news came in the form of basilisk hide ... yards and yards of it. Severus and whatever house-elves (or whoever) he had drafted to the cause had gotten the basilisk dealt with in early November, but it had taken time for the hide to be treated and made into armor for as many people as possible, so Severus hadn't said anything until it was all ready. Included had been a half dozen daggers made from its fangs and the 'replacement' fangs tucked up into its gums waiting for when the existing ones got snapped off or worn down.

Even better news, at least on a personal front for Harry, was the fact that towards the end of November, he'd been able to wean off the vision-blocking potion. The altered Occlumency barriers were holding, keeping Voldemort's thoughts and emotions out of Harry's head unless he went looking, much to his relief. Snape had, incredibly, managed to be tolerable throughout the teaching. They'd never be friends or anything ridiculous like that, but something that resembled grudging respect had grown between them, and they were both willing to just let be.

Additionally, all of the New Marauders were finally beginning to make progress on their animagi forms, though the progress was uneven. Ron, despite being one of the last to discover his form, was the furthest along, able to both bring up his fur and change both arms into badger legs and paws. He'd come in for a bit of teasing that his badger stubbornness must be coming in handy for mastering the transformation. Most of the others could make themselves all furry, and even transform a hand into a paw, though the amount of time and effort it took varied widely. Harry was lagging behind somewhat, thanks to all the trouble he'd had with the visions, and had thus far only managed to coat himself in feathers, which never failed to bring Hedwig out of nowhere to preen him, which had cracked him up the first few times it happened.

The New Marauders had also been working with Hagrid, to catch him up on the magical training he'd missed as best they could. They were all deeply fond of him, after all, and it was the least they could do. Fortunately, Hagrid, having been around magic despite not being able to use it (officially speaking, anyway, as Harry could attest to the fact he'd used his broken wand more than once), he'd caught on fairly quickly.

Then, at the end of November, they found the last of Dumbledore's diaries, the ones that concerned the years since the Marauders and Severus first went to Hogwarts and Voldemort started really causing trouble.

Harry really didn't know what to make of the revelation that Snape had been the one to tattle about the prophecy to Voldemort. Part of him wanted to hate the man, but the rest of him reckoned that Snape had been making up for that screwup ever since. It helped that the diaries made it clear that Snape was little more than a chess piece to Dumbledore, to be moved and manipulated at will. Harry had honestly been surprised that Snape hadn't thrown a fit when that bit came to light, but he eventually realized that Snape had probably figured it out already by then. It also helped that Snape had realized what he'd done and gone to Dumbledore in an effort to stop it, so while things got a bit more strained between them, Harry didn't storm off in a snit or try to hex Snape into the next millennium. Sirius, however, was an entirely different matter, and the only reason he didn't end up on the floor bleeding (Sirius was, after all, relatively out of practice, whereas Snape had been keeping in
fighting trim all these years) was the fact that McGonagall was there and threatened to end the Black line if he got out of hand. From the gleam in her eye and the way Sirius reacted to the threat, she hadn't meant killing him, either. Sirius had settled for calling Snape a backstabbing coward and stormed out to cuss and fume in peace.

From there, things got uglier, and in a lot of ways, Harry was glad Sirius wasn't in the room for the next bits, because as explosive as the man's temper was, he'dve blown half of Hogwarts to bits. Dumbledore had suspected Pettigrew was the leak for months before the Potters' deaths, but done nothing to confirm or deny the suspicion. There was a section about 'that' night, that explained how Hagrid had got to the cottage so fast. It was something McGonagall had heard about and wondered at, not to mention Hagrid himself, given how things had fallen out where Dumbledore was concerned. It turned out that Dumbledore had had a portkey created just before the Fidelius had been cast. The lunacy of that ... if the portkey had somehow fallen into the wrong hands! ... was astounding. Dumbledore had planned, from the very beginning, to use whichever child was marked to the utmost, but when things happened the way they did that night, he'd seen an opportunity.

The child was, after all, supposed to be Tom's equal. Therefore, they would need to be raised in as similar an environment as possible. To that end, Dumbledore had allowed Sirius to waste away in Azkaban, ignored the Potters' will, and immediately placed Harry with the Dursleys, whom he knew would never feel so much as a jot of caring and affection for Harry. There was at least some relief to be found in that at that point, Dumbledore did not think the Dursleys would stoop to abuse, just a lack of caring an affection.

He was able, in the months that followed, to discover just how Harry had come to be protected. It turned out that both James and Lily had performed a rare, ancient ritual designed to protect children from mortal danger at the hands of others. The ritual had, back then, been performed as a matter of course, and for many, that was the end of it, as the protections never got triggered. But if the child found themselves under direct attack, the ritual would defend them from harm in the moment, and from future attack by the same person that had attacked them if they tried again in future.

Sadly, the ritual hadn't been quite strong enough to completely stop the killing curse, which is why Harry had the scar, but it had shielded him from death, and marked Voldemort as an enemy to be dealt with harshly if he ever attempted anything with Harry again, hence the whole mess with Quirrell in first year.

It wasn't until nearly a year later, when Dumbledore's investigations into just how Voldemort could had survived that night (he was quite sure Voldemort had done so) that he stumbled across Horcruxes. From the notes Dumbledore had made, it looked as if the protection wouldn't have been strong enough to destroy Horcruxes on its own, but that was a moot point anyway, now that Voldemort had his blood now.

From there, things got more than a bit dodgy, as somehow, Dumbledore convinced himself that Harry was a Horcrux, despite the fact that the one text he'd found that had information on the foul creations made it clear that a living thing could not be a Horcrux. Carry a Horcrux, yes, be one, no. It was clear to Dumbledore that the only way for Tom to be utterly defeated was for all his Horcruxes to be destroyed. Including Harry. This caused more than a bit of a hue and outcry, not least from a horrified Harry.

"So wait, he thought ... " Harry fairly squeaked, then, turning an alarming shade of green. "Are we sure I can't be? And he really meant for me to ... " He swallowed. " ... die, trying to fight Voldemort? That's why he wasn't letting me know anything, or getting me taught stuff I'd need to fight?"

"Positive." The reassurance came from, of all people, Snape. "I have hear of Horcruxes before, in
my studies. A living being cannot become a Horcrux. An item can be made into a Horcrux and then put into a living being for additional protection, but the being themselves are not Horcruxes. They inevitably become tainted by the presence of one ... " Snape trailed off, as if something had just occurred to him, then continued. "Given the instantaneous nature of the Dark Lord's downfall, there was no way a Horcrux item could have been forced into you, nevermind it being your scar!"

Dumbledore poked, prodded, and did do an immense amount of research, until he finally put together what he thought was a reasonable possible list of things used as Horcruxes. Given what Dumbledore had written about Tom up to that point, Harry actually found himself agreeing with the conclusions Dumbledore came to ... namely that the items used would have some great significance to Tom, and wherever possible, Hogwarts. Founder Heirlooms, if he could find them.

Snape spoke up again at that point. "I believe I may know what one of the Horcruxes are." He said, which got everyone's attention.

"What?" Harry wanted to know.

"Nagini, the Dark Lord's familiar. She is a venomous snake, yet she is the size of a full-grown python. That is not possible, not even with an engorgio charm ... animals cannot stay engorged for long, or their bodies self-destruct under the strain. If, however, she had a Horcrux forced into her, it would explain a great deal. And it keeps to the theme. Parselmouth was, insofar as the Dark Lord knew, a unique skill of his. It would have pandered to his ego to have a snake housing one of his Horcruxes."

The others were nodding in agreement. "Going to make getting rid of her right tricky, though." Moody growled.

"We're going to have to figure out what the others are, find them, and get rid of them, quickly." McGonagall decreed. "I shall make a list of Founder's items that are known to still exist so we can begin to eliminate them as potential Horcruxes."
Of course, saying they needed to figure out what the Horcruxes were, and where they were, was easier said than done. At least one was dealt with, according to Dumbledore's notes, which was a mercy, though Harry'd had a massive case of the willies when he realized what the diary had been. Ginny'd nearly had a coronary, and everyone was sticking close to her, keeping an eye on her, trying to comfort her. As bad as the whole mess had been at the time, it was infinitely worse now, knowing exactly what they'd been dealing with. Harry just reflected that it was a good thing Dumbledore was dead and gone, because Molly had gone on the warpath, and if he'd been alive, he'd've ended up wishing Voldemort had caught him and used him as a playtoy, if Molly's enraged reaction was anything to go by. From all reports, Septimus'd had to be Petrified to keep him from going out and hunting Lucius Malfoy down like a rabid dog for his part in the whole fiasco.

So that was two. Leaving them with four to find and destroy. Here too, Dumbledore had made a mistake. He'd discovered that Tom intended to split his soul into seven pieces, and assumed that meant seven Horcruxes (which had led to the 'Harry is a Horcrux' theory, apparently). Apparently, Dumbledore couldn't add. Seven Horcruxes plus the bit left over in Voldemort himself made for eight pieces of soul, not seven.

Unfortunately, not even Dumbledore had had a good idea as to what the remaining Horcruxes might be, though he'd had a good idea of where they might be ... namely, the orphanage where Tom grew up, the Riddle house and the Gaunt shack. Much to everyone's ire, he'd found where one Horcrux was at for sure (some cave by the sea), but had not retrieved it, merely making plans to bring Harry there and have Harry do it, as he seemed to think the protections around the Horcrux would serve as a useful training tool. He had also, apparently, searched every corner of Hogwarts since Tom's last visit here and found nothing, so was confident nothing had been stashed at the school.

Given how questionable his decision making ability had apparently been, they were taking that with a grain of salt. McGonagall promptly summoned the head house elf and told him to organize his fellows and search every corner of the castle for anything that stank of dark magic and bring it to her office.

By dinnertime, the still-missing Horcruxes were down to three. There was some lively debate as to how to deal with the horcrux in Ravenclaw's diadem. For understandable reasons, nobody wanted to destroy the thing if they could manage not to. It was Flitwick that came up with a possible solution.

"Goblins are master crafters. They may be able to remove the gem and destroy it without harming the rest of the diadem. It would then be a relatively simple matter to replace the gem with one of similar size and color, if not function."

"Would they be willing to do it, though?" Minerva wanted to know.

"If I am the one to ask, they would. They are rather pleased with wizardkind at the moment, thanks to the house-cleaning that's going on." Flitwick said.
Unfortunately, before they could get in contact with the goblins and see about dealing with the diadem without losing it as a priceless Founder's artifact, Voldemort struck again. But this time, it wasn't at Muggleborns or Muggles or even pureblood 'blood traitors'. No, this time, after a month of silence on the subject, he lashed out at Snape.

In the middle of lunch.

It all started so quietly. The teachers, Order, and New Marauders sitting around one of the long student tables (the Head table wasn't big enough for all of them). There’d been quiet chatter and even the odd bit of laughter, despite the seriousness of the war. Then, literally between one bite and the next, Snape let out an almighty shriek of agony and folded up like he'd gotten punched in the gut.

For half a second there was stunned disbelief, and then Poppy and Minerva almost tripped over each other as they rushed to Snape, who was in dire danger of dashing his brains out against the floor, or the table or chair legs. For a few moments, utter confusion reigned as they tried to figure out what was going on, with little success. Snape was writhing so much they couldn't get a good look, with eyes or wands, and since they hadn't a clue what was wrong with him, hitting him with a Petrificus Totalus to get him to hold still was evidently exceedingly ill advised. Finally, Hagrid got over there and managed to pin Snape long enough for Poppy to get a diagnostic scan in.

"His nervous system's lit up like a Christmas tree." She said, looking worried. "And from the way he's holding it, I think the Mark's the cause of it."

Harry had managed to sneak around the table enough to see what was going on, and Snape was indeed cradling his left arm tightly against his body, his face twisted in agony. At least he wasn't screaming anymore ... his vocal chords had apparently locked up, or something. Either that or he just didn't have breath enough to scream, thanks to the pain.

Over the next ten minutes, Poppy worked frantically ... to no effect. No potion, spell, or even (when they'd been attempted in sheer desperation) Muggle medication had any effect whatever. Worse, according to Poppy, it was worse than the Cruciatus. And towards the end of the ten minutes, the worries about whether or not Snape would survive with his sanity intact were disappearing.

Because Snape was dying. Slowly, millimeter by millimeter, and in the sort of agony you really only had nightmares about.

It was at that point that Harry did something ... well, typically Gryffindorish, as Snape would have said. Brash, rash, brave ... and more than slightly suicidal. He'd 'peeked' into Voldemort's thoughts shortly after it all started, but Voldemort had mostly been chortling happily about killing the traitor ... there hadn't been anything useful.

But at this point, Harry was desperate. No one deserved to die like this, in agony so intense they couldn't even scream. And as quite a few people could attest, Harry tended to do ... very rash things when desperate. Until now, everything he had perceived from Voldemort had been ... for lack of a better term ... 'pushed' at him. Stuff that was going through Voldemort's mind right then and there, right at the forefront of his mind.

But Harry knew the bastard had created the Dark Marks. He knew how to manipulate them. And maybe, just maybe, there was a way to be rid of the things. Or shut them down, or something. Harry wasn't sure, but the knowledge of the things had to be in Voldemort's head somewhere. All he had to do would be to find it. And if he could hear at-the-time thoughts, maybe he could get ahold of stuff Voldemort knew but wasn't thinking about actively right then. Harry sat down, closed his eyes, and flung himself into the stream of information coming through from Voldemort.
It was more than slightly horrifying. To Harry's unending disgust, Voldemort was a step away from being aroused by torturing Snape. He gave a thoroughly disgusted and horrified mental shudder and latched onto the part of Voldemort's thoughts that were concentrating on the Mark itself, and manipulating it, and tried to follow the thought back to any other information about the Marks. And discovered he was right. He could find information that Voldemort wasn't actively thinking about right that second.

Voldemort's mind was a quagmire of hate and rage and more than a little insanity. There did not seem to be much, if any, organization, and Harry lost track of the thread he was pursuing repeatedly, flinching away from the truly traumatizing things he stumbled across in his search. But finally, eventually, he found what he was looking for ... everything Voldemort knew about the Marks. How they were made, how they were manipulated.

The bad news ... there didn't seem to be a way to destroy them. Once done, the Marks could not be destroyed by any means except the death of their creator. It was based on an ancient spell, once used to bind human slaves to their masters, and twisted to Voldemort's purpose. And if it could be twisted once, it could be twisted again. All Harry had to do was shut down the part of the spell that allowed Voldemort to hurt Snape. And make it so that Voldemort couldn't change it back.

Of course, that was vastly easier said than done. Harry would have one chance, and one chance only. If Voldemort twigged to what was going on, Harry wouldn't stand a chance ... Voldemort could kill Snape outright with a thought, through the Mark. If he thought he was losing his playtoy, he probably would.

All the information he needed was right there in Voldemort's mind. It didn't take long to figure out what to do, how to word it. Thankfully, the original spell had been created to ensure the loyalty of the slave to the creator, and to prevent the slave from physically harming the creator or controller. Even better, because slaves changed hands, the original spell allowed for changes of ownership, though not for the ending of the slave-mark without the death of the person who initially did the spell to create it. There was a simple phrase to add to the spell that created the original slave-marks that would transfer the loyalty and prevention of harm bits to the new owner. Voldemort, of course, hadn't included the 'transfer of ownership' bit, and had added a 'can punish or kill the slave at will' bit, but re-altering the spell to its original form was possible. Harry shot to his feet and hustled to Snape's side, ignoring Pomfrey's outraged demands that he be gone. He clamped both hands over Snape's Mark and words started pouring out of his mouth in Parseltongue as well as echoing in his mind.

The spell responded with such speed that Harry was startled. Evidently, the original, ancient spell had resisted Voldemort's corruption of it, and wanted back to its original state, because there was no resistance from the spell to the changes Harry made. The part of the spell that allowed Voldemort to cause pain (or death) to Snape folded and twisted, collapsing in on itself. At the same time, the 'ownership' of that one particular Mark was transferred, to McGonagall. He also ensured that the only way to change the Mark back to the way Voldemort had it was if you were touching it, and tried to make sure that Voldemort wouldn't even realize the Mark had been changed. And since McGonagall would never in a million years pull the sorts of crap Voldemort had, Snape would basically be free and clear. The Mark would remain until Voldemort died, but the thing would just sit there, essentially no more than an ordinary tattoo, since Snape was already on their side of the fight. And Harry knew the man would find being 'beholden' to McGonagall far less ... vexing ... than being beholden to pretty much anyone else he could think of offhand.

Completely exhausted, Harry collapsed across Snape the moment the deed was done. He was wholly unaware of the furor as Pomfrey pulled him off Snape and got him to his own bed, then discovered that the Mark had gone quiet. Very shortly thereafter, practically the entire Order had a meeting in
the Infirmary, trying to figure out what the heck had happened. They would, unfortunately, have to wait for details until after Harry (or Snape, they hoped) woke up.

In the end, they waited almost three full days. Snape woke, sane and snarky, late in the evening of the first day, but he had been as clueless as the rest of them, staring at his quiescent Mark in dumbfounded disbelief. He'd drifted off again, still recovering from the agony he'd been in for what had felt like eternity. It wasn't until two days later that Harry finally woke. He blinked blearily at the surprisingly large group around his bed. Sirius and Remus, of course, and most of the New Marauders, but there were several Order members hanging about as well.

"Did it work?" He rasped, then frowned at how dry his throat was.

Sirius handed him a glass of water, then, once Harry'd slaked his thirst, hugged Harry hard enough to threaten his ribs before pulling back and smacking Harry on the shoulder rather hard. "Don't you ever do that to us again, Harry! You scared a decade's growth of Remus and I. What in Merlin's name did you think you were doing? You're going to be grounded until doomsday!"

Harry glowered. "I had to do something!" He objected, then, still concerned. "Did it work?"

"If by work." Came a most welcome voice. "You mean that I retain my wits and my life, then yes, Mr. Potter, it worked. However, I find myself quite curious as to what 'it' was. As do most of my colleagues." Snape growled.

Harry glanced around, trying to spot Snape, before he realized Snape was probably still bed-bound. Pomfrey was fierce about that sort of thing. "I ... umm. I can hear what Voldemort's thinking."

"We are aware of that, Mr. Potter." Snape growled, his tone carrying a very clear 'explain, now, or else' warning.

"I just ... I figured ... he made the Marks, right? So he had to know all sorts of stuff about them. So I ... well, I just hoped there was a way to stop him doing what he was doing. And wondered if I could see more than what he was thinking right then, you know? So I went looking."

"YOU WHAT?" Came the concerted shriek from about a dozen throats. Harry cowered.

"I had to! He was dying! Nobody deserves to die like that! And it worked, didn't it? It stopped, and he won't be able to change it back, 'cause he has to be touching Snape to do it, if he even realizes that Snape's Mark changed in the first place!" Harry said, glowering at everyone.

"What, exactly, did you do, Harry?" Sirius finally managed to ask.

So Harry told them. He managed to sit up enough to see Snape, and gave the man (and McGonagall) a sheepish look when he explained about switching the spell's controller to McGonagall. "It had to be somebody, Professors. Professor McGonagall was the only person I could think of that you wouldn't totally hate being 'slaved' to. Once Voldemort's dead, the Mark will disappear and so will the spells, but until then, this was really the best I could do."

Neither McGonagall nor Snape looked thrilled, but considering the alternatives, they apparently decided to live with it.

HPHPHP

Two days after Harry woke up, Augusta, Septimus, and Sirius hit the Wizengamot. Again. This time, they managed to push through a law that seized all property and money belonging to any convicted Death Eater, whether they were still in Azkaban or not. The law didn't nail Malfoy to the
wall, since he'd never been convicted, but it stripped the vast majority of the rest of Voldemort's followers of everything they owned save the clothes on their back and the wands in their hands. Not that any of them had been stupid enough to hang about their homes (unfortunately) in the wake of the Death Eater Wizengamot members decamping. Every house raided proved to be empty as a freshly dug grave.

The house raids were easy enough, but the vaults would take considerably more time, unfortunately. Mostly because of the sheer mass of money and objects within ... everything was being examined, and Dark items either de-spelled or destroyed.

The Order had been stepping up their own attacks, now that everyone had recovered physically from the attack on Hogwarts. Sirius, Remus and Bill Weasley were working as a team hunting Horcruxes. By the end of December, they'd found a ring at the Gaunt shack, and had a hell of an adventure trying to get to the horcrux in the cave that Dumbledore'd found.

Which led to the (highly worrying) discovery that someone had got to the horcrux first. They didn't find that out until they got back. Fortunately for everyone's sanity, Sirius recognized both the handwriting and the initials as belonging to his little brother. He'd disappeared for the next day and a half, probably grieving a brother he'd thought on the wrong side of the line, who hadn't actually been.

Unfortunately, the question now became ... what had Regulus done with the Horcrux? Had he destroyed it? Hidden it somewhere? They had no way of knowing, and debate batted back and forth.

The week before Christmas brought resolution to the destruction of Horcruxes without actually destroying the objects. Filius' goblin contacts had come through for them (for a price, of course, but one they willingly paid), and Rowena's diadem was now horcrux-free. It also, sadly, no longer worked, but it still existed, and that counted for something. The ring had likewise been de-Horcruxed (was that even a word, Harry wondered?) and now rested in the drawer of McGonagall's desk in the Headmistress' office. The diadem was put on display in the Main Hall in a glass case.

That week brought another, smaller victory. Ron, the New Marauder furthest along in his attempts to become an Animagus, finally succeeded in that goal just two days before Christmas. And Harry himself was finally catching up with everyone else, able now to transform his feet into talons (he'd decided to start there, rather than with his arms, which would become wings). Ron spent the best part of a day scampering about, and even got into a wrestling match with Padfoot when Sirius joined him in the four-footed romping.

Despite the war and the near-constant raids taking place outside of Hogwarts, Christmas was a light-hearted affair. Gifts were exchanged by one and all. Harry even witnessed Sirius, of all people, giving Snape (again, of all people) a present. Snape, being no one's fool, had checked the thing for hexes and pranks before he so much as touched it, but to his evident surprise, it was untouched ... and turned out to be a rare and very old potions book.

The attempted peace offering startled Harry, but evidently Sirius was beginning to see that Snape was, perhaps, not quite the bastard he'd thought the man to be. Harry sincerely doubted the two men would ever be anything more than wary associates and reluctant allies, but that state was better than bitter, hex-on-sight enemies.
Just barely over half the students that left after the attack on Hogwarts returned at the end of the 'normal' holiday break. Slytherin in particular had been gutted ... there were precisely three Slytherins who were fifth year or over that returned, and all three of them were fifth years: Daphne Greengrass, Tracey Davis and Blaise Zabini. Half of the first through fourth year Slytherins had failed to return as well, leaving a grand total of less than two dozen Slytherins. They seemed rather lost sitting at their huge and badly denuded House table. Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff had lost roughly a quarter of their members, mostly from the younger years. Gryffindor had lost the least, half a dozen all told, and most of them had been muggleborns affected by the increasing attacks, and thus unable to return due to losses in the family or the loss of their homes and belongings.

McGonagall responded by consolidating classes. The few Slytherins were combined in with either Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw for classes. After a long talk with Severus, who then talked to his Snakes, they were also moved into Hufflepuff's dorms, rather than be isolated from everyone else when there were so few of them. Severus, of course, was still their Head of House, but this way they weren't rattling around in the Slytherin dorms like a handful of marbles in a wardrobe. Most of the Slytherin table disappeared from the Great Hall for the time being. There had apparently been a discussion about the Slytherins eating with the other Houses at every meal, but it was eventually decided that going to that extreme might make them feel like they'd been booted out of Slytherin or something. Security had been tightened to the point where Harry would have been surprised if an unauthorized flea got in, but considering Rita's animagus form, that was actually probably a good idea. Not that she'd bother with Hogwarts much, not when she had loads of juicy stories to write about in the wider world. Six more students, all muggleborns, had lost their lives along with close to a hundred innocent Muggle bystanders during the two-month break. Thanks to the increased spending for the Aurors and the basilisk armor for the Order, no one else had been lost from those organizations, but there'd been a huge number of debilitating injuries.

Their classes had taken on a grim air. The students that had returned all seemed to have one goal ... learning enough to survive the mayhem that was trying to tear the Wizarding world apart. The teachers were all in like moods, and Charms, Transfiguration, Dueling and even Potions were all concentrated on things that could be used in defense or offense.

Snape, freed of the onus of being a spy (and tied to a thoroughly reprehensible creature) had become ... quite tolerable ... in class. He was still a strict perfectionist, and given to snarky comments, but the sheer viciousness and bias he'd displayed had disappeared almost entirely, though there were times he seemed to lapse back into it out of habit. It made classes a lot easier to deal with, to the point where even Neville had begun to have better luck with his potions, now that he wasn't shaking with fear of Snape.

Laws be damned, the fifth years and up were beginning to be taught apparation. And though they wouldn't be managing it anytime soon, the New Marauders were now far from the only ones learning to become Animagi ... over a quarter of the students fourth year and up turned out to possess
the skill. Harry had been startled, since he'd been told that Animagi were rare, and had asked McGonagall about it.

"Animagi aren't as rare as most people think." McGonagall told him. "But it's a skill that doesn't have a necessarily applicable attribute, unless you plan to become an Auror or the like, so most people never bother to discover whether they have the ability or not, and many of the ones that do discover it simply don't have the drive to complete the transformation. Your father and Sirius had a definite goal in mind that drove them to complete the transformation."

Fudge hadn't been too terribly far from the truth, with his mad obsession. He'd just been a bit beforehand. Hogwarts really was training an army ... but not for Dumbledore. This was out of sheer necessity.

The only truly bright spot in that first couple of weeks was the fact that Fred and George completed the Animagi transformation within two days of each other, and, true to their mischievous nature, used their forms to entertain Gryffindor Tower with their antics as they chased each other all over the Tower.

January 15, 1996 Hogsmeade

Just past midnight, in the near-total dark of a waning crescent moon, a person could be forgiven for thinking that Hogsmeade was a ghost town. Not a light was on, not a chimney smoked, and there was certainly no one out and about at this hour of the morning. The town, bright and light and active during the day, huddled in the dark and the snow at this hour, looking shabby and abandoned. Even Hogwarts, just visible in the distance, better resembled the hulking, dark and brooding den of a mad scientist rather than the school for magical children it actually was, with all its windows dark.

So it was that there was no one to see the movement at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, which bordered both school and town along one side. The movement soon resolved itself into more than two dozen people wearing black cloaks and silver masks, the one in the lead skipping occasionally like a child, an air of anticipatory glee wrapped around it. Though they quickly became more than visible on the expanse of white snow, there was no one awake to sound the alarm.

Silent as wraiths, the black-clad figures split up into pairs, making their way down Hogsmeade's streets, arranging themselves in front of certain homes and businesses. At an unseen, unheard signal, every wand was raised in concert, and a volley of simple Reductos and Incendios began the night's ... entertainment.

Within seconds, the homes so attacked became alive with noise and movement as the inhabitants were woken by their homes shaking to ruins and burning down around their ears. Screaming in fear, most of them fled their homes, racing straight into the waiting, laughing arms of the waiting Death Eaters. Those few who retained their wits upon waking in so unexpected a manner and attempted to apparate quickly discovered they were unable to do so.

Within moments, fully half of Hogsmeade was alight, and many of its residents lay dead or dying. The few who'd not panicked upon waking were trying desperately to mount a defense, but they were too scattered to do much good.

It was Rosmerta that turned the tide. She slept in room above the Three Broomsticks, and when the lower level very nearly fell out from underneath her thanks to the Death Eaters, she was one of the ones that retained her wits. Braving the half-destroyed stairs and the raging fire, she made her way to the downstairs fireplace where the floo connection was. She got a fire going in the grate easily enough, considering the fire raging around her, and found just enough powder in part of the broken, spilled jar to make a single call.
Knowing that the Aurors would never be summoned in time, and that there was quite a number of able-bodied adults at the school, she made her choice.

"Hogwarts Headmaster's Office!"

Had Dumbledore been alive, it was entirely possible the call would have gone unanswered. Not even he was usually awake at this hour, and despite the growing unpleasantness beyond Hogwarts' doors and his exalted position in Wizarding society, he had never made any provision for if someone tried to contact him after he went to bed for the night.

McGonagall, thankfully, was not that great a fool, and had put a spell on the fireplace that would automatically divert the call to the fireplaces in the Head's rooms, her classroom office, and the staff meeting room if she was not in the Head's office to receive the call. So it was that the roar of the fire and Rosmerta's frightened voice roused Minerva McGonagall from a sound slumber.

"Minerva! Hogsmeade is under attack!"

Minerva hustled out of bed and raced into the sitting room. "Rosmerta? We're on our way. Hang on!" She called, then quickly scrambled into clothes and slashed her wand at a simple silver instrument sitting on the mantle. Seconds later, a loud alarm sounded throughout the school, waking the staff and students.

"Sonorous! HOGSMEADE IS UNDER ATTACK. ALL STAFF AND STUDENTS TO THEIR STATIONS." McGonagall bellowed the words.

Hogwarts came alive with activity. Staff (which included some Order members) and students rushing to pre-arranged places to defend the castle if it became necessary. Half the staff raced for Hogwarts' main doors, to defend Hogsmeade. What no one was expecting was for the New Marauders to follow them, grim-faced and determined. McGonagall gave them a displeased look.

Harry gave her one right back. "You're going to need all the help you can get." He pointed out. "We've been training since the start of summer. We know what we're doing and what we're getting into."

McGonagall did not look best pleased, but admitted that Harry had a point. "Very well. Stick together and watch your backs."

"Planned on it." Harry said, and they all raced for Hogsmeade.

Harry skidded to a halt near the Shrieking Shack. "Ron, Fred, George! Use your animal forms to get into the houses and get people out. Neville, Ginny, Hermione, with me. We'll draw their fire."

Everyone nodded and Ron, Fred and George shifted to their animal forms, racing ahead of the rest of the New Marauders, their small forms quickly becoming lost in the mayhem.

Between the smoke, flames, and snow, it was nearly impossible to see much of anything clearly. Even spellfire. Harry very nearly got his head blasted by a yellow-orange spell that was virtually impossible to tell from the flames behind it until it was almost too late. He threw himself to the ground with a yelp, and Hermione quickly threw up a shield while Ginny and Neville returned fire. None of them could see where the Death Eater was at, so the best they could do was lay down covering fire while they tried to get out of range. More by luck than by design, one of their spells hit a structural member in a half-destroyed building they were fairly sure was the hiding spot, and the whole thing collapsed. There were no more spells from that quarter.

"We better go check." Harry said after several long moments of no spells.
Carefully, the four of them edged towards the collapsed building. It didn't take long to find the Death Eater, unconscious but apparently mostly unharmed by the collapsing building, half-buried under some wreckage.

"Right. Accio wand! Accio portkeys!" Hermione said firmly. Half a second later, a wand and a dull gray sock zipped towards her. She stepped aside so the sock wouldn't hit her, since they had no way of knowing how the portkeys activated, and wand and sock fell to the ground. She pocketed the wand and carefully wrapped the sock in a bit of torn drapery before putting it in her pocket.

While she was doing that, Harry was making sure the Death Eater would not get a chance to get away, carefully working them out of the wreckage and then casting the spell that Ron, Hermione, Cho and Gabrielle had been subjected to last year during the second Tournament task. It would keep the Death Eater asleep until he released the spell. One down, who knew how many to go. Harry and his group started working their way deeper into Hogsmeade.

Deeper in Hogsmeade, a ferret, honey badger and raccoon were racing towards the homes that were being destroyed, the ferret riding pick-a-back on the badger. Despite all three not being native to Britain and two of them being in the 15-30 pound range, they were managing quite easily to run around unremarked.

They skidded to a halt when they got to the most-devastated sections of Hogsmeade, then began to search for survivors hidden in the wreckage. Their animal senses ... and their small sizes ... came in handy for that. Building after building came up empty. Finally, they found traces of someone in one of the buildings fairly close to the continuing action, and the ferret (Rascal), being smallest and lightest, worked his way into the building. Inside, he found a toddler who had apparently dived under their bed when the chaos began. The bed's sturdy construction had kept the little boy safe, but most of the house had collapsed around him, making it impossible for him to get out on his own. Rascal turned around and headed back out, and moments later returned with Rogue and Grumbler. The three brothers then transformed and started levitating bits of collapsed house aside. Once that was done, Ron hunkered down to peer under the bed at the terrified, silent toddler.

"Hey there, little guy. C'mon out. It's all right. You'll be all right now." Ron cooed, trying to imitate the soothing voice his mother had used to calm him (and Ginny) when they were little. He didn't realize it, but he was doing a pretty good job at the imitation. "Come on out of there and we'll get you to Hogwarts, right? I bet you'd love to see it, wouldn't you? It's really brill. We can show you around, even."

The little boy, responding more to the tone than the words, began to crawl towards Ron, and once close enough, Ron gently pulled him out of his hidey-hole. Fortunately, the boy was completely unhurt, just scared out of his mind ... and possibly, probably an orphan at this point. Just. Ron somehow managed to keep that sad thought out of his voice as he continued to gently pat and reassure the little guy.

"Y'see these two? They're my big brothers. This one's Fred, and that one's George. We're gonna get you out of here, ok?"

The little boy, still silent, just stared at the three of them, wide-eyed and anxious, tears still streaking down his face, before he buried his head in Ron's chest.

Ron gave the little kid a sad look, then glanced at Fred and George. "Shrieking Shack?" He recommended. It was far enough out of town to probably not get hit by the Death Eaters, and thus their nearest way to Hogwarts. All of the tunnels out of the school had been booby-trapped, but the New Marauders, the teachers and Order members all knew how to use the tunnels without triggering the traps.
"Probably the only one useable. I'm pretty sure Honeydukes was ablaze. We'd never manage to get in there." One of the twins said.

The other twin nodded. "We'll go ahead, make sure the coast is clear. If we circle around the village, we ought to be all right."

The main street of Hogsmeade was a warzone. The bulk of the Death Eaters had ended up here, herded there by the tightening noose of Order members and teachers. The fight was bloody, vicious, no-holds-barred brutality at its worst. The Death Eaters, cornered and finding themselves unable to portkey (one of the first things Mad-Eye had done), were fighting for their lives, and trying to take as many people with them as possible. The defenders, which included a good number of Hogsmeade residents by that point, while limiting themselves to non-Dark spells, were not exactly sparing the Death Eaters any mercy.

Most of the adult defenders were working in teams of two, so that they had someone at their back just in case. It was proving to save their hides from the utterly nasty spells the Death Eaters were throwing around. So far, no one had been hit by anything that would screw with their lives forever, though a few simpler spells (bone breakers and the like) had gotten through, mostly because the person being attacked was more worried about a really nasty spell coming at them from a different direction.

Slowly, one by one, the Death Eaters were being worn down. Unfortunately, that's when Voldemort showed up. The defenders, knowing that he couldn't be dealt with permanently right then (as there was Nagini and two other Horcruxes out there somewhere) and that any attempt to hex him so badly that he'd be slowed down would likely lose a lot of valuable lives, promptly retreated, making tracks for the tunnels to Hogwarts (and hoping a Death Eater or ten would be dumb enough to follow them).

Oddly ... Voldemort let them go. They didn't stop to wonder why.

Harry and his group, seeing Voldemort arrive, joined the general exodus unseen, though Harry dearly wished he could hex the bastard. Unfortunately, at this point, it would have been a useless gesture, and he knew it. Fortunately, they managed to reach the Shack unmolested, and headed inside to get to Hogwarts.

The next few hours were rather chaotic, as people were treated for their injuries. All too soon the death toll began to tally up ... almost a quarter of the town's residents were dead, and most of the rest injured. By noon, it became clear that Hogsmeade herself had been burned to the ground.

It wasn't until sometime after lunch that the exhausted defenders discovered something else. Dumbledore's grave, put at the edge of the main clearing near the Forbidden Forest and Hagrid's Hut (this had been done before they found out all of what Dumbledore had done), had been ... vandalized.

From the look of things, someone had actually tunneled in from a spot inside the Forest that was just beyond the school's protective wards. They had then dug Dumbledore up and ... stolen his wand.

That made no damn sense whatever to anyone. Harry in particular was deeply angry.

"So ... all those people killed, a town destroyed ... all for a diversion so Voldemort could, what, have a trophy?" He muttered something nasty and unrepeatable. "I am rapidly getting to the point where I really won't lose so much as a second's sleep for ending him. I really won't."

Shortly after that, he and pretty much everyone else collapsed into bed. Before he did, though, Harry
made a mental note to poke Voldemort's brain and see why the bastard had done this. If it really was just to get a trophy ... well, there'd definitely be an accounting, sooner or later.
The first thing Harry did the next day when he was awake enough to concentrate, was try to see why Voldemort had stolen Dumbledore's wand. He really, really, really wasn't expecting the answer he got.

In among the manic, cackling, megalomaniacal and distinctly unhinged mental celebrations of his triumph, Harry found a thread of thought that, had he ever been permitted to read fantasy books, he would have compared to Gollum with the One Ring. Harry fought his way through the morass, following that thread, and found ... a children's tale about extra-powerful magical artifacts.

Harry was rather disinclined to believe such rubbish, but it was clear that Voldemort did believe. Very strongly. Enough so that he presumed the stone in the ring he'd made into a Horcrux was one of these 'Hallows', and Dumbledore's wand the other. He'd never been able to find/fixate on a suitable 'cloak', however.

Right now, Voldemort was in transports of joy over having two of the Hallows, and well on the way to presuming himself invincible on top of being immortal. Not good. He was also contemplating ways to be rid of one Draco Malfoy without arousing the ire of his (rather rich and influential) parents, since evidently the only way to control the wand was to kill the previous owner. That, Harry didn't have too many quibbles about, given what Draco had done. However, as he followed the thread of thought about the wand, he discovered that while the wand may not be some super-powerful artifact, it had definitely changed hands ... a lot. Voldemort had been able to trace its ownership back a couple hundred years in his search for it. Every owner had been killed ... always in a way that either did not involve a duel, or involved them getting hexed from behind unawares ... and the wand stolen from the body generally before it could cool, though a few had, like Voldemort, resorted to grave-robbing to get it. That kind of history could make a guy wonder, especially considering what little knowledge Harry had of wands said that a wand wouldn't operate as well for someone other than its rightful owner.

The stone had, at some point, ended up in the Gaunt family. Voldemort had been unable to discover how, mostly because by the time he realized what the ring was and investigated, the only person who could tell him was dead. There, it had passed down from father to son for generations, until Voldemort discovered it (and the Gaunt shack) in his late teens, after he'd made the diary horcrux, evidently. Tom had stolen it from its rightful owner, not knowing at that time what it was, after killing the Riddles (his father and grandparents) and framing his Gaunt relation for it.

Harry pulled out of Voldemort's thoughts and sat there on his bed, contemplating. Voldemort, contrary to what he thought, didn't actually have the stone, thanks be ... IF it was what Voldemort thought it was. Harry sighed, and then did something normally reserved for Hermione ... he got dressed and headed for the library. Time to see if he could find the book the tale of the Hallows was in, as he didn't trust Voldemort's rather scattered, shattered, and more than slightly crazy recall.

He finally found the book three days later, buried in a nook along with a small selection of other
children's books that were evidently intended for recreational reading. He read through the relevant story, and discovered that Voldemort had actually remembered the whole of it correctly. He put the book back, then headed off to walk and think.

Did he tell anyone? If so, who? On the one hand, finding out that the Elder Wand (and the Resurrection Stone) were apparently real might be important. On the other hand ... given the history of the wand in particular, it might be a better idea to keep his mouth shut. And too, there was the fact that the cloak had, evidently, been lost to time, so far as Voldemort knew. He'd certainly not be able to find out anything from a children's storybook about it!

It was apparent that Voldemort intended to keep Draco alive for a while, so there was no immediate threat to the ferret. He should probably mention at least that to ... nevermind. There was no one to pass on the message, not with Snape having retired from spying. Damn. Well, sort-of-damn. Harry didn't feel too terribly about the ferret getting his, not after four years and a bit of his attitude, and then the bloody bastard letting Voldemort's army in and killing Dumbledore. Harry might not be all that happy with Dumbledore, but killing someone by shooting them in the back was just not on.

In the end, he decided to keep the news to himself ... after all, there really wasn't anything anyone could do at this point. Voldemort had the wand, and he had Draco. And even if Snape hadn't been retired from spying, there would have been nothing he could have done about either part of that without forfeiting his life. At this point, Voldemort and his wand were now Harry's problem, if the prophecy were to be believed.

About the time Harry came to that decision, he and the rest of the underage New Marauders had learned how to apparate properly. The vote for Minister was held on the twentieth of January, and Amelia Bones was confirmed as Minister, her proactive stance on Death Eater and Voldemort related issues proving to be highly popular. It didn't hurt that she was also sensible and fair-minded.

In the last days of January, they got some very, very welcome news ... Helga Hufflepuff's cup, made into a horcrux, was found. The goblins, who'd been the ones to find it, had been well-pleased with themselves. It had, apparently, been stashed in Bellatrix LeStrange's vault for safekeeping. The discovery inspired Sirius to check the Black vault for the missing locket, to no avail, though he did turn over a raftload of Dark items to the goblins and the Ministry team that was dealing with them. The cup was stripped of its horcrux, and, like the diadem, put on display in the main hall. It was, perhaps, not the wisest thing to do, but there was precisely nothing that Voldemort could do if he found out about it. The only horcrux still in his control was whatever had been crammed into Nagini.

The first week of February found a tigress prowling around Gryffindor Tower, startling pretty much everyone and scaring quite a few folks out of a year's growth. Like her brothers, her fur was red with black stripes and white markings, rather than the natural orange, black, and white colors. Ginny, amused by their alarm (because really, a tigress, just showing up in the Tower? They should have realized) turned back human and grinned at them.

That left just Neville and Harry to complete their transformations, though Harry was pretty sure Neville would beat him to it, since he'd gotten so far behind everyone else. That thought was born out mid-February when an enormous brown bear joined the ever-increasing menagerie. It made for quite the sight, to be sure, seeing a tiger, bear, badger, ferret, raccoon and an enormous black dog capering about (Sirius had been unable to resist the temptation, not that he'd fought it very hard).

It was at that point that Sirius finally decided to strip Grimmauld place of its rather large and frightening collection of Dark Arts artifacts. He, Remus, Bill, and Snape spent two weekends in succession at the manor, hauling everything out of there. Harry'd been completely shocked when he found out Snape had gone, since he'd figured hell would have to freeze over before Snape subjected
himself to the Marauders' company of his own free will. Evidently, he wanted a look at some of the stuff at the Black house bad enough to subject himself to their company. Harry was just glad he didn't have to be there.

Kreacher apparently took great offense to this, screaming to the heavens and obstructing them so much that Harry had to send Dobby and Winky over to assist in restraining the insane house-elf midway through the first weekend. Whatever happened after that and during the second weekend, it ended with the quartet returning in pleased triumph ... the de-horcruxed locket in hand.

There was a minor celebration that night, because by everyone's calculations ... they were down to Nagini. The bad news was ... they were down to Nagini. Who, apparently, was never out of Voldemort's presence for more than a few minutes at a time, which made sense given what she actually was (or housed, anyway). Nothing anyone came up with seemed like a good plan to lure Nagini away from her master, so it was looking like they'd have to deal with her with Voldemort present, which would not be easy by any means.

Debate raged on what to do for a couple days, before Harry put his two knuts in.

"Look ... Voldemort wants me. He'll come to wherever I am, sooner or later. And that means here. We've got the home advantage, you guys ... we know Hogwarts better than he does, we've got the place pretty well sewn up ... I say we dig in, plant some surprises, and then I taunt the heck out of him and make him come to me."

Understandably, Sirius and Remus were not fans of this plan, and neither were a lot of other people. Harry remained resolute. "It's the best chance we're going to get." Harry told them. "The way things are now, he can hit and fade into the woodwork almost at will, and we've got no idea where his base is ... this could go on for months. Years. I don't know about any of the rest of you, but I'd really rather not have it go on that long. We arm Hogwarts to the teeth and make him come to us ... it ends things a lot faster. He'll have everyone here! All his Death Eaters, all his allies. He'll think he has us cornered, but the stuff Remus, Sirius, and the twins have been working on ... " Harry grinned. "And I'm betting Professors Sprout and Snape can come up with a few dozen nasties to toss at the bastard and his helpers."

The more they thought about it, the more it seemed like it might work. Dig in here, prepare everything they could think of, and then lure Voldemort to them for one final (they hoped) strike. McGonagall grinned at them at one point. "We can activate the school's defenders as well." She pointed out. "I've always wanted to use that spell. What better time than this?"

That seemed to decide everyone, and they broke up into groups to plan what to do and where.

In the last couple of days of February, Harry found a few books on invisibility cloaks in general that he found ... rather interesting. They were rather temporary things, it seemed. They came in two varieties, charmed or woven. The charmed ones lasted all of two or three years before the charms stopped working or the cloak got torn up. The woven ones (made of demiguise hair) lasted longer, but evidently no more than a decade or so before they started not working. That surprised Harry, since he knew his own cloak had been his dad's, and hadn't even been used in a decade, nevermind being made less than a decade ago, and it seemed to work fine.

Given that the wand and the stone were real, Harry could be forgiven for wondering if his cloak wasn't, perhaps, the cloak. If so ... now he had two out of the three. Of course, it really didn't help that the two he had were the two that weren't really of use in a massive fight. Oh, going around unseen was useful, no three ways about it, but he wasn't exactly intangible or inaudible under the cloak, and in the chaos of a big fight, it'd be all too easy for him to get stepped on, tripped over, or otherwise detected. And the stone ... heck if Harry could find any use for that thing. He seriously
wondered why in the name of anything the 'brother' had wanted that thing. It made no sense to him. Oh, it'd be nice to be able to talk to his mum and dad, he wouldn't deny that, but (evidently) raising them from the dead and them not being really 'them' ... that sort of killed the temptation. He'd just settle for hearing about them from the people who'd known them.
Preparing for War

Preparation for War

A/N: This is gonna be the last semi-quiet chapter, folks. After this, things are gonna get fugly.

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March 1- April 14, 1996

The first day of March, Professor Sprout and all the best of her Herbology students (which included Neville, of course) headed out onto Hogwarts' grounds, a startling array of plants and supplies bobbing along behind them. They were intending to plant a protective ring around the part of Hogwarts' grounds that was not protected by the Forest, along with preparing a few other ... surprises ... for the anticipated invading army.

Hagrid disappeared into the forest, intent on having a word with Aragog and his children, as well as the thestrals, centaurs, and who-knew-what else. Remus left as well, though he didn't tell anyone what he was up to. Severus pulled the best of the Potions students still at the school into the dungeon to start working on potions.

The rest of them worked in and around the castle itself, building traps that could be sprung on the unwary, constructing 'blinds' hidden in corners where defenders could have a good line-of-sight to hex people and still be protected. Each blind was stocked (eventually) with a variety of potions, both from the Weasley's stock of inventions and Snape's, as well as the orbs that shot silver spikes all over the place (which had been improved upon to the point they were quite deadly). The traps and blinds were done both inside and out. Additionally, the outdoors was equipped with the color-spell balls scattered around in various places, though those weren't, of course, activated yet.

The Muggleborns recommended (and assisted in building) catapults up on the roof to help deal with flying menaces that were hard to hex, as well as caltrops as a possible delivery device for some of the potions ... scattered on the ground and stepped on, they'd punch through most flesh and boot leather (save dragon or basilisk hide) to deliver whatever they'd been coated with.

The house-elves helped wherever they could, and a few of the braver ones made hesitant suggestions, which almost always were implemented.

The first week of March also saw Hermione finally manage to complete the animagus transformation, scampering around with the rest of the gang. She seemed thoroughly delighted with it. Harry gave a mental sigh, but he was now not too far away from managing it himself, which, considering how hectic things had been for him, was a bit surprising.

Hagrid eventually returned from his extended stay in the forest, looking well pleased with himself.

"Aragog's got his kin organized." He reported at the meeting held on his return. "An' the Thestrals seem willin'. Firenze and Ronan and a coupla the other centaurs seemed willin' ta help as well."

Harry had to grin at that, and McGonagall looked exceedingly pleased.

"Well done, Hagrid. Very well done. We should perhaps have everyone wear something to identify us as allies to the acromantulas?"

"Somethin' other'n black." Hagrid recommended. "Tha' way, they'll know anyone dressed like tha's
McGonagall nodded. "Perhaps a sash of the person's house color. The acromantulas won't need to know the difference between the colors, just that they're not black."

"I'll tell 'em." Hagrid promised.

So everyone started wearing sashes. Yellow for Hufflepuff, red for Gryffindor, blue for Ravenclaw and green for Slytherin. The colors were deliberately kept bright, as a visible contrast to the black of the Hogwarts uniforms the students (and Snape) wore.

Mid-March, Remus finally returned ... with nearly fifty werewolves at his back, over half of whom were under the age of sixteen, having been bitten by Fenrir Greyback. Every last one of them was thin and ragged and rather pathetic looking, and Harry felt awful for them. The adults were twitchy and wary and skitish, and the children (Most of whom had only been infected in the last year) were largely traumatized.

The New Marauders met them with open arms and whatever gentleness and compassion they were willing to accept. The house-elves were in transports of joy at being able to provide food and clothing (much of the latter scavenged from the Room of Requirement) for so many. They were housed in the Slytherin Dorms, both to reassure them that they'd not be attacked by their non-wolf bunkmates and to provide them a place where they could transform without fear. Snape, after rolling his eyes and grousing to McGonagall, started a mega-batch of wolfsbane for the next month's full moon.

Harry and the New Marauders spent the best part of a week in Slytherin dorm, hanging out with Remus and the other werewolves. Gradually, they seemed to realize that Harry and company really couldn't have cared less about their lycanthropy, and were quite thoroughly comfortable around Remus. They began to come out of their shells a little bit, and several of the kids (two of whom were under the age of eight, which just made Harry want to tear Fenrir to pieces) began hanging out on the fringes of the Marauder 'pack'.

The last week of March, Filius was the one to take off for parts unknown. He returned the next day with an awe-inspiring sight ... some fifty goblins, armed to the teeth. They were accommodated in Ravenclaw Tower. Harry wondered, privately, how Filius had managed that one, but whatever he'd said or done, he didn't tell in the meeting that followed his arrival.

Two days later, just days before the end of March, Harry was outside working on his animagus transformation when he finally managed the last bit (his head).

The world looked ... very strange ... from just a foot or so off the ground. Not to mention the fact that his vision had altered drastically. The colors were sharper, clearer, and, weirdly, overlaid here and there with an odd florescence. And as much as he'd noticed movement before (hence his ability to catch the Snitch), it was even more now ... he swore he could see each individual blade of grass twitch in the breeze created by his wings as he settled himself.

It took him a minute or two to get used to the change, and then, somewhat tentatively, he tried to take off. It didn't work so well, and he nearly did a faceplant. But then he remembered a comment Sirius had made, about the animal's instincts being right there to tap into (as well as the change in emotions), and after a moment of fumbling ... all of a sudden, he knew exactly what to do.

Seconds later he was streaking into the sky like a bullet. He all but danced in the air, giving a fierce, shrieking cry of triumph and joy. As much as he'd loved flying on a broom ... this ... this was so much more. So much better! He slingshot himself around one of the towers, then swooped and dove,
pulling up just in time to let his talons skim the grass. He zoomed up and towards the owlery, blazing through and startling all the owls. To his surprise, Hedwig gave chase, and he slowed enough that she could keep pace with him. To his even greater astonishment, he could understand her, sort of ... he could sense her delighted pleasure and pride. They swooped and dove around each other for a bit before Harry zoomed off again, going as fast as his wings would take him as he twisted, turned, and looped in the sky.

At some point in his exuberant display, someone 'in the know' must have spotted him, because several rather familiar animals came pouring out of the school. Harry took great delight in buzzing them, playfully snatching at their fur without actually connecting. He led them a merry dance around the grounds before he finally tired and landed, then changed back. Moments later, he was being hugged half to death by Hermione, Ron, and Ginny (Neville and the twins being off working on stuff around the castle at the time).

"That. Is. Brilliant." Harry crowed, practically bouncing. "Merlin, that's incredible. And I thought flying on a broom was good!"

There was a major celebration that night with the Marauders old and new. Somewhere in the middle of it, Harry grinned over at Remus. "You do realize, you're going to have an awful lot of company, come next full moon, right?"

"Well of course, I'm going to be with the other werewolves." Remus pointed out, only to promptly get smacked upside the head with a pillow by one of the twins.

"He means us!" the other twin pointed out.

Remus gave Harry a look and opened his mouth, and this time it was Harry that whalloped him with a pillow. "So help me, Remus, if the words 'you don't have to' come out of your mouth, I will hurt you."

Remus blushed a bit. "Very well, I won't try to argue on my behalf. The others might not be comfortable with it, though."

"They seem comfortable enough with us, and once we explain we won't be in danger, it should be ok." Harry commented, then sighed. "We're about ready, aren't we?"

"Yes." Sirius said, speaking up from Harry's other side. "You never did say how you planned on drawing Voldemort out."

"All I have to do is taunt him. I've got an idea of just how to do that, too." Harry grinned.

"WHY do I think this is going to be bad?" Sirius moaned.

"Hey!" Harry complained.

The next morning, with a little help from Dobby and Winky, he implemented his plan ... to whit, a wizarding wireless radio, and the equipment needed to broadcast. He set himself up in the room of requirement (the less everyone else heard of what he said, the better) and then looked at the two elves somberly.

"Get in and get out *fast*, you hear me? I don't want either of you hurt. Not for this."

"We is being careful, Master Harry sir." Winky chirped, and Dobby nodded emphatic agreement.

"Good luck, both of you."
They took the radio and popped out.

Five nerve-wracking minutes later, they popped back. "We is putting it under his chair, Master Harry sir." Winky said. They were both of them more than a bit trembly.

"You're ok?"

"Oh, yes, Master Harry sir." Dobby said. "But we's is not liking being in that place."

"Right. Showtime."

He'd had the radio tuned to the appropriate frequency before they left ... and now, all he had to do was piss Voldemort off badly enough to make him try and come after Harry.

Ought to be easy enough.

"You know, Tom ... you're really surprisingly pathetic. Insane, too." Harry said into the microphone. "I mean, really. Just how much intelligence does it take to get yourself stripped of powers and body by a one-year-old, again? And then to keep on trying to get that kid back ... and keep getting your butt beat? Just how badly did it hurt when I burnt you out of Quirrell, by the way? Sounded like it was rather uncomfortable. Oh, and by the way, just in case you haven't noticed? You've got a spy in your midst. Still haven't figured out who it is, have you? I'd love to tell you who it is, but really, I think I'll save telling you that for when I can tell you face to face."

Harry took a 'peek' into Voldemort's mind and nearly cheered. He was frothing in rage, but still listening. Hadn't, apparently, hexed the radio, if he even knew where it was at.

"It must really burn your biscuits, being second place to a kid less than a quarter your age. I've got more brains, more talent, and more ... well, everything ... than you've ever had. All you've got is your delusions of grandeur. Oh, and Tom? They really are delusions. You're never going to succeed. Not as long as I draw breath. Not even that nice, fancy wand you stole's going to help you. Oh yes, I know all about that. And a great many other things, too."

THAT seemed to do it. The gibbering rage was joined by horror. And a determination to wipe Harry off the face of the planet, post haste and forthwith.

"See you soon, Tommy boy. I'm going to enjoy this."

HPHPHP

Between then and the full moon, it quickly became clear that Voldemort had taken the bait. He was gathering his forces as fast as he could. Harry grinned as he forewarned everyone of what they'd likely be facing, and the traps and protections were quickly tailored to them.

The evening of the fifth, the New Marauders retired to the Slytherin dorm, and spent the night with the werewolves. It ended up being quite a lot of fun, since everyone had taken the wolfsbane, and therefore was in their right mind, and more minded to romp and play and be goofy than trying to gnaw themselves or others into ribbons. That so many people were willing to actually spend a night as animagi in order to be with them seemed to hit most of the werewolves rather hard, if in a good way. Harry was just relieved that Voldemort hadn't been ready to go that night, as having to deal with Fenrir's pack on a full moon would have been more than a bit hair-raising. It was going to be bad enough when that lot were human.

And then, Voldemort was ready. The castle hunkered down, readying itself for battle. All the kids under fourth year were stashed in the most remote corner of the castle they'd been able to find,
surrounded by the heaviest protections. The remaining population of Hogsmeade (whom the castle had been hosting thanks to the town being razed), Order, aurors, goblins, werewolves, students and staff tried (mostly unsuccessfully) to get a good night's sleep, knowing what would be coming in the next twenty-four hours.
A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter. LOTS of action in this, folks. You're going to see some creatures that weren't mentioned in the Harry Potter series, but only a couple. Fair warning, the first bit is NOT for arachnophobes.

April 15, 1996, Hogwarts

Hagrid, of course, had moved back into the castle for safety's sake. He was rather vulnerable, being the only person who lived outside of the castle. Not much of anyone got any sleep on the fourteenth, though most tried. In the end, a few hours before dawn, fully three-fourths of the castle was awake. The young children and other noncombatants (mostly a handful of elderly Hogsmeade residents who'd survived the town's destruction) huddled together in their heavily-protected corner while the defenders ended up having an impromptu gathering in the Great Hall over various drinks and edibles as they were all too wound up to sleep. For many of the adults, the sight of goblins, werewolves, and wizards/witches of all ages sitting together and talking amiably was ... more than a little strange, but most of them took heart from it.

Then Hagrid abruptly got to his feet, staring at his hand, where sat a tarantula-sized acromantula. Even though the thing was too small for its voice (if it even had one at that size) to be audible, the meaning of its presence was clear. The Forbidden Forest had been invaded.

**HPHPHP**

Forbidden Forest

Aragog, despite what anyone else might have thought, cared deeply for Hagrid. The concept of Hagrid being in danger from invaders had enraged the elderly acromantula when Hagrid had spoken to him, and the old spider had lost no time in deploying his children to watch the edges of the Forest. The smallest and youngest, those the size of large tarantulas, had that job, as at their size they'd not draw any notice to themselves to speak of.

The invading army was spotted by six of these smallest and youngest acromantula. Two of them promptly raced off towards the main nest, where Aragog and a handful or so of his oldest children waited to spread word through the rest of the colony. A single tarantula-sized youngster waited with them, to bring word to Hagrid that the enemy had come. Within seconds of the scouts' arrival, the nest was empty. Aragog himself headed for the invaders while his older children raced to the groups of their siblings that had been stationed at various points to allow for a swift reaction no matter where the enemy chose to enter the Forest. The younger made tracks for the castle and Hagrid, escorted by the two scouts as protection.

The Death Eater attack force, comprised of Fenrir and his pack (some thirty or forty strong), and about two dozen each of trolls, vampires and Death Eaters (most of the latter being school-age 'new recruits'), was completely unaware that they were being rapidly surrounded by a legion of acromantula within five minutes of crossing the forest boundary. Every acromantula with a two-foot legspan or larger (and roughly a pound in weight), converged on the invading army. The acromantula were careful to move silently, and stay out of sight until the last and largest arrivals managed to complete the noose around the Death Eaters and their creature minions.
The first any of the attacking army knew of their danger was when some two dozen bulldog-sized acromantula dropped into their midst from the trees. Lucius Malfoy, the group's 'leader' alongside Fenrir Greyback, was the first to start throwing curses when one of the acromantula almost landed on his face, but he was soon followed by Crabbe and Goyle (senior and junior in both cases) and the rest of the Death Eaters. Of course, the acromantula that had dropped into the middle of the invading party had been a decoy. Something to garner the attention of all and sundry and get them to stop staring into the depths of the forest proper. It helped that in their eagerness to be rid of the 'decoy' acromantula, the Death Eaters were hitting their own army with spells far, far more than they were managing to connect with an acromantula in the confusion.

The moment the invaders' backs were turned, Aragog and his oldest children descended on the army from all sides. Even with magic on their side, the invaders were no match for the sheer number of acromantula that descended on them, and within a few short moments, despite a sudden hailstorm of spells, all of the invaders had disappeared, most of them screaming in agony, under a sea of very angry ... and very hungry ... acromantula.

But not all of them died. As much benefit as the huge group of acromantula was in overwhelming the invaders, it also allowed some few Death Eaters on the edges of the group to escape their wrath, slipping under and around the massive bodies that couldn't exactly stop on a dime to nail them when a good dozen or so of their kin were behind them, pushing them forward. The werewolves, trolls and vampires fared a bit better, being possessed of above-human strength and durability, but not by much. Of the original hundred-plus strong army, less than half survived the acromantulas, only five of them Death Eaters. The rest were werewolves, vampires, and trolls. Bloody, bruised, and shaken, the surviving wizards made frequent use of 'incendio' as they and their decimated 'army' beat a hasty path towards Hogwarts. Every now and again, a badly-wounded member of the army would fall behind, unable to keep up with the rapid pace, and get swarmed by the acromantula.

HPHPHP

Hogsmeade

Voldemort had sent the Forest group ahead several hours before the bulk of his army went on the move, as they would require a bit more time to work their way through the Forest than the rest of them would require to arrive at Hogwarts. Eventually, the time was right, and he sent the dementors and inferi on their way, followed by the Rocs, Harpies, and Stymphalian birds. The vampires, giants, trolls, banshees and most of his Death Eaters portkeyed straight to the edge of Hogsmeade. They did not see Voldemort keep quite a few of his best and most frightening aside and stay behind himself ... and he, in his turn, did not spot Draco Malfoy grabbing a portkey at the last second. Indeed, Voldemort didn't even realize Draco's absence until a good five or ten minutes after the Hogsmeade group had left. He was very much not pleased, but did not feel he could call attention to the boy's actions, lest someone wonder why. He could not afford that. Ahh well, he could get the boy later, if he survived.

The main attack group met up just outside of the burnt-out remains of Hogsmeade and made their way through. While they knew (thanks to Pettigrew) about the tunnel entrances in town, no one attempted to make use of them as they were bright enough to realize the things had probably been booby-trapped to heck and gone with both Sirius and Remus inside the castle. Instead they made their careful way through the town.

But the Hogwarts defenders hadn't bothered trying to booby trap the town itself. They'd concentrated all their defenses inside the ward boundaries, since they realized the wards could be attacked at quite a distance. One way or another, Voldemort's crew would get inside the wards. There was nothing they could do to stop that, so they concentrated on making the rest of the attack as close to impossible
as they could manage. They did, however, rig magical motion detectors to warn them when the army reached the town.

HPHPHP

Hogwarts

The Great Hall went utterly silent for a moment after those closest to Hagrid spotted the young acromantula, then, nearly as one, everyone shot to their feet and raced for their assigned positions. There was little to no confusion, though everyone was grim-faced. Within minutes, the best of the blinds both inside and outside the castle were inhabited, as were the roof catapult stations. A spell activated the color-spell orbs, and McGonagall performed the spell that activated all the suits of armor and statues scattered throughout the school. The armor twitched as one, but stayed put on McGonagall's order, to provide 'surprise' assistance when the attackers managed to get into the school (they were very sure that would happen). The statues made their way to various points throughout the school and just beyond the doors, but stayed well clear of the booby-trapped zone on McGonagall's orders.

Just beyond the school wards, the Death Eaters in both parties were busy. Copying the actions that had worked so well in obtaining Dumbledore's wand, they excavated large tunnels well under the wards. As soon as these were completed, the attacking armies began marching through. Unfortunately for the Hogsmeade group ... the Hogwarts defenders had anticipated such a tactic. Devil's Snare, as well as several other subterranean and highly lethal plants had been planted at intervals around the ward perimeter. Tentacles and roots shot out into the tunnels and wrapped themselves around whatever got in reach, yanking the victims back to wherever the plant itself happened to be, folding and mutilating the bodies in the process. Some dozen or so of the inferi were captured this way (they'd been sent through first) before the wizards and dementors managed to thwart the plants through spells and freezing cold, enabling the rest of the army to get through unmolested.

The moment they were through, the rocs, stymphalian birds and harpies took wing, and were met by a hail of spellfire and explosive orbs of various kinds from the roofs. Moments after that, Buckbeak, a quartet of other hippogriffs and the thestrals arrived, swarming the flying menaces in a fierce aerial battle.

The giants, of course, were the last through, other than the wizards themselves, being chivied along by a combination of spellfire and insistent commands. The ground forces ... really weren't prepared for what they were marching into. This was no school of frightened, defenseless children. Just beyond the range of the plants lay the rest of the outer defenses. Many of the inferi toppled into the hidden pits, and the caltrops, soaked in various poisons, raining down on them from Hogwarts' roof were taking their toll.

A signal went around the school, and a few seconds later, a bunch of half-grown mandrakes, planted at intervals in the middle of the booby-trapped zone, suddenly rose into view from out of the ground, screaming their displeasure. Almost instantly, half the surviving army collapsed, unconscious. The defenders, forewarned of that particular defense, were unaffected, as they had all donned earmuffs.

Unfortunately, the banshees responded in kind, and for a few long moments there was one hell of a screaming match going on. Doubly unfortunately, the mandrakes didn't affect the inferi, giants lethifolds or dementors, and several of the wizards managed to shield their hearing before they collapsed, and were thus able to re-awaken those that had collapsed. Still, the attackers were badly disorganized now, between trying to duck and dodge both real spellfire from the blinds and fake spellfire from the orbs, avoid caltrops both on the ground and in the air, and avoid the other traps that
lay in wait for them. Eventually, they managed to kill the last of the mandrake plants.

At that point, they were finally close enough to the school to begin attacking it ... not that they got to
do this with impunity, as the defenders hidden in the many blinds rained spellfire down on them.
The statues got into the act now as well, whaling on anything that got in range ... including the
dementors. The things might not be killable, but they had bones that could be pounded into powder,
and their power had no effect on stone defenders who had withstood a millennium of Scottish
Highland winters.

The giants got the furthest. Big, strong, and all but immune to spellfire and poisons, they shrugged
off everything that got thrown at them and started trying to take Hogwarts down stone by stone with
their clubs. The goblins, armored and armed to the teeth, swarmed them, roaring nearly as loudly as
the combined banshee-mandrake yelling had been as they brought the giants down one by one.

But there had been holes made in the outer walls, and the rest of the invading army began to pour
through the holes. The first group that got in had the misfortune to arrive near the blind that
McGonagall and a quartet of seventh year Hufflepuffs were using as their base. Within seconds of
their arrival, they were being chased and beaten up by chairs, desks, bookcases and pretty much
everything else that wasn't nailed down that had been animated by McGonagall, and trying to dodge
a fierce volley of spellfire from the Hufflepuffs.

The next group had the misfortune to encounter Snape ... and assume he was still on their side. What
followed was a vicious no-holds-barred beat-down as Snape showed exactly what he was capable of
and took out a lifetime's worth of rage on his (at least at first) unsuspecting victims.

The third group encountered Flitwick and a half-dozen of his sixth and seventh year Ravenclaws.
This bunch at least had the wits to know they were in deep trouble (Flitwick's standing as a dueling
champion was fairly well known, after all). Within moments, the entire group of invaders was either
unconscious or so much ash in the wind (the vampires and inferi).

The only beings that failed to get inside were the giants and the dementors. In the case if the giants,
they were just too big. The dementors were being hounded ... and herded. Some of the outside
defenders had seen the statues pounding the dementors into paste, and the word had gone out to herd
the dementors at the nearest statues to be dealt with. Though they were very much not dead, the
dementors that tangled with the statues found themselves unable to move at all, and were thus
neutralized rather effectively in the ongoing battle.

One of the larger groups that got in met up with the Marauders (new and old). Draco, Macnair,
Fenrir and two of his surviving pack, two vampires, a troll and a half dozen inferi against seven kids
and two adults. The invaders had no clue what they were getting into.

"Fenrir's mine." Remus growled, glaring at the ... thing ... that had made his life a living hell.

Fenrir just bared his teeth in a parody of a smile. "You don't have what it takes to kill me." He
snarled.

"We'll just have to see about that, won't we?" Remus said, his voice quiet and cold. The two men
lunged at each other, Remus forgoing magic in favor of beating Fenrir to paste with his bare hands.

Sirius launched a spell at Macnair, taking the only adult Death Eater out of the equation as Macnair
returned fire and concentrated his attacks on Sirius. Hermione, Ron, and Harry gave each other an
amused look before Ron repeated his first-year triumph over a troll (this time under far less uncertain
conditions). That left eight rather flammable beings ... and Draco.
Unfortunately, Harry and company soon discovered that while inferi were, on the whole, slow-moving and stupider than a troll, the vampires were the exact opposite. Fred, George and Hermione made short work of the Inferi. The entire group of New Marauders ended up back-to-back, though, as they tried to nail the insanely fast-moving vampires with a spell ... any spell, nevermind something that would light them afire. Harry tried desperately to keep an eye on Draco, who, so far, had not joined in the fight. Harry was wondering what the blonde was waiting for.

He found out soon enough. Remus got thrown halfway down the hall by Fenrir. Dazed, he didn't get to his feet instantly, and that's when Draco, showing once again just how much a coward he was (hitting a man in the back, waiting until a man was down and mostly defenseless to act), yelled 'Avada ...'

That, however, was as far as he got, because Harry instantaneously, instinctively, shrieked a spell in response to hearing the start of the killing curse, aiming at Draco's arm. "Reducto!"

Draco cut off his own spell when he heard Harry's bellow and tried to dive out of the way. Unfortunately, he moved the wrong direction ... straight into the spell's path. The results were ... messy, to say the least. And fatal. Half his chest got blown away, and he was dead before he hit the floor.

Remus managed to shake off the daze at that point, got to his feet, and launched himself at Fenrir again.

In the end, it was Neville, of all people, who finally managed to nail the vampires. Frustrated and angry at their inability to catch the two fast-moving targets, he bellowed out a spell that Harry'd never heard before that shot a huge net out of his wand. One of the vampires ran straight into the net, unable to stop, and quickly discovered there was no getting back out. The second vampire was caught less than a minute later in similar manner.

"What the heck is that spell, Neville?" Harry wanted to know.

"Containment spell that Professor Sprout taught me. Gets used a lot by Herbologists, to contain aggressive plants without hurting them, so they can be transported."

"Nice. You gotta teach us that one, sometime." Harry said. Privately, Harry was ... well, not quite sure how to handle what had happened with Draco. Part of him was glad the cowardly ferret was dead, part of him was wigging out both at the way he'd died and the implications when it came to 'the wand', and part of him, despite having known this sort of thing was going to happen, was freaking out at having killed someone, even accidentally. Oh, he'd killed Quirrell, but he'd been eleven at the time, and the impact had sort of passed him by, between being out of it for three days, returning the Dursleys, and the lingering thrill of saving the day.

The parts of him that were freaking out didn't last long, though. They got pushed to the side and ignored pretty damn fast, as they always had in the past, in favor of dealing with the current emergency. So far, the defenses were holding remarkably well. The enemy may have gotten into the school thanks to the giants, but by the time they had, the invading army had been cut to something like a quarter of its initial numbers thanks to the outer defenses and defenders. Not a one of the dementors or lethifolds had managed to make it into the school, the former all getting pounded to paste by the statues while the latter fell to overpowered fire spells. The goblins looked to be having the time of their lives taking down the giants and trolls that hadn't made it inside. a largeish knot of people, all fighting hand-and-teeth, rolled past, and Harry recognized one or two of the older werewolves that had taken refuge in the castle in the melee.

The knot came apart about the same time Fenrir launched Remus again, and the two groups faced off...
against each other for a few seconds before Ginny huffed.

"Oh, enough of the posturing. Reducto!" And the wall behind the enemy werewolves exploded, huge chunks of stone raining down on them and taking most of them out.

Remus blinked, gave Ginny a look, then shrugged and pulled out his wand for the first time, spitting out a spell that launched what looked like half a hundred silver flechettes at Fenrir. Fenrir shrieked in agony and collapsed, his body seizing violently for a few moments before he went still. The few remaining werewolves that hadn't been buried under rubble and or knocked unconscious took to their heels in the face of people wielding wands.

Sirius finally managed to knock Macnair out of the fighting (Harry didn't look to see if he was dead or just knocked out) and they all headed off to deal with the next group of invaders, since their part of the castle seemed to be clear for the moment. The werewolves joined them.

They made their way down to the main entrance hall ... and utter chaos. Dobby, Kreacher, and what looked like every house-elf in the castle had joined in the fight. Some of them carried knives, but most of them seemed to be content using their own peculiar brand of magic against the invaders. Considering that they could blast people off their feet, they were meeting with a great deal of success, as they were aiming the people they were knocking around at walls. They were also coming to the assistance of any of the defenders that seemed to be in trouble, popping in and out to attack and confound the invaders so fast they were impossible to keep track of. Two or three of the most ingenious (Dobby among them) had grabbed lengths of wood, set them alight, and were wielding them against the remaining inferi.

From the look of things, the vast majority of the invaders had been chased into the main entrance hall from the various corridors, and were now facing an intimidating hail of spellfire from all sides. Harry managed to snag one of the house-elves that passed.

"I need you to take some of your fellow elves and check the castle for invaders. Make sure no one's still roaming around where they don't belong." The elf gave a fierce nod and popped out.

That taken care of, Harry took a few moments to survey the chaos and frowned. Voldemort wasn't here. Damnit. Clever bastard. Harry glanced at the Marauders. "Cover me for a minute!" He told them, then pressed himself into a corner where he could concentrate on something other than the ongoing battle without worrying too much about getting his head taken off.

It took a minute to swim through the morass that was Voldemort's mind, but Harry finally figured out where the bastard was and what he was doing, and snarled in frustration before shaking himself back into the waking world.

"Bastard's raiding the Ministry. Took some of his best folks to do it, too." He told the others. There were a lot of grim looks, but there was nothing they could do at the moment ... they were needed here. The Ministry was just going to have to fend for itself for a little longer. Fortunately, Amelia Bones was no one's fool, so hopefully, it wouldn't be a bloodbath.

They flung themselves back into the battle. The New Marauders, who'd spent the best part of a year training together, were putting one hell of a dent in the enemy compared to other groups of students ... but then, with Harry, Ron, and Hermione especially, they knew each other like the backs of their hands long before the training, had faced dangerous situations before, had had an idea of what each other could do, was capable of when the chips were down. The training had just magnified that, taught them how to move and fight as a cohesive unit so they didn't trip over each other in the heat of the moment. They trusted each other and depended on each other ... and that made all the difference. While other groups of friends might have known and trusted each other, they hadn't had as long to
train together, so they weren't quite as effective. As for the Death Eaters that were stupid enough to assume the New Marauders were easy prey ... well, most of them didn't get much of a chance to realize their error before they got knocked on their butts and/or killed in the crossfire created by the other invaders, who had clearly never been taught to fight together, or simply didn't trust each other (hardly surprising).

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity or three, all of the invaders save a handful or so of werewolves (who had all surrendered after Fenrir was killed) had been soundly defeated. Harry glanced over at the others.

"We've got to get to the Ministry to help." He told them.

Ron nodded. "We can fly out ... that'll get us past the traps without getting caught in them. Then once we're past the wards, we can apparate."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Right. Meet you at the boundary." He concentrated for a moment and then blurred as he shifted to his hawk form, then took off like a bullet.

Hermione huffed, but then accio'd some of the school brooms (which had all been brought inside the castle) and soon the rest of the group was on their way, meeting Harry just past the ward boundary, where he stood with a mischievous smirk. Despite the situation, the whole flying under his own power thing was still (and probably always would remain) very, very cool.

"Where should we apparate to?" Fred wanted to know.

"Visitor's entrance. There's an alley nearby we can use." Harry said. "Too dangerous to try to apparate into the Atrium, even if the wards are down."

"Yeah, things are going to be a bit crazy down there." George agreed.

"Good luck, everybody." Harry said, and then almost as one, they apparated out.
April 15, 1996, Ministry for Magic

While the attack on Hogwarts was beginning, Voldemort and a good-sized chunk of his adult Death Eaters were gathering in a knot, preparing to apparate to the Ministry.

Voldemort chose well for the group that was going to attack the Ministry, for the most part. Nagini, a devastating combatant in her own right (as well as holding a horcrux, something that no one knew) was draped over his shoulders for the apparation. The only truly questionable member of the group was Pettigrew, but Voldemort wanted that cowardly backstabber under his personal surveillance, so would contend with his incompetence on this all-important mission.

"Kill any mudblood you find." Voldemort ordered, though there was little need to actually say it with this group. "Maim the others to your heart's content, but attempt to keep deaths to a minimum amongst those of pure blood."

He glared at the lot of them, the unstated threat of mass amounts of pain (and possibly their own deaths) hanging in the air as incentive to obey his commands. They all bowed and scraped before him, assuring him of their compliance with his orders. Voldemort largely ignored it as he apparated out of there, expecting them to follow him, or else. Of course, they did.

Unfortunately for any of Voldemort's plans, Amelia Bones had tightened security around the Ministry to a fare-thee-well. It could not, however, be as tightly secured as Hogwarts, since people were always coming and going. Voldemort and his Death Eaters took advantage of one of the weak points in the defenses ... the floo network.

Complete pandemonium broke out when fifteen Death Eaters, Nagini, and worse (at least where most folks were concerned) Voldemort himself flooed into the Atrium of the Ministry. Voldemort had timed their arrival for the time of day when the Atrium was at its busiest ... the scarce night shift leaving the building while the far more populous morning shift was arriving. People began to scream and run even before spells started flying, trying to find places to hide. But scattered here and there amongst the crowd were people who were made of sterner stuff. By no means were all of these people Gryffindors, either. As spells started raining down, they attempted to shield themselves and those around them, and fight back, not that it did much good in most cases. Fully half the impromptu defenders were cut down in the first two minutes.

But they were not the only ones in the Atrium who came to the defense of the general populace. Amelia, forseeing an attempt to raid the Ministry, had stationed Aurors in the Atrium, and these men and women were far more well-trained than the impromptu defenders. Their only problem lay in the fact that they were none of them vicious, cold-blooded killers. They stuck to ... gentler ... spells than the ones the Death Eaters were using, which put them at a bit of a disadvantage. Too, there was the psychological impact of Voldemort's presence. He refrained from casting any spells, merely meandering along behind his followers as they cut a swath through the crowds, but his presence was enough to make even the bravest of the people present watery in the knees. It didn't help that he had sent Nagini into the masses with a quiet, almost happy-sounding "Nagini ... kill." Nagini was, of
course, only too happy to obey that command, and began to cut her own swath through the
defenders with her venomous bite.

Within about two minutes, the defenders had been herded towards the elevators as the Death Eaters
made their way in that direction, intending to conquer the other levels. It was at this point, however,
that the Death Eaters and Voldemort got an unpleasant and unwelcome surprise.

The moment the alarm announcing Voldemort's arrival had gone off, all the elevators had gone to
other floors, and Aurors, Hit Wizards, DMLE agents and Unspeakables had all piled into them, led
by Amelia Bones herself. The elevators all arrived back at the Atrium at the same time ... allowing
the nearly fifty-strong fighting force to pour into the Atrium at once.

At the same time, heavy-duty spell-proofed gates slammed down over the fireplaces, cutting off the
Death Eaters’ only means of escape and trapping them rather effectively in the Atrium. Amelia had
known that doing something like that was a massive gamble, but she'd been determined to not let a
single one of the bastards sneak out so that they had to be hunted down later. She'd only been able to
hope that the resultant, inevitable loss of innocent lives would be counted as worth it.

Temporarily unable to reach their desired goal of the elevators, the Death Eaters fell back in the face
of the oncoming swarm of defenders. Before too long, the fighting had broken into small pockets of
one or two Death Eaters fighting off three or four defenders.

At first, Voldemort continued to refrain from engaging in the battle, but soon enough he had no
choice but to do something, as Amelia and two Unspeakables converged on him and started
throwing pretty much every spell they knew at him to little to no effect. Voldemort laughed
mockingly at them as he batted their spells aside.

"You dare to defy me? To stand against me? You are fools. Children. Your deaths shall be all the
swifter and more painful, so that all may learn from your ... impudence ... that Lord Voldemort is not
to be trifled with." And then, almost lazily, he began to rain spells down on the triad.

But these three were made of sterner stuff than most. Amelia had not gotten to be head of the DMLE
because of her good looks, after all, and no one got to be an Unspeakable without learning a
frightening amount of magic. Alone, each of them would have fallen under Voldemort's attack, but
together, they managed to fight Voldemort to a draw for nearly ten minutes.

During that ten minutes, six of the fifteen Death Eaters managed to win free of their attackers and
reach the elevators, heading to the other floors to try to complete their assignments for their Lord.
The Atrium was becoming quieter and quieter as bodies, both dead and wounded, began to pile up.
Faced with the most brutal of Voldemort's followers, only the strongest of the defenders were
managing to survive.

The good news was that most of the non-fighters had managed to find cubbyholes to hide in shortly
after the elevators delivered Amelia and company, so civilian casualties had been kept fairly low.
Also, not all of the Death Eaters managed to survive their duels. Five of them lay dead, sprawled on
the floor of the Atrium in various grotesque poses and pools of blood.

The bad news was that despite that, the defenders were losing. The remaining four Death Eaters
slowly overwhelmed them and reached the elevators and the other floors, free to continue their
missions. Of course, Pettigrew, being the coward that he was, had simply shifted to rat form and
waited out the worst of the fighting before making his way to the elevators. Then, Voldemort finally
succeeded in landing a telling blow to Amelia and the Unspeakables, killing one of the Unspeakables
and throwing the other Unspeakable and Amelia halfway across the Atrium, where both landed with
bone-shattering impacts. With no one else in the mood to try to cross wands with him, Voldemort
strolled to the elevators, and made his way to the Department of Mysteries.

It was at this point that Harry and company arrived in an alley above the Ministry. They quickly made their way to the only still-working access into the Ministry ... the visitor's entrance. Seven kids should not have been able to fit in the thing, but they managed it, and were soon descending into the Ministry. They did not, however, wait for the booth to land on the floor. The booth was too big and noticeable a target to allow that, so as soon as they could, they forced the door open and one by one leapt down to the floor.

What they found was a charnel house. The Atrium had more or less been blasted to bits. Glass and bits of masonry littered the floor, and the air was thick with stone dust, the coppery smell of large amounts of spilled blood, and the reek of voided (or ripped-apart) bowels and bladders. Bodies, both dead and in varying stages of 'still alive' were scattered everywhere. Other than a few dead bodies, there was no sign of any Death Eaters. Some few of the non-fighters that had hidden themselves in whatever corners they could find had begun to creep out of hiding, many attempting to aid the injured defenders as best they could.

For half a minute, the New Marauders stood there staring in horrified dismay. The damage at Hogwarts had been nowhere near this bad. Then again, they had, for the most part, been up against the children of Death Eaters and magical creatures. A grim-faced Harry was the first to regain his equilibrium.

"C'mon guys, we've got to get a move on. They've made it to the other floors. We're going to have to split up."

Ron and Hermione immediately frowned. "I don't like that idea, mate." Ron objected.

"Neither do I, Harry. It's too dangerous." Hermione agreed.

Harry eyed them. "I need you guys to find Nagini, remember?" He prodded.

"She'll be with him." Ron pointed out.

"I don't think so." Harry said. "He doesn't know we've offed all his horcruxes, remember? He still thinks he's got most of them, minus the diary." And possibly the diadem and cup, but Harry hadn't gone looking to see if Voldemort had found out about those two being destroyed. "So he's not overly fussed about protecting her. Besides, with the Horcrux in her, she'd have to be hit with something that can kill a horcrux before she went down."

And he wasn't about to tell them that he'd made a ... side trip ... when he'd shifted to hawk form and taken off. He'd grabbed his cloak, and then gone to McGonagall's office where the diary, locket, and ring had been being kept after they'd been de-horcruxed (was that even a word?). Harry didn't know what, if anything, having the Ressurection Stone along for the ride would do, but at the absolute least, he could taunt Voldemort into doing something rash by dangling the thing in front of his nose.

The others weren't any too happy, but eventually agreed to split up. Neville headed for the second level and the DMLE offices. Ron headed for the fourth level and the Magical Creatures offices. The twins headed for the fifth level and Magical Cooperation, while Hermione and Ginny headed for the sixth level and Magical Transportation. Harry, after a moment's hesitation to poke Voldemort's brain and see where he was at, headed first for the courtroom level, then down the stairs to the Department of Mysteries.

Neville
Neville quickly discovered that the second level was all but deserted, since the vast majority of the DMLE workers had gone down to the Atrium to try to deal with the Death Eaters and Voldemort. Only a half-dozen or so people had been left on the second level, most of them secretaries and the like, untrained for combat. Easy prey for the likes of Bellatrix Lestrange and Nagini.

Fortune shone on Neville in that Bellatrix was so enraptured with and distracted by her torture of her most recent victim that she didn't notice Neville's entrance into the room. Even better, her gleeful cackling and taunting of her victim covered what little noise Neville made. Nagini had curled up near Bellatrix, as the few remaining survivors had wisely hidden themselves in places Nagini could not reach.

Neville had just one chance to do serious damage to Bellatrix before she could retaliate. If he managed to keep his head down and keep her from realizing someone else was there. He crept as close as he dared get ... and let fly with a silent Reducto.

The first Bellatrix knew of her danger was when the spell lit the room. Unable to stop the Crucio she was tormenting her victim with and cast a shield spell fast enough, she tried to lunge out of the way, but there simply wasn't time enough to get entirely clear. The Reducto reduced most of her right leg to mincemeat and splinters. She screamed in agony as she got thrown halfway across the large room, knocking down quite a few cubicle walls as she went.

Still, despite being gravely wounded, she was not out of the fight. She managed to pull herself out of the wreckage and seal off the stump of her leg, stopping the bleeding. Leaning heavily on whatever happened to be handiest, she managed to get herself upright, and, spotting Neville (who'd been looking for another shot at her among the wreckage), began to cackle gleefully.

"So the bitty baby learned how to bite, did he? Come to join your mummy and daddy, have you?" She taunted. "I'll enjoy listening to you scream." She flung a silent Crucio at Neville.

Neville, however, was no dunce, and hit the floor the moment Bellatrix' wand started moving. The spell zinged over his head, missing him by inches. Of course, at that point, Neville discovered he had another problem. Namely a twenty-foot long venomous python named Nagini, who was bearing down on him, mouth gaping wide.

Forced to choose between facing Bellatrix's wand or Nagini's teeth, Neville chose the former, aiming a silent Reducto at Nagini to drive her back (since it wouldn't be enough to kill her even if it connected) and then scrambling to his feet and firing off as many spells as he could think of as fast as he could think them at Bellatrix.

Unfortunately, while Bellatrix's ability to dodge had been shot to hell, her ability to shield had not, and Neville's assault never reached its target. Bellatrix gave Neville a creepy little smile and then launched her own attack. Neville found himself in the fight of his life ... for his life. Scrambling around, ducking and dodging behind every bit of furniture he could find (and using the odd bit of furniture to fend off Nagini), he shot spells at Bellatrix whenever he got the chance.

And the longer the fight lasted, the more chances he got. Suffering from massive blood loss and shock, Bellatrix's energy and ability to concentrate were fading fast, and so was her rate of fire with spells. At the same time, she was finding it harder and harder to shield herself from Neville's attacks until finally, Neville managed to get three or four heavy-duty spells off at once, and they proved to be too much for Bellatrix, and she collapsed to the ground, bleeding heavily from Neville's last spell, never to rise again.

Neville didn't have any time to celebrate the death of the woman responsible for his parents' condition, however. Nagini made sure of that, lunging and striking at him. Neville scrambled away,
mentally going over his options and swiftly realizing he ... really only had one option.

Seconds later, a great gout of flame shaped like a dragon roared out of Neville's wand. Nagini, her body at full extension as she lunged at Neville, caught the blast full in the face. For a half a second or two, it seemed as though nothing would happen, and then abruptly Nagini burnt to ash, a high-pitched scream marking the destruction of whatever had been used as a horcrux and jammed into her.

It took Neville the better part of a minute to wrestle the Fiendfyre back under control and stop the spell. Once he had, he collapsed down onto the ground, gasping for breath as his body trembled. After a minute or two, he tried to get to his feet only to discover his body was having none of that, as injuries he hadn't even realized he'd gotten in the mad scramble against Bellatrix and Nagini finally started to report in now that he wasn't swimming in adrenaline.

He did a swift inventory and was relieved to discover that while he was covered nearly head to toe in bruises, cuts, scrapes, and the odd gouge or two, he was in one piece and, as best he could tell, not suffering from any Dark curses. After another minute or so of rest, he forced himself to his feet, grumbling at how shaky he felt, not realizing he was suffering from magical exhaustion on top of everything else, thanks to the Fiendfyre spell. Taking a deep breath, he summoned enough energy for one last spell ... a patronus ... and sent it to find Harry. There was no verbal message, but there didn't need to be one. Harry would understand what it meant. Then he slowly made his way to the elevator and headed back to the Atrium. He would be no help to the others in the shape he was in, but he might just be able to do something to help the Atrium survivors.

Ron

The fourth level was a bit more populated than the second level, as Ron quickly discovered ... not that the folks on this floor were any better at combat or self-defense than the ones left behind on the second level. He had only to follow the screams to quickly discover where the Death Eaters were at on this level.

He almost tripped over a knot of bodies as he rounded a corner. There were two or three Ministry employees, and, just visible under them, the black cloak of a Death Eater. From the look of things, the poor idiot Ministry folks had decided to rush the Death Eater. They'd paid for the idea dearly. Grimacing, Ron bent to make sure the Death Eater was truly down and out, then continued on towards the screaming.

He found a rather horrible sight when he rounded the final corner. Pettigrew, easily recognizable after that night in the Shrieking Shack, pressed against a wall and watching avidly as a Death Eater Ron didn't recognize by sight tortured some poor woman with Crucio. Ron snarled and lashed out with a Reducto. Unfortunately, he was not quite as lucky as Neville had been. Bellatrix had only had a snake as companion, and as altered as Nagini may have been, she didn't comprehend anything about magic other than 'green light from Master might mean dinnertime for me.' Pettigrew, for all his sniveling cowardice, was still human, and fully comprehended the consequences that a wand pointed at someone usually meant.

"Rab ... " That was as far as Peter needed to get before the other Death Eater turned his head enough to see Ron and the spell. Unlike Bellatrix, who had tried to lunge to one side and therefore still had part of her body in the path of the spell when it arrived, Rabastan Lestrange flung himself forward, the same direction as the spell was going, and collapsed on top of his erstwhile victim. The spell missed his head by less than an inch, rattling his brains and giving him quite a headache. He rolled off the woman he'd been torturing and came up spitting spells, forcing Ron to defend himself.

But here, Ron was lucky. While Rabastan was definitely dangerous, he did not have his sister-in-law's deranged, obsessive vindictiveness, nor her comprehensive knowledge of Dark Arts spells and
dueling expertise. Better, Peter, true to his nature, was staying out of the fight for the moment, possibly waiting to see who would prevail. Or perhaps there was some twisted shred of attachment somewhere in there making him reluctant to attack, given that Peter had been around the youngest two Weasley children all their lives, and had only missed a few years of Fred, George, and Percy’s lives.

Whichever cause it was that was staying Peter's hand, it was helping Ron immensely. He could concentrate wholly on the fight with Rabastan, though he was smart enough to glance in Peter's direction from time to time as he fought, to ensure that Peter was both staying put and not looking like he wanted to join in the fun. Ron wasn't willing, however, to let the situation remain the way it was, and when, after a couple minutes, he managed to knock Rabastan on his butt temporarily, he immediately turned and aimed a triad of spells at Pettigrew ... Petrificus Totalis, Incarcerous, and Stupefy. Peter, dolt that he was, got caught by all three, and hit the floor, wrapped from nose to toes in ropes, unconscious.

"Got you, you traitorous bastard." Ron muttered before he returned to the fight with Rabastan. "If you're lucky, the Aurors'll find you before Harry does." Not that Ron actually intended for Peter to stay as he was ... he knew the spells were a temporary capture at best, with an unknown number of Death Eaters running about. He'd have to do something far more permanent to the bastard once he'd dealt with Rabastan. Ron figured he'd force the little bastard into rat form, then lock him in an Unbreakable cage and keep him with him.

If he survived. He yelped in alarm as an Avada Kedavra came roaring at him, and flung himself behind a nearby desk, aiming a spell (he was so panicked and rushed he didn't even pay attention to what he was casting) as he landed. He scampered partway around the corner, using the heavier wall as a shield while he regained his wits and got his mind back on the fight with Rabastan and not on Peter.

He came back around the corner flinging every spell he knew, just about. He didn't care if he actually hit Rabastan, at least at first. That wasn't the point. The point was to herd the bastard into an increasingly small space where it would eventually become inevitable that the bastard got hit. And so he did. Rabastan's reign as a Death Eater ended when a large chunk of wood, stone, and plaster very nearly smeared his brains all over the floor. Getting your skull smashed in tended to ensure you didn’t get up to fight another day.

Ron sagged against the wall, breathing hard. He stayed like that for a few moments before stomping over to the still-petrified Peter and glared. With quick, sharp movements he transfigured some nearby rubble into a cage, and cast spells on it to ensure that it wouldn't come apart if Peter tried to transform back to human. Then he used the spell they'd all learned when they were working on becoming animagi. Normally, it was used to force a person into their animal form if they got stuck partly-transformed, as casting the animagus-revealing spell, which forced a person out of animal form, tended to go very wrong when performed on someone partly transformed. Ron then put the still-tied up, petrified and sleeping rat into the cage with a triumphant grin.

"You know, I almost hope the Aurors let us have you. Be interesting to see what some of the others could come up with." Ron growled at the rat. Certainly, Sirius was owed some paybacks, at least. Sadly, Ron doubted that would ever happen, though ... and in a way, he was glad. As much as he'd like to see the rat pay the price personally, he knew that something like that ... well, Pettigrew wasn't worth dancing with the devil over.

The Twins

Fred and George found the fifth level about as populated as the fourth, and, to their great surprise, it
was a bit more organized. A bit. Most of the survivors had ganged together and were now huddled in a corner, shielding themselves from the concentrated attacks of the two Death Eaters attempting to overwhelm them.

More than one person over the years had speculated that Fred and George were telepathic, what with the way they finished each other's sentences and seemed to know what the other was thinking without so much as exchanging glances, among other 'evidence'. The truth was ... they weren't. They were an oddity amongst twins. Many identical twins fight to have a sense of self separate from their other half, but the twins had actually gone the other way, and deliberately immersed themselves in each other, learning the others' quirks and mannerisms to the point where literally no one would be able to tell them apart, if they didn't want to be told apart. This intimate knowledge of each other was what allowed them to think, act, and react as, essentially, a single organism.

That ability was going to serve them in good stead now, as they were facing dealing with one of the few sibling teams in the Death Eaters ... the Carrows. While the Carrows were most definitely not as close as the twins were, they had something most Death Eaters didn't ... the ability to work together seamlessly as a team. This made them far more dangerous than any single other Death Eater save perhaps Bellatrix, and leagues more effective than any pair of Death Eaters asked to work together save the Lestrange brothers.

The twins got no lucky first shot that evened the odds. Alecto may have been busy trying to break down the shield the survivors were hiding behind, but Amycus had no such problem, and noticed the two redheads' arrival. A swift, wordless warning to her brother had him bringing the wall behind the survivors down on them, knocking them out at the very least as the overstressed shield gave under the weight.

While Alecto was neutralizing the Ministry survivors, Amycus launched a series of spells at the twins, forcing them to shield themselves. Or, at least, that's what she'd expected them to do. But the twins, like the rest of the Marauders, had got training from Filius and Minerva. Filius had made it a point to drill his students in blocking spells with any bit of detritus to hand rather than relying on energy-draining shielding spells. Minerva had found something close to a kindred spirit in the twins' abilities with Transfiguration, though they applied that skill in highly ... unorthodox ... ways.

One twin yanked some debris into the 'fire zone', allowing it to absorb the impact of the spells. While he was thus occupied, the other twin transfigured other debris into a swarm of what looked like pixies that he then sent to bedevil both Carrows.

This started an incredibly fast-paced and close-to-equal fight. The Carrows had the edge in sheer experience and spell knowledge, but the twins had the edge in ability to work together and sheer inventiveness. Spells of every description were flying back and forth, as was debris, both in its natural state and transfigured into any number of creatures and even plants.

Gradually, slowly, the twins were pushing the Carrows back, overwhelming them. Their stronger ability to work as a pair, combined with their utterly unpredictable use of every spell in the book, up to and including Wingardium Leviosa, was throwing the Carrows into confusion. They were too used to more traditional dueling methods and a more limited, if more devastating, range of spells. No fully trained adult expected first year spells to be put to devastating use in a to-the-death duel, after all. Then again, none of them had Ron Weasley for a brother, who'd managed to KO a troll as a first year with Wingardium Leviosa, either. Eventually, the Carrows found themselves cornered and disarmed ... literally. When Alecto, despite the shock and blood loss, lunged at the twins, intending to ... well, the twins didn't wait around to find out what he'd planned. They hit him with a reducto.

When Amycus, enraged at her brother's death, tried the same thing, she got the same treatment.
Dumbledore, had he been alive, would have been horrified, dismayed, and completely, totally and utterly against the fight-to-kill attitude the New Marauders had gone into this whole mess with. But then, he'd've been against adults fighting to kill, too, as evidenced by his insistence on nonlethal spells with the Order. But the New Marauders all knew that the chances were good of Death Eaters squirming their way out of trouble one way or the other if they were still alive when all was said and done. That had, after all, happened after Voldemort's first defeat. They weren't willing to take that chance this time, and if that meant maiming people for life at best and killing at worst, they'd done what they could to prepare themselves for that. This wasn't a game. This was a fight for the future of their world, and it was for keeps ... and none of them intended on losing.

Hermione and Ginny

Hermione and Ginny arrived on the sixth level only to find the half-handful of people there all already dead, all looking like they'd been tortured. They discovered Antonin Dolohov and Rodolphus Lestrange sweating and swearing over the floo network controls and spells, evidently trying to force a connection between the Ministry and Hogwarts (that had been completely shut down the minute Hogwarts had been attacked).

"Damnit, what the hell did they do? Nothing we're trying is working. The Dark Lord will not be pleased." Rodolphus snarled in aggravation. "He wants to be able to walk in there when he's done here. The Potter brat is there."

Dolohov didn't dignify Rodolphus' snarling with an answer. Hermione and Ginny stared at each other for a second, both horrified and amused. Horrified because the fight at Hogwarts was basically done, barring one or two possible troublemakers still hiding somewhere, and having Voldemort and whatever of his followers were here flooing into the middle of the school would be exceedingly bad. Amused because contrary to what Lestrange and Voldemort had assumed, Harry was not currently at Hogwarts ... a fact that Voldemort had no doubt discovered for himself by now.

Distracted as they were, Dolohov and Lestrange never knew what hit them ... literally. With their heads together and their full concentration on the floo network problem, Hermione and Ginny were able to hit them with the Petrificus-Incarcerous-Stupefy triad before they even realized they had guests. The girls then transfigured some odds and ends into a cage, and bespelled it to be completely un-escapable before they accio-d the mens' wands away from them and broke them into kindling. They then frisked both men and deprived them of everything they had in their pockets, no matter what it was, before dragging them into the cage and sealing them in.

"That was more than somewhat anti-climatic." Ginny groused as she eyeballed the two men.

"Be grateful. I am. Dolohov's supposed to be as bad as Bellatrix, and the other guy's married to her." Hermione gave a shiver, then sighed. "One of us ought to head downstairs. There's a lot of people hurt."

Ginny nodded. One of them would have to stay and watch the Death Eaters ... unless ... "Do you think we could squeeze them onto the elevator? I'd really rather not split up if we can avoid it."

It took a bit of finagling, but they did manage to cram the cage onto the elevator, and made their way to the Atrium to help the wounded.

Harry

It took Harry a good few minutes to figure out the security measures in the Department of Mysteries ... and another couple of minutes poking his head in various doors to finally find Voldemort, who had made his way to a room filled with orbs. By the time Harry got there, Voldemort had found what
he was after ... the prophecy orb for him and Harry. He'd also listened to it.

Not that that knowledge bothered Harry overmuch. He already knew the prophecy himself, and had every intention in the world of being the sole survivor of this encounter.

"Hello, Tom. Got a lot on your mind?" The quiet greeting from Harry came at the same time as a fierce barrage of spells.

Voldemort, sadly, was no slouch, and batted the spells away and launched a volley of his own. Very shortly the Room of Prophecies was being reduced to so much sand and grit.

Neither man held back in the slightest, launching every spell they knew at each other, shielding, ducking and dodging, and eventually being forced to flee the room as the multitudes of racks began to collapse around them. They fought their way through one room after another, leaving destruction in their wake. Voldemort got more and more angry and frustrated at his inability to overpower Harry. Blast and damn, but he should have killed Draco when he had the chance!

Voldemort didn't notice in the mayhem, but the vast majority of his problems with Harry were thanks to the Elder Wand. The Wand knew full well who its master was, and while it could not stop Voldemort from using it, it could and did weaken powerful spells to the point they were laughable and force the spells to go wide of their target.

Then the two men more or less fell into a room with an odd, crumbling rock arch with a strange, fluttering veil in it. At first, neither Harry nor Voldemort paid the arch any mind ... they were far too busy trying to kill each other. But after a few moments, Harry became aware of a low, indistinct murmur of voices. Quite a few voices. His first inclination was to think that 'backup' was arriving ... and hoping it didn't find them, because none of them could do anything about Voldemort. But after a minute, he realized the murmur was coming from the arch. About a minute after that, he realized that Voldemort seemed to be hearing it too, as Voldemort kept tipping his head and glancing towards the arch.

About then, a Patronus bounded into the room. Harry recognized it instantly as Neville's, though it looked a good bit wispier than it normally did. The import of its arrival made Harry give a feral grin. Nagini was dead ... and Voldemort was out of Horcruxes.

Harry had been withholding as much of his magical strength as he had dared to during the battle, knowing he'd not do any lethal damage to Voldemort even if he went all out, at least not until Nagini had been dealt with. Now ... now was the time. Harry took a deep breath and then aimed a series of spells at Voldemort, putting as much oomph into them as he could. Voldemort, who'd been easily fending off Harry's attacks until now, attempted to fend off the spells ... only to get sent flying halfway across the room when the stronger spells overwhelmed his 'tailored to the previous strength seen' shields.

Midflight, his grip on 'his' wand weakened. The Elder Wand, sensing its chance, wrenched free of Voldemort's grip and went sailing across the room, flipping end over end just once so it was heading for Harry grip-first. Harry, who hadn't been expecting that ... after all, he'd not hit Voldemort with an Expelliarmus ... nevertheless managed to catch the Elder Wand.

For the first time since their creation, the Deathly Hallows were united.

The room shook violently, as if in the midst of an earthquake, the walls and roof cracking under the strain, raining debris down on both Voldemort and Harry. At the same time, the room was filled with a loud, booming, echoing scream of rage ... that wasn't coming from either Voldemort or Harry. As the room stilled, Harry warily poked his head up from the floor, looking around for both Voldemort
and ... well, whatever the heck had caused the quake and the yelling. Up on the dais, the arch looked like it had completely escaped any damage.

And as Harry watched, the odd, fluttering curtain that hung from the arch twisted, solidified ... and began to pull away from the arch. It began to take a form that chilled Harry's bones, because as it stepped away from the arch, it looked very, very much like a dementor. A dementor on steroids, that is. Half again as tall as a normal dementor, its 'cloak' was pitch black and apparently in perfect condition. Its hands and the one foot Harry spotted peeking out from under the cloak as it stepped forward were, unlike a regular dementor, purest white and definitely didn't look to be scabby or rotting or any such thing, though they were definitely very thin, giving the appearance of being no more than bone with skin stretched tight over it.

Harry grimaced. He was in so much trouble. As if having to try to kill Voldemort wasn't bad enough, now he had to fend off the dementor from hell as well? This was just great. But a second or two later, Harry somewhat belatedly realized something. The room wasn't going cold ... and he wasn't reacting the way he normally did around a dementor.

What the hell was going on here?

Before Harry could figure out what to do, the hooded figure waved one hand lazily, and Voldemort got pulled towards it through the air, until Voldemort was a couple feet from it, his feet dangling a good six feet above the floor. Harry was hard put to keep from snickering at the expression on Voldemort's face, despite the seriousness and uncertainty of the situation he found himself in. The ... whatever it was ... briefly examined Voldemort, then tossed him aside like a piece of garbage, apparently utterly disinterested in him.

And then, apparently, it was Harry's turn to garner the thing's attention. Except in his case, he didn't get hoisted up and then thrown aside. The thing just turned its hooded head in Harry's direction and ... apparently ... stared for a minute. At which point Harry finally realized something. There had been absolutely no noise whatever since the yell. Not the sound of debris falling, not Voldemort mouthing off (which Harry was fairly sure Voldemort was incapable of NOT doing).

"I smell the blood of the Peverells in you, stripling." The raspy, growling baritone made Harry jump in startlement. Since the HELL when did Dementors talk?

There was a harsh laugh. "I am no dementor, stripling. I. Am. Death." The last three words had the ring of a royal proclamation. "Long ago, three brothers, in their arrogance, thought they could stop me. They summoned me, and through trickery, forced me to create them gifts, thinking to weaken and humble me. But I, I had the last laugh. Their gifts turned to curses in their hands, and two fell into my realm despite all they attempted to avoid it."

There was a short pause. "The third ... ahh, that one, that one was wise. He came to understand his and his brothers' folly. Long he sought to destroy the gift I had given him, thinking that in doing so, I might be appeased. But my gifts are not so easily destroyed, and he failed. Every hand that has touched them, have I struck down before their appointed time for their temerity."

Harry swallowed nervously as Death seemed to drift closer. "And yet here is an enigma. All three gifts in the hands of one, a mere stripling child who has but the vaguest idea of what he holds ... and desires not their power. One you gained by birthright, I see. One, befouled by magics meant to defy me, which has since been cleansed, and the wand, which this ... foul creature ... " It motioned towards Voldemort. "sought and sought to control, yet it answers to you."

Death began to circle Harry, who swiveled to keep it in view. "You are a most curious child. There is no thought in you of using these gifts except in the defense of others. No crowing, strutting ego
proclaiming yourself greater than all others."

Harry finally found his voice. "Look ... I really don't know what the whole deal is with all of this. I'm just ... " He glanced over at Voldemort. Before he could continue, Death broke in.

"Yes, that one has done all he could to ensure he and I never meet, has he not? A more corrupt, wicked, depraved soul would be difficult to find. Yes, that one will be coming with me, this day. All his precautions against meeting me have gone. There is but the question of what shall be done with you."

Harry winced. "Ummm ... ok, these things can't be destroyed, evidently, but ... what if I give them back to you?" He offered. "I mean, you're here, after all, and you made them."

Death went still for a moment. "Indeed you are an unusual child." It growled. "But your offer pleases me. Return to me the stone and the wand. The cloak you may keep, as it belonged to the wise brother, and you have much in kinship with him. In return, I will take this creature with me ... and shall not seek you out before your time."

Harry couldn't get the resurrection stone out of his pocket fast enough before tossing both stone and wand towards Death, unwilling to get close enough for Death to grab them from him. Death snatched both items out of the air. A split second later, there was another booming, echoing roar, this time of victory, and the room shook even more violently than the first time, tossing Harry flat on his back.

By the time he managed to get back to his feet after the shaking stopped, there was no sign of Voldemort, or of Death, and the arch had regained its fluttering curtain.

Harry couldn't get out of there fast enough, bolting for the central room and the exit as fast as his legs would move.
Aftermath

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter.

(____)(____)(____)(____)

April 15, 1996, Hogwarts

In the chaos of ensuring the castle was empty of enemies, gathering and segregating the wounded ... putting the surviving Death Eaters in the same room as the defenders was a VERY bad idea ... and getting everyone triaged at least, as well as gathering the dead, the absence of the New Marauders was not noted for a good ten minutes or so.

Hogwarts had fared remarkably well in the battle. The castle had suffered a bit of structural damage, but not too terribly much. Casualties had also been surprisingly light ... only a dozen adults and students had perished in the attack. Injuries had been a good bit more prolific, but less than a half-dozen people would walk away from the battle with something more severe and permanent than scars to remind them of it.

It was Severus who finally noticed the absence of certain students. Having prowled through the Great Hall, where the injured defenders were being handled, the trophy room where the injured Death Eaters were being treated, and the Entrance Hall where the dead were being laid in state until they could be collected by family or tended to by the Ministry if no family survived without spotting Harry and company, he immediately headed back into the Great Hall.

"Black, have you seen your godson?" He snapped when he reached the man. The two of them may have more or less buried the hatchet, but that didn't stop them from still disliking each other and Severus would have preferred to speak with Lupin, given a choice on the matter. Unfortunately, the wolf was clear on the other side of the room.

Sirius eyed Severus, suddenly alarmed. "No ... no I haven't. Not since we got separated in the Entrance Hall towards the end of the battle." Sirius was not slow to realize the implications. "Shit. They figured out where Voldemort was at and went after him!"

Severus gave a grim nod. "We need to find where they have gone, and quickly." He glanced around the room, contemplating the Death Eaters he had seen, both injured and dead. "Bellatrix is not here. Nor are the Carrows, or the Lestrange brothers." He frowned. "None of his best fighters, as a matter of fact."

The two men looked at each other, and for one of the few times in their lives, were of like mind. "The Ministry." Sirius breathed. "Shit, it'll be a slaughterhouse." He straightened up and gave a loud, sharp whistle. "We need every able-bodied fighter and as many people capable of healing as can be spared to assemble in the Great Hall. The Ministry's under attack!" He bellowed into the ensuing silence.

That galvanized the people in the Great Hall. Within a few minutes, nearly half of Hogwarts' fighting force (many of them also capable with triage and healing spells) had hustled off the Hogwarts grounds to help defend the Ministry.

Of course, when they got there, it was to discover that the fight was, apparently, over. At least in the Atrium, anyway. Everyone scattered throughout the Atrium, quickly checking bodies as they went,
doing a rough and fast sort of 'dead' versus 'not dead'. Crude and crass as it might have been, for the moment, the dead were simply being floated to one end of the Atrium. Unlike at Hogwarts, the casualties and injuries here had been catastrophic, and there wasn't the time or ability to be respectful of the dead.

About two minutes after the Hogwarts contingent arrived, Hermione, Ginny, and their caged opponents returned to the Atrium. Remus, who'd happened to be closest to the elevators, hustled over.

"Hermione! Ginny! Thank goodness you're all right! Where are Harry and the others?" He wanted to know. Then he took a longer look at the cage, a faintly amused look on his face. "And who have you got here?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know where anyone else is. We had to split up." She told Remus, looking far less than pleased.

Ginny, for her part, gave the cage a dirty look. "It's Dolohov and one of the Lestranges." She told Remus and Sirius, who'd come trotting over when he spotted the little gathering. "They were trying to force the floo open so they'n whatever of the Death Eaters are still around here could sneak into Hogwarts with Voldemort."

Sirius grimaced. "That would not have ended well." He said. "Thanks for stopping them."

"Wasn't hard." Ginny said with a laugh. "They were so busy with the floo they never knew we were there."

"Well, shove the cage in the corner there for now ... we're too busy trying to keep folks alive in here to deal with them at the moment." Sirius said, motioning towards an out-of-the-way corner of the Atrium.

Hermione nodded and floated the cage away. At that point, Ron arrived, looking disheveled and sporting quite a few bruises and minor cuts. He grinned hugely when he realized Remus and Sirius were so close to the elevators.

"Hey, Remus, Sirius! Got a present for you two!" He called, waving the cage in his hand in their direction without a care for the rat trapped within, who was getting thrown around inside the cage.

It didn't take Remus and Sirius more than a second or two to realize who Ron had caught. Both men looked at each other, then glances over to where Severus and two others were casting spells and pouring potions down Amelia Bones' throat in an attempt to keep her alive. She was one of the worst injured they'd found so far, most of her bones broken when Voldemort's spell knocked her across the room on top of the damage the spell itself had done.

"You think they'd care? Or miss him?" Sirius wanted to know, his expression somewhere between mischief and murder.

Remus contemplated the question. "Probably not. The real question, though, is whether or not Harry'd be happy with us.”

The two men shared a long look, remembering Harry stopping them the last time, telling them he doubted James would have wanted the two of them to become murderers over a sniveling little rat like Pettigrew, no matter what he'd done. Both men sighed quietly, sincerely doubting that Harry'd changed his mind.

"He just damn well better make it through this." Sirius growled. He hated this, not knowing where
Harry was, and knowing that even if he had known, there wasn't a damn thing he could do to help.

"Agreed." Remus said, his voice grim.

Ron could only nod agreement as he handed the cage over. The twins arrived at that point, looking rather the worse for wear, but sporting huge, triumphant grins that morphed to 'hell on wheels' grins when the spotted the rat.

"Who caught him?" They wanted to know.

"That would have been Ron." Sirius said with a grin.

"Good one, bro." The twins said, then one of them pulled his wand.

Immediately, Remus moved the cage around behind himself. "Harry ... " He started.

The twins grinned at him. "We don't intend." One said.

"To kill him."

"That would be."

"Too easy on him."

"Besides, there's nothing."

"That says we can't prank him."

"Until an Auror takes custody."

Sirius laughed. "They've got a point, Remus. Long's we don't hurt him, we're not going to get into trouble."

Remus brought the rat back around to where he could be seen, and all five men started conferring as to what sort of mayhem to wreak on the rat.

It was perhaps fortunate for Pettigrew that before any of the five could actually start hexing that Neville all but crawled out of an elevator, ghost-pale and shocky from blood loss, physical and magical exhaustion. Sirius hustled over and Neville more or less collapsed into his arms.

"Crap. What the hell happened to you, Neville?" He wanted to know as he eased the boy to the floor, and he and Remus started patching him back together again.

"Whatever it was, his core's practically gone." Remus said, having done a diagnostic. "Must have been a hell of a fight."

Neville may have been teetering on the edge of unconsciousness, but he managed to pull it together enough to mutter. "Bellatrix and Nagini. Got'em both."

Sirius and Remus shared a look over Neville's head. Bellatrix and Nagini? That'd about do it, all right. That combo would have pushed most of the adults to their limits, nevermind a still-growing teen.

"Just relax now, Neville. Think you've done your bit and then some." Remus said, then yelled over to Severus. "We need some potions here."
Severus rolled his eyes slightly. Fortunately, Amelia had finally stabilized, so he could afford to take his attention away from her. He headed over and one eyebrow headed for his hairline when he saw Neville.

"He took on Bella and Nagini." Remus said. The 'and won' was really unnecessary. With that unholy duo, it was either win or die.

They were in the middle of patching Neville back together when the floor trembled.

"The hell was that?" Sirius wanted to know.

"Offhand, I'd say that was Voldemort and Harry." Severus' tone was somewhere between mocking and concerned.

"Yeah, I really didn't need to hear that." Sirius complained, looking worried.

And then the floor shook again, harder this time. "Shit." About the only thing keeping Sirius where he was was the fact he didn't know where Harry was. He hated this.

Remus looked like he agreed, but Severus was, at that moment, a wee bit distracted to agree or disagree ... and not because he was still pouring potions down Neville's throat. No ... the moment the floor had shaken the second time, he'd felt the oddest ... twinge. For lack of a better word. He shot a look around the room, half expecting someone to jump out at them, not realizing the twinge had nothing to do with his paranoia and everything to do with the Mark disappearing from his arm.

Harry

During his swift trip the heck out of there, Harry had very little time to figure out what to tell people. There was no way in hell he'd tell anyone about the whole veil and Death thing. Just ... no. Not a chance. But he'd have to tell them something. Fortunately, the Department of Mysteries looked rather like a particularly vicious hurricane had gone through it. Harry would be surprised if there was anything unbroken down there, outside of the one room neither of them had managed to get into during the fight. The room with the prophecy spheres was particularly bad ... Harry was fairly sure that not a single sphere had survived.

The simplest solution that presented itself was to tell everyone that after Nagini was taken care of, he'd thrown a particularly powerful spell, and Voldemort had exploded. With the mess down in the Department, which included gobbets of flesh from some weird looking creatures in one of the rooms, the chances of anyone discovering there were no Voldemort remains was nil. At least, if anyone asked, he could honestly say that Voldemort was gone, permanently.

He was not at all startled to see that some of the Hogwarts crew had arrived by the time he made his way back up to the Atrium.

Sirius, Remus and Ron spotted him at about the same time, and converged on him, with Hermione, Ginny, and the twins following swiftly on their heels. Harry found himself being passed from person to person, being hugged and shaken (gently) amidst a babble of voices that scolded, congratulated, and demanded information all at the same time. It took a good five minutes for everyone to calm down enough for Harry to tell them the false version of what happened.

April 30, 1996

The next two weeks were rather hectic for everyone. The extra defenses in and around Hogwarts were dismantled, and the rebuilding of Hogsmeade and the Ministry Atrium and Department of Mysteries begun. The final tally of dead and wounded at the Ministry and Hogwarts both was
published, and innumerable funerals held, as nearly a hundred people had died in the Atrium. Amelia, despite her grave injuries, was back on the job within three days, against Healer's orders. She'd told them flat out that there was too much to be done for her to be lazing about.

Trials were held for the surviving Death Eaters, and every last one was convicted and given the Kiss. No one wanted a repeat of what had happened after the first Voldemort war. Where such fates meant that a family had died out, their worldly goods were sold off and the money (as well as all contents of any vaults) were used to fund the rebuilding, and distributed to victims of Death Eaters as compensation, as paltry as it might have been, for the death of loved ones or their own injuries and trauma.

Through it all, the New Marauders hid in Hogwarts, trying to evade the press and a sudden flood of fans from all walks of life. Harry and Neville especially came in for a lot of attention, and all of them, much to their amusement and horror, found themselves the recipients of quite a number of marriage proposals, business offers and the like.

Harry was just glad that no one was questioning his tale of Voldemort's death. He really didn't want to have to explain, and he had a feeling that people would think Voldemort could still come back, if they knew that he had just disappeared, no matter who (or was it what?) had done the disappearing.

In a lot of ways, if felt odd to still have two months of school left ... usually, when all heck broke loose, it was at the very end of the school year. Not that much in the way of schooling was being done, actually. The atmosphere in the school the last two weeks had been very relaxed. Of course, they had nothing on the parties happening in the wider wizarding world. The first week especially, most everyone had been partying hard, celebrating the final, true end of Voldemort and his followers.

There had even been talk of delaying the OWL and NEWT tests, probably until the end of summer. For one, there'd been about a month or so when everyone'd been sent home while Hogwarts was repaired from the surprise attack last year, which had lost everyone a good bit of time. And while those who had returned had been working hard, the vast majority of what they'd learned had had more to do with fighting and surviving than the requirements to pass OWLs and NEWTs. While that meant that pretty much everyone would pass Charms, Transfiguration, and DADA with flying colors, the other classes were far from certain.

And too, there was the fact that practically half the school had not returned after the surprise attack. While some of them had been the children of Death Eaters, most had been children that had been withdrawn by frightened-out-of-their-minds parents, who were now allowing said children to return. They'd lost months of schooling, and while most of them were not OWL or NEWT year students, they were still far behind everyone else.

It had taken the better part of the last two weeks, but eventually the teachers had all agreed, and for the first time, Hogwarts was going to have 'summer school', for everyone that wanted and or needed it. Hermione, of course, had been thrilled, though most of the rest of the New Marauders had been less so.

On top of all of that, the Weasleys were gearing up for a wedding. Bill had, evidently, taken to Fleur Delacour, and she to him ... a state of affairs that had passed Harry right on by. Molly and Ginny were somewhat less than pleased with Bill's choice, but were soldiering on.

Better still, Harry was fairly sure that Remus had finally got off his ass where Tonks was concerned. That, Harry'd seen plenty of, and they'd been circling each other since the start of summer last year, so it was about dang time. Sirius, of course, was having all sorts of fun teasing the two of them, and mock-threatening both of them in turn, since Remus was his best friend, and Tonks was Sirius' cousin, and therefore needed a 'big brother' to vet her boyfriends. Or, at least, that's what Sirius had
said yesterday.

He was still sporting tentacles from Tonks' retribution. The rest of the Marauders had been too busy laughing themselves silly at Sirius to help him get rid of them.

Things finally seemed to have slowed down a bit. Enough, at least, for Harry to finally risk hanging around outside. He was currently sitting on a rock by the lake, tossing bits of bread to the Giant Squid as he relaxed. It was the first time in two weeks he'd had more than a brief moment alone.

He'd not really thought much about what he'd do 'after'. To be completely honest, he'd not expected to survive, at least not until things had changed last summer. A kid against a sixty-or-seventy-something Dark Wizard ... well, even Dudley would have been able to tell that wasn't going to end well for the kid. But now, Harry found himself alive and with an entire life to look forward to ... and needing to figure out what he wanted to do with it. At least he had time to think about it ... two whole year's worth, before he passed his NEWTS and left Hogwarts behind forever. All he knew was that at this point, becoming an Auror was much less appealing than it had been.
Epilogue

A/N: Disclaimer's in the first chapter. Here ends Fate We Make. You will notice that I don't mention who married who here, aside from Bill marrying Fleur, Remus marrying Tonks, and Ron not marrying Hermione. Other than that, feel free to imagine the boys (and girls) with whomever you wish.

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September 1, 2020, Hogwarts

Harry leaned back contentedly in his chair at the Head Table as Filius led the new First Years into the Great Hall. So much had happened over the last almost quarter-century.

He'd had an enormous amount of fun with Remus and Sirius the summer after Voldemort's defeat. He'd managed to pass his OWLs without having to attend the summer school that had been offered, thanks be. So had the rest of the New Marauders, thanks to their additional schooling from so many sources. Remus and Tonks had married at the start of Christmas break that year.

That last two years of school, though, had been complete, unmitigated hell. Harry had never been given a moment's peace, not by the students, not by the press, not by anybody save those closest to him. The Marauders had closed ranks completely against anyone and everyone, all of them suffering to one degree or another from their very much unwanted fame. The only escape had been the summers, when they'd all fled England for two months and got a breather. They'd very ruined Percy's wedding thanks to the reporters descended on the ceremony to harass Harry and company when Perc got married just over a year after Voldemort's defeat. Thankfully, the press had calmed down just enough they'd been able to attend Fred and George's double wedding the following year without the press crashing the ceremony and being all over them about the war and not paying any mind to the wedding.

Immediately after he took his NEWTs, Harry had fled England, and brought Sirius, Remus and Tonks with him. Virtually the entirety of the New Marauders followed suit, scattering in all directions. It wasn't until nearly a year later that Harry had finally begun to deal with ... well, everything. Away from the constant, insane pressure in England, he'd finally lowered his guard, and the full impact of ... well, to be honest, his entire life ... had hit him. Sirius had fallen apart at much the same time. Leaning on each other while they patched themselves back together had brought all three of them closer than ever before.

They'd eventually settled for a while in a little place in South America, where no one had the vaguest clue who the heck they were, nor did they care. In the next few years, Harry finally had a chance to figure out who he was. He'd spent his entire life up to that point being the Dursley's punching bag, Dumbledore's playtoy and the English wizarding world's savior/demon, he'd never really had a chance to be himself.

Much to Harry's never-ending amusement, Ron met a girl while he'd been abroad, and ended up marrying her. Neville got hitched a month later. Ron had been the first to return to England, wife in tow, and managed to become the starting Keeper for the Cannons, much to his delight. The Cannons still hadn't won the league while Ron was on the team, but they'd done a far sight better than usual, managing to stay in the top five, mostly by dint of Ron managing a truly frightening number of shut-outs over his decade-long stint as Keeper. When he'd finally retired, he joined his father in the
Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office, which had expanded exponentially after the war.

Percy, and Hermione when she returned from her time abroad, both went into politics. They made for a hell of a tag-team, especially with Amelia Bones' support and both Harry and Sirius' backing (albeit from a distance). Between them, they'd abolished all of the old, unfair laws, and drafted a whole raft of new ones. Many of the new laws echoed the equality laws in the Muggle world, making it illegal to force any magical, sentient being into a lesser status than that of wizards. The goblins and centaurs especially had been quite pleased by the new laws. Unfortunately for Hermione's particular soapbox, the house-elves continued to lag far, far behind the rest of the sentient beings. The best she'd been able to thus far was to make laws that kept house-elf owners to stringent standards of care. It would probably be a few centuries before any house-elves would be ready for any amount of true freedom at all. Thus far, Dobby continued to be the only house-elf to thrive on freedom ... and even he kept, largely, to 'acceptable' house-elf behavior. There'd been surprisingly little opposition to the changes, but then again, most of the hard-line conservatives had got themselves killed or jailed for life.

Fred and George opened a shop when they returned, and within five years, they were able to buy out Zonko. Their products were wildly popular, both the joke products aimed at kids, and the more serious defense-related items aimed at adults. They were the first England-based Weasleys in something like two hundred years who were well-off, much to Arthur and Molly's pride. Of course, it had helped that Ron and Ginny hadn't been long in joining that club. Neville opened his own business, obtaining and cultivating a huge array of plants, selling them both for home gardens and for use in potions. Harry had laughed for days when Neville wrote him, telling him Snape had become his biggest and steadiest customer. The concept of those two managing to work together in any capacity had been highly amusing.

Luna never did return to England. She was still abroad, searching the world for her 'imaginary' creatures. To everyone's surprise, she'd found more than a few. The look on Hermione's face when she found out about the first one had been priceless. Ginny, like Ron, had gone into Quidditch, though as a Chaser for the Holyhead Harpies. She'd ended up back at Hogwarts when she retired, becoming the Transfiguration teacher, replacing McGonagall, who'd never quite managed to find someone to take her place and had tried to run both her class and the Headmistress position. She'd managed, but by the time Ginny stepped in, McGonagall's age was such that she was slowing down, and doing both jobs had been impossible for her.

Bill and Charlie, of course, were still at their jobs, though Bill was now based somewhere in China, and had risen to Head Curse-breaker of all projects there.. Charlie was still in Romania, and had finally met and married a girl just shy of a decade after the end of the war. He too had risen in rank, until he was now running the Romanian reserve.

As for Harry ... well, once he'd returned, five years after the war, he'd returned to Hogwarts, and become the Dueling teacher. He'd surprised himself during his time abroad, when he'd discovered how much he enjoyed teaching. Sirius blamed Remus for that, much to Harry's amusement. A few years later, he'd become Head of Gryffindor, replacing the elderly teacher who'd taken the Head of Gryffindor House position when they'd been hired by McGonagall. Susan Bones had taken the Wizarding Cultures teaching position that the elderly teacher had also filled. He, Sirius, Remus, and their families all lived in Potter Manor, which, the good knew, had room enough for all of them and to spare.

Harry and Sirius had taken the longest to 'settle down', of the Marauders. But then again, it could be argued that they'd suffered the worst damages, Sirius with over a decade in Azkaban and Harry with his entire, miserable childhood. They'd sort of indulged themselves with highly immature hijinks for quite a while. Eventually, they'd both gotten married, within two months of each other, much to their
amusement at the time, as neither of them had quite been aware that things had been that serious for
the other. Sirius spent the bulk of his time in the Wizengamot these days, helping Hermione and
Percy push their reforms and laws through. Remus had gone back to teaching, doing part-time
classes with both werewolves and kids.

As for the rest of the 'hero crew', Kingsley had become Head Auror, and had stayed in that position
for roughly a decade before retiring, at which point Tonks had taken his place, and was still in it,
though she planned to retire in a year or so. Moody, the old codger, having survived the war, died in
his sleep four years later. Trelawney had left Hogwarts two years after the war, after two years of
having absolutely no students. She'd not been replaced. Neither had Filch, who, like Moody, had
died of old age a few years back. Harry thought it was a rather sad state of affairs that no one missed
the cranky bastard. The house-elves had been quite pleased to be trusted to do things on their own,
and had been doing a spectacular job of it.

McGonagall was still Headmistress, and Flitwick and Sprout were both still teachers and Heads of
House. In point of fact, the only other teaching position that changed had been Potions. Snape had,
to Harry's shock, stayed at Hogwarts after the war. Harry had fully expected the man to bolt for the
nearest place of solitude he could find, sick to death of having to teach dunderheads. Snape had,
however, reached his breaking point a decade after the war, a year or so before the first of the new
generation of Weaselys, Potters, Blacks, Longbottoms and Lupins had descended on the castle.
Harry still laughed when he remembered Snape's disgusted rant on that subject. Snape had opened
his own apothecary and ready-made potions store a year after that, and had, in the years since, been
forced to hire on something like a dozen helpers and obtain larger premises twice. He was, at this
point, the man to go to for high-quality potions and ingredients, and Harry had never seen Snape
happier. He actually smiled these days. And meant it! Daphne Greengrass had replaced him as both
Potions teacher and Head of Slytherin.

It was also thanks to a combination of the death of Fenrir Greyback, abolished unfair laws, enforced
fair ones and Snape's wolfsbane potion (offered free of charge to all werewolves) that there had not
been a single new werewolf infected in the last twenty-four years. The existing werewolves had
benefitted from the new laws, though they still preferred their own company, and had a small village
in a remote spot where they didn't have to worry too much about running into any humans on a full
moon. Thanks to some arrangements that had made and donations from Sirius and Harry, all the
werewolf children that Fenrir had infected, magical and muggle, had been able to attend school like
they were 'normal' kids. The adults, many of whom were lacking educations, were also helped,
getting them caught up education-wise and helping them get jobs to support themselves.

Harry glanced over the four tables. This year marked the first time in close to a decade that there
were no 'Marauder' offspring among the First Years. Of course, there were currently eleven said
offspring scattered among all four tables. Another eight had already graduated. The only remaining
offspring that had yet to pass through Hogwarts' doors was Harry's youngest boy, currently eight
years old. Harry had a feeling he'd been the only one not shocked when Percy's only child as well as
one each of Fred and George's kids had ended up in Slytherin. Goodness knew those three had
enough Slytherin traits themselves, to pass on to their kids. While the majority of the rest had ended
up in Gryffindor (earning it the teasing nickname of 'Marauder House') there was a Ravenclaw (Bill's
youngest) and two Hufflepuffs(one of Sirius' kids, and one of Neville's) in the bunch as well. Harry
strongly suspected his youngest would end up in Slytherin. He was also fairly sure that Snape was
encouraging it, as his son had shown a keen interest in all things potions pretty much from the
moment he could sit up and stir at the same time, and had taken to trailing after Snape the few times
the man had attended the yearly reunions. Harry'd been braced for a bad reaction from Snape, but to
his surprise, Snape had been quite pleased to take his youngest under his wing.

To say that, overall, life was going well was an understatement. Britain had not fully recovered from
the war, not yet, but they were certainly well on their way, both politically and population-wise. There'd been a massive baby-boom in the years following the end of the war, and the Marauders had been far from the only ones to contribute. Harry well remembered how few kids had been in each year, when he'd attended ... they'd been lucky to scrape ten kids together per House, most years. These days, it was double that, and there'd been a couple years, right around the twelve-to-thirteen year mark, where there'd been nearly thirty kids per House. Better yet, as the political atmosphere improved, old expatriates had returned to their homeland, further expanding the existing population, both of adults and kids.

The population had boomed so much, in fact, that the first-ever pre-Hogwarts schools had been opened about seven years after the war, providing a central place for wizarding children to learn the basics of reading, writing, and so on. A year after that, Hermione had managed to get a law passed that brought Muggleborn children into the Wizarding world as soon as they started exhibiting magic. They had the choice of either entering the Wizarding world fully and attending the pre-Hogwarts school with the wizard-raised children, or attending part-time classes that caught them up on the basic things they needed to know about the Wizarding world before they truly entered it at eleven. There were also classes for the parents/guardians and families of Muggleborns, to educate them about magic and the wizarding world.

That had the dual benefit of allowing the teachers to catch any cases of abuse long before things got out of hand, as Muggleborns still tended to face that problem thanks mostly to fear and religious issues. Hermione had finally, just two years ago, managed to get a law passed that allowed wizards to remove any muggleborn child from abusive parents and place them with wizarding foster parents. The last thing any of them needed was to leave a kid in an abusive home and end up fostering a new Dark Lord. That particular bill had been a hard-fought one, as many people felt ill-at-ease essentially kidnapping children, but given the alternatives, it had eventually passed. Thus far, three kids had benefitted from that law. One of them had been adopted by Arthur and Molly, who'd not been happy with their empty nest, despite the plethora of grandkids that constantly swarmed the Burrow. Certainly, they were an ideal home for an abused child, something to which Harry could attest.

The rules governing Muggleborns and the Statute of Secrecy had been altered as well. A way had been discovered to ensure that no muggle in the know about the Wizarding world could accidentally spill the beans to someone who wasn't without the permission of the person who cast the spell. This iron-clad assurance of secrecy allowed muggleborn children to include more than their mother and father in their wizarding lives, if their other family members proved amenable to the situation. The restriction on magic done out of school had also been abolished, since the vast majority of the wizard-born lived in homes that allowed them to practice magic without being punished, if their parents so allowed. The Trace was completely removed from all underage wands as well, since its existence was unnecessary after the underage restriction was abolished.

Another more recent breakthrough had been an alteration to the muggle-repelling spells that cloaked wizarding locations. Someone had figured out a way to allow in-the-know Muggles to approach wizarding locations without a wizard escort, while keeping those still ignorant of the wizarding world at bay. The end result was that Diagon Alley had seen an upsurge in business, to the point that the entrance arch had been altered so it did not require a wand to open it. Hogsmeade also saw a lot more traffic. Muggle adults explored both places while their kids were at school, and frequently bought things for their kids, and even themselves, since many wizarding items could be operated by a muggle. They also met their kids for Hogsmeade weekends. The alterations had also allowed Hogwarts to host families for Quidditch games and things like Parent-Teacher conferences and a myriad of other school events where the kids could show off what they'd learned.

Harry was already looking forward to the yearly reunion at the start of Christmas break. It tended to be a rather raucous affair, with spouses, kids, and more recently, the first Marauder grandkid (Born to
Bill's eldest daughter just two months ago). While all the Marauders attended, they also hosted teachers and Order members most years. While Christmas presents did feature in the day, they also inevitably talked about the war, both the first round and the second, and those that had been lost. It had become something of a tradition for stories about the dead to be told, so they were remembered.

It had taken every bit of clout the combined Marauders possessed to keep the Ministry at large from erecting a statue in the Atrium to the Marauders. They'd managed to convince everyone that a memorial for the dead was a better idea, thankfully. Harry hadn't been alone in not wanting any part of a statue with his face on it. There was a second memorial at Hogwarts, listing all of the Hogwarts victims of Voldemort's campaign, Myrtle being the first name on the list, as his first victim.

Harry shook himself out of his introspection when McGonagall got to her feet for the after-dinner announcements, only then realizing he'd been sitting there staring and not eating. Ah well. He'd get a snack later, as he had to check in with his Lions before curfew. Once the kids had been dismissed, he got to his feet, waving off McGonagall's slightly worried look before he headed out.

As much as had been done, there was still work to be done, and kids to be taught. And Harry was looking forward to every minute of it.

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