That Terrifying Momentum

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/580152).

| Rating:   | Mature                  |
| Archive Warning: | Graphic Depictions Of Violence |
| Category: | F/M                     |
| Fandom:  | Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling |
| Relationship: | Harry Potter/Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger/Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom/Luna Lovegood |
| Character: | Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Ginny Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, Original Male Character, Original Female Character, Albus Dumbledore |
| Additional Tags: | Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Drama, Humor, Romance, Action/Adventure, Canon Relationship, That Terrifying Momentum, Military |
| Stats:   | Published: 2012-12-02 Completed: 2014-04-07 Chapters: 31/31 Words: 230634 |

That Terrifying Momentum

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Summary

To every action there is always opposed an equal reaction: or the mutual actions of two bodies upon each other are always equal, and directed to contrary parts. An AU sixth year. - Revised Edition-
It was on a scorching Tuesday afternoon under an engorged orange sun that Harry Potter finally understood what the expression, 'the dog days of summer' meant. He couldn't quantify exactly how that knowledge had come to him, only that it had. This foggy burst of information in actuality had a very obvious source: his brain was frying.

He was slumped on a swing whose rubber seat seemed to be melting into the bottom of his trousers. There was no shade and not even a hint of a breeze in the playground. Shimmering waves rippled off the pavement and the car roofs as they baked in the sun. The metal bars that made up most of the playground's construction were blistering to the touch. The urban surroundings seem to trap the high temperature like a furnace, a sweat-sticky summer in the asphalt heat. It was probably fairly similar to hell, except that in hell he'd have a lot more company. Unsurprisingly, the playground was deserted. He supposed there could have been an Order member watching him from somewhere nearby. He might have raised his head and looked around, but under the crushing noon it seemed like too much work.

He never should have left the house. And he wouldn't have, had the unbearable weather not driven Aunt Petunia to rarely seen levels of irritability as she was forced to watch her carefully manicured garden wilt below the brutal sky. After spending his morning dodging both job assignments and the occasional household item, he had decided to try his luck outdoors.

In one way, the scorching climate was a blessing. He was able to concentrate fully on his discomfort, and in so doing, didn't have to think. He was tired of thinking. It got him nowhere, the same circular patterns wearing themselves onto the inside of his skull like tracks in sand. He'd rather sit in this kiln of a playground whilst his skin melted and ran than crawl back into his darkened room for another round with his demons. Madness lurked behind the drawn shades. Memories turned his room into a killing jar.

It hadn't been the best of summers. And with his past record, that was saying something.

He wouldn't think about it. He absolutely refused to. The playground had been designated a thought-free zone, an environment sterile of emotion or impulse. There was only the sun, the heat, the swing, and the gravel beneath his feet. Anything else had been sanitised. The sun would cook away all impurities, boiling his rage and regrets off the top of his head to dissipate in the atmosphere.

He sighed and tried to open his eyes against the blinding glare before giving it up as a bad job. If anyone decided to sneak up on him, he'd just have to hope he heard them first. It was too hot to see.

As if the thought had somehow summoned noise to his position, he heard the crunch of the playground gravel. Caution banished his uncaring stance. No matter how attractive apathy was, he couldn't bring himself to surrender entirely. He opened both his eyes, using his hand to shield them from the sun.

Another young man about his age was in the process of sitting down on a nearby bench. There
didn't seem to be anything particularly remarkable about him, though Harry couldn't discern much in the brightness other than his raggedy blond hair.

It was public property, after all. The other boy could sit on the bench if he felt like it. Really, Harry wished he had thought of it first. The swing was an adequate seat but didn't support his back, and that lack of bracing was slowly developing into an unpleasant stiffness. But the blond-haired teen probably had not the persistence born of desperation that Harry did. He'd move along eventually and surrender his choice seat. Harry couldn't imagine anyone else willingly subjecting themselves to the midday climate for long.

Sure enough, no more than five minutes passed before the boy rose from his position. Harry would wait until he trudged away, and then take the bench. But instead of moving along like he was supposed to, the blond made his way to the swings on which Harry was perched and slid into the next swing over.

It was public property, Harry reminded himself again. There was nothing to say that the stranger couldn't sit wherever he wanted. Harry only hoped the boy would not attempt to start any sort of conversation. He was not feeling at all sociable and preferred for the time being to be left to his misery. Brooding might be hard on the back, but it was easier than doing anything constructive.

The other boy said nothing. Harry said nothing. Then they both said nothing together. In a scene that would have looked bizarre had there been anyone around to witness it, the two sat next to each other for over half an hour without exchanging a single word. Small circles of shadow lengthened beneath them. Neither of them moved.

After quite some time had elapsed in that way, Harry thought he'd better get back to Number Four, Privet Drive before he became dehydrated. The last thing he needed was to pass out in the middle of the playground; his relatives certainly wouldn't come looking for him, and he didn't know if he could count on the stranger to help. Perhaps that was why the boy was sitting there. He was waiting for Harry to pass out so he could not help, the bastard.

Harry thought his brain must be liquefying. He was feeling a little light headed, so he'd best be moving. Standing painfully on knees inflexible from disuse, Harry shuffled over a few feet of gravel and started the walk back to the house.

“Nice talking to you, Harry,” the blond boy said.

Harry turned and stared at him. The boy met Harry's green-eyed gaze with a grey-eyed one of his own. Neither backed down. Slowly, Harry reached one hand to his right pocket and slid his wand out from where it was hidden beneath his shirt, being careful to let his arm conceal it.

The boy blinked owlishly. “I don't have a wand. If you're going to let me have it then just get it over with. Anticipation is sometimes worse than pain, you know.”

Harry didn't put his wand away. “That's an American accent,” he said slowly in a voice rusty from a day of neglect. “I don't know you.”

“American? Maybe. Home is where the heart is, after all — work, church, school, a jar of formaldehyde,” the boy mused before continuing. “And I don't know you. But I do know of you, and you don't know of me. So where does that leave us?”

“It leaves us,” Harry growled, “with you answering some questions before I hurt you.” It wasn't entirely false bravado; he wouldn't mind hurting someone in his current mood. A pointless fight picked with a wizarding admirer might be just what the doctor ordered.
“I'll tell you anything you want to know,” the boy said, shrugging.

“Who are you?”

“Scott Kharan.”

Harry frowned. “Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“It's the answer to your question. It's not my fault that it doesn't mean anything.”

“Come on,” Harry scoffed. “You were obviously looking for me, you know what a wand is, and you're an American in the middle of Surrey. What do you want?”

“Maybe I want to talk to you.”

“So talk. I'm right here.” Harry was tired of not knowing what was going on in his life, and rage was an easy remedy for impotence. The anger fuelled him, stole his clarity back from the heat.

“No, not here. Let's go to your house.”

“Do I really look that stupid?”

The boy — no, 'Scott', grinned at him in obvious amusement. “Don't ask questions where you might not like the answers.”

“Just tell me what you want,” Harry said coldly. “I don't want to play games. Just tell me.” His fingers twitched on his wand. He was ready to fight, run, or both. This 'Scott Kharan' — presuming he'd told the truth about even that much — was quite possibly a Death Eater and there weren't any guarantees he was the only one around. Harry held tightly to his wand, but knew that his feet might well serve him better.

“Dumbledore sent me.”

Harry hesitated at that — but then, it was an easy thing to say. “Can you prove it?”

“No, because it's a lie. He didn't really send me. But I did talk to him before I came here.”

“If you're trying to gain my trust—” Harry glared at the boy. “—then you're doing a bad job of it.”

Scott shrugged again. “What kind of proof would you accept?”

“Are you a member of the Order?” If he was, he'd know certain things, including what 'the Order' meant in the first place.

“No.”

“Then I don't think you can tell me anything I'll believe. So I'll ask you again,” Harry said: “What do you want with me?”

“I'm here to talk about this mess you're in and what we're going to do about it.”

“Only one of us has a wand and it's not you, so I don't think I'm the one in a mess,” Harry said darkly.

“The Prophecy, Harry,” Scott said dryly. “I know it's hot, but try to focus.”
Harry froze. “What Prophecy?” he bluffed. The rumours in the wizarding world weren't specific. Scott might know that a Prophecy existed, but he wouldn't know what it said.

“As I understand it, you have to kill Voldemort. And not in the victim of circumstance way so much as the victim of fate way. One of you is going to kill the other.”

For a moment, Harry didn't even breathe.

Scott was still talking. “About puts your nuts in a vice, don't it? Still, these things work on a balance we can't see or understand. We can tip the scales, but first we have to try.”

There seemed little point in denying it further. The blond teen had somehow heard the Prophecy. But what that meant, Harry didn't know. “Dumbledore told you this?”

“No, he did not.”

“Trelawney. You took it from her, didn't you. You got into her mind.” Harry felt the brief pinch of fear at the thought of having to battle a Legilimens, alone and unprepared in a Muggle playground.

Scott just sighed, looking bored. “I have no idea who you're talking about.”

“If I sit back down,” Harry said, holding Scott's gaze intently, “will you tell me what this is all about?”

“Yes.”

Had Harry not spent so much of his life in the dark, he probably would have left the boy right then and there. Instead, he found himself thinking again that answers were sometimes worth a risk. Scott Kharan knew something. And Harry wanted to know what that was. Tucking his wand back into his pocket, he reseated himself on the swing.

“This never goes easily. I don't see the point in wasting our collective time with things you either can't or won't believe,” Scott began. “Let's stick closer to home. I'm here to help. You don't have to really believe much; just that would be enough.”

Harry made a derisive noise. “I think you might be surprised what I'd believe at this point.”

The other boy nodded. He opened his mouth with a breath like he was going to speak, then closed it. It was another few seconds before he started again. “Harry, do you believe in destiny?”

Harry thought about it for a second. “After the Prophecy, I don't see how I could not.”

“Exactly! Good. Yeah, the Prophecy is essentially a verbal proclamation of what we're going to call 'destiny' for the sake of comprehension. It states what has to be done and who has to do it. Most people don't have that kind of life objective.”

“Lucky them.” Harry wasn't sure where Scott was going with this.

“Well, yes — and no. People like you have a task so strong and so specific that it drives them. But once it's completed, you know you're free. Kill Voldemort and that's it, you can do whatever you want with your life. It's a tough goal to have hanging over you, but at least you can see the finish line.”

“No, I can't,” Harry muttered, feeling that familiar sense of defeat come over him. “I don't even know where to start.”
“I might be able to help,” Scott stated offhandedly.

“So that’s what this is about,” Harry said, all but sneering as he looked at Scott with bitter eyes. The answer to this conundrum should have been obvious from the start. “You want to be a hero. You want to join the Chosen One on his great quest for victory.” He turned away, staring down at the gravel. “I've already got enough friends who might get killed for this. Go find some other source of glory.”

“I've known a few Chosen Ones,” Scott said vaguely. “The best of the lot came from Arroyo, but that’s neither here nor there. The point is, I'm offering a little help to someone who could probably use it.”

“Are you deaf?” Harry retorted angrily. He felt like his eyes were burning a pit in the ground. “Or just stupid? People around me get killed. Didn't you hear the Prophecy? You can't help me. Nobody can.”

Scott rolled his eyes dramatically. “If you're done sobbing on your shirt sleeve,” he said, “I'll continue.”

Despite himself, Harry chuffed out a short laugh. It was hard to hold onto his anger for any length of time. Emotions seemed to drain out of him, as if he were sporting several holes. “By all means.”

“So you're willing to accept the idea of destiny. The universe has a purpose. Sometimes.” Scott rubbed the side of his neck, looking a little lost in his own speech. “Let's suppose that there are people who are aware of this purpose.”

“Seers, you mean.”

“No, not Seers.” Scott blew out a breath. “Try not to jump to conclusions, because they're pretty damn likely to be wrong. I'm trying to parse this out for you.”

Harry started to grow angry again. “I don't want the small bits of the truth that you think I can handle. I'm tired of people not telling me things for my own good!”

“The entire truth is incomprehensible without context and I can't fully explain something that I don't totally understand. So how about — no, that's no good.” Scott frowned in thought for a moment. “This doesn't get any easier with time. Everyone has their own level of understanding when it comes to things like this… The trick is to find a common ground.”

“It's really very simple,” Harry said impatiently. “You open your mouth and tell me the truth.”

“Well aren't you the communications expert,” Scott responded scathingly. “Let me file that advice under 'B' for bullshit and then you give me a couple seconds to think about this, all right?”

“Fine,” Harry said shortly, feeling more of his anger return.

“Okay let us pretend, together…” Scott started again. “That sometimes a universe might gain an objective. So then naturally we could conjecture that, if the universe doesn't meet that objective, then bad things will happen, right?

Bad things. Scott had a flair for understatement. Harry nodded in agreement with that lacklustre assessment.

“Now we've got this purpose to fulfil. But it's not easy, you know? Of course you know. Maybe the person who has to do this huge thing could use some help. So if there were people who knew
about the thing that needed doing and the person who had to do it, then they'd be obligated to lend a hand.” He gave Harry a sideways glance. “Do you believe that with the power to intercede comes the responsibility to do so?”

Harry had always lived that way, though he'd never put much thought into it. “I suppose I do.”

“Then you understand more than you think. This 'destiny' is so important to the shape of things, all things; it stands to reason that making sure it arrives at a satisfactory completion would be in the best interests of everyone. That's exactly what these people are all about — the best interests of everyone.”

Harry put his head in his hands and rubbed his eyes tiredly, trying to repress either manic laughter or a scream of frustration, he wasn't sure which. “So you're trying to tell me you're my guardian angel.”

“Don't be obtuse. This is a meeting, not a religious experience.”

“You're barking mad.”

“Maybe, but not because of what I told you. Look,” Scott said seriously, leaning towards Harry, “you don't have to believe me. When I came here today I wasn't going to tell you the truth yet; I had some crap thrown together about how I was a new student and Dumbledore said I should meet you before I started going to Hogwarts so I could make at least one friend first. But after sitting here and seeing your sorry ass, I figured you'd had enough of that to last you.”

Harry appreciated the sentiment, even if it was coming from an insane person. “Thanks. I think.”

“Okay, all right. You don't have to be my friend if you don't want to. But it is important that you at least believe that I can help you. I may be a stranger, but I'm on your side. That's all you have to believe.”

“And what can you do that I can't?” Harry asked, though without any real scorn.

Scott raised an eyebrow. “What can you do that I can't?”

That was a fair question, and one that Harry didn't really have an answer for. Instead he addressed something that Scott had said earlier. “You said Dumbledore was going to let you in to Hogwarts. You convinced him somehow.”

Scott nodded. “That mean anything to you?”

It would have meant more in the past, a thought that filled Harry with both with shame and disillusionment, and a small surge of an old anger. “There was a time…” he mumbled in response. “I bet he won't even tell me he talked to you.”

“No, because I told him I was coming to see you myself. Here—” Scott reached into his pocket and deposited something on Harry's lap. Harry picked it up and saw it was a student admittance form, signed at the bottom with the Headmaster's familiar, sprawling signature.

Harry knew then that at least Scott wasn't lying about his attending Hogwarts with Dumbledore's permission. He handed the paper back to Scott and nodded slowly. “I can believe that much then; but you can understand…”

“Sure. Just count me as an ally.” Scott looked around, taking in the sunstroke-worthy surroundings. Harry thought there was something odd about his face for some reason. After a moment, he
“realised it was because the other boy wasn't squinting in the unbearably bright afternoon sun. “Your shadow is still watching us. Do they know if you have any Muggle friends?”

“What?” Harry swivelled his head, but didn't see anything. “My shadow?”

“There's someone to your left, in the bushes.”

“How…” Harry tried to see the spot out of the corner of his eye, but it was too bright. “Are you sure? Maybe you imagined it.”

“No, I don't think so. Wait.” Scott looked up at the sky over the patch of brush as if scoping for any clouds. “They're under some sort of covering. Looks like a sheet.”

“An Invisibility Cloak,” Harry said, Scott's words confirming his suspicions. “They must not have it on all the way if you can see them.”

“If that's what's happening. I'll take your word for it.”

“You actually do have a wand, right?” Harry asked tersely. He pushed out with his feet and moved the swing backwards, trying to get a different angle on the bushes.

“I told you I don't.” Scott's eyes widened slightly. “If you're going to do something, you'd better do it. They're—”

“STUPEFY!”

A jet of red light shot from the bushes towards Scott. A cloud of dust rose from the gravel as he hit the ground, having flipped himself backwards off his swing. In one smooth motion, he did a reverse somersault onto his feet and dove through to the other side of the swing set, dodging another Stunner sent his way. This time when he hit the ground he stayed down, rolling sideways as a third stunner threw up a geyser of gravel, until he reached the small cover offered by a nearby bin.

Harry hadn't been idle whilst that was happening. He fell flat to the ground, in the shallow furrow carved by the feet of people who had used the swings. “STUPEFY! STUPEFY! STUPEFY!” He shot three spells in quick succession into the area from which the incoming fire had originated, spacing them out for a blanket effect.

Whoever was under the Invisibility Cloak threw themselves downwards to avoid the spells; he could see the bushes compress under their weight. “STUPEFY!” He blasted the flattened shrubbery and tracked the attacker rolling sideways through the brittle twigs. “STU—”

“Harry, wait!”

Before he could finish the incantation the Invisibility Cloak fell away, revealing one flushed and dishevelled Nymphadora Tonks lying on her side on top of the now decimated hedge. They stared at each other for a long moment before she winked at him from her undignified position. “Wotcher, Harry!”

Harry let out a breath that was part relief and part fury. “Tonks! What the hell are you—”

“Sorry, sorry, Harry! But we can't be too careful, you know.” She pulled herself to her feet, trying to remove some of the detritus that was caught in her hair and clothes. “Constant vigilance and all that! I was just going to Stun the Muggle bloke to see if he was a Death Eater, then Obliviate him. No harm done.” She paused. “Bit of a quick mover though, isn't he? I suppose we'll have to
“Obliviate him anyway.”

“Oh, well, if that's all, why'd I even bother?” Scott's sarcastic voice came from somewhere behind the bin.

“He's not a Muggle,” Harry said, picking himself up. He paused. What was Scott, exactly? Introducing him as a possible lunatic didn't really help his chances of escaping a Memory Charm. “He's a new student from America. Dumbledore wanted him to meet me.”

Tonks' face lit up. “You don't say! America, is it? I've often fancied a holiday there.” She turned to Scott, who was back on his feet but prudently still behind the bin. “I knew a girl from school who moved to New England. Have you ever been to Innsmouth? They have quite the Merpeople population there, I understand.”

Scott shook his head. “Can't say that I have.”

“Uh, anyway,” Harry said, breaking in. “He'll be attending Hogwarts this year, so we were going to go back to the house and go through my supplies…”

“Yes,” Scott immediately agreed.

Tonks looked a little disappointed that she wasn't going to get to bombard Scott with questions on the spot, but nodded anyway. “Oh, all right then. Let me grab my cloak and I'll escort you back.”

“Tonks, how long have you been following me?” Harry asked her.

“All day today, luv. It's my shift.”

Harry clenched his fists. “I don't need a keeper.”

“We all have to make sacrifices, Harry. Some things are bigger than we are,” she said carefully, shooting a meaningful look at Scott.

“I suppose,” Harry granted grudgingly, if only to avoid an argument. It was too hot for a row.

“It'll be back to school before you know it; no need for the long face, Harry. Off we go then!” She covered herself with the cloak and disappeared from sight.

“Wait,” Harry said before they started walking; “if you've been here all day then why didn't you just Stun him right away?” he asked, motioning towards Scott.

“I wasn't sure whether to risk it or not at first,” Tonks' voice said from his left. “But then he didn't leave after awhile, so I started looking for a clear shot. Bad move on my part to get in those bushes; I was a bit stuck, what with having the cloak on.”

As they walked down the street, Harry had the odd sensation of his trainers sticking to the still-shimmering pavement whenever he put them down. He realised with a start just how thirsty he was. The events of the afternoon had put his discomfort temporarily out of his head. He heard Tonks sigh somewhere behind him. “Rotten weather for an Invisibility Cloak. You wouldn't believe how miserable it is in here.”

“Out here isn't a vast improvement,” Scott observed.

Harry silently agreed, feeling the sweat roll down into his collar. “You don't have to sit outside the house all day, do you, Tonks?”
“God, no, I only need to watch you when you go out. If you're inside, I can go somewhere cooler — preferably with a big icy glass of lemon squash.”

Harry thought that sounded really good right about then. He'd settle for a glass of water, though, when he returned to the house. If not, maybe he could ask Tonks if she knew how to cast any sort of cooling spell—

He stopped dead in his tracks, a chill running through him. “Tonks?”

“Oh, Harry, it's awfully hot for talking.”

“I performed under-age magic back in the park."

There was a pause. “Oh my,” Tonks said worriedly. “I hadn't even thought of that. If I was on Auror duty it wouldn't be a problem, but…”

Harry closed his eyes. Even if his past offence really had been stricken from the record, he knew he couldn't count on the Ministry to be fair. He was in serious trouble.

“Maybe they didn't detect it, what are the odds on that?” Scott asked.

“Well, there's a chance,” Tonks said, “but to be honest it's very small. I'm so sorry, Harry. I didn't think how you'd react if I missed…”

“They would have to track you somehow, right?” Scott said intently. “How else would they know?”

“That's the Trace, yeah. Harry's still got it since he's not quite old enough yet. Bloody hell, I really did it this time…” Tonks groaned.

Scott seemed to relax then. “Hey, you could get lucky. It's probably not a big deal.”

What exactly was Scott trying to do? Harry looked at him in confusion.

“We'll see what happens when we get back,” Scott said.

“Let's at least get out of the sun,” Tonks added. “I can't think anything through in this bloody heat.”

Number Four, Privet Drive didn't seem so much to come into view as coalesce from the refracted light, constructing itself in bits and pieces pulled to it in flickering waves. If anything, it was hotter outside than when Harry had left. The driveway showed that Uncle Vernon hadn't returned home yet, which was good news.

Clumping wearily, Harry opened the front door and stepped through. The air inside washed over him as if he had walked into a freezer. He was suddenly, blissfully cold.

If Scott enjoyed the transition as much as Harry did he didn't show it as he came in behind, holding the door open just a second longer than necessary so that the still invisible Tonks could enter. Tonks said nothing, but Harry was fairly certain he had heard the release of a pleasurable sigh.

He poked his head into the kitchen and found Aunt Petunia doing something on a cutting board. There were no unusual letters anywhere, and certainly no owls. He couldn't be certain he was safe until he checked his room, though. With some trepidation he motioned to Scott to follow him and went up the stairs, stepping carefully to avoid attracting attention.

“This is my room,” he said to Scott, though it was self-explanatory. He briefly felt embarrassed
over the mess he knew was inside, but Scott didn't seem like the kind of bloke who would hold it against him. His suspicions were confirmed when, upon entering the clothes-strewn bedroom, Scott slumped onto the end of Harry's bed and pillowed his head on a discarded pair of jeans without comment.

Relief didn't set in until Harry had scanned the room and seen nothing out of place. Hedwig was the lone owl in his living space, and no letters had been dropped anywhere. Somehow, he had escaped punishment. The tension fleeing his body, Harry collapsed on his bed and propped himself up on the pillows.

The bedroom door closed itself by way of an invisible hand and Tonks slipped out from beneath the cloak. “I see things haven't improved since the last time I was here. I don't suppose there's something to drink under all this?”

That seemed like a worthy reason to get up. “I'll be right back,” Harry said.

Seeing that Aunt Petunia had moved on to some other room of the house, Harry felt particularly daring and stole several cans of pop from the fridge. Returning with his bounty of condensation wrapped cans, Harry resumed his position against the headboard of the bed and took a deep, delicious drink of the cooled liquid.

The next couple of hours slipped by in pleasant conversation, though it was mostly between Harry and Tonks. Scott understandably said little, lying at the foot of the bed with his eyes closed for the majority of the time, opening them only to answer Tonks' occasional questions about America. Harry diligently avoided such topics as school work, Voldemort and Sirius, and Tonks followed suit.

“Right,” Tonks said eventually. “I'll call it a day, then. Just don't leave the house again, Harry, or I'll have to come back!”

“I won't be going anywhere,” he assured her. “Be seeing you.”

“Bye for now, luv. You too, Scott, I'm sure you'll love Hogwarts — I know I did!”

“Later, Tonks,” Scott said with a lazy wave.

Throwing her Invisibility Cloak back on, Tonks left through the door, closing it behind her. Harry looked at Scott, who appeared to be perfectly content to fall asleep where he was. “Do you actually want to look at my school supplies?”

“Nah.” Scott still didn't open his eyes. “I've got a list.” He sat up with a groan of discontent. “I'd better head out though. Just a few more things to tell you.”

Harry felt he already had quite enough information to absorb as it was, but he nodded anyway.

“Just to summarise, I'm going to be going to Hogwarts with you in order to help you fulfil the Prophecy.” Scott smiled a little bit. “It probably would have been easier just to do this without jumping on you first thing about who I am, etcetera, but you have a right to know.”

“I don't 'know' anything about you,” Harry stated firmly. He didn't want Scott to get any ideas about acceptance. As far as Harry was concerned, Scott was completely mental.

“Fair enough. Just give me the benefit of the doubt at least.” Scott stood. “I'll see you around, I don't know when or where. But if you don't see me before the train, you'll definitely see me then.” He looked somewhat distracted. “I've got some things to do.”
Harry looked at him. He really didn't know what to make of Scott Kharan. He decided that he would write to Dumbledore immediately and ask him about it. “All right. Nice meeting you.”

“Oh, I'm sure,” Scott said with mocking self-awareness.

“I'll let you out,” Harry told him, reluctantly rising to his feet.

The street was empty of cars or people when Harry opened the front door, and he wondered where Scott was going to go. Surely he didn't live close by.

The blond teen stepped outside and began walking back towards the playground. “See you later, Harry.”

Harry frowned after him. “You got someone to pick you up?”

“Yeah, my sister will get me,” Scott called back, but for some reason Harry didn't entirely believe him. Why couldn't his sister just come get him at the house?

Well, that was Scott's problem, Harry decided as he shut the door and went back up to his room. For all he knew he'd never be seeing blond teen again.

As he lay back onto his bed, Harry put an arm over his eyes and tried not to think too hard about the day he'd had. There was something almost laughably surreal about having spent a lazy summer afternoon with a complete stranger who claimed to have come to help him complete the Prophecy. But there they had been, drinking cans of pop and talking about nothing — a scene insane in its normalcy. It was almost frightening, the sort of twists his life could take without falling apart. Scott's absurd explanations of his intentions had left Harry not feeling much of anything — but what on earth was he supposed to feel? What was the accepted range of emotional response for blandly delivered information that was impossible to take seriously?

Harry had a lot to think about.
The wizarding world was an interesting place.

It was full of things that drew the eye and captivated the senses. Even the more mundane stores on Diagon Alley seemed full of the promise of more mysteries to be unravelled. There was an aura of wonder and impossibility about it, a fairytale given form and motion. It was as if every common myth and flight of fancy had risen to life amongst the stalls and windows to sparkle and amuse.

Scott Kharan was intrigued, but also cautious. Tourism wasn't his focus. He had a job to do.

That wasn't to say that he found the hidden magical side of the United Kingdom to be unappealing. It had a certain charm, to be sure. The downside of that homey sort of comfort was that it resulted from what he saw as a stagnant culture. They were well into the 1990's; he'd have thought by this point they would have discovered, like the rest of the world, that candles were only for making your house smell funky when you had dinner guests and setting the mood for romantic baths. And what was this nonsense about having to use a quill and ink pot?

Of course, that was hardly the worst of it. The dress code sent something very close to physical pain stabbing through him. He had unobtrusively scoped out some of the witches and wizards who scurried their way past him on the streets. Robes were so prominent that they might as well have turned on their wearers and become the dominant species.

It bothered him, this obsession with robes. He wasn’t a monk, he wasn’t a Hare Krishna, and he wasn’t a fucking Jedi. Why not just drape a bed sheet over himself? It’d be much easier to get ready for the day. At least a sheet would make a decent toga. Togas were hardly the pinnacle of casual fashion, but they looked good on chicks. With all these damn robes you couldn’t tell what, if anything, the witches had going on. It was positively Victorian.

It was some small measure of comfort that everyone else at Hogwarts would be forced into the same ensemble.

The streets were less crowded than he supposed they usually were. People huddled together in groups and moved quickly to their destinations. Several shops were boarded up and a plethora of posters from the Ministry for Magic seemed to cover every square inch of available surface. It assured him that his presence was, if not necessary, then at least warranted. That vague undercurrent of societal panic meant that he wasn’t completely wasting his time.

Flourish and Blotts had been worth the trip. His first visit to a real wizarding book shop had awakened within him the scholar that was often forced to lie dormant in the face of more pressing matters. He had scanned several books on Magical Theory before collecting the volumes on his school list. The school texts that concerned Defence Against the Dark Arts held the most interest for him. Scott had always subscribed to the adage ‘know thy enemy’. An understanding of Voldemort’s abilities would be inherently useful.

After grabbing everything that he needed to, he amused himself by passing an hour or so in the
section of the store reserved for books containing weighty pondering on the nature of the universe and its possible surrounds. He received several odd looks from other patrons as he laughed his way through *Condensed Dimensional Theory and Its Practical Applications in Local Space*. These morons hadn’t even figured out that time and space were the same thing.

His next stop was much less pleasant: an extended fitting session in Madam Malkin’s. He purchased the mandatory set of black school robes and a pointed black hat that he hoped would never be necessary.

His wand had presented a problem. Ollivander had disappeared and his shop was accordingly closed. It was imperative that he get his hands on a wand for his schoolwork, and while there were other wand-makers around Ollivander was the best. A little midnight mischief the night before had solved that quandary, and he was now the proud owner of a fine, if stolen, wand.

He passed up the Menagerie, having no interest in owning any sort of magical pet. Likewise with Quality Quidditch Supplies – he knew that such a view wouldn’t endear him to the local populace, but he thought that a broomstick was just about the stupidest looking form of transportation conceivable. There had to be some kind of protective magic involved, or no self-respecting male would ever mount one of those things.

The sight of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes lifted his flagging spirits. Next to the other buildings on the row, the Weasley twins’ shop resembled nothing so much as a house fire, and the outrageous colours called to him with a multitude of promises – Scott had to admire good showmanship when he saw it. Despite the generally repressed atmosphere of the alley the store was doing an obviously brisk business as a steady stream of customers came and went.

He was about to approach the shop and enter when something even more interesting caught his eye.

Three familiar teens were huddled under an Invisibility Cloak, trying to slip through the crowd at the exit. Succeeding, they moved quickly down the street. Shouldering the large backpack into which he had crammed his school supplies, he began following them at an unobtrusive distance. He didn’t know what was going on, but anything that required such measures of stealth was probably important and therefore of immediate interest to him.

They disappeared into an alleyway; it seemed deserted, but his eyes told him there were at least two people observing the street from behind darkened windows. It wasn’t hard to avoid their line of sight as he pressed himself into alcoves and sidestepped underneath eaves.

The trio had stopped outside of a shop called ‘Borgin and Burkes’, according to the sign set over the entrance. He stepped partway down a set of cellar stairs and flattened himself against the wall nearest to them, listening in. They said nothing until a blond boy that Scott didn’t recognise stepped out and hurried back down the alleyway.

The three teens beneath the Cloak were talking to each other, intently discussing the purpose behind the other fourth teen’s visit to the shop. Scott was already capable of recognising Harry’s voice, so it wasn’t hard to put names to the other two. A female voice, and therefore Hermione’s, instructed the boys to wait behind. Obviously she intended to enter the shop, which was probably a mistake judging by the looks of it.

A moment of indecision arrived. Interference might prove to be a mistake, but so might refraining from doing so. His initial instincts told him to take a hands-off approach for the time being. On the other hand, allowing Hermione to take action alone could be dangerous. When she bent down to slip out from under the cloak, Scott made his decision.
“Wait!” Scott hissed from his concealed spot. He dropped his backpack on the steps. The three teens froze underneath the cloak.

Careful not to expose himself to view from the front window of Borgin and Burkes, Scott crossed the street and leaned against the opposite side next to the hidden trio, as if he were waiting for someone. Rather than look directly at them he stared at the ground, giving the impression that he didn’t know exactly where they were. “Harry. So, what are you trying to do here?”

The ensuing silence was somehow audibly stunned.

Harry broke it. “Scott.” His tone was a mixture of surprise and wariness. “We wanted to know what Draco Malfoy was talking about.”

“What did he say?”

“He was reserving something – and he wanted something else fixed. But we couldn’t see what.” Harry sounded frustrated at this. “Hermione was going to go in and try to find out, I think.”

The most probable outcomes of Hermione attempting to do such a thing were, without exception, undesirable. Scott shook his head. “I don’t know about that. Why don’t you let me go in?”

“No offence,” came Ron’s voice, “but who the bloody hell are you?”

“Ron!” Hermione again.

“My name’s Scott Kharan, I’m a transfer student. From America,” he added as an afterthought. “Aren’t the three of you a little tall to be running around under that cloak?”

“Did anybody else see us?” Harry asked.

“I don’t think so. I saw you leave the shop and followed you.”

“A new student!” Hermione had not moved beyond the point of the conversation that had touched upon school. “Oh, that must be exciting! When did you meet Harry?”

“We met over the summer,” Harry explained. “Dumbledore introduced us. I – er – didn’t think to tell you about it.”

More likely Harry just didn’t know how to tell them about it, Scott thought wryly. It was one thing to casually mention that you met a new student, it was quite another to have to explain that he was a raving lunatic.

“Harry! How could you forget something so important?” Hermione sounded positively aghast.

“Yeah, Harry,” Ron echoed mockingly. “How could you?”

“Hermione, Ron – this really isn’t the time,” Harry murmured. “Let’s either go in or get out of here.”


Before they could protest, he opened the door and entered the dimly lit shop.

The place was a maze of dusty cabinets and dark stone floor. Cobwebs hung in abundance in the ceiling corners and there was a film of grime over everything. Scott thought it looked a lot like an unusually expensive rat hole. The latent magical energy made his skin crawl – judging from the
looks of a lot of the merchandise displayed in the various nooks and crannies, a good fire would improve the place immensely.

Borgin eyed him disdainfully as he approached the counter. Scott had to remind himself again that as a sixteen-year-old, he wasn’t very intimidating.

“Hey,” Scott greeted him casually. He went straight to the point. “I’m here to ask about an item of special interest… I think you know which one.”

It was a transparent ploy, but Borgin’s eyes darted to a necklace in its glass display case for a fraction of a second. “I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific,” he replied coldly, but the damage was done.

“Okay. I like the look of that necklace,” Scott said, pointing a nonchalant finger towards it.

The man went very still. “It’s one and a half thousand Galleons. I only accept cash.”

“One and a half? What is that, a joke?”

“No, it is not a joke... sir,” Borgin sneered disdainfully, looking over Scott’s Muggle attire. “There are other parties who are more capable of purchasing such a rare item... might I suggest you peruse a different section of the shop?” The shopkeeper looked pointedly towards a dim corner that held a neglected collection of apparent junk.

Scott ignored the unsubtle hint. “What other parties are we talking about?”

“It is not our custom to give out private information,” Borgin said in a dark tone that implied Scott was a fool for even suggesting it.

“If I knew, maybe I could make a better offer.”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

“You might, but perhaps some of your other partners would be more interested,” Scott said, trying a different tact. “I’m not the only kid to come in here with some money to throw around.”

Borgin visibly flinched. “If you’ve been spying on our customers, boy, you’ve got much bigger things to worry about than our business!” he hissed.

“I’ve got money, and you’ve got what I want. The only thing you have to worry about right now is me,” Scott told Borgin in his most threatening tone, but immediately he could tell that it was ineffective. He’d hardly begun and his teenage appearance was already undermining him.

Borgin sneered at him and disdainfully began to busy himself sorting a small box of what appeared to be antique coins. “Leave, now. Before someone makes you.”

Scott had lost his best chance when his threat had failed. His only recourse was to escalate things to violence, and he wasn’t sure that the results would be worth the damage. Perhaps it would be better to quit while he was still ahead. After all, Borgin had already inadvertently confirmed what Scott had wanted to know.

He turned and exited the shop, deciding that discretion was required for the time being.

Once out on the street again, he made sure to check that it was clear of possible witnesses. Borgin had been easy to trick, at least initially, but Scott didn’t know how important the information
gained was.

Hermione’s voice came out from under the Invisibility Cloak. “Well, at least you got something out of him.”

Scott shrugged, unsure of that. “Did you learn anything useful?”

“We’ll go over what we heard later.” Harry said before the conversation could continue. “We’d better get back before Mrs. Weasley notices we’re gone.”

“Good idea,” Scott said. “I’m gonna hit up that Wizarding Wheezes store you were in before I leave.” He retrieved his backpack from the cellar steps and began walking quickly back the way they had come, remembering that to other people it looked like he was alone.

“So, Scott...” It was Hermione. “You said you were from America?”

“Yeah. Moved here not too long ago.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever had a new student from America yet,” she mused. “That must be quite an adjustment.”

“It’s not all that bad. Dumbledore showed me around the school already so hopefully I won’t get too lost.”

“Both Ron and I are Prefects in our year,” Hermione said rather importantly. “If you get sorted into our house, we’d be glad to help you settle in.”

“I hope so,” Scott said. “It’d be nice to go into a house where I already know some people.”

They split up at the door to the joke shop, the trio disappearing somewhere into the back while Scott examined some of the merchandise. It was a higher quality brand of novelty item than was found in most places that offered similar wares – he was quite taken with a great many of the offerings. Near the front of the shop, a pair of red-headed twins were alternating between regaling customers and looking after the more mundane business aspects of the shop.

The trio emerged from the back of the store to be berated by a short, red-haired woman, who Scott figured must be Molly Weasley. They were trying to explain their disappearance but it seemed to be slow going. He positioned himself a little closer to them so that Harry saw him.

“Uh, Mrs. Weasley-” Harry spotted Scott standing by a rotating display of new fake wands and, as Scott had assumed he would, used him to distract Mrs. Weasley. “This is Scott, he’s a new student from America. I met him over the summer. Scott, this is Molly Weasley, she’s Ron’s mum.”

“Really!” Mrs. Weasley said. Scott shook the motherly little woman’s hand as she took him in with interest. “Well, it’s lovely to meet you, dear, I’m sure you’ll love your first year at Hogwarts. Are your parents here?” She looked around the store as if expecting to see a matching pair of tall dark blonds somewhere nearby.

“No, I’m here by myself today,” Scott said a little self-consciously. “I live with my sister.”

“Oh, I see,” Mrs. Weasley said, a slight frown creasing her face like she thought that was hardly a suitable arrangement for a young man.

“We don’t have any parents,” Scott felt compelled to explain. “So my sister takes care of me for now.”
Immediately the frown transformed into open sympathy. “Oh, I’m so sorry, dear, I didn’t mean to bring it up. Where are you living?”

“Ottery St. Catchpole. We’ve rented a flat.”

“Well, you must come over for dinner sometime, we live right outside of town.” She looked positively delighted at the thought of having frequent dinner guests. “Tell your sister she can owl me any time if she needs some help moving in. She can reach us at The Burrow.”

“I’ll tell her,” he promised. “Nice seeing you again, Harry.”

“You too,” Harry replied, eyeing him. “And I guess we can have a nice talk later, can’t we?”

“You can count on it.”

As the group left, Scott took note of Ginny Weasley, memorising her stature and appearance. She was an important figure. Scott knew he most likely wouldn’t be seeing as much of her as the others, which could present a problem in the future.

He’d worry about that later, though. There was still too much to do in the present.

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Something had happened that Hermione Granger did not understand.

And she did not like that at all.

It wasn’t anything to do with Draco Malfoy, either, despite Harry’s obsession with the Slytherin’s activities. Though she would readily admit that whatever Draco had been doing hadn’t been aboveboard, she was not buying into the ‘Draco as a Death Eater’ theory. It was a concern that he was interested in a cursed necklace, but hardly damning evidence of ties to Voldemort. She felt frustrated that the answer was not immediately apparent and despite her dismissal of Harry’s theory, she couldn’t seem to let it go as unimportant.

But no, far more pressing on her mind was the riddle of Scott Kharan. Their brief encounter with the boy in Diagon Alley had been bizarre from start to finish, and on top of that, there was something Harry wasn’t saying about Scott – she was sure of it.

First the American had been the only one in the crowd to somehow spot their feet under the cloak while they were leaving the shop, and she had been positive they were covered at that point. More confusingly, even if he had seen their feet, how had he recognised Harry? From a distant pair of shoes?

There was an answer to that, however unlikely – he had only followed them out of curiosity and hadn’t known Harry was there until he heard them talk. But then not only had he approached them like he knew exactly where they stood, he had also shown absolutely no surprise at hearing Hermione’s voice. It was as if he had known precisely who was under the cloak, despite having never met any of them save Harry before.

On top of that, he had then jumped directly into their plan to find out what Malfoy had been up to without having any background information on the situation or knowing why it was important. His willingness to put effort forward for a cause he couldn’t possibly understand was perhaps the most baffling thing of all.

Taken separately, any of these observations might be dismissed as coincidence or personal
idiosyncrasy. When put together, they painted a picture that Hermione couldn’t even begin to make something of.

Harry knew more than he was telling, and that made him her priority target.

Predictably, as soon as she started to seek him out Harry was nowhere to be found. She did however discover Ron in his room, closely examining a shirt he had probably found on the floor to see if it was worth packing. “I’d say burn it, personally.”

Ron laughed, throwing it towards his trunk despite her suggestion. “While wearing it, right?”

She frowned. He didn’t really think she’d say something that mean, did he? In this case he seemed to have been joking, despite his tendency to mistake her occasional sharpness for genuine antagonism. “Have you seen Harry?”

“Not since breakfast. I thought he was with you.”

“Maybe he’s with Ginny,” she mused.

Ron perked up at that. “Yeah? You think?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Let it go, Ron. Ginny is seeing Dean now, remember?”

“I always knew he was a wanker,” Ron muttered darkly.

“Oh hush! You’d say that about anybody she was seeing, and you’ve never disliked Dean before,” she pointed out.

“It sort of changes your view of a bloke when he starts snogging your sister,” Ron said. He shrugged dismissively, and looked away from her. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Obviously not,” she huffed. Couldn’t they coexist for five minutes without one of them setting the other off? She tried to re-establish the peace. “I know you’re just trying to protect her. I think you should really talk to her about it sometime, and maybe if you explain yourself, the two of you can come to terms.”

Ron merely grunted in response and Hermione flared up again. “Fine! Forget it.” She left the room, storming off to look for Ginny.

Ginny was lying on her bed, leafing through a dog-eared copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages*. She smiled knowingly at Hermione as the older girl came striding angrily through the door. “Talk to Ron recently?”

“No! Well, yes. That’s not important!” Hermione took a deep breath. Ron had a talent for leaving her out of sorts, and she’d never understood why he affected her so much. “Have you seen Harry?”

“Not since breakfast. Why? Is something wrong?” Immediately, there was concern in Ginny’s brown eyes. Hermione knew that Ginny wasn’t as over Harry as she would like people to think she was. Not that Hermione could blame her. Harry was a hard person to forget about.

“No, I just need to talk to him.”

“Have you looked outside? Maybe Dad’s cornered him in the garage again.”

That was a good idea. Hermione hadn’t thought of that. “Thanks, Ginny.”
But alas, Harry was not to be found answering endless questions concerning Muggles for Mr. Weasley. Nor was he anywhere near the broom shed. With her list of options rapidly being depleted, Hermione decided to try the garden.

As it turned out she could have saved herself a lot of trouble by going to the garden first, because Harry was propped up against the trunk of a tree as he stared into the pond, deep in thought. For a moment, Hermione wondered whether she should bother him, but it didn’t look like he was brooding – he seemed to be in more of a contemplative mood. Most people wouldn’t draw much of a distinction between the two, but with Harry the subtleties of self-pity were very involved. He held a folded letter loosely in his left hand.

“Harry?”

Harry looked up as she approached. His eyes were clear and not particularly haunted, which she took to be a good sign. He straightened out his legs, stretching a bit. “Hey, Hermione. Need me back at the house?”

“No,” she said, settling down next to him. “I wanted to talk to you.”

The reaction to those dreaded words was immediate – she could feel him close off from her like a gate had dropped between them. “Uh huh.”

“Not about any of… Of that,” she said, trying to tiptoe her way around the more sensitive issues. “I wanted to ask you about Scott.”

That seemed to alter the effect she was having on him, though she couldn’t say whether the change was an improvement. There was an odd look in his eye. “What about him?”

She decided to be direct. “There were some things I didn’t understand. Why did Dumbledore introduce the two of you over the summer?”

Harry fielded that question easily enough, and the answer didn’t really surprise her. “He didn’t. Scott came to see me on his own. But,” he hastened to add, “Dumbledore knew about it. So he, uh, knew that Scott was introducing himself.”

“Well that’s a relief,” Hermione said. “To be honest, I had been a little worried that he might not be who he says he is.”

Harry went strangely still. “What makes you say that?”

“Oh, lots of things,” Hermione said, watching Harry intently to judge the impact of her words. “Like how he was able to see through your Invisibility Cloak, and what he did at Borgin and Burkes.”

“He can’t see through Invisibility Cloaks,” Harry said, laughing, but it sounded like he was trying to convince himself. “He just saw our feet.”

“That’s not very likely.”

Harry shrugged. “If you’ve got a better explanation…”

“Fine, what about Borgin and Burkes, then? You don’t find it odd that he went in just to satisfy your curiosity?”

Harry hesitated. Hermione gave him her best McGonagall glare. “When we talked over the
“summer,” Harry said slowly, “he said that he wanted to help me fight Voldemort.”

“But that had nothing to do with Voldemort!” Hermione said in exasperation. Harry gave her a look. “All right, I think it had nothing to do with Voldemort.”

“Maybe he disagrees.”

“Maybe,” Hermione said severely, “you know more than you’re telling me. In fact, I know you know more than you’re telling me.”

Harry sagged back against the tree, sighing. “Yeah. I do.”

“Then why won’t you tell me?”

“Because I’m not sure if I believe it.” Harry glanced at the letter he still held in one hand. “Look – Scott is going to be attending Hogwarts with Dumbledore’s permission. That much is true.” He shrugged awkwardly. “The rest of it really isn’t mine to tell. If you want to know, you’ll have to ask him yourself.”

Hermione was not at all happy with those terms but Harry refused to budge on them. Finally giving up, she left him to his thoughts and stomped back to The Burrow in no better of a mood than when she had left.

She met Ginny again halfway up the stairs – being of a disposition to pick another fight with Ron, she was on her way to his room. “Talk with Harry didn’t go too well, then?” Ginny said.

“No. He wouldn’t tell me what I wanted to know.” Hermione clenched her fists for a moment in frustration before forcing them to relax.

“Is it really that important?”

“It might be. It’s hard to know when he won’t tell me the truth!”

“About what?” Ginny looked intrigued. Hermione didn’t get this aggravated at Harry very often.

“Oh, it’s that friend of his. The American. There’s something strange about him but Harry said if I wanted to know more I’d have to ask him myself.”

Ginny frowned. “The blond-haired boy in the twins’ shop?”

“Yes, that’s him,” Hermione confirmed. “Harry said he met him over the summer.”

“I don’t see what’s so strange about that,” Ginny said. “I mean, besides Harry meeting someone over the summer.”


They went up to Ron and Harry’s room, shutting the door behind them. Ron was dozing in the sun on his bed, shaking himself and sitting up when they entered. “Oh, hey. You find Harry?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, sitting at the foot of the bed. “For all the good it did me.”

“Yeah,” Ron said with a yawn, “that sounds like Harry.”

Briefly, Hermione related the events that had transpired at Borgin and Burkes to Ginny, who seemed both fascinated by and jealous of the adventure. “So he just walked in and tried to buy it?
Without any money?"

“When I asked Harry about it,” Hermione continued, “he said I would have to talk to Scott myself.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Ginny ventured. “Harry isn’t the sort to abuse his friends’ trust.” Ron nodded in agreement.

“No, he isn’t,” Hermione sighed. Put that way, it was hard to stay angry. “I just wanted to... Well, never mind. I’ll talk to Scott myself when school starts.”

With any luck, Scott would be more forthcoming than Harry had.

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Platform nine and three-quarters was a jumble of baggage and noise. The crowd of wizards and witches surged back and forth next to the Hogwarts Express, saying hello, saying goodbye, and occasionally arguing. Scott navigated the throng with practised ease, sporadically pausing to stiff-arm his way through.

He had been willing to make some concessions to conformity, but he had his limits. He’d admitted to himself that it had been well and good to decide that he was going to do his best to blend in when it was all academic. So instead of acting the chameleon in robes, Scott strolled down the platform in a t-shirt with his school supplies split between a Muggle backpack and a suitcase he pulled behind him on wheels. He looked out of place, but the platform was so crowded that he didn’t draw more than the occasional glance.

He thought he might be running a little late. The edge of the platform was mainly lined with parents calling to their children through the windows of the train. Pushing his way past another waving couple, Scott went up the short staircase to the train door, lifting his suitcase behind him and setting it down again once inside.

He looked around with some interest. Students were moving up and down the corridor either searching for available compartments or chatting with friends. He found it strange that the primary choice of education for children from the age of eleven was to be sent away to boarding school, but figured that with the wizarding population only a fraction of the Muggle one, they had little reason to build local schools.

His thoughts were interrupted when the door shut and the train whistle blew, signalling departure. Resettling his backpack, he started moving down the corridor, reasoning that since he had entered at the very front of the train he simply had to follow the cars back towards the caboose until he found Harry.

As he moved down the train, he noticed that he was receiving a lot of curious glances. He figured his attire might have something to do with it, but knew a lot of students were born to Muggles so he couldn’t have looked all that strange despite the settings. He thought instead that it was because no one recognised him. He was clearly not a first-year in age, and the other teens in the top years were wondering who he was.

Two cars down he saw the long red hair of Ginny Weasley as she left a group of friends and entered a compartment, shutting the door behind her. She could probably point him in Harry’s direction. Switching his suitcase to his left hand, he went up to the door and briefly looked inside.
Ginny was leaning against the wall to the side of the door, apparently visiting with the assembly of girls inside. He rapped on the glass.

She turned and regarded him with surprise before recognition set in. Sliding the door open, she smiled at him. “Scott, right?”

“Yes, Scott Kharan. I met your mom at your brothers’ shop,” he said, shaking her hand.

“Right, I remember. What’s up?”

“I was looking for Harry, have you seen him?”

“Just a minute ago; I think he went looking for a place to sit. Oh!” she said, remembering herself, and turned towards her friends. “This is Scott Kharan, he’s a new student.”

Scott received a chorus of “hello”s, some shy and some aggressive. “Hey,” he returned with a smile. There wasn’t any point in being antisocial, and such behaviour would only adversely affect the integration process. “Okay, well thanks then. I’ll go look for him.”

“I’ll see you later,” Ginny said. “You’ve got to be Sorted, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

She gave him a supportive smile. “Cross your fingers for Gryffindor, then!”

“You can bet on that.”

He backed away and let her close the door, turning to make his way down the corridor again. He began checking into each compartment he passed for a familiar shock of black hair.

His search didn’t take him too long. He had just squeezed past another congealed gaggle of students into the next car when he heard a shout. Peering into the compartment from which the yell had emanated, he spotted Harry conversing with a witch who could only be Luna Lovegood, judging by her eccentric taste in personal accessories and dreamy, wide-eyed gaze. It was more difficult to identify the person who was wedged underneath one of the seats, seeing as how he had nothing to go on but the person’s backside. He knocked on the door to draw their attention before opening it.

“Hey, Harry. Any room?”

Harry obligingly scooted over to make some more space while Scott hauled his suitcase into the luggage carrier. He neatly avoided stepping on the student on the floor, who could now be recognised as Neville Longbottom, rolling about as he struggled to extract himself from his awkward position. Scott slumped gratefully into the seat. “Thanks, man.”

Harry nodded amiably, but Scott noted with some disappointment that he was still wary of him. Neville was looking at him with open curiosity. Luna, appearing more than a little bizarre in a pair of what looked like spectacle style 3-D glasses, was favouring him with a mildly interested stare. “You’re not from England,” she stated.

“Scott Kharan,” he said, introducing himself. He held out his hand, which Neville shook, and which Luna silently inspected like she’d never seen a hand before. He withdrew it. “I’m from America.” He looked back and forth between them. “And you guys must be Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood.”
Luna nodded politely before returning her attention to a magazine – the front cover proclaiming it *The Quibbler* – that she held, but Neville’s mouth opened slightly in surprise. “How’d you know that?”

“Well of course I’ve heard of you, haven’t I?” Scott shrugged. “Neville Longbottom, you fought the Death Eaters; so did Luna.”

Neville blushed a little at the praise and fidgeted, clearly unused to such admiring words. “W-well, it was mostly Harry… We were just there to help…”

Scott made a dismissive gesture. “Sounded more like a team to me. You need one if you want to survive something like that.”

Neville seemed taken aback, while Harry just looked thoughtful. Luna might have been carefully considering his words or pondering the benefits of wearing socks with sandals, it was difficult to say which.

Scott reopened the conversation and steered it in a different direction by asking some questions about Hogwarts, a subject that all three of the others knew intimately and were happy to discuss. He was already informed about the timetable from the school papers he had been given, but Harry, Neville and Luna had more specific details on student life and, more importantly, social conduct. Teenage life was a play performed within a minefield, both a romantic comedy and a tragedy. Mapping the lay of the land when it came to cliques and circles was essential to integration.

It was some time later that Ron and Hermione entered the compartment. Hermione didn’t seem surprised to see him there, but Ron briefly raised his eyebrows. Scott moved aside to let Ron sit beside Harry while Hermione took the seat next to Neville. They both greeted him, and Hermione gave him a searching sort of look, but Ron seemed more concerned with telling Harry how Malfoy had flipped him the bird while neglecting his Prefect duties, then wondered out loud why Malfoy wasn’t pushing the first-year students around, as was his normal priority.

Harry shrugged, but it looked like his mind was racing. Scott frowned. Harry obviously thought this information was important, though Scott didn’t know why.

Before long, Harry and Neville received an invitation to some sort of private party at the back of the train. Neither seemed very enthused about it, but they left to go anyway.

As soon as the door had shut behind them and they had moved on, Scott turned to Hermione. “Do you know where the bathroom is?”

“Yes, down towards the back of the train and just to the right of the door to the next car,” Hermione told him.

“Thanks.”

Scott reached the furthest train car that was accessible by students just in time to see Neville’s back disappear through a door. Scott found a place near one of the windows to the left-hand side of the door and waited for the two to re-emerge.

He knew something was going to happen, he just didn’t know exactly what. It was a frustrating uncertainty. The small details could become lost in the larger shape, fading into the static. Threads came and went without warning or apparent meaning, offering no insight before transforming yet again. It wasn’t easy trying to catch one spark in a sea of fire. The shape was a vast and bleary wall of maybes with all the lucidity of a fever dream. Scott could feel the pressure, but the intent was
indecipherable. Judging by the general state of things he should probably become used to that. Harry's world was a knotted, intractable mess.

The sun was setting by the time the door opened and students began to emerge, breaking Scott from his concerned thoughts. He moved closer to the wall so Harry wouldn't see him. Waiting for them to all move past him, he followed from a safe distance. Whatever Harry was going to do, he'd start doing it without interference.

Up ahead Harry stopped, whipping a cloak out of a bag and throwing it on, after which he vanished from sight. Obviously, Harry had an Invisibility Cloak of his own. He was definitely doing something he wasn’t supposed to.

Scott watched as Harry tailed another student whom Scott didn’t recognise, carefully staying very close to his back. Scott’s suspicions were confirmed when Harry used his invisibility to gain access to the compartment the other boy entered.

Harry was spying on Malfoy. Risk was an important element in any enterprise but the last thing Scott needed was for Harry to get himself killed right at the beginning of the year. It went against his impulse to avoid needlessly disrupting the flow, but he prepared himself to do something drastic regardless.

Scott nearly held his breath while he waited for any sounds of struggle to emanate from the compartment. Though he didn’t want to start that sort of trouble this early on, if left with no option he’d fight to get Harry out in one piece. It turned out to be unnecessary; the occupants of the compartment hadn’t noticed Harry’s less than subtle entry.

Or at least, so it seemed. The train slowed to a shaky stop as it reached its destination and students began streaming out into the corridor, which quickly emptied. The compartment Harry had entered had also drained – but neither Harry nor Malfoy had left. Something was wrong. Scott tensed, readying himself.

“Petrificus Totalus!”

That was his cue. Moving on silent feet, he approached the glass window set in the door.

A voice was speaking in sneering tones, and it could only be Malfoy’s. Edging up to look into the compartment, Scott could see Malfoy standing over Harry’s rigid body. To his relief, Harry’s eyes were moving. That relief quickly faded when Malfoy raised his foot to stomp onto Harry’s face.

Scott had to react. It was a bad way to start his assimilation at Hogwarts, but there was no time to think about it.

Like a coiled spring, Scott slammed aside the door and shot into the compartment. Malfoy was still in the process of awkwardly lowering his foot in order to turn around when Scott delivered a sharp kick to the side of his left knee. With a cry of pain, the Slytherin fell backwards as his leg folded under the precisely placed blow. Scott was there to catch him with one arm wrapped tightly around his throat while the other gripped the wrist of his wand hand. Malfoy struggled for several seconds, but it was futile.

“I could break your face right now, and I don’t need a wand to do it,” Scott noted calmly into the trembling boy’s ear. With a squeeze and a twist, he swiftly disarmed Malfoy. “But, hey – we’ve all got places to be.”

With that, Scott spun around, taking Malfoy with him. Unwrapping his arm from the Slytherin’s
throat, Scott gave him a sharp shove on the shoulders followed by a solid kick to the small of the back, sending him flying out into the corridor to land roughly on his face. Without bothering to see if Malfoy had survived the fall without major damage, Scott closed the compartment door and turned back to Harry.

“Interesting situation you’ve gotten into here,” he said to the frozen boy. He pulled out his wand before remembering that he didn’t know what to do. “Um… I don’t suppose you could blink me the right spell in Morse code?”

Harry, of course, only stared back at him.

“I didn’t think so.” Scott sighed and tucked his wand away. Reaching down, he put a hand on Harry’s stiff arm. Right away the active spell was apparent; a thick skein of magic coiled around the limb. Scott broke the chain and the energy dissipated.

The spell released its grip on Harry, and he shook himself before gasping out a quick “Thanks.”

“No problem. Let’s get out of here before we’re late.”

Exiting the compartment, they found Malfoy standing in the corridor with a considerable amount of rug burn on his face and humiliation in his eyes. He glared at them with a hatred so intense it was almost holy. Harry returned the sentiment, while Scott looked on with interest. Obviously, this was not a new rivalry.

“Who’s your hero, Potter?” Malfoy spat. His venom was mixed with uncertainty; Scott was an unknown quantity.

“Scott Kharan,” Scott introduced himself. “If you’re lucky, you won’t see me around.”

Before Harry could respond to Malfoy himself, Scott had grabbed him by the shoulder and steered him back towards their compartment, leaving Malfoy to retrieve his wand and rage in private. Harry shot him an angry look, but Scott only returned it with a composed one of his own. “I’m not going to be late my first time at Hogwarts because some asshole wants to trade insults for half an hour. We gotta go.”

Scott imagined Harry wouldn’t have minded goading Malfoy into a losing battle, but he nodded grudgingly. “Fine.”

They retrieved their luggage from the rack in their now empty compartment and made their way off the train. Looking back, Scott didn’t see Malfoy following them. He doubted it was over. Pride was quick to recover and slow to forget.

Emerging onto the platform, Scott stopped to look at the castle rising up in the distance. The partially risen moon shone bright on the battlements and the many windows were lit with a warm yellow glow. The ancient castle was a massive construction, both grand and ostentatious. In its walls was housed a bewildering array of corridors and staircases, which were confusing enough without the added difficulty of their apparently random movements. Perched on the cliff over the silver lake, Hogwarts projected a timeless majesty.

“So that’s Hogwarts,” Scott said. He thought about it for a second then nodded in acceptance. “Not bad.” He leaned over to Harry, and whispered in his ear, “Just don’t let me do anything stupid on my first night.”
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“Well for starters you might not want to follow me, then,” Harry said. He pointed at the waiting carriages. Scott thought the skeletal steeds that pulled them were kind of cool looking. “Those take students second year and above to the castle. I guess you’re really a sixth-year, but since you haven’t been Sorted yet you’ll probably want to go with Hagrid.”

“Yeah, I’d hoped to avoid that. I’ll go ask about it,” Scott said glumly.

Harry gave him a shrewd look. “You can see the Thestrals, can’t you.”

“What, the anorexic horses over there?” Scott gestured towards the carriages and their spectral pullers. “Obviously.”

“Not really. You can only see them if you’ve seen someone die,” Harry explained.

“Oh.” Scott considered that for a second. It was an odd qualifier.

Harry waved his goodbye and hurried to catch up to Ron and Hermione, who had already climbed into one of the carriages.

Scott took a deep breath. This was it – his big debut in front of the full crowd. All of the required objectives were clear enough. It was figuring out how to complete them that would be the problem. He let out the breath.

“Prorsum,” he muttered to himself, and started walking.

He made his way over to the hulking figure of Hagrid, who was shouting and gesturing to get the scared looking first-years to assemble. Rather than gain everyone’s attention by trying to shout over the top of him, Scott simply tugged at his sleeve.

“What-?” Hagrid glanced around in confusion before remembering that he had to look down in order to see other people. “Oh, you’ll want ter go to tha carriages, over there-” Hagrid pointed towards the carriages before continuing, “FIRS’ YEARS OVER HERE!”

“Actually,” Scott said once his ears stopped ringing, “I’m new, this is my first day. I have to go with you to be Sorted, right?”
“Really?” Hagrid peered at him. “American, are ye? Is that your accent?”

“Yeah. I just moved here.”

“Well, alrigh’, alrigh’ then,” Hagrid rumbled good-naturedly. “Dumbledore said something abou’ tha’, if I remember. Welcome ter Hogwarts! You can get in tha’ boat over there, be careful now and watch yer step.”

The boat was somewhat rickety and sported no oars, so Scott assumed it had to be magically propelled. The lake looked bottomless and dark in the moonlight, stretching out and away into the distance. Sitting awkwardly in the gently swaying vessel, Scott could see things moving down below the surface in deeper water. None of the first-years crowded around him with pale faces seemed to notice them, which was good, since Scott felt it would probably have led to full scale panic.

The boat rocked as two other students clambered into it with him. Scott’s legs were significantly longer than the small craft’s bottom allowed and he was forced to bring his knees up to his chest in order for the first-years to squeeze by. Once settled, they looked at him with open curiosity.

“You’re not really a first-year, are you?” one of them, a small, dark-haired boy piped up. His companion, a pale girl with strawberry blond hair, merely looked on with wide eyes.

“I’m a new student,” Scott explained. He speculated that a large pin with the words ‘I’m an American transfer student’ emblazoned on it might speed introductions along.

The boy squinted at him. “You talk a bit funny, don’t you?” The girl appeared shocked at his audacity.

“I’m from America,” Scott said dryly. “We all talk a bit funny over there.”

The girl’s eyes widened further. Scott thought there was a fair chance they might detach and roll out of her head. The boy looked intrigued by Scott’s revelation. “That’s all the way across the ocean, innit?”

Scott wondered whether Hogwarts had a good geological curriculum. “Yeah, across the Atlantic.”

“What team are you backing, then?”

“What?”

“What team are you backing? You’ve got to pick a Quidditch team, you know, since you live here now.” The boy said it with authority.

“Oh, of course,” Scott said. “Well, I haven’t had time to pick one I like yet.”

“The Falmouth Falcons are the right one,” the boy stated with absolute conviction.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“What’s your name?” To Scott’s surprise, the wide-eyed girl had spoken up in a small voice. Her question was put forward very timidly, and Scott wondered if she thought he was going to eat her.

“Scott Kharan,” he introduced himself. “I’m a transfer student to the sixth-year class.”

“I’m Kylie,” she said softly, and then promptly shut her mouth as if afraid to say any more.
“And I’m Trevor,” the boisterous boy said in a tone that was ear-splitting in volume after straining to understand Kylie.

“Really?” Scott said conversationally. “I know a toad named Trevor.”

The boy looked outraged at the thought.

All talking ceased as the boats began to move, Hagrid looming large at the front of their diminutive fleet. The vessels glided silently through the glassy surface of the water, trailing expanding ripples in their wake. Scott could feel the magic that propelled the craft humming just beneath normal senses like an electronic noise beyond human hearing range.

His two boat mates were a study in contrasting reactions. Kylie was shivering in her seat, eyes firmly fixed on the bottom of the boat – either to avoid looking at the water or to check for leaks. Scott considered putting a comforting hand on her shoulder but felt the action might give her such a jolt that she really would go overboard. Trevor was all but leaning out over the prow of the tiny vessel, eagerly monitoring the progress of the other first-years and gazing rapturously at the castle that was beginning to loom over them. Every time his movements rocked the boat slightly, Kylie would close her eyes in abject terror.

The last thing Scott wanted was a hysterical girl on his hands when he was crossing a lake that had God only knew what living in it. He tried to distract her. “So, Kylie, any subjects in particular that you’re looking forward to?” This garnered no response save a barely perceptible nod, but he felt that it was progress nonetheless. “I figure Defence Against the Dark Arts should be interesting. You think they’ll let us practice duelling?”

Kylie appeared terrified at the thought, but it pulled Trevor’s attention back to them. “Yeah, maybe!” the boy said excitedly. “I’d like to learn to duel!”

Kylie buried her face in her hands; doubtless, visions of mandatory duels to the death were dancing in her head. Scott hastened to change the subject. “Any houses you guys are holding out for?”

“My mum was in Hufflepuff,” Trevor said. “But sometimes she says I’m as brave as a lion and twice as foolhardy, and it drives her spare… So maybe Gryffindor?”

“That’s where I’m headed. How about you, Kylie?”

“Don’t know,” Kylie whispered from between her hands.

“Well, you don’t seem like a Slytherin to me,” Scott said encouragingly, “so you really can’t go wrong.” Privately, he thought the slip of a girl was probably destined for Hufflepuff.

The castle was now almost overhead, blotting out a considerable section of the starry night sky. The sound of the lake against the immovable cliff on which the school was perched was now loud in his ears. He focused on the great vertical sheet of rock, trying to discern whether there were any spells placed on it to prevent erosion. As apparently immutable as the rock face was he knew the lake would eat its way through with the passage of enough years.

Moving past such titanic constructions of nature was still slightly humbling for Scott. He hoped that he never lost that sense of awe entirely. Trevor didn’t seem to have that problem. The small boy gaped with unselfconscious wonder.

The boats slid into a subterranean dock, the lanterns glistening off the wet limestone walls in a dazzling array of shifting glitters. Getting out of the boat proved to be more difficult than getting in. Scott would have had no problem simply hopping out of the craft on his own, but his shipmates
were troublesome. Trevor very nearly capsized the boat when he tried to clamber out and after that Kylie wouldn’t even move until Scott all but picked her up and set her onto the dock. The first-years assembled by a staircase with Hagrid as a stern-looking older witch came down to meet them.

Scott recognised her as most likely being Minerva McGonagall, a fact that was confirmed when she introduced herself. As she spoke, he ran through the information he had on her in his mind, placing her in the ever-changing puzzle that was his mission. It was important to know where people stood in the grand scheme of things. He catalogued the shape around her for future reference, tangled though it was.

His internal council of war was interrupted when she called his name. “Scott Kharan?”

“That’s me,” he said, before tacking on a quick “Professor.” McGonagall was a key figure at the school, and he didn’t want to be on her bad side.

“There have been some special arrangements made to accommodate you, taking into consideration that you will be joining the sixth-year class.” She examined him closely. “Hogwarts has not had the opportunity to accept many American students. May I be the first to welcome you to our school. I know adjusting will not be easy. If you have any questions, please feel free to come and see me.”

“Thank you, Professor,” he replied with a smile. She returned it with a small one of her own and a terse nod before turning and leading the group up the stairs.

Despite his unusual status as both the eldest and the only transfer student of the group, he did not receive much attention. The huddled children seemed much more concerned with their own growing nervousness.

The inside of Hogwarts was much as he remembered it from his earlier visit, though now it was full of life. He could see why people loved the school so much – despite the cold stone that made up most of its vast structure, the castle had a welcoming feeling of warmth to it. Hogwarts was not only a school, it was a home, and that distinction had sunk into the very walls.

The party stopped in front of the huge double doors that led into the Great Hall. Scott only half listened as McGonagall explained the Sorting process – he already knew how that worked. A number of the first-years did seem mightily relieved, though. Once she was finished the doors swung open, and they filed through to be Sorted into their houses. Scott felt it was kind of strange for a school to actually promote segregation and disunity. Kids could already ostracise each other well enough without outside help.

The Sorting Hat sat on a stool in the middle of the Hall, lined up directly with Dumbledore’s chair in the centre of the professors’ table which stood against the far wall. Scott spotted Harry sitting with Hermione, Ron and Neville along with some other students whom he didn’t immediately recognise. He was receiving some assorted looks and mutterings as he passed the house tables, no doubt due to the fact that he was substantially taller than any of the other students in the group.

After the line of new students had come to a stop, the Sorting Hat opened its wide brim in preparation to say something. Scott was intrigued. He had been unaware that the Hat directly addressed the students in any way but in their own heads when worn.

He certainly hadn't expected it to start singing.
Welcome, students, welcome here!
Once again, another year,
Has brought new minds to learned halls,
For brighter futures, one and all!

And I, the Hat, your trusty guide,
Will send you to your chosen side,
Of this Great Hall, where tables four,
Mark each House of ancient yore...

Strong Gryffindors, the red and gold,
The home for all those brave and bold!
Or Hufflepuff, the black and yellow,
where you will meet your loyal fellows!

And Ravenclaw, the bronze and blue,
where minds are sharp and wit sparks true!
In Slytherin, the silver and green,
you will claim ambition by any means!

But remember, students, I am your host,
And though judgement is mine to boast,
I seek to show you your own heart,
Not to force an improper start.

I Sort not just what each House requires,
But hear your thoughts, your own desires.
So choose not merely by destined creed;
But by what you want, and what you need.

Scott listened with one ear and absently applauded with the rest once the Hat finished, but was far more concerned with cataloguing the various faces around the Hall. He noted the students he recognised and made a mental list of those he didn’t. Putting names to faces was important. He liked to know who was doing what, and with whom.

The line began to move as students’ names were called. With trembling hands the first-years donned the Sorting Hat. Sometimes the Hat would immediately call out the name of the house chosen, and other times a tense silence would descend on the Hall as the Hat made a more difficult decision. Each Sorting resulted in a round of applause from the table of the house that had received the new student. He watched as Trevor hurried eagerly to the Gryffindor table.

His name not being all that far down in the alphabet, Scott’s turn soon came.

“Kharan, Scott!”

As Scott approached the stool Dumbledore stood from his spot at the table, causing something of a stir. There had been no previous occasion on which the Headmaster had interrupted the Sorting ceremony. Scott halted and waited for him to speak.

“I would like to announce…” Dumbledore said, gesturing to Scott and giving him a benevolent smile, though his eyes conveyed a deeper understanding. Scott nodded slightly in acknowledgement. “…the arrival of our first American student in some time. Scott will be joining
our sixth-year class, having recently moved from the United States. I trust we will all make him feel welcome.”

Scott supposed that would save him a lot of questions in the future but he wasn’t all that happy at being singled out. A dull roar of conversation rose and fell in the Hall until Dumbledore held his hand up for silence – though that still didn’t stop a great deal of students from standing and craning their necks to get a good look at Scott. Ignoring them, he picked up the Hat and placed it on his head, taking a seat on the stool.

“Back again, are we?” The dry voice of the Sorting Hat sounded in his head.

_I don't exactly have a choice. Nice song, by the way._

“Thank you. You’re quite the sensation, Mr. Kharan. I dare say that at this moment, almost any of the houses would like me to speak their name, if only so they can deluge you with questions…”

_Almost any, huh._

“Yes, well, Slytherin has never been a house for the more open-minded…”

_Is there something I should know about my probable opponents?_

“Opponents?” The Sorting Hat sounded amused. “You must have been busy indeed to claim foes amongst students you’ve never met before… No doubt this has something to do with your mysterious purpose here…” There was a short pause as the Hat seemed to consider that. “The Slytherins will not accept you because of what you are. America is a much younger country than the United Kingdom… The wizarding society there is different than it is here. Nearly all American wizards are half-blood or Muggle-born… The Slytherins are fond of neither.”

Scott should have known the Sorting Hat would prove a valuable source of information. Who better to give insight into the wills and whims that made the students of Hogwarts what they were than the very creation that was tasked with dividing them by those same inner proclivities? _Second class citizens by pure-blood definition._

“Exactly. In America, the magical and Muggle societies are much more closely related than here. Those who hold to certain brands of pure-blood ideals feel that has tainted American wizards beyond redemption.”

_Interesting. We should talk later, but for now how about you lay some Sorting on me._

“Droll as always, Scott Kharan, and as much as I’ve enjoyed our little chat, the time has come for me to deliver on a promise and say–” the Hat opened its mouth and shouted for the Hall to hear, “GRYFFINDOR!”

There was no eruption of furious applause or anything of that sort – Scott was hardly a celebrity – but he did receive something slightly above the normal level of clapping reserved for a newly Sorted student. Removing the Hat and placing it back on its stool, he made his way to the Gryffindor table. He was pleased to see that Harry had moved to make room for him. He gratefully slid onto the bench.

“Newell, Patrick!”

“Any problems from Malfoy on the way in?” Scott whispered to Harry while the Sorting continued. Ron leaned towards them to listen in.
“No, not yet,” Harry whispered back, remaining focused on the Sorting so as not to alert any teachers.

“Malfoy? What about Malfoy?” Ron said a trifle too loudly before Hermione shushed him.

“Raster, Sharon!”

“I’ll tell you later,” Harry muttered to Ron. “Ask me tonight.”

Ron looked a little disgruntled at that but held his peace. Hermione seemed curious despite herself, still though she kept her eyes steadfastly on the Sorting. Turning his attention to his new-found house, Scott tried to spot the other boys he’d be sharing a room with. Being on good terms with his room-mates would be the most important thing. There was no point in having to work in a hostile environment.

“Timous, Kylie!”

His concentration was pulled back to the ongoing Sorting by the shaky appearance of Kylie, looking like she’d rather be anywhere than about to be Sorted. She donned the Sorting Hat with weak hands and looked desperately at the floor while it panned through her brain. If the Hat really was most strongly guided by personal desire then Scott figured it would send her home.

Thus he felt no small measure of surprise when the Sorting Hat loudly proclaimed, “GRYFFINDOR!”

As Kylie scurried over to find a seat at the table, Scott wondered if the Hat was really infallible. Only Slytherin would have been a less fitting choice than Gryffindor. Perhaps the Hat had seen something in her that Scott had missed. He decided to bring it up the next time he talked with it.

The Sorting ended with “Yarrow, Caroline!” and the first feast of the school year appeared before the hungry mass of students. Harry and Ron appeared perfectly content to stuff themselves in silence. Hermione, on the other hand, was eyeing him with obvious questioning intent. Scott readied himself to dance his way around the truth.

But before she could corner him with pointed queries, he was saved by less dangerous curiosities. Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan made their way over to meet the new addition to their dormitory. Scott shook both their hands in greeting and mentally blessed them for the much-needed distraction.

“American, huh?” Dean was saying. “I know you play football over there too.”

“Yeah, we call it soccer,” Scott replied, noticing that nobody save Hermione was following the conversation. “We have a different sport that we call football. It’s really a misnomer but it’s too late to change things.” Scott’s desire to befriend the Muggle-born was tempered by the knowledge that the boy’s relationship with Ginny would have to go. Harry needed Ron’s little sister, even if he didn’t know it yet. Dean’s love life would be another sacrifice on the altar of necessity.

They continued in this vein while everyone else looked bored, Scott dredging up everything he could remember about FIFA. Soccer had never been his game, but if that was what it took to normalise himself in Dean’s eyes then that’s what he’d talk about. Seamus had already wandered back to his original seat. Scott gathered that the topic of football was well-worn territory for all of Dean’s friends.

All conversation ceased when Dumbledore stood and addressed the Hall. There was quite an uproar when it was revealed that Professor Snape had become the new Defence Against the Dark
Arts teacher. Scott smiled humourlessly at Harry’s dark comment regarding the curse that supposedly plagued the position.

Dumbledore finished his speech and the Hall immediately began to empty, the students standing and filing off towards the dormitories. Most of them looked tired. Scott wondered how the first-years managed to get any sleep their first night away from home.

As Scott stood to follow the rest of the Gryffindors, Dumbledore called him from the front of the Hall. “Mr. Kharan! A moment please?”

“Looks like the Headmaster wants to see me,” Scott said to Harry and Ron. “Uno momento, por favor.”

Dumbledore motioned Scott aside from the other teachers, placing a hand on one of his shoulders as if taking a moment to privately reassure the boy. Scott allowed himself to be led. “I see you’ve become acquainted with Harry and his friends,” Dumbledore said quietly. “I trust everything is going well?”

“So far, so good,” Scott replied. “But I’ve still got a lot to do.”

Dumbledore glanced backwards over Scott’s shoulder. “Harry wrote to me after your visit. I expect he’ll wish to speak with you privately.”

“I figured he would,” Scott said, nodding. “You didn’t spread any unsavoury truths about me, did you?”

Dumbledore smiled slightly but his eyes were serious. “I told him that I believed you. That is, so far as your efforts on our behalf are concerned.” He paused. “Personally, I am inclined to accept a great deal more than that… But I think Harry will not be so willing to take such a leap of faith.”

“It’s enough if he just sees me as an ally. Anything else is chaff.”

“I told him as much myself,” Dumbledore said. “I stressed that you should be given the chance to prove your intentions. I hope that he will be convinced, but—” a pained expression flitted across his features, “—Harry no longer….” He stopped, before continuing, “He does not place blind faith in me.”

Scott shrugged. “I can talk a good game if I have to, but I’d rather move the ball with something besides my mouth. I’ve got a job to do whether he trusts me or not.”

Dumbledore gave him a piercing look. “Were you planning on telling the others?”

“Yeah. I don’t know when,” Scott said, answering Dumbledore’s unspoken second question. “Maybe Harry will tell them all first; it really doesn’t matter.”

“Then I will leave you to your work.” Dumbledore smiled, some of the twinkle returning to his eyes. “If you need anything, please feel free to visit me in my office. The password is still the same.”

“You might be seeing my sister sometime soon,” Scott told him. “And yes, that is a warning. She’ll want to introduce herself to some of the key people around here, so you can expect a visit someday.”

“It would be my pleasure to meet her,” Dumbledore assured him.
“Meeting her oughta divest you of *that* little delusion,” Scott muttered. “Anyway, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Good luck tomorrow,” Dumbledore said as they parted. “The first day is never easy.”

As Scott walked back towards the exit of the Great Hall he was pleased to see that Harry and Ron had waited for him, though Hermione was nowhere in sight. Whether this was indicative of a growing friendship between them or a desire on Harry’s part to keep an eye on him, he didn’t know. Ron was leaning against the wall, looking impatient.

“Just some first day stuff,” Scott said by way of explanation as he approached them. They all turned to leave, heading as a group for the Entrance Hall.

“Lucky, you getting into Gryffindor, wasn’t it?” Ron said. “Though I guess after what happened at Knockturn Alley—”

Ron’s supposition was lost as Hagrid drew up behind them, thundering, “Knockturn Alley! I thought I told you ter stay out of there, Harry. It’s no place fer young wizards!”

“I had my cloak,” Harry said in defence. “We were curious about something.” Scott was unsure why he was avoiding any mention of Malfoy.

“No good tellin’ the two of you off,” Hagrid grumbled, though his voice had lost most of its fire. “Yeh never listen, yeh don’t.” He looked at Scott, noticing him for the first time. “Yeh made it to Gryffindor, then? I didn’t know yeh knew Harry.”

“Dumbledore introduced us over the summer,” Scott said. It was sort of true. “And we met up in Diagon Alley during school shopping.”

“Well, good, good.” Hagrid grinned down at him in a welcoming sort of way. “Always great to make new friends. Are yeh taking Care of Magical Creatures, by chance?” Hagrid asked.

“Not as a scheduled class,” Scott said. “But I’ll probably be turning up for some private lessons. Dumbledore said he’d talk to you about it.”

“Did he?” Hagrid puffed up in pride. “Private lessons, I can do tha’. You’ll be missing out on the group fun, though – too bad, eh, Harry?”

Harry nodded silently, looking a bit pale.

“Anyway, you two should come to class a bit early tomorrow,” Hagrid advised. “So you can see Buck – ah, Witherwings. He’ll be happy ter see yeh!” Hagrid waved over his shoulder at them as he trundled off towards the main entrance.

Scott looked at Harry, who was standing stock-still. “Let me guess – you’re not taking Care of Magical Creatures?”

“Nope.”

“Me neither,” Ron added. “And I’m not looking forward to Hagrid finding out.”

“Well, maybe he won’t take it too hard,” Scott said philosophically. Harry and Ron didn’t seem to buy into that, but he pressed on anyway. “What’s more important is showing me to the dorms so I can get my stuff set up.”
"I didn’t think about that," Harry said. "There might be room for another bed in there, but it’ll be a lot tighter fit."

"Maybe the room gets bigger by itself," Ron suggested as they walked. "Like the Room of Requirement."

"You think?"

Ron shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe they’ll put you on the stairs…” He snickered at Scott.

"Yeah, whatever," Scott said. "I guess I could always sleep on the couch. At least I’d sort of have my own room then."

"It’s not so bad," Harry reassured him. "You get used to the snoring after a while."

"Well yeah," Scott said sarcastically. "Sure. But what are you supposed to do when you want to masturbate? Pretend you’re alone and just go for it? And you can’t rub one out under the sheets, you’ll block your shot."

Ron made a face. "You seem like a creative bloke. Just don't share with the class when you work it out."

"Like you couldn't give me any pointers."

Harry and Ron spent the rest of the trip to Gryffindor Tower answering Scott’s various questions about school life, taking the occasional detour to point out important areas and classrooms for him.

Scott told them a little bit about himself (‘Don’t tell my dad you’re a Muggle-born,’ Ron warned. ‘You’ll never hear the end of it.’) but withheld any real revelations. He had been honest when he had told Dumbledore that he would reveal himself to the core group, but he hadn’t worked out a good timetable for it. He’d already told Harry before he probably should have – it was easier to inform people of the facts after he had done some things to help support them. Timing was a trickily subjective matter when it came to the truth.

“…which was a lot of trouble to get a good location,” Scott concluded. “We’re still getting settled into our apartment. Now that I’m at school my sister will have to do all the work around the place herself, at least until Christmas break.” He grimaced. “I can probably expect to come home to some pastel pinks and whites and superfluous curtains.”

“But she won’t touch your room, right?” Ron said, looking genuinely worried.

“Probably not. But you never know with her,” Scott said glumly. He opened his mouth to say something else but stopped, looking down the hall ahead of them. “Is that Kylie?”

It was Kylie, standing alone in the corridor and looking more than a little scared. As they approached her, she hugged her bag to her chest and stared at the floor, appearing absolutely mortified.

"Oi! Are you lost?” Ron shouted to her, as they were still some distance away. Predictably, instead of taking comfort in the presence of the loud prefect Kylie only flushed bright red and said nothing.

"Let me talk to her," Scott whispered to Ron as they drew near the slight girl. "We met on the boat over, and she’s kind of… shy."

"Oh,” Ron said with some distaste. “One of those.”
Scott still couldn’t believe that Kylie had been Sorted into Gryffindor. She didn’t look up as he advanced towards her but she also didn’t run away, which he took as a good sign. “Hey, Kylie. Trying to find the tower?”

She nodded.

“Okay, just come with us; that’s where we’re going.”

She nodded again, but still didn’t look up or move. Scott looked back at Harry and Ron. “Lead the way, guys.”

“This way,” Ron said to her, though he spoke less loudly than before. Harry tried to catch Kylie’s eye with a friendly smile but she kept her gaze firmly downcast. Scott shrugged at Harry in silent response. Kylie seemed like a lost cause when it came to being social.

“So you’re going to be taking lessons with Hagrid?” Harry said, restarting their conversation as they began to walk. Kylie was following Scott so closely that she was almost stepping on his heels. She must have been steering solely by mimicking the motions of Scott’s legs, because she still hadn’t looked at anything but the floor.

“Not just him,” Scott explained. “It’s sort of a catchup program for me. I’ll be spending some of my free time – more some days than others – with different teachers for tutoring. Dumbledore wants to be sure I’m in line with the rest of you guys.”

“Free time?” Ron said, aghast. “You have to work?”

“Is that required?” Harry asked.

“The American school system uses a different curriculum, so these sessions are to find out what I know and what I don’t know.”

“What’s your old school called?” Harry looked genuinely curious; Scott figured he had probably never heard anything about the American equivalent of Hogwarts.

“Maliseet,” Scott said. “It’s in northern Maine.” He saw the blank looks on Harry and Ron’s faces and added, “That’s a state on the very northern edge of America’s eastern coastline. We had Canadian students, too.”

“And they don’t teach the same things there?”

“That’s a question with a long answer.”

Scott didn’t expand on that statement any further since they had reached their destination. The portrait swung aside in response to Ron’s password and admitted them into the common room. It was mostly empty, a lot of students having gone to settle themselves in their dormitories. There were some older students gathered on the chairs and sofas, talking quietly, and the few new additions to Gryffindor who were still caught up in the novelty of it all. Hermione was sunk in an armchair, cradling a large textbook while keeping one eye on several boisterous first-years. She looked up when they entered.

“There you are!” she exclaimed. “What kept you?”

“Showing Scott around the school a bit,” Ron said offhandedly. He flopped down into a chair across from her.
Scott had never been in the common room before and was examining it thoroughly. It was a comfortable, homey sort of a place that immediately made him feel secure. There was a certain solidity about a stone tower, after all. It was a self-contained area of both work and play, sealed off from outside distractions by a wall and password. The world receded in the face of this microcosm.

“And who are you?” Hermione asked Kylie in a kind voice, seeing her standing behind Scott and using him as a moving shield.

The diminutive girl managed to squeak out her name before hiding herself completely behind Scott’s much larger form.

“The stairs to the girls’ dormitories are right there,” Hermione said, pointing towards the staircase. She stood. “I’ll show you up to the room for your year. This way…” She gently took Kylie’s hand and led her up the stairs.

“Mental, that one,” Ron said after they had left. “I bet she sleeps with the lights on.”

“I don’t think the Sorting Hat is infallible.” Scott seated himself on a couch.

“That’s a scary thought,” Ron said. “I hope it doesn’t change its mind. Imagine if we got Malfoy in here or something.”

“Bollocks to that,” Harry snorted. “He wouldn't last a day.”

Scott shrugged. “If that happened, I’d just have to beat the shit out of him again. Boy, I’d sure hate to do that.” He sighed insincerely.

“Again?” Ron perked up at that. “That’s right – what happened with Malfoy?”

Harry told him briefly about his partly invisible adventure. Ron gave him a sceptical look when he explained his theories concerning Draco and Death Eaters, though he let it pass. By the time Harry was done, however, he had an almost grotesquely gleeful visage. “I can picture it almost perfectly,” he said dreamily. “Malfoy landing right on his fat face...”

When Hermione interrupted their conversation by returning from the girls’ dorms she looked suspiciously at the three suddenly silent boys. “What was that about Malfoy?” she questioned them.

“I don’t know who that is,” Scott said expressionlessly.

“Oh really.” Hermione was obviously unconvinced.

Scott attempted a redirection. “How’s Kylie?”

“She’s fine now,” Hermione said, still eye-balling Scott. “What were you saying before?”

“Scott was telling us about his school in America,” Harry interjected. “Weren’t you going to tell us how they taught things differently there?”

Hermione was neatly deflected by the topic of school, settling down with a rapt expression on her face. Scott raised his eyebrows at Harry in amusement – he obviously knew exactly how to distract his friend – but switched back to their hallway conversation. “Yeah, the curriculum isn’t the same. That’s one reason why some of my free time will be spent getting tutored. Like, we have a class on Native American magic and Herbology.”
“I’m sure that’s a fascinating subject, Native American magic,” Hermione said with enthusiasm. “I’ve often wondered why Hogwarts doesn’t have a Druidism course.”

“The school system isn’t structured the same either,” Scott continued. “America is a much bigger country than the UK and we have more than one wizarding school. Anyway, that’s why I’ll be getting private lessons to make sure I’m on the same page as everyone else.”

“That stands to reason,” Hermione agreed. “If you’d like, I still have all of my notes – you could borrow them.”

“Cool, I might do that,” Scott said, though he had no intention of doing any such thing. He had enough to work on already without wading through a mass of Hermione’s overly detailed notes. “Anyway, it’s getting late. Let’s go test Ron’s theory of automatic room expansion.”

Before Hermione could winnow out the details of yet another snippet of background information to which she was not entitled, Scott had removed himself from the couch and started up the stairs to the dorms. Harry shrugged a little apologetically to Hermione, and followed him up.

“Night, Hermione,” Ron said, standing.

“Goodnight,” Hermione replied somewhat distractedly. She had already re-immersed herself in her book. Ron didn’t ask her what she was reading about – he didn’t want to accidentally learn anything before classes started in the morning.

When Ron joined them upstairs, Scott was surveying his new room. Despite Harry’s concerns, it didn’t appear to be all that cramped. Whether this was due to spatial distortion or a clever rearrangement of furniture, Scott was unable to determine. It was easy enough to spot the bed that was his; it was the only one without any personal accoutrements nearby and his suitcase was resting against the foot board. It seemed pitifully small next to the massive trunks most of the other boys were unpacking.

Dean was plastering his available wall space with football posters while Seamus looked on in obvious amusement. Neville was arranging a carefully cultivated batch of various plants on his bedside table. He looked up from his task long enough to give Scott a welcoming smile, one that the blond boy returned. He made a mental note that a few talks with Neville could save him a lot of studying when it came to Herbology.

“Thinking about class tomorrow?” Harry ventured from somewhere over Scott’s shoulder.

“More or less.” Scott sat on the edge of his bed and regarded Harry with serious eyes. “So. Here we are.”

Harry returned the look for a moment, before saying in a low voice, “Tomorrow night, I think we should talk.”

Dumbledore hadn’t needed to warn Scott that this might happen. He had expected it. “You got it.”

Harry nodded and didn’t pursue the topic any further, moving back towards his own bed. Fortunately, it didn’t seem like Ron had noticed the exchange – he was too busy trying to get things out of his haphazardly packed trunk. Scott figured he should follow suit.

The following day would be his first real school experience at Hogwarts, and his goals would be not so much altering anything as blending in. For the moment, his sister would be doing any fieldwork.
So there wasn’t much else to do but unzip his suitcase and start making his new room a home.
It was always disorienting to wake up and not be entirely sure where you were.

Scott was used to it. A moment’s unease was all he suffered before his brain snapped into gear and recent events came flooding back into his consciousness.

It helped that he had awoken several times during the night, and thus his head wasn’t thick with accumulated snooze. His instincts were always on a hair trigger – the slightest noise could wake him. He’d learned to sleep light the hard way, and now it was deeply ingrained. It could be customised, however. A couple of weeks would train his subconscious to tune out the sounds that were a part of the nightly backdrop at Hogwarts and allow him uninterrupted sleep in the absence of anything out of the ordinary.

It didn’t take him long to brush his teeth and don his school robes. Neville was also running a little late. He had only one shoe on and was frantically flailing about with his robes tangled up on his arms and neck. Scott reached over and grabbed what he thought was the hem of the robes, tugging them downwards.

“Thanks!” Neville gasped, emerging red-faced from his cotton cocoon.

“Couldn’t let you suffocate on the first day of the year,” Scott said amiably.

“Don’t know if I’d mind entirely…” Neville laughed nervously, straightening out his collar with hands that were not quite steady.

Scott gave him a comradely clap on the shoulder. “Some days you just gotta roll with the punches.”

Neville didn’t look very reassured by that. “I think I’d rather not get hit.”

Scott looked down at himself before heading for the common room, wrinkling his nose at the unflattering clothing. To him it looked like he had cut a few holes into a garbage bag and pulled it over his head. He shook his head and sighed at himself. Apparently this new look was going to make him vain.

The common room was full of students readying themselves for the day ahead, a steady stream of them exiting through the portrait to walk to breakfast. Scott came down the staircase just in time to catch the tail end of an argument between Ron and Hermione centring around a ‘Fanged Frisbee’. He considered the two of them thoughtfully – what was he going to do about them? He knew that if he didn’t do anything, his sister would. Perhaps, then, it was better to leave it to her. Still, a few nudges in the right direction couldn’t hurt.

“I hate to interrupt your sparkling wordplay,” he said loudly as he stepped into the common room, “but I’m fucking hungry, and I must be fed. Kindly point me towards the nearest trough.”

“That would be the Great Hall,” Harry said dryly, clearly glad to have a distraction from his
friends’ bickering. “You remember the way?”

“I’m a man of the people,” Scott said expansively. “And though I might know the way, I would much prefer to traverse this fragile earth in the company of others.”

Harry turned towards Ron and Hermione. “Coming?”

They spent another minute standing around while Hermione rushed back to her dorm and checked to make sure that she hadn’t left any of her textbooks behind. When she returned, they stepped out of the portal and into the halls of Hogwarts, lit by the morning sun.

“About breakfast,” Scott said as they approached the doors to the Great Hall. “Do you order whatever you want or is it sort of a buffet kind of thing?”

“Almost all meals are served buffet style,” Hermione explained. “With a few exceptions, such as the Yule Ball.”

“I don’t suppose the words ‘chicken fried steak’ mean anything to you?”

Hermione frowned. “No, what is that?”

Scott sighed. “It’s going to be a long year.”

During breakfast Scott filled his plate with a tasty assortment of bacon and eggs, observing his new classmates between mouthfuls. He saw that he was being similarly watched by Dumbledore from his seat at the teachers’ table. He gave the Headmaster an acknowledging nod before turning his attention back to the food and trying to follow a conversation between Harry and Ron concerning Quidditch. Hermione didn’t eat much, rigid with anticipation for the moment when McGonagall would assign their new class schedules.

When the stern professor began moving down the benches, Scott found himself glad that he didn’t have the same class load as Hermione. He’d have more than enough learning to do by books alone, and that was without counting his overriding objectives that had nothing to do with school.

When it came to his turn, McGonagall shuffled through a slightly thicker folder than she had for the other students. Scott wondered just how many documents Dumbledore had forged. Of course, Scott knew as well as anybody that you could paint out an entire life in paperwork. Identification numbers, credit cards, birth certificates – all tracing the trail of a person who had never existed.

“There was some difficulty obtaining your school records,” McGonagall told him as she leafed through the papers. “But fortunately the Headmaster was able to get them all together in time.” She withdrew a blank schedule from the folder. “As I know you are aware, besides your normal classes you will periodically be assigned tutoring sessions.”

“But whether I keep going to a teacher or not depends on how much they find out I already know, right?”

“Correct. I hope it won’t be necessary for you to be tutored in more than one or two subjects extensively.” She handed him a list of his available subjects. “Remember to choose the classes which interest you the most, as you will be pursuing them to N.E.W.T level.”

Scott picked out his classes from the sheet, being careful to select the same as Harry without being too obvious about it. He thought McGonagall knew what he was up to anyway, but she didn’t say anything. Once he was done she tapped the empty schedule with her wand, filling it. “A schedule of your extra sessions should be given to you by tomorrow,” she told him. “It will be altered at the
discretion of your professors.”

“Thanks, Professor,” Scott said, looking over the timetable she had given him. He had three free periods, which would actually translate into about two, taking into account his tutoring sessions. Some days he would probably only have one, at least until he had proven he could pass the classes without help. In order to achieve that he’d have to step up on his reading.

His first class of the day would be Defence Against the Dark Arts, following a free period. He frowned. He’d already heard some disquieting things about that class. Apparently, Snape was a potential problem. Scott’s proximity to Harry and status as a Gryffindor would already make him a target for Snape, though as far as he knew the professor couldn’t do anything more than be verbally vicious.

Scott spent most of the free period before his first class going over his DADA textbooks. While he usually remembered things he had read well enough, he simply hadn’t read all of them yet. Harry and Ron talked Quidditch. It seemed that he was going to have to develop some sort of interest in the sport if he wanted to fit in.

They met Hermione in the hallway outside of the DADA classroom, looking frazzled and weighed down by enough books to choke a large mammal. She complained about the workload she had already been assigned in Ancient Runes, but Harry and Ron seemed unsympathetic.

Other students soon congregated around them. Scott noticed the amount of attention Harry drew to himself without any effort. Harry always seemed extremely discomfited by the scrutiny, even on the occasions when it wasn’t bordering on hero worship. Some people just couldn’t fit into the role of celebrity, and Harry was clearly one of them.

“Your fly open or something?” Scott murmured to the media proclaimed ‘Chosen One’.

Harry looked down in confusion before realising that Scott was joking about all the focus on him. “They’ve been reading the Prophet,” he said disgustedly. “First they hate me, now they love me. Maybe one of these days they’ll wake up and start thinking for themselves.”

“Unlikely. It’s much easier to believe the hype.”

Their discussion was halted when Snape emerged from the classroom. He was glowering at all the students, but especially at the two of them. It was Scott’s first close-up look at the man and it didn’t serve to make a good impression.

The object of his inner derision finished trying to bore a hole through Harry with his eyes and turned his attention to Scott. “Scott Kharan,” Snape said, caressing the syllables. “Our new student.” His gaze shot to Harry for a second. “And already in the close confidences of our very own Chosen One… I suppose fame really is the most valuable commodity in America.”

Harry’s fists clenched on top of his desk. Hermione hissed something to Ron, who had gone pale with anger.

Scott kept his face carefully blank, but couldn’t resist responding. “Don’t hate the player, Professor
– hate the game.”

The room fell completely silent. Scott’s comment hadn’t been directly insulting, but Snape apparently needed no excuse to hand out punishments. From the other side of the class, Scott could feel Malfoy’s hate-filled stare like the heat from an open oven.

Snape’s eyes flashed, but the slight curve his lips held suggested that he was pleased to be given the opportunity to discipline his new student. “Wasting no time establishing your arrogance, I see. Twenty points from Gryffindor.”

Scott nodded impassively in reply, suppressing the multitude of flippant responses that came to mind. It was not the right time for further impudence.

Scott listened to the rest of Snape’s opening lecture with one ear. A girl that Scott hadn’t identified yet asked something about ‘Inferi’, which Scott had discovered in his readings to be another word for zombies. Magically reanimated corpses were common in many magical worlds. They were less threatening than the kind of zombie that resulted from viral infection or other biological contamination.

Things became more interesting when Snape divided the class into pairs to practice non-verbal spells. He found himself working with Harry while Ron and Hermione silently squared off.

Harry raised his wand and sighed. “Even if I can do this, what’s the point?”

Scott blinked. Had that been a tacit admission that there was something out of the ordinary about him? Dumbledore must have included some strong hints in his letter. “I won’t stop you. Go ahead and zap me.” Harry visibly strained himself at the task for a moment, lips fighting to stay shut. Scott shook his head. “You’re not lifting anything, man – stop trying to give yourself a hernia and just think the words.”

“Yeah? You do it, then,” Harry said, looking a little put out.

“I’ve already got a non-verbal spell,” Scott grumbled as he readied his wand. “It’s got a custom hardwood grip and a smooth action.” Nevertheless, he pointed his wand at Harry and tried to fire off a Jelly-Legs Jinx. Nothing happened.

Harry looked rather smug about that. “I’m still waiting.”

“Huh,” Scott said, looking down at the wand he held with a slight frown. He thought he was performing the spell correctly... or had he messed up? Perhaps he needed to take a different approach.

“Well?” Harry said impatiently.

Scott started to explain but in mid-sentence, Snape swept over to them, sneering at their lack of progress. “Pathetic, Potter. This is the proper method-” The man spun on Scott with practised speed, raising his wand.

The spell emerged from the magical instrument with a bright flash and sped directly towards Scott’s face. There was, of course, only one thing to do.

He took the hit.

Any questions as to the purpose of the spell were answered as soon as it touched him. His legs locked together in a rigid posture and the resulting lack of balance sent him toppling over
backwards. He braced himself with his arms and managed to land in a way that was awkward but significantly less painful than simply smacking straight into the floor. Palms stinging, he gingerly lowered himself until he was sitting stiff-legged on the cold stone.

The rest of the class were oddly silent during all of this. Scott had expected laughter, but it seemed that Snape’s presence stifled it even when he was the instigation. Harry and Ron were both clearly furious, while Hermione looked on with a sympathetic expression. Scott wasn’t sure why; he hadn’t been seriously injured.

Scott looked up as Snape loomed over him. Despite already having been the subject of reprimand, he couldn’t resist some token defiance. “Excellent shot, sir. You really showed me.”

Snape’s lip curled in a disdainful sneer. “What I have shown is your inability to perform the simplest of non-verbal spells.” He turned away, walking back to his desk at the front of the classroom. “Potter, help him up, if you can...”

Harry’s hand was gripping his wand so tightly that it was shaking, but despite the anger in his stance he stepped forward and cancelled the spell binding Scott.

“Hey, it’s not the first time I’ve fallen down on the job,” Scott informed Harry with a grin. He pushed himself back to his feet but was disappointed to see that his joke hadn’t earned any smiles.

“Just when I think he can’t be any more of a slimy git...” Harry muttered venomously, staring hard at Snape.

“He tops himself without much effort,” Ron said darkly.

Hermione appeared to be uncomfortable with the level of hatred being directed towards Snape, but she kept her silence.

“A neat trick, I must admit,” Scott declared, looking down at his now functional legs. “But he didn’t paralyse my arms; I still could have responded before the next spell.”

“He could have frozen you completely if he’d wanted,” Harry said lowly.


“A Shield Charm would be sufficient,” Hermione told him. “Now we need to be quiet before we draw his attention again...”

“How about just getting out of the way? Would that work? Or does it have an area of effect?”

“Yes to the first, and no to the second, now hush!”

When class ended the students poured out into the hallway in a silence equal to the one that had prevailed during the lesson. Not until an invisible line present at some point further down the hall was crossed did the conversations suddenly come to life like a spontaneous fire. Scott marvelled at the control Snape exercised over his class. It was odd how he had such a dominant personality, and yet had been subservient to Voldemort and now Dumbledore. Perhaps a desire for power had led him to seek out those who seemed to offer the greatest amount of it... or was it the protection, the safety? A mystery as dark as Snape’s wardrobe. Something to muse upon.

Scott’s train of thought was abruptly derailed when he heard his name shouted. Turning around in response, he spotted the small form of Trevor hurtling down the hallway towards him.
“Scott!” Trevor said loudly again, despite it being clear that his first cry had sufficed. He skidded to a graceless stop and produced a crumpled letter from somewhere in his school robes. “I’m supposed to give this to you!”

“Mission accomplished,” Scott said absently, opening the letter. As he had assumed, it was from Dumbledore. The Headmaster requested an immediate meeting.

Scott briefly flirted with the idea of ignoring the summons purely to make a point, but discarded the thought as being impractical. His foothold at Hogwarts was too tenuous to jeopardise it in an unnecessary demonstration of independence. Like it or not, he needed Dumbledore’s help.

“Nice delivery time, kid,” he thanked his excitable courier, and then turned towards Harry. “Headmaster wants to see me; something about paperwork, I don’t know. Don’t wait up.”

Harry appeared slightly suspicious, but said, “All right, later.”

The Headmaster’s office was steeped in what seemed to be an almost stifling calm after the noise and bustle of the school halls between classes. The odd stone escalator carried Scott up to the antechamber without incident, though he still felt like it might give out from under him. The double doors leading to the office proper were cracked open but Scott knocked against them just to be safe.

“Hello?” he called out.

“Come in!”

Dumbledore was seated in his usual position behind his desk, although this time the paperwork strewn across it appeared to be in greater disarray. Scott wondered if the beginning of the school year was a bureaucratic nightmare. “I got your letter. I like the fancy Hogwarts letterhead it’s got on it. Personal stationary?”

“The office does come with several perks,” Dumbledore said humorously. “Please, have a seat.”

Scott slumped into the chair. “So what’s up?”

“Not one thing in particular.” Dumbledore set several stacks of paper aside and leaned back, looking slightly tired. “Rather I thought it might be best to monitor your progress today. It is, after all, in both our interests for your acclimation to go as smoothly as possible.”

“I’m afraid there’s been a bit of turbulence. I ran into some trouble in the form of Snape; apparently he’s not too thrilled to have me within this fine institution of learning, or at least his dim corner of it. I have to admit, I’m wondering why you hired a sociopath.”

Dumbledore frowned. “You are of course entitled to your opinion of his personality, but while you are a student here I will ask that you treat all of your professors with the appropriate respect.”

Scott didn’t think much of that idea. “I didn’t walk into class trying to get hexed or jinxed or whatever the crap, but it happened. If Snape keeps it up, we’re going to have a problem.”

“Professor Snape,” Dumbledore said pointedly. “I’m aware that his conduct is sometimes—”

“Are you? Look, I’m not trying to tell you how to do your job, but it’s very simple: if Snape doesn’t get off my nuts, then I might have to break his. This is hard enough without him ‘teaching’ me.”

“I see.” Dumbledore’s disapproval was quite pronounced. “I will be sure to talk to him, but I very
much doubt that you played no part in exacerbating things.”

Scott shifted a little in his chair, trying to decide how much he could minimise his part in Snape’s antagonism without outright lying. “Maybe I could have handled it better. But it’s not like I was asking for a fight.”

Dumbledore sighed. “All that I ask is that you attempt to tolerate each other. I wish for a higher level of cooperation, but at this point I suppose I must be realistic.”

Scott thought that the most realistic way to deal with Snape would be sterilisation, but he kept that to himself. “I understand.”

“I assume that your interactions with the rest of the staff have been more amiable?”

Scott shrugged. “Nothing comes to mind as being an issue. Although I think McGonagall might be aware that something isn’t right with me turning up.”

“She has always been insightful,” Dumbledore said with a sigh. “Perhaps more than me, when it comes to the things that matter most. I’m afraid there’s little I can do to temper her suspicions.”

“Time will, if nothing else.”

“We may hope. If our arrangement should come to light, ‘insane’ would be one of the kinder things said about me,” Dumbledore said ruefully.

“It might not count for much, but I don’t think you’re crazy.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “An opinion insured by self-interest. Your methods may be a mystery to me, but your allegiances are not. I know your mission comes before our agreement.”

“The mission comes first,” Scott confirmed.

“As it should.” Dumbledore became more serious. “I think it is not necessary to remind you, but Harry is more important than even this secrecy. Sacrifice it if you must, and I will assume the consequences. All I ask is that wherever you go, take Harry with you.”

Scott fought to hide his surprise. Dumbledore was making some bold allowances. “If I do my job right then it won’t come to that. I can’t be certain at this point, but I’d be willing bet that Harry has things to do here.”

“As do you,” Dumbledore said, glancing up at one of the several clocks he had in the office. “I believe your next class begins soon.”

“Crap.” Scott stood up quickly and made for the door. “Get another note to me if there’s something you need, but try not to contact me directly too often. It won’t do my integration any favours to get singled out.”

“Of course. We’ll talk later.”

“Yeah, we will,” Scott muttered as he sped towards the stone escalator. Dumbledore’s level of interference had been partially anticipated but was still an annoying problem. Scott needed space to work, and having the Headmaster keeping tabs on him would be limiting. With any luck the business of running the school would keep Dumbledore occupied enough to leave Scott alone.
Scott found himself ducking into Potions class within an inch of being late. He gave the professor an apologetic smile, thinking that it would have been smart to get a note from Dumbledore, but the corpulent Slughorn only waved him in without comment. He squeezed himself in between Ron and Harry, pulling a chair from an empty table behind them.

Harry looked like he was about to say something, but Professor Slughorn began talking and they fell silent to listen.

There was some to-do with Harry and Ron not having the proper class supplies, but after that was all sorted out Slughorn proceeded with the lesson. At least, Scott thought he did – he found himself wondering why it was so hot in the classroom. There was a mixture of delectable odours wafting through the air that seemed to set his skin to tingling.

While Hermione was identifying various potions for Slughorn, Scott leaned over to Harry and whispered, “You smell that?”

Harry started to answer but was diverted when Hermione correctly identified the source of the entrancing smells as Amortentia, a powerful love potion. Scott knew that no corporeal substance could create love in the abstract sense, or even in the classical sense as based on shared interaction and commonality. He figured that ‘love potion’ was probably a euphemism for an aphrodisiac with some unusual capabilities. He paid close attention to Slughorn’s explanation of the potion’s workings.

His attention was further captured by the Felix Felicis that Slughorn was offering as a prize to the best potion maker at the end of class. Despite the professor’s ramblings about its power and price, Scott knew that nobody else in the room understood exactly what they were looking at. Liquid luck? If the potion did what Slughorn said it was capable of then it was something truly extraordinary. He had to get his hands on some to see how it worked and whether he could influence its effects. Normally, any objects of such import gave off a tangible sense of power. If the Felix felicis was a shaping substance, then it was dormant in its current state. It didn’t call to him from its cauldron.

However, making the best potion in the class on his first try would be a bad idea – not that he was remotely capable of pulling that off. He’d try to perform acceptably, and find a way to get his hands on the liquid luck at some later date. To his left, he noticed Harry was working off of some instructions that had been scribbled in the margins of his school loaned book. He mentally shrugged. If Harry wanted to roll the dice with unverified advice, that was his business.

“So,” he said to Harry while they worked, “what does that stuff smell like to you?”

“I’m not quite sure – it’s hard to pick out the main one.” Harry frowned in thought. “Some sort of flowers? I’m almost sure I’ve smelled it before… But I can’t think of where.” He looked at Ron. “Maybe The Burrow?”

Ron shrugged. “We do have a garden; that might be it. Didn’t think you had a thing for flowers, though.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry said, annoyed. “What’s it smell like for you, then?”

Ron immediately looked embarrassed. “Ah, well… Sort of warm, I guess…” he said awkwardly. “And like – books, maybe? But warm… I don’t know.”

“Warm books. That’s the key to your heart.”
“Stuff it,” Ron grumbled, stirring his potion viciously.

“How about you, Scott?” Harry asked the blond boy.


“Something else?”

Scott grinned. “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

“You’re not any older than us!” Ron protested. “Where do you get off, talking like my mum?”

“There are all kinds of age, Ron,” Scott said sententiously. “Someday you’ll understand.”

“Wanker,” Ron said under his breath; Harry looked inclined to agree.

“Will the three of you shut up?” Hermione snapped. She was becoming increasingly frustrated that her textbook instructions were not yielding the same excellent results as Harry’s. “Some of us are trying to work!”

“And yet, Harry’s potion is looking pretty good about now,” Scott shot back. “Maybe you should try less?”

Hermione’s face coloured, but before she could formulate a rejoinder the time was up. It came as no surprise to Scott that Harry was the clear winner. He supposed he could just steal the Felix from Harry on the way out of the room, but so much of what he was doing was based on trust that he couldn’t bring himself to do it. “Sweet deal,” he said to Harry as the other boy looked closely at the small vial of potion that was his reward. “Gonna take it before you proposition Ginny?”

To their right, Ron made a sound like someone had just jabbed him in the kidneys. Harry stared at Scott. “What?”

“If that shit works like Slughorn says it does then you’re guaranteed some action,” Scott said, deadpan. “Just take a sip and ask Ginny if she wants to play ‘hide the salami’.”

Ron opened his mouth and spluttered, “What the-”

“Ron!” It was Hermione, at the door of the classroom. “What are you three doing?”

The rest of the classroom had been vacated, leaving Scott, Harry and Ron still at their table. There was a flurry of activity while they packed up their things and went out into the hallway. Scott was feeling like he had scored a minor victory. In the earliest stages of manipulation, subtlety came in different forms – it was enough to bring up the concept, even if it was disguised as a joke. Harry might have been put on the spot and embarrassed by Scott’s salacious ribbing but the thought was there now. He’d be considering Ginny in that light, if only for a second. The mind of a teenage male was a fertile place for that particular sort of seed.

He imagined his sister might take issue with his methods… But it didn’t matter. If she thought she could do better, she’d have her chance.

At dinner that night Hermione confronted Harry about his performance during Potions. Scott said nothing, personally thinking that if Harry had been given the book he should be allowed to use it. Ron didn’t seem too bothered either. Ginny overheard their conversation and questioned Harry worriedly about the book. Scott caught a hint of flowers when she went past him and hid a smile.
Maybe the whole thing would be easier than he had thought.

In the late evening, when both dinner and classes had finished for the day, there was a space of time in which the Gryffindors congregated in the common room to relax or study. Ron and Harry settled into a game of chess which soon ended in utter defeat for Harry, who didn’t look surprised. He heard Neville retelling the story of what had happened with Snape to some third-years and made a mental note to discourage that. He didn’t want to become well known, even if it was just as a student who had suffered another minor humiliation at Snape’s hands. It was difficult to work under a spotlight.

Harry and Ron sat next to Hermione on a couch opposite the chair Scott had slouched into. “I can’t face my homework tonight,” Ron groaned.

Scott looked around the room, taking in the ambience and behavioural patterns of the students. “So what exactly do you guys do around here in the evening?”

Ron shrugged. “Sit around. Talk. Sometimes we play games.” He quickly looked at Hermione. “But don’t say homework!”

As if on cue, Neville approached them, looking hopeful as he sat in the chair next to Scott’s. “Hey… What are we talking about?” he asked slightly nervously. Neville seemed to exist on the edge of Harry, Ron and Hermione’s close friendship. The poor guy was just looking for someone to hang out with, and Scott had no problem including him.

“Hey Nev,” Scott said, as if he’d known him for years. Most people weren’t aware of it, but there was such a thing as forced familiarity. It was an extremely useful tool in Scott’s situation. People tended to respond based on how they were treated, and jumping straight in the verbal lexicon from ‘acquaintance’ to ‘close friend’ accelerated the bonding process. “Just stuff, mostly.”

The five of them chattered on about nothing until it was a little past the normal bedtime. Hermione left her seat before the others to help gather the first-years up for bed and make sure no one was out after curfew, Ron reluctantly rising to follow her. The remaining three boys trudged up to their dormitory to settle in for the night. Scott remembered that he’d probably be getting his schedule of additional lessons in the morning.

The lights went out and Hogwarts fell under the blanket of sleep. Scott allowed himself to succumb to its smothering influence, slipping off not long after the others.

About one in the morning Scott awoke to the sound of Harry stirring in his bed. Rather than get up immediately, he waited until Harry tapped him on the leg. Pushing off his sheets and rolling to his feet, Scott silently padded across the room and followed Harry down the staircase. The common room was empty, the fire still smouldering in its place against the far wall. Harry and Scott sat in the two chairs closest to its feeble light, facing each other. Neither spoke for a moment. Harry was holding a worn letter in one hand.

“I wrote to Dumbledore after you left,” he said in a hushed voice.

“I know.”

“He seems to think that you’re on the level… So far as being on our side goes.”

“That was the impression he gave me,” Scott agreed. “Like I said, you don’t have to believe all of it. But I really am here to help you.”

Harry sighed. “It’s not easy to accept, you know?”
“Yes, I know. The principal is basic enough, but the implications are... intricate,” Scott said.
“Some days I’m not sure if I believe it.”

“What changes your mind?” Harry asked wryly.

“Home. The Republic. If you could see The City stretch to the horizon, or even just step through
the Transferral, then you’d understand,” Scott said, his eyes far away. He saw Harry’s
uncomprehending look and shrugged apologetically. “Sometimes you have to realise that you’re
part of something much bigger than yourself. That’s what pulls me back when I start thinking that
this limited space—” he waved his hands at the room, a gesture meant to encompass much more
than just that, “—is all there is.”

“Do you ever make any sense?”

“As little as possible. It makes me mysterious, and girls love that.”

“What I want to know,” Harry said, determinedly moving on, “is what you told Dumbledore to
make him believe you.”

“It wasn’t just what I told him,” Scott said, “but what I showed him. It’s a long story.”

“I know you met with him,” Harry said, sounding frustrated. “Just tell me what happened then.
Dumbledore wasn’t very clear.”

“There were some things that happened a long time before that. But,” Scott said, stopping Harry
when he started to speak again, “I’ll tell you what I can.”

“You convinced him somehow.”

“He was already at least partially convinced before I showed up,” Scott said. “The rest of it came
with a serious amount of info.”

“So tell me the same thing.”

“It was just before school started,” Scott began to explain. “And it was really the second time – but
nobody ever said stories have to be chronological...”
There was something lonely about Hogwarts during the summertime.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore strolled through the school in no particular hurry and with no firm destination, his footsteps echoing in empty hallways and classrooms. There was an anticipation on the air, as if the building itself knew that soon its occupants would be returning in all their chattering, lively glory. Of course, Dumbledore reflected, it was entirely possible that was literally true. Hogwarts had many secrets, and though he was the Headmaster he sometimes still felt like he was merely passing through a history no one could ever hope to transcend. Hogwarts was – and always had been.

He had spent a great deal of his life within the castle walls. Though his many years weighed upon him on occasion – some days more than others – he had never lost his passion for the process of learning. It was always like new to him, the deep satisfaction he derived from seeing the desks lined with children, the opening of young minds, the text books and quills and essays scrawled over parchment. The halls filled with the hustle and bustle of youthful energy. That was the essence of Hogwarts.

And it caused him no small amount of pain that of late, Hogwarts had instead become a fortress.

He was no longer simply the kindly and eccentric Headmaster – in these times he was primarily a guardian, bearing the burden of being the only wizard that Voldemort feared. The protections and wards of the school were now less an expected tradition of secrecy then a cruel necessity. Even those had proven to be less than sufficient at times in the past. Yes, it was true that Hogwarts was more secure than most places outside of it… But no place was truly safe.

These were dark thoughts for such a beautiful day. Dumbledore found himself at the top of the Astronomy Tower, looking out over the grounds in the morning light. With the dew on the grass shooting back the sun’s radiance under a china blue sky, it was hard to maintain any sort of moodier demeanour. It reminded him that though things were bad, they could be worse. He had some key advantages over Voldemort this time, including the unlocked puzzle to the Dark wizard’s apparent immortality.

Dumbledore also counted Harry among his assets. The boy had shaped into a man, and a powerful wizard besides. It would be Harry who decided how the war would end, though Dumbledore would help him in every way possible. An important first step had already been taken with the destruction of the ring. The cost had been great, and terrible, yes… But no sacrifice was too much to bear. Voldemort could not be allowed dominion.

Consciously removing himself from such pondering, Dumbledore took one last look out over the grounds and lake, noting the smoke coming from the chimney of Hagrid’s house. He would have to visit his loyal groundskeeper for tea sometime soon.

“Sure is nice out.”
If age had slowed Dumbledore’s reflexes then it was a negligible weakening. His wand was firmly in his hand, hidden underneath his sleeve, in less than a second. Shifting his grip slightly on the worn handle, he turned calmly to face the unexpected visitor.

A young man leaned against the parapet to Dumbledore’s right. He was dressed in Muggle summer clothes. He appeared to be fifteen or sixteen years old, though he was tall enough that he might have been older. His dark blond hair, lean face with a square jaw and raw boned body of ropey muscle combined with the grin he wore to spark something in Dumbledore’s memory. It wasn’t until he looked into the laughing grey eyes that true recognition shot through him.

The teen stood from his slouched position. “It would seem to be that time again.”

“Scott Kharan,” Dumbledore said softly as the memories were dredged to the surface of his mind.

In the first years after the incident it had been easy to put it out of his mind. It would always be intrinsically tied to the memories he had of that dark time in history, but he’d had a busy life. It wasn’t until a former student named Tom Riddle had started to alter the course of the world that the words spoken by that strange man amidst the ruins of an apartment building came back to haunt Dumbledore. They echoed in his remembrance.

In the future, there will be a war. You will win this war. Near the end of the war there will be a Prophecy. You’ll know what to do. Eventually a second war will start – and that’s when I’ll show up…

And now had Kharan truly done that impossible thing?

…and ask for that favour from you.

There had been a war. And they had won. And there had been a Prophecy. Now the second war was upon them. Lately, Scott Kharan had very much been on Dumbledore’s mind. It had been only a year since Dumbledore had gone to the Department of Mysteries and read through thousands of dusty of pages, scanning the records of Seers for any prophecies made by one Scott Kharan. He had found nothing – but surely the man had been a Seer. The other alternatives were too far-fetched to contemplate.

And yet there seemed little question that it was the same Scott Kharan who now stood before him, inexplicably younger. The resemblance was quite exact and his knowledge only confirmed it. Still, the eyes could deceive readily enough. It would be foolish to accept without question.

The boy nodded in acknowledgement. “Correct. And here I was thinking you might not remember me… Old people being what they are.” Scott grinned.

The corners of Dumbledore’s mouth quirked at that. “Since I believe I last saw you fifty-one years ago, I’m not sure you are in a position to insult my age.”

“Touché.” Scott saluted him mockingly. “I guess we’re all wizened here.”

That intrigued Dumbledore. Scott clearly demonstrated the ability to alter his age. Unless there were limits he was unaware of, that would mean Scott could have lived any number of years. “Are you in fact older than me?”

Scott shrugged. “Time is relative. We can get into that later, if that’s your thing. It’s not that I don’t enjoy your company, but I’ve got some other junk to do.”

If the boy intended to go straight to the answers then Dumbledore had no intention of stopping
“We can use my office. This way,” he said, leading Scott back down the staircase.

They passed through the Entrance Hall on their way, Scott looking around with some interest. He seemed particularly preoccupied with the layout of the school, and asked Dumbledore several questions about the destinations of the corridors and staircases they went by. Soon they reached the gargoyle which guarded the entrance to the Headmaster’s Office.

“Pepper Imp,” Dumbledore intoned, and the statue moved aside. Scott looked curiously at the moving stairwell as it took them to the office.

“Not everyday you see a stone escalator,” he commented.

They passed through the heavy oak door into the office. Dumbledore sat behind his claw-footed desk and waited for Scott to stop wandering the room and inspecting the various odd and ends that adorned the shelves and bookcases. For someone who had professed to be in a hurry, Scott was certainly taking his time.

After inquisitively poking one of Dumbledore’s silvery instruments, Scott finally sat down. His gaze however did not linger long on the Headmaster. Instead even as he talked Scott’s eyes were busily assimilating the room. “I have to say, I like your digs. Cool bird, too.” He rubbed Fawkes’ head, to the Phoenix’s obvious pleasure. He pointed to Gryffindor’s Sword, sitting in a glass case next to the Sorting Hat. “I bet that’s a conversation piece.” He then favoured Dumbledore with a piercing look. “Though not as much as your hand.”

Dumbledore had been wondered when that would come up. Certainly he would not be trusting Scott with the knowledge of the Horcruxes. The man, or now boy, was almost a complete unknown, his motivations and allegiances a secret. Instead Dumbledore merely smiled and tried to pass it off as nothing. “A bit of a magical accident, I’m afraid.”

“Anything I can help with?”

Dumbledore smiled easily. “No, I’m afraid this particular problem is mine alone.”

“Suit yourself. Back to business, then: I gave you something in Köln.”

With some ceremony, Dumbledore stood and crossed the room to the entrance of his private quarters. He went inside and returned moments later with a familiar envelope held gently in his left hand. It hadn’t been opened. Sitting back down, he set it on the desk between them.

“Looks like it’s still in good shape,” Scott observed. “You keep it in your sock drawer?”

“Yes,” Dumbledore replied, some of the twinkle returning to his eyes.

“Okay. I’ll tell you what’s inside of it, and then you can open it up.”

Dumbledore picked up the envelope and held it in his good hand, studying the yellowed paper. “It will satisfy a very long standing curiosity.”

Scott took a deep breath and recited,

(This is a password,
A past written sign.
The outside is yours,
And the inside is mine.
Open it with your hands,
Memorise with your mind.
Trust not to your senses,
Instead cleave to this rhyme-
Fear not the fighting,
Or the cliffs yet to climb.
The journey is dangerous,
But our real problem is Time."

Dumbledore did not move to open the envelope as he absorbed the message of the poem. Time…
That was indeed a force to be reckoned with, but in what precise duration? The most obvious
answer was the time until Voldemort reached his full strength. He speculated that perhaps there
were other invisible constraints of which only Scott was aware.

Resting his injured hand on the envelope to hold it into place, he smoothly ran a letter opener
through the top of it and withdrew a musty piece of paper. He unfolded it, and felt some small
measure of satisfaction that the neatly printed words it held were identical to those Scott had
spoken.

Setting it down, he gave Scott a slight smile. “Does that confirm our respective identities, Mr.
Kharan?”

Scott grinned. “So formal already? I had thought you might save that for when I begin attending
your fine centre of learning.”

Of all the things Dumbledore had expected to hear, that hadn’t been even close to being one of
them. He stared at Scott over his half-moon glasses. “You wish to attend Hogwarts?”

“Most of the time, yes,” Scott replied more seriously. “I might have to leave now and then to take
care of some things. It’s a matter of proximity.”

“You have stated several times that you have some objectives to see to,” Dumbledore was
perplexed, and looking forward to some concrete answers, “but I don’t understand how attending
the school will help you accomplish them.”

“You could hardly be expected to. Let me tell you, though – it’s one hell of a story.”

“I am almost breathless with anticipation.”

There was a minute of stillness as Scott seemed to wrestle with a way to begin. He laughed a little
sheepishly. “It’s hard to find the starting line. There’s so much background… Well, I’ll start with
the very basics. What do you know about the universe?”

Dumbledore blinked. “In what capacity? The universe is rather encompassing.”

Scott sighed. “I always do this wrong. You’re a smart guy; allow me to be blunt. This isn’t the only
universe. There are many of them, and all together we refer to them as the Multiverse.” He fidgeted
in his chair. “I wish I had a model or something to illustrate my point. Anyway, the Multiverse is a
big place. So big that we’ve never seen the end of it, and there are millions and probably billions of
universes in which we’ve never even set foot. So for the most part, the majority of universes exist
without any interference.

“Now, that’s not all that difficult a concept to grasp. People have been supposing the existence of
other universes for a long time, in one way or another. What most people never realise is that not
all human problems are man made. All those universes – sometimes they get broken.” Scott
looked at Dumbledore. “Okay, progress check. Are you with me so far in any way, shape or form?”

“There are many universes in existence, which in whole are called the Multiverse,” Dumbledore summarised, “and on occasion things can go wrong with them.”

Scott looked relieved. “That’s a good basis. Now we understand that there are many universes and that they can have problems. What you don’t understand is how I fit into that picture any differently from you.” He pointed at himself. “What makes me special, that I should know any of this? We might imagine that the vast majority of people living and dying in our boundless collection of universes never come close to this level of realisation – and why should they? It’s unnecessary to existence. The fact that other populaces are living in some distant parallel world you can’t possibly reach means nothing to the shape of the average life.

“It is odd but perhaps in the end fitting to our societies that it’s largely a question of occupation. You’re the Headmaster of Hogwarts, and that means you know more about this school than any living person. I’d imagine your caretaker knows the floor plan of the building like the back of his hand. Your job decides a great deal of what you know… So you have to ask yourself, what is the transuniversal equivalent of a custodian?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Dumbledore said, “but I imagine you’re about to tell me.”

Scott stated, “I am a Kharadjai. The Kharadjai are a race of people whose unique quality defines them. It is our job to both make sure universes remain unbroken, and to fix them if they do become broke.” He scratched his cheek. “That’s about as compact and simple a definition as I can give. There’s a lot more to it.”

In an odd way the information that was being poured on Dumbledore was overwhelming to the point where it didn’t affect him any more. There was something raw and true about it that he could feel in the deepest parts of his soul – knowledge of the heart that he had been born with. The word ‘Kharadjai’ rang some internal bell.

“Difficult to accept? Of course it is,” Scott continued. “Ordinary life leaves no room for that sort of speculation to infringe upon what we see as certainty. We Kharadjai are invisible by default. We normally operate in secrecy, of course – who wants to believe in this sort of thing? It’s uncomfortable to know that things can go wrong which can’t be fixed by normal means. It’s only a half-truth, besides. More often than not we are nothing more than a guiding hand, not a cure-all.

“Sometimes universes gain a very specific purpose. We don’t know why. We call this kind of driving force the ‘UO’, Universal Objective or Objectives, plural. Fate, essentially, or destiny if you want to call it that. They’re both vague concepts, but everyone understands them. Some things are intended to happen. The universe begins to form around this objective. It becomes vital to continued operation.

“In order to accomplish this UO, the universe draws together a group of destined people, or occasionally just one person. We call them ‘Primes’. They are essential to the completion of the UO – it is their own personal fate to participate. Primes are arranged according to how indispensable they are and we call that ‘Priority’. The universe can do without some of them, but there’s always at least that one individual upon whom it all hinges.” Scott smiled at Dumbledore. “I don’t think you need three guesses as to who that somebody is in this universe.

Dumbledore nodded grimly, but said nothing.

“So you’ve got the UO, and you’ve got the Primes to complete the UO. So what do you need Kharadjai for?” Scott shrugged. “The answer to that question isn’t entirely clear. The Multiverse
can’t be destroyed – no one has that kind of power. So really, if you get right down to it, the Multiverse doesn’t need us. But sometimes, people do. I know it sounds trite, but saving lives is what we’re all about. It’s our job to monitor and fix problem universes. It’s my job to make sure the Primes in this one succeed.”

Dumbledore broke in. “What if the Primes in question are destructive themselves?”

Scott seemed momentarily startled, as if he’d rarely been asked such a thing. “That’s a difficult question, and I really couldn't answer it without a more specific scenario. Most problems can be solved with a delicate touch. The majority of our missions are carried out from the sidelines with careful manipulation and the Primes don't need to know we're there, destructive or not. We generally know what to do, and what not to do.

“Let me clarify that last sentence with an example: there’s an evil villain out stomping around, as they seem to enjoy doing so much. The Prime has been destined by the universe to kill him, but isn't ready yet. The longer it takes, the more people die. There’s a Kharadjai watching and he decides to step in and take care of it personally. The day is saved, right? Unfortunately, no. The universe falls into what we call a ‘CLR’ – a Catastrophe Level Reordering. It's on a universal scale, applicable to everything and providing consequences that are impossible to predict. You step outside of what the universe will allow you, you go against the shape of things to fix something bad, and you’ll only cause something different, and maybe something worse. It’s not the kind of situation you want to mess with. Not every mistake results in a CLR, but it’s rarely something you can just shrug off. Risks are unavoidable... But not to be taken lightly. I'm sure you understand.”

Scott stopped to take a breath.

No wonder Scott was having such difficulty explaining it all, Dumbledore mused. He was attempting to sum up more information than was possible in a single sitting. He let Scott catch his breath, and then prodded him with a question. “So in this case you have revealed yourself to me, which is not what is normally done?”

“No. It is done, but not as often as the more indirect meddling. This is the deal – for this mission I am required to integrate myself with the Primes. Hence I have assumed the age of sixteen and am explaining myself to you. I need you to introduce me as a transfer student from America. I will then join Harry Potter and his friends, and assist him in completing the UO which is his fate.”

“The Prophecy...” Dumbledore said softly.

“Essentially a verbal declaration of the UO. Harry Potter has to kill Tom Riddle. I’ll do what I can to help him. When it comes down to Riddle, it'll be up to Potter to take care of it. I can only work on getting him there.”

“Why were you required to integrate?”

“I don't know why they pulled me for this,” Scott admitted. “To be honest, I was handed the mission in a hurry and I’m behind the clock. They had someone else lined up who backed out, maybe… I’m not sure what the story is. That’s part of the reason I’m explaining so much; I’m not fully prepared. You might be, and I could use your help.”

“I’ll do what I can, but what help could you give Harry?” Dumbledore asked shrewdly. “How did you know the second war would come, and if you have foreknowledge, how much of it are you able to share?”

Scott's expression didn't change, but Dumbledore immediately sensed a reticence that hadn't been there previously. “‘Foreknowledge' isn't the right word in this instance. Your universe accelerated
towards this moment and I managed to squeeze in during the compression. Our meeting in Germany was random and not significant as far as time and place. It was just where I could catch you.”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “I don't believe that addresses my question, not that I fully understand your answer...”

“When your universe was tagged for an operation, there was research done. The compression that is a side effect of UO acceleration would have made things patchy, so it was in bursts, whenever they could port in and look around.”

“So, if I gather correctly, other Kharadjai entered this world at intervals to gather information?” Dumbledore hazarded.

“Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying,” Scott said, appearing a bit relieved. “Mostly generalised, the stuff that's writ in the shape. There's a Prophecy, there's a Harry Potter, there's a Voldemort. I'll learn more here at Hogwarts than I did from the papers.”

Dumbledore still did not grasp Scott's off-hand mentions of compression and acceleration, but it didn't seem as if the boy was going to explain this particular subject more fully. Dumbledore decided not to press the issue, as there was already more than enough on the table as it was. “I see. I hope your stay here will be illuminating, then. And of course, never hesitate to ask.”

Scott nodded and took a deep breath, looking as if he was searching for some way to conclude. “I’ll wrap it all up by saying, look at it this way – it’s classical. The ragtag group of heroes go on a dangerous journey to slay a mighty dragon. The unwitting farm boy finds out he's actually a King who has been hidden from dark forces. The last great Magician gives his life to destroy the ultimate evil. A boy named Harry Potter discovers that it is his fate to kill the Dark Wizard who murdered his parents. All I do is make sure the good guys stay alive long enough to win. I’m not the hero of the story, I’m the insurance,” he said self-deprecatingly.

Dumbledore sank back in his chair almost wearily, his sharp mind rapidly cataloguing the wealth of revelations that had just been poured into it. He would have much to think about.

Scott was watching him closely. “So. How do you feel?”

“Old,” Dumbledore said honestly, pushing his half-moon spectacles back up the bridge of his nose. “But enlightened. I will have to think about what you have told me, and I hope at some time in the future we might sit and talk again. As you can imagine, I have many more questions.”

Scott laughed at that. “Hey, I still have questions. It really is true, you never stop learning. And speaking of learning...”

“Yes, your attendance.” Dumbledore straightened in his chair. “I’ll get you a syllabus and book list. Are you going to be able to keep up with the other students in the sixth year?”

“I’ve already been ploughing through a mountain of books, so don’t worry about that.” Scott hesitated. “I can’t promise to be a stellar student, but I think I’ll be able to scrape by with a passing grade.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Will you require any money?”

“Money won’t be a problem,” Scott assured him. “Only thing I need from you is a signed admissions paper, plus anything else I’ll need to have a plausible background.”
“I can get the necessary things in order concerning your paperwork. I know some people in the American government who can supply me with the proper forms.” Dumbledore withdrew a blank copy of an admissions paper from a drawer in his desk and proceeded to fill it out with an experienced hand. Once finished, he signed it and handed it to Scott. “And where will you be staying?”

Scott frowned. “My sister is still working on that, but I’ll let you know.”

“You have a sister? Will she be enrolling also?”

“No. She’ll probably drop in to check up on me, though. She likes interrupting my work,” Scott grimaced.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled in merriment. “Family is the burden we love to bear.”

“Speak for yourself. Anyway, basically I need a ticket into the sixth year class. Other than that, I need to get into Gryffindor. I’m already here, there’s no point in working from a distance. How would I do that?”

“The Sorting Hat will assign you your house in a sorting ceremony we hold before the first meal. Will is very important – if you wish to join Gryffindor house, the hat will sense it.”

“Is that the hat in question?” Scott asked, pointing towards the shelf where the Hat was kept.

“Yes, it’s kept here until the ceremony.”

“Okay... Do I put it on and just think about Gryffindor, or...?”

Dumbledore smiled. “No, no. The Hat is alive, in its own way. Its a very powerful magical artefact. It can hear your thoughts and assess your personality when it is worn. Every student is placed in the house best suited for them on the first night.”

“That’s all well and good,” Scott said, pushing himself to his feet, “but I’d like to have a talk with it now.”

Plucking the Sorting Hat off its shelf, he perfunctorily jammed it onto his head.

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“What’s this?” The voice of the Sorting Hat rang tinnily inside Scott’s head, as if a small person were sitting in his ear. “In a hurry to be sorted, are we? Most irregular of course but, well… Let’s see what we have here…”

*Gryffindor please*, Scott thought in a very boring tone, as if he were ordering lunch.

“What’s this?” The voice of the Sorting Hat rang tinnily inside Scott’s head, as if a small person were sitting in his ear. “In a hurry to be sorted, are we? Most irregular of course but, well… Let’s see what we have here…”

Gryffindor please, Scott thought in a very boring tone, as if he were ordering lunch.

“Hah! Yes, I saw that right away, that sense of humour… They would enjoy such wit in Ravenclaw, you know. And quite a mind lurking in here…”

They might also *not* enjoy such 'wit' being directed at them.

“Perhaps, perhaps. Slytherin, no, that’s out of the question... There’s surprisingly little ambition; curious, for one so young…”

*Yes yes, it’s all a rich tapestry. How about laying some Gryffindor on me now.*

“Oh no, Mr. Kharan, I’m not done with you yet. Loyalty, I see here too... Though not blind, it must
“Most insistent, aren’t you, but very well… My, my… You do indeed qualify to join the brave Gryffindors. Rarely have I seen such insouciance in regards to conflict. Again, a mystery… Under what circumstances could you have acquired such a disregard for personal safety?”

“It’s damn puzzling, all right. Guess you better just stick me into Gryffindor before you go crazy trying to figure it out.

“But why, Mr. Kharan, why… You’ve never passed through these halls before, I’d have to have sorted you, and clearly this is not the case so you have no friends at that table... What is it that fuels this desire of yours?”

Maybe I like red and gold.

“Maybe. Not to be difficult, you understand… I just love a challenge.”

There’s something I have to do, and I need to be in Gryffindor to do it.

“Very well, you may keep your secrets… I see that the Headmaster is aiding you, which is good enough for me. When the time comes I will place you in Gryffindor where, despite your hidden agenda, you will find a place.”

Wait, what? Can’t you just sort me now?

“I sort during the Sorting, strangely enough, Mr. Kharan. When that day comes sit on the stool in the Great Hall, and I will sort you with the others… But not before. It just isn’t done, you understand.”

And you get to make me the weird kid on my first day, getting sorted in the sixth year.

“I’m a simple hat, Scott Kharan, and I must take my pleasures where I can find them. A very good day to you.”

Later.

Scott placed the Sorting Hat respectfully back onto its shelf – he admired anything that possessed such a keen insight into human nature. He still wasn’t looking forward to being the curio of the hour when he had to be sorted, however.

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“Okay, that’s taken care of,” Scott said with some satisfaction, and turned back to Dumbledore. “I need to head out and get my stuff, figure out where I’m going to live and etcetera. I’ll be back later before school starts to pick up anything you need to give me.” Reaching over, he grasped Dumbledore’s good hand and shook it. “Thanks for at least pretending like you believe me.”

“You made a convincing entrance,” Dumbledore smiled, returning the handshake. “Before you leave, could you perhaps demonstrate some greater proof? You’ve spoken of abilities you possess, but I’ve yet to witness any.”

“Fair enough.” Scott shrugged “Cast some spells at me and I’ll see if I can stop them.”

Dumbledore didn’t think that plan was very sound. “Forgive me if this seems altogether egotistical,
but an inexperienced young wizard like yourself wouldn’t stand much chance of blocking me.”

“The Kharadjai have power, and I mean it in the most literal sense. The manipulation of raw energy is our speciality, and that’s exactly what magic is.”

Dumbledore felt somewhat sceptical. “That’s quite an advantage.”

“I’m simplifying. That’s pretty much all I’ve been doing. We don’t have time to give you a crash course in Shaping 101 so you’ll have to settle for face value.”

“Very well,” Dumbledore accepted. “Defend yourself then.” He decided to start light. Raising his wand, he gestured at Scott. “*Stupefy!*”

The red jet of light shot towards the boy, who remained still. But before impacting it simply vanished without the slightest sound or movement from Scott. Dumbledore could feel the magic being snuffed out like a candle.

Scott raised a mocking eyebrow. “Bad day? Need me to stand a little closer?”

Almost despite himself Dumbledore felt a little needled by that. He was not accustomed to having his spells, which were often significantly more powerful than the equivalent of other wizards, dismissed so easily. He took up the challenge.

Soon the office was lit by a cacophony of spells, many of them high level incantations that carried injurious power, as Scott calmly evaporated every magical attack sent his way without so much as a wave of his arm. Fawkes backed away in alarm, but the spells never ricocheted – they were completely nullified.

Dumbledore had to concentrate on his casting but he still watched Scott carefully. The boy was standing in a nonchalant pose that seemed a bit too casual to not be designed. Even though the Kharadjai was making no physical motions to deflect the spells his eyes were tightly locked on Dumbledore's wand arm, and he appeared to tense slightly when the spells were especially powerful. Whatever he was doing clearly wasn't involuntary.

At last Dumbledore lowered his arm, silently admitting defeat. There seemed little question that Scott had been honest. By rights the last round of spells should have left him unconscious and badly hurt.

Scott tilted his head to one side. “Proof enough for you?”

What Dumbledore needed was time to come to grips with everything he had been told. For now though, he would simply accept. He could hardly do otherwise faced with such obvious evidence. “Enough for now. You will be returning at some point to talk again?”

“Yeah, sure. Right now though, I need to lay the groundwork for my immediate future. I need to talk with Harry, and you can probably expect a letter from him since I’ll be dropping your name.”

Dumbledore reseated himself. “I will make sure the other teachers are aware that we are gaining a new student from America. Do you have a story as to why?”

“I was just going to say it was a family thing and let people draw their own conclusions.”

“Very well, I will leave that to you.” Dumbledore peered at Scott over his half-moon glasses with serious eyes. “And I will also say that with all things considered, I wish you success in your venture. I fear we may need your interference on our behalf.”
“We’ll see how it goes,” Scott said levelly. “I don’t know if it will make you feel any better, but I’ve had experience doing this sort of thing. Try to put me out of your mind when it comes to Harry and the Prophecy. Remember, this is his job to do and it involves you too. Keep doing what you were doing, use the help I give you to further your own ends. Consider me another weapon in your war, but don’t discount the others. It’s my job to keep you all alive but you’ll make my job that much harder if you don’t keep yourself alive.”

Dumbledore nodded gravely. “I will consider what you have told me. Good luck.”

“‘Once more into the breach,’” Scott quoted. Before leaving the office, he turned in the doorway and sketched a small salute to Dumbledore. Then the door closed behind him, and Dumbledore was left to his thoughts.

Dumbledore didn’t hear the stone staircase descending. He knew the Kharadjai had already gone.
The phone was ringing.

Sighing, she reached down and turned the knob to the off position, watching the water pooled on the tile swirl down into the drain as it was slightly replenished by what liquid was left to sluice off her body. Immediately the air in the bathroom brought goose bumps to her skin. The shower had only been lukewarm; somebody else must have been using all the hot water. She had really been done anyway, continuing her shower because she didn’t have anything else to do.

Actually, she had a lot to do, just nothing that she wanted to do. The boxes piled up by the front door had to be emptied eventually, and, thanks to her no-good brother, it was all up to her to work it out. She did take enjoyment from interior decorating but she principally objected to being forced into anything. Her brother knew that, of course, which was why he had done it.

The answering machine kicked in after she deliberately missed the call, recording only a dial tone. The shower stall was now nearing room temperature and beaded with water drops. She missed her old shower, and she’d definitely have to improve on her current one. It was small and not very comfortable and didn’t have a seat like she was used to. Reaching towards the top bar of the shower door, she pulled her towel down and wrapped it around herself.

One of the first things she had unpacked were several dark blue and highly fluffy bathroom mats to place down on the cold tile floor, so she was spared that much upon stepping over the rim of the bathtub. She’d always had a little more taste for creature comforts than her brother did, at least at home. She could sleep in the mud with the toughest of them, but when she was in her own house she wanted some nice cushions for her ass and some place soft to put her feet. Her brother just didn’t appreciate the aesthetic quality of curtains and throw pillows.

She paused in the front of the mirror to wrap her hair in another towel. Her brother had often suggested that she just go butch and hack it all off – his exact words. She disagreed. Her life often required her to do things that simply weren’t especially feminine. She was, however, a woman, even though her brother often preferred to ignore that aspect of her self. So she kept her hair at shoulder length and held it back in her trademark ponytail.

She exited the bathroom into the living room, which at the moment was more room than living. Aside from a single couch with an end table and a few cardboard boxes, it was empty. She flopped down on the couch and waited for the phone to ring again. If it had been who she thought it was, then he’d call back.

There wasn’t much to do while she was waiting. Twiddling her thumbs didn’t really suit her, and it was unsatisfying to tap her fingers against a soft surface such as the couch.

Idly she looked down and sighed at the familiar sight that was presented. She didn’t consider herself a vain woman. But if there was one thing that it could be said that she hated about her physical appearance, it was her breasts. They were quite large, and she wasn’t on a career path where that was a benefit.
She was five foot ten, fairly tall for a woman, so they didn’t look completely out of place on her. She didn’t have a very wide body. She was built like her brother, lean and tall, so her chest seemed slightly too big for her frame. Scott found great hilarity in purposefully taking the narrowest, most cramped routes during missions so that he could watch her suffer.

He could make her so mad sometimes.

The phone rang again. She reached over to the end table and picked it up. “Hello?”

“It’s me.” It was his customary greeting. “Made any more progress unpacking?”

“I just got up, Scott. I was in the shower.”

“We finished breakfast about fifteen minutes ago,” Scott said. “They don’t let us sleep in too much. You were in the shower when I called the first time?”

“Yes.”

“Then what have you been doing since then?”

“Waiting for you to call back. Thinking dark thoughts about my boobs,” she dryly informed him.

“Your twins?” Scott sounded like he was grinning, a likely bet when it came to him. “Gigantos and Enormia?”

Trust him to rub it in. “What do you want, Scott?”

“I want you to get in touch with Molly Weasley,” Scott instructed her. “We need to build some close ties with that family.”

“All right. I’ll drop by The Burrow today and introduce myself,” she said. Scott might be a maddening sibling, but a mission was a mission and there was no point in arguing over it.

“Cool. She seems like a good person, so hopefully you’ll get along.” He sounded a little distracted. “I’ll give you a run down of what’s been happening later. I don’t have time right now.”

“Do you think we should get an owl?”

“Might not be a bad idea. I’m not really sure what’s involved, we’ll have to mess with that some other time... Nothing else comes to mind that can’t wait for later. Just remember I’m trapped here for the time being, so you’ll have to be my legs if something comes up.”

“I’ll be ready,” she promised.

“Kay. Talk to you later.”

“Later.”

After she hung up, she reflected on how strange it was to hear her brother as a sixteen year old. He didn’t sound so different as to be unrecognisable, but there was definitely less bass involved. She’d have to make fun of him for it when she saw him – especially if his voice broke.

The first step of the day was to get dressed. She walked into her barely furnished room and opened her dresser, pausing momentarily to retrieve a picture from its frame and set it aside. Today’s ensemble would be a black halter top complimented by a pair of camouflage jeans. She had once had a matching camouflage spaghetti tank top, but had stopped wearing the combination after Scott
had started calling her ‘Sergeant Skank’. There was nothing worse than when he had thought of a clever insult and he knew it was clever. The black went better with the jeans anyway. She slipped on a pair of white and red sneakers, put the picture into one of her pockets, and was ready to face the day.

Actually, she had to brush her teeth first.

So she went back to the bathroom, deciding to discard breakfast and pick up an early lunch. After her oral scrubbing she applied a little mascara to her eyelashes and a hint of lip gloss to her mouth. She wasn’t all that fond of makeup and had never worn very much of it. Between that and her simple ponytail, she really didn’t spend a lot of time in the bathroom – no matter what Scott said to the contrary.

Now she was ready to face the day.

Ottery St. Catchpole was bright under the morning sky when she stepped out the front door of the building. The air still carried a slight hint of chill dew, but the sun was quickly burning it away. There was a soft breeze sweeping through the town, and she judged that though it would be a warm day it wouldn’t become overly hot. It was excellent weather to go for a morning walk, which was lucky because that was exactly what she had to do.

She took the road south at a leisurely stroll, passing shops and houses, some with their shades still drawn against the intruding light. She stopped on the bridge crossing the river and leaned out over the edge to take in the view. To the south, she could see the forested hills that hid The Burrow from sight. It was a nice place for a house, she thought, nestled back in mostly untouched land but still within easy distance of a town with all its modern commodities.

She continued to follow the road past the water until she spotted the two-track lane leading off into the trees. It curved in such a way that she still couldn’t see any of the property unless she counted tree trunks. The woods were dark and cool, shading her from the rising sun. The lane was almost completely covered with leaves and it was obvious that it had hardly ever been driven on. Wizards had several alternatives to automotive travel, she remembered.

The woods broke away to reveal a verdant lawn and orchard, complete with a pond on the far side of the land. The path she was on wound its way towards the house to end in front of a ramshackle garage, though she wasn’t sure whether it actually contained a car or not.

The Burrow itself reared up against the backdrop of green leaves, a multi-storey catastrophe of architecture. It was a hodgepodge assortment of additions over a very old stone base, the surrounding yard area covered in odds and ends and the occasional chicken. It was a decidedly odd-looking dwelling.

Despite its haphazard appearance, it still felt like a home. There was no sense of its being run-down or in any way poorly cared for. The paint wasn’t peeling, none of the windows were broken, and, though the lawn was overgrown in some places, it still had a lived-in look. Smoke curled gently from a chimney on one corner of the first floor. There was a welcoming warmth to the place that was tangible even at the distance she stood.

She followed the driveway up to a point and then cut across the yard to the front door. Some of the windows on the first floor were open, and, judging by the smells emanating from within, they represented the kitchen and source of the smoke wafting from the chimney. Looking down at herself to make sure she didn’t have leaves all over her or something equally embarrassing, she raised her hand and knocked.
There was a clatter from the windows as something was set down, followed by a muffled “Well who could that be?” Short, quick footsteps grew audible through the doorway, and then it was opened to reveal Mrs. Weasley.

The red-haired woman blinked up at her unexpected visitor, who was at least six inches taller than her. “Oh, hello,” Mrs. Weasley said. She sounded friendly enough but was also somewhat guarded. Her hand slipped down into a pocket on the side of her apron, clutching her wand.

“Mrs. Weasley?” There was no doubt that this was, in fact, Molly Weasley, but it was only polite to ask.

“Yes, speaking.” She peered closely at the younger woman, trying to identify her.

“Lila Kharan,” the blond introduced herself. “I’m Scott Kharan’s sister – I think you met him at your sons’ shop in Diagon Alley?”

Mrs. Weasley’s eyes brightened in understanding. “Oh yes! The blond boy that Harry knew, I remember. You’ve rented a flat in town?”

“I just walked over here to introduce myself,” Lila said. “Our apartment isn’t far.”

Mrs. Weasley seemed to relax, but she still hesitated. “I hate bring it up, but do you have any proof that you’re Scott’s sister? Things being what they are these days…”

Lila reached into her pocket and withdrew the photograph she had stored there earlier. “Will this do?”

The picture had been chosen due to its content. A teenage Scott and an adult Lila were standing in front of what appeared to be a fancy hotel, with twin brass revolving doors under a dark red awning behind them. Lila’s arm was jokingly wrapped around Scott’s throat in an appropriately familial pose, providing just the right mix of affection and sibling rivalry.

Mrs. Weasley appeared momentarily confused by the Muggle-style photograph, but she quickly recovered. “Yes, I recognise him. Were the two of you on holiday?” Before Lila could answer Mrs. Weasley continued, “Oh, but where are my manners, keeping you on the doorstep. Come in, come in!” The energetic woman hurried Lila through the house and into the sitting room. “I’ve just put some tea on; it will only be a moment.”

Tea had never been Lila’s drink, but she smiled anyway and nodded in gratitude. While Mrs. Weasley bustled off back into the kitchen, Lila took stock of her surroundings. The room was cluttered with comfortably worn furniture and various decorative odds and ends. The breeze from outside filtered in through several open windows, ruffling the curtains and stirring the back of Lila’s hair. It was the sort of room where people could sit and talk for hours or curl up on a couch for an afternoon nap.

It made her even more determined to do something about her apartment. Her new house wasn’t a home yet.

Mrs. Weasley soon came back bearing two steaming cups and saucers and a small plate of cookies. Check that – biscuits. Not cookies. It was always a little disconcerting to rearrange the language when entering yet another new locale, but when in Rome…

“It was nice of you to drop by,” Mrs. Weasley said as she handed the cup and saucer to Lila. “It’s been too long since I’ve had company for tea.”
“I haven’t gotten out much lately myself,” Lila said carefully. It was a delicate task to guide conversations from within. She needed Molly Weasley to invite her back for tea again sometime—it was important that Lila become, if not a regular, then at least an occasional fixture around The Burrow.

That wasn’t the only reason. Sometimes a girl just needed someone to talk to.

“You’re more than welcome back any time,” Mrs. Weasley told her with a smile. Lila returned it, thinking that either she was really good, or Mrs. Weasley was really nice. “With Arthur at work and my two youngest at Hogwarts, it gets too quiet around here.”

“I can understand that. With Scott at school now, it’s just me left.”

Open sympathy crossed Mrs. Weasley’s face. “Oh, yes. All my boys are either at school or working now, and Ginny’s in her fifth year,” she said a little despondently. “But of course, the house is always full during the summer months, and Bill and the twins come by to visit sometimes. Do you have any other family in the area?”

“No,” Lila said, feeling the same way she knew Scott did whenever the topic of family came up—out of place. “The two of us are all there is.” It was the truth.

Mrs. Weasley seemed a little shocked by that. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Lila supposed the woman was accustomed to having a large family. “It’s okay; I’m not upset,” Lila reassured her. She didn’t have any bad memories as far as family went. That was Scott’s burden to bear, as much as she wished it didn’t have to be that way. “We have each other at least, and that’s better off than some people.”

“Absolutely – I give thanks everyday for my children. Sometimes they can be a handful, but it’s all worth it in the end,” Mrs. Weasley said sagaciously. “Family should always be important….” She blinked a few times after that, looking sad about something. Lila didn't ask, figuring it was too early for that.

“I really like your house,” Lila said, changing the subject. “Right now mine is just a bunch of boxes.”

“It’s such a mess most days,” Mrs. Weasley said modestly, “but things have calmed down with the twins living over their shop now. They were the worst when it came to making messes.”

“My brother seems to share that problem,” Lila said wryly.

“Teenage boys,” Mrs. Weasley sighed in commiseration.

Lila took a drink of her tea, thinking that ‘teenage boys’ was one excuse Scott couldn’t rely on. He had always been a slob.

“So are you working in town, Lila?” Mrs. Weasley asked her, placing her now empty cup back on its saucer. “Or do you commute?”

“I actually work at home. I do... well, it’s a Muggle thing,” Lila said, carefully giving the exact response that Scott had recommended.

“I see,” Mrs. Weasley replied though she obviously didn’t. “When did you graduate from—” she stopped. “I can never remember the name of that American school….”
“Maliseet is the one I would have gone to. And I never graduated.” She hastened to explain herself. “I was too busy working to support Scott and me. Except for his schooling, we’ve spent most of our time as Muggles.”

Mrs. Weasley was taken aback but tried to cover it up. “Well, be careful not to tell Arthur; he’ll never stop asking you questions! He’s obsessed with Muggle life and all the alternatives to magic… You… You can…”

“Do magic? I can, though I don’t know much about it.”

“I’m sorry to pry, dear. You just caught me by surprise is all,” Mrs. Weasley said hurriedly.

“It’s no problem. Neighbours should get to know each other,” Lila said calmly, subtly nudging the dialogue back towards the other woman. Mrs. Weasley was more than happy to comply.

They spent the next hour in idle conversation though Lila occasionally dug a little deeper when she caught on to something that might be important to know. She was careful not to seem like she was panning for any particular information. She wasn’t scoping out The Burrow for a future occupation or anything, but sometimes the mission had to come before personal niceties. Lila comforted herself with the thought that she really was growing to like Molly Weasley; so, in that sense, her visit wasn’t entirely impersonal.

It was early afternoon when Lila looked outside and figured she’d probably better go home and continue the task of unpacking. She groaned internally at the thought. Her only consolation was that it had been Scott who had packed it all up in the first place.

“I should probably go. I’ve still got a lot of unpacking to do,” Lila said after Mrs. Weasley finished relating a childhood tale involving Ron and the twins. “Thanks for having me over. I had a great time.”

“Well, thank you for coming!” Mrs. Weasley said with a smile. “I haven’t had a decent teatime guest in far too long. You must come over again soon. Actually that reminds me – did you have any plans for supper?”

Lila shrugged. “Whatever place I can find near my apartment. I should probably put together the table first. I don’t really want to eat holding over the sink again.”

Mrs. Weasley looked appalled at that image. “Oh… You’re more than welcome to eat here tonight. Arthur and I would be glad to have you.”

“Thank you,” Lila accepted. “Sounds a lot better than cold food on the couch.”

The older woman beamed at her. “Come round at six then, and everything should be ready.”

They exchanged some more pleasantries, and Mrs. Weasley pressed a few cookies (biscuits?) on Lila for the road, and then she was back out on the path. It was substantially warmer out now than it had been on her way to The Burrow but the breeze kept things tolerable. The street was well shaded up until the field before the bridge that spanned the river, sparing her from the sun. She ate a few of the treats that Mrs. Weasley had given her as she walked.

Her apartment remained in the state in which it had been left – full of boxes and not much else. So much for any hope she had been holding out that the problem might somehow fix itself. After all, it was an unfamiliar universe. They could have unpacking fairies or something, right? Wrong, apparently. She’d have to unpack the old fashioned way by busting her ass.
On the upside, she’d be eating well come dinner time. As well as was possible in the UK, anyway. She supposed that English cooking would just have to become an acquired taste. But did they really have to boil so many things? There were many methods of cooking, and boiling ranked somewhere just above pouring gasoline into a bucket and throwing a match in. Not for the first time, she envied Scott his ability to nonchalantly eat anything put in front of him. Her brother had tastes and preferences the same as the next person, but when it came time to consume whatever local oddities were presented to him Scott could choke it all down without even changing expression. Lila did her best to emulate, but that sort of culinary mindset came with the kinds of experiences she wasn’t sure she wanted to have.

She should be grateful for any offered meals. An apartment in Devon was infinitely preferable to, say, a stick lean-to in the Amazon. She might be stuck for the duration but at least she was comfortable.

Sighing, she reached down and grabbed the nearest box.

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The call from Scott came in the middle of the night, forcing her to discard a pleasant dream involving a beach. It was all somewhat vague like most dreams. That didn’t mean she wanted to leave it.

Lila rolled over in her extremely comfortable bed to grab the phone off of her bedside table. “What do you want?”

“How terribly rude. I’d like to speak to your manager.”

“Hold, please,” Lila mumbled. She rested the phone against her chest for about five seconds then raised it back to her ear. “This is the manager speaking. What do you want?”

“I want to talk to my sister. It’s been what, about a month since the last time?”

“Yeah. One glorious month.”

“Before you let reminiscence sweep you away, how about I bring you up to date?”

Lila turned over onto her back, nestling into a more pleasing position. “All right.”

Scott proceeded to outline for her the events that had transpired at Hogwarts – Harry’s private lessons with Dumbledore, the near disastrous Quidditch tryouts, and Scott’s ongoing struggle to learn magic and pass his classes.

He also touched on more personal matters such as Harry’s mounting frustration with his unwanted celebrity status and the growing attraction between Ron and Hermione. Lila woke up a little at that last part. Growing attraction was her speciality.

“So Ron and Hermione are getting closer?”

“They want to fuck, if that’s what you mean.”

“You have the soul of a poet, Scott. I thought you were trying to manipulate more than lust.”

“Sure, a lot more. But they’re sixteen – and accordingly, they want to fuck.”

Obviously ageing backwards had served to increase Scott’s obsession with that particular sphere of
human activity. “I understand that, thanks.”

“Fear not; you’ll get your chance to dip those indelicate fingers of yours into their love lives. It shouldn’t take much to get Ron and Hermione moving in the right direction. Harry and Ginny are more of a problem. They’re both in denial.”

“I like a challenge.”

“Then the first one to surmount is Dean. Ginny is dating him currently, but fortunately it’s not serious. They’re on the brink – maybe you can knock them over.”

“Any chance of me getting close to Ginny soon?”

“It’s your lucky day. There’s going to be a trip to Hogsmeade on the nineteenth. I need you to meet me there.”

“For introductions?”

“Partially. If everything works out right, you’ll be bringing something for me too.”

“Mexican food?” she asked hopefully.

“Yes, if you can manage it. More importantly, there’s a certain necklace I want.”

Lila had the sudden mental image of Scott wearing thick gold chains. “Feeling unglamorous?”

“Maybe, but I really want it because it’s an important object, and it needs to be taken out of the picture.”

That raised her attention level. “Important object as in...?”

“As in Priority Item. Someone must have decided to cut us a break because it’s the first clear sign we’ve had so far.”

A Priority Item was an object tied to the Universal Intent. Sometimes the universe would point towards one, or sometimes they were obvious. Even baselines could understand the importance held in objects of power. Whatever part this necklace had to play in things, it was near to the UO.

“I don’t feel it,” Lila sighed in disappointment. “Guess I still have a long way to go.”

“Not necessarily. I’m right here at the centre of things in Hogwarts, so the little shaping available is much clearer to me. I bet you’ll feel it once you get closer.”

“I hope so. Where is it?”

“Borgin and Burkes in Knockturn Alley. Get inside, steal the necklace, and stash it in our house somewhere. Our real house, I mean.”

“You don't want me to send it to the Archivists?”

“Too much paperwork. We’ll mess with that later; for now, just throw it in a drawer or something.”

“Should this be an obvious theft?”

“That’s probably not a good idea,” Scott mused. “Smash up the shop a little and take anything else that looks valuable.”
“What if the guy is there?”

“Kill him if he sees you. Otherwise, just get in and out.”

“You don’t think a murder might help to make it look more like armed robbery?”

“It would, but if he isn’t there then it won’t matter. Don’t bother looking for him. He’s a bit player.”

“Okay. I’m heading out.”

“Thanks Lil. Talk to you soon.”

Lila pulled herself from her bed and moved swiftly to her closet. Jeans and a dark shirt would do for tonight since she wasn’t expecting any heavy opposition. She grabbed a plastic bag that had been used for packing in order to store the loot. This wouldn’t be a delicate operation. Breaking and entering without leaving a trace was difficult, but smash and grab was the simplest of tasks.

She already knew where Diagon Alley was, having made it her business beforehand to plot out some key points on the map. The aperture she created took her to the back of the Leaky Cauldron. She pulled out the wand that Scott had somehow procured for her and tapped the bricks as he had instructed. They moved aside, allowing her entry into the darkened street.

It was the dead of night and Diagon Alley was a ghost town with only a few windows, most of them second story, showing some dim glow behind drawn shades. The shops and houses took on an eerie cast in the filtered moonlight, all sharp angles and looming forms. There wasn’t a single soul out on the street. Lila wondered if things might have been different before the war. Still, it served her purposes well enough. She couldn’t be seen.

With that in mind she slipped into the side streets and shadows, moving on silent feet where eyes could not penetrate the shroud of darkness. Scott had been right – the necklace called to her from its resting place in Knockturn Alley. Invisible lines and arcs curved and illuminated the way, guiding her forward. All of this happened on a sensory level that could not be described in ordinary words. It was not visual or audible but something else entirely. She could point towards the landmarks that the universe devised, but she could not see them. She could hear the Priority Object disturb the space around itself, but there was no sound.

Knockturn Alley was even more steeped in gloom than the rest of the surrounds. If anyone was going to be moving around at one in the morning it would be in this less than pleasant locale. She moved more carefully here, staying flattened beneath eaves and ducking under windows. The alleyway was forbidding, full of deep corners and the threat of the unknown. But Lila had more pressing worries than chimerical monsters.

It didn’t take her long to reach Borgin and Burkes. The door to the establishment seethed with a tangled plethora of warding magic. Lila wasn’t familiar enough with the local forms to distinguish what each individual spell did, so she wiped them all out of existence. It was a blunt approach and lacking any trace of craft but that would suit her purposes well enough. She moved to pick the standard lock before remembering that this was intended to be interpreted as a smash and grab. She’d have to be quick.

Moving over to the display window, she quickly located the green necklace in its case as well as some other items that looked pricey and were within easy reach. Returning to the door, she leaned back and kicked it in. The frame splintered with a loud cracking noise, and the door flew inward to collide with the wall.
Once inside, she moved in a flurry of activity. The glass case containing the necklace was smashed, the necklace itself thrown into the bag she carried. She knocked over tables, shattered more glass cases, and ripped the mantel off the fireplace in an orgy of destruction, all the while picking up anything that seemed expensive. She grabbed a solid gold candelabrum, a skull with rubies set into its crown, and a set of jewelled obsidian chess pieces. She knew that with magical objects the truly valuable things would often appear ordinary and old, but she didn't care. She wanted it to look like an intruder had taken whatever had immediately presented itself as being of high worth.

Lights were coming on outside in the street, her cue to exit. Hoisting her sack of ill gotten gains, she opened another aperture and vanished like the thief in the night she was.

She appeared in a blank grey room, devoid of decoration or features save for a single metal door set into the wall with an emitter next to it. Light emanated from strips around the ceiling, and a low hum permeated the sterile air.

She walked over to the emitter and waved a hand in front of it. “Primare Lila Kharan, 1-908-554. Primarius Transferral Desk, please.”

There was a buzz and then the emitter lit up, the holographic revealing a familiar face at the desk.

“Gus,” Lila said in greeting.

“Lila Kharan! Haven't had you in the box for awhile,” Gus said with a smile. “What brings you in today?”

Lila held up her sack of stolen artefacts. “Priority Item plus change. Local power, probably non-compatible. If you can clear me I'm going to put it in Scott's blankroom for now.”

“It must save you all kinds of time having your own rated blankroom,” Gus said idly as he worked some controls Lila couldn't see. “They probably don't like that at the Archival.”

“They don't like a lot of things over at the Archival,” Lila said. She blinked a few times uncomfortably as her skin buzzed and stung. She had never liked the sensation of the inclision grid passing over her.

“Very true. All right Primare, you're clean,” Gus said cheerfully. “Looks like GEP baseline bacteria; a few abnormal microbes were on your shoes but nothing alarming.”

Lila didn't know why Gus always felt the need to explain the findings from the grid. None of the other PTD staffers did that. “Thanks.”

“Always a pleasure. I've already got a lift for you, it's going to be number six on your right. Hey, say hi to your brother for me!”

“Will do,” Lila called as she walked out the now opened door.

Lila kept the lift screens opaque as it sped her to her destination. The Transferral lifts moved so quickly that there wasn't much to see anyway, just a grey and black blur. She never flipped the screens unless her lift was moving up the outer shell, in which case there was actually a view.

The lift brought her to another corridor that looked exactly like every other corridor in the titanic construction. Endless identical doors lined it, made distinct only by their individual labels. Lila quickly found the one she was looking for. She keyed in her passcode and waited a moment for the biometrics to confirm her identify. With a soft click, the door opened and she stepped through.
She emerged in the entryway to her home.

The Kharan house existed in its own pocket dimension within the Kharadjai universe. It was not structured like any land based architectural equivalent but rather a sprawling mass of rooms and connecting hallways suspended in empty space. The house was mostly comprised of the warehouses that Scott rented out for safe storage – the actual living space was small by comparison.

The door from the entryway led to Scott’s bedroom. Her own room was above his and they shared a bathroom. It would have been very easy to get her a bathroom of her own, but neither of them was willing to admit that the bathroom didn’t belong entirely to them. She liked that bathroom, especially its shower, and she wasn’t going to let Scott foist some lesser bathroom off on her. She passed through Scott’s messy abode and entered the door to the central staircase. Upon reaching the ground she opened a pair of large double doors and moved into the passageway beyond.

There were many parts of the house which were quite comfortable. The ubiquitous drab hallways that made up much of the connecting areas, however, were not, and Lila never did understand why Scott kept them around. This particular one was lined with, of all things, suits of armour. For someone who so often fell outside of life’s little clichés, Scott was committing a big one with the hall. She would have to grit her teeth and bear it though, since she was forbidden to alter his portions of their domain as specified in the Great House Treaty. There were many days she regretted signing that document.

She entered a nondescript side door off of the hall, flicking the light switch to her left and dispelling the darkness inside. The lights revealed a room made entirely out of solid metal – walls, ceiling and floor. It was completely bare, with the exception of the far wall opposite the door. There, against the middle of the metallic surface, was held a large sword in a black leather sheath. Metal straps, tinted a faint blue, pinned the weapon tightly against the wall, each sporting a separate keyhole for unlocking.

Lila didn’t know how dangerous any of things she had taken from Borgin and Burkes were, so she had decided that the blankroom would be a good place to leave them for the time being. She crossed the small space and dumped her bag in a corner. The sword on the wall vibrated slightly as she went near it, rattling the straps. The metal room echoed with a few squeaks and booms as it seemed to expand and contract slightly. Lila ignored this. Rockbreaker wasn’t going anywhere, no matter how much it wanted her to wield it.

Turning off the lights and closing the door behind her, she called Scott.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Lil. I got the necklace and some other junk with it. I put it all in the blankroom for now.”

“Any problems?”

She tried not to take that as an assumption on his part that she would have had any problems with such a simple assignment. “No. The people at Borgin and Burkes might disagree with that assessment, though.”

“Wish I could have been there,” he sighed.

“It was a quick job. Is there anything else tonight, or can I go back to bed?”

“Well, you do need your beauty sleep, I know that much for su-” he broke off.
“Scott?”

“Hey, Harry.”

“What? Oh,” she said, realising that he wasn’t talking to her any more.

“I gotta go. Unless you want to talk to her, Harry?”

Lila rolled her eyes, despite the fact that Scott couldn’t see it.

“Don’t think he’s going to take me up on that. See you soon.”

“Bye,” she said and closed the connection.

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Upon arriving in Hogsmeade for the first time Lila was struck with exactly how much the place looked like its name sounded – a quaint wizarding village. She supposed there was a certain rustic charm to it, or at least there would have been if the weather weren’t so miserable.

The sleet was coming down at a rate that wasn’t quite a deluge but was more severe than a drizzle. It pooled like cold gravy on the cobblestones of the street and in gutters, seeping down inclines and the backs of people’s necks alike. Lila watched dispassionately as witches and wizards hurried through the town with quick steps, trying to get through with their business and indoors as soon as possible. She herself was pretty well inured to the elements. She stood on the street corner outside the Three Broomsticks with no concessions towards the weather save a beaten up BDU coat that had long since lost its hood. It made her stand out, which was fine. There were four people in particular that she wanted to see her.

She almost missed seeing her brother entering the shop called Honeydukes just down the street. His familiar blond head was shorter than she was used to. She briefly considered following them into the store, but it looked to be fairly busy and a poor choice for conversation. She did have more of a sweet tooth than Scott, though. Maybe she should call him and tell him to buy her something. Then again, phones were supposed to be inoperative in magical locales. She redirected her attention to her surrounds while she waited for her brother to re-emerge. Two disreputable-looking wizards were having a furtive discussion a few yards away. If Lila had been in a major city she’d have guessed it was a drug deal in progress, but instead it was probably a fence operation. She didn’t represent the police so she didn’t think it wasn’t any of her concern. A few moments later that proved to be an incorrect assumption.

She didn’t understand the altercation that followed. From her spot in front of the Three Broomsticks she watched as the boy she knew was Harry began talking to the short, shabby wizard before furiously pinning him against the wall with one arm. Hermione and Ron stood back, shocked. While Harry snarled at the wizard he now had by the throat, Scott bent over and retrieved a dented suitcase the fellow had dropped. Lila started moving towards them to assist when some sort of spell pushed Harry away from the wizard, who immediately tried to grab the suitcase from Scott. Scott skipped back out of reach and the wizard disappeared with a crack, leaving Harry swearing sulphurously.

“At least I got the case,” Scott was saying as she approached. “Here, that’s some your stuff anyway – oh, hey, Lil.”

“Harry, please calm down – I’m sorry? Lil?” That was Hermione, looking in confusion at Scott.
“Who?” Ron joined in, swivelling his head about.

“Me,” Lila said, stopping next to Scott. She noted with some pleasure that he was just barely taller than her now. Harry cancelled his cursing in mid-tirade.

Hermione looked at Lila, then at Scott. Lila knew the resemblance was unmistakable. “You must be-”

“Hey! You didn’t tell us you were a twin!” Ron blurted.

That was a common misconception. Scott and Lila shared a lot of the same features: the same dark blond hair, the same lean frame, and the same grey eyes. According to Scott, they both took after their mother. They were, however, not twins.

“I never got around to telling you her name either,” Scott pointed out, “but that’s only one out of two failures on my part because we’re not twins.”

“Lila Kharan,” Lila said, holding out her head for each of them to shake in succession. “Are you going to give Harry his stuff back, Scott, or have you grown attached to it?”

“Maybe. I could always use another suitcase.”

Lila grabbed the suitcase from him and handed it to Harry. “I’m sure you’ve noticed my brother thinks he’s funny.”

“Yes,” Harry said dryly, accepting the suitcase, “I have noticed that.”

“Bunch of fucking ingrates, that’s what you are,” Scott said, ignoring Hermione’s glare at his language. “Guess this is a chance to find out who my real friends are, right, Ron?”

“Don’t try to drag me into this,” Ron laughed, “I’m just standing here.”

“Et tu, Ron?”

“As much as my little brother is enjoying this,” Lila said, Scott shooting her a dark look for her comment, “how about we go inside where it’s not freezing cold?”

“Is everything all right?” The group turned towards the new voice to see Nymphadora Tonks’ bright pink hair come bobbing across the street. She gave Harry a friendly smile. “Wotcher, Harry.” She looked at Scott. “You too, Scott.”

“Hey, Tonks,” Scott returned the greeting.

Tonks nodded at him in response before giving Harry a concerned frown. “That was Mundungus, wasn’t it?”

“He’s been stealing Sirius’ stuff!” Harry said hotly, obviously still angry. “Can’t the Order control him?” Tonks immediately looked towards Scott and Lila in warning, but Harry brushed off her unspoken caution impatiently. “They already know about the Order.”

“We might,” Tonks sighed, answering his question, “but everybody’s been everywhere lately. I’m sure you’ve been reading the paper – things aren’t looking too good.”

Harry nodded grudgingly. “I still can’t believe that bloody bas-” he caught himself, throwing a quick glance at Lila. It was a slightly startling reminder to Lila that she was supposed to be the adult in this situation since apparently Harry didn’t expect Tonks to care.
“Don’t look at me,” Lila said calmly. “I don’t give a shit if you want to swear.”

“Fuck!” Scott added helpfully.

“They’re your things he’s taking now, aren’t they Harry?” Hermione asked, steadfastly disregarding the amount of profanity that was occurring.

Harry seemed startled by that. “Yeah! They’re mine now; no wonder he tried to run!”

“Dung might be a bloody bastard,” Tonks said, giving Harry a wink, “but he’s still useful to us right now.”

“Well, we got this much off him,” Scott said, tapping the suitcase Harry held with one foot.

“I’m still going to tell Dumbledore about this,” Harry declared firmly.

“If that’s what you want to do,” Tonks told him. “Now who’s this then?” she asked, referring to Lila. She held out one hand. “Nymphadora Tonks – but just Tonks, please.”


“Well, I’d love to stay and chat,” Tonks said after they were introduced, “but I’m still on duty – miserable day for it, too. You lot should get inside before you ice over.”

“Tell me about it,” Scott agreed. “I was sweating inside the castle and now my ass is frozen together.”

Ron laughed at that while Hermione briefly closed her eyes and shook her head. Lila imagined she was seeing typical responses to Scott’s off-colour comments.

The Three Broomsticks wasn’t overly crowded, and they didn’t have much trouble squeezing through the entrance and finding a table. There was room for all five of them in the booth seat, Lila placing herself next to Scott with Ron, Hermione and Harry on the opposite side. Hermione ordered something for them called ‘Butterbeer’. To Lila it tasted like root beer with butterscotch. She found that she liked it well enough and quickly drained half her bottle though Scott didn’t seem to care for it.

Her attention turned back to the other people at the table when Hermione asked her about living arrangements in Ottery St. Catchpole. “I rented an apartment there,” Lila explained. “Finally got all settled in now. Except for Scott’s room – that’s his job.”

“What are you now, my mother?” Scott laughingly scowled at Lila. “Who do you think packed up all your crap in the first place?”

“Oh, you are so grounded, young man.” Scott, of course, merely laughed her off. The verbal games she played with him were amusingly familiar, but Lila thought that Hermione’s presence was more immediately interesting. The situation offered an opportunity to see how things stood with the young witch from a romantic perspective. Perhaps some aspect of things might even be shifted for the better. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Hermione,” Lila said to the girl. “I hope Scott hasn’t been giving you any problems?”

“Problems?” Hermione said. “No, what sort of problems do you mean?”

“You’re an attractive young woman,” Lila told her, keeping an eye on Ron, “and my brother does most of his thinking with his little head.”
Hermione looked at Scott, confused. “With his little… Oh!” She blushed bright red.

Scott grinned. “If you’re trying to embarrass me, Lil, you know it’s not gonna work.”

Maybe not for you, Scott, Lila thought to herself. It didn’t matter since he hadn’t been the target in question. Ron had also flushed, but it wasn’t in embarrassment. He glared at Scott for only a second, but it was all the confirmation Lila needed. The table was set – now the game could begin.

“No, nothing like that – no!” Hermione stuttered. “He would never…”

“I most certainly would!” Scott countered indignantly.

Hermione gaped at him. “But – we’re, we’re not-”

“Well, no…” Scott shrugged. “But I’d hit it, that’s all I’m saying.”

Harry looked like he was an inch from snorting Butterbeer up his nose. The paleness Hermione had gained due to shock was immediately subdued by another blush. “Of all the-”

“We know you have better sense than to hook up with my brother,” Lila reassured her. “You’re obviously smart, and even girls of average intelligence know to dodge that bullet.”

“I’m often misunderstood,” Scott said sadly. “Hermione – hold me.”

“All right, lay off!” Ron growled, giving Scott a nasty look.

Scott immediately sank back into his seat, holding up his hands disarmingly. “It’s a joke, son, a joke. Hermione is strictly hands off. I promise.”

Ron must have noticed that Hermione was studying him intently because he attempted an obvious reverse. “Not like it’s me you have to say that to or anything….” he mumbled, trying to cover up for himself with a swig of Butterbeer.

There it was! The split second shift, a minute gap in the cosmos. This was what Lila did best of all, even better than Scott could. A single invisible stab into the crease presented was all it took to set the future into wild motion. Scott possessed greater power, but he lacked an eye for the finer details when it came to the human component. Lila manipulated the momentary opportunity with the skill of a surgeon. Relationships were a subtle creation built of many separate interdependent components, and a slight change was often all it took to cause a cascade and alter the entire course.

The people whose love lives were being distorted felt nothing. They never did.

It didn’t slip unnoticed past Scott, of course. His eyes widened for a moment and he sent her an amused look, but didn’t comment.

Harry had gained control of his choking problem and said, “Scott, you didn’t tell us your sister would be meeting us here.”

Scott shook his head dismissively. “It must have slipped my mind. She’s a pretty forgettable person.”

“I think I’ll forget not to paint your room,” Lila said thoughtfully. “What colour of pink was it that you prefer?”

“Sharkleberry.”
Lila had to laugh at that despite herself. “It’s not a big deal,” she told Harry. “I haven’t seen him in awhile, and this was a good time to do it.”

The rest of their time at the Three Broomsticks was passed in idle confabulation over a few more Butterbeers (though Scott still hadn’t finished his first one). Lila closely observed Ron and Hermione. She didn’t know enough about the two of them to judge whether Scott had tampered with their dynamic in any significant way, but she thought she had set them on the right course. Unfortunately, with Lila away in Ottery St. Catchpole it would be up to Scott to maintain it. Her brother had a tendency to neglect the romantic side of his duties. When it came to encouraging love his attitude generally seemed to be one of ‘good enough’.

On their way out the door back into the wet and cold street, Scott fell behind the others. “Harry,” Scott said, getting his attention. “I’m gonna talk to my sis for a minute; I’ll catch up.”

Harry nodded his understanding, and the trio began the soggy walk back to the castle.

Scott pulled Lila to one side, looking around first to make sure nobody else was near. As the temperature continued to drop with the approach of evening, the sky darkened, and distant objects were obscured in a gathering gloom. The few boarded up establishments and houses that dotted the village took on a sinister aura. The thickening sleet was swallowing the world.

“Here, have some frogs.” Scott handed her a box labelled ‘Chocolate Frogs’, which she dubiously accepted. “They ain’t real frogs. Ron said they’re good.”

“It’s not often I’ve met a chocolate whatever that I didn’t like,” Lila said, looking the box over. “I’ll add this to the short list of nice things you’ve done for me.”

“And I’ll be sure to balance it out with some deliberate cruelty.”

“Ginny isn’t here, is she?” Lila said, looking towards the trio who were now a ways down the street.

“She was around somewhere but with some other people,” Scott answered. “She’s probably back at the school by now. We’ll have to find another opportunity.”

“Do you want the necklace?”

“No, let’s just leave it at the house for now,” Scott said. “Ron and Hermione – what did you think?”

Lila looked up, contemplative. “They really have something strong; it was just misdirected. I changed things, but I don’t know exactly what the result will be. You’ll have to keep an eye out for deviations.”

Scott grunted in frustration. “If I had some fucking clue as to the original shape of things, then I could do that. I’m running blind here.”

“I think we’re doing okay so far. Maybe you’ve changed more than you think.”

“Yeah, and maybe I’ve changed nothing,” Scott scowled. She gave him a look and he added, “Okay, nothing that matters.”

“I don’t think it’s that bad,” she said. “You’ve still got time to preserve the non-essentials.”

“Why does progress always feel like treading water?” Scott groused. “I need to be making some
bolder moves, not playing matchmaker while Riddle is running around.”

“All we can do is try, Scott.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“Then what the fuck do you want me to say?” Lila bit out, running low on patience. Scott could be very tiresome when she was reaching out to him, systematically shooting down her soothing words, and her sharp tongue often got the better of her. “You can’t touch Riddle, and you know it. These kids aren’t ready yet, and you know it. What, you want me to go try and take out the UO? Is that what you want? Why don’t you go tell Harry and friends what a CLR is while I get started. It’ll be good practice for when you have to explain to command why you shouldn’t be digging Blue out of some rock in the ass end of nowhere.”

“All right, all right!” Scott threw up his hands in surrender to her tirade, but she was pleased to see that he was highly amused now. Instead of becoming defensive in the face of her rages, Scott usually was jolted out of whatever idiocy he had been sunk into prior to her angry wake up call. She had counted on that fact. “You know what? I guess I’m just tired of sitting around that castle with my thumb up my ass waiting for something to happen.”

“You’re frustrated that I went and got the necklace instead of you,” Lila said knowingly.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “I hate staying behind.”

“You want a tissue?” she asked bluntly.

“Fuck you,” Scott grinned. “Whatever, I’m going back to Hogwarts. I’m gonna stake out the Hufflepuff common room entrance – those ‘Puff girls can’t keep their hands off me.”

“You’re a better liar when you’re older.”

“Yep, gonna score me some sweet ‘Puff pussy,” Scott continued, ignoring her. “Comes from being friends with Harry you know, celebrity and all that. I told him, if that kid put forward a little effort he could get more ass than a toilet seat.”

“At this point I think it’s my duty as your legal guardian to beat the bullshit out of you,” Lila said, peering closely at him. “But I just don’t have the kind of stamina that would require.”

“Too much chocolate, that’s your problem, fatty,” Scott said cheerfully and leaned in to give her a rare hug. “I’ll talk to you later, Lil. I’d better catch up.”

“Later,” Lila said and watched as he ran up the street through the slush.

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“Is vandalism a problem here?” Lila was looking at what had been a table and vase and was now a pile of rubble. Someone had smashed both.

“Only if Peeves is on your level. Not many students would bother with vandalism – if Peeves is in the same area it’d be redundant,” Scott told her.

The two of them were discussing Peeves’ latest work on their way to the Headmaster’s Office. Scott could have told Lila the way but it was easier if he led her, and when they went together they could talk. There was always a great deal to talk about though most of it wasn’t suitable for a public hallway. Lila, again wearing her baggy coat, had been worthy of more than a few startled
Lila had planned for her visit to be a quick stop but was distracted by the fascinating architecture that Hogwarts presented. Scott had just come from morning Herbology and was giving her an impromptu tour while the students milled about during the break period.

The castle was very old, and Lila could feel the magic moving in the stones beneath her feet. It was an ancient magic, sunk deep into the pores of the rock and adhering through the bindings of age. “How often do they renew the spells on the school?” Lila asked as they approached an ugly gargoyle statue.

“No idea. They might be anchored to some sort of self-refreshing source, and I know they’re definitely long term spells since I’ve never felt any of them weakening.” Scott stopped in front of the stone gargoyle. “I guess you could ask Dumbledore. Fizzing Whizbee.”

The statue leaped to the side, infused with magical animation. The entryway it revealed held an aborted set of steps that rose a few feet off the floor and then abruptly ended. Scott nodded towards them. “It’s this sort of weird escalator. Dumbledore should be able to hear you coming, but go ahead and knock anyway. I’ll wait here a little while. If you take too long you’ll have to find your own way out.”

“I’m sure I can manage.”

“Then what the hell am I doing here?” Scott grumbled as the gargoyle moved back into place, shutting him off from her view.

With a bit of trepidation, Lila stepped gingerly onto the stairs and waited for something to happen. Past experience had taught her that local forms of power were not to be trusted. Sometimes energy infused objects reacted oddly to the presence of a Kharadjai. She need not have been so cautious; the platform rose smoothly up the stone spiral without a hitch.

She exited the conveyance into a small antechamber, a pair of elegant double doors backing it. Crossing the space, Lila raised her hand and rapped on the right half of the doorway, ignoring the griffin-shaped knocker. The wood was warm under her knuckles, and she felt a familiar tingling. The door was warded in some way, a skin of spells crawling over the surface.

She let her fingertips linger on them and tried to discern their purpose. The sensation was like brushing the top of a still pool of water with the barest portion of her palm, and though she could feel the magic move it was written in a language she didn’t understand. The only information she could glean was the most basic of directions: this spell was like a wall; this spell was like a spark. Was she even separating them properly? The boundaries blended together in the stream.

Lila sighed and let her hand drop. Learning the local power would require time and effort.

“Come in,” a genial voice called out.

Lila obligingly opened the door and stepped into the office, giving the door a push with one hand so that it closed behind her.

The room into which she had walked was very interesting. It seemed that every square inch of space held an item of possibly remarkable origin. There were globes and books and glass cases and strange silvery instruments on shelves. There were gizmos and gadgets wrought of steel, brass, and gold. It was the kind of room in which there was a story behind every individual article.

Presiding over all of it sat Albus Dumbledore, his blue eyes twinkling at Lila from behind a pair of
half-moon spectacles. Lila found herself automatically sizing him up as a potential opponent, not out of any hostility but because he radiated a palpable power.

“It is not my intention to be overly presumptuous,” Dumbledore said as she approached him, “but you very strongly resemble your brother.”

“Got it right – and on your first guess,” Lila said sardonically. She seated herself in the available chair facing his desk. “So much for my dramatic entrance.”

Dumbledore smiled. “And you sound a great deal like him, too.”

“Lila Kharan,” she introduced herself for what felt like the hundredth time. Unfortunately, it would most likely not be the last.

“Albus Dumbledore,” the Headmaster returned the courtesy, holding out his left hand for Lila to shake.

“I don’t have an appointment,” Lila said perfunctorily when Dumbledore released her hand, “but I do have this hall pass. It has my name on it and everything.” She extracted the neatly folded guest pass for Hogwarts from the pocket of her jeans. “My name happens to be spelled wrong but I think it’s still good.” She held her lined pass, made out for one ‘LILLAH KAREN’ for his perusal.

“I’m genuinely surprised you bothered,” Dumbledore said in amusement. “The first time Scott came to see me here, he let himself in.” He peered at the guest pass, humouring her. “Written and signed by Argus, I see. At the very least, he did record the correct pronunciation. Your brother wrote out your surname when I was gathering his school documents, otherwise I might well have done the same.”

“It is kinda weird.”

Dumbledore folded his hands and leaned back in his chair to regard her. “So, with that all in order, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

“Recognition. Now that you know who I am it won’t be a problem in the future.”

“I see you share your brother’s pragmatism,” Dumbledore said. “Understandable in your position.”

“Actually, I am significantly more sensible than Scott,” Lila corrected him. “He’s only practical when he has to be. In other words, when he has to work.”

“And you are always the realist?”

“It’s never that simple.”

Dumbledore raised a questioning eyebrow. “No?”

“No, because my job requires me to see the bigger picture and take the occasional leap of faith,” Lila explained. “Scott’s the one who loves theory and philosophy and art, but they don’t have any place in combat. And I can do without all that sort of airy speculation, but if you don’t allow for the reality of wonder then you’re blind to half of the world – and when you’re trying to watch the universe for its next move, the last thing you want to be is blind.”

Dumbledore looked intrigued. Lila remembered Scott telling her that the Headmaster had a deep thirst for knowledge. “So you must allow all points of view in order to be effective.”
“Right. There’s no such thing as worthless knowledge, an idea that conflicts with my basic tendencies to reject conjecture.” Lila didn’t mind talking about herself and Scott so long as Dumbledore didn’t expect her to ramble on for eternity in a detailed synopsis of Kharadjai life. “Look, I don’t know exactly all of what Scott’s told you so far, but if you want somebody to sit down with you and talk about being a Kharadjai then you’ve got the wrong girl. You’ll have to stick with Scott if you want a book buddy.”

Dumbledore blinked, a little taken aback at her forwardness. “I didn’t mean to impose upon you.”

“I know. I was just getting that out of the way.” She paused. “I don’t have any problem dishing the dirt on my brother though. God knows he deserves it.”

“Perhaps then we should ground our conversation in more immediate topics,” Dumbledore said agreeably. “Most importantly, is there anything you need to tell me about our mutual purpose?”

Lila nodded. “A few facts and then a couple things we should probably go over. You might read about a robbery in Diagon Alley; that was us, and the object we removed was of Priority and likely malevolent. There also have been some alterations concerning several relationships here at the school, but you don’t need to concern yourself with those. Now on a more personal note,” Lila became serious, “Scott isn’t going to be content to sit around here and wait for things to happen. Events are gradually accelerating. It’s slow, but that’s always the way it starts. I know you can’t feel it so you’ll have to trust us on that one. He’ll start taking the offensive, probably sooner rather than later. The best thing for you is to look the other way and pretend for the sake of appearances that nothing out of the ordinary is happening. Let him do his job, and if anyone asks you about it deny any knowledge or involvement.”

Dumbledore frowned slightly. “What actions would he be taking?”

“Harry has to fight Riddle, but there’s a lot of people in the way. It’s a tricky thing to second guess the universe. Scott will be careful. If he removes various tertiary obstacles now, we won’t have to deal with them later.”

“And by obstacles, you mean those who are in league with Voldemort.”

“Yes, though not exclusively.”

Dumbledore had gone quite still. “Murders, in other words.”

If Dumbledore had hoped for Lila to back away from the ugly term then he was headed for a disappointment. “Yes. I’ll need you to let me know if you require a report for your own purposes. The media can be unreliable in that regard.”

“You believe this is the proper course to take.” There was no question from his tone what Dumbledore thought of that.

“I can see you’re not much of a realist,” Lila said bluntly. “My brother could probably make this easier for you to swallow, but he’s not here. Riddle has to die. If he doesn’t, then it could mean the end of life on this planet as you know it. We would like to stop that from happening. Anyone who stands in opposition to that goal is expendable.”

Dumbledore said nothing, but he looked suddenly tired.

Lila continued, “I’m sorry if this is ruining any idealised notions, but a component of our work involves lethal force.” She met Dumbledore’s eyes steadily. “We’re soldiers – and maybe monsters – if that makes you feel better about yourself. Don’t try to interfere.”
“Hunting Voldemort with his own methods,” Dumbledore said and sighed. “You will fight hatred with hatred.”

“Is that a joke?” Lila scoffed. “’Hatred’ isn’t the right word. Don’t confuse hate with necessity.” She shook her head in exasperation. She’d never had much patience for Dumbledore’s kind of viewpoint.

“You offer them no redemption then. Only an end.”

“Redemption isn't something I can offer, if you want to make this a spiritual discussion. I’m here to help save the majority of lives in this universe, and that means Harry has to kill Voldemort, and that means Harry has to live long enough to do so, and that means the people who want to kill Harry have to die first. You’re at war, Headmaster. Load bullets, not bullshit.”

Dumbledore looked off into space, unmoving. “I will consider your words,” he said finally, “though I doubt that I shall ever find them comfortable.”

“You don’t have to. The only thing you have to do is keep everything running smoothly here at Hogwarts.” Lila looked down at her wrist before remembering that she wasn’t wearing a watch. “Damn. Where’s Scott when you need him?” She spotted a clock on a mantle and checked the time. “I’d like to get back home for a very late breakfast. Thanks for seeing me.”

Dumbledore managed to regain some of the twinkle in his eyes, nodding towards her in farewell. “We may not see things eye to eye, but we are still allies. If you require anything, please feel free to visit me again.”

“I doubt I will,” Lila said, walking out the door, “but you never know.”
Breakfast had never been Neville Longbottom’s favourite part of the day for several reasons.

He had a history of receiving embarrassing packages – Howlers, for one – even on weekends. His Gran also always ended up sending him whatever he had forgotten to pack before leaving on the Hogwarts Express (like underclothes). Thus it was no surprise that he viewed the coming of the post owls with some trepidation. The last thing he wanted was another delivery that he would be mortified to open in front of his classmates.

He had also never been a morning person. If he had it his way, the world wouldn’t start moving until noon. Still, the breakfast offerings at Hogwarts were uniformly delicious, and that offered a good incentive to make it down in time to partake.

He was running somewhat late and jogged into the Great Hall with his clothing still askew. His friends were all involved in conversation at the Gryffindor table, but Scott looked up from his plate long enough to spot Neville and wave him over. Neville gratefully took the seat next to Scott and immediately began piling his plate.

“Pace yourself,” Scott advised him. “Dip your other food into your eggs – it’s more efficient.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were discussing something about Hagrid, a conversation that neither Neville nor Scott felt qualified to join. Between mouthfuls, the two of them fell into the topic of the Quidditch tryouts that were to be held that morning.

“Are you going to watch the tryouts?” Neville asked the taller boy.

Scott nodded, swallowing a wad of scone. “It’ll be good for a laugh if nothing else. Have you seen the signup sheet? It’s gonna be amateur hour out there with Harry’s Harem.”

“I bet there will be a few good players,” Neville said reasonably.

“Harry better hope so, or he’s shit out of luck.”

“I’m out of luck with what?” Harry had heard them and leaned across the table questioningly.

“Finding good players,” Neville mumbled through a mouthful of eggs.

“With all the signups and crap,” Scott clarified.

“There’s been loads this year,” Harry said. He looked both confused about this fact and nervous. “I dunno why Quidditch is the rage all of a sudden.”

This caused Hermione to launch into an aggravated spiel about how Harry was the cause of the popularity and not the sport itself. Though Harry looked mortified and Ron dispirited, Neville
privately agreed with her assessment. Harry had been drawing admiring stares and whispers in every hallway and classroom. In the past Neville had often wished that he could be a celebrity and garner that kind of attention, but lately he didn't envy his dorm mate quite so much. Harry's fame seemed to cause him more pain than it was worth (which wasn't to suggest that Neville would have minded a few fawning girls).

“She's right,” Scott was saying to Harry. “You’re the big man on campus this year – you could be scoring more ass, or arse, than a toilet seat.”

Neville drowned a laugh in his glass of juice while Harry blushed slightly. Put in Harry’s place Neville knew that he would have gone beet red, but he was comfortably on the sidelines.

“Well, what about you?” Harry shot back, trying to remove the focus from himself. “Remember those Hufflepuff girls outside of Potions?”

Ron snorted into his kipper, and Neville wondered exactly what had happened with those Hufflepuff girls outside of Potions.

“Being the new guy ain’t all bad,” Scott noted. “I should have asked for their common room password. Too bad Hermione had to come and interrupt.”

“You should be glad I did!” Hermione lambasted him. “Their conduct was verging on lewd, and in a hallway no less!” She turned her glare on Ron. “And my fellow prefect was no help whatsoever.”

“C’mon, it wasn’t ‘lewd’,” Ron scoffed. “I can’t give a girl detention for asking about his wand size…”

Their argument appeared perfectly capable of sustaining itself without outside interference, so Harry ignored them and asked Scott, “So you’re coming to the tryouts then?”

“I’ll be your moral support,” Scott said importantly. “Nev said he’s coming too.”

“I’ll be there,” Neville affirmed.

Once he had finished his food Neville left the table before the others so that he could stop by the common room and check on his plants like he did every morning after breakfast. Surprisingly, Scott went with him, saying that there was something he had to do.

Most of the students were still at breakfast and the hallways remained largely empty. Scott, who was normally very talkative, said nothing as they made their way towards the tower. He stared at the floor with a slight frown.

“What are you thinking about?” Neville ventured.

Scott looked up, snapping out of his reverie. “Huh? Nothing. Have you seen Luna lately?”

Neville was a little startled at the sudden inquiry but answered, “Not for a couple days. She’s in Ravenclaw, you know, so we don’t get to see her much.”

“Yeah, that’s too bad,” Scott said. “But at least she gets to talk to you, right?”

“I try to catch her after classes sometimes,” Neville explained, “I think she feels left out with all of us in a different house, and her housemates don’t treat her very well…”

Scott nodded. “Sounds like she needs you to be her friend. Next time you see her, try and get her to
hang out with us on the weekends when she can. That would be cool.”

“I will,” Neville pledged. Luna probably was lonely. Neville knew that he would be if he was in her position.

Their dormitory was empty, all of the other boys in their year being elsewhere. Neville watered and tended his plants while Scott watched him from the foot of his bed. He looked at Scott curiously. “What was it you had to do?”

“I already did it.”

“Oh. All right then.” Neville hadn’t seen Scott do anything but sit around. “I’m ready to go.”

They went downstairs from the boys’ dormitory and through the common room, which was becoming more crowded as students filtered in from breakfast. For the academically inclined there were textbooks to read and nearly forgotten essays to revise (or finish) before classes started again on Monday. A general mutter of conversation filled the space, originating from the chairs and couches and filtering down from the dorms above. The morning sunlight streamed in through the tower windows and danced across the floor in shifting rays.

Scott and Neville were moving towards the exit when Scott ran smack into Trevor, or, rather, Trevor ran smack into Scott. The boisterous first year bounced off of Scott and onto his rear. He looked up to identify the source of his unexpected halt and his face broke into a wide smile.

“Scott!” Trevor said excitedly, apparently not at all bothered by the fact that he had just been knocked to the floor. “Are you going to the Quidditch tryouts?”

“Yeah, we are. This is Trevor,” Scott said to Neville. “We were boat buddies on the lake trip.”

Neville immediately thought of his toad but supposed that Trevor was a pretty common name. “Hello,” he greeted the first-year.

“Hey,” Trevor said, barely sparing Neville a glance. He jumped back to his feet. “C’mon then! They’re going to start soon. We’d better hurry!” he said breathlessly.

“All right, we’re going,” Scott said with exaggerated patience. “Did you tell Kylie about them?”

“Yeah,” Trevor replied dismissively. “She didn’t care.” Trevor looked as if he couldn’t even conceive of the idea that someone wouldn’t be interested in Quidditch tryouts.

“Maybe you didn’t try hard enough. She shouldn’t be here by herself while everyone is at the thing. That sucks. Go tell her that we’re all going, and tell her that I’d like it if she came.”

“I can’t, she’s in her room,” Trevor said impatiently.

“Yes? All right, hold on.” Scott walked to the steps leading to the girls’ dorm, cupped his hands around his mouth, and shouted, “HEY, KYLIE!” with enough volume to cause the majority of people in the common room to nearly die of cardiac arrest.

Neville winced apologetically at the outraged looks some of the students were sending his way. Scott was ignoring them, so Neville found himself guilty by association.

Kylie came running to the stairway, trembling from head to toe. She stopped at the edge and stared down into the common room as if she were expecting to see a murderer standing amidst the bodies of her classmates, calling her down so he could finish the job.
Instead she found only Scott, who greeted her with a small wave. “Hey Kylie. We’re going to the Quidditch tryouts. How about you come with us?”

She gawked at him, still frozen to the spot.

“Come on; it’ll be fun. And we gotta support the house team, right, Trevor?”

“That’s right!” Trevor fervently agreed.

“Okay,” Kylie whispered. She wasn’t really whispering, Neville supposed, but she had a soft, breathy voice and never spoke above a murmur. She scurried down to them and hovered close to Scott.

As per usual, Neville nearly tripped on his way out of the portrait hole. Scott caught the back of his robes with a swift hand before he could tumble the rest of the way. “Makes you wonder how many people have killed themselves stepping through this thing,” was his only comment.

“No one on my watch,” the Fat Lady retorted haughtily.

It was a wet and cold day as they stepped outside on their way to the Quidditch pitch. The sun was obscured by an overcast sky and the air was correspondingly chilly. School scarves were in abundant display on student uniforms, the severe black of the robes contrasting with the bright house colours adorning necks and shoulders. Still, the wind wasn’t bitter and conditions were clear, so it was a decent day for flying.

The stadium loomed large against the verdant backdrop of the Hogwarts grounds and Neville was again struck by its sheer size. Judging from the dull roar emanating from within, there were a good number of people in attendance. Trevor ran ahead of them, unable to contain himself. The rest of the group walked through the ground level entrance and out onto the pitch.

Neville had attended several Quidditch tryouts in the past and he had never seen it so crowded before. Harry’s shouting drifted back to them from across the stadium as he attempted to marshal what appeared to be a small army. At least three students were dazedly sitting on the sidelines sporting the bedraggled appearance of recent crash victims. Neville recognised a lot of the faces awaiting their turn on the pitch, and they were not Quidditch players. Harry had a long morning ahead of him.

“See?” Scott said, pointing towards a large gathering of giggling girls, all of whom were sending sly glances Harry’s way. “Harry’s Harem. They’re not here to play Quidditch – they just want to beat his Bludgers, and/or polish his broomstick.”

Neville was saved from having to respond to that by Trevor, who was wildly waving at them from the stands closest to the tryout. “OVER HERE!” he shouted at them. “I’VE GOT SOME GREAT SEATS!”

This proved to be a somewhat empty claim since the majority of people present were actually out on the field and the stands were practically empty. The four of them settled themselves on the very first row and watched as Harry supervised the catastrophic flight of a group of first years.

“Should’ve brought a camera,” Scott muttered as one of the luckless neophytes ran directly into a goal post. He drew in a sharp breath and made a sound that should have been sympathy but was at least nine-tenths glee when the boy fell off his broom and landed with all the grace of a plummeting anvil. “He’ll be feeling that in the morning.”

“I think he’s feeling it now,” Neville said, watching the first-year futilely attempt to get back on
his feet.

The next test flight was no more successful. Harry grew visibly frustrated at a giggling group of girls who had no business trying out for an elementary broom-riding class, much less a Quidditch team. At the breakfast table Scott had claimed to be Harry’s moral support, but instead of projecting any encouraging emotions towards the beleaguered Quidditch Captain the energetic American was deriving an inordinate amount of entertainment from Harry’s suffering. And Neville had to admit, it was pretty funny. He wouldn’t have said that within arm’s reach of Harry, though.

The stands were slowly beginning to fill as both latecomers and the rejected trickled into them. The Beaters began their test runs, circling the stadium air in hot pursuit of the Bludgers.

“I think I’m beginning to understand this game,” Scott said to Neville as one of the applicants barely avoided taking a Bludger to the face. Kylie had practically burrowed herself underneath Scott’s arm, using it as a shield from any potential wayward projectiles. “Like all the best spectator sports, you only watch because somebody might get killed.”

The tryout for the Beaters finished without any major injuries, to Scott’s apparent disappointment. It was time for the Keepers to show their stuff. Ron was looking pale as he passed by them to line up for his turn. Neville gave him a thumbs up while Scott shouted, “Block the holes, and that stops the goals!”

Neville still hadn’t figured where he stood with Scott. He considered Scott a friend, but more of in an acquaintance type of way than any really deep capacity. Apart from his being an exchange student, Neville knew nothing about the blond boy. Still, Scott had always treated Neville with a friendly camaraderie, so Neville was glad to return it. It was the right thing to do, and he took his friends where he could find them.

And speaking (or thinking) of friends, the familiar wispy blond hair of Luna Lovegood came into view on his right, bobbing through the stands towards them.

“Luna!” Neville called to her, catching the girl’s attention. He waved her over to them and shifted to make some room, the other three following suit.

“Hey, Luna,” Scott said when she sat next to them. His eyes were firmly fixed on the Keepers and especially Ron, who was looking greener by the minute as he came near the front of the line. Trevor didn’t even seem to notice that Luna had joined them, and Kylie, of course, said nothing.

“Hello,” she replied in that dreamy manner of hers. “It’s a nice day for Quidditch.”

Neville looked up at the overcast skies but didn’t contradict her. “Did you have a late breakfast?”

“No, I was looking for one of my books,” Luna said, and held up a wet and raggedy copy of The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5. It was obvious that someone had thrown it into a toilet. “I found it.”

Neville felt the uncharacteristic stab of anger that he always did when things like that happened to Luna. What had the Sorting Hat been thinking, putting her in Ravenclaw? They treated her so badly.

“You know who did it?” Scott asked Luna, meeting her eyes for the first time.

Luna looked closely at him, as if she had seen him before somewhere and was trying to place him. “No, I don’t. You have grey eyes like me.”
“Yours are more silvery than mine,” Scott said, turning his attention back to the tryouts. “If you ever find out who it was, let me know.”

“All right,” Luna said amiably, as if it were an everyday request. “Would you like to know too, Neville?”

“Yes, I would,” Neville answered firmly. Luna returned her gaze to the pitch and missed the approving nod Scott gave Neville.

Ron’s turn had come to guard the posts, and Neville mentally crossed his fingers. The last candidate had done quite well, and Ron would have to really come through to win his position. Neville spotted Hermione sitting down at the other end of the first row of stands, and she was physically crossing her fingers. Neville knew that Ron had it in him to succeed if he could only get over his recurrent nerves.

Ron must have realised the same thing, because he saved a perfect five out of five goals and reaffirmed his place on the Gryffindor team. Neville clapped and cheered for his friend as Hermione came running down from the stands to congratulate Ron.

“He’s quite good, isn’t he,” Luna remarked.

“That’s my boy,” Scott sniffed, wiping away a fake tear.

“I’d like to try out for Beater someday,” Trevor said, gazing rapturously down at the now completed Gryffindor team. “You think I could?”

“Kid, I bet by the time you’re fourteen you’ll be a champion at beating,” Scott said with a straight face. “I know I was.”

“Really? Wicked!”

The ‘show’ was over and the stadium was beginning to empty. Harry was still addressing his newly reformed Quidditch team, and Hermione was hovering nearby. At least one gaggle of smitten girls was also sticking it out, batting their eyes at an oblivious Harry. Neville rose to his feet and stretched.

“Getting close to lunch,” Scott commented.

“What time do you think it is?” Neville asked. The school clock tower was out of sight from inside the Quidditch pitch.

“ Eleven thirty-two AM,” Scott said meticulously. Neville glanced down at Scott’s forearms but he wasn’t wearing a watch. “So we can sit around the common room for a few minutes or just go straight to the Hall. I’m open.”

“I missed breakfast because of my book,” Luna said. “I’d like to go to lunch.”

“Lunch it is.”

On their way back to the Great Hall, Neville lagged behind with Luna, wanting to talk to her. It wasn’t difficult since Scott was keeping a quick pace in order to stay with Trevor, who never seemed to move any slower than a jog. Kylie was now firmly clamped to Scott’s right arm, and it was amusing to see her tiny legs working so fast.

“I – uh… I noticed you haven’t been around much lately,” Neville said to Luna. She regarded him
with the piercing gaze he knew so well, and it always seemed to make him stutter more than usual. “I know it’s busy with classes and all, but maybe you could spend some time with us on the weekends? Like we did today?”

Had she been waiting for an invitation, or did she just not care? Luna smiled at him, and not for the first time he was struck with how beautiful she was. Most people couldn’t see past the cork necklace. “I’d like that,” she said. “There’s more to do when you have friends.”

“You got that right!” Scott called back over his shoulder.

“You should come back to the common room with us after lunch,” Neville told her. “We can always find something to do, even if it’s just talk. Scott has some great stories he tells sometimes.”

“I’ll tell you about the trip where I wrestled six sharks into submission with my bare hands!” Scott shouted, demonstrating some sort of shark-subduing manoeuvre for their benefit.

If Scott had been about to say more he was distracted as Trevor tripped over his own shoelaces and went sprawling into the dirt. Neville and Luna watched as Scott ran forward and picked up the scrawny first year with one hand. Trevor seemed not any worse for wear.

“Scott’s a bit odd, isn’t he?” Luna asked Neville thoughtfully as they stood back and observed.

Neville blinked. This coming from Luna Lovegood? “Er – in what way?” he hedged.

“I don’t know. But I rather think he’ll tell us soon.”

Neville frowned. “You mean more about himself?”

“I don’t think it’s entirely about him--” Luna said. She was using the bland tone of voice that she always did for her insights. “--just that he’s a part of it.”

“I don’t understand,” Neville confessed.

Luna smiled again. “Neither do I, but that’s okay. Life would be rather boring if you understood it all, don’t you think?”

And as they started walking again, Neville looked at her and thought for a moment that he really did understand what she meant.

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Charms was not the most boring class at Hogwarts (a distinction held by History of Magic), but it could be difficult to pay attention. Despite the blustery weather outside, the windows still called to young minds with the promise of freedom. Professor Flitwick was explaining in detail the wand motions required for the Charm that was the focus of the day’s lesson and Harry was struggling to memorise them. It didn’t help that Scott was sitting next to him, feeding Harry a steady stream of commentary.

“You think that stool disassembles so he can take it with him?” Scott whispered, indicating the elevated platform which the tiny Flitwick used to address his class. “It’d almost have to, right? Otherwise he’d drown in the shower.”

Despite his best efforts, Harry released a snort of laughter into his sleeve, and Hermione sent them what had to be her sixteenth disapproving glare in the last ten minutes. In retribution Harry elbowed Scott in the side, willing him to shut up. Scott cooperated for the time being, though Harry
was sure it was a temporary reprieve until he thought of something else to say.

Still, Harry’s inability to concentrate gave him ample time to think on the subject of what he was going to do about Scott Kharan.

Their talk in the middle of the night after the first day of class had left Harry adrift, searching for some kind of handle on the situation. He didn’t think he believed everything he had been told – but he also didn’t actively disbelieve it, which put him in a strange place. Knowledge and comprehension were two separate things. There was something different about Scott, that much Harry could acknowledge. The size and depth of that difference remained to be contemplated. So what were the things that he really knew about Scott?

The blond boy was an American… Actually, that should be mentally scratched off the list. Harry didn’t know where Scott had originated. Added to that discarded pile of assumptions should be Scott’s status as a sibling, since this mysterious sister he sometimes referenced had never been seen. Harry couldn’t think of any reason why Scott would lie about having a sister, but it was still unproven.

That left Harry with very little that was concrete. The knowledge Scott had confided in Harry accounted for many of the irregularities… But that knowledge itself was unaccountable. The simplest explanations didn’t fit, and the given explanation was inconceivable.

Even if Harry decided to rely on blind faith and take Scott at his word, there were a great many things that didn’t make sense. Though Scott seemed to possess unusual skills that had been hinted at, he was clearly behind the curve when it came to magic. Hardly a night went by that Harry hadn’t seen Scott leafing through a variety of books, assimilating information that by this point almost every other student took for granted. And between his incessant cursing, bizarre sense of humour and occasional mood swings, Scott didn’t give the impression of being particularly sapient. He was smart, sure, but also erratic.

Flitwick was still talking. Only Hermione could stomach that much lecture material. Everyone else came to life when it was time for the hands-on stuff.

So as long as he was ruminating on his recent experiences, what was going on with Ron and Hermione? Their well worn dance around each other was becoming increasingly significant. Every time they interacted they seemed within an inch of fighting or snogging, and so far they had managed not to exercise the gentler option. Harry couldn’t help but wish they would just get on with it – who did they think they were fooling besides themselves? A snogging Ron and Hermione would be easier to handle than all the sniping they indulged in, fuelled by tension so sharp that even Harry could feel it. He could only hope that they would succumb to the inevitable instead of self-destructing. He didn’t want to imagine the kind of damage that would be caused to their three-way friendship if Ron or Hermione started seeing someone else.

Luckily for Harry, Charms was the last class for the day. After a mercifully short review they were set free from their desks and released into the hallways.

“The two of you were very disruptive,” Hermione said severely as they walked towards the Great Hall for dinner. “Why you think you can behave like that and then expect me to give you my notes, I don’t know.”

“Ron would have been disruptive too, but you had him cordoned off,” Scott pointed out, “so, in a sense, you should be mad at him too.”

“I knew was missing out,” Ron lamented.
“Sorry mate,” Harry apologised, “I didn’t think to save any of the fun for you.”

“You three!” Hermione huffed in exasperation, but they could tell she was fighting a smile.

“It’s not like it was--” Scott stopped mid-sentence. “Uh oh, Malfoy alert, eleven o’clock high.”

Sure enough, Draco Malfoy and his toadies were coming down a staircase straight towards the four of them. Harry tensed himself for confrontation. At least now if it came to a fistfight they wouldn’t be outnumbered. Hermione simply wasn’t a brawler, and Scott would eliminate the advantage Malfoy had with Crabbe and Goyle.

“Potter,” Malfoy sneered in pseudo-greeting as they passed each other. Harry kept walking in hopes that they could leave it at that, but apparently Malfoy couldn’t help himself. “I see you’ve collected another Mudblood. Wasn’t one enough?”

Hermione ignored the Slytherin with a disdainful dignity, but Ron’s fists immediately clenched and he turned to face Malfoy. Harry silently sighed as he did the same. So much for avoiding a fight.

“Get fucked, Malfoy,” Ron snarled.

“Temper, Weasel,” Malfoy cautioned. “Someone could get hurt.”

“So I’m a Mudblood?” Scott said, apparently determined to get in a few verbal jabs before Ron lost his cool and fired the first punch. “That’s still preferable to what you are.”

“It speaks!” Malfoy said snidely, daring Scott to continue as Crabbe and Goyle loomed threateningly. “If you could string three words together, you might even be able to tell me what you think I am.”

Scott looked as if he couldn’t believe that the boy had provided him with that kind of opening. He enunciated slowly and distinctly, “You – are – the – load – your – mother – should – have – swallowed.”

Naturally, things went downhill from there.

Well, detentions aren't that bad, Harry thought as he prepared to give Goyle a right hook to the jaw. Malfoy was pale with rage as he closed on a grinning Scott, and Ron was eagerly sizing up Crabbe. Hermione’s hand hovered near her wand as she tried to decide whether she wanted to help her friends or try to stop the fight.

“Is there a problem here?”

All of the soon to be combatants froze as the sharp voice of Professor McGonagall rang out in the hallway. Hermione sighed in relief, her shoulders slumping. McGonagall stopped next to them and fixed them with a frosty eye while the boys slowly shuffled away from each other.

“I sincerely hope this isn’t what it looks like,” the professor said curtly, “because I will remind you that there is absolutely no fighting in the halls.”

“It isn’t a problem, Professor,” Malfoy said sullenly.

“I see.” From McGonagall’s tone it was obvious that she saw a great deal more than that. “I suggest that all of you go to supper without further interruption.”

“Yes, Professor,” they collectively mumbled. Malfoy shot Scott one last murderous glare before
stalking off with Crabbe and Goyle in tow. Harry was glad that they hadn’t gotten into trouble but still felt a slight disappointment that they had been interrupted. Watching Malfoy get pounded by Scott would have been worth a couple bruises.

“Damn it.” Scott shook his head, clearly sharing Harry’s regrets. “I was going to beat his ass so hard he’d have to crap in a bag. Hey, Hermione, is there some magical equivalent of a colostomy bag?”

“Must you?” Hermione said, shuddering. Harry wondered if she was ever going to get over Scott’s unique invective.

Ron said nothing, but the look on his face spoke for him. Few things could enrage him like insults directed at Hermione. Did Ron even realise that? Could he?

That was a novel idea. What if Harry just, well… asked him? It was the sort of situation that they usually ignored until it went away, but Hermione was the root cause and she wasn’t going anywhere. Maybe it was time to grow up a little. The worst that could happen was Ron would deck him. Harry considered himself a fairly hardy sort of person – he reckoned he could roll with at least one punch.

Supper went by without any unusual events. Ron ate everything he could get his hands on, Hermione watched with both disgust and affection, and Scott repeatedly attempted to hang a spoon off of his nose until he managed to make it work (“These stupid spoons aren’t the right shape,” he had complained). At another section of the table Harry caught sight of Ginny and Dean sitting next to each other, and it sent a torrent of feelings through him that he wasn’t brave enough to examine. So instead he reached over and knocked the spoon off of Scott’s nose after he had finally achieved his goal, sending him into a fit (“MY SPOON! YOU FUCK!”).

The common room was pleasantly warm when they all traipsed through the portrait to settle in for the evening. Harry had been fully intent on sinking into a large chair and not moving until he absolutely had to until Ron somehow suckered him into facing yet another inevitable chess defeat. Scott settled in to watch as Harry’s half of the board was systematically demolished.

“You want a go?” Harry asked him, resignedly knocking his king over in response to Ron’s checkmate. “I’ve had enough.”

Scott shook his head. “Pass. I need to go over some Charms stuff.”

As Scott headed up to the dorms to retrieve a book or two, Harry looked around the room. Hermione was gone, most likely out patrolling for any students who had decided to remain illicitly in the halls. Nobody else was paying any attention to the two of them and their game of Wizard’s Chess, so it seemed that his opportunity had arrived.

But how to begin?

“Ron, I wanted to talk to you tonight,” Harry said. That was a safe place to start.

“Yeah? What about?” Ron said curiously, resetting the pieces on the board despite Harry’s previous declaration of despair.

Sometimes there was nothing to do but dive in head first. “Hermione, actually.”

Ron froze. “Hermione?”

Okay, so they were on the correct subject, but what was the right tangent? “Oh, you know her
“Ha ha,” Ron said without inflection. “You’re a riot, Harry.”

“What’s been going on with you two?” Harry asked pointedly.

Ron shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t give me that. You know what I mean.”

Ron was silent and didn’t meet Harry’s eyes.

“Look,” Harry said impatiently, “you can’t avoid me forever. Maybe I can even help.”

“Help?” Ron scoffed. “I wasn’t aware your love life was so experienced.”

“So this is about love,” Harry said triumphantly.

“No! I don’t know. Just let it alone, Harry.”

“If you fancy her, just tell her already,” Harry told him. “You’re both driving me spare with this bickering, and we all know why you do it.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Ron asked, stubbornly crossing his arms.

“About everyone in our year at this point. You think you were fooling anybody after what happened with Krum?”

“That grouchy git,” Ron muttered darkly.

Harry threw up his hands in exasperation. “See? That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Anybody else so much as looks at Hermione and you’re fighting mad. It’s not the most difficult thing to figure out.”

“Well what the bloody hell do you want me to do?” Ron glared at him.

“Tell her. Hell, just go snog her – I bet she’d let you.” Harry was only half-joking.

“You’re just full of great advice, aren’t you?” Ron slumped in his seat, looking defeated. “I can’t tell her. What if she says no? She’s my best mate, Harry. I can’t lose that.”

“Ron, she’s not going to say no,” Harry sighed. “She’s mad about you. Seriously.”

“She told you that?”

“Yes. The same way you told me you were mad about her. It’s obvious, mate. She can’t hide it any better than you can.” Ron didn’t say anything after that, but Harry hoped that his words were being considered so he concluded by saying, “At least think about it. I don’t think she’ll wait for you forever, Ron. Don’t muck it up by doing nothing at all.” Harry purposefully chose not to entertain any thoughts of how his own advice applied to himself.

Ron mumbled something about going to bed and went up to the dormitories, looking contemplative. Harry remained where he was, sitting in the glow of the fireplace and musing about girls, Quidditch, Dark Lords, and Khardajai. He wished that his life didn’t have to be so complicated. He had too many problems and not enough solutions.
Before reality could come crashing down on him, his mind spiralled into darkness and sleep claimed his consciousness.

How long he slept, he didn’t know. He awoke to a darkened common room, the fire now a pile of smouldering coals giving off a weak orange light. Groaning, he pushed himself into a sitting position and stretched out his neck, still stiff from his sleeping arrangement. The warm sheets of his bed were calling to him. The chairs in the common room might be excellent for sitting but they left a lot to be desired when it came to sleep, and he resolved not to slip off in one again.

It wasn’t until he stood that he heard the voice coming from the far corner of the room. Someone was holding a hushed conversation.

“Any problems?”

Harry peered at the shadowy figure, a familiar head of dark blond hair coming into focus.

“Wish I could have been there.”

It was Scott, on his phone again. Who was he talking to this time?

Scott laughed quietly at something. “Well you do need your beauty sleep, I know that much for su-” Harry had moved into his peripheral field of vision, and Scott stopped. He and Harry both stared at each other for a moment before Scott gave Harry a small smile. “Hey, Harry.”

“Who are you talking to?” Harry asked him.

“I gotta go,” Scott said into the phone. He raised an eyebrow at Harry. “Unless you want to talk to her, Harry?”

“Who?”

“Don’t think he’s going to take me up on that. See you soon.” Scott closed the phone and pocketed it.

“Who was that?” Harry questioned him again.

“My sister,” Scott answered nonchalantly. “She was taking care of some things for me. Nothing to panic about.”

Harry was starting to wonder if ‘my sister’ was Scott’s euphemism for anybody that he knew and Harry didn’t. “What sort of things?”

“Kharadjai things,” Scott said.

“As in… changing things?” Harry said tentatively, thinking back to some of the details Scott had imparted during their conversation about Dumbledore.

“Yeah.”

“What did she do?”

Scott bit the inside of his cheek, shaking his head. “I can’t tell you that. Well... I won’t tell you that, anyway.”

“Why?” Harry demanded, feeling a familiar anger growing. “Why won’t you tell me?”
“Because that is in itself a change. It’s a form of pre-emptive prudence.” Before Harry could explode, Scott held up a hand. “But I will say this – with or without my interference, everything is always shifting, Harry. But what’s more interesting are the things that stay the same.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that none of us can understand what’s happening right now until it’s over,” Scott sighed. “Maybe I’ll tell you later. I don’t know.”

“You expect me to accept that?” Harry said angrily.

“You don’t have a choice,” Scott said bluntly. “Now you can keep being mad at me for doing my job if you want, but I’m going to bed.”

“I want a promise. Promise you’ll tell me this stuff soon,” Harry demanded.

Scott’s eyes hardened. “Is that an order?”

“No. It’s me asking you to be a friend.”

The Kharadjai’s face crumpled into an expression of dismay. “Ow. You really hit where it hurts.”

“So you’ll promise?” Harry persisted.

“I sort of have to now. You don’t fight fair.” Scott glumly shook his head. “I’d be kind of proud of you if it wasn’t against me. I promise to tell you what Lila did later.”

“I won’t forget about it, either.”

“No, you won’t.”

And that was that. Harry followed Scott up the staircase to the dorms where everyone else was sound asleep. Sinking beneath his covers, Harry fell back to dreams of graveyards in the moonlight and a language made of lies.

***---~**~---***

It had been a couple of weeks since Ron had been cornered by Harry in the common room, and his words still reverberated through Ron’s head.

At first he had outright rejected his friend’s advice; after all, what did Harry know about it? He wasn’t exactly an inspiring example when it came to dealing with the opposite sex. A single disastrous date with Cho Chang did not provide a great deal of experience. So with regard to Hermione, Ron figured Harry could just keep his mouth shut.

But it was difficult to overcome the slight stirrings of hope that Harry had engendered. What if Hermione really did fancy him back?

It didn’t help that he had a history of buggering things up when it came to Hermione. His track record was a mess of mistakes, the side effects of doing more of his thinking with his heart than with his head. And now Harry wanted him to listen to his heart to the exclusion of all else? It had all the makings of another bad idea in a long line of bad ideas. He wasn’t sure he wanted to go out with a whimper, but the detonation of his close friendship with Hermione was too much of a bang.

And that was, after all, the real issue at hand. Pursuing Hermione in any other sense would be hard enough, but she was his best mate, and that was a cruel thing to sacrifice for some romantic
inclinations that might never work. Maybe Harry didn’t realise exactly what would happen if Ron and Hermione had a falling out. It would be the most severe blow their friendship had ever sustained, a hundred times worse than their fight over Scabbers and Crookshanks in third year.

Not that the benefits weren’t desirable, so to speak. If Ron had a Galleon for every time he had pictured Hermione naked, he’d be rolling in gold. Somewhere along the way, her figure had swelled into some seriously interesting curves – when had that happened? Maybe it wasn’t so much that they had sprung up over night as that he had simply started noticing. Whenever she was three feet or less in distance from him it seemed like every molecule in his body was incontrovertibly drawn to her like a moth to the flame. Each second spent in her presence was an exercise in self-control.

Even without the other feelings which he had not yet put a name to, the sheer hormonal aspect was a powerful impetus. It was an odd situation in which his heart and his cock were telling him to do the same thing. Past experience warned him to disregard both of them – but his brain hadn’t exactly proven itself to be trustworthy either. So where did that leave him? Maybe he should flip a coin, for fuck’s sake.

“Ron?”

“Wha-?” Ron was jolted out of his stupor by Hermione, who was peering at him closely. They were on the uncomfortably cold walk to Hogsmeade, and Ron knew he had been uncharacteristically silent as they leaned into the wind and sleet.

“Are you all right?” she asked, concerned. Ron forced himself to look away from those chocolate eyes before he couldn’t.

“Huh? Yeah, I’m fine,” he said, pulling his scarf a little tighter around his neck. “Blimey, it’s cold out.”

The weather was a wretched combination of blustery and bitter cold, sending sheets of slushy ice whipping down from the heavy cloud cover. It was one of those days where the colour was leached out of everything and the world faded to grey – a vista modelled in the ugliest concrete, drab and without life. Ron felt a trickle of water run down the back of his neck and futilely tugged the scarf even closer to his skin.

Next to him, Harry nodded in miserable agreement, his glasses all but iced over. “Maybe this wasn’t the best idea.”

“Cry me a river, you fuckin’ poofs,” Scott said cheerfully. The blond boy was assimilating the portions of British slang that were of interest to him – in other words, the expletives. “I can still feel my balls, so it can’t be that cold out.”

“Can’t you complete a sentence without being obscene?” Hermione asked him plaintively.

Scott frowned, as if he were considering that. Then he shrugged. “Guess not.”

“But you just did!” she pointed out triumphantly.

“No, that was a sentence fragment.”

“Just let him swear, Hermione,” Ron advised her. “He’s a poor, uncultured American. He can’t help himself.”

“He’s right, you know,” Scott said. “Shit! Ass! Uh, arse!”
Hermione flinched as if she had been physically assaulted. Ron gave Scott a chiding look. “You're using all of them up!”

“I don’t mind repeating myself,” Scott assured him. “Sodding… damn!”

Harry shook his head. “You’re both going straight to hell.”

“Oh, not you too, Harry,” Hermione groaned.

Hogsmeade’s usual aura of cheery comfort was dampened under the blanket of sleet. Instead of stopping to congregate on their way about their errands the witches and wizards in the streets hurried down the icy walks, huddled against the cold. The frozen branches of trees crackled in the wind, brittle as they swayed and shook. The town chilled and congealed beneath the kind of all pervading cold that seeped through skin like water into cloth.

Ron noted that Zonko’s had been boarded up, a sign of the times. None of them commented on it, though Scott was looking the store over curiously. Ron remembered that the blond boy had never been to Hogsmeade before.

“It’s not the best day for a trip,” Harry said apologetically to Scott.

“It’s cool,” Scott said. He pointed at Honeydukes. “That place looks busy.”

“That’s Honeydukes,” Ron explained. “They’ve got sweets, mostly. Let’s go there first.”

“Out of Chocolate Frogs already?” Harry laughed at Ron.

All right, so his obsession with Chocolate Frogs wasn’t exactly a secret. Harry never need know that Ron still had a substantial stash of them in his trunk, as he hadn’t been sharing. “I could use some more.”

Hermione gave him a disapproving look, but it was mixed with affection. “I don’t know how you can eat them like that without making yourself sick.”

“It’s a gift,” Ron boasted, but his heart wasn’t really in it, and Hermione seemed to sense that. She gave him another searching look, which he returned with a bland smile. What was he supposed to say?

Compared to the temperature of the street outside, the ambience inside Honeydukes came blasting over them like a furnace as they stepped through the doors. The shop was not nearly as crowded as it usually was on Hogsmeade weekends but it was still an oasis of activity compared to everywhere else. The inside was a visual cacophony of colours as a million different shades of sugar called to customers. Usually the sight would have made Ron’s mouth water. His mouth was still watering, but only because Hermione was standing closely in front of him and her hair was wafting into his face. He clenched his jaw and suppressed the urge to plant a kiss behind her right ear. How was it even possible for an earlobe to be sexy?

“I admire variety in a candy store,” Scott stated as he gazed with interest at all the shelves and bins.

“Here, I’ll show you around—” Ron said immediately, desperate to separate himself from temptation. He moved to the first row of displayed sweets and waved Scott over. Here was something he’d be good at – tour guiding at Honeydukes. He was fully qualified.

So he immersed himself amongst the various confections, pointing out candies of particular excellence to Scott as they went along. He heard what was unmistakably the booming voice of
Professor Slughorn behind him and didn’t bother to turn around. He was already feeling inadequate enough without the influence-mongering Potions teacher ignoring him completely. Instead Ron pressed a container of Jelly Slugs into Scott’s hands with the promise that they were excellent and pretended that he wasn’t being excluded from a party.

It wasn’t really the party itself that was important. It was being the one left out. Harry and Hermione went under a velvet rope that held him back, and he resented not the rope itself but the act of separation. He didn’t care about the stupid parties. He just didn’t want to be left behind.

“So these Chocolate Frogs are good?” Ron’s attention was pulled back to Scott, who was holding a box of said Chocolate Frogs and reading the print on the packaging.

“Yeah, great stuff,” Ron confirmed, “can’t go wrong with those.”

Scott nodded and added the frogs to his small pile of candied assortments. “I’ll give these to my sis; she’s a chocolate whore.”

“Then she and Ron would get along famously,” Harry said, coming up behind them.

Ron felt frustrated with himself when he couldn’t think of a witty comeback. Wasn’t he supposed to be the funny one? This moody pall that had been cast over him dragged him deeper every second it remained. It was like he had used up all of his vitality on the walk to Hogsmeade. A single comedic exchange with Scott and he was done for the day. He struggled to force a rejoinder from his lips before giving up. He didn’t miss the way Harry frowned at his complete lack of response.

It didn’t take long for Scott to make his purchases, and they moved back towards the door and the cold outside. When Hermione asked Ron where he wanted to go next he only shrugged testily and she pulled away from him, respecting what she saw as his desire to be left alone.

Harry suggested that they go to the Three Broomsticks, so they went back out into the wind. After the almost smothering heat of Honeydukes the October weather was like a slap in the face.

Hermione shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, and Ron quite nearly had to grab his left arm with his right in order to prevent it from settling on her shoulders. Was this what it was going to be like from now on? Watching himself, carefully keeping control? One day he’d be half-asleep or not paying attention and he’d do something impulsive, and after that she’d know.

They hadn’t gone far when Harry spotted Mundungus Fletcher, looking as seedy as always, standing on a street corner with a dented old suitcase. When Harry called his name, the shabby wizard dropped the case and it sprang open, dumping its contents into the slush. A silvery object rolled to Ron’s feet – it was strangely familiar. Frowning, he bent over and picked it up.

It was a goblet bearing a recognisable crest. “Hang on,” Ron said, “isn’t this—”

Mundungus grabbed the goblet back from Ron, but Harry had made the same connection as his friend and pinned the thieving Fletcher against the wall with his arm. Mundungus squawked as his air supply was cut off, and Harry leaned in to hiss venomous words in his face. Hermione pleaded with Harry as he increased the pressure against Mundungus’s throat. She gave Ron a desperate look, as if he should step in and intervene. Not that he was going to. As far as Ron was concerned, Dung deserved what he got for stealing Harry’s goblets.

Was Hermione actually surprised at Harry’s behaviour? Harry had been a ball of repressed rage since the Department of Mysteries, and maybe even before that. It swelled around the edges and through the cracks of his personality now and then. He would explode and then cool, like a volatile substance that burned itself out in seconds. Ignore that fact, and it was almost like there was
nothing wrong with him.

Somehow Mundungus managed to push Harry away for a split second, enough time to make a try for the suitcase, but Scott had picked it up and stepped back out of reach. Mundungus Disapparated before Harry could grab him again. Hermione watched with growing alarm as Harry proceeded to give vent to some of the darker portions of his vocabulary.

“COME BACK YOU THIEVING SON OF A-”

“Harry!” Hermione yelled. She whirled on Ron, her glare clearly demanding that he say something.

“He’s gone, mate,” Ron said loudly over Harry’s tirade. “There’s nothing you can do.”

“At least I got the case,” Scott said, holding it up. “Here, that’s some of your stuff anyway – oh, hey, Lil.”

“Harry,” Hermione pleaded, “please calm down – I’m sorry?” She stopped, looking towards Scott in confusion. “Lil?”

“Who?” Ron figured he must have missed something in the conversation. Who was Lil?

“Me,” an unfamiliar voice said. A woman wearing a strange green coat was standing next to Scott. Harry lapsed into silence while they all focused on the newcomer.

Hermione was wearing her ‘I’m-solving-a-puzzle’ face as she did a double take. Ron could see why – the resemblance was definite. The woman seemed to represent the feminisation of Scott’s basic features. Scott’s straight edged nose gained a delicately rounded tip on her. His square, jutting chin receded into a smooth curve, his thin lips became more compressed and full. But what drove home the obvious blood relation between the two of them was the exact same shade of dark blond hair, the same calculating grey eyes (though hers looked out from beneath decidedly more feminine eyebrows), and the same set of the jaw.

There was no question that she was beautiful. But she also wasn’t Hermione. Accordingly, she managed to stir only a basic appreciation in Ron. He wasn’t sure whether he should resent the diminishing of his general libido or become more determined to get what it really wanted.

Hermione had drawn the obvious conclusion, unfortunately at the exact same time as Ron. “You must be—”

“Hey!” Ron interrupted her. “You didn’t tell us you were a twin!” It was pretty odd that Scott had never mentioned that fact.

Scott informed them that they weren’t actually twins, which surprised Ron. He’d have bet money that they were. Maybe they both took after the same parent. Scott’s sister introduced herself as Lila and held out her hand for them to shake. When Ron’s turn came, he found her grip to be very similar to Scott’s – calloused and deceptively strong. As she turned away to take Harry’s hand, Ron wondered why Scott had never talked about her before.

As the conversation continued the interactions between the siblings proved to be amusing, but Ron found himself mostly preoccupied with his increasing discomfort. The temperature had dropped even further, and his teeth began to chatter as the wind cut through his coat. When Lila suggested that the group go inside, he was in immediate agreement.

But before they could act on that excellent suggestion, yet another new voice called out, “Is everything all right?” Unlike the last vocal addition, this one was familiar. Tonks’ bright pink hair
came into view as she approached them, giving Harry a friendly smile. “Wotcher, Harry. You too, Scott.”

Since when did Tonks know Scott? Ron had to have missed out on something. Harry’s rage at Mundungus resurfaced, and he asked Tonks why the Order couldn’t control the sneak thief, causing Ron to blink in surprise. Was Harry completely daft, talking about the Order in front of Scott and his sister? That was top secret! Hermione looked shocked too. Tonks shot a warning glance towards Scott and Lila, but Harry was dismissive of her caution, saying, “They already know about the Order.”

When? Why? Maybe there was no point in asking. The last thing Ron wanted was to be drawn back into the mystery of Scott Kharan – he had enough to brood about with Hermione occupying his days. There were a lot of things that didn’t add up when it came to Scott, but sometimes Ron thought it was better not to know. It was simpler to let everyone else think that he was unobservant.

Tonks seemed willing to take Harry at his word. Maybe it was because neither Scott nor Lila showed any signs of not having already known about the Order, or maybe Harry’s word was worth that much.

Despite Tonks’ assurance that Dung was still useful, Harry stubbornly insisted on telling Dumbledore about the goblets. Ron knew that Mundungus was scared of the Headmaster, so it probably wasn’t a bad idea. Tonks, apparently realising that Harry wasn’t to be dissuaded, didn’t contest the decision. Instead she changed the subject by introducing herself to Lila.

“Well, I’d love to stay and chat,” Tonks said after they were introduced, “but I’m still on duty – miserable day for it, too. You lot should get inside before you ice over.”

Scott nodded in agreement. “Tell me about it. I was sweating inside the castle and now my ass is frozen together.”

Everybody laughed at that except for Hermione, who Ron suspected held her tongue more out of principle than a total lack of humour. It was a shame really; he loved to see her laugh. Making her do so was one of the greatest accomplishments he could put to his name.

The Three Broomsticks wasn’t very crowded though it still retained a comfortably close atmosphere. It wasn’t difficult to find a table and they all slid into a booth, Ron discovering himself delightfully squeezed in next to Hermione when she sat down with the Butterbeers. He sipped at his drink and tried not to concentrate on the heat of her thigh close to his, a task easier said than done.

“Lila,” Hermione began, starting up the small talk, “Scott said you were living in Ottery-St. Catchpole?” Ron did recall Scott saying something about that when they had been in Diagon Alley. There would be a good chance of seeing Scott over the holiday.

“I rented an apartment there,” Lila answered. “Finally got all settled in now. Except for Scott’s room – that’s his job.”

Scott and Lila had the kind of relationship that Ron would have expected from a brother and sister about the same age, not the kind that would result from one sibling being forced into the role of parent. Still, it wasn’t like he knew much of their history. Maybe things were different at their home. Taking a drink of Butterbeer, he refocused on the discussion.

“—you’re an attractive young woman,” Lila was saying to Hermione, “and my brother does most of his thinking with his little head.”
Ron sat straight up.

“With his little… Oh!” Hermione blushed bright red. That was a good thing, right? That meant that she hadn’t understood, so it couldn’t be true. Or did it mean she was thinking of an occasion where it had been true?

Scott was grinning. “If you’re trying to embarrass me, Lil, you know it’s not gonna work.”

“No, nothing like that – no!” Hermione stuttered. “He would never…”

“I most certainly would!” Scott interjected.

Ron was going to kill him. He was going to kill that sodding wanker, Scott Kharan.

Hermione gaped at Scott. “But – we’re, we’re not—”

“Well, no…” Scott shrugged, like the conversation hadn’t taken the turn it had. “But I’d hit it, that’s all I’m saying.”

Actually, Ron was going to kill him slowly.

Harry, the traitorous bastard, was laughing into his Butterbeer. Hermione blushed again. “Of all the —”

“We know you have better sense than to hook up with my brother,” Lila said. “You’re obviously smart, and even girls of average intelligence know to dodge that bullet.”

“I’m often misunderstood,” Scott said sadly. “Hermione – hold me.”

Enough was enough. “All right, lay off!” Ron snarled at Scott. What the bloody hell was the American playing at anyway? He should know better than to talk about Hermione like that!

“It’s a joke, son, a joke. Hermione is strictly hands off. I promise,” Scott said shrinking away from Ron, though he was still grinning.

Ron felt Hermione’s eyes on him and realised he had said too much. He should have waited until they got back to Hogwarts to confront Scott – now she was probably on to him. “Not like it’s me you have to say that to, or anything…” he mumbled, attempting to cover up for himself with a swig of Butterbeer. He tried not to meet Hermione’s intent gaze.

Ron couldn’t have repeated a word of the conversation that followed – he was too busy maintaining a false sense of distance between himself and Hermione. What was it that he had thought earlier, about Harry needing to keep his mouth shut? Ron should know; it was a shared affliction. A single sentence could break the friendship with Hermione that he held so dear, and he had come dangerously close to it.

It didn’t do to entertain hopes that she might have wanted to hear it.

On the way out of Hogsmeade, Scott fell behind them to talk to his sister. Ron trudged onwards, lost in his thoughts. The October wind was biting and scoured the senses clean of any lingering somnolence, but instead of providing clarity it only made him numb.

Hermione was shivering again next to him. What would happen if he gave in? Maybe if he would just reach over and offer her his warmth, everything would turn out fine. But that was the point of no return. That brought him back to the crux of the situation.
He was afraid to find out.
It was during the break period after morning Herbology that Hermione found the opportunity to corner Scott by himself. The blond boy seemed to instinctively know when she was attempting to seek him out and was almost never found without the company of others. She wasn’t sure whether he was doing this on purpose or if he was just a very sociable person, but she strongly suspected the former.

So when she came across Scott loitering outside of the entrance to the Headmaster’s office, she seized upon her chance to talk with him. If she could have chosen the time and place then it would have been at some other juncture, as she already had a great deal on her mind after Herbology. Between Ron’s behaviour during the trip to Hogsmeade and Hermione’s recent intimations that she might invite him to Slughorn’s Christmas party, she had quite a bit to think about.

Of course it was possible that Scott could assist her with that, since he was at least partly responsible for some of it. His manipulations, as well as those of his sister, had not gone unnoticed by Hermione during their trip to the Three Broomsticks. She wasn’t fully prepared to shoot down any counterarguments Scott might conjure, but she had to take her chance when it came.

Upon spotting Hermione bearing down on him Scott’s eyes went carefully blank. Hermione mentally reinforced her plan of attack. She was sure he would be infuriatingly intractable.

“Hey, Hermione,” Scott drawled. It was his typical greeting, but the quirked-up corners of his mouth said that he knew exactly what she wanted.

“Hello, Scott,” Hermione said. She didn’t waste any effort propitiating with a smile or an innocently friendly demeanour. He said nothing, forcing her to continue, “Are you here to see the Headmaster?”

“Nope.”

“Oh. You already talked to him?”

“Nope.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“Standing around.”

“In front of Dumbledore’s office?” Hermione raised an eyebrow. “Somewhat of an odd place to stand around, don’t you think?”

“Not really.”

Scott wasn’t making this easy, and she was becoming quite cross with him. “When we were at the
Three Broomsticks, why did you tease Ron like that?” she said directly, switching to a different approach. If relevance wasn’t working then she’d try a topical ambush.

Scott shrugged. “Why do I do anything?”

Hermione’s standing with Scott was difficult to label. He seemed to exist in a separate space for each individual who knew him. For Harry, he was what Hermione would best describe as a co-conspirator. For Ron he was just another casual friend. For her, he was a puzzle. She treated him with a wary amity since he had, so far, been harmless. She suspected that Harry possessed the most complete picture. Dumbledore also had to know at least some things about him, or how else could Scott have gained admission to the school?

Her suspicions concerning Scott’s dubious origins were enough to tag him as untrustworthy, but what bothered Hermione even more were his utterly inscrutable motivations. Was he really just an American student who had a troubled past to hide? Hermione supposed a history of petty crime or family troubles would justify his secrecy if he was trying to break away from an old persona.

Those pieces only fit certain parts of the puzzle, and the picture they made didn’t feel right. There was more to it – she just wasn’t seeing it. She didn’t know enough.

Still, the idea that he was running from his old life earned some sympathy from her. This, combined with his seemingly genuine friendliness and clear desire to help them when he could, had resulted in her treating him as a friend in return, if a somewhat uncertain one.

So it was that Hermione felt upset by Scott’s refusal to confide in her what he had told others. What was wrong with her that he thought such treatment was necessary?

“Why won’t you answer me?” she asked him, and she must have failed to suppress the hurt she was feeling because his eyes softened at her tone.

“All right... I thought you and Ron could use a little help,” Scott confessed.

“Help? What do you mean?” Hermione said a bit nervously.

“Yeah, I wonder. You two obviously have something going on. You saw how Ron flipped out when I was coming on to you, it was an obvious joke and he still couldn’t take it. Anybody could parse that.”

“Yes, well… Ron can be overprotective sometimes,” Hermione said, though that wasn’t what she wanted to believe.

Scott lifted a sceptical eyebrow. “If that’s what you really think, then why would you even bother asking me about it?”

Hermione struggled with herself for a moment before bursting out, “He’s so stubborn! Why can’t he just tell me what he’s thinking or feeling without me having to pry? Then when I do, he only gets angry again and we’re right back where we started,” she said, and sighed despondently.

“He doesn’t work like that. And neither do you, for that matter. When was the last time you walked up to him and said ‘Hey, Ron – I’m hot for your body, let’s make out or something’? Never, that’s when.”

Hermione flushed. “I wouldn’t say that!”

“So you’re not hot for his body?”
“That’s really none of your business,” she said primly, “and this is hardly constructive.”

“You told him this morning that you were going to invite him to the Christmas party, so that’s a good start. Dress up nice, let those boobs hang out a little, and sparks will fly – I guarantee it,” Scott said, giving her a dual thumbs up.

Hermione coloured even further, catching herself just before she looked down at her chest, an action which would have given Scott no end of amusement.

Scott laughed at her pinked cheeks. “Relax, Hermione. He wants you, believe me. I know the look. Here you are all worried that you’re not attractive enough because you’re a bookworm or whatever, and all he wants is for you to sit on his face.” He leaned in towards her. “You have absolutely nothing to worry about – with the possible exception of pregnancy. You’ve seen his family.”

Scott’s crudity was unforgivable. But even worse were the images that sprang unbidden before her mind’s eye at his words. She was appalled that Scott would even imply Ron wanted her to… to do… well… that thing he said. That didn’t stop the scene from playing out like a silent movie in her head… Ron’s strong hands wrapped around her thighs while she lowered herself down and he slipped his tongue up into – no!

No, no, no, Hermione Granger did not entertain those kinds of thoughts, no matter what Scott Kharan said! It would be wrong of her to fantasise about Ron that way; he was her friend after all…

She steadfastly ignored her previous breakings of that particular rule, as well as the fact that she had figured out the logistics involved in just such a situation from literature that she would never confess to reading.

“I don’t think that’s exactly what he’s been feeling -” Hermione said, bravely ignoring her burning cheeks as Scott snorted in derision. “- but I will ask him to the Christmas party… like I said I would.”

“Swell. Now we’d better hit it if we want to get to class on time.” Scott straightened up, moving from his position against the wall.

“What were you doing in front of the Headmaster’s office?” Hermione asked one more time as they walked.

“Oh,” Scott raised one hand and dropped it in a dismissive gesture, as if just remembering himself, “my sister is in there talking to Dumbledore. I was just showing her to the office.”

That was a reasonable alibi. After the events in Hogsmeade, Hermione suspected that Lila Kharan was a member of the Order. Was there an American branch? Certainly she wouldn’t put it past Dumbledore to have contacts in many other nations.

For now, she’d have to add this information to the growing pile of questions without answers. It wasn’t that Hermione would ever abandon the drive for the truth about Scott, but her life had its own growing demands on her time.

Over the course of the following two weeks, Hermione was able to think of little else but the approaching Christmas party. Every day an unspoken understanding lingered between her and Ron, and they seemed to move closer together. Eye contact was a risky proposition. It was when she could observe him unnoticed that she could appreciate the changes maturation had effected upon him. She often caught herself watching him just for the sake of looking.

It was in the blank spaces that life at Hogwarts flew through the motions. Between her class load
and showing support for Ron and Harry during their Quidditch practices when she could, the days slipped by with increasing speed. Scott was becoming gradually more absent from their down time in the common room – his schedule of tutoring sessions was growing increasingly demanding as he took multiple written exams. Neville and Luna became common fixtures during their break periods. Lately it seemed as if Luna was spending a greater amount of time in the Gryffindor common room than in the Ravenclaw one, which was a good thing as far as her friends were concerned.

Most of all, Hermione found herself concerned with homework – mounds of it. It had been brought upon her by her own choice, as she pursued more classes than her friends, but that didn’t make it any less testing. She endured the snide remarks from her classmates and the extra work because she took a deep satisfaction in learning, a kind most people couldn’t understand. Goofing off was all well and good on occasion, but there was so much to think and to write and to discover!

One evening, Hermione was unfurling a length of parchment on which was written a partially completed essay for Ancient Runes. She quickly scanned over her effort thus far and, pleased with what she saw, dipped her quill into the inkpot and settled down to finish. She had chosen to work in the common room as it was mostly empty at this time of day (it was not yet curfew, and the majority of students tended to remain at dinner and in the halls until they had to leave), and now and then she liked to curl up on a couch while she worked. There was something wonderful about a Hogwarts evening in front of the fire.

The second her quill touched the paper, the portrait entrance swung open to admit a great deal of noise, startling her. Her hand jolted across the essay, leaving a thick black streak. She scowled down at this new blemish on her otherwise perfect composition. Whoever was responsible would suffer the full wrath of her prefect powers.

“- Need to calm the fuck down, right now -” Was that Scott?

“Calm down?” She immediately recognised the second voice as Ron, clearly in a rage. “After what she said -”

“- Because you are out of line, man, way out of line -” Yes, that had to be Scott.

“You are sort of overreacting,” Harry’s voice joined in, though he sounded oddly unenthused.

“YOU HEARD WHAT SHE SAID, THAT -” Ron choked on whatever he had been about to say.

“Don’t,” Scott said firmly, “don’t even go there. Take a deep breath and chill out.”

Hermione shrank deeper into her couch. It was facing the fire and the back was to the entrance, so they hadn’t seen her yet. Despite her misgivings about eavesdropping, she wanted to hear more and knew that if she stepped in they would stop.

“Things were said; mistakes were made, all right?” Scott continued. “This ain’t worth a fuckin’ meltdown.”

“Do you think she did?” Ron said after a moment of silence, and Hermione had the feeling this wasn’t the same ‘she’ as before.

“Dunno…” Harry said uncomfortably.

Ron must have looked at Scott because Scott said, “I don’t know, man - I wasn’t here. Why don’t you ask her?”
“I can’t,” Ron muttered. “I can’t ask her that.”

“Then go be all pissed at her without her knowing why.” Scott said irritably, “and when she stops talking to you, you’ll never find out. How’s that sound, big guy?”

Ron sighed as if he had been deflated, and she heard him slump against the wall. “It’s just -”

“- just that you want to hate this Krum guy, but he’s not here, so you’re mad at her instead,” Scott finished, his voice less harsh now. “I get it.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. Viktor? What on earth did he have to do with anything?

“He’s right, Ron,” Harry said, and he sounded less apathetic this time. “Don’t start a row with Hermione over some ancient history. For one thing, my ears will thank you.”

Hermione barely managed to repress a squeak of surprise, clapping one hand over her mouth. There was no sound following Harry’s revelation and, for an awful moment, she thought they might have heard her. She was able to relax when Scott started talking again. They were talking about her! Her and Viktor! She was torn between indignation and the unbearable need to know more.

“Harry’s ears aside,” Scott was saying, “I don’t think you’ve got anything to worry about. You guys know Hermione better than me, but I just can’t see her doing anything with this Krum dude. If he tried to slip her the tongue you’d have known about it, because he’d probably be dead, or enjoying life as a toad. Though not a bad existence really, toads… I could go for that…”

Hermione was furious that they were talking about her semi-relationship with Viktor behind her back but was also a bit stunned at how well Scott had read her.

There was a moment of silence before Scott got back on track and continued, “Anyway, the goods are intact if you get what I’m saying. The cherry remains unpicked. So don’t get your knickers in a twist over some kindergarten level foreplay. There’s been more hardcore shit filmed by Disney. If it was any more innocent it’d be a Precious Moments collectible. I could put it on a billboard and sell breath mints. You’d be more likely to get a boner from Sunday School. …I’m running out of one liners. Let’s go to bed.”

“You’ll feel better in the morning, Ron,” Harry said, “then maybe you can talk to Ginny again -”

“I don’t want to talk to Ginny!” Ron spat, evidently still somewhat in the grip of fury.

“All right, no Ginny…” Scott said. “Whatever. Just don’t freeze out Hermione for something your sister said - you dig?”

“What?”

Scott sighed. “You get it?”

“Yeah… I get it…” Ron said, but he still sounded miserable. “I’m going to bed.”

Ron’s dejected footsteps receded up stairs to the dormitories, leaving a hidden Hermione with Scott and Harry. Her mind was racing, thoughts coming and going so quickly that she was surprised the others couldn’t hear them ricocheting off the inside of her skull.

“Looking a little green there, Harry.”

“… I don’t know what you mean.”
“Yes you do.”

“She’s just a friend,” Harry said unconvincingly. “That’s all.”

Hermione repressed a tut of disbelief and was shortly distracted from her own predicament. Who did Harry think he was fooling? Whatever had happened with Ginny before the three boys had arrived at the common room, Hermione could have told anyone who asked that something had been going on between Ginny and Harry long before that.

“You know what?” Scott said, the annoyance returning to his voice. “I really don’t want to deal with another round of this crap. Talk to me again when you’re ready to man up.”

Another set of footsteps went up the stairs, and Hermione held her breath, waiting. Were they all gone now? There was nothing audible save the crackling of the fire. She prepared herself for a quick peek over the top of the couch to confirm that they had left -

- and nearly jumped out of her skin when Scott said, “See? I told you so, Hermione.”

The final pair of feet walked up to the dorms, leaving Hermione with her thoughts and a fast-thumping heart.

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It was the day of the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Slytherin, and while Luna Lovegood was neither (nor was she particularly absorbed with Quidditch), she was still attending the game to show support for her friends. It was the nice thing to do, and she did enjoy watching the occasional Quidditch match. It was quite exciting at times. Basking in the tension of the crowd could be quite a thrilling experience, much like Snorkack hunting… or naming new stars.

But first, she had to find her special hat.

It was with some ceremony that she reached underneath her four poster bed and felt around with a blind hand. Her fist closed on a familiar fuzzy mane, and, with a tug, she freed her unusual headgear from its dusty resting place. Pulling her wand out from behind her ear, she renewed the magic that powered the hat. With the charms freshened, she was certain it would be extra loud. She felt it was important that the hat deliver its morale-boosting roar to every person in the stadium - she didn’t want anyone to feel left out.

Luna carefully dusted the lion’s head replica off, making sure its tawny coat gleamed. The lion needed to be beyond reproach for such a momentous event. After all, lions were prideful creatures. A dusty lion just wouldn’t do.

Sitting back, she stopped to admire her handiwork before she donned it. It was, in her opinion, a very excellent replica of a lion’s head - life-sized - and its roar was very realistic. The fact that it was also a hat was just the icing on the cake. Even without its lofty perch, it would still be excellent. Yes, she was fond of the hat. She hoped Neville liked it too.

The hat was heavy, but not unbearably so, as she settled it on her crown. It did limit her vision somewhat, so she tipped her head upwards to compensate. It was a little difficult to navigate the stairs in such a manner, but she managed it without injury and hurried out into the corridor.

Upon Luna’s arrival with her humongous headgear, Scott was suitably impressed. “Oh good lord, what the hell is that?”

Luna looked up into the brim of her hat, trying to view it from her standpoint. “Do you like it?”
“I feel a stirring deep within me at the sight, and while that might be chalked up to the green chilli my sister sent me, I think it’s the Gryffindor pride.”

“It’s a cool hat, Luna,” Neville affirmed, “especially when it roars.”

She beamed at them.

“HEY!” The three of them turned to see Trevor come tearing down the hallway at full speed, a bedraggled looking Kylie panting behind him as she tried to keep up. He came to a skidding halt in front of them. “Sorry I’m late; I had to find Kylie!”

“It’s fine, we’re just now ready to go,” Scott said, motioning towards Luna.

“Wow!” Trevor gazed up in awe at Luna’s hat. “That’s a wicked hat!”

“It’s unanimous - the hat is awesome,” Scott said solemnly. Then he frowned and looked over his shoulder so that he could see Kylie, who was hiding behind him and eyeing the fierce hat with trepidation. “Well, almost unanimous.”

“Maybe I should test it to make sure,” Luna said thoughtfully. She didn’t want to arrive at the game with a malfunctioning lion. She touched her wand to the hat.

The lion head reacted with a deep throated bellow that was deafening in the confined space of the hallway. Trevor was rocked back on his heels by the blast of sound, but the look on his face couldn’t have been more delighted. Kylie jumped as if she had been electrocuted.

“Works fine, I think.” Neville winced.

Scott dazedly looked towards the ceiling. “Is that you, God?”

“Cool!” Trevor said in summary, then immediately switched subjects. “We’d better hurry or we might not get good seats!”

“All right, let’s go find Hermione,” Scott agreed.

There were many other students on their way down to the stadium. As the group made their way, Luna’s hat attracted various forms of attention, including a few cheers from the Gryffindors and some very ugly looks from the Slytherins. Her fellow Ravenclaws ignored her rather than be associated with such a sight. That didn’t bother Luna; she was accustomed to being disregarded by her house.

The weather was sunny as they walked across the grounds towards the pitch, taking the edge off of the early November chill. Luna was a little disappointed that the clear blue sky held no clouds as she enjoyed naming cloud shapes in addition to stars. They spotted Hagrid leaving his cabin and waved to him. He returned it with a cheery wave of his own and ambled over to them.

“Great day fer a match!” Hagrid said by way of greeting. He looked at Luna and gave her a wink. “I like yer hat, Luna.”

“Yes, it’s quite popular,” Luna said serenely.

“I’ll be sittin’ with Dumbledore an’ the other teachers today,” Hagrid explained, “but you lot know who I’ll be cheerin’ for, eh? Give Harry a roar for me, Luna!”

The stadium was a riot of conflicting colours, one half predominately red and gold and the other an
explosion of green and silver. Homemade banners and pennants were in abundance. Luna’s hat elicited multiple comments as they moved through the Gryffindor stands looking for Hermione. They found her sitting on the very first row just above the players’ entrance to the pitch. Upon their arrival, she shifted over and removed the scarf she had put on the bench to save it for them.

“I felt bad taking so much of the bench like that,” she said as they sat down. “It’s filled up so fast today that I didn’t have much choice.”

“This is a great spot!” Trevor exclaimed, clearly enthused by their position.

“We were running just a little late,” Scott explained to Hermione. “Luna had to get her hat – which was totally worth it.”

“Here comes Harry,” Neville interrupted them, pointing towards the team entrance.

As Harry and the rest of the team made their way to the starting positions, Luna lifted her wand again and activated her hat. Despite the overwhelmingly loud cheering and booing that drowned out all other sounds, the lion’s roar cut through the cacophony like a foghorn. A few people turned towards the disturbance and grinned appreciatively – but only the ones that were sitting a good distance away. Everyone in Luna’s immediate proximity gave her an entirely different sort of look while they massaged their ears. Out on the field, Harry looked slightly startled and turned towards where they were seated before his attention was pulled back to the toss up.

The lion roared again when Ron saved his first goal. Luna decided not to sound it after he saved his second. It rattled her brain inside of her head, and while everyone’s brain could use a good rattling now and then, there were limits on that sort of thing.

“Aww, yes! Hell yeah!” Scott exclaimed after Ron made yet another spectacular save. He raised his right hand, making an odd gesture that looked like a pair of horns. “Ron is on fire today!”

“No, that’s just his hair,” Luna told him patiently. It was a mistake anyone could make, she supposed.

“It’s an expression – it means that he’s doing really well.”

Luna nodded agreeably. “Yes, he is.”

“Ron’s a great player so long as he doesn’t get nervous,” Neville said. “I saw he was really pale this morning… I wonder what happened?”

Nobody said anything after that, but Luna noticed Hermione’s lips thin out into a severe line, much like Professor McGonagall seemed to be fond of doing.

As the ferocious game played itself out in the air in front of them, Luna devoted her time to people-watching rather than Quidditch-watching. Her mind moved in such a fluid manner that it was hard to occupy it solely with one thing at a time. The match continued in a whirl of colour and fury without her supervision. There were so many more things to think about than just Quidditch.

Like Neville, for instance. For Luna, Neville occupied an oft visited corner of her mind. She wasn’t entirely sure why, and that in itself warranted further investigation. He was her closest friend, an oddity in her solitary existence. Self-realisation was a strong trait in Luna and she had no illusions about what other people thought of her. But she was who she was, and she chose not to care what they said when she wasn’t around; and apparently Neville didn’t care either. He always stuck by her without concern for the damage it would do to his own social status. Luna thought Neville was a strong person on the inside; he just needed some help seeing that in himself.
Luna stopped thinking about Neville long enough to witness Harry’s capture of the Snitch. The stands around her exploded in celebration, and Luna correspondingly activated her hat for one last victorious bellow. Scott was making that symbol with his hands again while Trevor stood up on the bench so he could see over the heads of the other celebrants. Hermione had vanished, and, down on the field, Luna could see her familiar brown hair streaking towards the triumphant Gryffindor team. For his efforts Ron received a full-bodied hug from Hermione, though she quickly let go with a blush. The look on Ron’s face clearly said that the Quidditch match wasn’t the only win of the day for him. For some reason Lavender Brown, who was standing near the foot of the stands, looked rather put out about something. Luna had a feeling that she knew what that something was.

Luna wasn’t surprised that things between Ron and Hermione were changing. They had been suppressing some very powerful emotions and urges, and that kind of frustration couldn’t be good for anyone. Now it seemed that they were finally on the right path.

Luna sighed happily to herself in a vague sort of cosmic contentment. Sometimes certain things in life just felt right to Luna, and Ron and Hermione were one of them. They had been wrong for so long that it had put her off balance at times when she was in their presence. She was glad they were clicking into place. If Luna ever felt that way about someone, she’d be sure to tell them right away.

The stands were beginning to empty and she looked to her companions to see if they were ready to leave. To her left, she found Scott looking at her with a very odd expression. “Do I have Nargles in my hair?” Luna asked a bit worriedly, her hands rising to tentatively pat her blond tresses.

“No...” Scott said slowly, “You’re Nargle free for now. Are you happy for Ron and Hermione?”

“Oh, yes,” she assured him. “Very. They were wrong for a long time – but now they’re almost right, so it will probably be okay.”

“You think?” Neville said, looking down at the field. Harry, Ron and Hermione were having an animated discussion near the exit. “I hope so. I don’t want to be around the tower if they start fighting all the time.”

“You might want to cross your fingers then,” Scott muttered.

Luna followed his gaze down to the still talking trio and saw that things might be taking a turn for the worse. Harry seemed to be explaining something to Hermione, and her eyes widened, darting over to Ron. Ron reddened dangerously while Hermione, her face steadily flushing, talked to him rapidly. Scott might have been holding his breath as he watched.

To Luna’s pleasant surprise, Ron appeared to exert some control over himself and released a sigh, giving Hermione an awkward shrug. To Luna’s even more pleasant surprise, Hermione hugged him again in apology for whatever it was that she had done. Harry stared at his feet, clearly out of place. The moment - whatever it had been - passed, and the three of them disappeared through the players' exit.

“Two for two,” Luna thought she heard Scott say under his breath as he let it out.

“Are you coming to the party, Luna?” Neville asked her, pulling her attention back to him.

“Yes,” she said. “But first I’d like to put my hat away. I wouldn’t want to set it down at the party for someone to accidentally sit on.”

“I think they’d get quite a surprise if they did,” Neville smiled.
“Nothing like a lion’s head up your ass to ruin your day,” Scott said, nodding sagely.

They followed the tail end of the crowd back to the school, a milling herd of students more concerned with talking than with covering any ground. Luna carried her lion under her arm since her neck had become tired due to the hefty nature of the hat.

Once inside, Luna split from the group and headed towards the Ravenclaw tower to stash the lion’s head back under her bed until the next time it was needed. In the dormitories, she received thankfully little harassment for sitting with the Gryffindors instead of her housemates. Though they hadn’t been directly involved in the game, the Ravenclaws enjoyed seeing a Slytherin defeat. The students of Salazar’s house had never gone out of their way to endear themselves to others. It was too bad, really. Luna thought some of the Slytherins might be interesting people in their own right. Why did they like snakes so much? There were creatures that were much more fascinating, though she supposed snakes had their own slithery appeal.

After storing the hat, Luna made her way across the school to the Gryffindor portrait, where she found Neville waiting outside to let her in. That was very thoughtful of him. She wouldn’t have wanted to be stuck out in the hall - she might have missed the party!

The festivities were going full tilt when the portrait swung open to admit the two of them. Luna spotted Scott ensconced in one of the couches next to Harry and Ron, both of whom were reliving the highlights of the game to a crowd of eager onlookers while Hermione rolled her eyes, though she was smiling. Crossing the room, Luna herself received a few pats on the back and acknowledgements for her display of support. It gave her an unfamiliar glow somewhere deep in her midsection. She quite liked that feeling.

“Luna!” Harry called to her with a wave. “I heard your hat!”

“Everybody heard her hat,” Ron laughed.

Neville nearly tripped over several pairs of feet while trying to reach the couch before giving up and turning himself around to fall gracelessly backwards onto it. Scott deftly reached over and scooped Kylie up a second before she was flattened by the descending Neville, who hadn’t seen her. Luna sat next to Neville, taking one of the butterbeers Harry offered the two of them from an icebox nearby.

The party continued with a dull roar of conversation as Luna looked about the room with fondness. The Gryffindor common room was a place she enjoyed being. It exuded a cosy comfort that the Ravenclaw equivalent never held for her. Of course, she reasoned, the Ravenclaw common room had never been full of friends. With Neville a warm presence on her right, her friends conversing around her, and the butterbeer settling wonderfully into her stomach, Luna sank back into the couch in gentle contentment. If she had known this had been what she was missing during her earlier years at Hogwarts, she’d probably have tried to make friends sooner.

She must have dozed off for a bit at that point, which in one way was a shame because she didn’t want to miss anything. But on the other hand, waking up warm and comfortable was always nice.

“Luna,” Neville was saying, shaking her shoulder gently.

“Hmm?” she responded sleepily. She yawned and sat up straighter. The shadows were deeper in the common room, and it was no longer full of boisterous celebrants.

“We’re going to play a card game that Scott knows. Do you want to play?”
“Yes, I would,” Luna said, waking up fully. A new game! That was always worth learning.

“Okay, the game’s called ‘War’,” Scott explained, passing a deck from hand to hand with easy dexterity, “and it’s really simple, so you won’t get lost. Now – hey, where did Ron and Hermione go?”

“What? They were just here,” Harry said in confusion, looking around the room.

“I thought they were getting some drinks,” Scott frowned. “Well, what the hell.”

Luna stood. “I’ll look for them,” she offered. She needed to stretch out after her nap anyway.

“All right, cool. Tell them we’re playing War and if they don’t want be seen as craven before the eyes of man and God, they need to report for combat.”

Easier said than done - or was it easier done than said? Luna pondered this as she wandered the tower aimlessly in search of her quarry. She found that when one moved in an aimless fashion, one tended to come across the most interesting things. This theory gained some circumstantial evidence in its favour when Luna paused at a random door and discovered that it was in fact the entrance to Ron and Harry’s dorm room. There were two familiar voices echoing from inside.

This presented multiple paths to pursue, a sticky problem of the decision-making sort. Should she return to the common room and inform the others that Ron and Hermione were busy, or open the door and tell the pair that they were needed downstairs, or even stay where she was and eavesdrop? She wasn’t fond of that word, ‘eavesdrop’. Eaves certainly had never done anything to her to be deserving of a dropping. ‘Reconnoitre’ was a much more pleasant term. It rolled nicely off the tongue and was uncommon enough to be an attractive addition to any conversation.

Oh, they had stopped talking while she stood in indecision. Perhaps she should open the door now that they were done? It seemed the proper course of action. Reaching out, Luna opened the door and stepped into the room.

She was greeted with the unusual sight of Ron kissing Hermione.

Now here was a fascinating development! And so soon after they had fought, too. Luna suspected it to most likely be their first kiss. Ron’s hands were hanging clumsily at his sides and Hermione seemed to be in a state of stunned astonishment, reacting about as much as a mannequin would have. However, Luna herself had never been kissed, so perhaps her analysis of the situation was flawed in some way. It made her a bit sad, actually. She should really get around to having her first kiss sometime soon.

The pair broke apart with a sudden jerk, and Luna realised that they had noticed her. Hermione slowly flushed a deep red, and Ron wasn’t much better off, his mouth working, but no sound emerging. They both had a wide-eyed expression that would have been comical in any other situation. Luna could have laughed, but it would have been a very rude response. It was her fault, really, for not taking her first option and returning downstairs.

Luna thought that she should probably attempt to put them at ease. “I’m very sorry to interrupt your first kiss,” she said in a calm, placating manner. “Scott is teaching us a card game and I came to get you, but I guess card games weren’t very much on your mind just now. It’s my fault for thinking you were done when you stopped talking - but you weren’t done yet. I’ll leave so you can finish.”

Luna’s voice seemed to jar Hermione out of her stasis. “I - I should go,” she whispered weakly and
sped out the door on shaky legs. For a second Luna thought Ron might reach out and grab Hermione’s arm. Instead he slumped back onto the foot of his bed and stared at the floor.

When it became clear that Ron wasn’t going to say anything, Luna backed out into the hall. “I’m very sorry,” she apologised again and gently shut the door.

Back in the common room, Scott looked up from the game of War that he was waging with Harry when Luna came down the stairs. “Hermione just came through here,” he said.

“They didn’t row again did they?” Harry asked resignedly.

“No,” Luna said, reseating herself on the couch next to Neville, “but I’m afraid I may have made things all wrong again.”

Her worry must have been apparent because Neville awkwardly patted her hand. “I don’t think you could ever do that, Luna,” he tried to reassure her, though he couldn’t have understood what she was talking about. Luna still appreciated him for his effort.

Scott became strangely still, and his eyes went unfocused and distant. Only a couple of seconds passed before he moved again, and his gaze returned to its usual sharpness. “No, I don’t think you did. I think they’ll be fine, whatever this is.”

Scott was probably right, Luna thought. Things didn’t feel the same as they had the last time Ron and Hermione had something come between them. Maybe everything would work out in the end.

“This is the problem with War,” Scott grunted, and Luna shunted all thoughts of right and wrong, Hermione’s and Ron’s, to the edges of her psyche. There was still a card game to learn, after all. “It’s a game of chance, so Harry is kicking my ass.”

“Like I couldn’t kick your arse in a game of skill?” Harry taunted him.

“This is what I get for not rigging the deck. Next time I’ll give that bitch a special shuffle, and we’ll see how you like fighting royalty with a bunch of deuces and fives.”

“So you can only win by cheating?”

“You just keep asking for it, don’t you? All right, you watch my deck come back in the second half. I know I’ve gotta be getting down to the good stuff now. I have not yet begun to fight!”

“You got that right; all you’ve been doing is talking.”

“Just bend over and take it, Harry. SHAZAM! Jack of Spades. Beat that shit - I dare you, I double dog dare you, I defy you -”

“The Queen of Hearts.”

“MOTHERFU-”

Luna supposed that even if she wasn’t really learning how to play, at least she’d come away with an expanded vocabulary.
Ron had kissed her Saturday night.

Wait, that didn’t sound correct. The words were familiar ones, common in vocabulary and, taken individually, they all made sense. It was when they were strung together that the completed statement sent her reeling all over again. She rearranged their order and reintroduced it to her mind.

Saturday night, Ron had kissed her.

Yes, but who was ‘her’? It required clarification for all parties involved. Restructuring the same sentence was easier than facing what it meant. Full embellishment, with greater attention paid to identities and time. That was the proper way.

During the Saturday night of the previous weekend Ronald Weasley had kissed Hermione Granger.

And as a consequence of that, Miss Granger was going quite mad.

Ron had kissed her! It had happened! It wasn’t a dream or a hallucination or even (how embarrassing to admit there was a precedence) a fantasy. It was solid, documented, verifiable fact with a least three witnesses that had been present. One of those witnesses was Luna, who had stumbled into the moment with her usual lack of discomfort. Another was of course herself – and she had been obsessing about it since the second she had fled the scene.

The third and final witness was sitting not three feet away from Hermione at the Gryffindor table.

And looking damnably arousing.

Hermione actually blushed at this thought and cursed her fair skin. She was careful to look down at the breakfast meal in front of her and not meet anyone’s eyes. Especially not his eyes.

What was she to do? Oh, if only she hadn’t run when Luna had come in! All she could think about in her mortification had been to get away as fast as possible. She had given in to her instinct to escape, and the result was that she had really, well... buggered it up, to use that phrase. She might have borrowed a similar expression from Scott but simply wasn’t comfortable using that level of profanity, even inside her own head.

Hermione wanted to bury her head in her hands and cry – either that or jump up and scream for joy, and both emotional reactions had their root in the same source. She wanted to cry because Ron had done exactly what she had wanted him to, and then, when Luna had surprised her, she had ruined it by leaving. The scream of joy was simpler to quantify – Ron had kissed her. Finally. Gloriously.

All right, to be perfectly honest it hadn’t been the most gratifying kiss in the world. It was chaste and awkward, and neither of them had really known what to do. But it was still with Ron, and that was the most important thing that made the memory so powerful. And besides, she had beaten her hasty retreat before they’d had a chance to improve upon it. She mentally kicked herself again. Was there anything more torturous than the mind’s extrapolation of aborted events? ‘What could
have been’ was always so painfully vivid.

So instead of facing that pain, she had foolishly avoided him all of Sunday, hiding in the library. What a mess she had created! If she had only gone and talked to him… But now it was Monday, and she was forced by classes into close proximity with him. She had to do something.

“Starving yourself isn’t going to help,” Harry whispered from his seat next to her and nudged her plate with his elbow.

Harry was right. Reluctantly she brought a forkful of eggs into her mouth and chewed without tasting them. Her brain was too occupied with other matters to bother devoting any of its processing power to her tongue. Harry seemed satisfied by her display of consumption and turned back to his bacon, only to find that Scott had stolen about half of it.

“There’s a whole plate right there!” Harry scowled at Scott, jabbing a finger towards the enormous serving platter that was piled with the crispy pork.

“Your bacon tastes better,” Scott said mildly.

Harry added more bacon to his plate and carefully wrapped one arm around it, guarding his food from further intrusion. Next to him, Ron was doing the same, now warned of possible trespasses from Scott.

Was Ron suffering as much as she was? He had been moody for weeks before the kiss, so it was difficult to discern whether he was thinking the same thoughts; his behaviour hadn’t been radically altered. Ron’s recently temperamental nature dissimulated his true feelings.

The post owls swooped into the Great Hall as they did every morning, a flashing, diving assortment of colours and sizes. Envelopes and packages fell to the tables in a heavy rain, dropping into hands and laps and occasionally food or drink. Hermione deftly caught her copy of the *Daily Prophet*, unfurling the paper and scanning the headlines. It was more bad news, as usual. She opened it to the middle, pursuing the continuation of a story from the cover.

A small article immediately diverted her interest. “Look at this, Harry,” Hermione said, leaning over to show him the paper. “There was a robbery at Borgin and Burkes.”

Harry quickly swallowed his food. “Yeah? Does it say what was taken?”

“No…” Hermione scanned the item, but it made no mention of specifics. “Just that someone robbed the store and vandalised it, too. They’re offering a reward for any information.”

“Really!” Scott broke in from his side of the table. “How much?”

“A thousand Galleons.”

Ron whistled lowly. “Wish I knew who done it,” he commented to Scott. “That’d be a right pretty payday.”

“For a thousand?” Scott shrugged dismissively. “They can do better than that.”

“Like you wouldn’t rat someone out for a thousand Galleons,” Ron scoffed at him.

Scott seemed to think about it for a second. “I suppose I would,” he said finally. “Yeah, if I knew who it was, I’d go turn them in right now… but instead I’m going to take another bite of Harry’s bacon.”
Harry swiftly intercepted Scott’s second attempt on his plate with a tightly clenched fork. “Hands off! Hermione, this is probably because of Malfoy. Maybe he stole the necklace… or had someone steal it for him…”

Hermione gave him a condescending look. “Harry, why would Draco steal something that was being held for him?”

“Dunno,” Harry mused. “Maybe he ran out of money. Lucius might not know about this…”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Hermione sighed.

“Hey, look at that,” Scott interrupted again. Hermione lowered her paper to see what he was talking about and realised that he had been looking at the front page from his position across from her.

Curious, she closed it again and turned it over. “What?”


While Hermione wouldn’t have used quite that description (or been that rude), she endorsed the sentiment. “They’re getting bolder,” she fretted, reading through the article. “This isn’t the first time either.”

“Anybody we know dead?” Ron asked her as casually as possible, and, for a moment, Hermione’s heart stopped. He was speaking to her! Then the import of his query hit home, and she swallowed hard.

“No,” she answered quickly. “No, nobody we knew.”

“Meanwhile the Ministry are sitting around, circle-jerking and waiting for someone to do something,” Scott sneered.

“No disagreements here,” Harry said bitterly. Hermione sighed a little. If anyone had a reason to hate the Ministry for Magic, it was Harry.

“Don’t they get it?” Scott said forcefully, spraying the table in front of him with yet more fragments of scrambled eggs. “They’ve got nothing less than a civil insurrection on their hands.”

Harry angrily stabbed his fork into his food. “Getting it is not the Ministry’s strong suit.”

“You need to fight fire with fire! The Death Eaters want a guerilla war? That’s fine, give them one. Go firebomb some of their mansions. Does the Ministry think these assholes have a copyright on ambushes or some shit? Take them out!” Scott emphasised his plan by pointing his fork menacingly at Hermione. “Bunch of dumbasses you guys got in charge over here, good grief.”

Harry and Ron looked at each other with twin expressions of amusement as Scott ranted on. Hermione frowned. “That’s all well and good for you to say,” she told Scott, “but I don’t think you can understand the realities of the situation. There are manpower limitations, you know. Or were you going to volunteer to do all of that yourself?”

“I didn’t volunteer,” Scott grumbled darkly, reaching for his glass of juice and washing down what was left of his eggs.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”
“It means shut it and eat your damn food.”

Hermione glared at him. Why did he always have to be so infuriating?

“Cheerful this morning, isn’t he? A right ray of sunshine,” Ron said to Harry.

“Could be a nutritional problem,” Harry blandly replied. “All that bacon.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Scott said sarcastically. “Or maybe it’s because you don’t have chicken fried steak at Hogwarts you treacle-loving twat.”

“You’re still hung up over that?” Harry laughed at him.

Ron shook his head. “Let it go, mate. Let it go.”

“I think,” Scott mused conversationally, holding up his fork and looking at it closely, “that I’ll stick this fork in your fucking eyeball.”

“No you won’t,” Harry said, but he still leaned back warily.

“If you’re done threatening Harry’s eyes,” Hermione said primly, “then we need to finish up and get to class.”

Scott rolled his eyes. “It’s eight forty-three, that’s plenty of time.”

“Not if you’re Neville,” Ron said, pointing towards the entrance to the Great Hall.

Neville had just entered, looking more dishevelled than usual and carrying his books haphazardly held under one arm. He was red-faced and panting when he sat down next to Scott, dropping half of his texts on the floor in the process. Scott shoved the platter of bacon his way, and Neville nodded in wordless thanks, breathing hard as he piled his plate with whatever food was easily in reach.

“You’ve got ten minutes before you have to sprint to class,” Scott advised him, “so take a deep breath because you’re gonna be holding it.”

“Problems – with – my plants–” Neville explained between rapid mouthfuls.

“Neville, slow down before you choke to death,” Hermione told him exasperatedly. What was it with boys and their suicidal eating habits?

“Can’t.” He took another massive bite.

Ron observed as eggs and bacon disappeared with incredible speed into Neville’s maw. “I don't know about you lot, but I'm impressed.”

“Now you know what it’s like watching you,” Harry said.

“What, like you’re any better? You always give me a run for my money come time for dessert.” Ron paused. “You treacle-loving twat.”

“You like it, too!”

Hermione bit her lower lip in an unconscious gesture of worry. Despite her personal inability to think of much else, Ron seemed to be largely unaffected by the events that had transpired the previous evening. Was all this joking banter a good sign, or did it mean he had stopped caring?
Maybe he had simply written her off as a loss after she had fled from him. Maybe he would try kissing some other girl instead… someone who would give him a better reaction! Oh no! She couldn’t let that happen!

Fortunately Defence Against the Dark Arts class would occur immediately after breakfast, so Ron wouldn’t be in any strategically viable positions for kissing any time soon. She had to keep him isolated until she could corner him for a good talking-to. And under no circumstances was he ever, ever, to be alone with Lavender Brown. Hermione might not have been the most socially experienced girl around but she was far from blind, and she knew exactly what Lavender had been up to as of late. Hermione’s history with Lavender had been rocky at points, but, for the most part, they got along well enough. That could easily change.

“I know I said to take a deep breath,” Scott was saying to Neville, “but that was sort of ‘rinse and repeat’ advice, you know? You’re supposed to do it again as the situation warrants.” Neville had been turning an alarming shade of blue.

“Gotta hurry” was Neville’s choked response.

“You gotta breathe, too. Pick one.”

It was only a matter of minutes before poor Neville was forced to abandon his half-eaten breakfast and head with everyone else towards Defence against the Dark Arts. Harry, Ron and Scott held themselves with the air of people preparing for battle. Hermione wished it didn’t have to be that way, but she had to privately admit that Professor Snape hadn’t exactly helped the situation any. Hermione always tried to discourage the undying enmity that Ron and Harry held for the professor, but, to her dismay, Scott had joined them in their antipathy with a cheerful abandon.

Professor Snape’s only words to the class upon his arrival were “Be seated.” His near silence set the tone for the rest of the lesson as he sketched out the plan on the board, and they once again divided into pairs to practice nonverbal spell casting. The stillness was contagious. Even as the students began to separate themselves for the exercise, the ambient level of conversation never rose above a dull mutter. Scott squared off against Neville while Harry partnered with Seamus, and Hermione found herself once again at the mercy of Ron’s blue eyes.

“Right,” Ron mumbled, not meeting her gaze. “Guess you can go first.” He held his wand loosely in one hand and didn’t seem all that interested in defending himself.

Any thoughts of running away from… from whatever was going on between the two of them were wiped away by his defeated posture. Given Hermione’s disposition, it was very difficult for her to admit that she had been wrong. But she was a Gryffindor, and that meant finding courage when it was needed. “Ron, about what happened—”

“S’all right,” he said, looking at the floor. “You didn’t… I didn’t think it through, so I shouldn’t have done… that, you know…” She opened her mouth to immediately contradict him, but he continued, “But I did do a lot of thinking last night, and I decided it was worse to lose you as a friend… So I won’t say anything, if you don’t want.” He shrugged but it was a sad gesture. “We can just keep going like we usually do.”

Should Hermione be touched or infuriated that he was willing to bury the entire affair for her sake? The two emotions warred within her until ‘touched’ won by a thin margin. “I know it wasn’t what either us imagined,” she murmured, “and I’m sorry things didn’t go better—”

“I gave it my best go, Hermione,” Ron whispered miserably.
“--but I’m not sorry it happened,” Hermione finished, raising her voice over his.

“I will remind the class that there is no talking during nonverbal spell casting,” Professor Snape said from the front of the room, his dark eyes fixed on Hermione and Ron.

Hermione immediately shut her mouth and tried to look like she was working. The irony of herself being in that situation was lost on her, at least for the moment. Ron’s mouth was still hanging open in disbelief. He had evidently not expected her to say that. He remembered enough to raise his wand like he was using it and whispered, “What are you saying?”

She would have thought that was obvious. “I think we should try again.”

Ron froze despite the fact that he was supposed to be making some attempt at wand motions.

“Ron!” Hermione hissed, waving her wand at him. He snapped out of it.

“You... you want to try again?”

“Yes.” It was unbelievable how a one syllable word could contain so much meaning.

Ron licked his lips. “When?”

As soon as possible, she thought to herself, but didn’t say it. With that in mind she looked towards Professor Snape to make sure he was otherwise occupied. “After class,” she told Ron quietly. He went slightly pale but nodded anyway.

When they sat back down for the closing lecture, Harry clearly wanted to ask her what she had been discussing with Ron but couldn’t risk it – Professor Snape always kept too close an eye on the student he loved to hate. On Harry’s other side Scott was also keeping his silence, seeing as how he was in the same boat. That didn’t stop him from inking out a highly childish drawing of Hermione and Ron sitting in a tree, ‘K-I-S-S-I-N-G’ according to the caption he had scrawled at the bottom. Hermione glared at him so fiercely that he quickly hid the offending picture in his bag. If Professor Snape had confiscated it, there was little doubt he’d have shown it to the entire class, after which Hermione would have had no choice but to murder Scott in his sleep.

The rest of the lesson passed by in a blur as Hermione attempted both to pay attention and prevent herself from staring at Ron’s mouth. She failed on both accounts. If the four boys were depending on her notes in order to complete their homework then they were in for a nasty shock come revision time.

Fortunately it wasn’t long before Professor Snape’s curt dismissal set in motion the usual clatter of pushed back chairs and rustling book bags. Hermione packed her textbook away, noting with dismay that her hands were trembling. Was she really going to do this? It was one thing to be spontaneous. Premeditation took a lot more courage, and Hermione had a history of not being able to think under fire as well as someone like Harry. Who knew what she would say or do once Ron got his hands on her? Oh, dear God, she couldn’t think things like that. The idea of Ron’s hands on her (a phrase far too sexual for comfort) made her weak-kneed while a familiar warmth spread through her lower torso. This was dangerous territory.

So why was the thought of stopping unbearable?

Once out in the hallway, Hermione managed to summon back her anger with Scott to provide a nice distraction. “If Professor Snape had seen that picture…” she began threateningly.

“Then you’d have died of shame and wouldn’t care any more,” Scott cut in. “C’mon Harry, I’ve
got some stuff to tell you about Dumbledore – you know my sister went to see him? Don’t wait up, guys.” And with that, Scott grabbed Harry by the arm and hurried him away down the hallway.

Neville watched them go with a startled expression before realising that he had been left to fend for himself in the company of Ron and Hermione. “I need to talk to Luna,” he said haltingly and followed Scott and Harry’s example in making himself scarce--

--which left Hermione completely alone in a hallway with Ron, who still seemed slightly stunned by the sudden departure of all their friends. There was a moment of silence before Ron said, “What picture?”

“A stupid thing Scott drew.” Hermione gathered her courage and, with a voice that was not quite steady, said, “Well, this way then.”

There was something extremely incongruous about her current situation – though it wasn’t so much ‘incongruous,’ it was perhaps more akin to ‘the end of the world.’ Hermione Granger was leading a boy off into a secluded alcove to, well… snog. The word gave life to what she was about to do. A snogging session. With Ron. In an alcove. It was definitely English, so why didn’t it allow itself to be comprehended? What had she gotten herself into? Why, why did she have to have run away from him the night before?! Maybe she could have already been acclimated to kissing Ron by now. Practice made perfect after all. Snogging couldn’t be any different. If she would approach things rationally, there was no reason why they couldn’t talk it over and then have the second kiss that they both deserved.

These comforting thoughts of reason went straight out the window when the pair reached a sheltered spot in a hallway that was well off the beaten path for most students. Their impulsive action just as suddenly gave way to inaction, and the two found themselves at a loss as to how to begin.

They really needed to get over these awkward silences. Hermione took a deep breath and broke it. “I need to explain myself first,” she said as firmly as she could manage. “I shouldn’t have left last night. Luna came in, and I was so embarrassed… I didn’t think. And--” she involuntarily fought the next words for a split second but forced them out-- “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Ron said to the floor. He had to be talking to the floor because he still wasn’t looking at her. “I wasn’t, you know… very good at it.”

Count on Ron to make this an issue of self-doubt. It wasn’t like she had done any better – she had just stood there like a lump! “I’m sure we both had some unrealistic expectations, but we can hardly expect to be all that great without any practice,” she said logically. “And that’s not why I left.” He opened his mouth and she held up a hand sharply. “Let me finish! I was embarrassed that Luna had seen us, and that I didn’t respond very well. You surprised me. But that’s all. I’m glad it happened, and I want to try it again.” Had she really said that?

She must have because Ron was looking dumbstruck again.

Hermione had built up some steam with her confessions and used that inertia to plough onwards and upwards. “No time like the present,” she said a little breathlessly, eyeing Ron’s mouth in what she hoped was a manner blatant enough to pierce the fog of self-pity he was mired in.

But Ron had always been more than a little thick when it came to reading her. “You… you want me to…”

“Here, let’s try this,” Hermione said, the beginnings of impatience building in her. She only had so
much bravery to work with; why couldn’t he just get on with it?

Moving closer to him she took his hands in hers and placed them on her hips. Ron’s arms went stiff as if she were imbued with an electric current. Of course, she thought, if Ron was feeling the same things that Hermione was when she touched him, then maybe she really was electrified in some way. Maybe they both were. The warmth and smell of his body so close to her own inspired a delicate dance in every one of her nerve endings. Once his hands were well seated, she placed hers on his shoulders. He had grown so tall – he’d have to bend over quite a bit while she stood on her tip toes if this was going to work. In the future, maybe Ron could just pick her up instead… That would be lovely…

“Hermione?” Ron whispered shakily. She reluctantly pulled herself out of her hormone-induced haze and met his eyes.

“This is nice,” Hermione said inanely. It was, in fact, an accurate, if brief, description of their position. She felt his thumbs move a little against her waist and shivered with the tremor that ran down her spine.

“Yeah,” he breathed. Was he leaning in closer? She wasn’t sure she was ready yet! Maybe she should close her eyes? No, knowing Ron, he’d take that to mean that he’d bored her to sleep. She needed to do something though!

It was in this burst of panic that Hermione, hoping to meet Ron halfway, pulled his head down towards her and pressed her lips to his.

Neither of them were really doing anything but holding the kiss in place, but it was already a hundred, no, a thousand times better than their last one, due simply to the way they were holding each other. It was that same lack of action that had caused so much trouble in the first place, Hermione dazedly remembered. Tentatively, she tried to move her lips a little bit and squeezed his shoulders more tightly. Surely she could provoke some kind of response from Ron if he was feeling even a fraction of what she was.

Hermione received the response that she was looking for – and then some. Ron groaned into her mouth like some metaphorical dam had burst inside of him and, without warning, scooped her completely up into his arms and devoured her lips with his own—inexpertly, yes, but she was not complaining.

It was so sudden that she couldn’t suppress a squeak of both surprise and delight. Unfortunately, Ron had never been good at discerning the subtleties. At her noise of what he took to be protest he immediately let go of her. “Sorry,” he gasped. “Sorry, I… oh fuck.”

What on earth was he thinking, just stopping like that just when things were getting good? Hermione wasn’t going to stand for it. She wanted this, needed this. Ron had awoken a physical craving in her, and there was no way he could be allowed to back off. As far as she was concerned, they were past the point of no return.

With that in mind, she grabbed the back of his head with more strength than was strictly necessary and greedily resumed the kiss, applying more suction this time. Yes, that was wonderful – suction was key.

Hermione learned more about the pleasures and pitfalls of intimacy in the next few minutes than she had in all her time at school. All her reading, all her eavesdropping on the bragging of tousle-haired girls, all her furtive observations of dark figures twisting and groping in castle corners had not prepared her for this.
In the interests of being instructive, she moaned approvingly when Ron ran his tongue over her lower lip. It was important to clearly indicate what was enjoyable – in this case, everything. Well, almost everything. Despite the pleasure thrumming through her body her neck was beginning to cramp and her ankles were giving out from standing on her toes for so long. Her lungs were demanding more oxygen than her nose alone could provide. Reluctantly, she broke away.

How long they stood there, breathing hard, she couldn’t have said. Ron raised his arms to gently cup her face in his hands, and Hermione’s heart did what felt like a somersault. “I think,” she said in between gulps of air, “that we’ve improved.”

Ron nodded, looking like he didn’t trust his own voice.

Though unwilling, Hermione forced herself to let go of Ron and smoothed out her clothing. There wasn’t much she could do about the state of her hair or lips, but, with any luck, nobody would notice. Ron’s condition wasn’t much better. She absently reached over and tugged on the hem of his shirt, straightening it. “We should probably go back,” she said. She wasn’t too happy about it but also didn’t fancy the idea of being caught snogging in a hallway.

“I suppose so.” Ron didn’t sound particularly thrilled either. His tone was huskier than normal, and she felt that shiver again.

Unable to resist, Hermione raised herself again and kissed him, softly this time. He returned it with a tenderness that made her chest ache, and she wished that they could have all the time in the world to themselves. They needed the time and space to demonstrate this new thing between them. She released him and turned to leave, reminding herself that there was no reason to be sad. Ron would be right next to her where he always was. Given enough practice, perhaps they’d even learn to be comfortable being intimate (or relatively intimate) in public.

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“Hermione!” Ron stopped her by grabbing her hand, a note of desperation in his voice. She turned to him questioningly. Ron stood frozen with his mouth partially open for a moment before blurring out, “Will you be my girlfriend?”

Hermione should have expected it – she would have, had she been thinking clearly. It was Ron; of course he would require some sort of clear affirmation. It was moderately amazing that he’d worked up the nerve to ask her outright. Then again, he had been the one to initiate their first kiss. They seemed to be trading the role of aggressor back and forth between the two of them.

So Hermione squeezed Ron’s hand and answered, “Of course I will.”

A massive amount of tension visibly flowed out of him. “Brilliant,” he said, grinning at her.

“You thought I might say no—after all that?”

“Bloody hell, Hermione, I never have the slightest idea what you’re going to do next,” Ron told her. “I was just glad you didn’t smack me after last night.”

“Oh, Ron,” Hermione sighed. He could be so endearingly clueless.

“We’re all right then?” Ron asked her, reaching out and holding her other hand. Hermione revelled in the new-found connection.

“Yes,” she answered him, moving closer to him with one overriding purpose in mind, “we’re going to be just fine.”
Luna Lovegood enjoyed hallways.

A hallway was like a trip through a miniature time zone, a second of life contained within two walls, a floor and a ceiling. Every step brought you closer to an end, or even a beginning depending on how you looked at it. A hallway took you to where you wanted to go without taxing your mind with distractions like direction or distance – you could only move in one of two ways, so that left you free to think of other things. Luna got a lot of thinking done in hallways. They were endlessly useful for that sort of thing.

To be sure, she could see how other people might find hallways too linear an experience. But those people must not have noticed all the doors lining the walls, each one holding the promise of discovery. And even though you could only move towards the point where the hallway must inevitably finish, well… You never knew if there was something wonderful there, now did you?

Life was like that. There were so many options and just not enough time to explore them all. Even the bad decisions could always teach you something important about yourself or someone else. It was all a matter of perspective.

The particular hallway she was traversing this morning was a favourite of hers since it contained a door which led to the courtyard. The courtyard was also a good place to think, when she wanted to think outdoors. Thoughts seemed to grow better outside. Too bad it was probably going to rain. Rain could be relaxing, but also distracting. Weather was a fascinating facet of the world that sometimes pulled her attention away from the more important things.

Such weighty pondering of rain, courtyards and hallways were brought to a halt when Luna quite suddenly found herself cornered by several Slytherins.

Their leader, unsurprisingly, was Pansy Parkinson. For whatever reason, Pansy had always seemed to take a particular delight in tormenting Luna – perhaps because she was such a frequent and easy target of opportunity. That seemed as likely a motive as any though Luna suspected that the older girl didn’t really need a rationale to pick on someone. The Slytherins grouped themselves around Luna to prevent escape while she stared up at them, unperturbed. She wondered if all Slytherins were so tall. Perhaps there was something in the water they drank in their common room? The possible discovery of another conspiracy briefly excited her before Pansy roughly shoved her back into the wall.

Luna wished they wouldn’t do that. At least the other Ravenclaws only took her things and didn’t push her. Being pushed was an unpleasant experience, one that hadn’t improved with age.

“Where are you going, Loony?” Pansy sneered.

Luna thought maybe she had learned that expression from Draco Malfoy. She decided not to answer. She’d learned it didn’t really matter if she said something since they’d only shove her again anyway.

Sure enough, she bounced painfully off the wall again a moment later. She decided to try a different passive strategy and, instead of meeting their eyes, looked down at the floor. Certainly the floor was more interesting than the Slytherins. She began counting flagstones, one by one. Two, three, four… How much time did it take to set down and cement a floor like this one? She wondered if perhaps Scott might know. He seemed to often know odd things like that.

“Don’t want to talk to me, Loony?” Rather than avert confrontation, Luna’s refusal to acknowledge her presence only seemed to goad Pansy on to further violence.
The Slytherins snickered, and one of them in the back spoke up. “Maybe you shoved her a little too hard.”

Pansy’s eyes narrowed as if in thought. “Maybe you’re right, Harper. I’ll see if I can knock some sense back into her.” She moved to push Luna again, and the shorter girl braced herself--

“WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON HERE?”

The push never came to Luna’s relief. The Slytherins pulled away from her and she looked up to see what was happening. Scott was bearing down the corridor towards them with Neville in tow. He stopped in front of the massed Slytherin students with his fists clenched dangerously at his sides, apparently completely indifferent to the fact that he was outnumbered. Neville looked angry too, and, while Scott and the Slytherins glared at each other, he leaned forward and grabbed Luna’s hand, pulling her to relative safety next to him. That was very nice of him, she thought. Neville was a good friend. She really ought to tell him so.

“Perhaps you didn’t hear me,” Scott said after a moment. There was a whimsical smile on his face that contrasted with his dark tone. “I asked you a question, cunt-rag.”

Pansy’s face coloured. “How dare you!” she hissed. “Filthy Mudblood…”

Neville’s eyes widened at the almost casual use of the insult. Luna thought it was a very cruel thing to say, but also thought that it didn’t seem to bother Scott very much. Perhaps ‘Mudblood’ wasn’t considered especially offensive in America? She made a mental note to ask him.

Scott looked at Pansy as if he was attempting to identify something particularly unpleasant he’d found on the bottom of his shoe. “Yeah, that one never gets old, right? You Purebloods sure are doing a good job of making me jealous. Maybe someday I’ll inherit a bunch of money I don’t deserve and bang my first cousin. I could be lounging in a mansion with a bunch of little inbred retard kids that would look like… you.”

All of this was only peripheral to Luna. Scott, Luna was thinking to herself, was an interesting friend to have. He was always very nice to her and was usually very funny, though he often said things that she didn’t understand.

Sometimes though, he would go all cold. Luna thought he wasn’t quite the same when he was like that. Confronting Pansy Parkinson had made him turn cold again; so she tried to ignore it and think about Snorkacks instead. Still, she couldn’t suppress a shiver. Neville must have seen it, because he laid a supporting hand on her shoulder. His hand was very warm, she noticed.

Her attention refocused on the altercation taking place. Pansy was saying something about how Draco would come after Scott for what he had said. Luna didn’t think Scott seemed very impressed by that. Given his temperament she wondered if he might welcome a fight with Draco.

“Good, I look forward to seeing him. Oh, and tell him that if his mom asks about me, he can tell her the check is in the mail and that I’m sorry for not bringing cash last time.”

Luna didn’t know very many things about America, or American Muggles for that matter, though she thought that maybe Snorkacks were more common there than in Sweden. She decided that later she’d repeat what Scott said to Harry since he seemed to understand Scott the most. Hermione might also, but it was probably something rude and she wouldn’t want to answer. Hermione could be strange about things like that. They were only words, after all. Hermione placed more importance on words than Luna thought was strictly necessary.
The mood was ugly in the hallway, ruining the good vibes it usually produced. She hoped there wasn’t going to be a brawl. They were outnumbered, and Neville could be seriously hurt if they ganged up on him. She wasn’t worried about Scott. It seemed like he could probably take care of himself if it came down to that, though whether he could take care of Neville and Luna at the same time was in question. The largest Slytherin moved forward menacingly.

Fortunately Luna’s fears were put to rest before things became escalated beyond the point of no return. Professor McGonagall had come down from one of the stairways and was approaching the seething students, her expression even more severe than usual. The Slytherins quickly re-established some distance between themselves and Scott, including some poor attempts to look casual.

“Is there a problem here, Mr. Kharan?” McGonagall enquired, eye-balling the retreating Slytherins.

“No,” Scott replied coolly, “just leaving a message for Malfoy. Thanks for your time,” he said, addressing the Slytherins.

Pansy flushed again but, under the gimlet eye of Professor McGonagall, had no choice but to sullenly turn and leave. Luna had little doubt that she’d hold a grudge, and Luna would be paying the price for Scott’s intervention at some later point. Still, dignity was important, and she was grateful to Scott and Neville for helping her maintain some of hers.

After they had left, the stern Professor fixed her gaze on Scott. “I don’t suppose I need remind you, Mr. Kharan, that there is no fighting in the halls.”

“No ma’am.” Scott gave her what he probably thought was an innocent smile, but it didn’t work all that well.

The look she gave him clearly showed that she knew what had been about to happen, but she said nothing and continued on her way. Neville let out a slight sigh of relief while Scott shook himself like he was shrugging off the coldness. “That same statement every time... If there’s ‘no fighting in the halls’, specifically, that strikes me as implying there is fighting somewhere else...” he muttered to himself.

Neville motioned to Luna. “We’d better hurry to class. We’ll go with you to the door just in case they come back.”

That was very thoughtful of him, Luna mused to herself, as they hastily made their way to the staircase. Things had turned out rather well, all considered. Now if only she could remember what she had been thinking about in the first place, before she had been interrupted... Snorkacks? No, that wasn’t right. Something to do with rain and thoughts... Or was it weather in general? Oh yes, that was it.

Luna Lovegood enjoyed hallways.

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Life as of late had been a bit odd at Hogwarts.

What made that in itself so strange was that as far as Ginny herself went, life had been coasting along at a constant level of ordinary. Her involvement with what she considered a key group of people close to her had been minimal at best. Not for the first time, she keenly felt the isolation between her and Ron, Hermione and Harry. Part of this was because they were in different grade
levels, but the fact was that Ginny simply didn’t move in the same circles. She admitted to herself that she hadn’t done much to close the distance. There were a few reasons for that, but most of them had to do with a certain green-eyed teenager who simply refused to get out of her head.

Her own comings and goings were encased in a bubble of normalcy. Ginny’s days were consumed with friends, Quidditch and school work. The months slipped by with regularity, and nothing really stood out in contrast to the patterned procession of her life. Sometimes it seemed like she breathed for the moments when she could zoom off on her broom and leave her thoughts behind.

But it was difficult to ignore all the sights that were to be seen only out of the corner of her eye. Ginny had never forgotten Hermione’s concerns about Scott Kharan. Had anything ever happened with him? The new student had popped up in the general social strata during the early days of class but since then had mostly faded into the woodwork as far as being a topic of conversation. The gossip mill went through interests rapidly. Scott had been a worthy subject during the first week or so of school, but attentions were quick to find newer targets.

Despite this there seemed little question that something out of the ordinary was going on. Ginny might not have been spending all that much time with Harry, Ron and Hermione, but she knew them and therefore could sense when they were embroiled in another secret agenda. Dynamics were shifting, things were happening behind closed doors, and Scott seemed to be with them at the centre of it all.

Ginny came into contact with Harry’s circle of friends like ships passing in the night. Her self-imposed isolation chafed. She had enjoyed emerging from her previous role as the shrinking violet, and she liked having an extended group of friends. But there was something special about being close to Harry Potter. Harry was where the action was – in more ways than one. Life around him was unpredictable and dangerous. It was important.

Ginny would be dishonest with herself to deny those facts, but she in turn also felt dishonest devoting so many of her ephemeral thoughts to Harry. Dean was the designated occupant for that corner of Ginny’s brain. Harry was a stubborn cancer that had never been fully excised. Dean was a fun enough sort of bloke to be around and not a bad kisser. But he wasn’t Harry. Was she an awful person for feeling that way?

She just couldn’t help noticing Harry. When he had been so absorbed with that potions book of his, it had frightened her. He of all people should know better than to trust a strange book! Nothing had come of it yet, but Ginny couldn’t shake the feeling she had about it. Every time she saw Harry carrying his book bag, she had the urge to rip it from his grasp. She was probably overreacting, she knew.

She tried to put it out of her mind, wondering how to put a final four inches on her Defence Against the Dark Arts essay while her head was churning at such a pace. She needed a break.

Pushing back her quill and partially inked parchment with a decisive gesture, Ginny stood and walked to her window.

Outside, the grounds of Hogwarts were covered in a thin, frozen crust of frost and patchy snow. The sky was a solid sheet of overcast clouds, dousing the world in a feathery grey. It was the kind of scene that belonged in a brush painting. All things beneath the horizon were locked in a sleepy stillness that dulled the senses and encouraged the eyes to close. Every blink carried the threat of interminability. One look was enough for Ginny to seriously consider going to bed.

An early bedtime was only a dream with the essay standing in her way. Her interlude with the window had not improved her situation; there was only so much time a person could waste staring
out a cold pane of glass. Ginny supposed that windowsill-brooding just wasn’t a strong instinct in
her. That was Harry’s territory.

There she went, right back to Harry again. Her thoughts were a Quaffle tossed up into the air,
inevitably returning to earth. Harry captured her in his gravity, and Ginny moved towards him as if
they were two heavenly bodies locked in a mutual pull. Not that Ginny would have minded being
drawn closer to his heavenly body…

Sodding Merlin, how could she even look Dean in the eye these days? Though that wasn’t usually
a problem. Ginny and Dean never did much looking, or talking. Their relationship seemed to exist
primarily as a joint snogging venture. She was fond of Dean – but she was also fond of pie. 'Fond'
wasn’t the strongest word in the English language.

The truth was that being with Dean while Harry was around made Ginny feel like she was merely
settling.

That thought was so awful that Ginny actually shivered. Dean didn’t deserve that. He was a good
bloke and a decent boyfriend.

And with a lukewarm declaration of passion like that, she thought wryly, how could things
between them be anything less than perfect? Maybe real passion belonged only in books and music,
and there was nothing unhealthy about her attitude towards Dean. Or— just maybe—her passion
was buried beneath a trap door of denial, to be unearthed without warning by sharp, green eyes….  

She would drive herself mad like this, obsessing over the unattainable. That was why she had
resolved to get over Harry in the first place. Ginny refused to admit to the possibility that the
resolution was dissolving away like almost all grand intentions of personal change did. The mind
was malleable, but the heart stubbornly clung to the past and the way it thought that things ought to
be.

Ginny needed a change of venue. Reaching back she removed her hair from the ponytail that she
had used to hold it away from her face during homework and worked it loose with a shake of her
head. A quick glance in her mirror confirmed that she wasn’t a mess and didn’t require any
emergency brushwork, so she left her dormitory and headed for the common room.

She wasn’t sure who was she was hoping to see, if anyone. It would be nice if Harry and Hermione
and maybe Neville were sitting around the fire having a chat – it wouldn’t be difficult to insinuate
herself into the conversation. Unfortunately the chances of Ron not being there were slim, and she
didn’t want to see him any more than he wanted to see her. At least, that’s what she thought. Ron
hadn’t been glaring at her every time they were within eyesight of each other lately, but that
notwithstanding, Ginny was still mad at him. It wasn’t her fault that Ron hadn’t been able to sort
things through with Hermione, and yet he had taken his frustrations out on her. Ginny wouldn’t
settle for anything less than an apology.

Instead of a welcoming group of friends, Ginny was disappointed to see Scott Kharan sitting by
himself in an easy chair next to the fireplace. Harry and the rest were conspicuously absent. He
was cradling what appeared to be a copy of *Hogwarts: A History* on his lap, though, at the rate he
was turning the pages, Ginny knew he had to only be skimming it. Not that she could blame him.
*Hogwarts: A History* was not the most compelling work of literature—despite Hermione’s
opinions.

Well, beggars couldn’t be choosers. Ginny’s interactions with Scott were limited to a brief
conversation on the train and a few words exchanged while passing in hallways, but he seemed like
an approachable person, though there was something about him that… well, she didn’t know what
it was. Still, anything was better than going back to her dorm and attempting to finish her essay.

With that in mind, she seated herself across from Scott, attempting to give herself the casual air of someone settling down at random. She didn’t want him to think she was trying to glean any specific information, even if that was partly the truth. “Hi, Scott,” she said. It was an innocuous opener.

Scott looked up from his book with those eyes of his that were so oddly… well, calculating would be the best way to put it. Ginny had sometimes seen - as she viewed him in passing - that he looked at people as if they were mathematical in nature, not individuals but problems to be studied and solved. Maybe Harry and the others hadn’t noticed, and it was easier for Ginny to see since she was on the outside of their group. Or maybe it was just her.

Regardless, it was uncomfortable to be subjected to what she felt was a penetrating and strangely detached grey gaze. Ginny resisted the urge to shift in her seat.

“What’s up, Ginny,” Scott replied, closing his book.

Ginny took that to be a sign of conversational acceptance. “Where is everybody?”

“I don’t know everybody, so it’s kind of hard to say. However, Neville is down at the greenhouses checking on something or the other, Luna is probably in the Ravenclaw tower, Harry has departed temporarily, and Ron and Hermione are off somewhere, no doubt canoodling as we speak.”

“Canoodling?” Did that mean what she thought it did?

“They’ve taken up the most popular sport in the world – tonsil hockey. I haven’t been keeping up to date, but last time I checked the score was tied.”

Ginny was discovering for herself what Scott’s other friends were already familiar with; the blond boy had a frustrating affinity for slang and turn of phrase. “Wait – you mean they’re snogging?!”

“Like it’s going out of style. I’m afraid your most recent interlude with Dean was tame in comparison,” Scott said apologetically as if it were some sort of contest Ginny had lost. “The saliva Ron and Hermione have swapped can probably be measured in litres. Enthusiasm has a lot to do with the choice of partner.”

Choice of partner? What exactly was he implying? Ginny guiltily remembered her thoughts of Dean and Harry. Scott was hitting a little close to home. “When did this happen?”

“I can’t say for sure, but I’d put good money that it all went down after DADA on Monday. That was after an aborted start on Saturday, of course. Seems like smooth sailing for now though, God bless those horny little bastards.”

Ginny exploded. “I can’t believe him!” she hissed. “After all that, that—”

“Crap?”

“—crap he gave me about snogging Dean, he goes around and snogs Hermione, that bloody hypocrite!” Ginny raged. “What an unbelievable prat! I should hex him into next week!”

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“Just keep it above the belt. I know you’re mad,” Scott said, “and rightfully so. But you need to consider Hermione’s place in all this. Before you go and hex Ron’s balls off, keep in mind that Hermione might have a use for them, and this isn’t her fault.”
He had a point. Ginny reluctantly calmed herself. Hermione was an innocent bystander and shouldn’t be dragged into the mess Ron had created.

“But look at this from Ron’s perspective for a second,” Scott continued. “How would you feel if you walked into a room, and Ron and Hermione were competing in the oral Olympics?”

“It wouldn’t be pleasant,” Ginny admitted, “but that does not give him the right to call me a slag!”

“He didn’t call you a slag.”

“He was going to.” Ginny stubbornly crossed her arms.

“Not necessarily. There are several other words that start with ‘S’ and mean the same thing,” Scott pointed out.

“I thought you were defending him?”

“I never pretended to be consistent,” Scott said airily.

“I deserve an apology.”

“You might forget all about that after tonight.” Scott seemed distracted by something. “Serious shit going down, you know. Crazy stuff.”

Now this was the sort of thing Ginny had been missing out on. “Like what?” she asked with a hint of eagerness she couldn’t repress. Was she insane for almost wishing that they were going to storm the Ministry again? She wasn’t blind to the cost that had been incurred last time. But that desire for action was in her blood; it was a part of what made her love Quidditch so much. Any danger could be faced in the light of an important purpose, and Harry’s purpose was the most important thing of all.

“Truth,” Scott muttered to himself. “The great cold that surrounds and brings all of us down to that same middle level… of temperature, and things that we’ve lost.” He frowned. “Who wrote that? That’s from something… Stonémarc? Aether?”

What the bloody hell was he talking about? “What?”

“Do you think I’m a good gambler?”

Ginny needed to find some sort of footing when it came to talking to Scott. Non sequiturs were difficult to respond to. “I really wouldn’t know.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Scott sighed. “I could have used a boost in confidence.”

“It might be easier to help if I had any idea what you’re talking about,” Ginny said irritably.

If Scott had heard her, he made no indication of having done so. “I’m making a possible mistake tonight. Sometimes it doesn’t work unless you’re willing to go for the full effect, and that’s not always an option.” He rubbed at his eyes tiredly. “But, as they say, nam et ipsa scientia potestas es.”

“You’re completely mad, you know that?” Ginny stared at him. “You’re not even speaking English.”

“Are you busy tonight?”
“Are you even listening to me?” Ginny demanded angrily. What was wrong with him? She couldn’t imagine Hermione putting up with this sort of maddening self-indulgent monologue. Ginny might as well have been talking to herself.

“Yeah, I heard you. Are you busy tonight?”

“I have homework, but other than that no,” Ginny grudgingly answered.

“Okay. When Harry gets back, I’d like it if you came with us. We’re holding a little get-together tonight, and you should be there,” Scott told her.

“Like a DA meeting?”

“Sort of. Just hang around until Harry gets back.”

What Ginny really wanted was to get up and smack some answers out of Scott, but she also didn’t want to jeopardise her chance to be back in the team again. If Harry was going to do something dangerous tonight, she was going to be there. The fight against Voldemort was just as much hers as it was his, no matter what Harry’s martyr complex made him think.

But if Scott was assembling nothing more than a midnight kitchen raiding party, Ginny was going to kill him.

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“Hey,” Scott snapped his fingers twice in quick succession to gain Harry’s attention. “Earth to Harry.”

Harry shook slightly, emerging not from a daydream but rather a pleasant blankness similar to sleeping with both eyes open. It was the tail end of the last class for the day, and Harry was more than ready to clear his mind of all scholarly pursuits and relax in the common room after supper. Some days just seemed to go on forever.

“What’s that?” Harry asked Scott, leaning back in his chair and trying to stretch as best he could. “You need something?”

“Yes, actually. Your undivided attention will do for a start.”

“I’m listening,” Harry said, wondering what Scott was on about now.

“I made some decisions last night,” Scott said lowly, “of a delicate nature. It’s time to take a chance and it’s entirely possible this could blow up in my face.”

Harry glanced around the room to make sure no one was listening in. “What could?”

“It’s difficult to operate without the Primes in the know. When everyone is in on the same gig, you can do what you want without having to create some convoluted explanation for it. I’m going to explain myself.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “You mean tell everyone about – you? Everyone?”

“No, not everyone,” Scott said exasperatedly. “I said I was taking a chance; I didn’t say I was insane.”

“All right, I get it,” Harry groused in irritation. “Maybe if you want me to know something you should try saying it in some basic form of English.”
“Oh, that’s your excuse for everything,” Scott said dismissively. “Look, I need a room. If we can find a place to sit down and talk this over, there’s no reason why everyone can’t go to sleep tonight fully informed.”

Harry frowned in thought. “The Room of Requirement would work… but after last year there are a lot of people who know about it. We’d have to check it first and make sure we could have it to ourselves.”

“Okay, cool. You up for it?”

“Sure,” Harry agreed, then hesitated. “…You really want to tell everyone else? All at once? That doesn’t sound like a very good idea.”

“I like how you insisted that I tell you everything, but you don’t care if your friends know or not.” Harry flinched in brief shame. “It’s not that I don’t care, but I don’t think they’ll believe you.”

“And you do?”

“Sort of…” Harry hedged. “I don’t really disbelieve you… I guess I just accept you at face value. You always do what you want to, and I never have any idea why anyway.”

The strangest things could become a normal fixture of life if one was around them enough. Scott had an underlying purpose, and while for Harry that purpose had been explained it was easier not to contemplate the realities behind it.

“But don’t you think those closest involved have a right to know?”

“Of course I do,” Harry said after a moment. “I just don’t know how you’re going to do this. Who are you planning to tell?”

“Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, and Ginny.”

“Ginny?” Harry was surprised. As far as he knew Scott wasn’t even familiar with Ginny.

“You’re not the only Prime around, Harry,” Scott said condescendingly. “Just because you’re Numero Uno doesn’t mean you’re my only concern.”

Harry scowled at the blond boy. “I know that. I didn’t want to be your concern in the first place, remember?”

“We don’t always get what we want. Now are you going to check that room for me or what?”

“Fine. After supper I’ll go have a look.” Harry pointed a finger at Scott. “And since I’ve already heard what you’re going to say before, how about you throw in some new stuff for me? I know there’s a lot you haven’t told me.”

“Yeah, well I didn’t think you’d be particularly interested in the specifics of Mach’s Principle as it relates to the comparative inertia of the Multiverse.” Scott shrugged. “There’s a reason I leave this sort of stuff out of casual conversation. Not only are theoretical physics subjective depending on the source universe, but they’re also about as exciting for most people as doing the dishes.”

Harry was feeling a little lost but said, “Okay, but you could still tell me some more about the Kharadjai.”

“We’ll see. I’m going to have enough to talk about already.”
Supper that evening took place under a nervous tension that everyone but Harry and Scott seemed oblivious to. Harry tried not to exchange any meaningful glances with the Kharadjai for fear of raising unwanted questions, but he probably needn’t have worried. Neville was cheerfully oblivious and Ron and Hermione were too busy trying to hold hands underneath the table without attracting attention.

Scott, always the actor, maintained the appearance of normality well enough that Harry didn’t have to. “You think I could get people to sign a petition for a breakfast night now and then? I could go for some bacon for dinner.”

“I have a hard time believing you don’t get enough at breakfast,” Hermione commented.

“What can I say? *Sum, ergo edo.* I’m a man of discriminating tastes.”

“If you call nothing but bacon taste,” Ron snorted. “At least I make a pig of myself with a little variety.”

“I do believe you just belittled my bacon. Son, don’t make me take my belt off.”

“By all means,” Hermione said, eyeing Scott distastefully, “keep your belt on. And what was that you just said?”

“What was what?”

“What you said to Ron,” she clarified. “It sounded like Latin.”

Scott shrugged. “*Denuone Latine loquebar? Me ineptum. Interdum modo elabitur.*”

Hermione stared at him. “You are speaking Latin!”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are!”

“Hermione, *nescio quid dicas,*” Scott said blandly. “Just because you keep saying that doesn’t make it so.”

Harry stared down at his plate as Scott continued to fend off Hermione by denying the obvious and wondered what the state of things would be after the night’s discussion. Ginny’s involvement, or soon-to-be involvement, had been unexpected. Harry’s growing attraction and suppressed feelings of jealousy towards Dean had sprung up on him quite suddenly, and he was still trying to cope. ‘She’s just a friend’ had become a mental mantra for Harry, albeit one that was increasingly unconvincing. Scott’s revelations would bring Ginny back into close confidences with Harry. The jealous monster in his chest was eager to accept anything that removed her further from Dean, but his head advised caution. Ginny was Ron’s little sister.

He was so sick of thinking that.

“Time to get your scout on,” Scott murmured to Harry as supper drew to a close. “I’ll head back to the common room. If you want to slip away, that’d be good.”

“Right,” Harry whispered affirmatively. It wouldn’t be hard with Ron and Hermione in their current state of distraction.

On the way back to the common room before curfew took effect, Ron and Hermione split off under
the transparent pretext of checking the halls for stray students. For once, not wanting to draw their focus, Scott didn’t make fun of them. Instead he threw one arm around Neville’s shoulders and loudly asked the shorter boy, “I ever tell you about the time I became King of the Morlocks?”

It was all the diversion Harry required. It wasn’t difficult to quietly drop behind Scott and Neville and head for the seventh floor.

With quick steps, Harry traversed the hallways and stairwells to reach his destination. He had a limited amount of time before curfew came into effect, and even before that he’d rather not be seen. There weren’t many students to be found alone on the seventh floor of the castle. Harry would certainly draw unwanted questions if he were spotted by a Prefect. He could talk down Ron and Hermione if he came across them, but anyone else would be a problem.

The tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy hung in its usual place on the way, acting as a permanent landmark for the hidden entrance to the Room of Requirement that was concealed directly opposite it. Harry fixed his mind firmly on thoughts of needing somewhere to talk privately, somewhere where they wouldn’t be found, as he paced back and forth in front of the familiar spot. On his third pass, the door appeared in the wall as the magic of the room did its work. Cautiously, Harry opened the door and peered inside.

The room had converted itself into a comfortable area of chairs and couches not unlike the common room. A fire crackled merrily against the far wall, illuminating the space. Aside from the places to sit, there were a few bookshelves and a table in one corner. It was empty of any other students, and Harry huffed a short sigh of relief. Given the notoriety the room had attained, he was thankful no one else was utilising it.

Harry headed back for the Gryffindor tower. Halfway there he stopped, thinking of Luna. Now would be his best chance to get her out of the Ravenclaw tower before curfew made it all but impossible. Changing his plans, Harry rerouted his path and made for the west side of the castle. He hoped someone would be entering the Ravenclaw portrait, since he lacked the password. He was lucky, to his mild surprise. Just as he reached the portrait, a group of third years were entering the common room. Harry wondered if Scott could manipulate events without being present. Was the Kharadjai shifting the threads of circumstance from the comfort of a chair even now? It was an uncomfortable possibility. Harry didn’t like the idea of fate being forced to open a path ahead of him any more than he liked the idea of fate forcing him down its own path.

Before the third years all made it into the portal, Harry addressed a short dark-haired girl. “Excuse me,” he said politely, “I was wondering if you could tell Luna Lovegood that I need to talk to her?”

The third year’s eyes widened when she realised she was being addressed by Harry Potter. “Oh! Yes, I’ll tell her!”

“Thanks,” Harry said as the group vanished into the tower, giggling and throwing glances his way. Sometimes fame could come in handy, he reluctantly admitted to himself. There were many times previous where they would have treated him like a pariah. At least being the Chosen One meant all the whispers coming his way were admiring. There wasn’t all that much of a difference in the end, but admiration, while tiring, wasn’t nearly as rough on the soul as unrelenting hostility.

The door swung open again as Luna emerged. Her hair was pulled back by some sort of clip, though it seemed like more of it had escaped the clip than was still held by it as a multitude of strands drifted around her face. Her silvery eyes met Harry’s expectantly. “Hello, Harry,” she greeted him with a vague smile. “Aren’t you at the wrong tower?”
“I came to get you, actually,” Harry said, doing his best to take Luna’s characteristic oddness in stride. “We’re having a meeting tonight.” That was an appropriately non-committal explanation.

Luna’s eyes became more focused. “Does Scott want to tell us something?”

Harry should have known. Luna had probably been on to Scott from day one. “That’s the idea. We’re all going to meet and then go to the Room of Requirement.”

“I’m sure that will be exciting,” Luna said in an entirely unexcited voice. “I hope we can understand everything he tells us.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Harry said dryly.

On the way back, Harry’s luck held as the two of them ran across Neville, who was returning from the greenhouses. “Luna! Harry!” Neville called to them as he hurried to catch up. Harry stopped and waited while Neville ran puffing up to them.

“There’s a meeting tonight, Neville,” Luna told him as he drew near to them.

Neville’s eyebrows shot up. “Meeting? Like a DA meeting?” He looked enthused at the prospect.

“Sort of,” Harry said. “Let’s get back so we still have time to slip out before curfew.”

With Harry leading the way, Neville kept pace with Luna and leaned over to ask her, “Do you know what this is all about?”

“No exactly,” she told him. “But Scott is going to explain some things. I imagine it should be very enlightening.”

“I guess you were right, Luna.”

“That does happen sometimes.” Luna nodded serenely.

Harry’s previous suspicions concerning luck and Scott returned to him in full force when Ron and Hermione happened to turn a corner and come into perfect walking sync with Harry’s group. “Harry!” Hermione said in surprise. “What are you doing out here?” She surreptitiously ran the back of her hand across her lips, which accomplished nothing as they were swollen, not covered in something.

“Meeting tonight. Room of Requirement. Scott’s idea,” Harry summarised in shorthand. He didn’t pause and kept moving towards the Gryffindor tower, Ron and Hermione stepping quickly to catch up.

“Scott’s idea? What kind of meeting?” Hermione pressed him. “What is going on?”

“You’re not making much sense, mate,” Ron added.

“We’re having a meeting in the Room of Requirement tonight,” Neville clarified. “Scott has something he wants to explain.”

That captured Hermione’s full interest. “I knew it!” she exclaimed triumphantly. “I knew he was hiding something!” She was gleeful at having her long standing uncertainties confirmed.

“Wasn’t too obvious now, was it,” Ron said under his breath so Hermione couldn’t hear. Harry disguised a snicker with a short cough. More loudly Ron continued, “Guess we’ll find out what he’s been up to.”
Harry was sure the looks on the faces of his friends were going to be hilarious, or at least they would in any other context. Scott had a lot to tell, and suspension of disbelief would only stretch so far – probably, in the case of Scott’s information, about halfway through the first sentence. With the lives they’d led up to this point Harry’s friends were generally capable of accepting new ideas without much fuss; but there were revelations, and then there were revelations.

All in all, Harry had to come to the conclusion that he hadn’t the slightest idea what was about to transpire.

“All right, Harry?” Ron asked him, leaning forward a little to catch Harry’s distracted gaze. Harry shook himself. “Yeah, I’m fine. You might not be in a bit.”

Ron frowned a little but smiled at the same time, as if he wasn’t sure whether Harry was joking or not. “Is it really as serious as all that?”

“Serious? Maybe,” Harry said. “Ever since I met Scott, what he said has been making me mental.”

“Yeah, but you were already mental before that,” Ron said fairly. “So I reckon you can handle it.”

“Thanks.”

“And Hermione’s going barmy because she doesn’t know, so it can’t hardly be any worse once she does,” Ron reasoned.

“And what about you?” Harry raised an eyebrow at Ron.

“My family drove me bonkers years ago, mate.” Ron shrugged. “I figure it’s all downhill from here, anyway.”

The troupe reached the Gryffindor portrait with curfew looming over them. Harry ignored the disapproving look the Fat Lady gave him as he spoke the password and stepped through into the common room. It was beginning to fill with students settling in for an evening of homework and idle discussion, and he picked his way through to where he could see Scott’s blond head protruding over the top of an easy chair.

What he hadn’t seen until he reached the chair was the familiar red locks of Ginny Weasley, sitting opposite Scott. “Hey, Ginny,” Harry said, purposefully denying himself any staring time by turning towards Scott. “Ready to go?”

“Where are we going?” Ginny demanded, and Harry immediately knew that Scott had been his usual obtuse self.


“Because all the cool kids are doing it,” Scott spoke up. “You do want to be cool, don’t you?”

“I’d rather have some answers.” Ginny narrowed her eyes at Scott.

“I think we all would,” Hermione joined in. “Isn’t that what this is about?”

“Why yes, yes it is,” Scott replied. “So let’s get out of here before curfew makes it difficult. To the Room of Requirement!”
On their way back out the portrait, Luna accosted Scott for a moment. “I just wanted to say,” she told him sincerely, “that whatever is it that you’ve been doing, I think you’ve done a good job.”

“Really?” Scott said, blinking. “Wow. Well, as far as I’m concerned that counts as a positive peer review, I’ll just write it up and turn it in. Not like anybody reads them.”

Hermione was all over that. “What review? Turn it in to whom?”

Scott held up his hands, warding her off. “Lord, woman – take a deep breath and control yourself. I’m trying to walk here.”

Hermione thinned her lips into a severe line but said no more as they made their way to the Room of Requirement, apparently deciding that silence was acceptable so long as she would be receiving all her answers soon. Harry wondered how many times she would interrupt Scott while he was trying to explain himself.

“Scott,” Ron said, moving closer to the Kharadjai as they walked and looking furtively over his shoulder back to where Ginny was talking with Luna. “Why is Ginny here?”

“No, I’m not angry,” Ron defended himself. “It just don’t understand why she’s here.”

“Because she’s supposed to be,” Scott responded with finality. Ron didn't look happy with that answer, but kept any further protests to himself.

The Room of Requirement opened itself to them and they filed in. Harry was the last person through the door and took one final look down the hallway to make sure no one was following them. Once inside, he noted the room had expanded itself in accordance with the number of people present. Scott located himself near the hearth of the fireplace at the back of the room. Everyone else chose from the variety of seats around him. Luna and Neville shared a loveseat while Ron, Hermione and Ginny sat on a long couch. Harry chose an easy chair somewhat to the side so he could observe his friends.

An expectant silence fell over the room. Scott stood in front of the fireplace, his hands clasped behind his back as he rocked back and forth on his heels, deep in thought. “How to begin…” he muttered to himself. “This is always the hardest part.”

“Maybe some questions would help to get started?” Hermione suggested, and Harry smiled to himself.

“Yeah… Yeah, okay. Shoot.”

“Is Lila a member of an American branch of the Order of the Phoenix?” Hermione asked him pointedly.

“No.”

Hermione’s face fell.

“But,” Scott continued, “Harry was right when he said that I already knew about the Order.”

“I suppose Dumbledore told you,” Hermione mused, “but why would he do that?”

“Maybe he didn’t tell me. Maybe Harry did. Or maybe Dumbledore told Harry to tell me. Or
maybe Dumbledore told me and I didn’t tell Harry. Or maybe Harry told Dumbledore to tell me to talk to Harry about telling Dumbledore.” Scott paused. “Bet you didn’t think of that.”

“I thought this was about getting straight answers?” Hermione said sternly.

“Who said that?”

“Scott!”

“What?”

Hermione pursed her lips. “Are you even really an American?”

“Now there’s an interesting question,” Scott said, frowning, “and I can’t say for sure because I don’t actually know.”

Hermione gave him a puzzled look. “How can you not know where you were born?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Scott said bluntly, “and whatever I was is no longer what I am. Ask me about something else.”

Luna raised her hand and Scott pointed to her. “Have you ever seen a Crumple-Horned Snorkack?”

Luna said curiously.

“I have not yet had the pleasure. If you see one let me know.”

“I will,” Luna promised him.

“Where did you learn to speak Latin?” Hermione asked, clearly not having forgotten what had happened earlier.

“A lot of people speak Latin. It used to be our official language. That was before my time, but even though we’ve switched to English it’s still in wide enough use for me to bother learning it. And besides, quidquid latine dictum sit, altum videtur,” Scott said with an air of unearned grandeur.

“What does that mean?”

“Anything said in Latin sounds profound.” Scott grinned. “It also has the side effect of driving you crazy because you hate not knowing what I’m saying, which is the real reason I was using it.”

Hermione glared at him. “I suppose I should have guessed.”

“Probably. Now, if that’s all…” Scott raised his eyebrows questioningly, but no one else said anything. “Then it’s time for the main event.”

A hush fell over the room as Scott paced back and forth, struggling with how to begin. Apparently it didn’t get any easier. During their encounter at the playground Scott had given Harry only the most basic ideas. With Dumbledore he had a history to build upon. For everyone else Scott was forced to start from scratch, a task that Harry did not envy.

Scott clenched his fists in frustration. “Another false start... And you know, it's not like they don't cover this at all in the training. But it all ends up being so inapplicable.”

“Maybe you should start with destiny,” Harry suggested.

“Hmm… Yeah, that might kill some time… Okay, do you guys believe in destiny?”
“No,” Hermione said immediately. “I believe that every person makes their own path.”

“Fair enough. Anybody else?”

“I’ve never really thought about it,” Ron said. Neville nodded in agreement.

“I believe in destiny,” Luna chimed. “Sometimes you can see it, like with Harry.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He had been hoping that this wouldn’t be about him for a little while longer. It was true that Scott’s presence was due to Harry’s destiny, but, as Scott had so pointedly reminded him, Harry wasn’t the only Prime. In the larger sense they were all in this together. He wasn’t sure whether that made him feel better or worse.

“I agree with Luna,” Ginny said finally. “I think some things are meant to happen.”

“Two ‘don’t know, don’t cares’, two who are strong in the Force, and one unequivocal ‘Nostradamus was a lying bastard’, ” Scott tallied. “Which is fine, because the truth is sort of all of the above.”

Hermione took issue with that. “How is that possible? Those aren’t exactly compatible points of view.”

“Not if you really look at what the colligation of those ideas is. Reality falls into the grey area – some people have a specific destiny, but most people don’t and therefore have no reason to care. The massive majority of bases doddering about their aborted life spans don’t have anything more to worry about than their next pay check. Then you’ve got guys like Harry who have some more weighty matters on their minds than whether game day for the kids is going to interfere with the next meeting of the sewing circle. Every existence has its ups and downs,” Scott explained, “the only difference is how steep.”

“I can certainly accept that--” Hermione said, and Harry could see that she was shifting into ‘lecture mode’. If Scott wanted to debate philosophy then he had picked the right girl, but what Hermione failed to comprehend was that in this case she was supposed to simply listen. Harry met Ron’s eyes across the room, and they grinned at each other as Hermione began her rejoinder. “--but what I don’t understand is how anyone can claim to know that a person has a set destiny. You can’t just look at Harry’s life and say that because it’s been in many cases out of the ordinary that he has a predetermined fate. That’s an arbitrary judgement. Without a proven pattern, you could look at anyone’s life and say it was led by fate.”

“Sure there is. If I give you a multiple choice question you get to pick which answer you want to give – the only missing choice is not to answer at all. You’ve been forced to pick something but you still get to pick. It’s free will within a smaller context.”
“But that’s a false argument because I would have chosen whether to answer your multiple choice question in the first place!” Hermione countered. “The same is true for the workplace: you have to take orders, but you accepted the job to begin with. Destiny is exactly the opposite – you have no choice in the matter at all; you’ve been fated to complete this task or die trying.”

Or die trying, Harry thought glumly. Yes, that was a possibility.

“Which brings us back to your point of destiny as an arbitrary judgement made by a third party – was it chosen for you or did you choose to follow it the moment it was voiced? And more fundamentally, if you were destined to do something, how would you know? If destiny is real, how many people would live their lives accomplishing those goals without even realising it? And if you are fated to do something and do it without knowledge that you’re doing it, is that divine intervention, pure circumstance, or subconscious motivation?”

“And that is precisely why I don’t believe in destiny,” Hermione declared triumphantly. “It’s a label for occurrences that people insist can’t be accounted for by normal means.”

Scott raised an eyebrow. “And what about the Seers?”

“I admit there’s a lot to magic that’s difficult to discount,” she said, “but most predictions are a bunch of nonsense. There’s more evidence than can be attributed to a few lucky guesses… But if a Time Turner can take you backwards in time, then I suppose glimpses into the future might be allowed. I believe, however, that even a correct prediction is still a look at your own personal choices and not a forced result.”

“Probability and causality with a general rejection of determinism,” Scott mused. “An interesting viewpoint. And, as usual, both right and wrong. When every transuniversal door you step through changes the rules, it’d be hard to be wrong everywhere.”

“This is mostly a matter of opinion,” Hermione said a bit defensively, obviously not taking well to Scott’s summary of her being partly wrong. “While I don’t agree with destiny as an overriding whole, I certainly can’t prove anything.” She paused. “And what was the second thing you said?”

“Keep it in mind if you really want to know,” Scott said, this time in a louder voice, “but for now take a rain check, because my name is Scott Kharan, I’m a Kharadjai, and this is what I do…”

Harry chronicled what followed in his role as observer, paying especially close attention to individual reactions. The words pouring from Scott’s mouth were of secondary importance as he was in already in possession of the vast majority of the knowledge they were imparting. Instead the faces of his friends lent insight into the depths of their initial disbelief and eventual numbness. So much unbelievable information was disconnecting. The mind suspended violent reactions in self-defence, settling on an anaesthetised acceptance. So it was that the group blankly took it all in.

Even Hermione said nothing during Scott’s speech. Her starting visage of eager concentration had faded into one of barely repressed challenge. Harry had little doubt that Scott would be defending his story as soon as he finished talking. Hermione would see that such outrageous claims did not go untested.

Ron’s mouth hung slightly open, and he started smiling from time to time, as if unable to believe that some elaborate joke was not in session and falling back on the appropriate response of laughter. Harry remembered that his own response had been similar. Ginny was projecting outright derision, and she looked at Scott as if attempting to classify his particular dementia. Harry knew that when Scott gave his closing statement that belief was irrelevant and that knowledge was enough, it would go a long way towards smoothing things over. It was okay if someone else was
Harry wasn’t sure how long Scott talked. Hearing the Kharadjai’s facts laid out again resulted in a partial resurgence of incredulity. He fought it down, reminding himself again that Scott did not require his faith. Whatever else he was or was not, Scott was an ally. That was enough.

“All right, so it doesn’t really matter whether you believe me or not,” Scott concluded. “But now that you ‘know’ the truth I can do things that you don’t understand without having to waste time covering for myself. Any questions?”

Ron immediately asked, “Is this a joke?”

“In the cosmic sense, yes.”

“You said you had the ability to nullify magic,” Hermione said. She had at some point slipped her wand out of her bag and was holding it in a state of readiness. Harry leaned back in his chair, preparing for the light show. “Would you demonstrate that for us?”

Scott spread his arms open in welcome. “Throw the heat, babe.”

When Hermione’s first few tentative spells failed to so much as part Scott’s hair, everyone else joined in with abandon, and soon the air was hot with a deluge of magic. The mood of the room was a strange mixture of fun and desperation – fun because it was always enjoyable to be able to cast at will and without restraint, and desperation because it would be a first, overwhelming step to accept the fact that not a single one of the spells headed Scott’s way impacted. By the time they had all finished Scott’s face was strained from intense concentration and there were a few beads of sweat on his temples, but he stood otherwise unaffected.

Hermione was the first to stop, her face pale. Evidently she had been counting on refuting Scott’s insane assertions fairly quickly. Harry commiserated with her inner struggle. The early stages of acceptance were the most difficult, and at least he had been given the benefit of privacy in which to come to terms with Scott’s certainties.

“Nullus vim supra intra scutum,” Scott said, the lapidary phrase rolling off his lips in the silence after all wands had been lowered.

“What does that mean?” Harry asked him.

“‘No power above the shield within’.” Scott sighed and sat down on the hearth. “I made that up when I was running drills out on one of the desolate rocks they call a ‘facility’. They do that to me every now and then. It’s good for morale, or so they tell me. I personally don’t feel it’s all that inspiring when you’re forced to dismantle a live incendiary device while I shoot at you.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “That’s considered training?”

“In pretty much any military training they try to push the limits of your endurance. If you just want to join the Third Army you could probably scrape by with a few bullets lodged in you. But if you’re aiming for the Primarius you won’t be so lucky.”
“This is the sort of thing I’d like to know more about,” Harry said. Greater knowledge of Scott’s job would lead to a corresponding understanding of his motivations.

“How about we save this for the time being – I think everyone is shell-shocked as it is,” Scott said wryly, looking at the group. “Right, Hermione?”

Hermione was staring at Scott like she’d never seen him before. She gave a start when he spoke to her. “I’m sorry,” she said in a weak voice, “but everything is… It’s all just…”

“Too much,” Scott finished for her. “I get it. My advice to you is: don’t think about it. You already knew I was up to something, so it’s not like your basic perception of me has been altered all that dramatically. Remember that you don’t have to believe me. It’d be nice if you did, but ultimately unnecessary.”

“It’s just such an alteration of the way I’ve always seen things! Trying to understand the… the universe and the Multiverse and your place in it, and my place in it for that matter—”

Scott shook his head. “Here, answer this – what is the beginning of eternity, the end of time and space, the beginning of every end, and the end of every place?”

Hermione looked at him for a moment in mute rebuke. “You know I don’t know much about those sorts of things yet!”

“The letter ‘E’.”

She blinked. “What?”

“That’s the answer to that riddle. The letter ‘E’,” Scott said again. “The point is you’re over-thinking this. The details are what drag you down. I’m here to help Harry - and the rest of you - take care of a problem. That’s only a complex idea when you start taking it apart. All you need to do is what you’ve already done – accept the fact that I’m on your side.”

It was sound advice. Harry had done much the same thing.

“I just need some time,” Hermione assured him, though it sounded more like she was trying to convince herself. “And some more questions – there’s a lot I’d like to know.”

“You and everybody else. But at least tonight took care of the dark of it, or at least some anyway.” Scott stood. “How about we sleep on it?”

It was well past curfew, so leaving the Room of Requirement was a tricky affair. They would need to slip out in ones and twos so as not to travel in a large, noisy group. Cracking open the door, Harry peered out into the dim hallway. Fortunately it was empty, devoid of other students or, more dangerously, teachers. He turned back to the others.

“It looks clear,” he said. “Who’s first?”

“I think I should go last,” Luna said. “It would be better if my housemates aren’t in the common room when I get back.”

“Right, good idea,” Harry agreed. “Ron, Hermione?”

“I’ll go with Ginny and Neville, Harry, and you can go with Ron and Scott. That way if we do get caught there will be Prefect present,” Hermione suggested. Then she frowned. “Oh, I didn’t think about you, Luna. Do you want me to come back for you?”
Scott broke in before Luna said anything. “I’ll take Luna back to the Ravenclaw tower, I don’t need a Prefect with me. I was gonna call my sister anyway.”

“All right, that’s fine,” Ginny said impatiently. “I really need to finish an essay, so let’s go.”

Harry didn’t know how Ginny thought she was ever going to concentrate on an essay after the evening’s events. Still, going by the generally calm demeanour of his friends Harry knew that the information Scott had so nonchalantly imparted was currently relegated to the backs of their minds. In the morning they would wake up and wonder if it had ever actually happened. Denial was a strong element of human self-preservation, but his friends were both uniformly brave and intelligent. It wouldn’t last long.

Soon after Hermione’s group had departed, it was Harry and Ron’s turn. The halls of Hogwarts were dark and convoluted, but the pair had long since memorised them in many other night time wanderings. Harry quickened his pace to match Ron’s longer legs. Harry wasn’t short, but Ron was just too damned tall.

“So that’s why you’ve been so weird around Scott,” Ron said as they went, breaking the companionable silence. “I never thought I’d say this, but I understand why you didn’t tell us.”

Harry’s heart dropped in his chest for a moment. Scott’s secrets weren’t the only ones he had been keeping. “It’s been a very strange few months,” he managed. “Stranger than normal, I mean.”

Ron snorted. “In your life, that’s saying something.”

“Don’t need to tell me. I’ve been living it.”

“Can you retire from life?” Ron asked, lowering his voice as they neared more trafficked areas of the school. “It's something you might want to consider.”

Harry remembered red eyes in a graveyard, glaring at him from behind a wand gripped by slender white fingers. “Yeah,” he replied quietly, “it might happen.”
it’s 2 am behind the dark line on the world
and the drifts resting at the windowsill
are that old familiar bedspread
tucked in with the cars outside, and,
waiting for someone with a shovel
to come and push the powder.
in the dim shutters my head
is a treetop bent under the deep weight
like sleep was a submarine
and streetlamps my hangar lights.
maybe I would follow them and close out tomorrow
beneath eyelids heavy with borrowed snow.

The early December weather manifested itself in a gentle swirl of snowflakes that sifted down through the frosty air and settled along tree branches and gathered in soft drifts. The falling snow was just heavy enough to obscure distant objects and give the dark world a dreamlike quality – none of which lent itself towards making Harry feel any better about his surrounds.

Given his present location he’d much prefer for visibility to be at a maximum. He felt the recurring urge to look over his shoulder back towards the school. The last thing he wanted was to be caught traipsing about the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Taking his past history with the wood into consideration, Harry doubted anyone would believe he had been out for an innocent stroll.

“Tell me again what we’re doing here?” Harry questioned Scott, lifting his legs higher than normal as he walked through a deep drift.

“Exploring,” Scott answered shortly. The taller boy peered into the woods, though what exactly he was trying to discern Harry didn’t know.

Harry still wasn’t sure how he had been roped into the impromptu excursion. It was Saturday evening, and immediately after supper Scott had told Harry that he’d like to see the forest. Harry’s explanation that the forest was off bounds had, predictably, meant nothing to Scott. Ron and Hermione had already made themselves scarce at that point for reasons that Harry didn’t wish to explore, and so it was he found himself out in the cold trying to keep pace with an apparently unaffected Kharadjai.

They had been at it for at least half an hour and Harry was starting to wonder with a certain dread if Scott intended to cover the complete circumference of the forest. Was he looking for something, or
was he just having fun? Taking Scott’s recent forthrightness into account, Harry decided to ask him.

“So are we looking for something?” Harry asked, his breath creating a billowing cloud in the frosty air. “Or did you just want to make me suffer?”

“A little from column A, a little from column B…” Scott said distractedly as he stared deep into the trees again. Harry waited for a moment for the blond boy to continue, but he didn’t.

Harry spotted a tempting lump of ice nearby and thought about how good it would feel to hit the back of Scott’s head with it. “Enjoying the scenery then, are we.”

The trees loomed up out of the snow like obsidian pillars from a frozen sea. Scott hadn’t moved from the spot where he gazed into the gathering stillness and mumbled something to himself that Harry couldn’t make out. “We’re looking for a main path – if there is one,” Scott finally answered.

Harry looked pointedly at the rapidly fading purple of the horizon. The ambient levels of light had already washed out into what was essentially night time. Only the dim remnants of the sunset and what inconsequential illumination the waning moon could provide through the thick clouds remained. “There’s a path by Hagrid’s cabin, but you won’t be able to see it. Why don’t you just come back tomorrow?”

“No, you won’t be able to see it,” Scott said, ignoring Harry’s not-so-subtle hints to return to the castle and resuming his walk. “I can see just fine.”

“Good for you,” Harry retorted. Was that a jab at Harry’s glasses or a reference to something else?

Scott didn’t reply, making a beeline for Hagrid’s cabin. Wandering about the Forbidden Forest after dark without a guide was not how Harry had envisioned spending his evening. He found himself trying to jog in the now ankle deep snow when Scott starting walking faster.

“In the dying of the light we find ourselves,” Scott muttered to himself as he increased his speed. “Darkness is just another way to blink.”

“Scott,” Harry said more calmly, trying reason instead of anger, “it’s getting late, it’s dark, and it’s cold out. What are we really doing out here?”

Scott didn’t slow down but answered, “It’s important to know where you are. If I map out the terrain then I can fight in it, hide in it, move through it.” He paused to wipe the snow from a tree trunk and break off a layer of ice, which he stuck in his pocket. “Now that we’re all nice and established, I can move around a little more. What’s in this forest?”

“Acromantula, for one,” Harry said, remembering his and Ron’s near fatal flight from the heart of the wood. “There’s Centaurs but they won’t be friendly any more. Unicorns, I doubt we’ll see one. Thestrals… far as I know, they’re not dangerous.” Harry looked at the forest with apprehension. He could be foolishly brave when it was required of him, but wandering off into the Forbidden Forest at dusk for absolutely no reason at all didn’t entirely appeal to him. The rest of his friends were probably warm and cozy in front of the fire while he risked life, limb and detention without purpose. “Couldn’t you have done this by yourself?”

“I guess you should have thought of that before you listened to me.”

“That’s definitely true,” Harry grumbled, but he wasn’t really angry. He could sort of see the importance of Scott knowing the Hogwarts grounds well, though he thought they might have chosen a better time.
Hagrid’s cabin crouched low in the snowfield, the lights from the windows casting a butter-yellow glow across the white expanse. Bright lines of snow criss-crossed the stonework that formed the foundation where the flakes had adhered to the mortar. Most of the curtains appeared to be drawn but Harry still tried to diminish his profile. It wouldn’t be difficult for Hagrid to spot them if he should look outside. Scott and Harry would be in stark relief against such a pristine backdrop.

“Look, we can’t go into the forest very far,” Harry said lowly. “I don’t know my way around, and Hagrid won’t take us unless Dumbledore says it’s all right. We need to stick to the edge.”

“Let’s just find the path and then we can go.”

The pair slunk towards the cabin, keeping close to the ground. Scott moved with a fluid, quick gait that seemed to minimise the amount of noise he made, and Harry was hard pressed to duplicate it. Harry supposed that sort of ability came with experience and training, neither of which he had any great amount of. Scott’s intention was to assist in defeating Voldemort – did that mean he would be willing to teach Harry how to fight?

The path into the forest was a dark hole in the world, a stretching void that gave Harry a sense of horizontal vertigo. The trees bent over the clear space in huddled groups, casting a tangled array of shadows that might as well have been inked upon the ground by the dying sun – not so much as the slightest breeze stirred the air. Further into the breach the faint light could not penetrate the branches and the shades faded to nothing, the woods dimming beneath an overcast of their own making. Not even a patch of light fell upon the snow beneath the mass of trees. The slivers of moon slipped in and out of cloud cover as the gentle snowfall slowly moved past overhead. The silence was stifling.

Harry halted only a few yards into the path and thankfully Scott did the same. The Kharadjai knelt in the snow and put his hand near some tracks.

“Rabbit?” Harry asked, reasonably certain he had identified them correctly.

“Hagrid’s garden is a tempting target.”

A thought occurred to Harry. “You know that night when I caught you talking to your sister on the phone?”

“Yeah?”

“I have a hard time believing you didn’t know I was there.”

In the darkness, Harry could see the white of Scott’s teeth as he grinned. “It’s all been quite a puzzle, hasn’t it? Every piece you move knocks three others out of place.”

Harry kicked some snow at him.

Scott smoothly ducked underneath the spray and rose to his feet, still grinning. “I didn’t care if you heard me. There wasn’t any point in hiding that from you.”

“Wouldn’t be the first thing you kept secret for no reason,” Harry complained.

“That’s just the nature of the game... or the players. Have a seat,” Scott said.

Though a bit confused at the purpose of Scott’s invitation, Harry complied and seated himself on a fallen log.
In another reality it might have been a painting. The two boys sat facing each other across the blank space of the path, backed by stark lines with frosted edges – a portrait etched in black and white. Somnolence given frozen form.

“So, Harry,” Scott breathed in the biting calm, “let’s talk about war.”

Harry looked at him askance. “What about it?”

“We’ve got one to fight. This concerns you rather directly for a number of reasons I don’t need to repeat. I have three things to tell you. None of them are particularly pleasant. These are only the first three things, but they’re not any less important. Do you want to hear them?”

It was funny that Scott should ask that, but his eyes met Harry’s quite seriously and Harry knew it wasn’t a joke. Harry reflected on the possible bliss offered by ignorance… But ignorance was something he could no longer afford (and had never wanted). He had already committed himself to the fight, whether it had been chosen for him or not.

“Yes.”

“You can’t win,” Scott stated with finality, and then, before Harry could wrap his head around that despairing proclamation, continued, “There is no victory in war – only varying degrees of loss. Your objective is to lose less than your enemy.”

Harry tried to come to terms with that vision of combat. It was not as easy to swallow as the standard contrasts of victory and defeat.

“You’ve already lost in this war,” Scott clarified. “Cedric Diggory, Sirius Black. And life isn’t the only thing on the playing field. You’ve lost aspects of your freedom. You’ve lost security. The economy has suffered; your morale is weakened. Compare this to the losses of your enemy. Riddle no longer has access to the prophecy; Riddle failed to procure the Philosopher’s Stone. Unfortunately, any other losses on his part are negligible.” Scott leaned forward. “Your loss is currently greater than that of your enemy. He is not winning – he is losing less. Any engagement in which the loss of your opponent is significantly greater than your own is effective loss.”

Harry frowned. That wasn’t very encouraging. “So that’s just common sense, then. You want to hurt him without hurting yourself.”

“That’s nearly impossible. Even a battle in which you don’t lose a single soldier still constitutes a loss. You’ve lost ammunition and other supplies, you’ve lost energy that requires time to recuperate. But the enemy has lost life, which might constitute a much greater loss than you sustained. Or it might not. Maybe the enemy outnumbers you enough that the loss of his men is a worthwhile trade. Loss is subjective.” Scott held up a cautionary finger. “That’s a simplification. Never take a hit just because you can.

“So what are Riddle’s resources? He relies on terrorism, which is ineffective from a combat standpoint but it does spread panic. Fortunately for him, he’s not up against much, and the civilian population is so intertwined with the combatants that panic is useful, fear is his weapon. The rules of your society are his natural defences. Also, Dark magic seems to be superior than standard magic when being used for weaponry, from what I’ve seen, but I don’t know much about that.”

Scott raised an eyebrow at Harry. “Given your own limited resources, you must decide how to strike back and remove his advantage with minimal loss on your part. Remember,” he continued more quietly, “you will lose something. Don’t hesitate to take the best course of action because of that.”
Harry wasn’t ready to think about that yet. Instead he went back to one of the resources Scott had listed. “Fear is his weapon…” Harry repeated, remembering similar words. “But how do you fight fear?”

“With your own media blitz. Nothing calms the masses like a constant stream of victorious news. Propaganda can be effective, but in this case I think the history of fear and Riddle is too deeply rooted. The time for altering cultural perception is past.”

Harry nodded in agreement. “Most people won’t even say his name.”

“He’s a regular Keyser Söze, isn’t he? I’ll answer the next question for you. Given magic as it currently exists, the chances of finding a cure-all counter for Dark magic is slim to none. The only other consistent method is learning more powerful spells, which will help – in this case research requires time and personal effort, the only two resources we have any amount of. We can afford to continue learning while we pursue other methods of maximising Riddle's loss.”

“So we attack his manpower,” Harry concluded logically. Phrased in this cadence war wasn’t as difficult a subject to deal with as Harry might have assumed. In the forest where words were the only reality of the theoretical conflict, it was almost like a game. Question and answer. It was all a bit ludicrous anyway – Harry wasn’t a soldier, and war was such an impersonal term. “But we don’t really have an army… It’s just us.”

“Exactly. Neither side can afford to fully commit to a pitched battle. At least, not yet. We’re operating on a skirmish level. On one hand, this means it’s easier to achieve a decisive victory. On the other hand, when the numbers are so small every person is indispensable. It works both ways.”

“You said ‘victory’,” Harry pointed out a trifle smugly. “There’s no such thing as victory, only degrees of loss.”

“That’s a mindset, Harry, not a compulsion.” Scott rolled his eyes. “Win and lose are terms of convenience. I don’t go around saying ‘effective loss’ all the time instead of ‘winning’, nobody would ever know what I was talking about.”

“And that’s different from the usual, how?”

“Shut up, Harry, I’m trying to make a point. What kept your battle at the Department of Mysteries from being an effective loss?”

Harry’s eyes darkened. “Sirius,” he said softly, the name dredging up familiar pain.

“Wrong,” Scott asserted. “The Battle of Mysteries was a defeat because the Death Eaters suffered no permanent loss save that of information. Preventing Riddle from getting his dainty hands on the prophecy was a good thing, but taking into account the opportunity present to decimate his core forces we must ultimately regard the affair as an overall ineffective loss.”

“Sirius died because of me,” Harry said thickly. Sirius had been all but resurrected by his escape from Azkaban, only to have his vital spirit snuffed out by a simple mistake. “I could have told you it was a loss.”

“And personally, nothing will change that. Logistically, however, effective loss was within reach. This brings us to point number two – a dead enemy is an enemy no longer. You put the Death Eaters in Azkaban, and they escaped. This is a war. Prisoners are either taken for information or in the act of surrender. Moral of the story is, if you see a Death Eater, kill them. Use any confrontation as an opportunity to diminish Riddle's strength, and the more important the Death
This was essentially the polar opposite of the attitude Harry had been learning from Dumbledore. Harry had to admit it made a vicious sense. In the dark hours of the night when Harry would once again see Sirius falling, he imagined what it would be like to strike Bellatrix Lestrange down. Hadn’t that been his goal during that frantic, maddening confrontation at the statue in the lobby? He would have done anything if he’d thought it would hurt her. He had done anything.

Sitting before him now was the means to shape his formless rage into a weapon. Briefly, Harry wondered what Dumbledore would advise him in regards to his anger. Self-control, probably. He was tired of self-control. He was tired of accepting the hurt forced upon him. He wanted to hurt someone back.

…but what were the dangers of being ruled by revenge?

A burst of hot fury obliterated the thought. Rationally, Harry knew he would cool down given a little time. Right then rational was the last thing he wanted to be.

“You said you’re here to help me fight,” Harry said, the words coming out without restraint or forethought. “If I asked you to kill someone, would you do it?”

Scott nodded without changing expression. “I’ll need the name of this someone.”

Bellatrix’s name was on the tip of Harry’s tongue before inner revulsion overcame it. Could he sit on the sidelines and order a death? Maybe there really was a monster inside every person, only this time the dragon in his chest wasn’t green but a deep crimson. Two words were all he needed to say. Voldemort wouldn’t have hesitated.

Harry shrank away from the realisation, and the insanity subsided into a bitter sadness. “Never mind,” he mumbled quickly, not meeting Scott’s eyes. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does,” Scott said shrewdly, “but maybe not right now.” The Kharadjai looked up at the overcast sky. The snow had stopped and the sun was gone now, night taking Hogwarts into its gentle embrace. “I’ll make my third point, and then we should head back.”

Harry nodded in agreement, beginning to appreciate just how numb his toes were.

“We’ve been sitting here, talking about Riddle. Seems like we have some things figured out. We know who a lot of the people working for him are, and we know a pretty good deal about those individuals themselves. Now if only we knew exactly what he was doing right now. If we did, we could probably think of a way to stop him. That’s lesson number three,” Scott told Harry. “Information is ammunition.”

Harry could certainly see the truth in that. Most of his frustrations seemed to stem from not knowing what was going on. He hated being kept uninformed. ‘The Battle of Mysteries’, as Scott had appropriately dubbed it, had shown the danger of misinformation. Voldemort had also learned this same third lesson.

“A single fact can tip the scale,” Scott continued. “Acting blindly is a bad way to operate, and is much, much worse when the enemy knows what you’re doing. Always scout any new situation if you can. If you’ve got prisoners, use them. Figure out everything possible from the actions of your enemy, but try not to jump to conclusions. Working with partial information can be just as dangerous as making decisions based on none.
“Dumbledore gets this, see? His lessons with you, what’s he doing? He’s studying the enemy. Understand why Riddle’s done things and you can understand what he will continue to do. Weaknesses become apparent. History can teach you just as much as the present. We all leave trails of evidence behind us, some more obvious than others.”

“You say kill the Death Eaters, but then you say prisoners are a good source of information,” Harry pointed out. “So which is it?”

“Subjective. Some people will crack if you give them a hard stare. Some people won’t talk even if you start cutting off their fingers. You can push if you want, but after a point you have to ask yourself how much that person can take before they start to lie. Put someone in enough pain and they’ll tell you whatever they think you want to hear, just to make it stop. What it really comes down to is whether you understand the nature of your prisoner. The true art of interrogation is psychological. And, prisoner information is only useful when it can be corroborated. The enemy might also be aware you’ve got this prisoner, which means they can make his information obsolete by the time you can act on it. Then on top of all that, a prisoner is only as good as his rank. Grabbing peons isn’t going to tell you much.”

Harry absorbed Scott’s words, though he wasn’t sure what Scott expected him to do with them. Harry was hardly a general. In fact, he wasn’t actually in charge of anyone at all. The lessons Scott had imparted could be applied on a personal level to Harry’s life but even if he followed them to some great breakthrough in the war against Voldemort there was doubt as to whether anyone would listen to him. After all, nobody seemed to care about his suspicions concerning Draco, a thought that sent a burst of frustration through Harry. Hadn’t he proved himself correct enough times in the past? Or was this punishment for his impulsiveness in invading the Department of Mysteries?

If the second option was true then Harry deserved their disbelief, and his anger deflated. Guilt was calming in the worst possible way. At least rage was a potent emotion. Hollowness was an insidious ache and somehow so much worse.

“Think about it,” Scott said, watching Harry closely. “Think about how this is useful to you. That’s all you need to do. For now.”

“Do you believe me about Draco?” Harry asked suddenly. It was important for some reason.

“That he’s working against us? I don’t think there’s much question about that.”

“Nobody else thinks that Voldemort would allow a teenager to work for him,” Harry said, the words sounding as ridiculous coming from himself as they had from other people.

Scott snorted in derision. “Then they’ve violated a tenet of lesson number three – they’ve forgotten their history. The Hitler Youth ring any bells? You think the Viet Cong strapped bombs to little kids because bombs are love? Assuming a guy like Riddle will hesitate to use children in his war is sloppy, biased thinking. What’s stopping him? Compassion? He’s abandoned that spectrum of human behaviour. Morality means nothing to people like him. It’s just a word.”

“That’s what I’ve thought,” Harry immediately agreed, “but it’s like no one wants to listen. I’ve told them: there’s evidence you know, I’m not just making this up… And then they think I’m just being daft about it because I hate Malfoy, which I do, but I know what I’ve seen and heard, and he’s definitely up to something.”

“Then you’re one step ahead. Lesson number three again – you know he’s up to something, but he doesn’t know that you know! Keep an eye on him. Figure out what you can, but remember to be careful about jumping to conclusions. You don’t want to make a wrong guess and scare him into
destroying the evidence. Guilty people are paranoid people. You have to be delicate.”

“I’m just glad someone finally believes me,” Harry sighed. “I’ve given up on Ron and Hermione. Every time I even start to bring it up they change the subject or stare me down.”

Scott shook his head. “They might come to their senses eventually, but by then it could be too late, so let’s keep a firm eye on Malfoy and see if we can piece together anything unusual.” He looked back down the path towards Hagrid’s cabin. “Let’s head on back.” He stood, then hesitated. “Actually, first I need to make some yellow snow.”

After Scott had done so, the two of them began slogging their way towards the castle. As the temperature started to drop further during nightfall the top of the snow hardened into a crunchy layer of ice that made walking silently impossible. Harry winced as his footsteps seemed explosive in the quiet and frequently checked Hagrid’s cabin to make sure the groundskeeper wasn’t emerging to see what the noise was. Their footprints made it obvious where they had been and Harry really didn’t want to suffer a lecture about staying away from the woods.

It was too overcast for the castle to sparkle in the moonlight; otherwise the scene would have been a pretty sight. Instead, Hogwarts was draped in a dead of winter gloom dispelled only by the many lit windows dotting the structure. There were even more windows that remained unlit, and, not for the first time, Harry wondered how much of the castle was even in use. He was certain there were whole sections he had yet to see.

Harry could discern the outline of Gryffindor Tower rising into the dark sky and, with a little imagination, even thought he could make out the faint shadows of people moving within. It was pure fantasy, of course – the tower was much too distant for such movements to be visible. Harry wondered if Scott could distinguish small details like that with his apparently superior vision. He looked to his right to ask the Kharadjai.

“Ca-” Harry began and immediately stopped when to his consternation he saw that Scott was no longer walking beside him. He pivoted a quick one-eighty to find Scott standing motionless a few yards back the way they had come. Puzzled, Harry retraced his steps.

Scott appeared to be transfixed by a copse of tall trees that stood off the lake shore to the south. Harry frowned, pushing his glasses more firmly up onto the bridge of his nose and squinting into the distance. He saw nothing. “What is it?”

“Well, they must have been planted… You can see they’re in straight lines… there,” Scott mumbled indistinctly. He shook himself and the distant look faded from his face. “Never mind. It just reminded me of something.”

Without further comment Scott started walking again and Harry followed suit. Given the other people Harry was familiar with in the Wizarding world, a half-giant and a werewolf to name two, he thought it was quite an accomplishment that Scott still managed to be the weirdest person Harry knew.
Harry and Scott came in from the cold, stamping their feet against the stone floor to shake off the snow that clung to their heavy boots. The interior of Hogwarts was appreciably warmer than the outside air but it still wasn’t as drastic an improvement as Harry was looking for. He wanted to sit down in front of the common room fire, kick off his shoes and put his feet as close to it as possible without his socks combusting.

Not for the first time he envied Scott for his apparent indifference to temperature. Harry wouldn’t be surprised if the Kharadjai wore coats just for appearances sake. It was funny since Scott would sometimes complain or comment on the weather like everyone else, but while Scott agreed that it was cold out he didn’t even put his hands into his pockets. It was another example of when what Scott said and what he did didn’t match up. Harry felt like Scott wasn’t deliberately lying but rather that ‘normalcy’ was the default reaction for him, even when it didn’t really apply.

“Not all that much better in here, huh,” Scott to Harry as they walked, compounding Harry’s inner thoughts. Scott frowned when Harry gave him an amused look. “What?”

“You weren’t cold out there,” Harry stated. “You’re never cold.”

“I can get cold. Besides, even if I’m more tolerant I still know what the temperature is,” Scott said defensively. “I’ve got skin, don’t I?”

“I don’t know, do you?”

“Yes, and unlike yours it’s actually seen some sun. You’re lucky Ginny is even paler than you are, some women wouldn’t touch that shit.”

“Shut it.” Harry glared at Scott. The last thing he needed right now was to be reminded of Ginny. Despite Scott’s numerous jokes to the contrary, Harry hadn’t made any progress with her.

“It must be those manly pectorals,” Scott continued as if Harry hadn’t spoken. “I know mine are better but I don’t showboat with my shirt off unlike some people.”

“Name one time I’ve gone around without a shirt!” Harry demanded.

“You do it all the time after Quidditch. Hoping she’ll show up?”

“I have to change, you prick!” Harry half-shouted. Why couldn’t Scott just leave the subject of Ginny alone? Harry knew he was acting a bit like Ron, but Scott’s unrelenting jabs at his non-relationship with Ginny set Harry on edge. Like he didn’t have enough to worry about. “Will you just shut it about Ginny already?”

“All right, don’t hurt yourself,” Scott said easily. “Don’t give yourself an aneurysm, I’d be out of a job.”

“That’d be a shame,” Harry grumbled insincerely. The portrait of the Fat Lady loomed into view
and Harry spoke the password. “Inter Mundos.”

“Yeah it would, they’d probably put me on probation for killing my Prime. My, what a fine looking group this is!”

Scott was greeting the rest of Harry’s friends, most of whom were preoccupied with homework that was immediately set aside when the snow soaked duo arrived. Neville, Ron and Hermione were revising essays together while Luna and Ginny compared fifth year notes. A fair amount of the other students must have retired to their dorms because the common room wasn’t crowded.

“There you are!” Hermione exclaimed, clearly in full scolding mode. “Where have you been? It’s past curfew!”

“Where have we been? We were out in the snowy, dark cold reconnoitring while you were sitting around the fire having a pyjama party,” Scott told her loftily.

“We were scouting the edge of the forest,” Harry quickly supplied before Hermione could explode. “That’s all.”

Rather than avert Hermione’s imminent rage his confession only served to spark it. “The forest?!” Hermione hissed. “Have you lost your mind? You went at night, after curfew, in the snow, and without us! You might have been killed, or gotten in serious trouble!” Dire fates were usually listed in the order of least to worst, and leave it to Hermione rate getting in trouble higher than dying on the scale of terrible things.

Scott made the tremendous mistake of laughing at her. “Nothing in there is going to kill us. How about a little credit, huh?”

“You weren’t there when me and Harry went in second year,” Ron said, and he shivered. “There are definitely things in there that will kill you.”

“We didn't go into the forest, we stayed by Hagrid's place,” Harry tried to explain.

Hermione crossed her arms, unforgiving. “I really don’t think it’s too much to ask,” she clipped out, “for you to kindly inform us that you’re wandering off to the Forbidden Forest!”

“You might have noticed where we were going if you hadn’t been testing how receptive Ron’s mouth is to your tongue,” Scott responded cuttingly. “Maybe you could practice kissing with your eyes open?”

On the topic of eyes, Harry briefly closed his. Why couldn’t Scott just keep his mouth shut whenever Hermione got all shirty?

Fortunately Luna, of all people, came to the rescue. “I imagine that might hurt the experience,” she mused dreamily, “there’s not much to look at while kissing.”

“Yeah,” Harry said rapidly, “you’re probably right. Anyway, what are we working on?”

“Potions,” Ron sighed. “It’s a nightmare of an essay, too. Well, mine is anyway. Bloody hell, look at that – I can’t rightly call that a sentence.”

“It’s looking much better now,” Hermione said optimistically.

“I don’t know what paper you’re looking at,” Ron sourly replied, “but mine’s a bleedin’ mess.”
“And mine’s even worse,” Neville said sadly.

Rather than go up to his dorm to get his own homework Harry seated himself by the fire as had been his original intention. He had little doubt it had been Hermione who had talked his friends into a Saturday night study session though he was surprised Ron and Ginny had gone along with it. Ron probably wouldn’t have if his relationship with Hermione hadn’t given her new sway over him, and as for Ginny, Harry never had any idea why she did things. Come Sunday the essay would still be there and he had just gotten back from being dragged through the snow by Scott. He’d earned a little rest.

Apparently Scott felt the same. “Look at you dorks, doing homework Saturday night,” he scoffed at them. “Let’s at least talk about something.”

Ron eagerly set his papers aside. “Anything would be better than this. What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know. Stuff. Hermione, how was your evening?”

“I think you’ve already decided for yourself what kind of evening I’ve had,” Hermione snapped at him, clearly not having forgotten his previous comment.

“Okay… Ginny, how was your evening?”

“I wasn’t snogging anybody, if that’s what you’re asking,” Ginny responded sarcastically. Harry ignored the feeling of relief that came over him.

“This could be going better,” Scott reflected matter-of-factly. “Harry, how was your evening?”

“Is that supposed to be funny?” Harry said.


Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “I take it you’re not going to let us do homework?”

“You take correctly.”

She closed her book with a loud snap. “Then you can tell us a story with two conditions – it has to be about you, and it has to be true,” she informed him.

“You always have to make everything a lesson don’t you, Hermione.” Scott shook his head. “I’m very disappointed.”

“I’m reopening my book.”

“Fine! It’ll be about me, and it will be true. Satisfied?”

“Yes,” Hermione said simply. She set her work aside and folded her hands on her lap patiently.

Harry settled back into his chair expectantly. Anything that revealed more of Scott’s past was worth hearing.

“Everybody on board with this?” Scott looked around, and seeing everyone looking back at him must have decided that they all were. “Something about me… Hmmmm…”

“Make it exciting,” Ron suggested with no small amount of bias.
“Action? Adventure? Possibly women of questionable virtue? Sounds like a good time to me,” Scott said agreeably. He stared up at the ceiling for a second. “Okay, every Kharadjai starts out partnered with a veteran for combat missions. Somehow Lil ended up assigned to me, probably command's idea of a joke…”

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My Love for You Is Like a Truck

The place was as silent as a tomb.

Altogether appropriate, since it was a tomb.

Kharan leaned against a delicately carved column of stone and hugged his gun to his armoured chest. Lila had moved ahead to scout but was taking longer than expected. Still, if she had run into resistance there would have been shots fired. He forced himself to relax and not check up on her.

Everything was going according to plan, or what little plan there was. Combat initiation training often seemed little more than a series of pointless encounters. Still, so far it hadn’t been all that bad. Slinking through ruins wasn’t the most pleasant way to spend a day but it beat fighting through ruins. The Locust were sparse in this sector, the legacy of chemical weapons long since degraded into harmlessness. A memory wouldn’t be enough to keep them away should Kharan and his charge be spotted, but it was useful enough for now.

Kharan wasn’t sure who or what the tomb housed but it served well as a temporary base of operations. The air was stale and dusty, some few shafts of light leaking in through crumbling stonework. There was an elegance about the rooms that time had yet to dim, a grandeur built of columns and engravings.

The telltale sound of pebbles rolling across the chequered stone floor signalled Lila’s approach. She came sliding down a pile of rubble left by the collapse of a section of the ceiling, her skin protected from the rough rocks by her bulky armour. The sound of the metal plates grating against chunks of rock seemed deafening after the total silence of before, and Kharan gritted his teeth.

“That’s some nice work broadcasting our presence,” he bit out, climbing to his feet. “I’ll recommend you for promotion to Dumbass First Class.

“I was just on the roof, there’s no one around,” Lila told him, shrugging.

“Are you really that retarded, or do you just do a great impression? There will be someone around if you keep pulling crap like that.”

Lila put her hand to her mouth in fake shock. “Oh, I’m sorry, did I say there was no one around? I meant there wasn’t anyone around yet… Unless you count the squad of Locust heading right for this building.”

So that was how it was. Kharan calmly thumbed the safety on his weapon. “All right. Your assignment is to stay here and distract them while I go find ‘help’.”

“I revolt and declare myself Queen of the Tomb. Bow to your Queen, worm.”

“That was some interesting phrasing,” Kharan said. “If you really want to roleplay my Boots of Anti-Revolting +5 just owned you. And furthermore…” Kharan immediately stopped talking when a vocal thunder echoed through the corridor, shaking dust and gravel loose. A distant, thudding cadence became clear.
“What is it?” Lila whispered, drawing her submachine gun.

Another bellow, this one closer. The thudding was now identifiable as heavy footsteps. Kharan sighed soundlessly.

“Well?” Lila asked again, more impatiently this time.

“Don’t breathe,” Kharan said quietly. “Or move from this spot. I’ll be right back.”

It was troublesome to make his footsteps soundless on the hard stone floor but he did his best in his cumbersome gear. When he turned the corner it was evident his initial assumption had been correct – an ominous shadow cast itself across the floor of one of the inner chambers. Something huge was lumbering about just out of sight. Kharan ducked back and returned to his sister.

“Okay, here’s the plan,” he said before yet another hideous roar cut him off. “Scratch that, here’s plan B… We run.”

“I’m understanding the method of this plan,” Lila said dryly. “But perhaps it might help if we had somewhere to run?”

The heavy footfalls picked up speed as whatever was coming towards them began to charge.

“Move,” Kharan said shortly, just before the Berserker burst through the rubble and smashed into the opposite wall.

Kharan whirled backwards from the force of the impact, dust filling his vision and lungs. “Lil! Go!” he choked out, firing his weapon blindly towards the last place he had seen the Berserker. The sound of the gunfire was deafening in the confined space. Briefly, Kharan wished he wasn’t so constrained. Training operations were aimed at expanding not only combat skills but also familiarity with localisation. Regret was useless in this situation. He turned and fled.

“WHAT IS IT?!” Lila screeched over her shoulder as they took off down a columned hallway. The Berserker must have regained its footing because a furious war cry echoed after them.

“A BERSERKER! AND STOP YELLING!” Kharan yelled.

With a sound like a freight train the blind monster shot up between Kharan and Lila as they threw themselves to the side. Scrambling to his feet, Kharan sprinted to where Lila was doing the same and grabbed her arm, dragging her into another corridor.

He decided speed was more important than stealth at this juncture and as such he sprinted away, Lila only a few steps behind. The Berserker careened off obstacles in its path or went straight through them as it blindly followed, drawn by the noise of their hurried flight. The creature was very fast but so were they, and the three of them moved together in a bizarre indoor footrace. The ludicrous nature of it was apparent even to those involved.

“So,” Kharan huffed out as he and Lila hurdled a fallen section of ceiling. “Is this how you thought you’d spend your day?”

“...Maybe?” Lila panted back.

“Left!”

The Kharadjai veered off in Kharan’s chosen direction but the Berserker didn’t need to understand English to follow them. Relying on smell and sound to replace any visual cues, the creature easily
kept the pace.

“Don’t worry! I have a marvellous plan!” Kharan told Lila.

He couldn’t check while running at full speed but he was fairly certain Lila rolled her eyes when she responded, “Don’t you mean ‘adequate’?”

“If I meant adequate I’d have said adequate, now take a right!”

They clambered up and over a short ceremonial bulwark of statuettes and made for what had once been a large garden outside the back of the tomb. A loud crack and crumbling noises let them know the Berserker hadn’t bothered to climb over the artwork.

Somewhere nearby a large fire was burning – the smoke wafted across the cityscape and obscured their scent from the Berserker behind them. Without a clear sense of smell the creature could only depend on sound to indicate their general direction. All they needed was a little luck. If the smoke was stronger than the musty odours of the place where road became dirt, then Kharan’s plan had a good chance of succeeding.

Quickly growing nearer in the distance was his objective – a deep rift in a city street where a Locust emergence had ripped the ground apart. The chasm stretched wide in front of them.

Kharan gave Lila a quick glance. “How are your jumping legs?” he asked her.

“Operable,” she replied, but her voice lacked its usual confidence. “That’s a pretty big hole.”

It was concerning whether or not Lila could make the leap, but there wasn’t any time to cogitate. The edge of the precipice was under their feet within seconds, and Kharan hurled his body across the abyss.

Just behind him the Berserker lunged forward in a grasping effort, only to find that solid ground was suddenly missing. With a strangely mournful wail the beast plunged downwards into the dark.

Upon impact with the other side Kharan was relieved to see that Lila had made a successful landing, however ungraceful. She stood and dusted off her posterior, having used it to skid to an ungainly halt. “That was interesting,” she said non-committally. “Let’s never do it again.”

“It could have been a lot worse and, frankly, I thought it was going to be,” Kharan said. “Let’s get out of here before she climbs back up.”

“She?”

“The Berserker is technically female. You know, kind of like you.”

“I suppose we have a lot in common,” Lila said acidly, “seeing as how we both want to kill you.”

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“After that me and Lil submitted conflicting reports and spent the better part of a day down at the Consist sorting it all out with the paper pushers,” Scott concluded anticlimactically. “And that’s how I ended up fighting with Lila instead of revising my statements like I should have.”

“That happen a lot, does it?” Ron asked.

“Having to work with my sister on a regular basis makes life’s little struggles just that much more uphill,” Scott dryly informed him.
“I know exactly what you mean,” Ginny said, shooting Ron a glare.

Somehow, Ron managed to ignore her. Hermione’s firm grip on his arm probably had a lot to do with that. “Blimey, you’ve had an exciting life haven’t you?” he remarked. “How many more stories like that you got?”


“Now that you mention it, I do seem to end up running for my life unusually often.” Ron looked over at Harry. “How many times you think?”

“Was I supposed to be keeping count?” Harry said wryly.

“There’s nothing wrong with knowing when to run the hell away,” Scott said, “though I prefer to call it a ‘tactical withdrawal’. Besides, things aren’t always like that. Sometimes I’ll find myself without any missions and a lot of time on my hands.”

“Really. Well judging by your stories, if they can be believed, your entire existence has been unremittingly violent,” Hermione said sarcastically.

“I believe the word you’re looking for is intense,” Scott corrected her absently. “Intense and action-packed. You’re lucky I didn’t charge you for admission.”

“I take it your next story has more gravitas?”

“Hell, I don’t know. You tell me.”

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“…And I’m All Out of Gum.”

The group disappeared to face the final obstacle. Kharan watched them until they turned a corner and were no longer within his sight.

He wished them the best of luck, and left to go and face his own fated encounter.

The structure was a mashed tangle of debris sucked together to form a contorted and twisting edifice that was as mad as the mind of its maker. A hideous geometry of rust was the result. Sharp angles dominated the interior. The floor was uneven and sometimes missing entirely. Impossible lines and curves defined the place, randomness the only guiding architectural aesthetic. Ignoring his unsavoury surrounds, Kharan gripped what handholds he could and ascended the makeshift stairway that lead to the roof.

High winds whipped across the shattered surface of the pinnacle, kicking up scraps of metal and fragmented wood. Kharan wondered if those lost pieces were drawn back to the building by the same force that had brought them there in the first place. The clouds overhead were swirling in a concentrated funnel, the focal point of which was centred directly above the monolith. The occasional skitter of feet and other appendages let Kharan know he was not alone, but the lesser denizens had learned their lesson previous to his second passing – they left him unmolested.

It wasn’t too far until he reached a more open space, a clearing of sorts on the southern edge of the construction. The unforgiving environment would lend itself to being a painful battleground. There
was nothing to be done about it. Sometimes pain was unavoidable.

Atma sat patiently across the expanse.

The being had little need to approach Kharan. They both knew the score and neither attempted to evade the coming confrontation. With the exception of its great eyes, Atma remained motionless as Kharan drew near to it.

The Kharadjai halted twenty feet away. The cold wind blew through the silence as the soon to be opponents surveyed each other with a wary respect. The amount of the power they represented together was substantial, and they both knew it. The question was who contributed more to that scale.

“The others are gone,” Kharan said slowly, breaking the stand off. “They’re going to finish it.”

Atma nodded its enormous head, flashes of lightning from the gathering storm reflecting off its bunch of warped blue horns and the glossy mass of branching gold armour that seemed embedded into its skin. “THEY WILL CAST DOWN THE DECIEVER.” Atma’s voice emerged as a dull rumble, rolling up from somewhere in its lumpy muscled torso. “THEIR POWER IS GREATER THAN THAT WHICH MADE THIS PLACE.”

“We were sort of counting on that,” Kharan agreed. “And you call him the Deceiver, but you still tricked him into thinking you were on his side.”

“THE GREATEST OF LIARS MAY BE LIED TO IN TURN. I AM NOT SHAPED IN SO PLEASING A MANNER AS YOU, WORLD-CROSSER.” Atma raised one of its four front limbs, flexing the sharp blue claws and peeling back its lipped muzzle to reveal rows of jagged golden teeth, some as long as width of one of Kharan’s hands, in a terrible equivalent of a smile. “IT IS EASY TO BELIEVE ME A MONSTER WITH NO THOUGHTS SAVE HUNGER.”

“And you’re not?”

“What are you?”

“I asked first.”

“I AM MUCH THE SAME AS YOU, WORLD-CROSSER-” Atma snorted, sending out a blast of hot air that blew rust flakes out in a red cloud. “A MONSTER WITH MANY HUNGERS.”

“But you’re not really on the wrong side. You just want something that I have.”

“AND I WILL HAVE IT.”

“My point is that there’s no solid reason for this.”

“DO YOU FEAR ME THEN?” Atma sounded amused.

“Do you think I need to prove something to you?”

“YOU ARE HERE. LEAVE YOUR FEAR BEHIND, WORLD-CROSSER. SUBMIT TO THE CONTEST. IF YOU WALK AWAY YOU WILL BE STRONGER FOR IT.”

“And if you walk away?”
“THEN I WILL BE LIFTED FROM THIS PLACE. I WILL TAKE WHAT IS YOURS AND CROSSED THE SPACES IN BETWEEN.”

“You don’t know that’s what will happen. You don’t know if it can be done, and I'm pretty damn sure it's never been done before.”

Atma’s head lowered menacingly. “I WILL DISCOVER THESE THINGS FOR MYSELF. FOR ALL YOUR TALK YOUR CONFIDENCE IS WEAK – WHEN HAVE YOU EVER DEFEATED MY EQUAL?”

“Never,” Kharan admitted. “But you can’t get what you want. It doesn’t work that way.”

“MORE IMPOSSIBILITIES?” Atma scoffed. “AND HOW MANY CAN YOU PROVE? THERE IS ONLY ONE METHOD OF DECIDING WHAT IS TRUTH. YOU SEEK TO DELAY THE INEVITABLE.”

“I'm making a half-hearted attempt at conflict resolution,” Kharan said sarcastically. “Don't make this out to be something it isn't.”

“SOME CONFLICTS MUST BE FACED. IF YOU FLEE, YOU ABANDON YOUR COMPANIONS TO MEET ME ALONE. I WILL NOT ENJOY THEM. THEY ARE SMALL THINGS.”

“You don’t really think I’m going to do that, do you.”

“NO. YOU ARE THE WORLD-CROSSER, AND WILL TRY YOUR UTMOST TO DESTROY ME. FOR ONCE WE BOTH WILL FACE AN EQUAL.”

“That remains to be seen,” Kharan said coldly.

Atma laughed, a horrible ripping noise like a magnified bark. “FINALLY YOU SHOW YOUR PRIDE! YOU HAVE ALREADY SET YOURSELF AGAINST ME. YOU KNOW WHAT MUST BE DONE.”

“Oh, of course.” Kharan’s face went blank. “I wouldn’t want to let you down.”

The customary threats had been exchanged and the battle lines were drawn. There was nothing left but to act.

With a bellow Atma charged like a thundering train, an impossible mass of flexing sinew and deadly natural weaponry. Kharan was silent, his face expressionless as he met the rush head on.

The two combatants crashed together in a meeting that was more about fury than finesse. Atma’s great teeth snapped at Kharan’s limbs as he pummelled the creature with incredible blows. Ducking beneath Atma’s jaw, Kharan delivered a powerful kick to the throat that cut another of the monster’s bellows off with a rasping choke. Atma responded by lifting his head and swatting Kharan away with a forearm as thick as a telephone pole.

Bouncing painfully off the jagged ground Kharan regained his footing just in time to avoid a follow up blow from Atma’s tail. The massive appendage whipped through the air and smashed with a concerted pattern that Kharan avoided only with sheer velocity. Sprinting past the tail just before it hit him, Kharan slid under a grasping claw and jammed his elbow into a soft section of Atma’s underbelly, feeling one huge rib crack and give way. Atma roared in pain, spinning with
surprising speed considering his bulk and trying to gore Kharan with his horned head. The Kharadjai juked to the side and avoided the manoeuvre but Atma had expected this – its giant tail was already in motion and brutally caught Kharan across the back, hitting with enough force to split the skin.

Kharan agonisingly rolled to a standing position and for a moment the enemies faced off again without speaking. It was a lull in the storm. They both caught their breath and prepared themselves for more pain, and then closed the attack again.

The battle raged back and forth across the expanse of the tower without either of them having a clear advantage. Kharan swung a roundhouse blow that crack the horn off the tip of Atma’s muzzle and brought tears of agony to the eyes of the creature. Atma responded by blowing out an icy stream of air so cold it froze Kharan’s legs solid, fixing him to the ground. The monster took advantage of his momentary immobility and swung its great tail into his side, leaving a pair of brittle legs behind as his upper body was ripped from them.

Another lull came as both Atma and Kharan slowed to a halt. The fight had been dragging on interminably. Atma’s laboured breathing was audible even over the dull roar of the wind, and though Kharan’s was not it was only due to his size for he was inhaling with just as much difficulty. Both of them represented a physical history of the conflict up to that point.

Atma’s golden armour was dented and tarnished with streaks of blood, both its and Kharan’s. Its mottled skin was darkened with bruises and other internal injuries, its front horn missing and most of its lower teeth revealed in a skeletal grin where much of its lower lip had been torn away. At least three fingers were missing from its forelimbs. When Atma moved it was with a low creaking sound emanating from the damage to its bones.

Kharan’s clothing was shredded and soaked through with blood. His skin was riddled with clean white circles where he had been perforated by claws and had healed, as well as several still bleeding stabs that he was now too exhausted to expend energy on fixing. His left eye was a pulpy mass, swollen shut, his hair missing in places where raw lacerations criss-crossed his skull. A steady stream of blood trickled from his mouth from when his lungs had been pierced, a wound which was now remedied but the fluid had already collected within.

“PERHAPS WE WILL DESTROY EACH OTHER.” Atma rumbled, though more subdued than it had been before.

“It might be for the best,” Kharan mumbled through a mouthful of blood, leaning over to let it sluggishly ooze out in crimson strings.

Atma was silent for a moment. “YOU BELIEVE WE WERE FATED TO MEET HERE SO THAT WE MIGHT EACH REMOVE THE OTHER?”

“Anything's possible,” Kharan slurred. “I just wish dying didn’t hurt so much.”

“THEN END IT.”

Now the fight was slower and more deliberate as Kharan and Atma pounded away at each other. It became a war of attrition as fatigue set in and energies were drained. Both contestants staggered when hit instead of immediately recovering, and it became increasingly difficult to maintain any sort of hold as both were slicked with blood and sweat. Atma moved ponderously, breathing like a great bellows and it was clear that Kharan was in better shape and still able to move quickly enough to dodge Atma’s clumsy blows.
Until a fatal circumstance occurred.

Sidestepping another swing of Atma’s tail, Kharan’s leg caught on a jagged piece of metal protruding from the ground. The obstruction tore into his skin and sent him sprawling, momentarily crippled. Atma saw its chance for victory, and with a mighty roar rushed Kharan where he lay.

With a great bound of its hind legs Atma launched itself through the air in a deadly jump. The shadowy bulk of the creature descended on Kharan, a weight that would surely crush him if not countered. It was a split second decision – reaching down to where his leg lay caught on the spike, Kharan ripped it free of the roof and in the last moment before Atma hit held the makeshift weapon in both hands and extended his arms.

With a horrible wet puncturing sound, Atma was impaled. Both of them screamed, Atma as its belly was stabbed deep and Kharan as his body was crushed beneath Atma’s mass. Kharan’s arms alone saved him from being completely flattened.

Atma’s shriek trailed off into a deep moan, and the creature feebly wiggled its arms and legs as it tried to dislodge itself. The golden fan that spun within its setting near the back of Atma’s armour gave forth a different sound than its usual metallic hum as dark blood sprayed out from it, ringing the device with a spattered pattern.

Kharan tried with all his might to lift the being off himself but could not – instead with his last ounce of strength he rolled both of them over and down through a hole in the roof next to where they lay. The two fell into the chamber and crashed on the floor.

Though the fall had succeeded in moving Atma to lie beside Kharan instead of on top of him, the descending creature landed on his right arm. One of the spikes from Atma’s armour deeply pierced the skin. Gripping his right arm by the bicep, Kharan cried out as he pulled his arm out from underneath the beast, peeling it like some hideous fruit. The dead white skin stripped away to reveal mushy flesh beneath. Clutching the mangled remains of his arm to himself, he wrapped it in the bottom portion of his shirt and stumbled a few steps to collapse against the opposite wall, shaking from head to toe.

His body was consumed in a burning agony that gradually slipped into numbness. He could feel his major organs succumbing to shock. He was hyperventilating, barely maintaining his consciousness. His breathing began to falter, and soon he felt like he was made of ice.

“world-crosser.” Atma’s voice was dimmed, a weak murmur compared to before. “can you call this a victory? we are unmade.”

“Easily...” Kharan forced out through chattering teeth. “Dust to... dust.” He was wracked with violent seizures.

“dust and ashes,” Atma sighed wetly as a bloody froth trickled down its chin. “in the end, we return to the beginning. time is a lie, and no matter how long you linger on this side, there is only one way to cross.”

Kharan closed his good eye and tried to swallow, but couldn’t. “Not yet.”

“you are...” In mid-breath Atma’s eyes filmed over.

And it did not speak again.
Time passed. Minutes, maybe hours. Kharan could no longer feel any sensation other than a burning, raw heat from severed nerve endings that contrasted with the arctic cold that had sunk into his pores. Coma sleep tugged at the edges of his mind. His failing body was shutting down one section at a time as he clung to consciousness.

Was that light in the sky real or only behind his eyelids? He heard thunder and saw heaven stretch across the empyrean while the Deceiver was cast down to lie on the ruin of his wings. A million voices sounded in triumph to mix with the howling gale. Forty days and forty nights of celebration… or rain? Someone was singing.

Reality faded in and out until the sound of footsteps came echoing down to where he lay slumped against the wall.

“Scott! Scott!”

They were looking for him. This meant they had won, and that all would be well. Atma was dead and so was his self-proclaimed master. For the first time he could tell that the tower was fiercely shaking, swaying on its base. As the life of its maker came to an end so was the titanic construction itself falling down. There was no time to extract his battered body from the pit in which it was entombed. He knew what he had to do.

“Scott!”

He closed his eye and went still.

A woman stood above him, her long green hair whipping in the wind. Her violet eyes widened in horror at the sight in the room below. “Scott!” she screamed. “Get up!”

Kharan didn’t move. Any pleas on his part for her to run would be ignored.

The tower gave another dying shudder. The sound of boots on metal let Kharan know she was trying to descend to him, and he felt a burst of frustration. Why wouldn’t she just go away?

“What are you doing?” A new voice, a man’s this time. Another pair of shoes clattered over the roof to stop somewhere up above. “Oh, no…”

“Help me get him!”

“You can’t.” The man sounded harsh and desperate. “We can’t help him. We have to go, now!”

“We can’t just leave him here!”

“We don’t have a choice!” The man’s voice broke and his harshness was merely a façade. “We can’t stay here any longer.”

An aborted intake of breath alerted Kharan to the fact that she was crying, and he felt a stab of regret.

The woman sobbed. “I-”

“We have to go,” the man said gently.

“I’m sorry,” Kharan heard her whisper as the tall man pulled her back to the top. “I’m so sorry.”

Then they were gone.
The minutes crawled by. Somewhere far below he could hear the deep pings of metal being stressed beyond its limits. Screeches and tearing sounds reverberated through the walls. It was when the first massive boom rattled him that he realised the floors beneath were collapsing. The wind rose to a howling crescendo and he knew the end had arrived.

The tower was ripping apart in a magical tornado, surrounding by a twisting, shrieking storm that tore the structure down plate by plate and sent them spinning into the vortex. A multitude of sparks from the fractured metal set anything flammable ablaze. The wall to the right of Kharan groaned under extreme pressure before being cleaved from its holding place and falling away into the void. The room became an air tunnel, filled with swirling debris and smoke. With his good arm Kharan reached over and took hold of a slightly protruding metal tile. The force of the wind pressed him into the barrier and held him there, and he watched as his blood slowly rippled its way across the surface of the wall like water over a windshield.

Gradually the great bulk of Atma’s body gave way to the wind storm and began sliding over the floor. Kharan watched as the creature finally fell and quickly disappeared from sight.

He knew it was only a matter of time until his handhold came loose. There was no point in delaying the inevitable.

He let go, slipped over the edge, and vanished into the gale.

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“I sort of remember falling but I don’t remember hitting the ground. Of course, given the wind speeds involved I was probably airborne for a good while so I might have passed out first,” Scott said, finishing his tale.

“But, what happened after that? Surely there’s more,” Hermione insisted, looking like she didn’t entirely believe Scott’s story. “How did you survive?”

“I didn’t. I got killed!” Scott leaned back in his chair and laughed loudly at his own jest. “I never get tired of that.”

Hermione frowned at him. “Scott, you said these stories would be true!”

“Who says I didn’t truly die?” Scott said with a wide grin. “You can’t prove I didn’t.”

“Oh, please,” Hermione said irritably. “This is the last time I ever believe you when you say you’ll be telling the truth.”

“Hermione, Hermione,” Scott said, shaking his head sadly. “You’re so quick to judge. Why can’t you be more like Atma, and love me for who I am?”

“It’s too bad you had to kill him,” Luna said softly.

“He had it coming,” Scott told her with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Harry knew what it was like to be forced into a confrontation, though he sort of hoped that if he survived fighting Voldemort it would be in better shape than Scott had been. The Kharadjai’s detailed descriptions of removing the skin from his right arm had left everyone a little pale, which had probably been the intention.

“Sounds to me like Atma was a lot of trouble,” Neville chimed in, obviously trying to reassure Luna. “I wouldn’t feel too bad for him, Luna.”
Scott nodded emphatically. “Atma was... daunting.”

“That why didn’t you get someone to help you?” Ginny said, raising an eyebrow.

“There wasn’t anybody else. Believe me, I would have taken the hand offered. Nobody wants to tangle with a B.O.P. alone. Atma probably could have swallowed the Blue and kept coming.”

“B-O-P,” Hermione interrupted, “that would be...”

“Being or Beings of Power.”

“Okay, and swallow the what?”

“Blue.”

Hermione gave him an exasperated look. “Yes, I heard you the first time. What is that?”

“It’s a colour.” When Hermione glared at him, Scott smiled and added, “It’s a weapon.”

“What sort of weapon?”

Scott sighed. “Okay, I think another story would best illustrate my point.”

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If This Was a Movie, You’d Die in the Prologue

The cavernous space was darkened, lined with tattered velvet and heavy with age, a musty feeling more than any smell. The air was not uncomfortable in temperature but the floor seemed hard and cold beneath his feet as if some chilling malice lay buried beneath the dusty layers of dark tiled stone. Debris crunched under his heels as he walked below dead arches and skylights that had not revealed the sun for years uncounted. It was nearly silent in the manor. The only sounds were the slight rustling of the dry leaves, stirred by a faint breeze like the breath squeezed from a corpse.

He was accustomed to traversing places that most people would find uninviting, or in this case downright threatening. It was never comfortable, but there wasn’t much to be done about that. What brought him to these locales was not idle curiosity or the cheap thrill of breaking and entering, but a newly acquired mission.

He stopped, having reached the end of the hallway. Before him was a large door set deep in the surrounding stonework. The building had obviously been a fortress of some kind in the past. It was heavily reinforced and built like a castle. With a solid kick the door flew open to slam against the inside wall with a deafening bang. Dust and pebbles shook loose from the ceiling and walls to scatter across the already filthy floor. A cloud of dirt obscured the inside of the chamber before settling and allowing Kharan to peer within.

The interior had been used as some sort of field hospital at one time. Yellowed bed sheets lay piled in one corner of the room, pillowcases in another. Rusted out folding cots were in a grim abundance; some stacked haphazardly, other strewn across the floor, and some few still intact and waiting for patients whose bodies were now as buried and forgotten as the place itself. It seemed to him that ghosts whispered along the windows sills, peering through cracked panes at a life now
beyond reach. The place ached of dried out memories, old pain. Some dim sorrow caught in the back of the throat. A sadness brittle, bleached and worn out like old bones.

What was it, he wondered, about these morbid places that drew such beings as those he hunted. They were scavengers, filled by the emptiness and seduced by the fading imprints of severed lives, licking old scabs in hopes of a mouthful of blood.

The creature was hideous, of course. They always were. It was pink and hairless, its charred skin hugging its ribs and overlying a bone structure that looked sharp and asymmetrical. Kharan caught a glimpse of teeth like needles as the thing smiled – about what, he wasn’t sure. A devil in the lips and tongue, it was innately disturbing. There was insanity in the smile, the shreds of a broken humanity hanging from a stripped mind.

Just another person who had sold their soul for a power that twisted them up and tossed them aside like a used rag. Evil never came out second best in a deal. If people would stop and remember that, Kharan thought with humour, he would have a lot more free time.

Kharan stopped in the middle of the room, gauging the distance between himself and the thing. It made no move to stop him, apparently content to let him approach. Kharan admired its self-confidence and pitied its stupidity. The best move it could have made would have been to run.

The creature was tense now, awaiting his next actions. Kharan didn’t see any point in trying to stare it down. He reached behind him and from his back pocket pulled a silver cylinder that looked akin to a cigar holder. The creature watched in silence as Kharan twisted the top off of it and held out a hand into which he tipped out a dull silvery bullet, seamlessly coated from the primer to the tip and striped around the middle with a bright blue line.

He held it up. “Do you know what this is?”

Predictably, there was no answer.

That was fine with Kharan, he wasn’t in a hurry. The longer it took him to do carry out his mission the more it seemed like he had done some actual work. “It’s a bullet, obviously. But what’s important is what’s inside the bullet. I’ll spare you the trouble of trying to pronounce its scientific name. We call this Blue. More specifically, it is a .45 calibre round with a jacketed Blue core.”

The creature impatiently edged forward.

“Blue is a unique, naturally occurring element. It is mined and carefully packaged for processing at our main armaments plant.” Kharan drew his pistol from its holster, holding it forward for the creature’s perusal. “You know what this is, right?”

The thing’s lips peeled back to reveal blackened gums.

Kharan smiled back. “Ah, you do recognise guns, then. And you’re smart enough to know that your magic will easily protect you from them.”

Emboldened, the creature took a few more steps towards him.

“But,” Kharan held up a finger, “this is where Blue comes in. Blue is highly explosive. Also highly unstable, making difficult to refine. But once you do, and place it into a firearms ready delivery device such as this bullet, its properties come to light. Blue is the anti-energy.”

The creature didn’t seem to care, approaching yet closer.
“You see, once ignited, Blue only interacts with the physical. That’s it. Heat, radiation, your own form of magic... None of it matters once this stuff starts to burn. Really, when considering the explosive power contained within this bullet, only two things are relevant: the quantity of Blue present, and the density of the matter it strikes. It bonds with the material and converts it to energy. I could get into the nuts and bolts of that, with the release of potential energy and the by-products, mainly heat and light, but I don’t think you’re really listening to me, anyway.”

The creature crouched to strike.

“I regret to say that the full import of this demonstration will be lost on you.” Kharan loaded the bullet into the chamber and fired.

The sound was louder than any conventional shot – along with the typical crack of gunfire an ear splitting shriek emanated from the weapon as the Blue ignited with the blast of the primer. A blue light lit up the surrounds with all the dazzling brightness and brevity of a lightning strike as the Blue quickly burned through its metal jacket. For the barest millionth of a second a glowing projectile sliced through the air, leaving the reek of ozone behind it. The creature’s torso vanished, vaporised by the impact. What was left of it flew back to smack with hideous force into the opposite wall.

As the sound faded, Kharan lowered the gun and closed his mouth (kept open to ameliorate the sound). The creature’s remains smouldered at the other end of the room, the edges of the limbs that had at one time connected to the torso cauterised surfaces of slowly fading blue-edged ashes.

Surveying his work, Kharan was satisfied. Reaching into his back pocket he extracted his com, hitting a button and bringing it to his ear.

“What?”

His sister’s voice came unexpectedly loud, though not unexpectedly bitchy. Not for the first time he seriously wondered if she was just on the rag, because she had been borderline intolerable recently. “It’s me. I finished up here.”

“Oh, it’s you.”

Only Lila could put so much into one word. He sighed. “Ring it in for me, would you?”

“And why should I?”

”The spirit of siblinghood?”

“Now that’s convincing.” Her voice however, softened somewhat. “Any casualties?”

“Just the one. It was a clean job.”

“All right, I’ll call it in. Now get back here and clean up the mess you left in my bathroom.”

“You mean my bathroom.”

She hung up on him.

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“So then I had to go home and clean the bathroom, but the upshot of the whole thing was that I had some free time after such a short mission,” Scott finished.
Hermione was frowning thoughtfully. “But what was it? The creature you killed.”

Scott shrugged. “I was just passing through.”

“Wasn’t really much of a fight,” Ron commented, sounding slightly disappointed. “You just up and snuffed him. Must not have been very powerful, eh?”

“Not really. But in his post-mortem defence, there’s not many people, or former people, that can weather a direct hit from a low-yield load of Blue.”

“Could Voldemort?” Harry asked tentatively, not certain he wanted to hear the answer.

“You’d know better than me. Without a better understanding of his capabilities, there’s not much I can tell you.”

“I hate to interrupt,” Luna broke in absently, “but it’s getting rather late.”

Neville looked up at the clock over the fireplace. “Wow, she’s right. I didn’t think it’d been that long.”

The mood was broken as everyone shifted from their places and stretched out the stiffness born of sitting for too long. Harry realised he was in fact very tired, and yawned widely. It had been an interesting evening, in more ways than one. There was a lot to think about but for the moment what Harry really wanted to do was to go to sleep.

“Who’s walking with Luna back to her tower? Neville, you got it? All right, cool,” Scott said, standing up. “Teper my povynni spaty. Let’s hit the sheets.”

On the way up the stairway to the dormitory Ron looked at Scott and said, “Next time Hermione has us doing homework feel free to tell some stories again. That was a lifesaver, mate.”

“I exist to entertain,” Scott said magniloquently, before adding, “But how do you accept any of it?”

To his credit, Ron wasn’t fazed. “You can’t just be lying about all of it – not after what you showed us. I figure at least some of it is true and then on top of that you’re totally mental, which is probably why you fit in so well around here.”

“Well that’s good, I’d hate to think I was out my fucking mind without any redeeming purpose…” Scott trailed off as they reached the top of the stairs since some of the other boys were already in bed and probably asleep. “There’s more where that came from,” he continued in a whisper. “And you know what? It’s kind of cathartic.”

“Cathar-what?”

Scott shook his head. “Go to bed, you poof.”

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ADDENDUM:

The Basics of Blue

Blue (Nitrodritostitonium) is an element that is unique to the Solus universe. It is a highly unstable mineral that is mined in a variety of locations, existing either in ores or as a soft, sheeted metal when in its naturally occurring form. Blue is unusual amongst all known elements and other
materials in that it is capable of bonding with matter through a violent chemical reaction that results in a high rate conversion to energy. So destructive is the element that is has been considered by some to be an ‘antimatter’, though that is an inaccuracy. Blue is inert until activated through changes in heat or pressure, and the destruction of matter in the bonding process is not total.

It is Blue’s reaction to energy, or rather the lack of reaction, that makes it especially useful in munitions. Regardless of the method or form within a universe’s power, Blue reacts directly with matter alone. It cannot be affected by anything other than direct physical means in its ignition state.

**Munitions Overview**

Blue is utilised in wide variety of offensive weaponry, due not only to its power but to its malleability.

Depending on density and quantity, Blue may either burn or explode. Blue ammunition for small arms is produced in several different types, including armour piercing, which are tipped with a thin layer of dense Blue that ignites on impact and burns through until expended. High explosive rounds use Blue as a warhead, consisting of a conventional, jacketed bullet with a varying amount of powdered Blue in the core. Rockets and other heavy weapons for anti-vehicular use operate under the same principles.

**Melee Applications**

While Blue is a very unstable element, in the hands of expert technicians it can be combined with more workable materials to form new compounds. Many of these combinations render the Blue permanently diluted and inert and therefore no longer useful, and many more result in detonation. However, certain materials of high density may be combined with Blue through a lengthy process that results in a small amount that is Blue-infused. The Blue in the metal no longer demonstrates its reactionary properties, and thus the composites produced by this process will not cut through armour or other corporeal protections. Instead, these metals are not conductive, require a temperature to melt exponentially higher than that of the original base material, and reflect all known forms of radiation.

**Exposure to Blue**

If you believe that you have been exposed to Blue, call emergency services immediately for assistance. If you are unable to contact emergency services, please heed these important safety tips:

* Do not attempt to brush, wipe or blot the Blue. Applying pressure may cause an explosion.

* Do not try to wash the Blue off with any liquid cleaning substances, including water.

* Do not make any sudden or strong movements.

* Avoid large variations in environmental temperature.

* Do not inhale or otherwise ingest the Blue if at all possible. If some Blue is inadvertently ingested, do not induce vomiting.

* Do not scream, shout or make loud sounds that produce vibrations.

* If the Blue absolutely must be removed without professional assistance, attempt to gently lift it with your fingertips in very small portions. Ensure that whatever you remove is kept separated.
* Try to relocate outdoors. This will minimise property damage in the event of an explosion.

Excerpted from Munitions Introductory Manual, Section IX

Published and distributed by the Imperiarchy Bureau of Information, Third Army Division

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“… so it’s not likely that a spell could be continuous in a self-contained manner; they’d have to be
drawing more energy from an outside source. There’s no such thing as a perfect closed system, all
methods of creating and routing power have waste that manifests as heat. Magic might have a
minimal amount of energy loss in conversion and transfer, but it still has to go somewhere – whoa,
evasive manoeuvres, veer right.”

Harry immediately complied with Scott’s direction and took a sharp turn into an adjacent corridor.
The move neatly avoided yet another cluster of girls anticipating his arrival beneath an
inconvenient batch of mistletoe.

“Don’t look back,” Scott advised Harry. There was a second of silence as they listened closely for
the sound of approaching footsteps. Hearing nothing, they relaxed. “I think you’re good.”

“This is a bloody pain in the arse,” Harry complained. “Whose idea was it to put up mistletoe in
the first place?”

“Not mine. That stuff has way too much mysticism attached to it for being such a stupid little
plant.” The more Scott thought about mistletoe the more he started getting into the subject. “Plus
everybody has to kiss under the mistletoe but nobody does it well, you know? Nothing kills the
mood like mistletoe. Mistletoe means your hot girlfriend will give you the kind of kiss you’d get
from your grandma.”

“That wasn’t really what I was thinking, but at least you agree with me.”

The pair was headed towards the library for an impromptu study session, though there were
ulterior motives. Scott knew Harry was seeking out some peace and quiet in the stacks away from
the ever-present eyes of his many admirers. Slughorn’s Christmas party would take place the
following day and Harry still hadn’t asked anyone to go with him, a fact that stirred up
considerable anxiety amongst a large portion of the female student body. The pressure was on the
Boy Who Lived, and he wasn’t handling it well from what Scott could see.

Scott’s presence was due to a request (or, perhaps more accurately, desperate plea) from Harry for
accompaniment. Understanding that the last thing Harry needed was to be caught alone by any
girls, Scott acquiesced.

“Are you even going to ask anybody?” Scott questioned Harry. He didn’t bother to introduce the
relevant topic for the inquiry. Harry knew exactly what he meant.

Harry looked despondent. “I don’t know. It wouldn’t be a big deal if I went by myself, would it?
Who would care?”

“I can think of any number of people who could possibly care quite a bit,” Scott said, “friends and
enemies. It’s up to you, but I think you should ask someone.”

“I wish this wasn’t so hard. You’d think I’d be better at it after the Yule Ball.”
Scott braced himself and casually suggested, "Ask Ginny."

Sure enough, Harry glared at him. "I thought I told you to let it alone?"

"You want me to ask her for you?"

"No! Look, just shut it about Ginny already. I don’t want to hear it."

"Would you do it if I ghost wrote a poem for you to give her?"

"What did I just say? Sod off about Ginny!" Harry said angrily.

"Would you do it if it was a good poem?"

This time Harry didn’t bother answering and instead upped his pace, leaving Scott behind. Scott let the smile he had been hiding spread across his face as Harry fumed ahead of him.

"Would you, could you, in a box?" Scott mumbled through his grin. "Would you ask that red-haired fox?"

Harry strode angrily through the entrance to the library, and Scott jogged to catch up.

He’d always had a soft spot in his heart for libraries. The allure of accumulated knowledge was timeless, and even while he followed Harry past the shelves of books he had the urge to pick one out at random. The sheer size and depth of the Multiverse guaranteed that no matter how long the lifespan, it was impossible to learn everything. Even if a person somehow managed to learn absolutely all that had ever happened in the past, the rate of new information being created would exceed the speed at which it could be absorbed.

In the study area of the library Harry and Scott found Hermione working on one of her many essays. Scott did a quick survey of the surroundings but Ron was nowhere in sight, an odd occurrence. Harry dumped his book bag onto the table and Scott followed suit, sliding into a seat across from Hermione.

"Hey, Hermione," Scott said, looking around again. "Where’s Ron?"

"You just missed him," she replied. "He went back to the common room—which reminds me..." Hermione put down her quill and looked at Harry quite seriously. "You’ll want to be careful when you go back, Harry."

Harry returned her look warily. "What? Why?"

"I was in the lavatory earlier--" Hermione began.

Scott leaned forward with exaggerated eagerness. "Do tell!"

"--and overheard several girls talking about you," Hermione said, pausing to give Scott a narrow-eyed warning, "including that Romilda Vane. They’ve all bought those love potions from Fred and George’s shop, and you can expect them to be used. I suggest you don’t consume anything offered to you."

Scott forced himself not to laugh at Harry. The poor guy was already suffering, and now Hermione’s dire prediction turned him decidedly pale. "And you didn’t take the potions from them?" Harry said incredulously.

"They didn’t have them at hand, Harry," Hermione snipped at him for daring to question her
“Why don’t you just ask someone so the rest will settle down? They’re getting desperate. You won’t be able to eat or drink until tomorrow night at this rate.”

“Easy for you to say,” Harry grumbled. “You had someone to ask.”

“Kids with love potions.” Scott shook his head. “That’s just plain wrong. Still, look at it this way. Harry – you should be thankful your admirers are going to be offering you love-potion-laced food instead of hiding in a dark alley with a syringe full of Ketamine.”

Harry ignored Scott out of long practice, but Hermione immediately latched on to scientific terms. “That’s a chemical, right? What does it do?”

“It makes Harry grateful for comparatively undamaging love potions,” Scott replied without actually answering her question. “Harry, she’s right. You gotta get off your ass and ask someone to the party.”

Harry stubbornly set his jaw. “We went over this a few minutes ago, and nothing’s changed since then.”

“Wrong!” Scott exclaimed triumphantly.

But before he could tell Harry why he was wrong the long nose of Madam Pince came into view, bringing with it her furious countenance.

“You will speak quietly in the library!” she hissed at Scott venomously.

“I will?” Scott’s eyebrows shot up. “If that’s what I will be doing, then what should I do now?”

Madam Pince appeared to literally choke on her own rage. Hermione quickly intervened, probably for fear that the woman would suffocate on the spot. “We’re very sorry,” she said with a level of sincerity that Scott was sure he could never achieve. “My friend was—um—overexcited about the topic of his essay. It won’t happen again.”

With some effort, Madam Pince drew another breath. Her beady glare moved between Scott and Hermione – apparently she couldn’t decide whether to trust the exemplary student or punish the one with the smart mouth. “See that it doesn’t,” she said finally, pausing before she turned around to give Scott one last nasty look.

Once the librarian had left, Hermione gave Scott an equivalent look of her own. “Why do you do things like that? We might have been kicked out!”

“I don’t like Pince, all right,” Scott said defensively. “She always gives me the weirdest looks for no reason.”

“So why am I wrong?” Harry prompted.

“Hmm? Oh, right. You’re wrong because Hermione is here. She wasn’t here before, therefore something has changed.”

“Pure semantics.” Hermione dismissed his argument.

“You’d still agree with me if you knew what we were talking about,” Scott told her.

Hermione raised a doubting eyebrow. “Oh? And what’s that?”

“Don’t,” Harry said immediately.
“I was telling Harry that—” Scott began.

“Don’t start.”

“—he should ask Ginny to the Christmas party,” Scott finished.

“Bollocks,” Harry said, and laid his head down on his crossed arms.

“You’re right; I quite agree,” Hermione said firmly. “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“Perhaps it doesn’t matter to you,” Harry said, voice muffled by his arms, “but Ginny already has a boyfriend, and it isn’t me.”

“You can still invite her as a friend,” Hermione pointed out.

“Exactly!” Scott agreed. “Friends with privileges. Fuck-buddies, I believe the arrangement is sometimes called. Though certainly not by me, heavens no.”

Hermione took on the severe, tensed up look she always did whenever Scott talked like that. “That really isn’t necessary,” she scolded him, “and it’s hardly likely to encourage Harry.”

Scott made a rude noise of disbelief. “Not encourage? How, in your bizarre version of reality, does the possibility of pussy not provide motivation for a teenaged male?”

“I’m ignoring you,” Hermione stated matter-of-factly. Turning to Harry, she said, “It really wouldn’t hurt to try.”

“It really might,” Harry sighed, lifting his head. “And I can’t, all right? I can’t, and I won’t. Stop asking.”

Hermione clearly wanted to say more, but, under Harry’s steady gaze, she closed her mouth and picked up her quill. Being Hermione, she still had to have the last word. “If that’s what you want, Harry. But you know what I think.”

“Oh yes,” Harry said sarcastically, “I know what you think.”

The rest of their time in the library was spent working. While scribbling down some musings that didn’t really relate to the subject matter he was supposedly studying, Scott saw with amusement that Hermione gave Harry’s customised copy of Advanced Potion-Making more than one dirty glance.

It wasn’t that Scott was blind to the controversy caused by Harry’s book, but he honestly couldn’t see the harm in it. He had examined the text on several occasions and, to the best of his ability, could detect nothing particularly important. The object simply was not one of any Priority. Scott knew that there was a chance, however slight, that the universe was concealing it in order to prevent interference; but without a solid reason, he didn’t want to take the book from Harry. Removing it could have just as severe consequences as leaving it alone.

Some time later Scott leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms out, releasing a sizeable yawn. “The library is going to close in a few minutes. Should probably pack it up.”

Madam Pince must have had the same idea because she re-emerged from somewhere back in the depths of the stacks right after Scott finished talking. “The library will be closing shortly,” she began. Then she spotted Harry’s book lying on the table, and things quickly deteriorated. “What have you done to that book, you depraved boy?”
The librarian lunged for the textbook with a grasping hand, and Harry quickly yanked it back beyond her reach. “It’s not the library’s; it’s mine!”

“Despoiled!” Madam Pince hissed. “Desecrated! Befouled!”

“You forgot ‘profaned’, ‘defiled’ and ‘vitiated’,” Scott noted impartially. When Madam Pince turned her vicious glare on him he blandly returned it. “What? You’re not the only one with a thesaurus.”

“Out!”

Hermione grabbed both Scott and Harry by their shoulders and hurriedly dragged them towards the exit.

“I really don’t like her,” Scott said pensively.

“Of all the stupid things…” Hermione fussed at Scott once they were free of the library’s forced whispering. “I won’t be surprised at all if you’re banned after this.”

“Like she could stop me from getting in if I wanted to,” Scott scoffed with pointless defiance.

Some small portion of Scott’s mind knew in a detached sort of way that he was being childish. While he had always possessed that aspect in some varying amount, this current level of insouciance and unearned pride was most likely a side effect of becoming a teenager again.

Those vague and distant realisations didn’t stop him from acting out anyway, of course.

Hermione huffed out a breath in exasperation. “You wouldn’t need to if you’d just keep your mouth shut! I swear, for someone who’s supposed to be undercover you’re not very good at avoiding attention.”

“I’m just keeping it real.” Scott shrugged.

“Madam Pince has always been barking mad anyway,” Harry said. “It’s not all his fault.”

“You’re right!” Hermione agreed a little too quickly. “If you hadn’t brought that book of yours--”

“I’m not listening to this again!”

Scott pushed his luck one more time. “Would you rather talk about how you’re going to ask Ginny to the party?”

Harry exploded. “Will you for once just fucking shut it about Ginny!”

The thunderous culmination of all Scott’s incessant pestering came at an unfortunate time. Professor Slughorn had just come around the corner and was bearing down on them at the exact moment Harry decided to let Scott know just how he felt. The corpulent Potions Master stared at them while the echoes of Harry’s fury faded away.

“Professor Slughorn!” Hermione squeaked. She edged slightly away from Harry and Scott as if she could distance herself from any possible disciplinary repercussions.

“Er, sorry Professor,” Harry mumbled. He turned his head for a fraction of a second to give Scott a white hot glare, which Scott felt wasn’t entirely fair since Harry had been the one yelling. “I sort of lost my temper…”
“Oh, well, no harm done!” Slughorn chuckled genially, and much of the tension left the three students. “Lily had quite a temper herself as I recall – these halls were no stranger to her full voice, I assure you! Just coming back from the library?”

“Yes sir,” Harry confirmed.

“Excellent, knowledge is power, you know. Of course that would be no mystery to such a superior student of potions like yourself, I would imagine… In fact, I believe it was just yesterday I was telling – oh, but you’ll be meeting her at the party tomorrow night! It will be a marvellous time, no doubt whatsoever. Will you be bringing a guest?”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. “I’m not sure yet. I might be.”

Slughorn gave him a knowing smile. “Unsure of your affections, are you? Ah, to be young again… But always remember, Harry, there’s no shame in bringing a friend – good company is always preferable to none, I say! And speaking of which, fortuitous I should meet the three of you here…” Slughorn turned his attention to Scott, who personally thought it highly unlikely that the professor had happened upon the three of them by chance. “Just the lad I was looking for. I’m afraid I’ve neglected a proper introduction for the two of us, Scott – may I call you Scott?” Without stopping to see if he could indeed use Scott’s first name, Slughorn continued, “It was remiss of me to forget our resident American, I sincerely apologise! I, for one, have always been a strong proponent of international magical cooperation. I don’t suppose, in the interests of goodwill, you would attend my party tomorrow evening? Fine dining and superb discourse, I would greatly enjoy the chance to speak with you further….”

“But I would be delighted to attend,” Scott said flamboyantly. “Cooperation is, after all, a principal duty of all civilised men.”

“I have thought much the same thing myself,” Slughorn jovially replied. “Tomorrow night then! Feel free to bring a guest if you’d like. The more the merrier!”

With a gracious nod to Hermione, the professor trundled off back the way he had come.

Once Slughorn was gone, Harry turned to Scott. “Who do you know that would make him interested?”

“Nobody, yet, with the probable exception of you,” Scott answered. “He’s scoping me out.”

“Well, good, now you can suffer too,” Harry told him vindictively.

“I don’t mind talking to Slughorn,” Scott said, disregarding Harry’s hostility. “It’s kind of fascinating – like conversing with a well-dressed walrus. He might shut up if I throw him a salmon.”

Harry didn’t laugh. “I don’t think anything could make either of you shut up.”

“Yeah,” Scott sighed. Harry was way too touchy about the whole Ginny thing. “You’re probably right.”

“I suppose now you’ll have to invite someone, Scott,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “Any ideas?”

Despite a brief internal struggle, the devil in Scott won out. “I guess I could invite Ginny.”

Without a word, Harry turned and stalked off down the hallway.
“Harry!” Hermione called out after him, but he didn’t turn around. She levelled a sharp look at Scott. “Why did you do that? He asked you several times to stop!”

Scott crossed his arms unrepentantly. “Don’t get all self-righteous on me, Hermione. You were bugging him about Ginny too.”

“Not like that, I wasn’t. You can’t have honestly thought he’d put up with it.”

Scott clenched his jaw in frustration. “He’s not cooperating. If he’d just grow some balls and make a move we’d be in business, but instead he keeps on dragging his feet every damn step of the way. And what the fuck am I going to do about Dean?!” He threw up his hands, despairing.

Hermione’s eyes revealed a dawning comprehension. “Wait a minute… you’re actually trying to get Harry with Ginny, aren’t you? And not just as a lark?” When Scott nodded in confirmation she drew in a quick breath. “But that would mean it was important….”

“Another brilliant deduction by Sherlock Holmione.” Scott fiercely rubbed at his temples in a gesture of aggravation. “I tried basic psychology, I tried shaping, I tried attacking his pride, and now I’ve tried getting him to do it just to make me shut up. We’re dead in the water, and I’m starting to wonder if I’ll just fucking have to kill Dean to get him out of the picture.”

“You wouldn’t!” Hermione gasped.

“No,” Scott sighed, “I wouldn’t.”

Hermione took a deep breath, steadying herself. “That wasn’t funny, Scott, don’t even joke about things like that!”

“Whatever.” Scott brushed her reproof aside. “Maybe Lil could fix this. Or maybe I’m fucked.”

“Yes, exactly.” Scott moodily gazed down the hallway where Harry had disappeared. “Heaven forbids.”

On the way back to the common room, Scott considered his options. It was entirely possible that Hermione was, in her own way, correct. The universe could be intentionally stonewalling his efforts to accelerate the growing attraction between Harry and Ginny. Given the lack of impact he’d had so far, it was tempting to accept that conclusion. However, that was dangerous thinking. Just because something wasn’t working didn’t mean it was impossible. Rather than give up, Scott decided that he needed a new plan of attack. Since approaching Harry hadn’t yielded any results, he would try working with Ginny. He would also try and get his sister in close proximity to the two of them in case he was missing a significant avenue.

By the time they reached the Gryffindor portrait, he felt a little better about the whole affair. Hermione was still rambling about relationships, or more specifically, the one between her and Ron. “… and after all, you’ve said yourself that most lives are carried out perfectly well without your interference. Ron and I had a bit of a bumpy start, but we managed to work things out. What makes you think Harry and Ginny can’t do the same?”

Scott laughed cynically. “Oh yeah, you and Ron. A storybook tale. The fact of the matter is you owe Lila in a big way and should get me at least a card or something.”

Hermione stared at him. “What are you talking about? It’s true that I do appreciate your occasional encouragement, but if you think a few crude comments on your part managed to compel Ron--”
“You’d be surprised. It doesn’t really matter though because Lila’s the one who set you on the right path. That’s the fine art in the shaping, you see,” Scott said, meeting Hermione’s widening eyes. “It’s the subtle nudging that gets the most done.”

“She nudged us?!”

“It’s like walking on ice. Shove somebody, and all they do is fall over. Give them a gentle push and they start moving. It’s not like you have anything to complain about. You got Ron, my sister got to prove once again that she’s better at that than I am, and I got out of having to do it myself. Everybody wins.”

Hermione was at an uncharacteristic loss for words, her mouth opening and closing soundlessly. Scott quirked an eyebrow at her. “Does it really bother you that much?”

“…I’m not sure,” she said finally. “I don’t know what to think. It’s certainly a disturbing imposition.”

“You can’t change what isn’t there to change in the first place,” Scott told her. “You can’t influence something that doesn’t exist. If Lila brought you and Ron together then it’s because that was already a possible, or probable, outcome.”

Hermione considered that for a moment. “I suppose that makes me feel slightly better…. But I don’t think I could become accustomed to having my life controlled like that without my knowledge.”

“You already are!” Scott scoffed at her opposition to the concept. “Your school, your government, your big businesses, your friends, your parents, your whole fucking society. You are obliquely affected, influenced, directed. I’m not saying this is a good thing, I’m saying that’s just how it is. All you can do is try to find your own way. Even if your path is never fully your own, you still chose it.”

“That’s just your opinion,” Hermione said stubbornly. “Not all of us see the world like that.”

Scott shook his head. Hermione had a strong inbuilt resistance to the loss of control. That was healthy so long as she could still recognise the bigger picture, but apparently she didn’t want to see it. “All right, whatever,” he grumbled. “Don’t listen to the guy with actual experience.”

“I won’t, thank you,” Hermione snipped. “You may have experience but you’re far too pessimistic for any of it to be unbiased.”


Hermione spoke the password and the portrait swung open to admit them. For whatever reason, the common room was fairly full that evening and the two of them had to step aside as a group left. Hermione looked at them disapprovingly for leaving with curfew closing in, but Scott rolled his eyes and pushed her through the portrait hole before she could say anything.

Scott spotted Ron sitting by the fire, engaged in a chess game with a beleaguered-looking Harry. A box of some sort lay on the floor next to Harry’s feet and Romilda Vane was hovering nearby with her flock of like-minded girls. Figuring that he owed Harry for what had happened earlier, Scott picked up a large chair and crossed the room to place it down next to the chessboard, blocking the view of the chattering females.

“Gentleman,” he greeted Harry and Ron, “how goes the war?”
“I could have used more advice for this particular one,” Harry said sourly. “You’re never around when I actually need you.”

It appeared that Harry had cooled off at least a little bit. “Knight to D-4,” Scott recommended.

“Will that help?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Nah. You’re fucked,” Scott assessed. “The only thing now is to do as much damage as you can when you go down, so that the next person who fights him can finish him off.”

“You do realise the board resets after a game,” Harry scowled, watching a now grinning Ron decimate yet another of his pieces.

“I know,” Scott said lowly, “but were we talking only about chess?”

Harry did not respond to that, but his face darkened and he made little further effort to delay defeat. Ron must have picked up on the mood because he quickly finished Harry’s chess pieces off and didn’t ask for another game. “That’s game,” he said. “I’m going to go, uh…”

Scott watched in amusement as Ron made a beeline for Hermione, who was ensconced in a nearby couch with yet another large tome. Turning back to Harry, he gave the other boy a small shrug.

“What can you say? The man knows what he wants.”

“Tried him long enough,” Harry said, watching Ron casually drape a long arm over Hermione’s shoulders.

Scott became more serious. “Harry,” he began evenly, “I know you’re mad at me, but if we could just be cool about this for a second… why won’t you make a play for Ginny?”

“How many times have I had to explain this to myself?” Harry said under his breath. “She’s Ron’s sister. She’s Dean’s girlfriend. And most of all, she’s over me. I missed my chance. And how would I even go about telling her anyway? I’m not like you. I can’t just say anything I want and not care.”

“Hey… Come on, I’m not that bad. And it’s not the same when you’re talking about romance. You don’t know what I would be like in that situation.”

Harry shook his head tiredly. “No, I guess not.”

“More to the point, you’ve got to figure out how much you want her. If it’s worth fighting for then fight for it. I know what’s been going on – you can’t get her out of your head.”

“I’ve tried.”

“And failed.” Scott raised his hands in ideological surrender. “I’ll shut up about it… well, for now. But you’re the one who has to live with her just out of reach.”

Harry didn’t reply, his face holding the blank look of dark contemplation. Scott decided to leave him to his thoughts and went over to sit across from Ron and Hermione.

“At least you two got it together,” Scott told them as he slouched in an armchair. “One more success story to my name.”

“Your sister is the one who did all the work,” Hermione said tartly, looking up from her book. Ron didn’t seem to have any trouble following the conversation, and Scott figured Hermione had been
“Yeah, but as the MOFA on this mission I can take the credit,” Scott said smugly. Hermione raised an eyebrow, so he added, “Main Operative Field Agent - that's me! It says so right on those reports that nobody reads.”

“What’s the point of filling out a report if no one’s going to read it?”

“The first job of any bureaucracy is to generate as much paperwork as possible. That way, when something goes wrong they can always find someone to blame,” Scott explained.

Hermione just looked at him for a moment. “Scott, you have a lot of very… interesting ideas, don’t you.”

Scott grinned at her. “And that’s why you love me, right?”

Hermione laughed. “I hate to disillusion you,” she countered, “but I’m already involved.” She closed her book and said to Ron, “I’ll be right back; there’s another book I want to start.”

When she left to go up to her dorm room, Ron smiled at Scott. “Already involved. I like the sound of that.”

“Yes, I thought you might.”

“She told me what your sister did,” Ron said.

“I think you’d have worked it out eventually anyway.” Scott shrugged.

Ron looked unconvinced. “Maybe. She was a bit upset about it. Me, I just wanted to say… thanks.”

Scott started to rise from his seat, pausing to grin at Ron. “I don’t need you to thank me – I get paid for this shit.”

He headed for his dorm room, his mind now turned to more imperative matters. With the Christmas party looming ever closer, he needed to come to a decision concerning whom he was going to invite. Also of importance was getting Ginny to attend, if that was even possible. Scott knew the situation might be static. That left either acceptance or subterfuge. He’d have to make a call or two.

Reaching his dorm room, Scott made sure nobody else was present before extracting his phone. He thumbed the speed dial button for Lila.

It took four rings before she answered it. “Hello?”

“It’s me. How’s the apartment?”

“I haven’t touched your room, Scott,” Lila sighed, “it’s just the way you left it – a drywall box with a bed in it.”

“And yet it still has more character than anything you could bestow.”

“I suppose the absence of anything at all would aptly fit your persona. It’s like a description of your existence in room form.”

“Give me a chance to work on it – I’ll actually have a little variety in my choices. I figure
everything you own is pale pink so you don’t accidentally walk into it, being colour blind to everything else.”

He thought he could almost hear her roll her eyes. “And how exactly are you going to give the room personality when you don’t have one yourself?”

“It’s not my fault. You have a vacuum effect on all life around you,” he explained. “My personality is blotted out by the spiritual stain you project.”

She sighed again. “Was there any point to this call, or did you just want to trade unpolished insults that we haven’t had time to mentally rehearse?”

“All right. Anything interesting happen lately?”

“Earlier I was taking a crap and I ran out of toilet paper,” Lila said brightly, “so I finished with Q-tips.”

“Now that’s the kind of ingenuity that makes a top field agent. Way to think on your feet. Or, seat.”

“Unlike you, I actually have things to do right now, so…”

“To the point then,” Scott said. “I’ve obtained an invitation to the Christmas party tomorrow night and I need someone to invite.”

Lila laughed at him. “And the best you can do is invite your sister?”

“No! You’re on back-up duty. Your presence wouldn’t be particularly useful unless I can think of a way to get Ginny to attend. I’ll need to invite someone else, though who that is might change depending on the situation.”

“I’m always glad to be your last resort,” Lila blandly intoned.

“I know. Any amazing ideas as to who I should invite?”

“You could always invite Strauss.”

Scott blinked in surprise. “That’d be a little out of my way. What made you think of Strauss?”

“You mean besides how the two of you constantly molest each other with your eyes?” Lila sounded like she was highly amused. “Strauss happens to be over here at the moment.”

“What?!” Scott barked out. “I didn’t give you permission to bring in an unattached Primare!”

“Cut the crap, Scott. What are you going to do, report me for insubordination?” Lila asked sarcastically. “You couldn’t face the paperwork. Despite your long held opinions I do have a life outside of you, O brother mine. Strauss wanted to see our house.”

“Well, put the Strauss-house on the phone then. Quit hogging all the social.”

“Strauss!” Lila called out. “Scott wants to talk to you!” There was a pause. “And no phone sex, I’m going to be standing right here and I’m not listening to that shit,” Lila added while she handed over the receiver.

“Lil!” a slight voice protested. “He can hear that!”

“Yes, I know,” Lila distantly replied.
“You really should start calling her by her last name,” Scott said into the phone, “she does it to you.”

“Scott? You sound so young!”

Scott had known many women over the course of his years, a fair number of them Kharadjai. Many were beautiful, and Scott had never been one not to appreciate art where he saw it. Existence on the bleeding edge of Kharadjai affairs was often bleak and lonely, and as such had fostered in Scott a certain admiration for the finer females in life.

But no one had ever quite so consistently or constantly caught his eye as Sophie Strauss.

“That might have something to do with me being young.”

“Lila said you were younger for this mission,” Sophie recalled. “I guess I still didn’t expect you to sound like this.”

“Give me a couple years,” Scott told her, “I’ll regain that low, sexy bass that sets you all aquiver.”

“Oh Scott, you’re so irresistibly manly when you’re full of yourself like that,” she said sarcastically, but giggled anyway. Sophie’s own tone was very light and girlish, the kind of voice that Scott had often told her would be perfect for voiceover work.

“I was never one to sacrifice ego for the sake of the mission.”

“No, never,” she gamely agreed. “How is your mission going?”

“It’s a work in progress. Actually, I just made a decision concerning it about five seconds ago,” Scott said.

“And what’s that?”

“I’m not going to try to get Ginny invited to the Christmas party. I think at this point jamming her into close quarters with Harry might actually hurt things. Harry’s a smart guy, he’ll know it was me.”

“Would that matter?”

“Yeah... Right now it would. I’m kind of in a tight spot, relationally speaking.”

“You know if you need any help, all you have to do is ask,” Sophie told him.

“It’s not a very hard mission when you get down to it, not yet,” Scott admitted, “but as long as you’re already offering, I may in fact have a job for you.”

“What’s that?”

“Will you go to a Christmas party with me tomorrow night?” Scott nearly pleaded. “I don’t want to go stag, Sophie.”

“Hmmmm...” Sophie hummed thoughtfully. “It is tempting, but the age difference is kind of creepy…”

“You’ll be ageing down to accompany me.”

“Is that an order?” she teased.
“Are you currently on assignment?”

“Nope! I just got back from a test at Crane Hill.”

“What did they want you for?”

“They wanted someone who was at the Seven Gates collapse to be on site,” Sophie explained. “You and Lil were doing this, Kresser is at a conference and I have no idea where Malin is, so I got called.”

“Then consider yourself pulled for this OP.”

Sophie hesitated. “Officially? I know you hate the paperwork, Scott, but I don’t want to get in trouble over this…”

“Fuck the paperwork!” Scott declared. “This is a matter of my social standing! I need a beautiful woman to bring to the party tomorrow night, and I need one now.”

“I’m not saying no,” Sophie stressed, “but I’d prefer it if you’d get permission like you’re supposed to.”

“Oh for crying out--”

“Please, Scott! You weren’t there when they got on to me last time. That might be how you like to finish your missions, but I don’t like getting yelled at!”

“Fine, all right. I’ll make the call. Happy?”

“Very,” Sophie answered brightly.

“I’ll come get you when it’s time to go. Make sure you’re about fifteen or sixteen by then.”

“I will. Do you want to talk to Lila?”

“Do I ever?”

“Yeah right…” Sophie giggled again. “If you guys couldn’t insult each other all the time, you wouldn’t know what to do with yourselves.”


“Bye!”

Scott stood in the silent room for a moment after ending the call, thinking hard. Excluding Ginny was a tough choice but the best one he could make. He needed to let things settle down before he pushed any more. Trying to force things into place was a good way to break them. He’d let it all drift for awhile and see where everyone ended up.

His deliberations were interrupted when Harry emerged from the staircase, looking tired and hassled. The dark-haired boy gave Scott a warning glance, obviously not wanting to deal with any more meddling. Scott obligingly kept his peace. Whoever Harry did or didn’t invite to the Christmas party was no longer relevant. For the time being, Scott would allow events to occur naturally except in the case of a blatant emergency.

He was sure that was a resolution that would be sorely tested. Nothing was more difficult than watching the action unfold when he possessed the capacity to change things.
Before breakfast the next morning, Scott slipped away from the trio to make his required call. With almost all of the student body occupied in the Great Hall, it wasn’t difficult to find a secluded place. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be a very long ordeal. He had always hated dealing with the Consistorium’s desk jockeys and their over inflated sense of self-worth.

It was only two rings before a surprisingly familiar voice answered. “Primarius Requisition Desk.”

“Eva?”

“Hello, Scott. How are you?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” Scott said. “Since when do you do the Consist’s busy work?”

“I do not,” the woman on the other end responded in her cool contralto. “They very politely asked me to sort out the filing in Second South, and I was bored so I have rerouted several lines to me.”

“I take it they don’t know that.”

“They will probably get suspicious since they have not received any direct calls for the last few hours. What is the current status of your mission?”

“Primes, UOs, clusterfuck intrapersonal relationships… The usual. Just out of curiosity, how many other calls do you have up on the board now?” Scott inquired.

“Nine concurrent calls from the Deep Blue – they have had another explosion on the new rig. Fifty-six regular reports from the Praesaedius, eight for temporary replacements, twenty for vacation time, ninety-two calls for various information requests, about four-hundred and eighty miscellaneous personal and business incoming connections that need to be forwarded, six new applications for the Primarius--”

“Poor dumb bastards--”

“--and one inebriated individual who sounds like he is in a bar downtown, asking for an immediate fire mission.” She paused. “He keeps screaming ‘broken arrow’.”

“Tell him the birds are en route.”

“It would be worth it just to hear him hit the floor. I will let him talk himself out, otherwise he might call again. Is everything well with you, Primare Kharan?”

“So formal?” Scott said in a wounded tone. “My dear Eva, what have I done to earn such distance?”

“Very well. How is it hanging, Scott?”

“Down and to the left,” Scott answered. “Why, you been dreaming about me again?”

“No, but if you would like, I could pretend for the sake of the joke.”

“Nah, don’t bother.”

“Why did you call Requisitions?”
“I need Sophie Strauss tacked on,” Scott explained, “which is why I’m damn glad I reached you. I didn’t feel like fighting over the necessity of it.”

“I see. Can you provide evidence as to why Primare Strauss is required?”

“Don’t even start with that shit,” Scott warned her.

“It is all in the phrasing, of course,” Eva commented evenly. “Actually, I am not trying to antagonise you, Scott. I would like to know why – off the record, as it must be.”

“I’ve got a party to attend tonight, and she’s my hot date.”

“Oh my,” Eva murmured. “I must admit to having wondered whether you would ever summon the courage to ask her out.”

“Hey now…” Scott said defensively. “This is all part of the bigger shape. When have you ever known me to mix business with pleasure?”

“Constantly,” Eva immediately replied. “For you there is almost no separation in the practice of either.”

“Okay, so I can enjoy my work,” Scott acknowledged.

“Sometimes more than you should. I will file it for you, no more questions asked. I would hate to think that it was me who sabotaged your ascent from bachelorhood.”

“Now there’s some uncalled for optimism. You do remember this is a mission, right?”

“I always keep my mind on the mission, Scott – you know that,” Eva said levelly. “The question is, can you?”

With that query hanging in the silence, she closed the connection, leaving Scott frowning at his phone. As usual, Eva’s words were laden with uncomfortable truths.

Obviously, she didn’t think that Scott was inviting Sophie to the party out of pure necessity. She was probably right. Scott didn’t feel like examining his underlying motivations too closely, but he had to admit that the concept of spending any amount of time in proximity to Sophie Strauss had appeal.

Pushing such thoughts aside for the time being Scott hurried down to the Great Hall to partake of breakfast before it was no longer available.

Taking several sets of stairs two at a time, Scott sprinted through the double doors of the Hall and over to the Gryffindor table. After seating himself next to Hermione, he made a swift play for Harry’s bacon, was blocked, and settled for the serving platter instead.

“That didn’t take as long as I thought it would,” Scott commented, shovelling the first crispy strips into his mouth. “Record time. Hey – I didn’t ask Slughorn, but what are we supposed to wear tonight?”

“Most of the other parties have been casual,” Hermione supplied, “but for the Christmas gathering we’ve been requested to dress formally.”

“Great, wonderful,” Scott muttered into his bacon. “Anyone know where I can get a cheap suit?”

Hermione frowned. “You don’t have any dress robes? They were on the school list.”
“What the fuck do you call these?” Scott gestured at his school uniform. “*Any* robes are ‘dress robes’. There’s no such thing as casual *robes*. That’s like saying you need a casual cummerbund. Oh dearie me, I seem to have misplaced my casual tiara.”

“I’ll have to get out my casual cufflinks,” Harry added.

“What about your casual pocket vest?”

“I’m leaning more towards my casual top hat.”

“You could always wear your casual monocle,” Ron joined in.

“No, I think it would clash terribly with my casual kilt…”

“I’m sure we all understand the joke by now,” Hermione interrupted them. “Scott, what are you going to do?”

“Panic,” Scott replied shortly, but his mind was moving quickly.

“You can’t borrow any of mine. I’ve only got one set.” Ron shrugged apologetically.

“And you’re too tall for Harry’s,” Hermione mused. “I suppose I might be able to enlarge them with a spell or two…”

Scott shook his head. “Forget it. I’ve got a plan.”

Hermione gave him a look of clear disbelief. “Does this plan involve showing up in a t-shirt and jeans?”

“Oh ye of little faith,” Scott rebuked her. “My plan is excellent, you’ll see.”

“I hope it’s excellent enough to get you a date,” Hermione said, “because the party isn’t that far off now, and you don’t even have dress robes.”

“Good point. Hey Harry, for the sake of convenience how about we go gay tonight?”

“You can if you want…” Harry leaned away from Scott.

“Fucking useless,” Scott grumbled. “Still, I must admit that particular plan B wasn’t very desirable – no offence, Harry.”

Scott discarded the majority of his food and left breakfast early, heading straight back to the secluded spot where he had made his first call of the day. He was getting a little tired of long distance conversations but networking was an important part of his occupation. If he needed help, his com was the way to get it.

When he had talked to Eva she had clearly been enjoying herself, and Scott was counting on her dragging out her time at the Consistorium to retain control of the communications system. It didn’t really matter because he knew how to reach her separately, but out of sheer mischief he dialled the extension for the marriage registry.

Sure enough, Eva’s smooth voice answered. “Registry and Census, Matrimonial Desk. How may I help you?”

“Yes, I’d like to register the marriage of Scott Kharan and Sophie Strauss.”
“You work quickly,” Eva said in a low tone of amusement. “Is there a third party or are you keeping this marriage traditional?”

“Hell, I don’t know. Is that even allowed?”

“No. But I could make an exception.”

“Well if you want to join us, I could see myself as the meat in that sandwich…” Scott said lasciviously.

“You were ever the charmer. Why did you call back again?”

“I need a suit, a nice one preferably, and fit for my sixteen year old self.”

“Tuxedo or pinstriped?”

“Mmm, pinstriped,” Scott decided. “Tuxedo is a little much I think.”

“Dark blue three piece with a white silk tie?”

“I’m wanting something a little more Mafioso. Make it a grey three piece with a red tie.”

“Understood. I will let Lila know when it is ready.”

“I couldn’t survive without you, Eva,” Scott thanked her. “And shit, I gotta get to class. Could you get in touch with Sophie for me and tell her it’s not a casual party?”

“I will take care of it.”

“There’s a reason you’re the best. Talk to you later.”

“Goodbye, Scott.”

With the suit taken care of and Sophie given adequate warning, there was nothing to do but go to class and wait for the evening. The rapidly approaching party was still something of a mystery – the amount of fuss surrounding it seemed to indicate an important event but Scott had yet to detect anything unusual within the shape. His preparations were now in place, and he was set to attend and react according to whatever should happen, if anything.

The gathering would provide him with the opportunity to examine a larger web of personal connections. His normal sphere of operation was a narrow one, spanning only his key group of Primes. With so many significant people in one place, the festivities could possibly highlight something he had missed. Developing any sort of tunnel vision was dangerous. Widening his focus, even if only for a night, could supply him with valuable reconnaissance.

On the other hand, it might also yield nothing at all. Not every event had to mean something. A party could simply be a party without any further implications.

The lesson in Transfiguration that afternoon proved to be challenging. The class was supposed to be practising human transfiguration by altering the colour of their eyebrows. It was not as easy as it sounded. Scott was once again frustrated by his lack of a full grasp on the local form of power.

His first attempt resulted in a misfire. While Harry chuckled in open amusement, Scott stared glumly into the mirror that had been provided to him, his hair now tinged an unpleasant lime.

“Mirror, mirror on the wall,” Scott sighed morosely, “who’s the greenest of them all?”
“You,” Harry gratuitously supplied.

“At least I didn’t leave a job half finished,” Scott retorted, motioning at Harry’s one yellow eyebrow, “quitter. And Ron – that’s quite a regal moustache you’ve sprouted.”

“Thanks,” Ron said, his voice slightly muffled by voluminous whiskers. “It should keep me warm, I imagine.”

“Wax it,” Scott suggested, “then you can curl the tips.”

“Here, Ron--” Hermione fussed over him with her wand, suppressing her laughter inadequately. “--let me try and fix this.”

“You should leave it,” Harry said. “It'll be the hit of the party.”

Ron shook his head, making Hermione grip his chin to keep him still. “Bad form, showing up the host. I think he works hard on that image.”

After class, Ron, Scott and Harry all headed back towards the common room for some down time while Hermione left for her next lesson. Scott’s mind was still firmly fixed on the evening ahead, though now his thoughts had turned from contemplations of Primes and their directions to his pseudo-date with Sophie. Given the space to ruminate on the subject, Scott found himself uncharacteristically nervous. He had known Sophie for a great many years, but the majority of time spent with her had been on the job or in a more general, friend-based social setting. They had certainly never been on a date. The Christmas party, while technically not a real date, was close enough to make Scott a little uncertain. How would Sophie expect him to act?

Scott was reminded of Eva’s statement that for him there existed no clear distinction between business and pleasure. It was comforting that at least Sophie had been a friend long before she ended up as his arm candy. About the best thing he could do was be himself and pick up on her mood to guide him.

Maybe he was completely over-thinking it, and Sophie regarded the night together as nothing more than a bit of possible enjoyment while on duty. Going by the book, Scott was officially her superior officer and could issue orders in the field, a fact that had been true even before Eva had assigned Sophie to the mission. In the Primarius however, things usually didn’t work like that unless the situation called for it. Discipline was important, but when every individual was so highly trained democracy had its place. Sophie could do what she wanted under the informal circumstances of the party, so perhaps she was in the same frame of mind as Scott.

Scott noticed during his deliberations that, despite the boy’s earlier humour, Harry was looking decidedly strained. Hogwarts’ most eligible boy had yet to choose any accompaniment for the party, and it was mere hours before the time would come to hit the scene.

With this in mind, Scott prepared to reach out to Harry one last time. “So are you just going to resign yourself here or---”

“Luna!”

“-are you whaaaaaaa……?” Scott trailed off when Harry shouted Luna’s name.

Luna had come around a corner ahead of them in her usual aimless fashion and stopped when Harry called to her, looking in their direction with a small smile. Harry approached her with a purposeful stride, and Scott immediately put two and two together.
“Wait a minute,” Ron said slowly, “is he really going to…”

Harry’s words drifted back to them. “Luna, would you like to go to Slughorn’s party with me tonight--as friends?”

“You gotta hand it to the boy,” Scott said to Ron. “He knows how to pick ‘em.”

“Well, she is sort of barmy, but she’s not all that terrible…” Ron uncomfortably replied. Both the greater amount of time Luna had been spending with the Gryffindors and Hermione’s influence had obviously served to increase Ron’s regard for the odd Ravenclaw girl.

Scott shook his head. “That’s not sarcasm, my friend. I can think of a few things I’d like to stick in that ass. Uh, if I wasn't actually an adult, since that's... Look, this ended up being way more fucked up than I thought. The point is, Luna is pretty.”

“I guess Luna is a bit of a looker, in her own way.” Ron agreed, and then immediately sent Scott a worried look. “Uh, don’t tell Hermione I said that though.”

“I think Hermione would just be pleased that you gave Luna a genuine compliment. What I said – not so much. But then I do tend to give Hermione reason to unleash the rage within.”

“I honestly don’t know how you’ve kept her from hexing your bits off by now.”

“My junk is impervious to hexing,” Scott boasted. “I’d cut this Hogwarts crap and go choke Voldemort to death with my dick, but he’d just take it like a pro.”

Luna happily bounced off to prepare herself for the party and Harry came back down the hall, appearing relieved that he had finally taken the leap. “At least that’s over with,” he said.

“Some fast thinking on your part,” Scott congratulated him. “Snagged her just in time.”

“The best part is you can’t bother me about it any more,” Harry told Scott.

Ron elbowed Scott in the side. “And you’ve been talking a lot for a bloke who doesn’t have a date of his own.”

“Shows what you know,” Scott scoffed at them. “Snagged her just in time.”

Harry and Ron both immediately looked at each other with twin expressions of condescension.

“Right, of course,” Harry said.

“We do know Moaning Myrtle, actually,” Ron said.

“She’s a Kharadjai, you fuckin’ cock holsters,” Scott retorted, “so obviously you wouldn’t have met her, now would you.”

“Whatever you say, mate.” Ron shrugged disarmingly, but he was still grinning.

Upon reaching the Gryffindor tower the three of them saw Lila standing outside the portrait and garnering more than a few curious looks from students passing in and out of the common room.
Under her left arm she held a nondescript white box. When she spotted Scott, she straightened up from her position of rest and raised an eyebrow in his direction.

“There you are,” Lila said as they approached. “This package is yours, apparently. If I came all the way over here to deliver a stack of porn, I’m going to kill you.”

“Oh, yeah, like you could resist from opening something addressed to me,” Scott shot back.

“It’s not a bad suit,” she commented. “Not the colours I would have chosen for you, but I’m sure that was factored into your decision when you picked them.”

“I could get through life pretty handily by doing the exact opposite of everything you tell me to do.”

The corners of Lila’s lips were tugged upwards as she fought a smile. “Don’t do that.”

“See what I mean?” Scott turned to Harry and Ron. “I’ll be a minute; you guys can go ahead.”

Grabbing Lila’s arm, Scott pulled her off to a more secluded area. Harry’s spur-of-the-moment decision to invite Luna had changed things yet again, and Scott was reacting, making it up as he went along. While not essential, Luna’s presence at the party would provide a possible opportunity that Scott had every intention of exploiting.

“Harry invited Luna to the Christmas party,” Scott summarised for Lila once they were alone. “I need to take advantage of this and get Neville to go too.”

“Then you’ll dump Strauss and invite Neville,” Lila said.

“I will if I have to for the mission’s sake but there’s another option – you party crash, just show up with me. Officially I’ll invite Neville to come, you bring Sophie, then once we’re at the party, we set Neville loose and let him gravitate into Luna, and Sophie can chill with me.”

“Not bad. I like it.” Lila nodded her approval. “Although this doesn’t help me get a chance to work on Harry and Ginny.”

“I know. Every time we try, something prevents us – nothing to do but let it go. I was planning on approaching Ginny later, but let’s take the beaches within sight and cut our possible losses for now.”

“Agreed. I’ll go get ready with Strauss and we’ll meet you right outside the portrait before the party.”

“Wow, that was easy. You feeling okay?”

“Even you can have a good idea every now and then, Scott,” Lila said scornfully. “The law of averages guarantees that much.”

“The ‘law of averages’ is actually used incorrectly in that regard. Repetition does not increase the probability of any statistical occurrence—”

“It’s an expression you overeducated asshole!” Lila put both hands on Scott’s shoulders and pushed him forcefully back towards the Gryffindor portrait. “Go find Neville, or do something else useful.”

Back in the common room Scott caught Neville emerging from the lavatory. Neville didn’t
generally seem like the party-hearty kind of guy, so Scott would have to make Slughorn’s shindig sound appealing. A simple mention that Luna would be attending would probably be enough.

A tap on the shoulder alerted the shorter boy to Scott’s presence. “Scott! I don’t suppose you’ve seen Trevor?” Neville asked hopefully when he turned towards the Kharadjai.

“I’m right here!” Across the room the tousled head of Trevor poked up from over the back of an easy chair. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, I meant my toad, actually…” Neville said awkwardly. “He’s run off again.”

Scott shook his head. “Haven’t seen him. But I’ll keep an eye out.” He looked over at Trevor and waved him off. “False alarm, kid.”

Trevor appeared a little unhappy at his being associated with a toad, but sank back into the chair.

“Anyway, Nev – you know that party tonight?” Scott continued.

“The Christmas party? What about it?”

“Turns out my sister is coming,” Scott said, “which opens up an extra slot on the guest list. You wanna hit it with us?”

Neville’s eyes widened. “Me? Are you sure you don’t want to invite a girl?”

“I already got a date; you’ll just be joining the group. Besides, Luna’s gonna be there with Harry, Ron and Hermione so we can all hang out. Free drinks, man.”

“That sounds like fun,” Neville agreed. “I’ll go then, thanks!”

“Sure thing. We’re going to meet up in the entrance hall at about eight, so be ready around then.”

With that taken care of, Scott headed for his dorm room to try on his suit. He made it about four steps before being accosted by Trevor.

“What’s in the box?” Trevor inquired, peering eagerly at the package. “Is it Quidditch stuff?”

Scott resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Nope, it’s a suit for the party tonight.”

“Is it a Quidditch party?”

“Tell you what--” Scott said, tucking the box containing his suit up under one arm, “--if you can convince Kylie to go with you, then you can come. And it’s a Christmas party.”

“You don’t think she’ll want to go, do you?” Trevor scrunched up his face, displaying a rare moment of awareness.

“You never know until you ask.”

Trevor eagerly scampered off to locate Kylie and Scott resumed his walk to the dorms. By this point he had dramatically exceeded his allowed party invitation of one extra person, instead bringing five. Scott wasn’t worried, though. He seriously doubted Slughorn would notice the extra people in the press of the crowd. Even if the professor did, Scott didn’t feel it would be hard to distract the man or talk his way out of it. Slughorn’s apparent geniality might have been hiding his obsessive self-interest, but in order to advance his social networking that same friendliness was essential. Confronted in public, Slughorn wouldn’t do anything to jeopardise his easy-going image.
The party had been dominating his thoughts recently, but it was also time to start thinking about Christmas break. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do while school was not in session. If Lila’s contact with Mrs. Weasley paid off, then he would most likely have opportunity to see his Primes outside of Hogwarts, but chances were they would be out from under his thumb a great deal of the time.

He’d have to make sure things didn’t get away from him.

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**ADDENDUM:**

**TO: ALL ACTIVE PERSONNEL (PRA0-PRI0)**

**FROM: PRINCEP GARY STAUFHOLM (DIR, CBMS)**

**SUB: Field Reassignments**

**Sat.Com Messaging Referral 1354.36976.99 ENCRY-B**

I have been asked by various parties to address an issue which has become an increasing problem. Over the past several years there has been a growing trend of field agents, both Primarius and Praesaedius, who have requested additional support through personal communication channels.

It is not the stance of the Imperiarchy or the Council to require field agents to complete assignments alone or under a strict personnel limit. It is understood that rapidly changing circumstances in the field often require supplementary manpower in order to effectively pursue goals on the ground.

However, while allowances can and have been made for rapid deployment in the case of emergency, it remains a requirement that the MOFA(s) requisition both AFAs and nonstandard equipment through the Requisitions Office of their specific military branch. Circumventing this process creates inaccurate post-OP records and can adversely affect the accounting process. Properly authorizing AFAs ensures that they are correctly compensated for their mission time.

Those of us in the administration do realize that tensions exist between the active field corps and the administrative staff of the Council Auxiliary, and ask that any field agents contacting the Consistorium for their appropriate Requisitions Office call the office directly and do not utilize the main Consistorium Directory Desk.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Princept Gary Staufholm

Director, Council Board for Military Staffing
The evening came upon Hogwarts quickly. Winter allotted little light to the day, and the sun sank beneath the horizon long before eight o’clock arrived. It was after supper that Scott found himself becoming accustomed to his new suit in front of a mirror.

“How do I look?” Scott turned to Ron, brushing his hands down the front of his suit to flatten it out.

“I don’t know – fine, I guess.” Ron shrugged as he pulled his dress robes over his head. “Why don’t you ask Hermione?”

“Right.” Giving his tie one last tug, Scott jogged down the staircase into the common room where Harry and Hermione were waiting.

Harry stood up from where he had been sitting on one of the couches. “Ready?”

“Yeah, just about. Hermione, how do I look?”

“Your tie is crooked,” Hermione said critically. “Here—”

Scott remained awkwardly still while Hermione straightened his tie, though he made several strangling noises for good measure.

“Oh hush,” Hermione told him. “There you are.” As soon as she let go of the tie, Scott reached up to fiddle with it again and she slapped his hands away. “Leave it alone!”

Scott did a quick survey of the room. “Seen Trevor and Kylie?”

“Trevor was tired of waiting; they’ve already gone to the entrance hall,” Hermione said.

“All right. Once Ron’s done, we can go then.”

“I’m interested in meeting this mysterious date of yours.” Hermione raised an eyebrow at Scott. “You said that she’ll be here with your sister?”

“If everything is going according to plan, then they should be outside in the hall right about… now.”

Ron came down the stairs, completing their group. “I’m ready!”

“Good,” Harry said, “let’s go try and survive.”

“C’mon, Harry—” Scott clapped him on the shoulder. “—I’m sure it won’t be that bad.”

“What the hell are you doing in there? Stuffing your chest?” Lila’s voice filtered through the door,
loud and impatient. “Hurry up.”

“I know. I’m almost ready,” Sophie called back. She adjusted the straps of her dress for the umpteenth time in the mirror.

The dress was a very tasteful number in soft yellow, topped by two shoulder straps and a bottom that expanded out just enough to swish around her legs. It was modest and not all that sexy, which was fine because Sophie wasn’t feeling all that sexy. While she was sure that most women probably remembered their youth with fondness, becoming fifteen years old again hadn’t done her any favours.

As an adult Sophie stood at a diminutive five feet, short by pretty much anyone’s standards. Despite her lack of height she had always been rather curvy, possessing the type of body that would have been predisposed towards chubbiness had her current career not prevented it (a previous career had not). She had been told that she had an hourglass figure, which she thought was probably a polite way of saying she had a big butt. And she did. With her full chest and wide hips Sophie could be described as being built for childbearing, a direct contrast to the fact that she was too small for that particular stamp. But that was the magic of genetics, she supposed.

Now she had regressed to her teenaged self and as such was being reminded just how much she had fit the label of ‘late bloomer’. When she was grown up she might have had a generous posterior, but at least it was a feminine one. Now she was a fifteen year old girl with the body of a twelve year old boy. She had gone from an hourglass to a plank.

Of course, she told herself, this was officially a mission so there was no point in worrying about her attractiveness. Scott had invited her not only to provide himself with a date but with another set of eyes. He would be expecting her to give a second opinion on his Primes.

And whose attention was she trying to catch anyway? Sixteen year old Scott’s or normal Scott’s? Neither one would likely be interested in stick-figure-Sophie. In a way, she should really be thankful for that. She had always been attracted to Scott. With both of them reverted to kids again, the majority of physical appeal had been eliminated. It would be easier for her to concentrate on the task at hand...

The bleak reality was that Sophie’s long held fantasy of Scott asking her out on a real date had come to fruition in the worst possible way. Not only was it tied to a mission and in unfamiliar settings with unwelcome company, but she had been stripped of her womanly curves and adult mindset.

It just wasn’t fair.

“Strauss!” Lila barked out.

“Just a second!”

Sophie checked herself in the mirror one last time. Her shoulder length hair was held up in a butterfly clip, and she patted it to make sure nothing was coming loose. Sophie’s hair was a milk chocolate brown that was naturally curly and, not for the first time, she cursed that fact as her locks fought to twirl their way free of the clip. Her large eyes were a bright, crystalline green, positioned over a delicate nose that was slightly upturned at the tip. A full pair of pink cupid’s bow lips completed the array of features set in her heart-shaped face. Sophie thought that, if she could be termed attractive, then she was more what people would call ‘cute’ than really beautiful – especially at this age when her face was thinner, making her eyes look even larger. She had been teased in the past for always appearing slightly surprised, in a constant state of wide-eyed wonder;
her teen features did nothing to improve upon that impression.

“Strauss! What the fuck!”

“Okay, okay, I’m done,” Sophie said placatingly. Running her fingers under her dress straps one more time to make sure they hadn’t twisted, Sophie opened the door to the bathroom and stepped out.

Lila immediately began looking her over. “Hah! Look at you!” she chuckled. “Going to an ice cream social, little Miss Priss?”

“There’s nothing wrong with this dress…” Sophie protested meekly.

“I’m laughing at you in general, not just the dress. I do think you could have worn something a little sleeker than that, though.”

“It’s a Christmas party, Lil, not a dance or something.”

“True, but I thought you’d be jumping at the chance to tart yourself up for my brother.”

“What? No…” Sophie turned her back on Lila and gathered up her purse.

“Oh please, like denial is convincing at this point.” Lila rolled her eyes. “Half the Primarius is in the betting pool on when you two are finally going to fuck.”

“Lila!” Sophie gasped.

“No wonder my brother is so bad at manipulating relationships. He can’t even get himself together and make a play for you. Does he think you’re going to say ‘no’?”

“I might,” Sophie said defiantly.

“Hah!” Lila scoffed again. “You’d let him feel you up in any proverbial back seat—much to my disgust, I might add.”

“I won’t deny that I’m attracted to him,” Sophie told Lila, trying to keep her voice even, “but just because Scott flirts with me sometimes—”

“Sometimes?”

“A great deal,” Sophie reluctantly corrected herself, “it doesn’t actually mean anything. You know how he is.”

“Do you actually believe that?” Lila asked incredulously.

No, what Sophie wanted to believe was that Scott was just as drawn to her as she was to him (and she had known him long enough that it was no longer merely physical). But instead of answering directly, she tried to change the subject. “It doesn’t matter; it’s just a Christmas party,” Sophie said, “and a mission besides.”

“You really are crazy,” Lila said matter-of-factly. “But then you have the hots for my brother, so I guess that goes without saying.”

“Yes, I know your opinion,” Sophie said, trying to be more firm and change the topic. “Shouldn’t we be going now?”
Both of them slipped on heavy coats and boots, putting their dress shoes into a plastic bag.

“Little Miss Priss’s first,” Lila said, opening an aperture. Through the one-dimensional portal in space and some aspects of time, Sophie could see snow and a dark evening sky.

The grounds of Hogwarts were dim as they walked across the expanse. The castle was a beacon, rearing up onto the horizon and guiding the way. Sophie leaned her head back slightly to take it all in – the looming edifice was bigger than she had imagined. The large front gate was open, and they hurried across the courtyard towards the entrance.

“We’re right on time,” Lila noted, looking upwards at the clock tower.

In the entrance hall they were accosted by an unpleasant man named Mr. Filch, whom Lila had apparently met before since she dealt with him familiarly. There were a number of students gathered around and Sophie tried to use Lila as cover from their curious gazes. She felt awkward and out of place in her coat, wet boots and teenaged body. She hoped that nobody would say anything to her. Her lack of a local accent was sure to attract further attention, and she was self-conscious enough about her girlish voice as it was.

Sophie jumped slightly when Lila nudged her in the side. “Here, take this,” Lila said, handing Sophie a small piece of paper. “It’s a sort of hall pass. Let’s go.”

Sophie had always hated following Lila around – her much shorter legs meant that she was forced to intermittently jog to keep pace with Lila’s brisk walk. As they went up through the winding stairways, she looked down at the pass she had been given. Across it was scrawled in dark ink, ‘SOFIE STRAUSS’.

“He spelled my name wrong,” Sophie said nervously to Lila. She didn’t want to get kicked out on a technicality.

“He spelled mine wrong again, too.” Lila took a sharp turn, leaving Sophie scrambling to catch up. “Take off your coat, the tower is just ahead.”

“What should I do with it?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t know. We can throw them on the couch or something. Who cares?”

That was easy for Lil to say, with her ratty old BDU coat that should have been thrown away ages ago. Sophie’s own coat had been a gift, and she preferred to keep it in good shape.

Sophie wasn’t aware that they had arrived until Lila stopped next to a portrait of a large woman in a pink dress. She looked around in confusion. “Where’s the door?”

“I’m the door,” the woman in the painting spoke. Sophie was not all that used to be addressed by pictures, but despite being startled she held her ground. “Password?”


The fat lady frowned. “No, that’s incorrect.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to wait for my brother. Strauss – shoes.” Lila snapped her fingers, reaching out for the bag of shoes that Sophie held in one hand.

They slipped into their dress shoes and placed their soggy boots in the bag. The seconds crawled by as they waited for Scott to emerge from the portrait.
Sophie felt the small fluttering of nervousness stirring again. She felt stupid in her prim yellow dress. It seemed like she was spending all of her time being uncomfortably self-aware. She was a stranger to her own body. She didn’t even know how to just stand there without thinking she looked dumb.

No wonder she never put much stock into adolescent nostalgia. She had been terrible at being a teenager.

The portrait swung open and a blond teen emerged from the room behind it. It took Sophie a good half-second longer than normal to realise it was Scott. Her first impression was that he was much thinner than she was used to. He had never been a very bulky man, but at sixteen he was a few inches shorter than he would be once he reached his full height and lacking most of his musculature. She began to feel slightly better about her own state of affairs.

Scott’s face might have been narrower, but the laughing grey eyes and corresponding grin it held were still entirely familiar. “Sophie!” he exclaimed. “Good lord, what happened to your tits?”

That was not the greeting Sophie had hoped for, though in retrospect she probably should have expected it.

“Scott, please don’t…” she pleaded with him, crossing her arms over her chest.

Lila’s remonstrance was less mild. She leaned forward and smacked Scott upside the head. “You’re so rude sometimes that I don’t know how anyone puts up with you.”

“Ow!” Scott rubbed the side of his head angrily. “I can’t believe I invited you. What was I thinking?”

“You don’t remember? I didn’t hit you that hard,” Lila said dismissively. “Is everyone ready to go?”

“They’re all right behind me, but I’m holding up the line.” Scott turned back to the portrait and motioned for the unseen people to follow him. “Everyone’s here; get going.”

As the Primes filed out of the common room Sophie attempted to put names to the faces. The black-haired boy with the lightning shaped scar was easily identifiable as Harry, and the only redhead had to be Ron. With her bushy brown hair and closeness to Ron, the girl was clearly Hermione. Though she tried, Sophie was unable to name the fourth unfamiliar teen until Scott spoke to him.

“Neville, this is my sister,” Scott said to the shorter brown-haired boy. “She’s sort of your date this evening, so go ahead and feel her up a little if you’d like. You’ll need both hands.”

Neville turned bright red and Sophie felt a stab of pity for the boy. “W-what?” he stuttered.

“The option is there, that’s all I’m saying. Lila’s like a bowl of candy – everybody gets a handful.”

“I can see you’re going to be a problem tonight,” Lila said darkly.

Sophie prepared herself to intercede as soon as Lila and Scott began fighting in earnest. Sometimes she felt like every time the two siblings were in close proximity to each other she ended up playing the peacemaker.

But before their bickering could truly start, Scott was interrupted by Harry and Sophie was approached by Hermione, who held out her hand for Sophie to shake. “Hello, I’m Hermione
Granger,” Hermione said, introducing herself very properly. “Are you a friend of Lila’s?”

Trust Scott not to explain Sophie’s presence beforehand. She wondered whether it was a secret ambition of his to keep everyone he knew in a constant state of confusion. “Yes, I’m Sophie Strauss,” she replied, taking Hermione’s hand in a grip that Sophie hoped was firm and confident. “Nice to meet you.”

“Luna’s still waiting in the hall. I should get down there,” Harry was saying to Scott in the background.

“I take it you’re going to the party with Scott tonight?” Hermione asked. Sophie refocused on Hermione and nodded. Hermione smiled at her. “He said he was bringing someone, but he wouldn’t tell us who.”

Sophie nodded again, this time knowingly. “I’m not surprised.”

“Hey!” Lila called out loudly, getting everyone’s attention. “Introductions can wait; save it for the party. Let’s go.”

With Harry and Lila leading the way, the group headed towards the entrance hall. Hermione kept pace with Sophie, talking as they moved. “So you’ve known Scott for a long time?”

“Yes,” Sophie answered simply. She wasn’t sure how much Hermione knew, or more importantly, how much she was willing to accept.

“I suppose you must work together,” Hermione said carefully.

“We do sometimes, yes.”

“It was nice of him to invite you to the party tonight,” Hermione commented, eyeing Sophie. “I’m sure it must be a good opportunity to spend time together without being on a job, unless of course there was something else he needed help with, though that’s probably not the case…”

Sophie recalled that Hermione had a reputation for cleverness, but that apparently didn’t stop the bright girl from being absolutely terrible at subterfuge. Taking into account Scott’s propensity for leaving aggravating gaps of knowledge in his wake, it was understandable that Hermione would turn to Sophie who was (seemingly) near Hermione’s age and a probably a less intimidating personality than Lila.

Sophie decided to try openness. “Scott needed someone to go to the party with him tonight, and I was available,” she explained. “Also, while I’m here, I can pay attention and see if I notice anything that Scott missed.”

Hermione was silent for a moment. “You mean things about people’s… relationships?”

“Just anything important,” Sophie said, then she shrugged slightly and scrunched up her nose in a quick grimace. “It’s not very likely, though.”

“Why not?”

Sophie blinked, not immediately understanding. “Um, because he’s good with the shape. Better at picking out threads than I am, at least…”

“Really?”
“Yes…” Sophie answered uncomfortably. She had inadvertently turned the conversation towards a possible discussion of her own shortcomings. “He’s very sensitive to changes in shape.”

Hermione frowned. “And that’s so uncommon?”

“Well, we all know the shape to some degree…” Sophie hedged. “But most Kharadjai can’t do this kind of thing.” Hermione opened her mouth for another question, and Sophie quickly tried to clarify. “What I mean is that most Kharadjai are just like baseline people except they live longer and are stronger and…” She struggled to continue. Scott and Lila were much better at explaining Kharadjai specifics to people; Sophie didn't have the same level of experience in interacting with baselines. “We're special forces... It's all, um... very select.”

“So out of all the Kharadjai, Scott is some sort of leader?” Hermione looked ahead towards Scott as if she was trying to see the greatness in him.

Sophie almost giggled at the thought but managed not to. Hermione didn’t seem like the kind of person who would take being laughed at well. Instead, Sophie shook her head. “No, Scott’s a soldier, like me and Lila. And there are specialities.”

Hermione looked desperate for more information, but before she could corner Sophie with another question they had arrived at the hall. Sophie used the distraction of Trevor, Kylie and Luna joining the group to move away from Hermione and get next to Scott. He grinned down at her.

“Thanks for telling Hermione how awesome I am,” he said pompously.

“You’re welcome,” Sophie said, sighing quietly. Of course he'd overheard. She was sure he’d tease her for it the rest of the night.

Scott gently nudged her in the side with his elbow. “You all right?” She looked up at him to see genuine concern in his eyes. “You look sort of down.”

Sophie bit her bottom lip. “I don’t really like being a teen again,” she confessed.

“There are a number of drawbacks,” Scott said quietly, moving closer to her so no one else would hear, “namely my lack of healing abilities. I’m worried that I’m gonna get mashed up one way or the other and I’ll have to wait for Pomfrey to put me back together again.”

Sophie’s eyes widened. “I thought you didn’t have stiff resistance on this OP?”

“Yet,” Scott muttered. “I hate to admit it, but I don’t have a handle on the magic here.”

“Well, there’s not supposed to be too many bad guys,” Sophie said, trying to be positive, “so maybe you won’t ever have that much pressure on you. Lila said you blocked everything that the principal threw at you just fine.”

“Thing is, Dumbledore didn’t know that my demonstration was kind of rigged. It’s easy enough to block something when you already know it’s coming – it’s the surprises that hurt, and the more that hit you—”

“—the more that will,” Sophie finished softly, completing the old Kharadjai adage.

“I’m not too worried,” Scott said, leaning away from her again. “I’ll be fine.”

Fine eventually, yes. The self-healing abilities of a Kharadjai were only good so long as they weren’t too exhausted to use them, and there wasn’t much else that drained more stamina. Sophie
hated it when Scott was hurt. She could quite vividly recall the various states of mutilation she had seen him in over the years. His nearly inhuman tolerance for pain didn’t make it any less horrific.

“Don’t get hurt this mission, okay?” Sophie said, trying to sound tough. “I don’t want to have to stitch you up again.”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about. It’s usually Lil that sews me back together anyway.” Scott turned around, looking back at the group. “Looks like everyone’s set. You ready to party like it’s 1996?”

“Oh, I forgot it was 1996,” Sophie said, blinking. “I haven’t been back to this decade for awhile.”

“Numerically it’s like the second coming of 1969,” Scott pointed out, “except there aren’t as many goddamn hippies around.”

Their group started walking and Sophie followed along, unable to do anything else since she had no idea where the party was being held. She had hoped that Scott would provide his services as a defensive line by staying near and talking to her, but no sooner had they left the entrance hall than he had strode forward to talk to Neville. Sure enough, shortly afterwards Hermione approached.

“So you said that Scott is a soldier?” Hermione asked, picking up their previous conversation as if it had never ended.

“We all are, but yes...”

“But you also said that there were other specialities, which I would assume require a different skill set,” Hermione stated.

“Well, nobody’s good at everything,” Sophie said with a nervous laugh.

“Do you mind if I ask what it is that you’re good at?”

“I’m pretty good at adapting to universal powers,” Sophie told Hermione reluctantly. She had never liked her designation as a specialist in that area. It seemed to imply that she was less effective in her wider role as a Primare, though that was mostly an unfair stigma associated to her particular duties. Local Shape Manifestation specialists were often considered ‘soft’ in comparison to the other designations.

If she were to be truthful with herself, Sophie had to admit this probably stung because it wasn’t entirely inaccurate in her case. She was too tiny to be physically formidable, and not especially skilled in combat when measured against many of her peers. Her talents, despite earning her a place amongst the ranks of the elite, didn’t lend themselves towards providing bragging rights.

“I’m sorry... I don’t understand what you mean.” Hermione looked like she was unused to saying those words.

“I have strong instincts when it comes to unravelling local power forms,” Sophie explained. “It’s just something I do well... Like, I’m sure you know that Scott has trouble using the magic you have here; it would probably be easier for me to learn.”

“Which is why you’re here, then,” Hermione said with some triumph, “to help him with magic.”

Sophie stared at the floor, wishing Hermione would leave her alone. This was all Scott’s fault for never taking the time to explain anything thoroughly to his Primes. “No, I’m really not. I’m just here to go to the party with Scott – that’s all.”
Hermione started to say something else but fortunately Sophie was rescued by Lila, who walked up between the two girls. “Very true, though,” Lila said agreeably. “Strauss is damn good when it comes to figuring out how to make things work in unfamiliar places. And I’m good at forming and altering relationships, and Scott’s good at killing people.”

Hermione blanched at that. “Surely that isn’t…”

“His speciality? Not that narrowly, no. But it does come up.”

“Are we going to a party tonight, or a funeral?” Scott called back over his shoulder at them. “Stop with the morbid shit. There’ll be plenty of time for that later.”

“I never thought I’d say this, but he has a point,” Lila conceded. “Strauss, change the subject.”

“What? I don’t know what to say…” Sophie trailed off.

“How about, ‘we’re here’?”

And so they were. The sounds of mingled party-goers drifted out of a doorway up ahead. Sophie quickened her pace so that she was next to Scott when they entered the room. The office, if it could still be called that, was very crowded with a variety of eccentric-looking people; or at least she assumed they were all people. A thin miasma of smoke drifted around the proceedings and somewhere there was music playing, though in the press of the crowd she couldn’t see from where.

“See? No problem,” Scott said, leaning close to Harry’s ear. “Let’s split up and mingle before Slughorn spots us as a big group. If you want to find me, I’ll probably be by the snack table.”

“Right. See you in a bit,” Harry said and vanished into the crowd with Ron and Hermione.

“Er – Luna, do you want to see if we can find some drinks?” Neville nervously asked the dreamy girl. With a cheerful nod she latched onto his arm, and Neville was turning slightly red as he led her off.

“Hey, Scott – check out Lugosi over there,” Lila said, nodding her head towards a tall, thin man who was extremely pale.

Scott snorted in laughter. “Hey now, go easy on the guy. For all you know, he just gave blood.”

“What? Like, all of it?”

“Or at least most of it.” Scott looked around for a moment, taking Sophie’s arm. “Better slip away, Lil.”

“I’m already gone,” Lila replied, her voice fading as she squeezed past a throng of people and vanished.

Scott watched her go and then turned to Sophie. “Looks like it’s just you and me, doll.”

Sophie forced herself to ignore the faint flutter that the endearment stirred in her abdomen. “But what about—” She looked back towards the door just in time to see Trevor hauling Kylie off towards the food table. Kylie appeared reluctant, but Trevor had a very firm grip on her hand.

“Textbook infiltration,” Scott murmured, drawing her closer to him so that she could hear. She shivered as his fingers brushed her bare shoulder. “Tell me what you see.”

What she saw… She closed her eyes and extended her sixth sense into the universe. A bewildering
array of associations lit up against the swirling morass of what was, what had been, and what was yet to be. Past and present swept along, coterminous, while the future snapped and sparkled in the corner of her mind’s eye.

It could be overwhelming. But she had been trained to steady herself and hold the pace.

A slight frown creased her forehead as she surveyed the room. Maybe it was just her, but it seemed like important connections were absent. “It’s strange,” she said to Scott as he watched her closely, “but it’s like a lot of lines are missing.” Her mouth thinned in disappointment. “But maybe it’s me…”

“You’re better than most,” Scott told her, “and it’s not just you. If Lila talked about how frustrated I’ve been lately, then this is why. I’ve been working blind. Ron to Hermione, Snape to Malfoy, Harry to everybody – it’s all been blinking in and out, or gone entirely.” He shook his head, looking very serious. “I don’t know what’s going on most of the time. I’ve been moving forward with my damn hands stretched out in front of me, waiting to walk into a wall so I know what I’m not allowed to do, which, so far, seems to be pretty much anything.”

Sophie tugged at a loose lock of her hair, thinking hard. “Do you think that’s why they gave you this mission? Because they knew the universe was so contracted?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that they handed it to me in a hurry, so maybe they had someone else lined up first… When you get back, could you ask around for me?”

“Yes, I will,” Sophie assured him.

“It’s been tough. I haven’t gotten any clear signs since that necklace Lil stole. That Malfoy kid is up to something, but not only do I not have any clues as to what I’m not even sure if I’m allowed to do anything about it.”

Sophie laid a sympathetic hand on his arm. “So what are you going to do?”

“The only thing I can. I’m following Harry around to make sure he stays in one piece while waiting for something to light up on the map. Besides that necklace, I’ve really done nothing to alter the course of things as far as I can tell. I mean, I don’t know where they’re going anyway so it’s not like I can spot the differences.” He shrugged. “Best I can do. Harry’s making the path.”

“He’s a Priority One,” Sophie said, trying to assuage Scott’s fears, “so that’s the most important thing.”

“But slow,” Scott grumbled. “Very, very slow. There’s been no opportunity for acceleration.”

That didn’t mesh with what Lila had said. “But what about Ron and Hermione?”

“What about them? Now they get more tongue time. Big deal.”

It had always been one of Scott’s biggest flaws, his impatience with romantic shaping. It had caused him trouble more than once. He liked to be on the front lines, causing damage to his enemies, and often didn’t even think about whether a certain relationship might be critical in some way. Not for the first time, Sophie wondered if his disregard for matters of the heart was the very reason why Lila chose to specialise in them.

Their conversation was abruptly ended when Scott ducked his head down and muttered, “Here he comes.”
“What?” Sophie tried to see who he was talking about but she couldn’t lean around him without being obvious about it, and he was too tall to see over. “Who’s coming?”

“Slughorn. I suggest you make yourself scarce unless you want to get trapped with me. I’ll come find you when he’s done figuring me out.”

“Good luck to him,” Sophie said, smiling back at Scott as she walked away. “I’ve never figured you out, and I’ve had a very long time to do it.”

“It must be the mystery you find so attractive,” Scott said, leering at her (or more accurately, her posterior), and then Slughorn had him cornered and Sophie slipped into the crowd.

Immediately Sophie felt like she had lost her lifeline, adrift in a sea of unfamiliarity. She tried to spot some sort of chair in a corner or something else she could sink into without drawing attention to herself, but it was impossible to locate anything – why was everyone else so tall? She felt increasingly uncomfortable as strangers milled around her. She crossed her arms and took a deep breath.

This was nonsense. What was wrong with her? She was a grown woman and a Primare who had seen combat. It was as if becoming a teenager again had stripped her of all her hard-earned confidence, and she hated it. With the obvious exceptions of Scott and Lila, there wasn’t a single person in the room she couldn’t take in a fight if she had to (well, probably). Disgusted with herself, she set her jaw and started moving towards where she had last seen Lila.

Unfortunately, as she walked she realised that her internal pep talk hadn’t helped all that much because she wasn’t worried about being attacked. Her real problem was a painful level of self-consciousness. The only real fix for that would probably be to grow up again, but, for the time being, that wasn’t going to happen.

She spotted Lila’s ponytail bobbing into view over to her left – of course she would be visible, Sophie thought spitefully. Wouldn’t it be great if everyone could be tall, supermodel-esque blonds with generically attractive features, an improbably lithe waist and an impressively stereotypical chest. Then maybe Sophie could ride the coattails of a talented brother while looking like an amalgamation of every beauty and sex cliché brought to life. How lovely if such a figure could be a quotidian characteristic.

Lila saw Sophie and smiled at her, picking up a drink from a nearby tray and handing it to the shorter girl. “Ditch your date, Strauss? Scott didn’t try to grab something he shouldn’t have, did he? I’ll go deck him for you if he did.”

Sophie felt so petty and horrid that she nearly ran away right then and there.

It must have shown on her face, because Lila’s eyebrows rose slightly. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing…” Sophie grimaced and took a sip of her drink. “Just an unwelcome surge of teenage angst and hatefulness.”

“I didn’t think you knew how to be hateful,” Lila commented.

“It was kind of directed towards you,” Sophie glumly admitted, “because you’re so… filled out.”

“Oh. Say no more.” Lila nodded in understanding. “I’m sure it sucks to be a late bloomer. But I can tell you it wasn’t that great to be an early bloomer either. Do you know how creepy it is to be fourteen and getting hit on by adult men? I was taller than most other kids and had a rack to match; though I never did get the hips and ass… I guess all my allotted curves decided they liked it.
upstairs. Anyway, talk about unwanted attention.”

Sophie considered that for a second. “I guess growing up is hard all around.”

“Yeah, but you’re not really. You’ve just aged down temporarily.”

“I know, and I keep telling myself that,” Sophie said, sighing pathetically. “But it’s been ages since I last did this sort of thing and it’s not going very well.”

“You want to know what I think?” Lila asked.

That was a dangerous question. Against her better judgement, Sophie answered, “Yes.”

“I think becoming a teenager again has exponentially magnified your already existing self-image problems,” Lila said with a detached air, “and then on top of that, Scott’s presence has exacerbated things further. You want him to see you as you perceive yourself to be, in your adult form, not in your current childlike body. Because you gained a more feminine physique later in life than most women, it’s that much more important to you, and you view your regression into teen years as a loss of the sex appeal that, A, you feel that you’ve earned, B, you feel very attached to because you used to think you’d never have it, and C, you think you need to capture the sort of attention you’d like to have from Scott.”

At that point Sophie, A, could have been very offended or, B, could have stubbornly rejected Lila’s suppositions. However, a person did not spend a great deal of time around the Kharan siblings without becoming used to being analysed.

So instead she took another sip of her drink with slightly shaky hands and mulled over Lila’s words. “Can’t you leave Scott out of this?”

“No, because he’s a critical part of your problems. You really wanted to look good for him tonight, subconsciously or not, and because you had to age down it was impossible to look the way you wanted to.”

“Just – keep it down, please…” Sophie nervously looked over her shoulder, but fortunately it seemed that nobody was listening to them. “Can we have this talk later?”

“Sure,” Lila said unconcernedly. “You’re the one who brought it up.”

“Well, now I’m changing the subject,” Sophie said as firmly as she could manage, which wasn’t very.

Suddenly, Scott came bursting out from between two groups of party-goers next to where Sophie and Lila stood. He was looking more than a little dishevelled after forcing his way through the crowd, his hair mussed and his tie halfway undone. He hurried over to them.

“You guys seen Harry?” he immediately asked them.

“No,” Lila said, glancing around. “Why?”

“He’s disappeared on me. I think something might be up.”

Sophie instinctively took a quick reading of the local shape, but there were no major events that she could discern. Lila must have done the same because she said, “I don’t feel anything.”

“Me neither,” Scott said, “but it’s just – you know. I can’t… If everything weren’t so fucking
knotted around here... I need to find him.”

“Okay,” Lila said. “You need us?”

“Go find Ron and Hermione and stick with them,” Scott told them. “If something is happening they’ll be the most likely to get drawn into it.”

As Scott shot off to find Harry, Sophie followed Lila towards Ron and Hermione. Unable to see over the crowd, Sophie could do little else but stick closely to her tall blond friend and hope that Lila knew where she was going.

They found their target pair conversing in a corner with Neville and Luna. “—and I'm not sure where Harry has gone,” Hermione was saying as they approached, proving that Scott wasn't the only one to notice Harry's absence. “Have either of you seen him?”

“I did earlier, but that was awhile ago,” Neville replied.

Hermione sighed. “He'd better not have just left us here.”

“Harry? No, if he was leaving he'd tell us. Unless it was about something dangerous, then he'd go alone,” Ron said wryly.

“He would, wouldn't he. Oh, he'd better not have,” Hermione said forbiddingly.

“I'm sure Scott will find him,” Lila said, breaking into the conversation as she approached. “He's looking right now.”

That mollified Hermione somewhat. “I suppose he's the best choice for finding Harry. He can use the shape for that, can't he?”

“Sometimes.” Lila didn't elaborate.

“...I see,” Hermione said after a moment, appearing a bit disappointed that Lila hadn't explained any further. But instead of pressing the blond woman for more information, she turned to an easier target. “Sophie, if it's not too much trouble, I had a few questions still...”

Sophie tried to stall. “Um, this probably isn't the best place for that...”

Hermione's intensity faded a bit as she glanced around the press of the crowd. “It's not exactly ideal, is it,” she admitted.

“Let's try to preserve a little bit of discretion. I'm sure you can assault Scott for answers later,” Lila said sardonically.

“Found him.” Scott made his reappearance as if summoned by the mention of his name, coming up behind the group with Harry in tow.

“There you are,” Ron said to Harry. “Where'd you go?”

“I'll tell you later,” Harry said, his eyes clearly expressing a desire to drop the subject.

Lila gave Scott a questioning look, and he shook his head in response. “Nothing to worry about,” he said.

As the evening progressed the party slowly began to disperse. The various guests left in small groups, heading back to their homes or common rooms. It was late when Sophie found herself
saying goodbye to Scott in front of the Gryffindor tower entrance.

“So... Sophie...” Scott stuck his hands in his pockets and shifted back and forth idly. “Apudne te vel me?”

Sophie pursed her lips and tried not to blush at his blatant come on. He had just asked her, ‘your place or mine?’ “Scott... Nullo modo.”

“Ouch. The party wasn’t enough to loosen your inhibitions, huh? It was okay, could have been a lot worse, I think,” he judged. “Thanks for bailing me out of my date situation tonight.”

“You’re welcome. It was interesting to meet your Primes,” Sophie said a little breathlessly. She was still flushed with the heat of the party and brushed a few limp strands of hair from her forehead. “Blech. I’m all sweaty.”

“You know, that sweat would come right off if someone licked it,” Scott said suggestively, eyeing her chest.

Sophie wondered, and not for the first time, exactly what he would do if she ever took him up on one of his many lewd offers. “It will also come right off when I take a shower,” she said wryly.

“Need someone to wash your back? I’ve been told I’m good with a washcloth.”

“Good night, Scott.”

***---~**~---***

It was later that night – in a different corner of the Multiverse – that Sophie stood in front of a mirror once more and surveyed her adult body with satisfaction. Much better, she thought to herself as she slipped a t-shirt on. If Scott wanted her to become a teenager again, he’d have to order her to do it because otherwise it wasn’t happening.

A thump sounded against the door as someone leaned against it. Lila’s voice came through the wooden divide shortly afterwards. “So what did you think?”

“About what?” Sophie answered absently as she brushed her hair.

“Everything.”

“It’s tough to say when the universe is that contracted,” Sophie mused. “Scott hates being kept in the dark. I hope he doesn’t overreact and do something he’s not supposed to.”

“I imagine he’ll be taking his frustration out on the Death Eaters. They’re not likely to be necessary.”

“As long as he doesn’t go overboard.” Sophie crossed her arms, feeling a pang of sympathy for Scott. “His Primes didn’t seem like the kind of people who would take that very well.”

The scrape of cloth against the outside of the wooden door told Sophie that Lila must have shrugged. “If it gets them where they need to go, then they can’t really complain.”

“I should have wished him luck before I left,” Sophie fretted. “Why didn’t I think of that? I usually do.”

“Like it matters?” Lila scoffed. “He’ll be fine. Despite what he says, I know the truth – Scott likes making it up as he goes along.”
ADDENDUM:

FIELD PERFORMANCE REPORT

1. BREVIUM

Primare Scott Kharan
1-776998

MOFA: Kharan, Scott
AFA: Kharan, Lila
Strauss, Sophie
Kresser, Albrecht (C)
Malin, Bharat
UNIVERSE: 47789-01

1. TAG: Seven Gates

SMA REF#: 0008
TIME STRAND: Anchor
TIME FRAME: 1121-1420(Anchor)
MISSION DURATION SST: Four Days SST
MISSION DISPATCHER: Coleman, Jeanine
MISSION PRIORITY: 5

1. Universal Objectives
2. Priority One
3. The Leveler’s army must not cross the Cloudspine.
4. Priority Two
5. Tharsis must not erupt.

1. Primes

N/A
III. Praesaedius Review (REF #47789-01-0008-PR-000001)

1. Nanuk, Lahna – She provided geographical information, mainly the locations of the passes and nearby settlements. During the missions phase she observed the movements of the opposing armies.

1. **Actions Taken**

2. The Leveler’s army was attempting to cross the Cloudspine mountain range in winter. While a normal force would suffer serious losses due to the cold and heavy snowfall his units were made up primarily of undead and were therefore unaffected. The army opposing him was gathering their strength but was not prepared to face such a superior force.

Before I get to the details I want to state right here and up front that the whole thing did get out of hand. The end result was not intended, but I would point out that the UO suffered no ill effects and retained stability. Secondly, I also want to make it clear that my unit was in no way responsible. We used the charges that were given to us and we were told they would be effective. I will not accept the censure of my team, who all performed flawlessly.

Four large Blue charges were placed on each of the seven passes through the Cloudspine, which are known as Seven Gates. We placed the charges in such a manner that they would cause significant avalanches and widespread slumps in the deep snow, the idea being that the Leveler’s army would be trapped until the snow melted. It had happened before and we hoped to make it happen again. The undead entered the passes, we waited until they were a third of the way through and then we set off the charges.

They were somewhat more powerful than was anticipated. Malin has a theory about melted snow mixing with the Blue and liquidizing it. A more likely scenario is charges that were incompetently packed.

The end result was that the charges completely demolished the mountainsides they were attached to, Burst the eardrums of my team, and buried the Leveler’s army beneath a million tons of rock. The ensuing mudslides wiped two forests off the map and put a mining town (luckily already evacuated) about fifty feet beneath what is now ground level.

1. **Mission Collateral**

The Leveler’s army and a great deal of the surrounding mountain terrain.

Casualties Inflicted (Hostile): Estimated 30,000

Casualties Inflicted (Neutral\Influenced): 0

Casualties Taken (Primes): 0

Casualties Taken (Friendly): 0

Civilian Collateral: 0

1. **Ordinance Expenditure**

Blue HE Custom Charges: 28

VII. Comments and Conclusions

The operation was a success despite faulty munitions.
The apartment wasn’t much to look at. Lila had done a great deal of decorating, but, predictably, most of it wasn’t to Scott’s taste. It wasn’t that he had anything against cushions, but two or three were enough to serve the demands of comfort. Anything over that was superfluous, a point that Lila had reached and then exceeded.

However, it did have at least three things going for it: it wasn’t a muddy hole in the ground, it had a bathroom, and nobody was shooting at him. There were many times in his past during which he’d have given a lot for any one of those things. His satisfaction at having all three was compounded by the fact that he had no classes to attend.

With that in mind, he slouched even lower on the couch, stretching his legs out to their full length and closing his eyes. Unless someone started shooting at him, he didn’t plan on moving.

“Scott!” Lila’s voice came from somewhere in her bedroom.

“What?” he mumbled, ready to refuse her in case whatever she wanted involved getting up.

“What do you want for dinner?”

It was a trick question: what he wanted probably wasn’t what he was going to get. Maybe if he broadened his target, he’d be more likely to hit it. “Food.”

“I know you were born a jackass, but try to suppress it for a moment,” Lila called back. “Seriously, what do you want to eat?”

“Fried chicken,” Scott stated with conviction. “Big, fat, crunchy, stop-your-frickin’-heart fried chicken.”

Lila’s head poked around the corner of her door frame. “Mmmm... It’s been awhile since the last time my heart stopped.”

“Mine skips a beat now and then. I eat a lot of crap at Hogwarts. But what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger, right?”

Lila’s head receded. “No, that’s just one of the many ways in which Nietzsche was full of shit.”

“Hey – ixnay onway ethay uthtray,” Scott warned her. “I’m trying to psyche myself up for a chicken binge.”

“Which you expect me to provide, no doubt.”

“I am the child here, if you’ll recall.”

“Yeah, but I’m not your mum,” Lila retorted.
Scott closed his eyes, supremely unconcerned by her attitude. “It won’t kill you to fry us up some chicken.”

Lila came out of her room, giving Scott the evil eye as she walked towards the couch. “No, but I just might kill you.”

“You wouldn’t be the first person to try,” Scott sighed, rolling his neck around on the back of the cushion and getting several satisfying popping noises for his effort. “Not the most powerful either, which doesn’t say much for your chances.”

“I’m your sister,” Lila told him loftily. “That’s all the advantage I need.”

“So are you gonna make some chicken or what?”

“Why don’t you get off your ass and help me?”

“Because you’re my guardian. You’re supposed to feed me.”

“Now that’s another issue entirely.” Lila went over to the kitchen area and opened the refrigerator. “Why are you still sixteen?”

“Because I was going to drop by the Burrow at some point,” Scott said, “and it would be difficult to explain to Ron’s family how I somehow reached my mid-twenties between the time I left school and now.”

“You should get your Primes accustomed to it though.” Lila pushed some bottles around inside the fridge, their jingling proving that there was actually something in there. “You don’t want them stopping and staring in the middle of a firefight.”

She had a point. Not only would assuming his adult form help inure Harry to Scott’s changes in age, it would also go a long way towards hitting home certain truths. “It’s a question of when.”

“Now.” Lila stood up and closed the fridge door, leaning against it and putting one hand on her hip as she looked at him. “Go over there, make contact with Harry and whoever else you need to, and then be back before dinner is ready. Because if you aren’t, I’m going to eat it all.”

“I’ve only been home for one day,” Scott griped. “I don’t want to do work right now.”

“Scott, you have how many decades of vacation time saved up that you’ve never used? Or wait, has it built up to centuries now?” Lila suggested acerbically. “You could take the next twenty years off after this mission if the effort is bothering you that much.”

“Shut up,” Scott said childishly, reluctantly pushing himself to his feet. “I’m going.”

“Then hurry.”

Scott went into his room and closed the door. There was an extra set of jeans and a larger shirt that he kept in the bottom drawer of his dresser. He pulled them out and laid them on the bed, pausing for a moment to check their size in comparison to the ones he wore. The jeans were only a few inches longer in the leg but substantially bigger around the waist, and he knew that his current shirt would be stretched tight across his adult shoulders. It was a pain to change attire, but completely necessary when it came to altering age.

It wasn’t essential to get naked when ageing down, but very much so when ageing up. He had made the mistake of not removing his clothes before when becoming an adult again, a painful error
he would hate to repeat. Divesting himself of his garments took only a handful of seconds. The
next step would be substantially more difficult.

Rapid changes in age required fine control of a vague ability. Ageing down was like pulling
himself inwards to the smallest point. It involved visualising a grip on the molecules at his very
fingertips and then drawing them back, stretching a second skin over yourself. Ageing up was the
removal of that skin and the layers beneath, pushing the indiscernible periphery out further. For all
the effort and concentration that was involved the change was anticlimactically instantaneous.
There were no in-between stages or perceptible alterations. One moment he was young, the next he
was older. Nobody who hadn’t ever done it could understand.

So it was that he quickly found himself viewing the room from a taller vantage point.

He looked down at himself to make sure that nothing had gone drastically wrong (he never knew),
and then stood in front of the mirror behind his dresser. The man that looked back at him was very
close in appearance to the teen he had become used to, with a few distinct differences. He had the
same dark blond hair, straight-edged nose, thin lips and grey eyes, but that similar visage had

gained definition that it lacked in its younger stages.

He prodded a few of his newly regained muscles with satisfaction. He hoped he could avoid any
future battles in his teen form – he wasn’t nearly as capable in it. Really, in comparison he felt
quite clumsy at sixteen.

Throwing on his change of clothes, he jogged back out into the living room and presented himself
for Lila’s perusal.

“How do I look?” Kharan asked her, rotating for inspection.

“Um, like you?” Lila rolled her eyes. “You look like my brother. You look like you usually do.”

“Just making sure I didn’t screw anything up,” he said, shrugging. “I didn’t want to come out
shorter than normal or something.”

“No,” Lila sighed, looking up at him for the first time in months, “unfortunately not.”

Kharan snapped his fingers, remembering something. “Do you know where my hoodie is?”

“It should be in your dresser. That’s where I put it.”

He ran back to his room and, sure enough, he found his dark blue hooded sweatshirt in the third
drawer down. Slipping it on, he started back out into the living room before stopping himself. After
a moment of consideration he crouched near his bed and stuck both his arms under his mattress,
withdrawing a pair of handguns.

They were his favourites. Different situations called for different degrees of fire power, but his
twin pistols had seen him through many of them. He took off his sweatshirt to don his shoulder
holsters, sticking the left gun into its slot. Before putting the other gun in the holster, he took a
moment to savour the heft of the weapon. His handguns were a comforting presence, especially
with his current enemies gaining power.

With a deft motion, he rotated the gun in his hand and settled it firmly into place under his right
shoulder.

“All right, I’m gonna jet,” he told Lila after he exited his room.
“If you’re going to bring any friends back for dinner you’d better call me first,” she yelled at him as he stepped out into the hallway, “or I won’t have enough food.”

The cold December air swept over him as he stepped out the front door and jumped down the short flight of stairs to the pavement. It was the time of day that people began returning home from work so there were a fair number of cars in the street. It wasn’t snowing but it was too cold for the snowfall already present to melt, and whatever hadn’t frozen solid to the earth hissed in thin, gusty sheets across the pavement. The sun set early in the dead of winter, and the dimmed orange glow was already nearly below the treetops.

Kharan set off towards the Burrow at a brisk jog; sprinting always drew a great deal of attention. He stopped at the bridge to lean over the side and look into the sluggish black water. It wasn’t very deep, but he knew it would be agonisingly cold. Under the bridge it was too swift-moving to freeze.

It wasn’t far before he hit the wood line. The small trail that led to the Burrow was difficult to find in the snow, but he was able to approximate it by following the wider gaps between trees.

He began to move more slowly, keeping lower to the ground and zigzagging from tree to tree. He didn’t want anyone to see him from the house. The structure itself was still hidden from view, but, against the striped evening sky he could make out a wispy column of smoke, marking the Burrow’s position. He hunkered down in the snow and crawled until he was at the edge of the clearing.

The Burrow sat as an oddly asymmetrical outline against the snowfield, the glowing windows set in it defining its shape. Kharan studied it, matching the windows to the floor plan as Lila had described it. Unfortunately, she had only seen a portion of the first floor. He would need to get closer in order to devise a way to contact Harry.

He started to crawl again, inching down a slight embankment where the field rose up to meet the woods. Abruptly he stopped and went still.

There was a shifting, tingling sensation just ahead. It took him a moment to realise what it was: the Burrow was surrounded by magical defences.

Kharan hesitated. He could break the spells, but he didn’t want to ruin the Weasleys' protection. Lila had approached the house openly from the road and hadn’t encountered any ill effects, but the rules might well be different for someone sneaking past the perimeter, especially at night. He didn't know if the magic field could seriously harm him, though the chance of setting off some kind of alarm made the possibility irrelevant. If anyone came running to an alert, he’d have to leave. Going back to his apartment and then returning in teen form would be admitting defeat.

His remaining options were risky.

He could open an aperture and move through it to get further inside, but there was no guarantee that the magical fortifications didn’t extend over the entirety of the grounds. His similar final option involved pushing the spells aside to make a hole large enough for him to enter. He’d have to figure something else out if the spells continued past the border. The biggest problem was that he didn’t know what the consequence of tampering with the field would be.

Indecision was costing him precious daylight and, more worryingly, possibly his fried chicken. He made his choice.

Reaching out with one hand, he felt for the barrier until he found the exact line where it began. He studied it with his senses; it wasn’t a static entity, but rather a flowing wall of magic. He didn’t
want to break the flow. Maybe if he pushed the top half up, and the bottom half down, so that it was still travelling unbroken through the soil…

Gingerly, he flexed his power and slowly parted the wall. Thankfully it held together, the current uninterrupted. He quickly crawled through it and let the gap close behind him. There were other spells suffusing the grounds, but they were different than the outer barrier. Nothing focused on him and there was no sign of an upset. Whatever the other spells were, they didn't seem to be a danger.

Now he needed to find Harry.

The yard and the large garden surrounding the Burrow were not completely flat. He stuck to the shadows and the low points as he moved in a swift half-crouch. He raised his head to gain a hasty look into the windows as he passed them, locating and identifying the people within.

It wasn’t until he moved to the opposite side of the house that a light in an upstairs window caught his attention. He stared at it for a moment. It was too far above him to see anyone within, but he had a gut feeling about it. Harry and Ron were in there, he was almost certain.

Well, there was one way to be sure.

Kharan fell to his knees and scrabbled about in the snow for a few seconds until he found what he wanted. It wouldn't be the most efficient way to get Harry's attention, but Kharan knew that the longer he stayed out in the yard the more likely it was that someone might see him. He wanted to get back into the trees.

The evening found Harry in the room he shared with Ron. The two of them were tossing a small toy Quaffle back and forth between their beds and flitting idly from one topic of conversation to another. The last remnants of the sun filtered in through Ron's window, casting thin shadows on the opposite wall.

Harry absently rolled the Quaffle through his fingers, his mind wandering. "So what do you think Malfoy is really up to?" he asked Ron, revisiting the subject for what had to be the tenth time.

“Give it a rest, Harry,” Ron groaned. He brought his hands up to deftly catch the Quaffle as Harry tossed it. “I already said I believe you.”

“But I need to know what he’s after,” Harry said, frustrated. Ron might no longer be rejecting Harry’s story outright, but he still proved to be annoyingly unwilling to discuss it. “Why wouldn’t he want Snape’s help?”

“I thought you said Malfoy didn’t want Snape to take all the credit for whatever it is he’s doing.”

“Yeah... He said something about Snape stealing his glory,” Harry mused,” but I thought Draco was smarter than that…”

“I could have told you he wasn’t,” Ron said with contempt, before stating, “I don’t know what’s going on any more than you do. Can’t you just leave it alone for now? There’s nothing we can do about it until we go back, and this kind of thinking is too close to homework for my comfort.”

Harry couldn’t help it. There was an aspect of the twilight hours that lent itself to deeper thought. It was always in the night that he couldn’t escape his demons, or the thoughts that rusted in the back of his mind. Something he'd once heard struck Harry with new relevance. “In the dying of the light we find ourselves,” he said softly.
Ron gave him an odd look. “What are you on about?”

“Nothing,” Harry told him, shaking his head. “Just something Scott said.”

“Oh. No wonder it didn’t make any sense.”

Harry started to explain his epiphany when he thought that he heard something hit the window. “What was that?”

Ron looked at him blankly. “What was what?”

It came again, this time louder and more distinct, the clink of a small object against the glass. “That!”

Ron stood and walked to the window, peering out of it. He must not have seen anything, because he reached down to open it. Harry had a terrible thought – what if it was some kind of trick? “Ron, wait –”

But it was too late. Ron slid the window open and stuck his head out. He looked left and right and then shrugged, withdrawing. “Nothing there,” he said.

An object came flying through the open window and landed on the floor.

They both stared at it. It was a medium sized rock, lying there innocuously. Hesitantly, Harry reached down and picked it up.

At first glance it appeared to be nothing more than a rock. Then he turned it over and saw the message on the bottom, marked on the stone with what looked like charcoal.

**MEET ME IN**

**W WOOD**

**SCOTT**

Harry studied the lettering intently. The meaning of the words was clear; it was their intent that left him puzzled.

“What? What is it?” Ron was still standing in front of Harry, unable to see the message. Harry wordlessly handed him the rock. “I don’t get it,” Ron said after a moment. “Why didn’t he just come to the house?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, his mind racing. “Maybe something happened.” Scott could be going somewhere or require help. Images of Scott covered in blood, perhaps someone else’s blood, flashed through Harry’s imagination. That would be reason enough for the Kharadjai to avoid the front door.

Ron nodded. “Do you think it’s a trick?”

“No… I don’t think a rock through a window would be something the Death Eaters would think of.” In Harry’s experience most wizards were quick to use their wands for pretty much everything, and that went double for the pure-blood aristocracy. He could easily picture some sort of magical message floating through the window and serving as a malevolent lure, but he just couldn’t see a Death Eater doing something so thoroughly Muggle as digging around in the snow for a rock to chuck.
That earned a brief grin from Ron, who obviously saw the humour in that. “I guess we’re going to go, then.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah,” Harry said, taking the rock back from Ron and pocketing it. “Let’s see if we can sneak out.”

That proved to be impossible. Mrs. Weasley was preparing supper in the kitchen, and, when the pair walked past her in coats and boots they caught her attention immediately.

“Where are you off to?” she asked in surprise.

“Going for a walk,” Ron replied offhandedly.

Mrs. Weasley looked out the window with a slight frown on her face. “A walk? I think it’s getting a bit dark for that.”

“We’ll be fine, Mum,” Ron said. “We won’t leave the yard.”

“Well… all right,” she said, relenting, “but I want you back in the house before supper.”

They stepped outside and the door closed behind them, sealing off its residual warmth. It was cold out under the evening sky, the air filled with the barren smells of ice and frozen bark.

“Do you think she’s still watching us?” Harry asked as they began slogging through the dense snow.

“ Probably.” Ron didn’t look back towards the windows. “This is more than a bit odd.”

“We’ll keep going this way,” Harry decided, “and then loop back.”

It took them awhile to head south far enough that they could no longer be seen from the house. There were no sounds save that of their breathing and the crunch of their boots in the snow. Harry noiselessly indicated to Ron that it was time to double back to the Northwest. They both continued to hold their silence for the remainder of the walk, listening intently for other movements in the snow.

The trees west of the Burrow were dark even compared to the dwindling twilight that barely illuminated the open ground. Harry gripped his wand tightly but was reluctant to light their way for fear of revealing their position. Just because he was nearly positive the rock had come from Scott didn’t mean he was right.

Harry turned towards Ron to ask him his opinion, and then nearly jumped out of his skin when a man’s voice came out of the scrubby bushes to their right.

“T ook you long enough. Why’d you take the scenic route?”

“Ron’s mum was watching us,” Harry said, staring hard into the bushes. “Where are you?”

“Behind these bushes,” the voice responded dryly, “but I think you already figured that out.” It sounded like Scott, though the pitch wasn’t quite right.

“Scott? Why do you sound different?” Ron said, taking a hesitant step towards the dead foliage.

“Because I am different,” Scott said, and then he stood.

It took Harry a moment to realise what he was seeing. His first vague impression was that Scott had
Ron stared at Scott. “Bloody hell, how much Ageing Potion did you take? That’s dangerous, you know.”

“I didn’t take any ‘ageing potion’,” Kharan said, rolling his eyes. “I’ve always been an adult. I said that before.”

“Well, yeah… You *said* it…”

“I know it’s a little different when you see it.” Kharan looked towards the house. “Go ahead and light us up. I’d like to go in a little further since we’ll need to be able to see, and I don’t want anyone to glance out a window and get lucky.”

That was probably a good idea. “*Lumos!*” Harry lit the way as they moved deeper into the trees. In the pale light of his wand he could now better see Scott in his older form. The Kharadjai was taller, bulkier, and had faint signs of stubble, but there were no radical differences.

Noticing Harry’s scrutiny, Kharan smiled at him, teeth flashing in the dark. “Conquering the cold again, Harry,” he said, his breath billowing out in front of him. “Another night in the snow. Should seem familiar. No moon though. This time you get to light the way.”

Kharan’s familiar mannerisms put Harry more at ease. “And darkness is just another way to blink, right?”

Kharan’s smile widened. “Exactly.” They continued stepping carefully through the debris-cluttered snow until they reached a break in the trees. “This looks fine right here,” he said, stopping and surveying the small clearing.

Harry brushed the snow off of a fallen log and sat on it, Ron following suit. “All right. What did you need us for?”

“We need to be back for supper soon,” Ron added.

“This shouldn’t take long. I was in the neighbourhood so I decided to drop by and do a little training session.”

Harry remembered his last twilight training session and frowned. “I don’t think we have that much time.”

“I said this won’t take long.” Kharan reached up into his hooded sweatshirt and withdrew an object, holding it up for their inspection. “Do you know what this is?”

“Yes,” Harry answered immediately, feeling some apprehension at the sight of the iconic and familiar outline. “It’s a gun.”

Ron leaned in to get a closer look at it. “Isn’t that like a Muggle wand?”

“Sure. I’m showing it to you because I want you two to know what it’s like when this thing gets fired, so if I have to do it in an emergency, which means in a hurry, you won’t stand around and wonder what the hell that noise was,” Kharan told them.

“What kind is it?” Harry asked curiously. He had never seen a gun in person before.
“It’s a 1911 with a few modifications,” Kharan said. “The barrel is about a fourth of an inch longer than standard, and the rifling is adjusted for…” He looked up at Harry and Ron’s blank faces and trailed off. “…I guess you don’t need to know about that. Anyway, it’s a powerful handgun. It’s not that great at going through things, but it’s very great at knocking them down. Here, guys,” he beckoned them over, “stand next to me.”

Harry was wondering whether he should cover his ears when Kharan pulled the trigger.

He had been expecting something on a par with the television and movies he had seen, perhaps a big pop, or a bang. Instead what he heard was a deafening crack that sent a sharp pain splitting through his head and left it feeling like it had been packed with cotton. It was a sound that he felt as much as he heard. His lungs compressed slightly, as if he had been briefly plunged into water. It took a few seconds for the ringing in his ears to subside.

“Great fucking Merlin!” Ron swore, gently putting a finger into his abused left ear.

“You get used to it,” Kharan assured them. Harry wasn’t sure he wanted to. “Your turn.”

“What?” Harry eyed the weapon, feeling a mixture of nervousness and excitement. “But I’ve never used a gun before.”

“I know. That’s the point,” Kharan said. He thumbed a button and the magazine slid out into his hand. “Here, I’ll point some things out to you first. Ron, you pay attention too.”

“I would if I could hear you,” Ron grumbled.

“Some of the obvious stuff you need to know – trigger, magazine release, safety, and slide lock,” Kharan said, pointing out the components as he named them. “And I don’t think you guys are stupid, but just in case, this is the muzzle – you point that towards what you want to shoot.”

“I got that, thanks,” Harry said. He leaned in to get a better look at the barrel. “Hey, what’s this part around the end–” He was interrupted when Kharan’s palm slapped against the side of his face and pushed his head away.

“Okay, safety lesson number one: muzzle awareness,” Kharan said dryly. “Don’t stick your head in front of the gun. Don’t ever look directly into the barrel. Keep it trained on the ground when you’re not firing. In short, don’t point it at anything you’re not willing to kill.”

“Sorry,” Harry said sheepishly, “but what is it?”

“This little ring here?” Kharan said. “That circle around the barrel isn’t grooved into the metal like it looks. It’s actually a separate piece that caps off a short spring wrapped around the barrel itself. You can see it pushes in. The barrel is threaded on the outside, so I can fit the locking end of a suppressor into there.” He frowned, looking critically down at the end of the weapon. “I guess they could have lengthened the barrel, but I like the original look of the gun.”

“Okay, but I meant this thing,” Harry said, pointing out the section of the gun at the bottom of the muzzle which was recessed.

“Oh. That’s just the bottom half of the slide. On a lot of the more modern designs, it’s not visible because the receiver extends all the way up to the end of the muzzle. Here, see–” Kharan gripped the back of the gun and pulled. The muzzle of the gun slid back into the bottom half of the weapon until only the top half of the slide was visible, leaving the weapon in an open configuration. An unfired round tumbled out of the chamber and fell into the snow. Harry bent over and picked it up. It was surprisingly heavy for its size.
“Now the slide is locked back,” Kharan said. He held out his free hand, and Harry dropped the bullet into it. Kharan slid the round back into the chamber and turned the gun sideways so that Harry could see. “When the slide moves back, it hits the hammer and moves it into firing position. Just hit the slide lock—” As he did so, the slide shot forward with a snapping clink. “—and you’re good to go.”

Kharan flipped the gun around in his hand and handed it to Harry, grip first. Harry took it from him, hefting it and trying to get a feel for the gun.

“Keep your finger off the trigger until you’re ready to fire,” Kharan told him. “Grip it firmly, but not so hard that it’s going to make your hands shake. Wrap your other hand around it and extend your arms towards your target, but again, not so much that you put them under strain. Now look down the sights.”

Harry closed his left eye and tried to aim. “That tree right there?”

“Sure, anything will do. Except rocks, don’t shoot any rocks. We don’t want a ricochet. Line up the back sight with the front, then cover your target with them.”

Harry did so. “Okay, I think I got it.”

“Now you can fire, but squeeze the trigger, don’t pull it hard. It also helps if you fire on your exhale.”

Harry took a deep breath, then slowly let it out and squeezed the trigger. The kick of the gun was like somebody punching him in the palm. He almost let go of the firearm as it violently pushed back, locking into the open configuration after its single round was expended. The sound faded quickly, and he blinked, trying to discern where he had hit. “Oof. It was harder to control than I thought.”

“The gun wants to go back and up, so compensate by pulling down and forward after you’ve fired,” Kharan said. “You have to fight the recoil.”

“Ron, you want a turn?” Harry asked his friend.

“I’ll bloody well let it alone, thanks,” Ron said, shying away from the weapon. “I’d probably kill myself.”

“We can do this again some other time. You guys probably need to get back.” Kharan took the gun back from Harry and slapped the magazine back into it, hitting the slide lock after he did so. “But before you do, how about a few more for the road.”

Kharan squeezed the trigger in rapid succession, the staccato roar of the gunfire beating into Harry’s brain. After the first few shots it didn’t hurt as much, which could most likely attributed to the fact that Harry had lost all hearing. With one final pull of the trigger, the gun was emptied and the slide locked back, a position that peculiarly made the weapon look even more threatening, like a monster with its teeth bared. He looked down to where the expended shells were melting tiny holes in the snow.

“Fun,” Kharan remarked. He thumbed the slide closed with a metallic slither and click, then pointed it at the ground and pulled the trigger so that the hammer snapped back forward. “You’d think after all this time I’d be tired of that, but you’d be wrong.”

“Now I have to explain to my mum what the hell that was,” Ron muttered, removing his hands from his ears.
“It doesn’t carry as far as you’d think, especially in the woods like this. If we were using something supersonic then it’d be a different story, but if she heard anything it was faint. Could have been fireworks. Most people can’t tell the difference.”

“We’d better hurry,” Harry said, nudging Ron with his elbow and nodding in the direction of the house. To Kharan he said, “Thanks for the… uh… lesson.”

“You needed to know what it sounds like,” Kharan told him. “There won’t be any confusion now. You’ll know there’s something bad going on if I’m firing.”

“I hope I don’t ever hear it then,” Harry said.

“How likely do you think that is?”

Harry again considered his chances of surviving the fate-driven spiral through which his life was falling. “…You will be there when it happens, right? You’re not going to get reassigned or something?”

The light from Harry’s wand was further away from Kharan now, casting deep shadows on his face when he smiled. “They can’t reassign me – I won’t answer my calls.” More seriously, he added, “I’m here because I want to be, Harry. I know a lot of people. I’ve got a lot of vacation time. I could have pulled some strings.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, and he meant it. “Truthfully, I still think you’re mental–”

Kharan grinned again. “Yeah.”

“–but I also think I’m going to need all the help I can get.”

They left Kharan in the woods and started the walk back to the Burrow. It was completely dark now, and they both used their wands to cast light across the black and white landscape of trees and snow that they traversed. The snow hid fallen branches and the occasional dip in the ground, making walking treacherous. Concentrating on not falling down freed Harry from other thoughts, a mercy given his frame of mind.

“Harry,” Ron said.

“Yeah?”

“You know how you said you needed all the help you can get?”

“Yep.” Harry carefully stepped over a tree trunk lying horizontally in his path.

“You’ve got me and Hermione,” Ron stated. “You know that, right?”

Harry felt a slight constriction in his throat, and the moisture burning behind his eyes had nothing to do with the bitter wind. He didn’t turn to look at Ron.

“Yeah,” he said, “I know that.”
It was Christmas Eve at the Kharan residence, which lent a festive atmosphere to the flat.

It was just past noon and Lila had spent the previous day stocking food for the rest of Scott’s stay. The refrigerator was full of goods, and her brother was handling the decorations. So with nothing better to do, she stood in front of the bathroom mirror contentedly brushing her hair. It wasn’t the most exciting way to spend her time but there was a ritualistic satisfaction to the act.

From the bathroom she could hear Scott singing to himself as he decorated the tree in the living room. He had reassumed his teenage form and everything that went with it; his voice reverberated about the flat as he gave vent with a cheerful abandon.

“You’re a douchebag, Mr. Grinch! You reeeaaaally aaaaaare a whore! You’re an ugly green fat sack of crap, you’re deluded and a bore, Mr. Griiiii-inch!”

She rolled her eyes at his antics, even though he couldn’t see her. “I’m pretty sure those aren’t the words,” she called to him.

Scott ignored her and continued his mangled recitation. “I’ve got just three words for you, and they are... You. Fucking. _SENSOR_PP setIsS!

“Bravo,” Lila muttered. She set her brush down and put her hair back into its usual ponytail. More loudly, she asked Scott, “Did you try those brownies I made?”

“Brownies?”

She lowered one eyebrow quizzically. He couldn’t have forgotten about the brownies. “I made them this morning, remember?”

“No. I was asleep this morning.”

“They’re on the counter.”

There was a deep thump as Scott jumped off of the foot ladder he had been using. “I thought I smelled something.”

By mid-afternoon the flat was bedecked with holiday cheer in the form of ornaments. Their collection of baubles had been amassed over the Christmases of many years and encompassed a wide variety. The colour scheme of the room had become overwhelmingly skewed towards green, red and gold. Some soft music would have completed the scene; instead there was a different sort of sound drifting through the apartment.

Lila rolled her eyes at the all too familiar sight of Scott moaning on the couch. “I told you not to eat that fifth brownie.”
“No you didn’t,” Scott groaned.

“I so did.”

“This is all your fault for making them deceptively moderate,” Scott accused her.

Lila just looked at him. “Deceptively moderate?”

“You know, portion-wise. They don’t look that big but they’re so heavy!” Scott said piteously. “I’m telling you, those things are about four times denser than iridium. I’ve got a fucking lead brick in my stomach. They didn’t even float for a second or two before settling. They sank like the Bismark.”

“Maybe you’ll recall this little incident the next time you get the urge to stuff your face,” Lila said heartlessly, “and the Bismark didn’t sink quickly.”

“I know,” Scott sighed, though it came out more like a gurgle, “but I’m in pain, and it was all I could think of.”

A rapping at the window interrupted Lila’s forthcoming response. She turned away from Scott and cautiously approached it, readying herself for any possible attack. Most people would have considered that overly paranoid, but with her career being what it was she didn’t think a high degree of caution was ever unjustified.

Instead of an adversary waiting for a clear shot, there was a tiny owl perched on the windowsill.

Lila stood very still, not wanting to startle it. “Scott.”

“What?”

“There’s an owl at the window.” She observed the creature as it did likewise to her, their stares meeting through the pane of glass. “What should I do?”

“Let it in.”

Lila unlocked the window and slid it open. The bird fluttered wildly into the room with movements more suited to a hummingbird. It settled on the back of the sofa, still twitching excitedly. Then, as if remembering itself, it dropped the letter it carried on top of Scott’s reclined form.

“You open it,” Scott mumbled, his eyes closed.

Lila nearly rejected the order, but curiosity won out over pride. She picked up the letter and slid one fingernail through the top of it. “Am I supposed to pay the owl?”

The owl hooted, fluttering his wings enthusiastically.

“I’m unable to open my eyes, but I’m pretty sure it’s just Pig, so no,” Scott said. “That’s Ron’s owl.”

“Sorry, buddy,” Lila said to the owl as she opened the folded letter, “but I can’t imagine what you’d do with the cash anyway.”

The owl hooted with a regretful dip of his head.

The letter was penned in such a messy scrawl that she immediately discounted the possibility that it
might have come from Molly. A quick skip down to the bottom confirmed Ron’s signature. “It’s for you,” she told Scott, “as if that’s a surprise.”

“I like surprises,” Scott said absurdly.

“Are you going to move, or do I have to read this to you?”

“Read, please.”

“Scott!,” Lila began, “How are you doing? I hope the answer is ‘not that great,’ because my ear still hurts.”

“Lousy poetic justice,” Scott grumbled.

“Just kidding you, mate. I’m sure you’re fine, even if my ear isn’t. Anyway, my mum said I was supposed to invite you over for dinner on Christmas Eve. I know that’s today but I forgot to ask you sooner. Lila’s supposed to come too. If you’d like to come, you can send a reply back with Pig. Or you could just show up. It’s not much of a walk. Writing because my mum told me to, Ron. P.S – Harry says not to bring your gun. Remus is here, and he’d probably know what it is.” Lila looked up from the paper. “That’s it.”

“Cool. We’ll go as soon as I can move.”

“You’re pathetic.” Lila tossed the letter and envelope on top of Scott and walked off towards her bedroom. “I’m leaving now.”

“Wait — wait!” The springs in the couch squeaked as Scott rolled around. “Look, I’m getting up. Hey, you can go now,” he said to the owl, “we’re going.”

The tiny creature gave an eager, affirmative hoot and sped back out through the window.

The walk to the Burrow wasn’t unpleasant. The weather had improved, and the cold was mitigated somewhat by a bright sun set in a pale blue winter sky. The light reflecting off the snow was blinding, and everyone they passed on the street squinted against the glare.

Scott was still moaning and waddling along behind her, holding his stomach. She ignored him. His capacity for pain guaranteed that he wasn’t suffering all that much, and he had always been prone to exaggeration. She would have bet good money that he maintained his act for no other reason than to annoy her. This theory gained substantial credibility when his malady conveniently vanished as they drew close to the Burrow.

“See, there are some protections on the path,” Scott said as they walked up to the house. With a little concentration, Lila was able to discern the spells he was talking about. “We just can’t tell what they do, that’s all.”

She grimaced as she admitted, “I must not have felt them last time.” Either Scott was feeling gracious or he was simply preoccupied because he neglected to comment on her oversight.

“Ready to mingle?” he asked her. They stood in front of the door, hearing the muffled voices of a number of people inside.

“As always.”

Scott reached over and knocked on the door.
It was Christmas Eve at the Weasley residence, which lent a festive atmosphere to the house.

Most of the Burrow’s occupants were either in the living room or their respective bedrooms. Mrs. Weasley was preparing for supper and had chased everyone out of the kitchen area. With the tantalising smells of cooking food wafting through the house, there wasn’t much else to do but sit around and impatiently wait to eat.

Pig had just returned from Scott’s home without a written response, which probably meant Scott was already on his way. At least Ron certainly hoped so, because that was what he had told his mum.

“Your turn,” Harry said.

Ron’s attention snapped back to the game of chess he was engaged in. Lupin was assisting Harry as best he could, but Ron’s friend was still fighting a losing battle. Ron had to admire his tenacity; Harry had been repeatedly beaten at chess for years and yet continued to accept Ron’s challenges and the humiliation that followed. He wasn’t sure whether that was a form of selfless friendship or masochism, both of which Harry was prone to.

He studied the board for a moment before making his move. Harry knew his situation was worsening and looked beseechingly to Lupin, who silently shook his head. Sighing, Harry reached down to move one of his pieces when he paused in mid-action. “Was that the door?”

“Nice try, Harry,” Ron said, smirking at him. “You’ve got to make a move eventually.”

“No, I’m serious.”

Sure enough, the sound of a knock at the door could be easily heard now that Ron was listening for it. “Mum will get it,” Ron said, not standing up.

“Can someone get that for me, please?” Mrs. Weasley shouted from the kitchen.

“All right, I’ll get it,” Ron amended.

“It’s probably Scott,” Harry said, following Ron to the door.

Sure enough, opening the door revealed Scott and his older sister standing outside in the snow. “A very merry Christmas Eve to you,” he addressed them flamboyantly. “We heard there was food here. Either give it to me or get out of my way.”

Lila casually raised her right arm and swiped Scott across the side of his head with considerable force. He squawked and fell off the walk into the snow. “Hello, Ron, Harry. What my brother meant to say is thanks for inviting us over.”

“No problem,” Ron said, grinning as he watched Scott flounder to his feet. “Here, come on in.”

Ron showed the two of them where to put their coats, after which Lila was diverted into a conversation with Mum that didn’t seem likely to end any time soon so he led Scott into the living room. Lupin looked up from where he was sitting, taking in Scott’s unfamiliar appearance.

“You didn’t bring the--” Harry started to say lowly to Scott.

“No,” Scott interrupted.
“Good.” Raising his voice, Harry made introductions. “Remus, this is Scott Kharan.”

Lupin rose to his feet and shook Scott’s hand with a small smile. “Remus Lupin. I’m pleased to finally make your acquaintance, I’ve heard a great deal about you.”

Scott returned the handshake. “And I know a great deal about you! Learned from afar, of course, and sometimes vicariously. I hope Tonks wasn’t too hard on me.”

“She was never anything but complimentary,” Lupin chuckled, but he gave Scott an odd look after he did so. It took Ron a moment to realise why. Not only had Scott’s first response been strange, his second implied that he knew Tonks and Lupin were well acquainted. Ron couldn’t recall ever mentioning it, but perhaps Harry had at some point.

“Nice digs.” Scott looked around the Burrow with interest. “Where’s your room, Ron?”

“It’s upstairs if you want to see it. Not much to look at, really,” Ron said, shrugging.

“Well fuck, give me the tour anyway. I want dinner and a show.”

Ron and Harry simultaneously winced at the expletive. Fortunately Lupin said nothing, though his eyebrows rose slightly.

“This way.” Ron gestured towards the stairs. Once they were above the first floor, he said, “You know not to talk like that around my mum, right?”

Scott shrugged. “Yeah, it’s cool. Lupin looked like the kind of guy who wouldn’t care.”

“Don’t guess next time, ask me first,” Ron told him. “If you keep letting fucks loose like that you’ll get us all in trouble. Especially me.”

“Duly noted.”

“Just talk the same way you would talk around Dumbledore,” Ron said. Harry and Scott exchanged a look at that.

“No, that’s a bad idea,” Harry said. “Talk like you would around McGonagall.”

Scott nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

They were going past the second floor when the door to the twins’ room opened up behind them. Ron was sure they were going to accost Scott. Sure enough, they converged on the Kharadjai, looking him over.

“So this is the infamous Scott?” Fred said, appearing unimpressed.

“I thought he’d be taller,” George commented.

“Ten foot at least.”

“Ten and a half with shoes.”

“Shakes the earth with his footsteps, he does.”

“Like a bleedin’ titan.”

“Too true.”
“So really, this couldn’t be him then…”

“Can’t be. Not a chance.”

“It may come as a disappointment,” Scott said, expressionless, “but this body is only a vessel. It’s a
necessary diminishing – my true form is pure energy, and you would be blinded by my glory.”

“Doesn’t think much of himself, does he?” George said.

Fred shook his head sadly. “Seems that getting invited to spend Christmas Eve with the Boy Who
Lived has gone right to his head.”

“Hey, I gotta find something to make a name for myself,” Scott said, shrugging. “We can’t all own
a joke shop and sell cheap crap for a living.”

“Cheap crap?” Fred echoed, looking highly offended.

“A low blow,” George said. “Below the belt, I’d say.”

“And completely untrue!”

“Totally without merit,” George agreed. “Who would tell him such lies?”

“It’s Ronald,” Fred said, looking down his nose at Ron. “He’s poisoned his friends against us.”

The twins would never show it, but Ron could tell they were pleased with Scott’s caustic brand of
bravado. It was probably for the best that Scott wouldn’t be spending that much time with them, as
there was no telling what kind of trouble the twins could cause with a Kharadjai on their side.

“Live and learn,” Scott said. “I thought your products were for dumb tourists, and you thought I
shook the earth. Because you thought I was fat, I guess.”

“But Americans are supposed to be fat,” Fred pointed out. “About 300 pounds apiece, isn’t it?”

“I’m only 290. Don’t hate us because we’re rich and know how to eat like it.”

“We could never hate so delightful a person as yourself,” George said condescendingly, but he
grinned anyway.

“I’m Fred, and he’s George,” Fred told Scott, and then the twins properly shook both his hands as
if their exchange of words had been a formal duel. And for them, maybe that was the case.

“Charmed, of course,” Scott drawled. “I’m Scott Kharan, student and Chosen One friend
extraordinaire.” That earned him a swift elbow in the side from Harry.

“An indescribable joy to meet you,” Fred said glibly. “I imagine we’ll see you around sometime.”

“He’s eating dinner here tonight,” George noted.

Fred’s eyebrows rose slightly, as if he hadn’t known that and was now mildly surprised. “Then I
suppose we’ll be seeing you sooner than ‘sometime’.”

The twins continued on their way downstairs and Ron resumed his guided tour. “That’s obviously
the twins’ room,” he said. He purposefully made no mention of Percy’s room, saying, “Ginny’s
room is the next one up.”
“Yes, I’m sure Harry could have told me that,” Scott said blandly.

Ron knew as well as anyone how maddening Scott could be, but in this particular instance he agreed wholeheartedly with Scott’s reasoning. Harry needed to get off his arse and do something about Ginny. That’s what Ron had finally done with Hermione, so Harry couldn’t even use Ron’s own situation as an excuse any more.

Ginny emerged from her room no sooner than Scott had shut his mouth. “Oh, Scott!” she said, sounding surprised. “I didn’t expect to see you here... though I guess I should have.”

“I came to see you,” Scott told her, smiling widely. “How about a Christmas hug? I’ve been good this year.”

“You wish,” Ginny scoffed. “We all know that’s not true.”

“Are you suggesting that I’m not a model citizen?”

“I’m saying you’re a stuck up git.”

“Okay, how about you hug Harry in my place, then? He can be my surrogate. He even sort of looks like me, if you turn your head and squint, and were drunk, and got stung in both eyes by a bee.”

Maybe it was Ron’s imagination, but he thought Ginny’s cheeks pinked slightly. “If you wanted a laugh at someone’s expense, you should have invited Hermione over,” she said coldly. “She’ll put up with your shite, but I won’t; so sod off.”

Scott laughed loudly as if Ginny had shared an excellent joke. “Oh, man! I love you, you know that? I really do.”

“Whatever,” Ginny said, brushing past him. “See you at dinner, Harry.”

“Dude,” Scott said to Harry as soon as Ginny had gone down the stairs, “she totally wants you.”

“Shut it, Scott,” Harry muttered. At that point Ron had to agree. Scott had done enough damage for the day.

They reached the fifth landing and Ron went through the doorway into his bedroom. “This is my room. You’ll have to excuse the state of it.”

“Already done,” Scott said magnanimously. He walked over to the window and looked down into the yard. “Nothing like a room with a view.” Ron heard Harry shut the door behind him. Scott sighed and slowly turned around, leaning back against the windowsill.

Ron stepped aside as Harry advanced on Scott. “You already knew Remus,” Harry said, and it wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

“How? Why?”

“Which is it, how or why?”

“If it was something important, you should have told me,” Harry said sharply, jabbing an accusing finger at Scott.

“It wasn’t anything important.” Scott crossed his arms defensively. “It’s part of my job to contact
all the Primes. You know that.”

“But why didn’t you tell me he was a Prime?” Harry demanded, voice rising. “Didn’t you think that was important?”

“He’s low Priority. Is this difficult for you?” Scott asked derisively. “He’s an old friend of your father’s, he’s been a big part of your life, and he’s on your team. The math is uncomplicated and the conclusions obvious. It’s not my fault if you can’t draw them.”

Ron almost had to admire how Scott’s vitriolic nature remained undiluted in the face of Harry’s anger. He didn’t, though, because it only made things worse. Hermione and Ron were generally able to maintain a reasonably calm exterior when Harry began to boil over for one reason or another, but Scott didn’t even try.

Harry glared at Scott. “Oh, so it’s my fault that you won’t open your damn mouth when I need to know something—”

“Don’t start that fuckin’ crap again, I’ve told you lots of stuff—”

“Yeah, when you think it doesn’t matter any more! Or when I find out about it on my own and confront you with it...”

“You want me to write a goddamn novel for you? Because that’s what it would take to explain everything. Here, I’ll go grab my pipe and smoking jacket, sit down in a big easy chair, and get banging on my typewriter. I’ll have a little treatise ready for you in no time, should only be a few million words—”

“I just want the truth,” Harry snarled.

“A tall order from a short kid,” Scott shot back with equal bite. “You don’t want the truth; you want me to check in with you every time I take a shit. Well here’s a clue for you, son – I barely write my fucking reports for my superiors, and they pay me. So what the fuck makes you think I’m gonna give you minute to minute updates on crap that’s got nothing to do with your Priority One ass.”

Ron looked back and forth between the two of them. Their fight was rapidly getting out of control. He hoped that they wouldn’t start screaming. He raised a tentative hand towards his two friends. “Hey, look—”

“Shut up, Ron!” they said simultaneously.

That was uncalled for. Ron sat down on the foot of his bed, now also angered. Fine. If they wanted to kill each other, then they could just go ahead.

Harry took a deep breath, his face pale. “This isn’t about me. I mean, I don’t care if it’s not about me,” he said, obviously trying to be calm but sounding far from it. “Remus is my friend. All I want to know is why you went to see him.”

Scott leaned against the window again. “Maybe that’s between me and him.”

“Not if he doesn’t know about it, it isn’t.”

Scott shrugged elaborately. “Then I guess it’s just between me.”

The two glared at each other for a few more seconds before Harry turned and left the room without
another word. As soon as he was gone, the look on Scott’s face changed to an emotion that Ron recognised, having felt it himself from time to time: defiance tempered by regret.

Scott grumbled a wide variety of obscenities under his breath. He took an angry swipe at the miniature Quaffle on Ron’s dresser, knocking it across the room.

Ron said nothing, knowing that any intrusion would probably only serve to spark Scott’s ire again. There wasn’t much to do but wait for him to cool off.

After a few minutes of silent fuming, Scott slumped onto Harry’s bed and rubbed at his eyes.

Ron gauged the mood to have mellowed enough for for a word or two. “…So, why didn’t you tell him?”

“I didn’t even think of it,” Scott admitted. “It was just some stupid love buggery.”

“It was what?”

“Love buggery. Relationship manipulations – more specifically the alteration of romantic aspects. People who specialise in that are called ‘love bugs’. My sister’s the only person I can think of who considers it a compliment... Maybe Hobson, but he’s crazy.”

Understanding came to Ron. “You must’ve got Remus and Tonks together.”

“Yeah.”

“Quick job?”

“Yeah.”

“Can’t really blame you for forgetting a small thing like that,” Ron said diplomatically.

“It wasn’t very high on my list of things to talk about.”

They both looked up when someone rapped on the door frame. It was Lila, her clothing dusted with a fair amount of flour. “Time to eat,” she said.

Dinner proved to be tolerable for Ron despite the glacial silence between his two friends. This was due mostly to Mum's cooking, which kept everyone busy and content. Not that anyone missed the fact that Harry and Scott never exchanged a single word over the course of the meal, but there were enough people around the table that the conversation kept moving in spite of that. Lila caught Scott’s eye at one point and gave him a look that said a volume of things, all of them harsh. Clearly she knew that he had done something, even if she didn’t know what.

She attempted to rectify that as soon as the Weasley’s and their guests had finished their repast. Most of the household drifted back towards the living room for an evening of postprandial relaxation. Lila used that opportunity to corner Scott near the front door.

“Now what did you do?” she asked him with a resigned air.

“What do you mean, now?” Scott bit out as his anger flared again. “Quit pretending like you have some long-suffering history involving me pissing Harry off.”

“The rest of my long-suffering history with you more than compensates for that lack,” Lila said acidly.
“Oh poor Lila, boo-boo-fuckity-hoo,” Scott sneered, mocking her. “Do I need to call the waaaaambulance?”

“I’m not the one who’s trying to mask self-pity with rage,” Lila told him, her eyes flashing. “Whatever you did – fix it.” She stalked off towards the kitchen, leaving Scott to glare after her.

“You wanna go outside for a bit? I need to go outside.”

Scott whirled towards Ron as if he was going to snap at him too, but then his shoulders slumped and he sighed. “All right, I guess.”

The world was still when they stepped out the front door, only the faintest of breezes stirring the dead air. The top half of the sun glowed low in the horizon without any clouds to threaten its supremacy but it was a feeble presence in December, lacking real warmth or power. Ron tucked his hands into his coat pockets and took a deep breath, letting the sharp cold burn the back of his throat. It was the calmer days like this which reminded that winter wasn’t the death of life, only its sleep.

Scott morosely looked out across the expanse of yard and muttered, “Mutantur omnia nos et mutamur in illis.”

Ron already had enough of a struggle when it came to understanding the finer points of language; he didn’t feel much like attempting to decipher Scott’s musings, especially on a holiday, and most especially when he wasn’t going to be graded for it. But it would be callous not to respond, so he said, “And what does that mean?”

Scott raised his head up, emerging from his thoughts. “It means we spend a lot of time trying to buy answers when what we really need is to look around. Clarity is something that happens, not something you make.” He spread his arms, indicating the scene before them. “I feel better already.”

“You know what, Scott?” Ron said amiably. “I really don’t understand you at all.”

“That’s okay, I don’t either. I exist on the thin edge between impulse and denial. Try spending a day without second guessing yourself sometime.”

“If I did that, there’d be a lot of Slytherins who’d get punched in the gob,” Ron said, grinning.

“But you know that about yourself – and that’s important.”

Both of them stood silent after that. The wind picked up slightly for a moment, and the lull in the conversation was filled with the dry rattle of empty branches and the hiss of loose snow.

“What’s it like to always have a purpose?” Ron asked suddenly.

“In what way?”

Ron tried to express his inner curiosities. “I mean you always know what you have to do ‘cause they give you these missions. And it’s not just a job; it’s your life, too.”

“So you mean I never have to wonder who I am, or more specifically, what’s the point of me? What I am supposed to be?” Scott said, cutting to the heart of the question.
“Yeah, something like that.”

“I’m sure that sounds very appealing,” Scott told him, “and, yeah, it is in a lot of ways. But don’t make the mistake of believing that a state of mind can ever be concrete. You’ll always doubt yourself in some capacity. Like, in my case, I might wonder whether I chose this job, or did it choose me? It’s easy to say that my being a field agent like this is the clear result of my choices: my choice to pursue the training, my choice to accept promotions and so on, but is it really? Or was I just as driven by the shape of things as Harry has been? A different shape in a different sense, sure, but we are still limited by the contours of our past.”

Ron blinked. “Were you?”

“I don’t know, and that bothers me sometimes.”

“Wait a sec…” Ron said, giving Scott a sceptical look. “Hermione was telling me you gave her a whole bloody speech about how everybody is always being made to do things, and that’s normal or whatever.”

Scott actually looked embarrassed. “Yeah, but what I meant was… Well, first you have to understand the difference between destiny and influence. Influence was what I was talking about with her. With destiny there’s only so much you can do within the confines. Besides, I said it was not knowing which it was that bothered me.”

Ron wasn’t buying it. “So it wouldn’t bother you at all, then, to know you didn’t choose your job.”

“But I did choose it! Inspired by ghosts or not, I still put in all the work, all the years. You see? Just because someone else set you on the path doesn’t mean you don’t still have to walk it.”

Ron could sort of understand what he was getting at, but there was still some contradiction. “I think what you know doesn’t always match up with what you feel,” he told Scott.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Scott sighed. “I was being kind of insensitive when I was talking to Hermione. These really are two different subjects, but I admit I’m not perfectly comfortable with fate. Mostly comfortable, but not perfectly. Naturally, it’s always easier to deal with when it’s happening to somebody else. At least with Harry it’s in a literal, tangible sense.”

“I just asked because I’ve always felt a little, uh… lost, I guess. Especially lately,” Ron said, returning back to the root of their conversation.

“How so?”

“It’s Harry’s job to be the brave one…. He’s the leader and the fighter, and, yeah, he’s sometimes scary when he’s all focused, but that’s just what he does. And then it’s Hermione’s job to be the smart one, to know all the answers when we need them the most and whatnot. So then I think, what’s my job? Making dumb comments to break the tension?” Ron said self-deprecatingly, and shrugged. “Seems like I can’t figure out what I’m supposed to be doing other than following them around and casting whatever spells I can think of when something bad happens.”

“It’s not a question of location, it’s a question of aspiration,” Scott stated cryptically.

“I don’t get it.”

“If you want to get somewhere, you have to know where it is. If you want to hit the centre, you have to pick a target. If you want to be something more than a sidekick to Harry and Hermione…” Scott trailed off.
Ron mentally concluded the sentence. “But I don’t know what they need me to be.”

Scott shrugged. “That doesn’t matter if they want you to be something you’re not. Are they what you think they should be?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Ron said immediately, and then felt like an idiot for falling right into that one.

“Exactly. You are who you are – except you say you’re not anyone, so then you are who you can possibly be.”

Ron’s head was starting to hurt. “Uh, all right…”

“Who you need to be depends on where you’re going,” Scott tried to explain. “Everybody is shaped by circumstance. My job has made me who I am, and maybe who I was directed me towards this job; so what do you want to do right now?”

“To get rid of You-Know-Who,” Ron answered without hesitation. “To finish all of this so we can actually relax for once.”

“And what needs to happen for you to get there?”

“That’s the thing we don’t know,” Ron said. He and his friends were embroiled in a war that nobody seemed to know how to fight. “We’re just making it up as we go along.”

“Sure, everybody is fumbling towards the finish line. But what’s the most important thing right now?”

Ron’s mind was blank for a moment. What was the most important thing? “To make sure that mad bastard doesn’t kill Harry,” he finally answered, “or anyone else.”

“Focus gives you strength. Of course, it’s important to maintain the difference between focus and a narrow view, but that’s another lesson entirely,” Scott said. “You know what you have to do, and it’s what you’ve been doing all along.”

“So what you’re saying is, I shouldn’t have wasted your time,” Ron said wryly.

“Self-reflection is rarely a waste of time,” Scott noted, and then he sighed. “Let’s go back in. I need to talk to Harry.”

“Are you going to apologise?”

“We don’t have to apologise,” Scott scoffed. “We’re men. We’ll just punch each other in the shoulder a few times and it will all be water under the bridge.”

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The moon was high in the night sky by the time Scott and Lila arrived back at their apartment. They hung up their coats and Scott drifted towards the couch. Neither of them turned on the lights in the flat – the darkness was illuminated by the various Christmas lights that sparkled about the room.

Scott watched from the couch while Lila removed her shoes. “You still mad at me?”

“Scott, if I stayed mad at you every time you did something like that I’d never have room for any other emotions,” Lila said tiredly.
“So yes, then.”

“No. What did you fight with Harry about?”

“Information, as usual.” Scott slumped lower into the couch and put an arm over his eyes.

“I’m not surprised, but that does remind me of something I need to ask you.” Lila poured herself a glass of orange juice and sat at the table.

“What?”

“A long standing curiosity. You never did tell me what happened during your first meeting with Dumbledore.”

“Oh, yeah… Never came up, I guess.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“What, now? It’s late.”

“So?”

Scott groaned, leaning over until he was lying on the couch. “Why do you care?”

“Because I want to know what happened, that’s why,” Lila said relentlessly. “Give it up, or I’ll make you talk.”

“What are you gonna do, make me eat some more of those fuckin’ brownies?”

“Just tell me what happened!” Lila demanded. It never took her long to lose her patience with him.

“Fine,” Scott sighed. “This is the prequel to the office meeting so the chronology is still mixed for you, but that’s all right. Just rearrange things in your head.”
The city was made of dust.

It filtered through every crack, every gap and crevice. It stirred in small puffs when touched by the breeze, or stormed about in clouds when pushed by the wind. It settled across tables and dressers, chair tops and sofas. It sifted through hair and teeth – it filled lungs and nostrils.

The world was being blown back into the powder from whence it had been formed, ground beneath the mortar and pestle of the bomb and the gun.

An apartment building stood on a street as cratered and wreckage strewn as all the rest in the city, a monument to an attack that was now only a memory written in burns and broken walls. It sat as a skeletal form against the horizon, a hollowed out shell of its former self, the flesh stripped from its stone and steel bones.

A man sat on a pile of rubble framed by the fading sunlight, and contemplated the remains of his adversary.

The corpse’s face did not show the agony that might be expected. The hands were not curled in a last, mute supplication. There were no gouts of fluid staining the surrounds. If one ignored the thin, whip-like slash that ran down the throat of the corpse into its chest, and the sticky, dark blood soaking the front of the robes, the body might have been sleeping.

But he was dead. He had died alone, without honour and without dignity, in the ruins of a town he had never called home. A Dark Wizard, dead on a floor made filthy by ruthless Muggle bombings. No last speech. No fanfare. Nothing but a moment of surprise, a short desperate struggle, and then sudden death.

Albus Dumbledore had killed him. And given the choice, he’d do it again.

It was a hard thing to accept about himself, but there it was. He felt little regret for the deed – that could come later in life, given the years to ruminate. For the present he found only an understanding of the great equalisation which death represented. Power was a giant’s elixir. People like himself were often referred as ‘larger than life’.

No one was larger than life. And all the Dark magic his opponent had possessed had not kept him
from becoming just another rapidly cooling corpse lying on its back in a dead city.

Dumbledore sighed. He could only hope that after the day he met that same equality, they would bury him beneath green earth and a blue sky.

“Who is he?”

Almost quicker than the eye could follow Dumbledore leapt from his seat and raised his wand to face the voice that had startled him.

The owner of the voice made no attempt to hide. A man stood in the corner to the right of where Dumbledore had been sitting, leaning against what was left of a windowsill. He was wearing an olive drab uniform with a rounded steel helmet of the same colour. A pair of intent grey eyes looked out from beneath the brim. He held a Muggle weapon casually in his right hand, the stock tucked in his armpit.

The man was a Muggle soldier, an American if Dumbledore had identified his uniform correctly. A simple Memory Charm would wipe this encounter from the man’s mind, but Dumbledore hadn’t missed the way that the soldier had shifted the barrel of his firearm until it was pointing in a dangerous direction. Though a gun wasn’t nearly as versatile as a wand, it was no less deadly. The situation warranted caution.

“Or rather, who was he,” the soldier amended. “I’d ask him myself, but I don’t think I’d be likely to get an answer.” The man looked critically at the still body. “Right in the throat, and deep, too. You should have done a horizontal slice, through the jugular. The last thing you want is your knife stuck in someone’s clavicle in the middle of a fight.”

Dumbledore wasn’t sure what to make of this one-sided conversation, but still made no move to Obliviate the stranger.

The man looked back up at Dumbledore, his eyes still searching. He continued, “You didn’t use a knife, though, did you Albus.” He shrugged and settled back into the windowsill. “Is that Grindelwald?”

That gained Dumbledore’s full attention. He immediately reassessed the man. “No,” he answered carefully. “But he was a follower of Grindelwald.”

“Er ist nicht der erste Mann, für seinen Führer zu sterben,” the man said darkly. He looked past Dumbledore towards the crumbling cityscape, “und kaum der letzte.”

Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose slightly in surprise. "Aber anders als ein Soldat, suchte dieser Mann die Dunkelheit, um ihr zu folgen.”

The grey-eyed soldier inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement. “True. Choice defines a great deal. In this case his demise, when he chose not to come quietly.”

This seemingly random encounter was becoming increasingly bizarre. Dumbledore decided to cut to the chase. “I’m afraid you have me at something of a disadvantage. You know who I am, but I regret to say I don’t recognise you.”

The man grinned. “Scott Kharan. I’d shake your hand, but I think we’re on nervous ground at the moment.”

“Indeed we are,” Dumbledore replied genially, glad to have had at least one of his questions answered. “You’ll forgive me then if I do not lower my wand.”
“Are you going to leave this here for the Third to find?” It took Dumbledore a moment to realise that Kharan was talking about the corpse. “I could get rid of it for you.”

The offer put a new twist on this puzzle. Dumbledore wondered if this man was here intending to retrieve the body – perhaps his master’s body? There were any number of uses for the remains of Dark wizard, all of them blasphemous.

Kharan seemed to read his mind. “But I’m sure you’d want to handle this personally. Sometimes you need to trade convenience for peace of mind. Speaking of which—” Turning towards the body, he raised his rifle and fired a shot. The bullet entered the corpse’s temple and exited at an angle through the top of its head, leaving a gaping exit wound and spraying that side of the floor with a mixture of brain matter, blood and hair. “It’s a cautionary measure,” he said. “I may not know much about magic, but I’d assume it would be difficult to resurrect a man with no brain.”

Dumbledore was not brutal by nature. The rather casual violation of a corpse by Kharan only served to enhance his suspicions. He decided to be blunt. “What is it that you want from me?” Dumbledore asked, his voice calm and even. “Surely you did not track me here in order to ensure he was fully deceased.”

Kharan shook his head. “It’s very simple. I want you to remember me.”

Dumbledore blinked. “I hardly think I could forget this meeting.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Kharan slung his weapon onto his back and approached Dumbledore while holding up his hands to show that he meant no harm. He stopped just a few feet away, so that they stood eye to eye. “I want you to remember me because someday in the future, I’m going to need a favour from you.”

“What sort of favour?” Dumbledore inquired carefully. “There are many things not in within my power to give.” There were many more things he was unwilling to give.

“Nothing difficult, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Kharan said. “Just an admission for a transfer student.”

Dumbledore wondered if he had misheard. “I beg your pardon?”

Kharan grew very serious. “I have something to do. I can do it without your help—” He held up a finger. “—but I’d much rather have you on my side. You’re going to see me again, but not for a long time, so it’s important that you remember my name and what I look like.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will.” Kharan backed away. “I won’t look quite the same in the future, though.”

“You’d be older, I expect,” Dumbledore said with some humour. “I’ve heard that happens.”

Kharan shook his head. “No, I’ll be younger. At least, I will sometimes.” Before Dumbledore could attempt to puzzle that out Kharan was already talking again. “Just in case your future self is less accommodating, I also have another means of identification so you’ll be able to tell it’s really me.”

Dumbledore was finding more and more that he did not like the feeling of not knowing what was going on. He was above all a scholar, and to be confronted by so many things he didn’t comprehend chafed at his mind. “Is this secrecy necessary? If you could be more specific as to what it is that you’re doing, I might be of more help.”
“No. Foreknowledge can be dangerous in specifics. It doesn’t matter if you believe me. The most important thing right now is that you must remember everything I say. Understand?”

This encounter would already stick firmly in his mind. Dumbledore reluctantly nodded his understanding.

“All right then. Who I am and what I’m doing is irrelevant right now. Don’t worry about it – you’ve got other things to do. So memorise these generalities,” Kharan said firmly. “In the future, there will be a war. You will win this war. Near the end of the war there will be a Prophecy. You’ll know what to do. Eventually a second war will start – and that’s when I’ll show up, and ask for that favour from you.”

Dumbledore started to speak but Kharan held up a hand to stop him. “You don’t have to believe me. Just remember.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a sealed envelope. “This is insurance. Inside something is written on a piece of paper. Do not ever open this envelope, until the next time you meet me – that way, only I’ll know what it says.” He shrugged a little self-consciously. “I know that’s somewhat extreme, but I was encouraged to implement backup measures.”

Running his wand across the envelope, Dumbledore checked it for any spells before sliding it into an inner pocket in his robes. Almost despite himself he found that he was drawn into the partial picture Kharan had painted for him. What was this mission, and why did it require such actions?

“The Third Armoured will occupy this city by tomorrow,” Kharan told him, “so I suggest you make yourself scarce before then.”

With that, Kharan jumped out the shattered window.

Dumbledore rushed over to the opening, but upon looking out and down into the alleyway which it overlooked there was no sign of the man. Of course, he could simply have Disapparated... but somehow, Dumbledore didn’t think so.

He had been given much to think about, although he doubted any real answers could be gleaned from what little information he had. Had Kharan been a Dark wizard, attempting to trick him? Or was he merely insane, and if he was, how had he known where to find Dumbledore?

If Kharan truly was aware of future events, well... there would be only one way to confirm that.

Time would prove Kharan wrong or right.

Sighing, Dumbledore turned back to the body and raised his wand.

“Incendio!”
Christmas had come and gone, and the students began to filter into Hogwarts from Floo connected fireplaces all across the country. The bare echoes of scattered conversation slowly escalated, building with every returning student until the usual dull roar filled the main hallways and common rooms.

Hermione had enjoyed her break as much as the next student, her reputation as a compulsive academic notwithstanding. Admittedly there had been a few things that might have caused her to lean in the direction of wishing it would end… Separation from a certain blue-eyed redhead, perhaps… But when all was said and done, everyone needed a holiday now and then.

It had been evening when she hurried back towards Gryffindor Tower. She had arrived before any of her friends had and was now hoping to see them present in the common room. Instead she was lucky enough to intersect with them at the portrait entrance.

“Ron!” she exclaimed, grabbing his attention. As an afterthought, she added, “Harry! Ginny!”

“Hey, Hermione,” Harry responded, but she wasn’t listening. She ran forward and Ron caught her up in a hug. He leaned forward to capture her lips, and, despite being slightly embarrassed, she moved to reciprocate. Her lips were less than an inch from his when a sudden realisation distracted her.

“Where’s Scott?” she asked, leaning around Ron to scan the area. The blond teen was nowhere in sight. Ron frowned in disappointment, and she hastened to make up for her untimely halt with a quick peck to his lips, which made Ginny smile and Harry look mildly uncomfortable.

“He gave us the slip then,” Harry told Hermione. “No idea where he is. Why?”

“I did some thinking over the break. We need to keep track of him better than we have been and make him tell us when he does something,” Hermione explained. “He keeps working around us, and I don’t like it.”

Hermione had thought her words might stir some support in her friends. She was disappointed when, with the sole exception of Harry, they seemed unmoved.

“I don’t like it when he keeps us in the dark,” Harry agreed. Hermione knew that Harry wasn’t really agreeing with her full idea. He just wanted Scott to let him in on everything; Hermione wanted to hold Scott accountable.
“He always does whatever he wants,” Ron said, shrugging. “If Dumbledore can’t do anything about it, what are we supposed to do?”

“I’ll try to reason with him,” Hermione declared. “I’ll make him understand that it’s detrimental for him to not work with us.”

Even Harry looked doubtful at that statement. “You’re assuming he’s reasonable,” he muttered.

“He’s never shown much of that quality,” Ron snorted.

“Regardless, I have to try,” Hermione said with a note of finality. Her friends exchanged looks with each other, but she ignored them. “Any ideas as to where he might be?”

“Our room, that one chair in the common room, or the back corner of the library,” Harry told her. “Other than that, no clue.”

Hermione had already thought of those places, the only ones she knew of that Scott frequented. The boys’ dorm and the common room were readily at hand and both proved to be vacant of her target. Remembering a nearly forgotten task, she accosted Harry before she left the tower.

“Harry, I almost forgot – Dumbledore gave me this.” She handed Harry the paper with his latest meeting time.

“Right, thanks,” he said.

She set off down the corridor, headed for the library. She disregarded the eye rolling from Harry and Ron. She didn’t care how controlling she seemed. Scott had been out from under her thumb for the duration of the break and God only knew what he had been up to.

It was perhaps egotistical of her to think she could in some way exert influence over Scott’s actions. Still, she felt that her status as a Prime probably lent her a degree of weight with him, or so she hoped. She didn’t trust Scott not to interfere in people’s lives when there was no call for it (if such a thing could ever be considered appropriate at all). The Kharadjai didn’t seem to care much when it came to such niceties as privacy.

Someone needed to hold him liable. It was a decision she had reached over the holidays. Hermione was sure that Harry knew a great deal, but a great deal didn’t mean everything and he tended to miss some avenues of inquisition.

All of this rationalisation was merely supporting evidence for her true reason – Hermione needed to know, to be in on the plan. The more she was aware of, the more she could think it through and prepare for eventualities. Bravery was all well and good when it was called for, but forward thinking could keep them safe… Keep them alive.

Such was the role she had created for herself, to be diligently circumspect, and she was determined to fill it. If Scott had a problem with that, then that was just too bad. His experience did not grant him the right to endanger Hermione’s friends.

Her willpower now suitably bolstered, she began to search for Scott in earnest. He wasn’t to be found in his haunt at the back corner of the library. That made things a bit more difficult. With his casual disregard for both rules and magical barriers, Scott could quite literally be anywhere. Hogwarts was a sprawling structure on a vast property and that did nothing to improve her chances of locating him.

Running low on viable options, she headed towards the Headmaster’s office. There was a chance,
however slim, that Scott was convening within, though she wasn’t sure how she’d find out if he was. Dumbledore’s office wasn’t the sort of door that was knocked on for every little thing.

Her luck must have been due for an upswing, because no sooner had she entered the corridor to Dumbledore’s office than the Headmaster himself stepped out from behind the gargoyle statue.

Hermione hurried forward. “Excuse me – Professor Dumbledore?”

Dumbledore turned towards her, eyes twinkling. “Ah, Ms. Granger!” he greeted her, smiling. “What brings you to my corner of Hogwarts this evening?”

She knew it was an odd and perhaps overly familiar question she was about to pose. Despite this she asked, “I was wondering if you know where Scott Kharan is?”

If Dumbledore thought it was a strange thing to ask, then he showed no visible sign of this. “I’m afraid I don’t. Have you looked in the library?”

“Yes, I have,” Hermione sighed. “Sorry to bother you, Professor.”

“It was no bother at all,” Dumbledore assured her. Hermione started to turn away and was stopped when he added, “Though, I wonder – is your need to find him urgent?”

It might be. She didn’t know yet. “I didn’t see him at all over the holidays,” she half-explained.

Dumbledore’s visage shifted to one of understanding. “It seems to me that some friends should be kept closer than others,” he said pointedly. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes sir, very much so.”

“Then allow me to assist.” With a fluid grace born of long practice, Dumbledore drew his wand. “Scott Kharan,” he said clearly and tapped the wand twice against the stone wall with an odd flick of his wrist.

A pale blue ball of light sprang from the end of the wand and hovered in the air for a moment before it began to drift back the way Hermione had come.

“Follow the light if you would, Ms. Granger,” Dumbledore told her. “It will guide you to him.”

Hermione barely had time to thank him before the light picked up its pace and she was forced to follow it a brisk walk.

The light swerved around corners and down hallways, always maintaining a generally upward direction. When it began to ascend the painfully long spiral staircase of the Astronomy Tower, Hermione almost wished she hadn’t been so persistent. The light didn’t tire or slow in the slightest on the steep incline and Hermione was panting by the time she reached the top.

The tower’s roof had been swept clean of snow and a bitter wind whipped across the bare stones. Hermione shivered and hugged herself, immediately grateful for the winter cloak, hat and gloves that she was still wearing after her visit with Hagrid and Buckbeak. Scott was standing with his back to the dark horizon, a layered panorama of faint purples blending into the starry dome above. He waited for Hermione to catch her breath, studying the light orb that was now circling him in a lazy holding pattern.

“I thought I felt something latch onto me,” he commented and reached out to touch the spell. His fingers passed through it harmlessly. “Interesting magic. I could have broken it, but I wanted to see
what was coming.”

“Of course you didn’t bother to trace it back to the source,” Hermione said reproachfully.

“Hey, I didn’t know you were following it,” he said mildly. “I didn’t even know what it was. It could have been some sort of soul-seeking magic missile for all I knew, you’re lucky I didn’t cancel it when it locked on.”

“If you’d kept up on your reading you’d know offensive magic doesn’t work like that,” Hermione primly informed him. “The spell was obviously tied to the castle in some way. It’s most likely a privilege of the Headmaster.”

“Dumbledore sent that?” Scott pointed at the orb. “What does he want?”

“He was helping me,” she clarified.

“Oh. Then what do you want?”

Hermione gathered her courage for a second time, born of what was (she thought) a righteous purpose. “I’d like to know of any actions you took or alterations you made over the break.”

“Oh really.” Scott looked more amused than compliant. “Did you appoint yourself as my parole officer?”

She had anticipated his reticence and the likelihood he wouldn’t take her seriously. “Yes, I did,” she coolly informed him. “This is my life, and they are my friends. I have a right to know if you’re playing with any of them, and you’re going to tell me if you have.”

Scott’s eyes narrowed. “Or else what?”

Hermione played the only card she had. “Or else I’ll refuse to cooperate. I won’t talk to you, I won’t listen to you; I’ll never do a thing that you say, and you can bet that my friends will do that same.” There was some false bravado mixed in with her message, but she still declared it as strongly as she could.

“Very good,” Scott said softly, appreciatively, like a general admiring the masterstroke of an opponent even as it decimated his forces. “Very good indeed. Yes, that would make my job more difficult.”

“So you’ll tell me?”

He shrugged. “Why only you? What makes you worthy to be the sole reservoir of the truth?”

“I might ask you the same,” she said heatedly.

“But this is my job. I’m qualified through training and experience to do the things that I have to, and secrecy can be a part of that.”

“Well, of course I’d tell the others,” she said impatiently, skipping over his excuses and switching back to his original question. “It wouldn’t be just me.”

“I don’t see why a diluted second-hand account should suffice for them.”

“Fine!” she snapped. “Then let’s call everyone up here, and you can tell the whole group!”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Scott murmured, his face creased with thought. “Some things are
better left unsaid.”

Why did he have to be so infuriating? “That’s a very convenient stance for you to take,” she argued.

“Let me pose a scenario for you, if you would; what if I had taken some preliminary steps towards the possibility of Luna and Neville become a couple? Should I tell them, even though there’s no guarantee it would ever come to anything? Despite the fact that telling them would probably sabotage their chance at happiness?”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “That’s not theoretical at all, is it.”

“Maybe, maybe not. That doesn’t change the nature of the question.”

It was a difficult thing to contemplate. Hermione struggled with her answer. On one hand there was nothing overtly objectionable about a little matchmaking, and Scott had said before that it wasn’t possible to manipulate feelings that didn’t exist. Her own relationship with Ron had certainly benefited from such subtle alterations.

In contrast was the decidedly invasive aspect of such meddling. Hermione had her differences with Harry, mostly when it came to his recklessness, but one aspect of his character with which she could identify was his hatred of being kept ignorant of his own circumstances. True, their shared dislike came from different sources – Harry’s from his history and Hermione’s from her pursuit of knowledge as an end in and of itself. That differing cause didn’t change the result, however. She had an inbuilt resistance to the idea of Scott changing people without their knowledge or consent.

What it came down to then was whether she could trust Scott to act in the best interests of those he was altering – and from what she had seen, Scott would act in the best interests of his mission. So far the two had mainly coincided. However, should that change Hermione wasn’t at all certain that Scott would jeopardise his grand objectives in favour of helping those who were, to face a cold truth, most likely expendable.

“I suppose, in the end, I can only know what you tell me,” she said simply, “and there’s no guarantee you’re telling the truth – about anything, for that matter. What I’m asking is for you to stop working around us and start working with us. If you’re really here to help, then why aren’t we on the same side?”

“A worthy question – and one for which I am lacking a worthy answer,” Scott said, and he sighed. Almost to himself, he continued, “The truth is often hidden because it’s so hard to believe – but is the partial picture that remains any less ludicrous?”

“Not really.”

“No, not really,” Scott echoed. His eyes focused back on to Hermione. “How do you handle it? What I’ve told you, I mean.”

“I’m not sure sometimes, to be honest.” Hermione frowned in thought. “I’m able to think about it rationally. It’s rather like how I had to accept the fact that I was a witch when I got my letter from Hogwarts.” She had undergone a rough period when it had seemed that all her faith in science had been misplaced.

“Maybe you’re waiting for the other foot to fall – or perhaps it’s not as difficult to make peace with the vagaries of life as you’d think. Almost anything can become mundane if you’re forced to consider it enough.” He gave her a small smile. “Why push things any further when the impossible
is already hard enough to swallow?”

“We know who you are, and we know in a general way that you’re to assist Harry,” Hermione said bluntly. “Don’t try to pretend we’re unwilling or unable to handle the truth. That’s not an excuse you can use.”

“Prickly tonight, aren’t we,” Scott commented.

“If that’s what it takes to get a straight answer out of you.”

“Then I admire your willingness to try every approach.”

“Thank you,” she said sarcastically, “but what I’d like to know is whether it’s getting me anywhere.”

“You’ve made your point,” Scott conceded. “Round up Ron and Harry. I’ll meet you in the ROR later tonight.”

“The – oh, the Room of Requirement,” she said, deciphering his acronym.

“Where else? See you there.” Scott turned his back to her and leaned out over the parapet, though if he was looking at anything in particular she couldn’t tell. He did that a lot. She wondered if he stared off into the distance as a matter of habit when he was thinking, or if he really was watching for something unknown. Given the concessions she’d already wrung out of him, she would save that question for another evening.

On the way back she mulled over what had been said. Dare she consider his answer a victory? Every private meeting she had with Scott ended up as another convoluted conversation that left her wondering if anything had been resolved or if he was steering her around the real issues. His closing statements had been direct enough. Maybe he was finally going to help them properly.

Hermione quickly returned to the Gryffindor tower and found Harry and Ron in their dorm room, unpacking their trunks and settling back in after the holiday away. She filled them in with hushed tones, ensuring they weren’t overheard.

“Why does he want to meet in there again?” Ron asked.

“You’ll be happy to know that, despite your nay saying, I did manage to talk him into telling us what he’s been up to,” Hermione proclaimed.

“So?” Ron shrugged. “He told us what he was up to the last time we met in the Room of Requirement.”

“No, the things he’s… changed, Ron. Like what he was doing over the break.”

Ron shrugged again. “We already know what he was doing over the break; we were there. Right, Harry?”

“For most of it,” Harry agreed.

“You were?” Hermione hissed. “Why didn’t you tell me?!”

“Because as soon as we saw you for the first time since the holidays you ran off to look for Scott,” Harry said reasonably.

“Oh. Well, it was important,” Hermione said impatiently, brushing aside Harry’s unwelcome logic.
“This is our chance to find out what he’s done to further our goals, not just his.”

“He wants the same thing we do, Hermione,” Harry said.

“I’m not so sure of that,” she said seriously. “I believe he wants the same end result, but we might have very different ideas of how to get there. And besides – this is our fight, not his, and we have a right to know how he’s helping to win it. Now, are you coming or not?” The way she said it made it perfectly clear that there was only one right answer.

Harry started walking towards his trunk. “I’ll get the Cloak, just in case.”

Ron, however, made no motions towards doing anything useful, instead loitering near her.

“Hermione…”

“Yes?”

“Are we going to get a chance to… I mean, I haven’t even asked you how your break was yet,” Ron said lowly.

Hermione felt a surge of affection for him and grabbed his hand, giving it a squeeze. “We’ll catch up later, I promise.”

The three of them held an extended discussion on the subject of Scott until it was just past curfew. The trip to the Room of Requirement was markedly different than the one they had taken for a similar purpose not too long before. Hermione was regretful that Ginny, Luna and Neville wouldn’t be attending the impromptu council of war, but it was probably for the best. There was always the strong possibility that Scott would touch upon subjects that no one else was to know about save those present.

“Remember, he agreed to do this,” Hermione reminded the two boys, “so don’t let him try and run us in circles like he usually does.”

“He always does that, even when it’s something unimportant,” Harry said. “How can you even tell any more?”

“He’ll answer a question with another question. He does that a lot,” Hermione said. She figured on some occasions when Scott used that tactic it was purely habitual, and the rest of the time he did it on purpose. The trick would be to distinguish which it was.

“Why do I feel like we’re going to a fight?” Ron muttered.

They reached the location of the hidden entrance and Hermione paced back in forth in front of it. We need a place to talk, she thought. We need a meeting area. The door appeared in the stone wall, materialising as the magic of the room opened its way for them. Grasping the doorknob, she entered inside.

The room had assumed a standard form, with several large armchairs and a couch or two surrounding a fireplace set into the far wall. Scott was sitting on the hearth, facing the doorway. Willkommen, meine Freunde,” he said as she stepped over the threshold. “Bist du gekommen, meine Geheimnisse zu stehlen?”

“You know I don’t speak German,” Hermione told him, not amused. She seated herself on the couch directly across from him. Ron took the cushion next to her, and Harry settled into an armchair.
“Yes, that is unfortunate,” Scott said, shaking his head sympathetically.

“How are you going to do this?” Hermione asked him, cutting straight to the point. “Because we are not going to sit here and ask questions until we hit on the right path of inquiry.”

“So, what, you want me to just start endlessly talking with no real direction in mind?”

“You’ve certainly never had a problem with doing that before,” she responded coolly.

“Mein Gott, ich bin hier mit einer schlechten Hexe eingeschlossen,” Scott said tiredly.

“Stop that!” Hermione snapped at him.

“Maybe you should just start at the beginning,” Ron said, helpfully trying to move the conversation forward.

“The beginning… Yeah, all right.” Scott leaned back in thought, scratching his chin. “Well, it all started while I was relaxing, because sometimes I do that. Then I got the call and reported for assignment. They handed me all the stuff they had on this universe and you guys… And that was pretty much it.”

There was a moment of silence. Hermione broke it, saying, “Just like that? They give you a paper, and then you’re here?”

“Well, I did have a talk with my sister and packed up some of our belongings for the move, but other than that, yeah. They just up and dropped this one on me. They could have had someone else lined up for it who skipped out at the last second, or maybe they rerated the Priority or Threshold of this mission.” Scott shrugged. “The details aren’t important.”

“I’m sure Priority is the urgency of the mission, but could you define ‘Threshold’?” Hermione asked him. Scott might have said that the details weren’t important, but she begged to differ.

“Difficulty. If they decided that this mission was more difficult than originally thought, they might have tossed it my way for that reason. That’s fairly likely. This universe is all knotted and contracted as fuck.”

Hermione tried to ignore his language and questioned him further. “What do you mean by that? How can a universe be knotted?”

“Let me think about it for a second; this is a weird concept to grasp,” Scott said. He tapped his foot on the floor and stared off into space for a few moments before he continued, “Okay. Let’s say you have a ball of string. When you look at it, what do you see?”

“Depends on what colour it is,” Harry answered wryly.

“Any colour but clear.”

“But clear is my favourite,” Ron joked.

Hermione frowned, trying to figure out where Scott was going with his analogy. “…I would see a ball of string. What else is there to see?”

“Nothing, because you can’t see through it,” Scott said. “Is there something inside the ball of string? You have no way of knowing. What’s directly behind the ball of string? It’s opaque, so you can’t tell. Now take that same ball of string and unravel it, or more accurately, pull it apart. After
that, it’s no longer a solid mass; it’s a loose collection of string, and you can see inside of it and behind it. A universe is like that. If it’s all condensed and knotted, you can only see what’s right in front of you. If it’s loose, like it should be, you can see through all the little loops. Right now, I can’t sense enough to do any good from the outside looking in. Everything I’ve done so far I was only able to do because I was right here. Without guidance, we’re left with improvisation.”

“And you must be good at that,” Hermione surmised.

“Let me put it this way – if you know something is up ahead, you can avoid it. Otherwise, you run right into it and then there’s no choice but to face it. Scenario number two has been almost all that’s been happening around here, and it puts us into tight, dangerous places. That plays into a speciality of mine – reacting violently in tight places.”

Hermione wasn’t sure how she felt about that. On one hand, Scott’s casual relationship with deadly force made her uncomfortable. Yet, when she thought about it dispassionately, she knew that having an effective killer on their side for once would be a balancing asset in the war they were facing. Hermione was subject to her feelings and principles the same as anyone else, but she was also nothing if not logical. Logic was a cold light on reality. It led her to understand that Scott’s violence might serve them well in some dark future circumstance.

“All of which brings us to a point,” she said, choosing not to comment on the matter. “How have you reacted lately?”

“I’ll summarise for your listening pleasure,” Scott said blandly, and began reciting a litany of acts in a monotone. “I came to this universe in the past, your past, and talked to Dumbledore. I waited for the present to roll around and then took stock of all my Primes. When I checked in on Lupin and Tonks, I saw an opportunity and gave them a little push towards the hookup. Then I talked to Dumbledore again and got into Hogwarts. I went to see Harry and told him that something was up. I met with you in Diagon Alley and interrupted things so I could question Borgin on the off chance that it was important. I stopped Malfoy from stomping Harry’s face on the train. The next day, I unintentionally got into some trouble with Snape. I sent Lil to talk to Mrs. Weasley so that we’d have a connection with that family, then I sent her to steal an important Priority Item from Borgin and Burkes, and then she met us in Hogsmeade and nudged Hermione and Ron towards the hookup. I’ve attempted multiple times to get Harry and Ginny to see their hookupableness, currently to no avail. Over the break, I visited Harry and Ron to familiarise them with firearms.”

He stopped, and an expectant silence pervaded the room. He looked at them and added, “That is all.”

Hermione absently tapped her fingers against the couch, absorbing everything Scott had said. The majority of it she had already been familiar with, and there were only a few things that required clarification. “When you said you went to the past-”

“Can we talk about time later?” Scott interrupted her plaintively. “I don’t really want to get into that. Talking about time takes a lot of... uh, time.”

“Fine.” She grudgingly granted him a reprieve. “But what’s this ‘priority item’ you mentioned?”

“A Priority Item is an object that has something to do with the UO, or the way that the universe is shaping. So far it’s the only burst of peri-noesis that I’ve been able to have. It was a necklace in a case at Borgin and Burkes – one day I could just feel it all of sudden, beating like a heart in a web, sending little shivers down the universe my way. I’d imagine it was what Malfoy wanted. Lil stole it, and it’s no longer a possible problem.”

“The break-in we read about,” Harry said, sitting up straighter in his chair. “That was her.”
“Yep,” Scott confirmed.

“But you weren’t able to tell why he wanted it?” Hermione asked. “Or that it was even Draco in the first place?” She didn’t miss how Harry sullenly slumped lower in his chair again. Regardless, she remained stubbornly unconvinced of Malfoy’s implicit guilt.

“No. That would be the simplest explanation, though.”

“Perhaps…” Hermione thought about it some more.

“I bet he was after the necklace, the git,” Ron said, adding his take on the situation. “It’s cursed, isn’t it? There’s all sorts of people he’d love to use something like that on.”

“Like you,” Harry said.

“And you. Or anyone in Gryffindor, for that matter.”

“Yeah, he is a little shite, isn’t he,” Harry mused.

“Harry!” Hermione reprimanded him.

“When he’s right, he’s right,” Scott said. “Any further questions that you’re just dying to ask?”

“Yes, actually,” Hermione said immediately. “What are you planning to do now?”

“I have no idea. I’m reacting right now, not acting. And before you say it – no, I can’t promise to check with you every time I need to make a quick decision.”

Hermione frowned. “You will discuss those non-quick decisions, though.” She wasn’t asking a question, and compounded her demand with a steely stare. Scott wasn’t going to waltz out of the meeting after dodging all promises of compliance, not if she could help it.

“I’ll be sure to run anything important by the committee,” Scott told her testily. Hermione could tell she was getting to him. His annoyance was a good sign. It meant that she was forcing him into things he wanted to avoid.

Which meant she could afford to be magnanimous in victory. “Thank you, Scott. I know it’s probably an inconvenience, but things will go much more smoothly if we work together.”

Scott only rolled his eyes at her. “You can force me into it, but don’t try to sell it to me.”

Even his cutting reply couldn’t dull her feeling of accomplishment.

They left Scott behind while he held a phone conversation with Lila, and the three of them hurried back to the tower under the no longer adequate cover of the Invisibility Cloak. Once they were safely back in the common room Harry went up to his dorm to store the cloak.

Hermione turned to Ron, seeking his opinion. “I think that went well, don’t you?”

“I guess,” Ron said neutrally.

That wasn’t the answer she had been looking for. “You guess? He said he’d stop keeping us in the dark; I’d say that’s major step forward.”

“It’s easy enough to say that, though.”
“You think he was lying?” Hermione asked worriedly.

“Not exactly lying…” Ron scratched the back of his head, face scrunched in thought. “More like, he sort of meant it, but he was probably also telling you what you wanted to hear. I think he’ll tell you if he’s got a big plan, or whatever… But I also think he’ll still run off in a hurry if he wants to.”

“I suppose I should take what I can get,” Hermione grumbled.

“You tried, though,” Ron said, and he reached up to brush a curl away from her forehead. “That’s what’s great about you – you always try.”

Hermione eyed him thoughtfully for a moment. At the very least, even if she hadn’t gotten all of what she had wanted from Scott, she needn’t end the evening on a low note. “Allow me to make another attempt tonight,” she said lowly.

She pulled Ron’s head down and met his lips in a kiss that started out tender but quickly became heated. He pulled her closer and she gripped his arms, dizzy with the sensation. Yes, this definitely wasn’t a low note. She closed her eyes shut more firmly and gave herself over to the kiss.

“Oh, hell,” she dimly heard Harry exclaim from the foot of the stairs, “I was only upstairs for a minute.”

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Harry suddenly awoke, and he didn’t know why.

It was still dark outside. The moonlight filtered in through the tower windows, dimmed by clouds. He rubbed at his eyes and blindly reached for his glasses on the bedside stand, the only remedy for his blurred vision. Finding them, he sat up and let the covers slide off of himself. He put on his glasses and looked around the room for anything that might have caused him to wake.

Nothing appeared amiss. No one was snoring loudly enough to wake the dead, a pleasant surprise. So why was he awake? Blinking, he scanned the room again. This time the thing that was out of place came to him with sudden clarity.

Scott wasn’t in his bed.

It was entirely possible, and indeed probable, that Scott had simply risen to go to the loo and had somehow woken Harry in the process. There was no need to assume that the Kharadjai was up to something. Odds were he’d be walking back into the room at any moment. The clear course of action in this matter was to simply lie back down, roll over, and go to sleep. Any second now, Harry would be doing just that.

Any second now.

He knew he’d been living an odd life, Harry reflected as he swung his feet out onto the floor, when he couldn’t even convince himself that the most innocently obvious explanation was true. At the very least, a healthy level of maintained paranoia might help him live longer. It was that thought which jolted him to full alertness and brought the tightness back into his muscles.

He decided not to wake Ron, just in case there really was nothing happening. Trying to rouse him in the middle of the night was usually more trouble than it was worth, anyway.

The stone floor was uncomfortable under his bare feet so he quickened his pace and silently went
down the staircase. In the common room the fire was burning low in the fireplace, casting eerie shadows. It was times like this, in the dead of night, that such blameless shapes as lumpy chairs grew menacing in the firelight and chimerical enemies lurked in every darkened corner.

Harry rolled his eyes, exasperated with his own inner monologue. An over-active imagination was a burden during a night time stroll. He pushed aside his self-generated fears and examined the room for signs of Scott.

There was a light coming from beneath the door to the toilet, which could mean any number of things. He’d play it casual and just walk in. He only hoped that if it was Scott he wasn’t going to catch the other boy doing something that Harry really didn’t want to catch him doing.

Grasping the doorknob, Harry readied his wand just in case and swiftly opened the door.

The interior was steeped in darkness, a single source of light carving every feature of the room out of the shadows in stark relief. Scott was hunched over one of the sinks, his wand lying on the counter next to him and providing the pale white light that didn’t seem to reach very far. He had his left arm lying inside the basin while he did something to it with his right. He was only partially dressed and covered in dirt, his exposed skin shiny with sweat and his hair hanging limply against his forehead.

What caught Harry’s attention most of all was the blood. It was everywhere, pooled and streaked around the edges of the sink and over the counter top, spattered on Scott’s shorts and splashed over his arms. In the thin light, it looked black.

Scott didn’t look up when Harry came in. “Hey, Harry.”

“Lumos!” Harry said, adding his light to the scene and moving to Scott’s side. “What happened?” He could now see what Scott was doing, and swallowed his initial revulsion. There was a hole ripped into the tender flesh on the underside of Scott’s left arm. It was bleeding profusely while Scott squeezed at it with the fingers of his right hand, alternating the pressure with attempts at digging into the wound. There was something strange about the way the skin moved on one side of the hole, as if something were lodged beneath it.

Harry looked disbelievingly at Scott. “What the hell did you do?”

“Caught a ricochet,” Scott grunted, squeezing the bottom of his forearm. The lump grew more pronounced. “Nothing to panic about. Go back to bed.”

“Blimey!” They both spun towards the door. Unnoticed by them, the door had not shut entirely when Harry had entered. Ron stood in the entryway in his too-small pyjamas, his face pale in the wand light. He approached them, his own wand in his hand and bare feet slapping on the tiles, to peer down with an awed expression into the sink. “What the hell did you do?” he gasped, unknowingly echoing Harry’s sentiment.

“Caught a ricochet,” Scott repeated. “This was supposed to be a private party, gentlemen. Isn’t it a little late for socialising?”

They both ignored him. Ron was looking at the wound with his mouth open in a sort of sick fascination. “That looks awful, mate. You need to get to the hospital wing.”

“Can’t.”

“What’s that under your skin?” Harry pointed to the shifting lump beneath the bloodless epidermis.
Ron leaned forward to see better from Harry’s angle. “You’ve got something in your arm?” Scott jammed one of his fingers down into the torn flesh and pushed, trying to hook onto something. Ron went even paler. “Blimey,” he said again.

“I told you, I caught a ricochet,” Scott said very slowly, as if talking to small children. “What is it exactly you don’t understand about that?”

“Here.” Harry moved over to Ron’s side and raised his wand. “Just tell me what it is and I can Summon it out.”

Scott shook his head. “It’s behind the muscle. There’s no straight line to it with all that crap in the way, if you Summon it out you’ll just tear me up even more.”

“And you’re doing a better job of it?” Ron snorted and then winced when Scott’s left hand clenched in a sharp stab of pain, releasing a fresh stream of blood.

“Yes—” Scott’s finger was still searching for its target in the pulpy mess of his arm, buried almost to the knuckle. “—because I think I’ve got it.” Gritting his teeth, he slid his finger back out with a jerking motion. Something slipped free with it, falling into the sink with a metallic clink and followed by a gout of dark blood.

With his uninjured arm Scott picked up the object and held it to the light. “Stubborn little bastard,” he said, still breathing heavily from the pain. Though covered in blood, Harry could see it was a small metal sphere, like a ball bearing. “No offence to you guys but I wish I was an adult again. Nothing like having a steel ball stuck in you to make you miss your self-healing abilities.”

“I’m sure,” Harry said in as normal a tone as he could manage, “but that doesn’t explain how it got there in the first place.”

Scott looked at him askance. “Isn’t it a little late? Aren’t you feeling some strong urges to go back to bed and forget all this?”

“Can’t say that I am. How about you?” Harry asked Ron.

Ron shook his head. “I’m wide awake, actually.”

Harry looked back at Scott. “You see how it is.”

Scott sighed. “All right, but let’s go back out to the common room. I need to sit down.”

“What about your arm?” Ron questioned him.

“Episkey,” Scott muttered, tapping his arm with his wand. Nothing happened, and he glared at his wand for a moment. “Goddammit. Harry, you do it.”

Harry picked up his wand and cast the healing spell on Scott’s arm. The wound didn’t so much heal as it congealed, some portions of the skin regaining a slight colour. It had to still hurt – the healing spell worked well enough on damaged tissue but wasn’t a very effective anodyne.

“That will hold me,” Scott said. “Here, hand me that towel.”

Ron grabbed a towel from a nearby rack and tossed it to Scott, who tore it lengthwise in two and used the pieces to fashion a crude bandage. “Good enough,” he said, grabbing his wand. “At least I can light this stupid thing, right? That’s something. Better clean this shit up.”
A few well-aimed cleaning spells and the sink was spotless enough not to draw notice. The same couldn’t be said for Scott’s shorts, which remained badly stained though no longer wet. Back in the common room, Scott sank into one of the chairs with a wince, cradling his arm. Harry and Ron also seated themselves, eyeing him expectantly.

Scott closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again, looking wan from blood loss. “Remember what I said about Riddle’s war?”

Harry frowned, thinking back. He knew Scott had said something about that subject, but couldn’t recall exactly when. “Sort of.”

“I said that if a guerilla war was what he wanted, then that’s what he should get.”

“I remember that,” Ron said. “You were going off on the Death Eaters, and something about the Ministry?”

Harry began remembering it more clearly. “Right, after we read about the attacks in the paper.”

Ron nodded. “Thought you were a bit barmy about the whole thing, really. You said we needed to act like Death Eaters in order to fight them. What do you expect us to do, creep around in the dead of night and jump them at their… houses…” Ron trailed off, his eyes growing wide as he looked at Scott’s injured arm.

Harry half rose from his seat, realisation dawning. The bland look on Scott’s face was confirmation enough.

“Bloody hell,” Ron whispered, “that’s what you were doing, isn’t it.”

“Perhaps. What’s necessary isn’t always easy,” Scott said mildly.

“Tell me what happened,” Harry demanded.

Scott leaned back into his chair as if his previous words had drained him of strength. “If you’d like.”

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Behind the grand manor house, there was a garden path.

It was a large garden, well cultivated, containing a myriad of different plants. Colourful flowers festooned the raised sides of the brick walk, delicately arranged in patterns pleasing to the eye, the bright blooms nestled next to well-pruned shrubs and elegant trees. The owner of the manor took great pride in the garden and enjoyed showing guests its many appeals.

Kharan didn’t care about any of that. For him, the garden was merely a place of concealment, its esoteric values lost on him in his efficient state of mind. The abundant growth provided excellent cover in the dark night; the glow that emitted from the manor house did not penetrate far into the foliage.

There was a party taking place on the terrace behind the manor. The tinkling noise of fragile wine glasses and the dull mutter of hushed laughter drifted to where Kharan hid himself. Their names were not important to him. His interest lay in two specific people amongst the gaily dressed herd.

They would walk the garden, he knew, for two reasons: one of the men was the master of the manor house, and the garden would allow them to talk without being overheard. They would
discuss their darker brand of business away from the chatter and light.

And in so doing allow Kharan to follow through on his own business with them.

Normally, he would not have developed such an ostentatious plan, but he was not so much removing a threat as he was sending a message. It was the first message and would have less impact than the ones to follow, so he had brought something special with which to send it. He was merely setting the stage. The next acts would be more meaningful, and perhaps more subtle.

There was nothing subtle about the Claymore Mine sitting in the lilacs.

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“A what?” Ron interrupted.

“A Claymore Mine. It’s a type of bomb,” Scott explained.

Ron glanced over at Harry to see if he understood, but Harry had never heard of such a thing either.

“What does it do?”

Scott leaned his head back and proceeded to recite, “The M18 Claymore is a directional fragmentation mine. It is eight and a half inches long, one and three eighths inches wide, three and one fourth inches high, and weighs three and one half pounds. The mine contains seven hundred steel spheres and a one and a half pound layer of composition C-4 explosive and is initiated by a number two electric blasting cap.”

“English, please,” Ron groaned.

“It’s a fragmentation bomb that you set off with a detonator. Fragmentation means that it doesn’t do its damage with an explosion but with shrapnel or debris thrown by an explosion. It’s directional – essentially a thin plastic box that has a bunch of ball bearings in it, with a bomb put behind them. The bomb explodes and all those little metal balls go flying out with enough force to punch right through you.”

Ron looked somewhat aghast at that. “That’s awful!” Harry couldn’t help but share his sentiment.

“Awful effective. Seven hundred steel balls moving at more than lethal velocity can do all kinds of damage. May I continue?”

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They came at a leisurely stroll, conversing softly. Kharan wondered if they were talking about the Muggle family they had killed the previous week (his research had been rushed and limited, but it wasn’t hard to connect the dots when it came to proximity: an unexplained triple murder not five miles from the manor and a blue car, reported as stolen, left on its side in the woods near the garden path like a discarded toy). They laughed at something, and he thought they probably were.

The Death Eaters liked to think that they were some higher breed of human, but Kharan knew the truth. People like them were as common as dirt, revelling in the pain of others, supporting their petty lives with delusions of grandeur.

The Claymore would kill them before they could even register the explosion. As far as their personal experiences went, their deaths would be instant and humane. It was the impact that the sight of their unrecognisable corpses would inflict upon the living that was important.
He had a message to send.

The targets entered the kill zone. Kharan flattened himself out on the ground behind a short dip in the soil, and pressed the trigger.

The sharp crack of the explosion mercifully drowned out the other sounds present in that fraction of a second – of bones snapping and flesh being perforated to the point of disintegration. The man closest to the blast had the flesh on his lower torso and legs pulverised to a sodden mass of deep punctures and bruises. His companion did not fare much better. Severed digits spun away into the flora.

Like sides of raw beef being hurled against a solid surface, what was left of the two Death Eaters lost the momentum lent to them by the Claymore when they smacked into the brick wall lining the opposite side of the path.

Kharan felt a sharp pain in the underside of his forearm, but didn’t spare it a thought. He had to leave immediately; it was of the utmost importance that no one see him, even from a distance. Being identified too soon could be disastrous.

Nimbly jumping to his feet, Kharan sped through the garden, leapt over the surrounding fence, and vanished into the nearby wood.

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There was silence as Scott finished his tale. Ron appeared to be trying to come to grips with the fact that Scott had murdered two people mere minutes before he had been found in the bathroom. Harry understood the motivations well enough, but the methods left him cold.

“Don’t worry about it,” Scott said, breaking the quiet. “It’s not your problem. If you really find this so disturbing, then maybe it’s better if you don’t ask me about it in the future.”

“I don’t know what to think,” Ron admitted. “I mean, I guess I forget that you’re actually older than us sometimes, you know? But Merlin… Killing two bloody people…”

“You want the Death Eaters to be the only ones willing to be lethal?” Scott asked them. “Stunning Spells are suitable enough for taking prisoners, which is what Dumbledore seems to want to do. If you want my advice, then the next time you see a Death Eater, give him a Diffindo to the neck or belly. Your enemy is playing for keeps.”

“I understand what you’re saying,” Harry said slowly, “but it’s not that easy to handle. We’re not…” He stopped, uncertain of what he wanted to say.

“Killers,” Scott finished for him. The Kharadjai was clearly not bothered by Harry’s reservations. “Your feelings are understandable. It’s a simple fact; not everyone is mentally equipped for these extremes as they become standard. That’s why there is, and always will be, the option to let me handle this. It’s what I do.”

Harry wondered if someday he would be able to deliver the same convictions after he killed Voldemort. How much of his soul would he have to trade for victory? How much blood would be on his hands? The distance that Scott inhabited seemed stark and cold.

And yet, what about all the aspects of life that Scott seemed to genuinely enjoy? All the jokes, all the fun? Scott could be ruthless, yes, but it was compartmentalised, a separate portion of his head. Perhaps taking life didn’t mean the end of your own.
Harry didn’t know. He shoved all the feelings aside, unable as always to find any answers within himself.

“I suppose you don’t want us to tell anyone else about this?” Harry asked. He knew that Scott would see the offered acceptance in the question.

“That would be best. Hermione will have to know about it, and it wouldn’t be the end of the world if Ginny or Neville and Luna found out. I’ll leave that up to you. Just make sure nobody in a position of authority learns about it.”

“What about Dumbledore?”

“He’ll put the pieces together, but I don’t know if he’ll confront me.” Scott smiled. “I guess I’ll find out.”

“You’ve got to do something about that arm,” Ron said. He pointed at the towel bandage, which was already stained a rusty red over the wound.

“I think I’ll have Hermione look at it in the morning, just to see if she can do anything.”

“At least re-wrap it,” Harry said, getting to his feet, “or you’ll be bleeding all over your sheets and someone is going to find out about it.”

“Are you a fucking doctor?” Scott inquired sarcastically, suddenly regaining his usual vitriol. “I know how to fix my arm, now get the fuck out of here and go to bed or you’ll be bleeding on your sheets, too.”

“I don’t know about you, Harry,” Ron smirked as they ascended the stairs to the dormitories, “but I don’t think that’s much of a threat coming from a bloke who got caught by his own bomb.”

“Too right,” Harry agreed. “I wouldn’t try to hit us, Scott, you might hurt yourself.”

“Yeah, when I break my knuckles on your fuckin’ teeth,” Scott grumbled, following them up. “A small price to pay to see you shit your own pearly whites.”

“Ron,” Harry asked as he suddenly remembered something, “what woke you up, anyway?”

“I was already awake, mate. Didn’t hear any snoring, did you?”

“I wondered about that.”

They had to silence their banter when they neared the top of the staircase, not wanting to wake the other boys. While Ron slid back into his bed Harry dug out an old white sleeping shirt for Scott to use as a bandage.

Sinking back into the mattress, Harry realised that he had never found out what had woken him.
The following morning Hermione embarrassed herself upon being shown the wound, letting loose a small shriek that, while muffled by the hands she had clapped over her mouth, was still decidedly girly.

“What did you do?!” she hissed in disbelief, tapping her wand against the palm of her hand like she was trying to decide whether to help him or hex him. She grabbed Scott’s good arm and pulled him aside while Harry and Ron stood around them to try to block the view of any passers-by.

Gingerly loosening his bandage further, Scott lifted it all the way off of the injury to give Hermione the full view, wincing as the cloth stuck to the damaged skin. Hermione appeared to be biting back another short scream.

“Oh, dear,” she muttered, paling. Her anger pushed its way back to the fore. “You should have gone to Madam Pomfrey immediately! And for heaven’s sake, what did you do?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Scott said, warily looking around the mostly empty common room. “Harry and Ron can fill you in until then. Can you do anything?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione snapped, obviously put out by his stonewalling. “I’m not a Healer. You need the hospital wing, not a few low level healing spells and a shirt for a bandage.” She rounded on Ron, who unconsciously backed up a step. “I can’t believe the two of you just let him go to bed like this!”

“I told him to go see Pomfrey!” Ron defended himself. “He wouldn’t listen!” He shot Harry a glance that clearly said ‘back me up’.

“It’s true,” Harry added lamely. “He wouldn’t listen to us.”

“He never listens,” she muttered darkly, giving Scott a cutting glare. “You could have bled to death in your sleep, but apparently such petty concerns are beneath you.”

“Your Episkey is better than mine,” Scott said, unmoved by her fury. “At least try it.”

She huffed in irritation but raised her wand regardless, slightly mollified by the compliment. “Anyone’s Episkey is better than yours. Hold out your arm, and try to tilt it so that the angle of the puncture faces me directly.”

Scott grimaced, clearly in pain while manipulating his wounded arm. “Ow. That hurts.”

“Of course it hurts!” she railed at him, her voice rising dangerously. “I suppose you might have thought of that before you somehow had a hole punched through your arm-”

“What’s going on?”

The four of them started guiltily. Scott tucked his arm back against his chest, while Harry and Ron
moved closer together to hide him from view.

It was Ginny, looking at them curiously. She raised an eyebrow. “Nice morning for standing about?”

“None of your business,” Ron said gruffly. “We were discussing something.”

Ginny’s eyes flashed. Ron always seemed to instinctively handle his sister in the worst possible way. “Oh, really?” she spat. “Well, I certainly wouldn’t want to interrupt.”

“Ginny, wait,” Harry said before she could storm off. “It’s… Well, here, take a look.” He moved aside to let her into the closed group.

Scott rather sheepishly held out his injured arm. Ginny’s eyes grew wide. “Merlin! What did you do?!?”

“Oh, I never get tired of hearing that question,” Scott muttered.

“It’s a long story,” Harry explained. “Scott will tell you later tonight.”

Ginny looked to be willing to accept that for the time being. Hermione raised her wand again. “Arm, please,” she said firmly. Scott adjusted the perforated limb to her prior specifications. “Episkey!”

The result was noticeable if not quite dramatic. The wound contracted slightly, and the inside darkened as it congealed further. Any other benefits were not apparent to the naked eye, but Harry thought that it might be a bit better.

“It’s not very effective,” Hermione fretted, examining his arm. “A deep wound like this needs stronger spells and potions.”

Scott rewrapped his arm in the old shirt, fitting it tightly. “Good enough for now.”

“And if it doesn’t get better?” Hermione questioned him severely. “Do you want to have that arm amputated if it goes gangrenous?”

“It’s not going to go gangrenous,” he scoffed. “I’m resistant.”

“Fine,” she grudgingly relented after a moment’s staring contest. “But if it doesn’t start looking better soon, I want you to promise to go see Madam Pomfrey.”

Scott waved her off. “Sure, I promise.”

Scott retreated upstairs to his dormitory in order to bind his wound in a fresher cloth. Upon entering the common room, he discovered the majority of the Gryffindor sixth-years gathered around the notice board.

He raised himself up on his tiptoes to see over the heads of the crowd but still couldn’t discern their object of interest. He frowned, absently tightening the makeshift bandage that covered most of his arm and then tucking the appendage underneath the front of his robes. Why had everyone congregated in front of the board? If something major had happened without so much as a twinge from the universe, he was going to be upset.
Harry, Ron and Hermione were clustered in with the rest of the jostling students. He made his way
over to them and approached Harry first, figuring that whatever could draw such a crowd was probably Quidditch related.

“So, what’s up in the magical world of Quidditch?” he asked Harry as he came up behind the other boy. “You holding waterboy tryouts?”

“What?” Harry said, looking over his shoulder at Scott in confusion. “There aren’t any more tryouts.”

Scott leaned in closer, now concerned. “This isn’t about last night…?”

“Try reading the announcement,” Harry said and pointed towards the board.

“Fine.” Scott walked up to the front and examined the large notice pinned to the centre of the board.

It was a form for Apparition lessons. Interesting, certainly, but nothing critical. He could see Harry’s name already scrawled on the list next to Ron’s. Clearly, Scott had a decision to make. Given his innate travel abilities, Apparition would be of little use unless the universe should close even that door to him – an unlikely event. Prudence dictated that he take the class regardless, if only to understand how the spell functioned. However, he knew that his chances of passing the class were slim. His academic performance at Hogwarts was acceptable only because of the time he dedicated to studying for the written material. By contrast, his practical performance left a great deal to be desired, save in Potions, a class which required no casting. In all his other subjects he had managed to blend in with the average students by expending a great deal of effort to craft and release just enough working spells to satisfy his teachers.

He struggled with control. Even the mildest of spells were difficult to cast. It was even more difficult to ensure that the spell had the necessary level of focus and accuracy, flowing out of his wand instead of jumping out of his hand in the form of raw force. The wand acted as a converter, creating specific effects. He had come very close to breaking his wand with a poorly directed surge on more than one occasion.

Taking that into account didn’t change the look of excitement adorning the faces of his friends and fellow students. That was what made up his mind for him. It would be very odd to show no interest in the lessons. Grabbing the quill attached to the notice, he jotted his name down near the bottom of the list.

“What do you need Apparition lessons for?” Harry asked Scott as soon as he returned to the group.


“Yeah, sure,” Harry said disbelievingly.

Apparition was very much the topic of conversation during Charms that day. The classroom was abuzz with a shared tremor of anticipation and nearly every student in the room was discussing the signups in between spells. Scott didn’t participate in much of it, his attention locked onto the hated wand that he held.

“Aguamenti,” he said precisely. Proper pronunciation was not his problem, unfortunately, as that could be remedied much more easily than the obstructions he faced. Half afraid that he might destroy his wand should he force the spell, he had tried to go through the motions and cast without using any energy at all. He had held out little hope for success and, sure enough, nothing
happened. “Aguamenti, goddammit!”

“Scott, hush,” Hermione said next to him. “Flitwick will hear you.”

Scott ignored her and waved his wand again. “Aguamenti. Aguamenti you fucking piece of shi-”

“Scott!”

“Is something wrong, Ms. Granger?” Flitwick’s piping voice came from the front of the room, his attention captured by Hermione’s exclamation.

“No, Professor,” she answered, mortified.

The professor gave her a chiding look and turned away to assist another batch of students. As soon as his back was to them, Hermione fixed a white-hot glare on Scott. He could practically feel the heat against the side of his face.

“If looks could kill…” he muttered, staring intently at his wand and rolling it over in his fingers. No one else required an outside power source to cast spells. It was as if he were disconnected.

“Then you’d certainly deserve it,” Hermione said in response to his mumbled comment.

“Probably,” he absently agreed. Disconnection – that was an interesting line of thought. Suppose he was, in some fashion, literally disconnected from the current of magic. When his classmates cast spells, the act of moving the wand and speaking the words were enough to summon the power to complete the spell. Theoretically, some type of conversion took place, like a power supply. The base energy of the shape was channelled into the caster and converted into spell power.

That didn’t happen for him. He had to supply his own sparks, and his power came in the rawest of forms. The only way to guarantee a successful spell cast was to devote time and effort to calculating the exact amount of energy to use and defining the extremely specific conduit through which it should flow, that being his wand. Then there was getting the spell to come out of the wand at the correct angle, a whole other issue in itself.

Time was not a commodity in combat. In the classroom he could work out a decent cast when given enough time to expend considerable effort on the problem. In a fight, well… He’d probably be better off throwing his wand at the enemy, or stabbing someone with it.

He wondered if he was trying too hard. Perhaps instinct was the key. Taking a deep breath, he blindly pushed a jolt of power through his wand. “Aguamenti!”

Two things happened simultaneously: Scott, sensing in that split second that he had used more energy than was safe, immediately smothered out most of the spell, the shaping equivalent of throwing sand onto a fire-

-and what was left of the spell came out of his wand in a frothy torrent of water – a torrent which emerged at a ninety degree angle and soaked Hermione from head to toe.

“Crap,” Scott said dully.

Hermione closed her eyes and her hands clenched into tight little fists. A wave of laughter rippled through the room, and Scott knew it was only a matter of seconds before Flitwick traced it back to its source.

“Nice shot,” Harry commented.
“But you might want to run,” Ron added.

Hermione was applying Drought Charms to her clothing, a task made difficult by the fact that every patch she dried immediately turned soggy again due to the surrounding soaked cloth and her dripping hair. “Shut it, you two,” she said with an air of resignation.

Flitwick assigned Scott to writing lines (I am a wizard, not a water balloon), a punishment the professor seemed fond of. Scott dutifully recorded the sentence the required number of times, not meeting the various smiling gazes he was still drawing from around the room.

In a way, making mistakes served to normalise him in the eyes of his peers. Initially this had been useful in hastening his integration, but at the present point he had already become part of the background at Hogwarts; to most, merely another student in the crowd. His dearth of native magical ability was now an inconvenience.

“It’s salt water,” Hermione said. She licked her lips and made a face. “How on earth did you manage that?”

“I thought of sand. I guess it must have been white sand,” Scott answered, shrugging.

Scott spent the rest of the class session carefully calculating an energy level and trajectory for the water spell and then demonstrated it for Flitwick in order to receive a good grade for the day. His equations were off slightly (unsurprising considering the amount of guesswork involved), and his spell was not perfect, but it was acceptable. The fact that he could only manage decent spell work under such controlled conditions confirmed to him that magic would be largely worthless in a battle.

Later that evening Scott slipped away from the other students in the common room and went to the secluded portion of upper-story hallway that he sometimes used for phone calls. He knew Lila would want to be kept appraised of the evolving situation.

She answered on the fourth ring. “Hello?”

“It’s me. Thought I’d drop you a quick update.”

“Oh, fun.”

“I had an altercation last night. Two down, no witnesses. With the highly annoying exception of my age change the universe hasn’t done anything severe to limit me, so I’m going to assume that I’m on the right track. I’ll take care of anyone else I find as soon as I can age up again. Tonight was a quick run, but in the future I’ll try to compare things with you.”

“Okay.”

Scott paused for a moment, waiting for her to say more. When she didn’t, he asked, “No questions? Comments? …Insults?”

“I’m busy. Are we done?”

“Busy with what?”

“None of your business, that’s what. Bye.”

She hung up on him. He lowered the phone from his ear and frowned at it. That had been strange. What exactly had she been busy with this time of the night?
On his way back to Gryffindor tower Scott ran into Harry on one of the main staircases. Harry wore the pensive look that he often did when returning from a session in Dumbledore’s office. “How’d it go?” Scott said by way of greeting, falling into step with Harry.

“Fine, sort of,” Harry said paradoxically.

“Any useful revelations?”

“I’m not sure.” Harry looked at Scott and raised his eyebrows in a facial shrug. “I know one thing for certain: he didn’t want to hear about Snape.”

“What did he say?”

Harry explained his conversation with Dumbledore, including his odd task to retrieve a memory from Slughorn, and finished with, “He said it wasn’t important and wouldn’t talk about it any more. He even got a little angry with me.”

“I bet you were pissed off too.” Scott mentally assessed the situation. During Slughorn’s Christmas party Harry had overheard a conversation that undeniably linked Snape to Malfoy’s mysterious workings. Dumbledore knew that Harry wouldn’t lie about such a matter, so if the Headmaster was not concerned then that was a revealing insight.

“It’s like he won’t even think that he might be wrong about Snape,” Harry growled in frustration.

“This is important, though, because you outright confronted him with what you heard, and he still didn’t give a shit,” Scott said. “That means one of two things: either he’s a senile old coffin dodger who is so totally in love with his ex-Death Eater pal that he rejects all rationale, or he knows something we don’t. I’ll say this much – he didn’t come across as senile when I talked to him.”

“I don’t know,” Harry said tiredly. “Maybe I could believe that if it was just this one thing, but...”

“But it’s Snape,” Scott finished for him. “I know what you mean. It would be a lot easier to buy into the whole ‘Snape is a born-again good guy’ deal if he wasn’t such a fucking dick. I mean, most people who have a change of heart generally show that in some way. Snape is just an asshole.”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“There’s not much we can do about it right now.”

“Why don’t you talk to Dumbledore about it?” Harry asked.

“I don’t see the point. He trusts you more than me, and if he won’t talk to you then my chances aren’t exactly stellar.”

“At least you’re an adult,” Harry argued. “You could make him see reason better than I can. He sees you as an equal. I’m just a student.”

“I’m an unknown, that’s what I am,” Scott contradicted him. “My motivations are clear only so long as you don’t think every word that comes out of my mouth is a lie. Dumbledore trusted me just enough to give me a chance. He must believe that I don’t represent any threat to you, or he wouldn’t have let me into this school.”

“If he thinks you can help then he should let you try,” Harry interrupted.
“No. It’s one thing to think that I might be able to keep you safe; he’s allowing me to be an extra layer of protection because that’s what I promised. It’s something else entirely to give me an opening to alter his most vital plans. Not happening,” Scott said, shaking his head. “As far as Dumbledore is concerned, I’m a handy secondary line of defence. I basically told him as much.”

“Then maybe you should do something about Snape yourself.” Harry said it under his breath, quietly and without true seriousness.

Scott knew that it might come to that. He didn’t address Harry’s comment, though. “So anyway, I don’t get paid enough to get into a fray with Dumbledore.”

Harry had a small smile for that. “That would be an interesting fight. I’d want to watch from distance, though... Wouldn’t that be illegal for you, anyway?”

“The Imperiarchy has always had a variable ethical standard. It’s easy enough to condone something when you’re not the one who has to do it. That’s a process known as ‘delegation’. It’s the cornerstone of all militaries.”

“I still don’t understand how you get your missions,” Harry said. “I mean, how did you know about all of this? About Voldemort, and the Prophecy, and me. Who told you this was happening?”

Scott hesitated, reflecting on the history of his profession. “Well... That’s actually sort of a sad story.”

Harry blinked. “Sad?”

“It’s something I don’t really like to talk about, just because it opens up so many difficult questions...” They had reached the Gryffindor Tower entrance and stood before the portrait. “If you want to know, I’ll tell you.”

“I would like to know, but if it’s something that’s hard for you to talk about, you don’t have to,” Harry said.

“It’s not personal like that. It’s... something some of us prefer to ignore because the truth is unkind.” Scott shook his head. “Let’s go in. I’m sure Hermione will want to hear this.”

It didn’t take long to gather up Harry’s two friends and relocate to the boys’ dormitory, which was devoid of their other room-mates for the time being. Scott sat on the foot of his bed and stared at nothing, his thoughts deep in his memories. Hermione was eagerly anticipating his words while Ron and Harry patiently waited.

“It’s a question that doesn’t always occur to people immediately,” Scott began abruptly. “I know a lot of my Primes have never thought to ask, probably because when a problem is so close to you it would seem impossible for anyone else not to know about it. Either that, or you would simply assume that we have people watching various universes in case something goes wrong. And we do. But there’s a lot of universes out there. We couldn’t possibly watch all of them.

“So how do we know when and where there’s an issue that could use our intervention? Somebody has to tell us, and they are the Liberi Visus.” Scott ran a hand through his hair and tried to lean back before remembering that he had nothing to rest on. “Or, ‘Children of Sight’, if you prefer English. Which you should, being English. Do you know what autism is?”

Ron looked blank. Harry frowned like he was trying to remember where he had heard that term before and predictably it was Hermione who provided the answer. “It’s a mental disorder. People who suffer from it have difficulty interacting with others, as I understand.”
There's a lot of variation there, but close enough. There are Kharadjai children who are born like that, but they're not autistic. They're what we call ‘overcognizant’; they are so sensitive to the shape of the Multiverse that they can’t handle it. We can all sense the shape of things in some capacity, large or small, but they feel it like the rest of us can’t even imagine. It’s devastating to them. The human mind is not designed to see so far or so clearly.

Hermione had already put the pieces together. “You use them to find where things have gone wrong.”

“Yeah, we do,” Scott said plainly. “There’s a place called Ara Collis where they’re kept. Some of them partially recover as they grow older. Like autistics, they can be taught self-care and enough social skills to get by if they can function at that level. But most can’t.” He sighed. “I’m not going to lie to you. Reading the shape can be frightening and painful for them.”

“Are they allowed to leave, though? If they want to leave that place?” Hermione asked. It seemed very important to her.

“It is essential to understand,” Scott answered slowly, “that, as Kharadjai, we all serve in our own way. It is considered an honour to have a family member at Ara Collis. Many of the people there don’t know any other life.”

“So they can’t leave if they want to.” Hermione’s face clearly showed what she thought of that.

“And they’re treated well?” Hermione persisted.

“Everyone knows how important they are. The people who care for the Liberi are specially trained. It’s a highly respected career. And let’s not even talk about appropriations; the Council pours money into that place like it’s tap water. Shit, you know what I could do if I had that kind of funding?”

“But they do care?”

Hermione was beginning to try his patience. “Where does the human component ever fit in a bureaucracy? I know some of the caretakers at the Hill. They’re good people.”

“So you get your missions from them,” Harry summarised before Hermione could say anything else. “That answers my question.”

“Why is it whenever we want to know something about you we have to know ten other things first?” Ron asked rhetorically.

“I’m complex?” Scott shrugged. “And I don’t get my missions directly from them. The information from the Liberi is recorded at Ara Collis, it gets passed to the Imperiarchy, and the powers that be decide whether to act on it. Those of us in the Primarius get our missions designated like everyone else, but chain of command-wise we answer to the Oritorius since he’s also our Praefectus.”

“Praefectus?” Hermione said startled.

“Now I guess you know where ‘prefect’ comes from. Praefectus means ‘commander’. Every branch of the military has several, Minors, Majors and so on. We don’t call the Oritorius that because he’s the only general-class commander we have in the Primarius.”
“You do remember we’re at school already, right?” Ron groaned. “I can’t learn any of this; I’ll forget everything else.”

Hermione didn’t seem to care about Ron’s distress. “That’s really rather fascinating,” she said. “Is there a wider variety of ranks elsewhere, or-”

“No, enough!” Scott told her, standing from his bed. “Enough exposition. I’m tired of it. I should write you a book or something, for fuck’s sake. Ron’s right, everyone’s sick of hearing about the Kharadjai.” He turned to Ron. “Ron – you, me, and a chess board. I will destroy you.”

“You’re on,” Ron said, grinning.

“You promised to start telling us about these things-” Hermione began to accuse Scott, clearly intent on wringing ever possible bit of information from him.

“Let it go, Hermione,” Harry said, siding with Scott and Ron. “You can ask him more questions later.”

“Fine,” Hermione responded shortly. To Scott she said, “I’ll be holding you to that.”

Scott rolled his eyes at her. “Like I’d expect anything less.”

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The next night found Harry and his friends once again in the Room of Requirement while Scott explained himself, though they were missing two as they had been unable to contact Luna and Neville had already been asleep. The heavy silence that pervaded the room following the Kharadjai’s admission was uncomfortably stifling. Harry shifted in his seat and wished that his current situation didn’t crop up so often.

He had anticipated Ginny’s reaction, one of shock and disbelief, but it was Hermione that surprised him. Rather than a well-justified visage of horror, she wore what might have best been described as resignation. Certainly, given her logical thought processes, it was likely that she had considered the possibility of Scott’s actions, but the divide between consideration and resignation was a large one.

“…No one saw you?” Hermione said slowly, shattering the quiet. Everyone except Scott stared at her.

“What kind of bumbling amateur do you take me for?” Scott said in mock affront.

“You weren’t exactly subtle about it,” Hermione snapped at him, not amused in the slightest. “I have reason enough to ask.”

Wait a minute... was Hermione chiding Scott for hurting himself and almost getting caught instead of committing the act itself? Harry traded a stunned look with Ron.

“I’ll be the first to admit that this hit was less than technically superb,” Scott conceded, “but to suggest that I might have allowed myself to be seen… Well. That’s just insulting.”

“I already refrained from asking how close you came to being more severely injured,” she said, eyeballing his still-bandaged arm. She took a deep, shuddering breath. “You’ve murdered two people, and I was tactful enough not to question your acuity. Perhaps I should be asking what’s wrong with you and why has it infected me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, or me-”
Ginny snorted at that.

"-war is unpleasant by nature, and it’s natural to become inured,” Scott carried on, disregarding Ginny. “The best soldiers have always operated on a clinical level. It’s a necessary function of the human mental defence.”

“It’s a necessary function of rationale for monsters,” Hermione said coldly.

“Only if you allow it to be.”

“Explain then, if you would, how becoming more like Voldemort is supposed to be conducive towards anything but being evil?”

“That’s a question unworthy of your acumen,” Scott chided her.

She lowered her head and swallowed hard. When she raised her eyes again, they locked onto Ron and Harry. “Well? What do you think of this?” she asked sharply.

Harry tried to think of some way to dodge the question. It was obvious that Hermione was searching for a handle on the situation, and he didn’t think he had one that she wanted to hear. Harry had reservations, certainly, but he still couldn’t help but believe ‘better them than us’. “I dunno…”

Ron shrugged helplessly. “It’s sort of a bad job all around. But they would have killed us if they could have…” he said, echoing some of Harry’s thoughts.

“We don’t know that for sure,” Hermione muttered.

“If they got a laugh out of killing other innocent people, I don’t see why your demise should be different,” Scott said darkly. “They were Death Eaters, and that’s reason enough to make sure they don’t get in our way.”

“You mean your way,” Ginny accused him.

“No, Ginny, I don’t,” Scott stated forcefully. “I mean our way. And our way is Harry’s way.”

There Scott went, dragging Harry back into things. While what Scott said was true, Harry preferred to be left out of it when Hermione and Scott went toe to toe in these philosophical battles.

Hermione sat up straight. “Don’t you dare try to make me accept this by using Harry-”

“Oh, you want me to lie again?” Scott asked sarcastically. “Shall I conjure up an amusing story for the benefit of your conscience?”

“Do you even know what you’re asking? How can you just drop this on us and then use Harry as an excuse?”

Scott’s brow furrowed and Harry sighed, slouching back into his chair. Apparently this wasn’t going to be one of the calmer discussions. “Are you incapable of dealing with the realities presented?” Scott said cuttingly.

“It’s not as easy as all that to accept a double homicide, Scott!”

“You’ve already accepted it!” he said loudly. “You’re just looking for the moral trapdoor so you can squeeze your pert little ass out of the line of responsibility!”
Hermione flushed a dangerous shade of red. Before she could retort, Ginny came to her friend’s defence. “Don’t talk to her like that – you’re the one responsible!”

“Yes,” Ron said, apparently feeling that Scott had crossed a line. “Don’t yell at Hermione.”

“Ginny, Ron – kindly shut the fuck up,” Scott said, not looking at either of them as his eyes remained locked with Hermione’s. “She can speak for herself.”

“You shut it-” Ron said hotly.

“No,” Hermione interrupted him, “he’s right. I… I didn’t want to admit it because then it’d be like I was giving him my permission to do it again.”

“I don’t need your permission,” Scott told her frostily.

“Scott, I am agreeing with you at the cost of my own embarrassment,” Hermione said shrilly. “The least you could do is reign in your defiant impulses for one moment!”

Scott glared at her for a moment; then his shoulders slumped, and he deflated. “Well played.”

“I can’t believe I’m even in this situation,” Hermione groaned. “How did it come to this?”

“Sorry for being born,” Harry apologised.

“Shut it, Harry,” Hermione said absently.

“I’m not sure where you expected this whole ‘war’ thing to lead,” Scott said to her, though the biting tone was gone from his voice. “You knew people were going to die. This time it’s someone on the other team, and you’re struggling with yourself because you don’t feel the way you think you should.”

“All right,” Hermione said matter-of-factly, “then what do you suggest?”

“You’re a logical person. Harry and Ron follow their guts, and their guts just told them that we won a battle. They’re pretty much at peace with that. What you need to do is consider the realities involved when there are people attempting to kill you. It’s the coherent course of reason that it’s better to strike back than to look away.”

“I don’t think we’ll ever fully agree on what the coherent course of reason is,” Hermione sighed.

Scott shrugged. “All I’m saying is this probably isn’t the ideal time to pledge yourself to pacifism.”

Harry thought Scott was making a great deal of sense, which was fairly unusual for the Kharadjai. Hermione must have thought so too because she changed the subject without further comment.

“How’s your arm been?”

“Sticky.” Scott shook back the sleeve of his robes and peered at his stained bandage. “I’m hoping to get it taken care of tonight.” He carefully began unwrapping his arm, grimacing as the material clung to the skin.

“I’ve done all I can, another Episkey isn’t going to work,” Hermione told him.

“That won’t be necessary.” Scott finished removing the bandage and looked closely at the wound, which had turned a nasty collage of red and dark purple.
Ron stared at it with the same sick fascination he’d had before. “Bloody hell, you’re a mess.”

Scott carefully prodded his horribly bruised appendage. “Okay, here’s the deal. In order to make this go away I need to be an adult, but ever since I attacked those Death Eaters the universe has squeezed in on me like I’m a fat baby in a birth canal.” He paused while everyone made exclamations of disgust at that analogy. “So, I need to loosen things up for a second.”

“How?” Ron asked.

“By doing something that wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“But you said that was dangerous,” Hermione objected.

“It is… so we’ll do it on a very small scale,” Scott explained. “The majority of what you do in life isn’t fated, but it all tends to take you towards the destination that is. All we need is to disrupt the status quo a little bit.”

“Scott, if there is any chance that this could cause a problem, then we aren’t doing what you want,” Hermione warned him.

Scott rolled his eyes. “We’re not going to break anything, just bend it a little…”

“What did you have in mind?” Harry asked.

“Well, here’s what I thought. You and Ron are supposed to be friends; that’s pretty obvious. It’s important to the universe that you guys remain best mates, so it’s in our best interests not to jeopardise that, since if you ever started hating each other for some reason it would, as Hermione put it, cause problems.”

“I’m pretty sure we can’t stop being friends on command,” Ron noted.

“Right, and that would be bad anyway,” Scott agreed. “But if you suddenly did something that was very un-best-mate-like, that would qualify as a minor disturbance, and it just might give me enough breathing space to change my age.”

Harry had a sinking feeling that he wasn’t going to like Scott’s idea at all. He exchanged a worried look with Ron, who was also looking apprehensive. “This sounds like a bad idea,” he heard Ginny mutter, and he wholeheartedly agreed.

Scott overheard her and countered, “I told you, it won’t be a big enough deal to cause any problems with the shape! Things are constantly going wrong with universes. It’s only the severe stuff that puts us in these situations. We’re going to create an unanticipated event with a minuscule impact.”

“And what is this unanticipated event?” Hermione questioned him.

“I figured Harry could punch Ron in the face. Or vice versa, whichever you guys prefer.” Seeing the looks on everyone’s faces, he hastened to continue, “Not real hard or anything. But that’s such an unexpected thing… The universe has to expand slightly in order for new possibilities to coalesce…”

“No. Absolutely not,” Hermione stated unequivocally.

“But-”

“No! You are not going to make Harry punch Ron in the face!”
“It wouldn’t be real hard, right? I guess I could just take it on the jaw…” Ron mused.

Hermione whirled on him. “Ron!”

“What? If it’ll help fix his arm, then it’s not a big deal,” he defended himself.

“You cannot be seriously considering this,” she said in disbelief.

“Yeah, how do you know he doesn’t want you to do it just for a laugh?” Ginny chimed in.

Harry looked at Scott. “You’re don’t, right?”

“I solemnly swear that I really do need the universe to be loosened in some way,” Scott promised.

“And you couldn’t think of anything better than that?” Hermione scoffed.

“For a minute or two I considered having Harry kiss you-” Scott admitted. Hermione paled. “-and while that would certainly create the reaction I’m looking for, I figured it might cause some real problems.”

“You’re bloody well right it would,” Ron said, sitting straight up.

Scott raised his hands in a helpless gesture. “You can see the bind I’m in…”

Harry shook his head. “This is so stupid,” he said, getting to his feet and facing Ron. “All right, you hit me.”

Ron stood up too. “Nah, you can let me have it.”

“You’re utterly mad, both of you,” Ginny told them. “Completely mental.”

“Maybe you should flip a coin,” Scott suggested.

“This is not going to happen!” Hermione burst out. “Stop it! There is absolutely no sane reason why anyone should get hit!”

“I think I explained everything pretty well,” Scott disagreed.

“Here,” Harry said, digging a Sickle out of his pocket, “you call it.”

“Heads,” Ron said. He reached out and grabbed Harry’s hand before he could flip the coin. “Wait – do I get hit or not hit if it’s heads?”

“Ummm… Not hit,” Harry decided.

“Right.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Hermione moaned and flopped back down on the couch in a huff.

Harry flipped the coin up in the air and deftly caught it, slapping it down on the back of his hand. His heart sank a little in his chest upon looking at it – it was heads. “Well, that’s that,” he said as stoically as he could manage. “A little punch to the face never hurt anyone, right?”

“That’s the spirit,” Scott said encouragingly.

“I cannot believe…” Hermione didn’t even finish her sentence, burying her face in her hands.
“Where do you want it?” Ron was kind enough to ask.

“I dunno…” Harry turned to Scott. “Where’s the safest place to get hit?”

“Well, there’s not really any good place to get hit in the head,” Scott said unhelpfully. “The eyes and the nose can be lethal, so not there, and anywhere on the cheek or jaw can cause some serious dental damage. I’d suggest a punch straight to the forehead. With a little luck, your cerebrospinal fluid will prove sufficient to prevent a concussion.”

“Fantastic.”

“Er, we don’t have to do this, mate,” Ron said, hesitant after Scott’s ‘advice’.

“Scott, if this works like you say it will, you owe me,” Harry told him. “And if it doesn’t work, you owe me double.”

“I understand,” Scott replied gravely.

“But, how hard… I mean, I don’t want to hurt him…” Ron fretted.

“Use your arm, don’t put your body weight into it.”

“All right.” Ron repositioned himself, and Harry tensed up. “Here goes…”

Ron didn’t throw the haymaker Harry had feared but instead let loose a straight jab to Harry’s forehead. His fist slammed home, and Harry felt his head snap back from the impact. He stumbled backwards and tripped over a chair leg, crashing to the floor.

“RON!” Ginny and Hermione simultaneously screeched.

“It wasn’t that hard!” Ron protested. Harry begged to differ. The room was still spinning when Ron bent down to help him to his feet.

“Methinks ol’ Ron don’t know his own strength,” Scott commented.

The pain began to set in once Harry regained his bearings, a dull throb that spread from the centre of his forehead and permeated the rest of his skull. “Did it work?” he wondered.

“Yes!” Scott exclaimed, jumping to his feet. “Wow! It actually worked!” He bolted from the room without any explanation, leaving them staring after him.

“Well, that’s good,” Harry muttered.

“He is so…” Hermione struggled to find the right word. “Inconsiderate! Are you all right?” She fussed over Harry, brushing back his fringe and examining the bruise that was forming in stark relief against his pale skin. Ginny hovered close nearby, occasionally moving forward as if she were trying to take Hermione’s place.

Harry would have rolled his eyes, but it felt like they might fall out if he did. “You pack quite a punch, mate,” he said to Ron.

“Sorry,” Ron said sheepishly. “I tried to pull it a little bit, but I’ve never really done that before, you know?”

“I couldn’t tell,” Harry said, rubbing gingerly at the bruise.
“Walk it off, Harry,” a jocund voice said from the doorway. The deeper pitch told Harry without looking that Scott had switched ages again.

“…Scott?” Hermione said faintly. With a start, Harry remembered that the two girls had never seen the Kharadjai in his older form.

“Who else?” Kharan strolled back up to his usual seat at the fireplace. He had changed into Muggle street clothes, which made sense considering his altered size. “Observe, if you would, my healing prowess. Try not to swoon, ladies.” He held out his wounded arm so they could see it, the puckered hole looking smaller against his now larger forearm. Then, without so much as a single word from Kharan or the slightest visual or audio cue, it simply vanished. The only sign it had ever been there was the ring of dried blood surrounding a pristine patch of skin.

“Wicked,” Ron breathed. “That’d be dead useful to learn.”

“Unfortunately, it is not within my power to teach.”

Hermione looked deeply curious, but Ginny was plainly in shock. Harry supposed that, being absent from much of the interactions they had been involved in with the Kharadjai, she had never really come to terms with his origins. Now, sitting before her as an adult and having healed himself in an impossible fashion, the truth about Scott Kharan was hitting her in a hard way.

“So this is your natural age? How old are you?” Hermione asked.

Kharan shrugged. “Physically, about twenty-five. Could be less, could be more, there’s no precise way to tell.”

“That’s genuinely amazing,” Hermione murmured. She moved in closer and inspected him like he was a specimen in a jar, even going so far as to tap him with her wand a few times. “There are some potions that can achieve a similar effect, but a decade’s worth of ageing in a matter of seconds is quite a feat…”

“Where, exactly, are you going to stick that wand during this examination?” Kharan asked her, eyeing her wand hand.

“What? Oh, sorry,” Hermione said, backing away and looking embarrassed.

“Anyway, problem solved,” he said, rubbing the newly healed portion of his arm. “I vote we adjourn.”

That sounded brilliant to Harry. His headache was developing nicely, and he wanted to lie down.

“What time is it?”

“Bedtime,” Ron yawned.

“Eleven fifty-two p.m.,” Kharan supplied with his usual inexplicable precision.

“It is rather late,” Hermione said, agreeing with Ron. She stood and headed for the door, pointing at Kharan as she did so. “I hope you don’t plan on going back to the Tower looking like that?”

“What? I like this shirt.”

“It’s not the shirt I’d worry about. Be sure you don’t forget to age down.”

Kharan crossed his arms. “I’m more useful to you like this, you know.”
“That may be, but you aren’t good to anyone here if you blow your cover.”

“I’ve had about enough of this being-a-kid crap,” Kharan grumbled. “I don’t know how you guys put up with it.”
“All right; Destination, Determination, and Deliberation. I got this.” Scott stared hard at the wooden hoop on the floor before him.

Ron was doing the same. “Destination, Deliberation… What was the second one again?”

“Determination,” Hermione supplied. She looked slightly worried. “I was hoping for a bit more detailed instruction than that…”

The Apparition instructor was still giving directions and Scott listened in with one ear while the rest of his brain tried to figure out exactly what Apparition was. Teleportation usually had little to do with willpower and a lot more to do with technology, but standing in the Great Hall with a little wooden hoop to concentrate on didn’t seem to be a likely starting point towards forming a wormhole or taking a foray into hyperspace. Destination, Determination, and Deliberation? That was all that was involved? There wasn’t even an incantation to learn. Scott hadn’t the slightest idea how that was going to work, though at least it was a lot easier to grasp than quantum entanglement. Maybe this first lesson would be theory, and more explanation would be given at a different time.

It became apparent a few seconds later that he was supposed to figure how it worked, and quickly. The instructor began counting up to three, and Scott braced himself. He still wasn’t sure what was going to happen.

“-THREE!” Twycross shouted.

At the last second Scott stopped himself from trying and instead did nothing, standing in place. He observed as the students about the room humiliated themselves by hopping, sliding, falling, and otherwise flailing in efforts to cross spacetime. Ron, like Scott, stood still in confusion. Hermione did a sort of graceful sidestep towards her hoop and then quickly resumed her original position, her face embarrassed. Scott looked over his shoulder to find Harry, who was regaining his balance after spinning in place.

For the second attempt Scott decided to at least give it a shot. He focused on the hoop, boring into it with his eyes. Destination – check. He then clenched his jaw and channelled an intense desire to enter the innocuous ring. I’m gonna Apparate right into you, you piece of shit, he thought, and there’s not a goddamn thing you can do about it. Determination – check. At the count of three, he combined his force of will with his target information, and deliberately stepped forward with the intent of skipping over the short distance.

A window in space sprang into being in front of him.

“Fuck,” Scott blurted. He lashed out within the shape and slammed the aperture shut.

The result of his almost-Apparation was not surprising. The wizarding methods which produced Apparition weren’t all that dissimilar from how he created apertures. He scanned the area to see if anyone else had noticed. Fortunately, his position on the right side of the room meant that only
anyone behind him could have seen the portal, as it was one dimensional. It was lucky for him that Hermione and Ron were the only ones to his back.

Because the portal had no edges and no sound to identify it, to an observer’s eye it would have appeared that everything in front of Scott’s hoop had been briefly magnified; an aperture was only truly easy to spot when it opened to a location that contrasted sharply with its surrounds. Ron didn’t seem to have noticed but Hermione must have caught a glimpse out of the corner of her eye; she gave Scott a look that said she knew that he had done something.

After that Scott didn’t bother trying to Apparate. He spent the rest of the lesson gazing half-heartedly at his hoop and wondering how he was going to pass his Apparition test. His interest was briefly recaptured when Susan Bones splinched herself. It was a strange magical injury lacking the usual shock and blood loss that came from amputation. She was crying, but did not appear to be in serious pain.

The instructor must have been used to colossal failure, because he showed no signs of disappointment as he dismissed the class after a solid lesson’s worth of negligible results. Scott fell into step with Neville and Ron on the way out of the Great Hall. They walked quickly to catch up with Harry and Hermione, who were discussing something up ahead.

“Well, that was complete rubbish,” Ron said, letting out a breath. “I didn’t even budge an inch.”

“All I did was fall over,” Neville said despondently.

Scott made a face. “And all I did was what I can already do.”

Ron looked over at him. “You did something?”

“I opened an aperture, which wasn’t the point. Maybe they’ll give me extra credit.” Realising that Ron probably didn’t know what he meant by aperture, Scott clarified by saying, “An aperture is one of those portal things I can make, you know, the ones that I can use to go places.”

“You made one right in the middle of the Hall? That’s brilliant,” Ron said, chuckling. “I can’t believe I missed it.”

“It’s good that you did. I wasn’t trying to be obvious.”

“Harry was talking to Malfoy before the lesson started,” Neville blurted out. Scott and Ron both turned to stare at him, and he shrugged. “I thought it might be important.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Probably asked the ponce if he’s a Death Eater or not.”

“Let’s find out,” Scott said.

The three of them increased their pace even further and caught Harry and Hermione at the foot of the stairwell.

“-wanted him to keep a lookout, Hermione, he specifically said ‘lookout’,” Harry was saying.

“And I said I believe you, but we don’t know what he meant by that,” Hermione argued.

“He meant ‘lookout’,” Scott said, coming up behind them and breaking into the conversation. “It’s one word and it has one meaning. You can’t dictionary your way out of this one.”

“I understand that, thank you, Scott-” Hermione said acerbically. Scott smiled to himself. “-but
until we know why he was asking—"

“That’s why I’m going to keep an eye on him,” Harry said, interrupting her. “If I can see where he’s been going it shouldn’t be too hard to suss out why.” He threw a quick look at Scott, and then continued, “Information is ammunition, Hermione.”

“If you must,” Hermione relented. “Just don’t do anything untoward.”

“Do what she says, Harry, but notice that she didn’t mention me,” Scott said. “Whatever information you’re looking for, I’ll be happy to beat it out of Malfoy for you.”

“Only if you let me hold him down,” Harry said with a tight smile.

Ron shook his head. “If you think I’d let the two of you do that without me at least kicking him in the stones a couple times—”

“I simply cannot believe all of you,” Hermione said, cutting Ron off.

“I didn’t say anything,” Neville protested.

Scott shrugged. “You were thinking it.”

“Sort of,” Neville admitted.

“And while we’re on the subject of disbelief,” Hermione continued as if Scott and Neville hadn’t conversed, “Scott, what happened when you tried to Apparate?”

Scott’s suspicions that Hermione had noticed were confirmed. “I created an aperture by mistake.”

“There aren’t any side effects, are there?”

“Not in moderation. It’s just a small hole cut into the universe.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “You cut a hole into the universe?!”

“Well, the shape part of it. It’s not a big deal, there's a lot of built-in capacity for self-repair,” Scott assured her. “Dimensional apertures occur naturally all the time inside some cosmic phenomena.”

“I’d still appreciate it if you didn’t cut any more holes into our universe. We have to live here, you know.”

“Just me moving around will not create any issues.” Scott sighed. “I know you care about this stuff even if nobody else does, so a quick explanation. Apertures work under a principal that we call Bachaim’s Aperture. The principal itself is about four hundred pages worth of theory, so I’ll condense it: it states that the apertures are totally impossible. Our understanding of principal physics blatantly contradicts our ability to travel faster than light between and within any universe or dimension. On paper, what I did during the Apparition lesson simply can’t be done. It’s a mathematical absurdity.”

Hermione seemed vaguely troubled. No doubt Scott’s statement contradicted with her faith in the status quo of knowledge.

“So don’t bother asking for the details behind apertures; nobody knows how it’s done, only that it’s technically impossible. The usual saying goes that the apertures work because we need them to, so you might sometimes hear a facetious reference to Occam’s Aperture.”
Hermione got a laugh out of that, though she was the only one. The joke went far above the heads of the rest of Scott’s friends, leaving them looking blank.

“I don’t get it,” Ron said.

“Me neither,” Harry concurred.

Scott patted him on the shoulder. “That’s all right, guys. Most people don’t and it’s not that funny anyway.” He focused back on Hermione. “Will that pre-emptive summary suffice?”

“Just barely,” Hermione told him archly, but there was a smile playing around her lips.

The rest of February flew by in a whirl of class work and weekend Apparition lessons. As time progressed, Scott found himself trying to read the shape of the universe increasingly less. It might have been the beginning stages of complacency, but he simply didn’t see much point in it anymore. The shape remained as occluded as ever. He made no further progress concerning the Death Eaters.

It was in the very last week of the month that a notice went up on the bulletin board. The usual Apparition lesson had been cancelled in lieu of the customary trip to Hogsmeade that the student body so eagerly anticipated. Scott and his friends took note of this on their way out of the tower on the morning of the 24th.

“Wicked!” Ron proclaimed, enthused by the promise of a trip to Hogsmeade. “I was worried I might get an Apparition lesson for my birthday.”

“No, you get to celebrate in style,” Scott said.

“That guarantees a trip to Honeydukes,” Harry said, grinning at Ron.

Ron didn’t take the bait, replying with a certain dignity, “I think we all like Honeydukes.”

“Some of us more than others,” Hermione said fondly.

“Yes, yes, Honeydukes is great, but I'm hungry now. Breakfast, anyone?” Scott asked, changing the subject. “I’m sure you wouldn’t want my bacon to get cold.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Perish the thought.”

On their collective way to the Great Hall, Scott was left to wonder what he was going to get Ron for his birthday. He didn’t feel knowledgeable enough about Quidditch to buy anything of that nature, and it was highly unlikely that Ron would be able to appreciate the latest videogame – not without an entire home entertainment system to go with it, anyway. Perhaps some sort of knife would do? Ron was a guy. Guys liked knives.

But how large a knife, and what kind?

“What are you thinking about?” Harry asked, breaking Scott away from his concentration on cutlery.

“Knives. You like knives, don’t you Harry?”

“I guess so.” Harry blinked. “Honestly, it’s not something I’ve given much thought.”

“If you had a knife, you’d understand,” Scott muttered, returning to his introspection.
Scott supposed the real question was, did Ron already have a knife? If he did, there was only one person who was likely to know. During his first break period, while the fifth-years were moving between classes, Scott went searching for her. Normally the shape might have provided some assistance in locating a Prime, but it proved unhelpful in the specifics: Ginny was slightly too low on the scale of Priority to be obvious the shape's cluttered state, so he would have to do his searching the old fashioned way.

“Have you seen Ginny?” he asked the first group of fifth-year girls whom he thought had been in Ginny's company at some point. For his trouble he received a mixture of giggles and blank stares. “Ginny Weasley? Someone? Anyone?”

“She has Potions in the morning,” a girl Scott recognised as a fellow Gryffindor volunteered.

Scott thanked her and sped off. His months spent wandering about Hogwarts were put to good use as he navigated the maze of hallways with ease and located the Potions classroom. He caught Ginny just outside the doorway. She was in the process of separating herself from a group of friends and entering the room when he grabbed her by the elbow and steered her away.

“What is it?” she said, looking a little put out at the way he had dragged her from the door.

“Hogsmeade, this weekend – you going?”

“Of course. You came over here to ask me that?”

“No, that was a side note,” Scott admitted. “Do you know if Ron has a knife?”

“A knife?”

“Yeah, like a pocket knife.”

“What would Ron do with a knife?”

“I’ll take that as a 'no'.”

“That’s what you’re getting him for his birthday?” Ginny shook her head. “You know he’ll just cut himself.”

“That’s okay, inadvertent self-mutilation is an important part of becoming a man,” Scott explained to her.

“Speaking from experience?”

“So if Ron was to prefer a knife, what sort of knife would he prefer?” Scott asked, ignoring her question.

“How should I know? Look, I have to go to class,” she said, pulling away from him.

“Thanks for nothing, Gin,” Scott grumbled as he watched her go.

That had proved to be a fruitless side trip. Scott took a meandering route back to the common room, still preoccupied with the birthday conundrum. He could always ask Hermione what Ron would like, but he had pretty much already decided to get Ron a knife and Hermione was unlikely to be enthused by that choice of present. In fact, he was certain she’d oppose it. There was nothing to be gained from asking her opinion.

Oh well. He’d figure something out.
“Ginny!”

What was that? Ginny looked up from her paper, bemused.

“GINNY!”

Someone was calling for her. From the bottom of the dormitory stairs, judging from the echo and the fact that the voice was male.

“Gin and tonic!”

Oh. That had to be Scott. Ginny marked her place in her textbook and rolled up her parchment, standing to go and see what he wanted.

Scott’s voice came to her louder after she stepped outside the door to her dorm. “Ginny-Ginny-Ginger!” he sang in a syrupy falsetto.

Ginny scowled, hoping that not too many other students were listening in. “What?” she yelled back before he could create even more annoying nicknames.

“Ginnysis!”

She knew he had heard her. Now he was just being obnoxious. “Shut it,” she said crossly upon reaching the common room. “The whole house has probably heard you by now.”

“And you, my sweet little Ginnycide,” Scott responded, grinning at her.

“Did you actually want something, or were you just looking to get hexed?” Ginny asked him ominously.

“So quick to violence,” he reproached her. “I merely wanted to ask if you were still going with us to Hogsmeade tomorrow for Ron’s birthday.”

“Yes, of course I am,” she told him. She had already told Dean. He hadn’t been happy about it, but family was important. On the more ulterior side of things, she was looking forward to a day in Hogsmeade without her boyfriend. The tiresome aspects of their relationship were becoming increasingly pronounced.

“Excellent. You know, Harry will be there too,” Scott mentioned offhand.

Why had he said that? Obviously Harry would be with Ron and Hermione, he always was. Ginny wasn’t completely sure if Scott was insinuating what she thought he was, but she didn’t like it. “So?” she said defiantly, refusing to give him the reaction he was looking for.

He only smiled. “Just sayin’,” he drawled. He ambled over towards the stairs to the boys’ dorm. “See you tomorrow, then.”

The next morning Ginny awoke and lay there for a moment, letting the sunlight streaming through the windows dispel the fog in her head. It was a few moments before she remembered that there was a trip to Hogsmeade ahead of her. With Harry.

She considered that while she brushed her hair. It had been apparent for some time that Dean was growing increasing chuckable, to the point where it was now practically imminent. Their joint snogging venture had reached its terminus.
None of that, however, had anything to do with Harry – or so she kept telling herself. Just because she was about to become boyfriend-less meant nothing in regards to Harry’s interest in her, or rather, the lack thereof. It would have to be enough that she could look forward to being blissfully single again.

That wasn’t to imply that she wouldn’t enjoy spending time with Harry. That was a given.

At breakfast she was able to use Ron’s birthday as an excuse not to sit by Dean, an arrangement that suited her well enough. She watched with amusement as Harry tried to use his fork to stab Scott every time he made a grab for Harry’s bacon.

“Knock it off!” Harry glared at Scott.

“I will – after I’ve stolen all your bacon,” Scott said mildly, munching on his ill-gotten gains.

“Get him, Harry,” Ron encouraged his friend as Harry made another attempt to spear Scott.

“Does this happen a lot?” Ginny asked Hermione, observing as the power struggle for bacon continued.

“I dare say breakfast wouldn’t be the same without it,” Hermione replied, sighing.

“Hey, slow down,” Scott was saying to Ron. “We’re going to Honeydukes today, remember?”

“Sod off, I’m enjoying a birthday breakfast,” Ron said. He took an especially large bite to emphasise his point. “You already wouldn’t let me eat those Chocolate Cauldrons this morning.”

Scott shrugged. “Why waste room on those?”

“Because they were a present!”

Harry frowned like he was trying to remember something. “What Chocolate Cauldrons?”

“The one’s you got me,” Ron said to him.

Harry’s frown deepened. “I didn’t get you any.”

“Somebody did,” Ron said through another mouthful.

Harry resumed eating without further comment, though he still looked faintly troubled. Ginny wondered why an uneaten box of Chocolate Cauldrons was worthy of notice.

“You’ll get my present later,” Scott told Ron.

“Probably because he has to buy it in Hogsmeade,” Hermione said knowingly.

Scott shook his head. “That’s insensitive of you. How could I possibly forget a day like today?” He pointed up at the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall. “Look, even the weather’s improved for Ron!”

Everyone looked up to see for themselves and Scott utilised the opportunity to steal every single piece of bacon on Harry’s plate.

When Harry looked back down at his substantially smaller meal he picked his fork back up again in one clenched fist. “Oh, you little gobshite.”
“Harry!” Hermione gasped, but Ginny didn’t miss the smile that flitted over her face as Harry and Scott wrestled for possession of the fork and Ron encouraged them from the sidelines.

Ginny felt a little odd about that. When had her brother and friends become so comfortable around Scott? She knew that she had to have missed something, and experienced a small pang of hurt at her exclusion. She’d have thought that she might be used to that already, especially since a fair amount of that distance was her own fault. In her absence the others had become accustomed to Scott’s presence. Was she the only one who found him so unnervingly calculating? Every time he looked at her she felt like she was a puzzle piece and he was trying to discern where she fit.

His latest late night revelation had also been disturbing. She could, after some thought, understand his reasoning. It was a war, and the Death Eaters were attempting to kill Ginny’s friends. Acceptance didn’t equal comfort, though. How could Harry just put it behind him? What did Scott and Harry know that the rest of them didn’t seem to? There had to be something. She just couldn’t think of what.

It was windy and wet outside when they started the walk to Hogsmeade. The snow had melted away and the sheen of water covering the world accentuated all the darker colours, especially the abundant brown of dead grass. The air was strong with the smells of wet soil and bark, still carrying with it sharp remnant hints of a fading winter. It was cold, but the bitterness had left and robbed the wind of much of its bite. Ginny took a deep breath and let the chilly air breed a slight ache in her lungs.

She noted with pleasure that Harry had fallen into step next to her. Just a little ahead of them Scott was constructing some sort of epic tale for Ron and Hermione involving killer crocodiles.

“What’d you get Ron for his birthday?” Harry asked her as they walked.

“A book of photos from the Cannon’s last season,” Ginny said. “You?”

“New Keeper gloves.”

Quidditch and food for presents. That meant a happy birthday for her brother. “Did Scott tell you what he got him?”

Harry shook his head. “No, he wouldn’t say.”

“He asked me if Ron already had a knife.”

“Really? Cool.” Harry actually looked pleased with the prospect. “I wonder if he’d get me one for my birthday.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. *Boys.* “Yeah, then the two of you can have matching missing fingers.”

“Hey, I can handle myself,” Harry said in a wounded tone.

“Harry, you can barely touch a broomstick without getting sent to the hospital wing,” she stated. “Merlin knows what you’d do to yourself playing with a knife.”

“I wouldn’t *play* with it…”

“We’ll see how long it takes Ron to hurt himself.”

“It’s a bet, then,” Harry agreed even though they had never discussed any terms for a wager.
It was funny how easily the two of them could fall into such byplay without having held a real discussion for months. Ginny had stopped caring what it meant. So long as it still held true, that was what mattered to her.

She glanced up ahead again. Scott had sprinted a goodly way forward and was amusing himself by stepping on the backs of Seamus and Dean’s shoes, tripping them up. “FLAT TIRE!” he crowed victoriously as they swore at him.

Ginny judged the distance between Scott and herself, and, seeing it was adequate, took the opportunity presented. “Harry, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“It’s about Scott.”

Harry’s demeanour shifted slightly towards guarded. “What about him?”

“Just something I’ve noticed; don’t you think that you’ve all become a bit too comfortable with him lately?” she asked carefully.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Harry said evasively. “We’ve known him for a good while now. He’s our friend.”

“But how much do you really know about him?”

Now Harry became outright defensive. “What are you saying?”

“Harry, it wasn’t that long ago that you didn’t trust him at all, and now it’s like he’s your best mate,” Ginny tried to explain.

“So he’s my friend, what’s wrong with that?” Harry said, a note of anger creeping into his voice.

Ginny refused to be cowed. If he wanted to get angry for no reason, that was his problem. “I just don’t think you should count on him like that.”

“At least he wants to help, which is more than I can say for most people!” he said roughly.

And that was reason enough to accept so dangerous a person as Scott into their midst? She knew that the indifference and deceit that he was so often subjected to were a sore spot for Harry, but that didn’t mean he should go running to Scott for help. “Harry, he kills people!”

“Then maybe it’s bloody well time that somebody did!” Harry retorted.

“Then maybe it’s bloody well time that somebody did!” Harry retorted.

Ginny stared at him. “You’re not serious.”

“Aren’t I?” he asked harshly. “Here’s someone who knows how to do something besides sit around and wait for Voldemort to kill somebody else, and you want me to turn him away? Maybe I like having someone around who knows how to fight, who knows how to win, Ginny! How to fight the real fight instead of this ‘good’ fight that everyone keeps telling me we’re in, someone who knows how to hit first instead of always hitting back, someone who will be on my side for once instead of deciding what’s best for me!”

The rage and resentment erupted out of Harry, leaving his bitter words sizzling in the silence that followed. His tirade had drawn the attention of Ron and Hermione. Hermione had one hand over her mouth, her eyes wide and sympathetic. Ron just looked dumbstruck.
“You don’t mean that, Harry,” Hermione said in a small voice.

Harry seemed to fully realise all that he had said and reached up with both hands to rub at his eyes beneath his glasses. “…No, I guess not,” he sighed. “I don’t know what to think any more. Maybe Dumbledore is right and Scott is wrong…”

“Right about what, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“Everything. Nothing. I don’t even know. I don’t know,” Harry repeated.

“I think, in his own way, Scott means well,” Hermione said carefully. “But Harry, you can’t forget that Scott is essentially a soldier – and he tends to treat you like one too.”

“And that’s so wrong?” Harry muttered.

“I think you have to decide when it is, and when it isn’t, Harry,” she told him sagely.

He stared at her for a moment. “You give me an answer like that, and you’re getting on to me about spending too much time with Scott?” Harry chuckled tiredly.

“That was like everything Scott says,” Ron joked, gently nudging Hermione in the side. “Maybe it’s really deep, or maybe it’s just too weird to tell.”

“Well, I thought it sounded good,” Hermione defended herself, but she was laughing, too.

Feeling the need, Ginny reached over and took Harry’s hand. “I just want you to be careful, that’s all,” she told him.

“You know me, Ginny. Safety first,” Harry said, but his words were not bitter and he returned her gesture, gripping her hand firmly.

Ginny had to smile at that. Discretion was not one of Harry’s strong suits.

The conversation might have continued at that point if it weren’t for Scott’s sudden reappearance.

“I see you guys are riding the slowmobile back here – need me to get out and push?”

“Some of us prefer to enjoy the walk,” Hermione told him.

“Okay, but the rest of us are moving. Ron, carry her if you have to.”

With the deep snows of winter now coursing their way through the gutters Hogsmeade was a more active place. The comparatively milder weather meant that more were willing to brave the elements, and accordingly the number of students milling the streets had increased substantially from the last Hogsmeade weekend. Ginny pretended not to see when Dean gave her one last look over his shoulder before moving on. She was not going to be excluded from Harry’s inner circle today, not even for her boyfriend.

“Where are we going first?” Ron asked, though he was eyeing Honeydukes when he said it.

“It’s your birthday, mate,” Harry said.

“Honeydukes, then?”

“THY WILL BE DONE,” Scott intoned.

“It’s a good thing he doesn’t have enough money to make himself sick,” Ginny said to Hermione,
louder enough so Ron could hear.

“You’re a riot, Ginny,” Ron said sarcastically.

“Yeah,” Scott joined in, surprising Ginny by siding against her, “that was so funny I’ll have to
multitask. Look, I’m laughing while I walk into the store!”

“Astounding,” Harry concurred.

Ginny frowned after the boys as they entered the shop, put out that her joke had backfired.
Hermione noticed her expression and smiled. “Scott’s an equal opportunity prat.”

Ginny decided to test her concerns on a different person. “And you don’t think it’s at all strange
how you’ve accepted him?”

“Sometimes, yes.” Hermione made a wry face.

Ginny stared at Scott through the front window of Honeydukes. He had a long string of black
liquorice wrapped between his hands like a garrotte and was pretending to strangle Harry with it.
“How much do you trust him?”

“Don’t think that I don’t still second guess him all the time – because I certainly do,” Hermione
said. She looked reflective. “But he expects that. And in an odd sort of way, I think he even enjoys
it. Isn’t that strange?” She paused. “Isn’t that Scott, I suppose I should say.”

“I don’t know,” Ginny sighed. “One minute we were all stuck with this mad American, and the
next he’s supposed to be our best mate. How did that happen?”

“That’s what happens when you spend a lot of time with a person, Ginny. Scott is certainly likeable
enough… When he wants to be, anyway.” Hermione shook her head. “I don’t know if attacking
Death Eaters is a good way to go about things, but I do believe that he’s doing it because he thinks
it’s the best way to help us. That doesn’t exempt him from suspicion; but don’t we have to keep a
close eye on Harry sometimes, too?”

That made sense. Ginny supposed the root of her problem was that she had missed the process of
acceptance by proxy. She had been absent, as usual.

“You should talk to Scott about this,” Hermione suggested. When Ginny gave her a look of pure
incredulity, she said, “I think he’ll surprise you. Besides, if you think he hasn’t already noticed
your suspicion then you’re being naïve.”

Ginny looked back inside the shop and, despite the thick layer of glass separating them, Scott met
her gaze and gave her a knowing smile.

“I’m going inside,” Hermione announced. “You should let Scott speak for himself.”

Ginny followed her in, still contemplating her words.

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“What are they doing?” Ron said impatiently. He was referring to the two girls, neither of whom
had entered the shop.

“Talking about me,” Scott answered casually. He looked closely at the label of an interesting candy
bar he had picked up, noting that the list of ingredients included several spells.
Ron gave him a sceptical look. “Feeling a bit more jumpy than usual today?”

“Perhaps, but that doesn’t change the fact that they’re talking about me.” He set the bar back down, deciding that the magical candy wasn’t to his taste.

“How do you know that?” Harry asked. He glanced out the window to where Hermione and Ginny were holding a conversation.

“Magic,” Scott said smugly. He palmed a chocolate coin and, after a few rapid gestures, pretended to remove it from his ear.

Harry was unimpressed. “Why would they be talking about you?”

“Well, I am pretty damn handsome.”

“I’d disagree, but that lie is your entire source of self-esteem,” Harry said, grinning.

Somewhere behind Scott, Ron was laughing at him. “That’s harsh,” Scott said. “I expect better from you, Harry.”

“I don’t,” Ron chortled.

Scott ignored the two of them and focused on the girls outside. Ginny was almost certainly voicing her long held suspicions, which were justified. Part of this resulted from her non-attendance during important events, and Scott thought that he bore some of the blame. His overriding objective of remaining close to Harry had limited his interactions with his more peripheral Primes. He didn’t feel the need to win her over on a personal level so much as he wanted to placate her.

Eyes narrowed, he watched as she entered the store, following Hermione. It was important not to lose sight of the fact that Harry was craving Ginny in both the physical and metaphysical senses. Scott always appreciated Harry’s defence of his work, but if that was going to lead The Boy Who Lived into conflict with The Girl Who Needed to Love Him, then it wasn’t worth it. Harry could just fuck off and get a girlfriend.

Emerging from his musings, Scott wandered over to where Harry and Ginny were perusing a shelf, bypassing Ron and Hermione on the way without comment as they were having a private conversation. He listened in just long enough to confirm that it wasn’t about him, and then tuned them out.

“Almost ready?” he asked Harry.

“I think I’ve got everything,” Harry said.

“Cool. Oh, and I almost forgot – we might see my sister around today, so keep an eye out,” Scott informed them offhandedly.

Lila was nowhere to be seen when they all stepped out of Honeydukes. Scott mentally shrugged and followed the others on the way to the Three Broomsticks. If Lila wanted to show up, then she would. It was an entirely optional visit and there wasn’t any point in calling her.

The weather had picked up outside and the trees creaked and rattled their bare branches as they swayed with the gusts. All traces of the sun had been eradicated by the cloud front that rolled overhead and Scott could tell there would be a high probability of rain come evening. The building storm brought a wind chill that lowered the temperature, and the students who had been strolling the streets earlier now huddled in their coats and cast furtive glances skyward, waiting for the first
They ran into Neville and Luna near the post office. One or both of them must have been late coming down from the castle, because they were heading towards Honeydukes when Scott waved at them.

“Hey! Guys!” he shouted down the street, getting their attention.

The pair hurried across the cobblestones, Luna’s hair whipping about in a pale golden halo as a particularly fierce gust of wind came roaring through between the close-set buildings. “Hello everyone,” she absently greeted the group when she and Neville reached them. “Are you enjoying Hogsmeade today?” She received a chorus of affirmations and moved her gaze over to Ron. “Happy birthday, Ron.”

“Thanks,” Ron said thickly, as his mouth was full of half a Chocolate Frog.

“Did you just leave Honeydukes?” Neville asked them a little breathlessly.

“We’re going to the Three Broomsticks now,” Harry confirmed. “You want us to save you a seat?”

“That would be nice of you,” Luna said.

“We won’t be long,” Neville promised.

The Three Broomsticks was crowded when they stepped inside. Scott squeezed himself between the jostling patrons coming in and out of the front door, trying to find a clear space so he could see where everyone was going to sit. He caught sight of Harry’s back moving away to his right and followed, figuring that Harry must have spotted a table.

The crowd dispersed slightly as the bulk of it moved towards the bar, revealing a familiar head of dark blond hair whose owner was calmly sipping a Butterbeer at an empty table. Scott grinned. He should have known.

Lila smiled at Harry and Ginny as they seated themselves across from her. Scott took the chair next to his sister and surveyed the room, noting that Lila’s table was the only one which hadn’t already been taken. It stood to reason that if any beautiful woman could keep a table clear in a crowded pub, it was Lila. Her ice cold glare could put a damper on even the drunkest libido (and for the persistent what came after was much worse).

“Come here often?” Scott said, turning to her. He scooted his chair over to allow Ron and Hermione to sit at the end of the table.

“Yes, but it’s not for the company,” Lila retorted. She plunked her empty bottle down and stared at it, apparently deciding if she wanted another.

“Neville and Luna will be here in a minute or two, don’t let anyone take those chairs,” he told her.


“Ginny Weasley, Ron’s sister,” Ginny said, returning the handshake. Harry’s eyes narrowed as he took this in, and Scott was sure he was remembering Lila’s specialities when it came to the lives of others. Scott smiled to himself. Harry’s reservations were entirely warranted.

“I’m sure we have similar stories of suffering,” Lila said, “though I doubt Ron could match this
reprobate I have for a brother.”

“I make life interesting.” Scott declared.

“Yes, you certainly do that,” Hermione said with a sigh.

“Now that we’re all agreed,” Ginny said, “shouldn’t we get something to drink?”

“I’ll get some Butterbeers for us,” Harry offered, half-rising from his seat.

“What? The Chosen One deigns to order our drinks?” Scott placed one hand on his chest and leaned back as if shocked. When Harry scowled at him he laughed and said more seriously, “I’ll get them. You’d better not in case elements of the Harry Potter Fanclub make an appearance. The public is a demanding mistress…”

Scott threaded his way up to the bar and ordered the requisite number of Butterbeers. While he was waiting a surge of talk from the direction of his table drew his attention, and he looked over his shoulder to see Neville and Luna taking their reserved seats. Fortunately, he had already compensated for their inevitable presence when he had ordered.

Upon returning to the table with the Butterbeer bottles Scott amused himself by sliding them across the tabletop to each person. “Ah, that takes me back,” Scott said as he sent Lila’s drink shooting towards her.

She caught it with a deft hand and popped the cork out with her teeth. She spit the cork at Scott and he jerked his head to the left to avoid it. “To what? No, wait; it doesn’t matter. Everything takes you back. Nostalgia is your natural state.”

“And here I am now, creating more good times to remember.” He leaned back in his seat. “Yep, good times. Speaking of which…” He reached into his pocket and extracted a large lumpy wad of wrapping paper.

Lila looked at it and rolled her eyes. “Why do you never bother to put your presents into boxes?”

“I already wrapped it,” Scott said.

“You put the present into a box and then wrap the box,” she said slowly, as if she were explaining something to a small child.

“Why? Nobody wants a box for their birthday. It’s just another annoying layer to open.” Scott handed the present to Ron. “Happy birthday, dick lips.”

“Cheers, wanker,” Ron replied, accepting the package. He eagerly tore it open and revealed a dull black stainless steel device. “Wow, thanks,” he said to Scott. “What is it?”

“It’s a butterfly knife,” Scott told him. “It flips open, see?” He took it from Ron and demonstrated, deftly unsheathing the partially hidden blade with a smooth flick of his wrist. “Easily concealable, sturdy and effective. Drab black finish for night work. Non-serrated blade for easy retrieval. If someone corners you in an alleyway, stick this in their gut and they’ll consider the benefits of leaving you alone.”

“Wicked!” Ron took the knife back and studied it closely, running his fingers over the flat side of the blade.

“Can I see it?” Harry asked, leaning over the table towards Ron.
“Geez, Harry, he just got it. Let the man fondle it for a second,” Scott said.

“This could be right useful,” Ron said. He closed the handle and tried to snap it open like Scott had, but only managed it halfway. “You think McGonagall would flip if I pulled it on Malfoy?”

Hermione’s lips had been compressed into a thin, disapproving line up until that point, and when Ron mentioned using the knife to threaten someone she apparently couldn’t keep her peace any longer. “A knife is not a toy!”

“I don’t know, that sort of depends,” Scott said thoughtfully. “If you’re peeling an apple, then I think it’s a tool, but if you’re playing mumblety-peg then that’s a game, so by definition it would almost have to be a toy…”

“You can play Russian roulette too, if you want, but that doesn’t make the gun a toy,” she countered.

“It’s just a little knife, Hermione. It’s not going to kill him to flip it open a few times.”

“I’m sure that’s quite easy for you to say, but we can’t all grow our fingers back,” she said snippily.

“I think I’ve about got the hang of this.” Ron tried to open his present with one hand again, succeeding slightly better than he had before.

Scott smiled in a satisfied sort of way. “I knew you’d like it.”

He leaned backwards on the rear legs of his chair and then nearly tumbled over when Lila surreptitiously jabbed an elbow into his side underneath the table. He suppressed the urge to glare at her. Apparently she wished to speak to him alone, though she could have found a less painful way to alert him.

Harry had noticed his reaction. “You all right?”

“Just got a call, wasn’t expecting it,” Scott lied. He reached into a pocket and extracted his phone. “I’d better take this. Be right back.”

Lila waited the perfect amount of time after he stood to say, in that level voice of hers that was always so misleadingly truthful sounding, “Excuse us, this could be important”, and followed him out.

The wind slapped him across the face when he stepped out onto the street. He leaned against the side of the building next to the alleyway and waited until Lila settled herself next to him. “Where’s the fire?” he said.

Lila said nothing until a couple walking by had passed. “You’ve impressed upon me how your Primes are all smart people; I thought if I said I wanted to talk to you then they’d draw the right conclusions.”

“It’s likely,” Scott admitted. “What’s on your mind?”

“I was getting a feel for Harry and Ginny…”

“And?”

“And I don’t know what you want me to accomplish.” Lila tilted her head and shrugged. “I can see
the wreckage of your various meddlings strewn about—” Scott was rather offended by that phrasing.
“...but the effect is progressing without a clear cause. They’re on the brink, close enough to taste it. Ginny’s thread to Dean is so thin it might as well not even be there.”

“It’s still keeping Harry at bay,” Scott pointed out.

“I wouldn’t be so sure. This relationship seems to be ticking in time to a higher authority. I could do something, but I have my doubts that it would change anything. You might want to consider that perhaps the two of them are being pulled together against outside tension. Acceleration could break the chain.”

Scott frowned, not at all happy about that. “So you’d advise a hands off approach.”

“With any hands, but especially yours,” Lila stated bluntly.

“I hadn’t realised they were that precarious...”

Lila shrugged again. “It’s impossible to say with everything as contracted as it is. But those were my feelings. If the universe is going out of its way for this despite all the turmoil then maybe you should let nature take its course.”

“Fine, I’ll let fucking nature take its fucking course,” Scott grumbled. He kicked at a bottle someone had left in the alley, sending it spinning away into the darkness. “Not like I do much else these days.”

“Oh, not this again.” Lila rolled her eyes heavenward, probably searching for patience.

Scott didn’t care. He was looking forward to indulging himself in a pointless tantrum. “Yeah, this again. This same old shit, again,” he complained. “This universe just does whatever it wants anyway. Why’d they even bother assigning me?”

“If you’re going to hold a pity party, then let’s do it indoors where I can at least drink,” Lila said brusquely. She pushed herself off of the wall and went inside without looking back.

“Okay, fine, walk away,” Scott muttered even though she couldn’t hear him. He sulked for a minute or two. What was the point of feeling sorry for himself if there was no one around to be miserable with him? Lila had robbed him of his chance to vent. Now his frustration had been shaken up but the pressure had no release. He clenched and unclenched his hands a few times and stomped his heel down on some skittering leaves. Then he kicked another bottle for good measure.

A well dressed wizard stopped to stare as Scott sent the bottle spinning off into the alleyway, a sight shortly followed by the highly satisfying sound of breaking glass. Noticing the man, Scott whirled on him. “The fuck you lookin’ at?!?” he barked.

The wizard recoiled, clearly appalled at having been verbally attacked by what appeared to him to be a far younger man. “Nothing!” the man said. He opened his mouth like he was about to say more, but shut it under Scott’s glower and scurried off. Further down the street Scott saw the wizard hit his shoulder into another pedestrian and continue on without apologising.

Scott smiled darkly. Nothing helped a bad mood like spreading it around.

Feeling better, he returned to the heat of the crowded pub and the table where his friends awaited his return. He gave Lila a close look when he sat down but her face was impassive as she sipped at her drink. Until he knew what Lila’s story had been, he’d have to keep his mouth shut about the fake phone call or risk contradicting her.
“Everything fine?” Harry asked.

“Nothing to panic about,” Scott told him. “Checking up on me, you know… Government shit.”

Harry nodded his understanding.

Lila looked over at him. “Did they ask about me?” she said, deftly expanding the lie.

“Nah.” Scott changed the subject. “Hey, how much longer are you jags gonna be nursing those Butterbeers? There are things to do, people to see.”

“What’s your rush?” Ron said laconically. “It’s warm in here.”

“It’s warm in your mom, too,” Scott muttered, but not loud enough that Ron could hear him. The Weasley’s were rather touchy when it came to family.

Scott was forced to wile away more time in the cramped pub. Usually he had nothing against pleasantly sitting around, but everyone else was enjoying their Butterbeers and since he didn’t like the stuff that made him the odd man out. He was keenly feeling the urge to explore more of Hogsmeade. He knew there were several points of interest he had yet to see.

With any luck, it wouldn’t take too long for the others to finish gulping down their sickly butterscotch drinks.

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Ginny sat at the table in the crowded, noisy pub and studied the woman across from her. Her mind travelled back to the first occasion she had met Lila Kharan, on Christmas Eve. She had already known that Scott had a sister. He had never made any secret of that fact, and as Ginny understood it Lila took care of him as his guardian.

So it was that when Ron had said that Scott and his sister might be attending supper on Christmas Eve, Ginny had expected to see an older woman, probably professional looking, who had the motherly strength necessary to corral a ward as wild as Scott would surely be; a parental figure somewhat similar to Ginny’s own mother.

Instead, the woman who had appeared at the door and invaded the kitchen was a tall, slim dark blond who looked no older than twenty and had the busty but streamlined figure of a model. Based on that alone Ginny would have been predisposed to dismiss Scott’s older sibling as a probable bint with nothing between her ears except a lot of information on skin care. However, Lila’s manner was in sharp contrast with her appearance. A pair of cool grey eyes that were, if anything, even more calculating than Scott’s had examined Ginny, and they had been matched with a distant demeanour.

Now, sitting at a different table with Lila, Ginny’s initial impressions hadn’t changed. The woman was as perfect as a porcelain statue, and just as impassive. Scott was always full of colour and motion. Lila might as well have been an ice carving.

Then she melted slightly in the minutes that followed their introduction. Her greeting to Ginny was jokingly formal and she displayed a similar sense of humour to that of her brother, though much more understated. Ginny decided to hold off forming an opinion about the woman until she heard some impressions from her friends.

Ron received his knife from Scott not long after they had all gotten their drinks, and Ginny watched with a little trepidation as he rather carelessly tried to open it. She could just imagine her
mum’s reaction if Ron lost a finger.

“You all right?” Harry said. Thinking he was talking to her, Ginny turned to him before realising he had been addressing Scott.

“Just got a call, wasn’t expecting it.” Scott shoved his hand into his jacket and withdrew an odd black case. He looked down at it for a moment, confirming something. “I’d better take this. Be right back.”

Without further explanation the blond boy stood and strolled out of the pub. His sister set her drink down and pushed her chair back. “Excuse us, this could be important,” she said in her unruffled voice, and followed Scott out.

“Oh, are they leaving already?” Luna said vaguely. She was collecting everyone’s Butterbeer corks and placing them in her coat pockets.

“No, he’s just had a call. It’s a Muggle thing,” Harry said.

Luna’s eyes widened slightly in interest. “I learned how to imitate the mating call of a female Snorkack. Would you like to hear it?”

“Er, maybe later…”

“Here, Luna – I found another one.” Neville distracted the dreamy girl by handing her another cork, which she accepted from him with a smile.

“Maybe she’d make you a cork necklace if you asked her nicely,” Ron sniggered quietly to Hermione.

“I’m not sure I could get away with that kind of fashion statement,” Hermione said.

Ginny turned her attention back to Harry. He was playing with his Butterbeer, sliding the bottle across the polished wooden tabletop from hand to hand, eyes far away. His skin was slightly flushed from the heat and tendrils of his untameable black hair were plastered to his temples. She barely resisted the urge to brush them away, feeling the strong rush of attraction that she always did whenever she was close to him.

“So do you trust Lila too?” she asked him quietly. He snapped out of his thoughts and looked at her sharply, but when she smiled to show that she wasn’t serious he relaxed.

“I realised something today, after what you said,” Harry told her.

Ginny leaned in closer. “And what’s that?”

“It’s not about knowing Scott… Not really.” Harry glanced at the door, but the siblings hadn’t made a reappearance so he continued, “I do think I know him, or enough, at least. But it’s more like how you trust a doctor… It’s his job. I guess you can always count on him not wanting to get fired.”

She was silent for a moment while she mulled that over. “So if he doesn’t help us he won’t get paid.”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t think it’s the money that matters to him. I get the feeling he does this because it’s what he’s good at.”
“How much help has he really been, though?”

“Dunno. But neither does he.” Harry smiled wanly. “He’ll have to wait to prove himself until the next time someone tries to kill me. Lucky for him, it’s bound to come up again.”

“That’s not funny,” Ginny said sharply. How could he joke about that?

“Sorry,” Harry apologised, but he didn’t sound very sincere.

She felt like telling him off some more but was briefly distracted when Lila returned to her seat. The older woman said nothing and resumed drinking her Butterbeer, so Ginny turned back to Harry. “I mean it,” she said.

“I know, I said I was sorry.” Harry didn’t meet her eyes.

“But you don’t *look* like you’re sorry.”

“It was just a joke, Ginny,” Harry said, frowning at her.

“No, it wasn’t,” she said quietly but in a hard voice. “There isn’t much that’s less of a laugh.” She never wanted to hear him talk like that again.

“All right! It wasn’t funny,” Harry relented. “I’m *sorry*. Really.”

She was sure he still didn’t understand her reaction. But that, she supposed, was just part of who Harry was. His own safety had never been of all that great importance to him. Some people might have considered that selfless; Ginny thought it was absolutely selfish. Sometimes it seemed like he didn’t even care what it did to everyone who loved him when he was nearly killed.

She couldn’t think of any way to phrase such thoughts without creating another confrontation, so she settled for saying, “I just don’t like it when you talk that way.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said yet again. “I won’t do it again.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Harry,” Ginny sighed. Harry gave her a hesitant smile and she was happy to be able to return it.

Scott came strolling back over to the table and sat down. He gave his sister an odd glance, which she ignored.

“Everything fine?” Harry asked him.

“Nothing to panic about,” Scott said with an offhand manner. “Checking up on me, you know… Government shit.”

Harry nodded his understanding, though Ginny figured he probably didn’t understand at all.

Lila looked over at Scott. “Did they ask about me?” she inquired.

“Nah,” Scott said. “Hey, how much longer are you jags gonna be nursing those Butterbeers? There are things to do, people to see.”

“What’s your rush?” Ron said laconically. “It’s warm in here.” Ginny was inclined to agree. She wasn’t ready to brave the wind again.

Scott muttered something in an insolent tone of voice, but subsided back into his chair and didn’t
complain any further.

“What’s his problem?” Ginny asked Harry in a whisper, indicating Scott.

“He’s not very keen on Butterbeer,” Harry told her lowly. “Let’s take a really long time to finish ours.”

Ginny gave him a wicked grin and picked up her drink. She made sure to meet Scott’s eyes as she took a long, slow sip of it.

Half an hour later when they all exited the pub and huddled against the wind, Scott was decidedly fidgety. He ran ahead of them while coats and scarves were adjusted for maximum protection against the weather.

“That’s it for me today,” Lila said, looking down at her watch. She turned to Ginny. “It was nice to see you, Ginny. Good luck with your triangular problem. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you which one to pick.” With that, she strolled off in the opposite direction.

Ginny swallowed hard and hoped that her pinking cheeks would be passed off as a result of the scouring wind. She quickly glanced at her friends. Harry, Ron and Neville all looked blessedly clueless, and Luna was impossible to read, but Hermione’s face was tellingly smug.

“What’d she mean by that?” Harry asked curiously.

“How should I know?” Ginny said misleadingly. “You’ve been around her more, you tell me.”

She must have replied more snappily than she had intended, because Harry leaned away from her, frowning slightly. “I was just asking…”

Ginny sighed. “I don’t know what she’s talking about,” she lied. She hastened to change the subject. “Hey, where’d Scott run off to?”

“He went up towards the Shack,” Ron said, pointing to Scott’s distant figure. “OI! SCOTT!”

But Scott must not have heard Ron’s shout over the wind because he continued up the wet path towards the hill where the dark form of the Shrieking Shack stood.

“Now what is he doing,” Hermione said exasperatedly.

They hurried to catch up with Scott, walking quickly up the soggy slope that led to the Shrieking Shack. Ginny stayed behind Harry’s larger form, utilising him as a handy windbreak. Up ahead she could see Scott peering through the bars of the wrought iron fence that surrounded the Shack.

“Scott!” Hermione called when they were closer. He turned around and raised his arms in silent question. “What are you doing?”

“Checking out this house!” Scott shouted back. He faced the Shack again and began climbing the fence.

Harry ran up and grabbed the back of Scott’s jacket, pulling him back to the ground. “You can’t get in that way,” he said.

Scott’s eyes lit up at the implied challenge. “Wanna bet?”

“It’s sealed with magic, there’s only one way in,” Harry told him.
“Yeah, but I could break-”

“There’s nothing inside,” Harry said. “Besides, Dumbledore wouldn’t like it if you broke the enchantments. They were put there for a reason.”

Scott studied the battered old house. “This is an important place,” he stated.

Ginny looked to her friends, but none of them seemed to know what he was talking about either.

“Sure, a lot of important stuff happened here,” Ron said.

“Yes, I can see that…” Scott leaned into the fence. “But something important is going to happen…” His eyes went unfocused.

“What’s going to happen?” Hermione pressed him.

For a few long, silent seconds Scott stared hard at the structure. Then he shrugged and turned away, and the moment was broken. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s nothing.”

“Scott, if there’s something that you should tell us-” Hermione began.

“I don’t know!” Scott half-shouted before she could start into him. “The house is important somehow. I don’t know why.”

Harry gazed at the Shack. “Maybe it’s just because of what already happened.”

“And if that wasn’t important, then I don’t know what is,” Ron muttered.

“Yeah, could be,” Scott said, but he sounded unconvinced.

The wind howled down the chimney of the ramshackle house and the windows rattled in their settings as the group looked upon the Shack and wondered why it had drawn Scott to itself.

“Anyway, that’s the Shrieking Shack,” Ron told Scott suddenly. Neville jumped slightly, startled, but it put an end to the mood. “Famous building, supposed to be haunted. It isn’t, though.” He paused. “Not much else to say about it.”

“It would be a much nicer place with some flowers out front,” Luna blandly commented.

With some effort, Ron managed to badly suppress a violent snort of laughter. “There is that,” he said in a strained voice.

“All in all, a charmingly bucolic locale,” Scott summarised. “It’s a fixer-upper, but the neighbourhood is so attractive…”

“You can live here if you want,” Harry said, turning to go, “but I’m not going to visit you.”

On the walk back to the castle Ginny realised that she had never cornered Scott like she had intended. It was unfortunate, but she’d have to wait until another time. There wouldn’t be any chances to isolate him on the way to Hogwarts. And after all, their conversation might well involve shouting.

She tucked the task away for future reference, awaiting the proper moment to confront him.

***---~**~---***
“You could do a pretty interesting study on human habits with that thing,” Scott was saying as he followed Harry down the hallway. It was a week after Ron’s birthday and the school was embroiled in yet another Quidditch match. Harry, however, seemed mainly embroiled in obsessively watching the Marauder’s Map. “You know, if you ever used it for anything but trying to find Malfoy.”

Harry looked at him sharply. “You think I’m wasting my time?”

“No. But your team isn’t going to feel that way if you don’t get to the pitch in the next five minutes.”

“No need to remind me,” Harry said grimly, and sped up his pace.

The corridors were deserted as most of the castle’s population had already made their way to the Quidditch pitch for the upcoming game. Harry was running late, a result of his fixation on tracking Draco Malfoy.

That proved temporarily pointless when they ran right into Harry’s quarry.

Malfoy, predictably, greeted them with a sneer. Two young girls, both of whom looked decidedly unhappy, trailed at his sides. Scott didn’t recognise them but thought they were probably second-years.

The Slytherin opened his mouth, no doubt for some acerbic remark, but Scott knew that Harry didn’t have time to be drawn into a fight. He decided to cut the confrontation short.

“Suck a dick, Malfoy,” he said loudly without preamble. Malfoy’s mouth snapped shut as he was temporarily frozen with rage by the unanticipated insult. Scott grabbed Harry’s elbow and propelled the two of them past their human obstacle before he could devise a retort.

But even once they were already past, Harry sent a longing glance over his shoulder. “I’m about ready to sod the game,” he muttered. “This is my chance to find out where he’s going!”

“You can’t dirt the game, everyone’s counting on you,” Scott countered.

“Shit.”

Scott eyed him. “How important does this feel?”

“I have to know what he’s been doing. I know he’s been up to something all year,” Harry stated.

“You want me to follow him?”

Harry’s eyes lit up. “Yeah, you could!”

Scott shrugged. “Up to you.”

“All that whinging you did over taking orders from Hermione, and now you’re letting me decide?”

“You’re the Priority One. That gives you a little more weight to throw around.”

Harry grinned. “All right, but don’t tell her that.”

“It’s your mission; make the call,” Scott said. “Go or no go?”

“…And you’ll actually do it?”
“Go or no go?”

Harry looked back in the direction Malfoy had gone. “Go.”

“Nu Iota.”

It wasn’t difficult to track Malfoy. Scott always lagged one corner behind, moving on silent feet with practised stealth. On longer hallways he darted from doorway to doorway and made use of the limited cover offered by the occasional suit of armour and various other decorations.

As they climbed higher in the school Scott began to entertain a strong suspicion regarding their mutual destination. When Malfoy turned down one specific hallway this notion was confirmed. Scott knew that particular corridor was a dead end. Unless Malfoy had been taken by the sudden urge to view some tapestries, there was only one reason to venture down that hall – the Room of Requirement.

The purpose of the two girls also became apparent when Scott carefully peered around the edge of the wall. They were standing guard, which, while still devious, was decidedly more innocent than the other reasons he could conceive of for taking two girls to a secluded room. He had a number of means by which he could quickly dispose of sentries, but he wasn’t particularly enthused by the prospect of knifing or strangling two young girls. Ideally, the situation called for a less than lethal approach.

Of course, he reasoned, there was little to be gained from taking such action. His mission had been to track Malfoy to his hiding location, a task that had already been accomplished. It would be impossible to enter the Room of Requirement through an aperture unless Scott knew the form that the room had taken (and perhaps not even then), and attempting a frontal entry would compromise his secrecy. No, the best course would be to return to Harry and report.

So he slipped away, down the staircases, through the passageways and out the entrance hall. The grass on the grounds outside was dry in the spring weather that, while still chilled, had lost the bite of winter. Only the faintest breeze stirred the tops of the trees and the sun played hide and seek with the aid of intermittent clouds. He took his time making his way to the Quidditch pitch. He had never been all that taken with the sport and felt little need to hurry.

The game was in full swing when he entered the pitch. The cheers of the students were nearly deafening as another goal was scored. He climbed the stairs up to the Gryffindor section of the stands and located Hermione near the front. He had to step on a few feet to reach her, but several muttered apologies later he was comfortably seated.

“How’s the game?” he shouted over the crowd.

“It’s going well!” she answered, clapping excitedly as Ron made a swooping save. “No sign of the Snitch, though.”

Scott looked around, expecting to see Neville and Luna nearby, but was instead surprised to find the small figure of Kylie behind him. Her strawberry blond head was wrapped in an enormous scarf, over which her eyes just barely had room to peek.

“Hey, Kylie!” he greeted her. Her scarf moved slightly so she must have responded, but Scott couldn’t hear her. “Is Trevor around?” He couldn’t imagine the shy girl going to a Quidditch game without her energetic friend.

Kylie pointed down towards the pitch. Scott followed her indication and spotted Trevor standing at
the railing, where he was looking excitedly at the feebly moving form of a Hufflepuff Beater who had fallen from their broom.

“He should have ducked sooner,” a familiar, dreamy voice was saying from the announcer’s booth. “Perhaps he was distracted by a cloud – that one looks like a horse, if it were lying down… No, there’s a horn now, so it must be a unicorn…”

Scott’s eyes widened. “Is that Luna?”

“She’s commentating today,” Hermione said, “though I’m not sure how that happened…”

“Then where’s Nev?”

“I think he went with her before the game… Oh, catch it!” she exclaimed, and sure enough, Ron rolled over and caught the Quaffle with his fingertips before it passed through the hoop. With an easy toss he threw it to Ginny, who managed to score a goal not fifteen seconds after.

“Dominating!” Scott chortled gleefully.

He had never felt all that great an affinity for Quidditch, but couldn’t help cheering his friends on to victory. The Gryffindor team was a well-oiled machine, and though the Hufflepuffs tried their utmost they stood little chance. The score became increasingly uneven as the momentum of the game remained firmly in the hands of the Gryffindor Chasers.

It wasn’t long before Harry was holding the Snitch and the stands erupted in victorious cacophony. When the players began to troup back into the locker room Harry looked up from the field and met Scott’s eyes. Scott nodded once in verification and Harry picked up his pace, clearly eager to talk.

Scott was leaning against the wall to the left of the exit when Harry rushed out, still straightening his robes. “Well?” he said anxiously.

“He went into the Room of Requirement,” Scott said. Ron had yet to emerge and Hermione was in conversation with Neville and Luna, so he wasn’t overheard.

“Of course,” Harry breathed. “He’d had it from the DA… The prick is using our idea…”

“You didn’t think he’d have any of his own, did you?”

“Nah…” Harry was deep in thought. “Did you get a look inside?”

Scott shook his head. “Couldn’t. He’s got those two skirts keeping lookout.”

Harry looked at him sharply. “Keeping what?”

“Lookout. Checking the coast. Peepin’ the fuzz.”

“I know what it means – he said it before, talking to Crabbe.”

“Right, during the lesson,” Scott said, recalling the conversation between Harry and Hermione.

“Yeah.” Harry frowned. “I just don’t see Crabbe and Goyle backing out on him… They haven’t got the brains, not even between them…”

“And you didn’t recognise the girls?”
“Nope.”

They were both silent for a moment, mulling it over. “Okay, so we must be missing something,” Scott said slowly. “Let’s lay out the options, that usually helps. The simplest explanation is that those girls are Slytherins that Malfoy’s drafted to do Crabbe and Goyle’s dirty work when they’re busy. He could certainly do that given the political climate in his House.”

“Sure, he could get a lot of help,” Harry agreed. “Who’s going to say no to a Death Eater?”

“We just told him to go suck a dick, so obviously we’d say no – but we’re not Slytherins. Option two is that the girls were simply there by coincidence alone, and they have no connection to whatever Malfoy is doing in the Room. Crabbe and Goyle would be off painting their nails somewhere or something.”

“Yeah, right,” Harry said immediately.

“I agree. Option three is that the girls are other Death Eaters who’ve infiltrated the school in order to assist him, so they’d be higher in the hierarchy than Crabbe and Goyle. But if they’re Death Eaters, then why would they stand guard instead of doing whatever important thing Malfoy’s doing?”

“And why would they be so young?” Harry further discredited that theory.

“That’s a problem.” Scott crossed his arms. “We need more options. We don’t have any workable alternatives to option one, and if that happens it usually means you’re not thinking hard enough.”

“Okay, um…” Harry stared at the floor for a second. “…Maybe Malfoy Imperiused them!”

“Why? Why not just use Crabbe and Goyle? Is having a couple extra hands worth the risk of using an Unforgivable?”

“Oh, right… We’re supposed to think of why the girls instead of them…”

“We need more explanations, but we got time to find them.”

“Maybe… They are Crabbe and Goyle…”

“How would that work?”

“Polyjuice!” Harry’s eyes widened. “He could be turning them into girls so no one will recognise them!” He shook his head in disbelief. “No wonder Crabbe was so unhappy. Can’t really blame him.”

“Easy, now.” Scott held up a cautioning hand. “Don’t jump to conclusions. We need to see if we can identify those girls and anyone else he’s been hanging around with lately that he didn’t use to. If they aren’t Slytherins, then you could be right.”

“You think you can follow him again?”

“Enough to get some evidence for your theory. What I’m more concerned about is how we’re going to get into the Room.”

“He did the same thing to us when we were holding the DA there,” Harry said dismissively.

Scott threw a quick glance in Hermione’s direction and leaned in closer towards Harry. “If we get into the Room, and we confront Malfoy, then what? What’s the outcome?”
“Depends on what he’s up to, doesn’t it?”

“I’m just thinking, if he’s really a Death Eater…” Scott looked towards Hermione again. “Well, there wouldn’t be a better time to remove him.”

Harry went still. “No, I wasn’t… I wouldn’t… We’d go tell Dumbledore, was what I was thinking, Stun Malfoy first…”

Scott decided not to press the issue. It wasn't as if killing Malfoy was a viable course of action; he'd been more interested in Harry's reaction to the suggestion. “Whatever you want.”

“Capturing him could be useful, right? He might know things,” Harry said, looking relieved that Scott hadn’t insisted.

“He might,” Scott agreed. “Hopefully we’ll find out.”

“If you wanted to beat some answers out of him, I wouldn’t say no to that.” Harry grinned viciously.

“Please, ‘beat’ is such an ugly word… I prefer to call it ‘non-verbal persuasion’.”

“You do, do you?” a sharp voice said over Scott’s shoulder.

Scott sighed and turned to face Hermione. “Yeah, I do.”

“And just who were you planning on non-verbally persuading?”

“Now, you know I can’t answer that,” he said chidingly. “That would violate persuader-victim confidentiality.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “I’m sorry, was that funny? I seem to have forgotten to laugh. Perhaps if you stay still for a moment, it will come to me.”

“Excellent form,” Scott congratulated her with an appreciative grin. “Calm, frosty, and with eviscerating sarcasm.”

Predictably, this compliment did nothing to mollify her. Her voice rose several octaves. “Scott, you can’t simply go around and injure whatever students you please-”

“Which is fine, because I wasn’t planning on it,” he interrupted. “Now is there any particular reason why Ron is being slower than the hills, or is today just the day for hanging around in the locker room?”

“He probably hit the showers,” Harry said. He looked down at his wrinkled robes. “I was in a bit of a hurry.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose at him. “Harry, that’s disgusting.”

“I’m not too bad, I think…” He cautiously sniffed himself.

“My eyes aren’t tearing up, so you must be fine,” Scott said.

“I think your standards are in need of revision,” Hermione said, backing away from both of them.

***---~**~---***
It was later that day, during the evening following the game, that Ginny was putting the finishing touches on a Transfiguration essay. With a final flourish she penned the last few words and dropped her quill, looking over her work with satisfaction. It was, perhaps, not a paper worthy of an Outstanding, but still more than adequate. She stood and left her homework where it lay, wanting to get out of her room and away from learning. She needed a break.

It had been difficult to sit down long enough to write anything; she was still filled with energy, a legacy of their victory that afternoon. The stairs flew beneath her feet as she jumped several of them and rushed down into the common room, hoping to find one of her friends with whom she could relive the highlights of the game.

Instead the common room was disappointingly bare. She checked the clock and was dismayed to find that she had spent far more time on the essay than she had intended. It was getting late, and much of the student body had already retired for the night, exhausted after attending both the Quidditch match and the after party.

Of the few that remained, the only one that she knew well was Scott. He was slumped in his usual armchair, eyes closed, with three large textbooks open and sitting haphazardly on his lap. Several papers lay on the table before him. When she approached him he didn’t stir, and she couldn’t help but peer curiously at some of the notes he had scribbled down.

Quarter rotation of the wrist with short flick. Entropy demands the school spells be refueled. (100\% efficiency is thermodynamically impossible) (ΔS = q/T) Does it heat the school? Second law states that Accio must slightly heat the object or wand, air : not a closed system? could you burn your hand if you cast too many spells? Could (possibly impossible) absolute zero be maintained with spellwork? T → 0, S → C expressed Keeping in mind that heat is not temperature. Diffused? p = \( w \cdot t \cdot (mg) \cdot h \cdot t \). Don’t think it’s a true isolated system. Maxwell was right?

Only the first line made any sense to her; the rest might as well have been Mermish.

“It’s not polite to pry,” Scott said, his eyes still closed.

“I’m not bad at Charms, I’ll have you know,” she retorted, looking at the subjects of his books. “I might have been able to help.”

“My problems aren’t subject to solution,” he grumbled. “It’s an issue of incompatibility. Or so I keep telling myself.”

Ginny seated herself on the couch across from him. “I need to talk to you.”

“I know.” Scott rubbed at his eyes and then leaned his head against the side of the chair. He still hadn’t looked at her.

She’d had a million things to say to him, but that was before she’d thought them through. Time had brought with it the chance for reflection, and she had realised that most of the things she had wanted to call him on didn’t really matter any more. Scott was part and parcel with the company he kept. She didn’t have to trust him. He just had to be tolerated.

Her confrontational speech had been boiled down to a single bullet point. “Actually, I guess I just have something to say to you.”

“Which is?”

“Harry lost someone very important to him last year,” Ginny said quietly. “It really hurt him a lot.”
“Sirius? I’m aware. We’ve touched briefly on the subject.”

“The thing about Sirius is, he was really on Harry’s side. Harry was more important than anything else.”

For the first time, Scott opened his eyes. “Where are you going with this?”

“You’re kind of like Sirius, a little bit,” Ginny said seriously, “and Harry really believes you can help him.” She looked Scott firmly in the eye for a moment. “You’re a terrible person if you take advantage of that.”

For a long moment Scott gazed back at her, his expression unchanged. “I’m not here to replace anybody,” he said finally. “I’m not even here to be anyone’s friend. If it happens, great. Life becomes that much more pleasant. But it’s not my intention to be a surrogate anything. If you don’t like me, you don’t have to. Just work with me so we can get this done.”

“This isn’t about me,” Ginny said heatedly. He was twisting her intentions! “I’m just telling you not to toy with Harry like that! He doesn’t need that, least of all now.”

Scott shook his head. “Exploiting this vulnerability of his isn’t necessary. Harry’s already been willing to accept my help, there’s no point in ‘toying’ with his emotions.”

“You might as well just say you would have if you need to!” Ginny seethed. She couldn't believe how callous Scott seemed. “Why does everything have to come back to this big mission of yours? Why can’t you just not do it because Harry’s your friend, because you respect him?”

“He couldn’t earn my respect before I got to know him,” he countered.

She stared at him in disbelief. “What, I suppose defeating and escaping You-Know-Who more than once isn’t heroic enough for you?”

He shrugged. “Great deeds guarantee little beyond the capacity to perform them. You want to prove yourself to me? Then prove yourself to me – not the public, not your momma, not your girlfriend.”

Scott was looking pointedly at her when he said ‘girlfriend’ and she fought a blush, gritting her teeth. Her relationship or the lack-thereof with Harry was not the issue at stake, and he couldn’t misdirect her that easily. “You’d think it would at least get him a chance before you used him however you wanted.”

“Who says it didn’t?”

“You did!”

“No, I didn’t. You inferred it. It’s not my fault you chose to reach beyond the literal context.”

Ginny was beginning to fully understand just what it was about Scott Kharan that drove Hermione so often to the higher plateaus of fury.

“If you take advantage of Harry’s trust,” she grated, “you will answer to me.”

“I’d expect as much,” Scott said dolefully. He had a resigned expression on his face. “It seems I’ve spent most of my time here working under the demands of entropy and other women.”

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Addendum:

I am often asked by colleagues why I continue to provide a foreword for these volumes. At a certain point, it must be wondered if there is anything left to say. The overview which follows this page provides all the pertinent summarization, so I am not required to do the same, and all the fine minds who have contributed to this collection are recognized on both the cover and within the table of contents.

In truth, I sometimes wonder as well. There is no single idea at work within this volume to capture in brevium, no overarching concept save the pursuit of science in its purest form. These theories are disparate, united only by the common thread of progress and perhaps even a faint hint of the greater good. We would like to believe, certainly, that our work is indispensable to the future.

Regardless of its importance, it is understood that this volume was published by us, and will be read almost solely by us. It is coached in terms of mathematical density and ultra specific jargon. No one not fully immersed in the field of its origin could understand the meaning behind any one of these works. Everything, we believe, can be explained, even if it is only to each other.

But as I deliver unto you yet another batch of theories distilled from our greatest scientific minds, I begin to question the purpose of it. I begin to question our methods of distance and formula. Men of science, it has been said, are not to be preoccupied with philosophical notions and intangible concepts.

And yet, are we so bent on understanding that we forget the beauty in our world? Does a microscope strip the subject of mystery, or magnify it? Can a physicist still see the poetry of motion even as he describes it in numbers? Have we forgotten the delicate workings of the atom, the dark depths of the event horizon, the subtle dance of quantum shifts? In our quest to explain, have we ceased to enjoy?

To the uninitiated, these theories within cannot be easily grasped. They are unexplained. To the common man, they are as magic. And to us, they are mundane.

We might wonder: if science is the magic for the untrained eye, then where is ours?

- Dr. Albrecht Kresser, Foreword to Modern Science Periodical’s Collected Theorems Volume CXLVII
“It’s not working.” Harry said in frustration. He started to pace before Scott caught his arm and forced him to remain still. “I don’t understand.”

The two of them were outside the entrance to the Room of Requirement, standing beneath Harry’s Invisibility Cloak. Harry was standing, anyway. Scott was forced to remain in a half-crouch as he was at least two inches too tall to be upright without revealing their ankles (and even Harry sporadically revealed their feet when they moved).

Harry looked down at Scott. “Are you positive you can’t do anything?”

Scott shrugged. “I can’t make an aperture unless I have a known destination.”

“You do have a destination, the Room of Requirement!”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, yeah…” Harry sighed. “And there’s no way to bust through?”

“I don’t think there’ll be anything behind this wall. The room is magically sustained and probably isn’t a physical place.”

“That’s not very helpful,” Harry grumbled.

Scott shrugged again. “If you got any bright ideas, I’m open.”

They both fell silent for a minute as a group of chattering first years moved by. Once they were gone, Scott stood and slid out from under the Cloak. “I don’t think we have much chance of getting in right now. We’ve got Defence in ten minutes, anyway.”

Harry acquiesced, removing the Cloak and stuffing it into his book bag. “We’d better hurry, then.”

Defence proved to be completely average in its rigours. Snape made the usual jibes in Harry’s direction and Hermione repeatedly prevented him from mouthing off right back. The only note of interest was the brief focus on the subject of Inferi. Given their general lack of cognition zombies were not the most threatening of foes, but Scott still felt it best to be prepared. He’d had to face enough unexpected zombie hordes in his life to know that they were not eventualities worth ignoring.

Once class had ended and the students were released into the hallways Scott resumed his conversation with Harry.

“It might be important to consider that maybe the Room can host more than one instance,” Scott said as they walked.

Harry frowned. “What do you mean?”
“I mean even if you manage to get in you might not find Malfoy in there because he’s in a different version of the Room.”

“That’s encouraging.” Harry sighed. “I don’t know what else to do. I think if he’s in there already then that’s my best chance to find him.”

“Probably.” Scott looked back over his shoulder to where Ron and Hermione were talking. “Let’s get Ron and Hermione’s opinions on this. Maybe we missed something.”

“All Hermione will do is tell me to drop it and work on getting that memory from Slughorn,” Harry said tetchily.

“Oh, yeah. How’s that going?”

“It’s not. He’s been avoiding me.” Harry looked up hopefully. “Maybe you could-”

“Okay, disillusionment time – I don’t read minds,” Scott said.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Don’t be daft. I know that. I was thinking maybe you could talk to Dumbledore for me, at the very least let him know I’m trying…”

“I don’t see the point. He’s already giving you a lot of time. About all you can do is keep at it.”

“I am,” Harry assured him.

The following weekend, however, Harry once again forsook any chances of cornering Slughorn to instead make another attempt at entering the Room of Requirement. The Marauder’s Map had revealed that none other than Gregory Goyle himself was standing in the corridor outside the Room, and Harry had eagerly shot off to take advantage of the chance presented.

Ron and Hermione had already left for additional Apparition lessons in Hogsmeade, and while Scott was always nervous when his Primes were separated by any great distance Harry was still his absolute priority. The Invisibility Cloak was dug out of Harry’s trunk and the two of them awkwardly huddled beneath it as they hurried towards the seventh floor.

The little girl that they were now certain was Goyle stood idly in the corridor, clutching a set of brass scales. As they peered around the corner, Scott straightened up slightly to whisper directly into Harry’s right ear. “What are you thinking?”

“We’ll have to scare him away,” Harry whispered back. “Nothing for it.”

“All right. Let’s get closer.”

Despite the nightmare of coordination that was trying to move two almost-fully grown teenagers beneath a slim cloak, they managed to be stealthy enough not to alert the Polyjuiced sentry. Achieving his target distance, Scott leaned in close behind Goyle.

“God, I just wanna fuck you in half,” he growled in his very best pervert voice.

Goyle let out a shriek that would have frightened a Banshee. The scales clattered to the floor as the terrified guard fled at top speed to get away from the spectral presence that had so vulgarly propositioned him.

Scott and Harry snickered underneath the Cloak for a good while before they decided to get down to business. Scott silently observed as Harry futilely endeavoured to find the right thought that
would open the Room. After fifteen minutes without any result Harry lost his temper and viciously kicked at the wall, an act for which he gained nothing but a shoe full of stubbed toes.

“Bloody hell,” he groaned, hobbling backwards.

“Somehow, I don’t think that’s going to do it,” Scott told him.

“He’s in there, I know he is,” Harry bit out, tense with frustration. “Why won’t this ruddy door just open?”

“You’re asking the wrong guy. But if I had to guess, I’d say it’s because the room forms around a material need. You need to find Malfoy, but that’s not working since you need to need what he needs.”

“I didn’t need that,” Harry grumbled.

“That’s just what I think. I could be wrong. Maybe you can’t get in if he doesn’t want you to.”

“You think I should keep trying?”

“No, I think that’d be stupid of you.”

“Cheers.” Harry slouched against the wall opposite the hidden entrance and stared at it morosely. He straightened up slightly as something occurred to him. “Maybe we could confront him…”

Scott scratched his cheek, considering that option. “Could we get him alone?”

“Probably not,” Harry muttered, his shoulders slumping again. “He’s been careful about that.”

“It’s not the best solution anyway,” Scott said. Harry gave him a surprised look, so he continued, “I know I’m usually the first to suggest an application of force, but known Death Eaters are one thing… If we grab Malfoy I guarantee Dumbledore will have something to say about it. Especially if we have to get rough.”

“We'd be in for it,” Harry concurred.

“That’s why I’ve tried to avoid hurting any students. Seriously, anyway. He wouldn’t like that.”

“Neither would Hermione,” Harry said with a small grin.

Scott opened his mouth to reply when the sound of distant footsteps caught his attention. “Someone’s coming,” he said quickly. Harry snatched the discarded Cloak from the floor and threw it over the both of them. Some hasty rearranging was required but within seconds they were silent and invisible.

Scott had expected to see another student – perhaps Crabbe coming to take Goyle’s place. Instead he was entirely surprised to see the bubblegum pink of Tonks’ hair as she came strolling down the corridor. The shape hadn’t revealed her approach, though it was obvious now that he was actually looking at her. He exchanged a confused look with Harry. What was her business at Hogwarts?

Harry must have decided to find out, because he straightened up and tossed the Cloak off of the two of them. In the split second of their revealing Tonks had drawn her wand with a blurred hand and brought it to bear upon them; as soon as she saw their faces she took a step backwards and let her arm fall limply to her side, one hand on her chest as she gasped out, “Harry! Bloody hell, you gave me such a fright!”
“Sorry,” Harry apologised.

“It’s all right,” she said, still breathing hard. “I just about cursed the both of you, though, you might want to say something first next time!”

“We were just wondering what you were doing here,” he explained.

“Came to see Dumbledore,” she told him, tucking her wand away. “Missed him, though. He’s not here.”

“Do you know where he’s been going?” Harry immediately asked.

“Not a clue,” Tonks said, shrugging. “I actually thought you might have an idea.”

“No,” Harry said, sounding disappointed.

“Not much to be done about that. Dumbledore keeps his secrets for good reasons, I expect.” Tonks looked back and forth between Scott and Harry, a faint frown creasing her face. “Say, what were you two doing under that Cloak, anyway?”

“Avoiding work,” Scott lied easily.

She smiled at him. “Wish I’d had an Invisibility Cloak when I was here. Bet that’s dead useful.”

“It’s hard to be given a job to do if no one can find you,” he agreed.

“Quite right. Anyway, I’d love to stay and reminisce, but I’d best be off,” Tonks said.

“Later,” Scott said.

“Say hi to Remus for me, would you,” Harry called out as Tonks walked away.

“Interesting,” Scott mused once she was gone. “I wonder why she wanted to talk to Dumbledore.”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

Scott frowned at Harry. “Why is it your solution for everything these days involves me talking to Dumbledore?”

“Because you can actually go talk to him whenever you feel like it,” Harry said with a trace of bitterness, “and he’ll listen to you.”

“Listening isn’t acting. Just because he’ll sit down and let me say my piece doesn’t mean he’ll do anything about it.”

“It was your question,” Harry pointed out, turning away from Scott and picking the Invisibility Cloak back up. “If you want the answer, go ask him. That’s what I meant.”

“Fair enough.”

They both submerged back in the Cloak again simply because without their book bags there was no place to store it. However, as the corridors were largely empty they were able to move without much regard for secrecy.

On the way back to the common room, Scott asked Harry, “Have you made any progress with Slughorn?”
“Not an inch,” Harry said unhappily.

“Maybe we should go find him today.”

“No, not today… I’ve had enough failure for the time being.”

“If you say so. You really need to find a new approach.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah. I’ll get around to it.”

***---~**~---***

It was in the late afternoon after Potions class when Scott traipsed across the Hogwarts grounds towards Hagrid’s cabin. The sun was low overhead and the weather was fair with a light breeze tickling the top of the grass.

He was heading out to see Hagrid in order to attend another session of his remedial Care of Magical Creatures class. Most of his extracurricular lessons had been stopped over the course of the school year, but he had continued seeing Hagrid on a semi-regular basis. The majority of his other classes dealt heavily in theory, and so he had managed to do well in any written work while carefully scraping by in the practical aspects. His teachers thought him to be an average student who simply lacked magical ability. Care of Magical Creatures, however, was very much a hands-on subject which required familiarity with a variety of beasts. There weren’t any written exams to take, and so he had to prove himself to Hagrid instead.

Scott was aware that Harry had received a tear-stained note from Hagrid during lunch concerning a murderous giant spider that Hagrid had apparently regarded as a friend. The spider had died and Scott wasn’t sure what to expect. He hoped that Hagrid wouldn’t cancel their session. He needed to learn.

When Hagrid answered his door, though, Scott’s hopes immediately died. The groundskeeper was in a terrible state, a sobbing, watery mess of a man.

“Who’s it? Scott?” Hagrid said, peering at Scott through swollen, red rimmed eyes. “Ah, I didn’t know yeh were comin’… But he’d a liked to have yeh here…”

“Uh, no lesson tonight, I take it,” Scott said.

“Wha’? Oh, right, yer lesson. No, not ternight… I couldn’t,” Hagrid said tremulously.

“I don’t want to be a bother, but I really need those lessons…” Scott played his trump card. “Dumbledore wants me to learn this stuff, I’d like to do what he says…” It was a claim verging on mendacious, but it got the job done.

“He does, I know,” Hagrid snuffled. “Well… alrigh’ then. I could teach yeh a thing or two jus’ till I have teh… Till it’s time teh bury him…” He broke out into sobs.

Scott would have felt like a little shit for imposing upon Hagrid if it weren’t for the stories Ron and Harry had told him about the acromantula. He knew that Aragog had hardly been man’s best friend.

“Thanks, Hagrid,” he said as Hagrid let him into the cabin. He seated himself in a rough hewn wooden chair and tried to look attentive.

“Alrigh’… Where were we?” Hagrid rumbled. He took several noisy slurps of steaming tea, which
seemed to calm him somewhat, though fat tears still occasionally leaked down into his beard.

“We left off with fire crabs,” Scott supplied.

“Righ’, fire crabs. Ternight will be a book lesson, ye understan’… Don’ feel like goin’ out an… Not at my best…”

“It’s all right. I don’t know anything about fire crabs so we should start from the beginning.”

“Okay, fire crabs.” Hagrid drained the rest of his tea with a mighty swallow and slammed the empty cup onto the table, blinking rapidly. “Well, they come from Fiji, yeh see. They look more like a tortoise than a crab, got this jewelled shell…”

Scott wasn’t exactly receiving an exemplary lesson. Hagrid frequently paused to wipe his eyes and occasionally broke off into a series of tortured sobs. Still, there was information interspersed amongst the weeping, and Scott dutifully absorbed it. With night time rapidly approaching he was determined to get as much instruction in as possible before he had to leave, though he had the feeling that his departure would be delayed. Hagrid had initially mistaken Scott’s arrival as being for the impromptu funeral that would be held later, and no doubt he would be expected to stick around for it.

His patience was aided by the fact that he found the subject to be more interesting than most of his others. Learning about magical creatures was something he could do without having to wield his hated wand. That in itself made it worth the time. So he sat there without complaint while Hagrid ever so slowly divulged everything there was to know about fire crabs.

His attention would have remained comfortably fixated on Hagrid’s lesson until its eventual end had the universe not chosen that moment to send the world spinning.

Scott reeled as the shape around him distorted and bottomed out. In a space of a few seconds it configured itself into a bewildering array of ephemeral geometry – he had the brief impression that Britain was a rhombus beneath a cube-shaped sun. He slapped his hands against the armrests of his chair and held onto them with a white knuckled grip as he struggled to ride out the sensation.

His reaction was violent enough that even Hagrid noticed through his tear-blurred vision. “Yeh alrigh’?”

“I’m fine,” Scott lied. He carefully began to rise to his feet when another shuddering surge destroyed his balance and he toppled to the floor.

“Careful!” With one giant hand Hagrid plucked Scott off the floor and stood him on his feet as if he weighed nothing. The groundskeeper peered closely at his shivering student. “Yeh look terrible,” he said hoarsely, which Scott thought was a bit rich coming from a man who had the appearance of having cried for twenty-four hours straight. “I think yeh might be gettin’ sick.”

Scott felt like he was lashed to the topmast of a ship in a squall. “Yeah, maybe,” he said, not trusting himself to move. This lack of faith was compounded when the universe tipped the space towards the underside of the shape and sent him staggering into Hagrid.

“Easy now,” Hagrid said. He guided Scott over towards the oversized bed that dominated one wall of the cabin and sat the boy down. “Lie down fer a second before yeh hurt yerself.”

Scott appreciated the compassion that Hagrid was showing for a student who he obviously thought had become suddenly ill, but what he really needed to do was get outside and figure out what was going on. “Maybe I should go see Pomfrey,” he said, looking for a quick exit solution.
“Yeh can in a minute, jus’ relax first,” Hagrid insisted, “can’t have yeh fallin’ down on the way over.”

But Scott wasn’t having any of that. It took a great deal of effort to push through the tumultuous shape – and he was accustomed to fighting against it with the benefit of his full adult capabilities – but he could manage. “I can walk!”

“Yeh sure?” Hagrid looked doubtful. “Yeh want me ter take yeh there?”

“I got it.” To prove his point, Scott stood as steadily as he was able. “See?”

“Well… alrigh’,” Hagrid rumbled uncertainly. “But be careful.”

“I will. Thanks for the lesson.” Scott did his best to try and look like he wasn’t in a hurry, but as soon as the door closed behind him he took off across the grounds.

The shape twisted and whirled in a cyclone around him but its momentum had settled into a semblance of regularity and he was able to compensate. The distortion had the same effect on his awareness that the shape’s usual state of contraction did – he had no idea what was happening. It was only clear that something was, and that meant he needed to find his Primes.

He cursed his teenage form for the millionth time as his legs failed to provide him with the speed required. He briefly entertained the thought that he should age up and blow his cover… but his gut instinct told him that this didn’t feel like that kind of urgency. Convulse as the universe might, he couldn’t really believe that anyone was currently in danger.

He decided that if he couldn’t trust his shaping instincts then he had no chance of success anyway, so he slowed his pace and called Lila as he jogged across the dark grounds.

She sounded perfectly calm when she answered, but that didn’t mean much. Lila was perfectly calm in most given situations. “Hello?”

“It’s me. How bad is it?”

There was a slight pause on the other end. “…How bad is what?” she said slowly, sounding suspicious. Scott realised that she thought his opening query had been the lead in for a joke.

“You don’t feel anything?”

“Should I?”

“Apparently not.” Scott frowned. “You’d have to be dead not to feel anything where I’m at.”

“Not even a tremor,” Lila stated.

That meant that the situation was localised. There was a chance that the agitation was natural – like any flow, the shape could experience turbulence. However, a disorder of this magnitude was rare enough to stretch the boundaries of coincidence further than Scott was willing to go. Still, Lila's isolation served to confirm his hunch; if the circumstances were truly serious then the problem wouldn’t have been confined to what was, by universal standards, a negligibly small area. The limitations probably meant that there were no Prime lives at stake.

Probably.

“I’d better go,” Scott told his sister. “Keep an eye on the shape.”
He set out to immediately locate Harry. Presuming that his Priority One Prime would be at the focus of the event, he went towards what felt to be the centre of the cyclone. The doors of Hogwarts were still a good distance away, so he broke out into a run.

Then he tripped and fell to his knees when the world snapped suddenly, and gloriously, back into place.

A million coruscating lines traced the paths of lives and their leanings. The golden trails marked the past, present and future, filling in the blank spaces with the tight bonds of evident friendships and enmities. The future was a tempestuous sky over the thriving land of the present and the deep earth of the past, written in light and substance.

None of this was tangible, but still felt with the inner skin, seen with the third eye and heard with the hidden ear. It was like a language that was not spoken, but illustrated. What was to be was an incomprehensible speech broken by the occasional muddied but half-recognized inflection. What was flowed forward in a universal vernacular made dense with local dialect, the voice of occurrences fading into record even as they were spoken. What had been was written in tongues, both plain and obscure and ever so vast. It was all inaudible, unknowable, non-sequential, foreign yet familiar. It was the reflection of existence, a sum total that could not be calculated.

He stayed there, pressed to the grass, and revelled in the feeling of clarity. He had been blind for so long that the sensation of immersion was almost overwhelming, a bright shock to his senses.

A thick cable ran from Scott straight to Harry, and Scott was pleased to witness the strength of it. Multiple lines of connection linked him to his other Primes. Harry was on the ground floor of Hogwarts, moving quickly towards the main door that had been Scott’s own objective. He frowned slightly, confused. Harry was lit up like the sun. Where was he going? What was going on? What could have happened to shake things into place…?

Once again clarity came to Scott, though this time it was confined to his own mind.

Harry must have taken the Felix Felicis. Scott could clearly see the strings of change wiggling out around him, crafting on the invisible canvas of circumstance. The shape surrounding folded to his will.

What an absolutely amazing potion. It had brought about an untangling that Scott himself could never accomplish. It was a temporary and limited change, true, but still an impressive feat.

It explained a great deal, including the local nature of the event. Scott’s comforting familial link to Lila was incomplete as she was unaffected, cut off outside the sudden eye of the storm that Harry’s potion had created.

In fact, once the immediate and overwhelming burst of information had diminished, Scott now saw that many connections were missing or incomplete. The Felix hadn’t made as large of an impact as he’d originally thought. It was disappointing, but he probably should have expected that. The potion was not designed to illuminate the shape, only its imbibers.

Harry’s roadmap for the night was clearly imprinted and it was obvious that Scott didn’t need to interfere. With the Felix working Harry was safer than he’d ever been, a protective cocoon moulded about him. There were other things Scott could use his time to attend to, since there was no telling how long the window of perspicacity would last.

He climbed back to his feet and resumed heading for the castle. Harry had exited the building and was walking in the opposite direction, hidden beneath his Invisibility Cloak.
“Hey, Scott,” Harry said in a cheerful tone as they passed, as if the two of them commonly met while strolling across the grounds after dark. He also didn’t seem to have any doubts that Scott could see him.

“Hey, Harry,” Scott replied cordially.

Neither of them stopped walking, and that was the end of their exchange. The shape was imbuing both of them with a strong sense of purpose, and for the time being it had nothing to do with each other.

Scott entered the castle with a quick step and immediately began following the lines of his Primes. Ron and Hermione were comfortably ensconced in the Gryffindor common room together, their connection as bright and strong as ever. Neville and Luna were also in their respective towers, and their associations were progressing along expected lines.

He noted with interest that Ginny’s link with Dean was all but disintegrated. She was alone in her dorm, apparently sulking, and he tried to discern what had happened. She had tripped? She was mad because she had tripped? No… No, that wasn’t right. It was a push. Wait – Dean had pushed her?! Scott’s anger immediately flared and he resolved to go and beat the crap out of Dean. Fortunately, his innocent dorm mate’s physical well being was preserved when he completed reading the strand and realised that Dean had only tried to help Ginny through the common room portrait entrance, so it was merely an infraction of minor irritation instead of abuse.

He took a moment to marvel at that specificity. The shape was never so clear, so absolutely distinct. Even in a universe with the smoothest of contours he would have only been able to glean that Ginny had been involved in some sort of event, and then perhaps with uncommon luck discovered it had negatively involved Dean. To go so much further was a rare wonder, indeed.

Scott turned his attention towards Malfoy. Disappointingly, the Slytherin was in his common room instead of the Room of Requirement, but Scott still read what he could. The shape around Malfoy was especially obdurate. Only the lines were clear. His connections to Crabbe, Goyle, and a variety of other Slytherins were all anticipated. However, there was an extremely strong yet oddly reluctant link between Malfoy and Snape, which was strange. Scott wasn’t sure what to make of that. Dumbledore also shared an unusual link with Malfoy. A one-sided friendship? …No, that wasn’t right. It was something else.

Malfoy’s lines were proving abnormal. Scott would have to run what he’d learned past Harry and get a second opinion.

Scott had almost decided to settle in and watch Malfoy for a time when something else caught his attention. There was a line that was connected to him that he hadn’t noticed before, probably because it was only just becoming apparent. It wasn’t a link of knowledge or relations, but rather of action, the same kind of line that was guiding Harry.

Scott studied it closely, perplexed. The disparate universes very rarely acknowledged the Kharadjai in any way. They were foreign objects within the system, unknown to the local continuum. Alien to any shape but their own, the partitions of the Multiverse simply ignored them wherever they intruded. As far as Harry's universe was generally concerned, Scott did not exist.

And yet, the tug of the line was quite clear. Whatever was on the other end required his attention. He didn’t know why, and so he briefly considered ignoring the summons. If he was honest with himself, this was partly out of sheer, wilful stubbornness. Since when was he an errand boy? This universe had no right to tell him what to do. He was a third-party. The shape was supposed to be doing its own thing, leaving him to sort it out himself. This just wasn’t supposed to happen.
Still… It could be really important…

As he began following the line he wondered if he had become more closely integrated with the system than he’d intended, so closely that he might begin to be considered a Prime himself. Perhaps living with Harry and the others had affected him to the point where he was no longer capable of maintaining an observer’s distance from the shape. If that was possible, then the implications disturbed him. The last thing he needed to be during the course of events was inextricable. If the universe began including him into the UO, he’d have no way to get out. Then he’d truly be blind and just as helpless in the tide of fate as his Primes.

After a moment’s worry, he thought it through and confidently dismissed the notion as being extremely unlikely at worst and completely impossible at best. Other field agents, including himself, had been deeply integrated into missions for far longer than he had been without experiencing such dire results. A far more likely scenario was that his link to Harry had caused him to vicariously experience some of the Felix Felicis’ effects through proximity. It was not the will of the universe that led him, but rather an unusual potion. That made more sense.

His trail led him straight to the gargoyle outside of the Headmaster’s office. Interesting. He spoke the password and the stone guardian jumped aside, allowing him entrance to the strange magic escalator. The twin doors at the top were shut, so Scott knocked on them twice.

“Come in,” Dumbledore called out. Scott entered to find the Headmaster not behind his desk as usual; instead he was rearranging some items on one of his shelves. He looked tired, but still smiled politely. “Out past curfew again, Mr. Kharan?”

“I doubt that’s a surprise.” While Dumbledore observed with open curiosity, Scott followed the line across the office to a small table near the back right corner that held a variety of bottles. One of them was clearly marked.

“Is there something you need?” Dumbledore asked, leaving his task to come up behind Scott.

“Perhaps,” Scott murmured, peering at the bottle. He picked it up and turned it over in his hands, now thoroughly puzzled. It was a bottle of oak matured mead. While there was certainly no way to tell in the course of the world exactly how an object would affect the lives of those around it, seeing as how circumstance was such a random factor, Scott still felt that his objective was disappointing. If he’d been led to a bomb then at least he’d have known why he had to remove it.

Dumbledore was obviously confused. “If you’d like a drink, feel free to help yourself. It’s a bit late for me, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t drink. Where did you get this mead?”

“Horace gave it to me for Christmas,” Dumbledore told him. “I’ve been meaning to open it, but the way things have been lately I don’t suppose I’ll ever have the chance.”

“Keeping busy with the Horcruxes?”

“Extremely.” Dumbledore slumped tiredly into his chair. “Scott, what brought you here tonight? Surely you did not visit to examine my meagre collection of mead.”

“Apparently, I did.” Scott held the mead up to his ear and shook it. Dumbledore’s brow creased slightly. “I don’t understand.”

“Me neither.” Scott turned around and looked at the Headmaster. “Maybe we can fix that. Have
“Besides your sudden preoccupation with it? No, I haven’t.”

“Okay, how about this approach: Harry took his Felix Felicis tonight and as a result I followed a line right to this bottle,” Scott summarised. “Now can you think of any reason why I would need to interact with this mead?”

Dumbledore was silent for a moment as he absorbed this information. “That is quite interesting,” he said. “You are certain you were led here?”

“Of course. When Harry took that Felix it loosened things up enough that I was able to take a few readings. It’s not much, but it’s better than what I’ve been working with so far.”

“Then I must admit I am at a loss. I can only speculate.”

“That’s what I’ve been doing.” Scott hefted the bottle and carefully examined the glass with his fingers, trying to discern anything strange about it. He looked at Dumbledore and made a face. “I’ve never really liked mead.” Popping the cork out, he took a swig – and that’s when everything became clear.

Scott had been trained to recognise poisons, and the mead was definitely laced. He spat it out back into the bottle. It was flavourless, so it couldn’t be Strychnine. Potassium cyanide had no taste, but he couldn’t smell the faint hint of almonds that came with it, though that was irrelevant since if he’d ingested cyanide then he’d have experienced a coma onset before convulsions. His jaw muscles were tightening and he could feel his body seizing. If the poison had already taken hold then it was bonding with his skin. It was almost certainly a fast acting neurotoxin. Possibly tetramine...? No, it didn’t matter. What mattered was that the mead was deadly.

Dumbledore was beginning to look concerned. “Are you all right?”

“It’s poisoned,” Scott said shortly, his tongue thick and uncooperative. He needed to change age, and fast. “Leave me alone for a second, please.”

The Headmaster had already jumped to his feet. “You need Severus-”

“No,” Scott said loudly, “I need to be alone for a second.”

“If it’s a poison then Severus can help you-”

“Albus, please!” Scott exclaimed, leaning against the wall and breathing heavily. “Will you just go into your goddamn room for ten seconds? I need to change age to survive this!”

Dumbledore stared at him for a short moment before he sighed and acquiesced. “I suppose I must trust that you know what you’re doing.” He quickly entered his private quarters and left Scott by himself.

With shaking hands, Scott stripped off his clothing as rapidly as he could. It became increasingly difficult to accomplish as his muscles knotted and convulsed. His Kharadjai body would resist the poison for a bit longer than a baseline human, even in teen form, but he had to be an adult if he was going to ride it out.

Naked and shivering, he performed the change of age as rapidly as he could given his battered concentration. He was fortunate that the Felix had loosened the universe to the point where such an action was easy.
Once he had resumed his natural form the convulsions ceased somewhat, relocating entirely to his limbs. He had absorbed a minimal amount of the poison, and his increased weight and natural resistance as an adult would likely be enough to ameliorate the effects. He pulled his discarded clothes onto his midsection and put the back of his head against the wall. He was sweating copiously, likely a good sign. There was no method to immediately cure poison with his healing abilities - it was too diffuse - but his body would reject the substance in whatever fashion it could. The toxin was being flushed from his pores, an unpleasant but necessary process.

“Don't... poison... a Kharadjai, you... fucker,” he gasped to no one in particular, his heart rate increased to a dangerous level. “Just... makes us mad!”

“Scott?” Dumbledore came back into the room with his wand drawn, having apparently heard Scott's stammered defiance.

“Oh, g-good... you're... back,” Scott said to him in as nonchalant a tone as he could muster. “Talk.”

“I'm sorry?” Dumbledore said in obvious alarm.

“Talk. Talk to me. Need to... not pass out, might not... wake up. For awhile,” Scott forced out through chattering teeth.

Dumbledore turned away. “I'm fetching Severus.”

“CAN'T!” Scott yelped. “Can't, all grown up now. Don't... let... him see!”

A short pause. “Very well. I'll return shortly with something to help you, can you stay awake?”

“Sure, yeah... No... p-problem. Never been bet-t-ter...”

Dumbledore left quickly, his robes billowing behind him. Scott stayed put and trembled on the cold floor, cursing himself for not ageing up before trying the mead. That would have been a much smarter approach. Instead he was getting his ass kicked by a tiny bit of neurotoxin that had assaulted his cells while he was still a weak teen. If he had been properly prepared his body could have started fighting back right away. Now he was a wreck.

He really hoped he didn't fall unconscious. It would be rather embarrassing if the man he had been trying so hard to show a strong front to came back to find him passed out in a puddle of sweat (and possibly urine). Not that it mattered all that much, he supposed. Shaking like a perspiration-soaked leaf with a handful of clothes over his crotch wasn't the most imposing sight he had ever presented.

Dumbledore reappeared after an indeterminate number of minutes holding something in his hand. “Here, swallow this. It should cure you. If not, we'll have to try something else.”

Scott didn't bother trying to take the small object with his cramping hand. He opened his mouth, allowing Dumbledore to place the cure inside. “Down... the hatch,” he muttered after consuming the unknown item. He didn't usually just eat whatever strange things were placed in his mouth, but Dumbledore had earned some trust.

“It's a bezoar,” Dumbledore informed him. “I don't know if you'll resist its magic, but try not to if you can help it.”

There was definitely some magic at work. Scott let it run its course and began feeling better almost immediately. “I can't believe I just swallowed the petrified shit that collects in a goat's stomach,” he grumbled as his muscles relaxed. “Thank you, non-sarcastically.”
“I’m simply relieved you were fit enough to swallow anything at all,” Dumbledore noted. “Your constitution is quite impressive.”

“Not like I can take any credit. Kharadjai physiology is pretty efficient at rejecting harmful substances. Though I guess goat turds work well enough in this universe.” Scott sighed and wiped the heavy perspiration from his forehead. “Gross. Okay, you mind stepping out again so I can shrink myself?”

“Of course.”

It took a little longer than usual, but after some effort Scott dressed himself resumed his younger age. “All right, I’m fine now,” he yelled to Dumbledore.

The Headmaster re-entered the room, taking in Scott’s state of dishabille. “Are you certain?”

“I’m not dead, am I?” Scott leaned against the wall and took a deep breath. He wasn’t feeling any crippling ill effects, but he was uncomfortably sweaty and weak. “Well. That answered one question.”

“But only one,” Dumbledore added.

“You said you got that mead from Slughorn?”

“Horace wouldn’t have tried to poison me,” the Headmaster said immediately.

“I agree. He has nothing to gain from doing so, and Slughorn doesn’t do anything without profiting from it, never mind taking that kind of risk. I was wondering more if you knew anyone who’d want him dead.”

Dumbledore reseated himself in his chair, face drawn. “Horace was in hiding before I hired him to teach this year. Voldemort would have liked to make use of his multiple talents. The Death Eaters never found him, but if they thought he had avoided them on purpose…”

“You don’t say ‘no’ when the Don wants a favour.”

“Precisely.”

“You think that’s what happened?”

Dumbledore stared out the window for a long moment without answering. Scott knew the Headmaster was deciding how much to reveal. “I’m not certain,” Dumbledore said finally. “Not about this, nor much else.”

“Welcome to life,” Scott said sardonically.

“I’ll have to talk to Horace and examine the rest of his liquors,” Dumbledore said, changing the subject. Scott supposed the Headmaster didn’t want to assign any blame without more concrete evidence. “There’s nothing to be gained by not being prudent.”

“Yeah.” Scott stood and walked over to a nearby shelf. “While I’m already here, I don’t suppose you’d mind if I had a talk with the Sorting Hat?”

Dumbledore looked mildly surprised at the request, but didn’t object. “Not at all.”

Scott plucked the Hat off the shelf and stuck it on his head.
“Scott Kharan,” the Hat greeted Scott, sounding pleased. “It’s been some time since we last spoke.”

*It has, yeah.*

“Man of action that you are, I doubt you donned me to exchange pleasantries,” the Hat said shrewdly. “What is it that you wanted?”

*I’m curious about something. You Sorted a friend of mine, Kylie Timous.*

“I remember. Small girl, strawberry blond hair, rather frightened at the time as I recall… What of her?”

*I don’t understand why you put her in Gryffindor.*

“Don’t you?” The Hat sounded amused. “Are my workings so obscure?”

*She’s scared of everything. The boat ride into the castle on the first night nearly sent her into hysterics. Gryffindor is hardly an ideal choice for her.*

“Oh, but you misjudge me,” the Hat chuckled. “The shapes of the heart and the head are important, yes, but do you not remember the most important thing of all…?”

*I guess you might have said something about that in the song I half listened to. You know the rhyme scheme was kind of sloppy.*

“I prioritise the message over the form, if you insist on being pedantic.”

*I do.*

“Yes, well that night was one of terror for Ms. Timous, but what she feared above all else was to be separated from her newly found friends, to start all over again amongst a horde of strangers… It was that fear, not courage, that led her to the Gryffindor table. Do you find that strange?”

*We don’t always want what’s best for us.*

“True enough, Mr. Kharan, but I must remind you that even the most timid of creatures will fight to defend their home, and those of us that fear life do not always fear death… Does not the true measure of courage come in the darkest of circumstances?”

Scott considered that. *So you saw that she could rise to the occasion.*

“What I saw is not to be told,” the Sorting Hat said firmly. “What she wanted was clear, but who she is belongs to her alone.”

*Patient confidentiality. I got tired of hearing that a couple epochs ago.*

“Then you are well used to dealing with it-” The Hat sounded amused again. “-or so I assume… Weren’t the details of your work part of our deal?”

*Fair enough. At least I know you’ll keep your mouth shut about it.*

Scott sped through a broad recap of his purpose. His job as a Kharadjai and the general events that had transpired were difficult to condense, but he thought that he managed it well enough. The Hat was silent during his tale. When he finished, it was still for a few seconds more.
“Fascinating…” the Hat finally said. “Improbable, impossible, yet true… At least, you believe it, I can tell that much…”

*Look at it this way – you live on a shelf, so you’ll have a lot of time to think about it.*

“That I will. It has been, as always, a highly unusual and enjoyable experience talking with you.”

*Until next time.*

Scott placed the Sorting Hat back in its place. In response to his question it had provided insight but no real answers. Still, it was good to know that the Hat took the matter of confidentiality with appropriate seriousness. If it were ever questioned, Scott could trust it not to reveal anything damaging.

Dumbledore looked on inquisitively, but, perhaps mindful of the information that he had withheld from Scott in turn, did not ask what Scott had discussed with the Hat.

“Okay, anyway…” Scott said, seating himself across from Dumbledore. “I think we can both agree that this was probably an inside job, so let’s keep our mouths shut and our eyes open. If I find anything out I’ll be sure to come to you.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Dumbledore said tiredly. “I would lament the difficulty of dealing with both Voldemort and this new threat, but I have a hard time believing they aren’t one and the same.”

“Yeah, well, he’s gonna die for causing these problems,” Scott assured the Headmaster. “Someone else will take his place eventually, but one battle at a time, right.”

“On the topic of battles,” Dumbledore said slowly, “there was an incident in January I’d wanted to ask you about. Two men, both of whom were allegedly Death Eaters, were killed by a bomb outside a home near Southampton.”

Scott had been wondering when the subject was going to come up. He decided to be forthright. “If you want a confession, you got it. If you want remorse, you’re in for a disappointment.”

“Your sister said much the same.”

“And?”

Dumbledore closed his eyes wearily. “And I know what it is you want from me, but I’m not certain I can hold my tongue.”

Scott felt a brief pinch of worry. It was important that he be allowed to take action against the Death Eaters, but it was *essential* that he be allowed to stay at Hogwarts. If he admitted that, Dumbledore was likely to extract a promise from him to stop the killings in trade for his student tenure. If forced to that point, then it was a compromise that Scott would have no choice but to make. He had to try and avoid that.

“I fully realise that it’s an unpleasant situation,” Scott said carefully, “but you have to remember that there are people dying out there – and they aren’t Death Eaters. If Riddle is building an army, don’t you think the logical thing to do is to thin his forces before you have to face them? Before *Harry* has to face them?” he added, playing on Dumbledore’s sympathies.

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore prevaricated. “However, you must remember that this war of ours starts and ends with Voldemort, not his servants. By finding his Horcruxes, we are taking action against him.”
“You’re weakening him so that Harry can finish the job,” Scott corrected. “I’m doing exactly the same thing. Every Death Eater that dies now is one less to stand in his way.”

“You’re weakening him so that Harry can finish the job,” Scott corrected. “I’m doing exactly the same thing. Every Death Eater that dies now is one less to stand in his way.”

“Why is it that we must defend mercy, but we never find ourselves lacking justification for murder,” Dumbledore mused quietly.

Scott was losing his patience. He bit the inside of his cheek and held himself in check, replying as calmly as he was able, “They don’t generally call it murder when the person you kill is actively trying to kill you.”

“Then what would you call it?”

“I call it taking care of business,” Scott said stiffly.

“I simply can’t consider the act of taking life a matter of business.”

“Then you can consider it whatever the hell you like, it doesn’t matter to me,” Scott told him sharply, “and frankly I’m starting to wonder if you really want Harry to win or if you think that war is a great excuse to sit around in your office and pontificate.”

The second the words left his mouth Scott nearly winced, fearing he had gone too far. But instead of blasting Scott with a righteous denunciation, Dumbledore wilted back into his chair with a deep sigh. “Forgive an old man,” he said roughly, rubbing at his eyes beneath his half-moon glasses. “This is a road I had hoped to never travel again.”

Inwardly, Scott was relieved at the change in the Headmaster’s demeanour. He didn’t show it, though. “You’re not going anywhere. This is my show, remember? You’re not responsible for what I do.” In reality Dumbledore had some fairly substantial leverage over Scott, but the Kharadjai was scrupulously evading any mention of that. He decided to hit his message home by bringing Harry back into the conversation. “I want Harry to win, just like you do. I want him to survive this thing. And I promise you, absolutely promise you, that I am doing everything I can to keep him alive. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, I stick to that kid like glue.” That was stretching the truth by a fair amount, but it sounded good.

“I can only hope our combined efforts are enough,” Dumbledore said.

“I think he’s got a really good shot at winning.” Another half-truth – Scott didn’t have a clear picture of the odds and was simply assuming that his presence would be enough to tip the scales. “But you see, the less he’s up against, the better that chance gets. That’s why I hit back. Don’t pretend like I’m just targeting random people because I get off on it. They started it. Voldemort started it, and his Death Eaters are continuing it. And, yeah, I understand that you’re gunning for King Riddle himself. But sometimes you can’t just cut the head off the snake. In this case, I know you can’t. Only Harry can do that. So instead, we have to dismantle mountain that the snake lives on. It’s the only way to reach him. To reach the mountain snake. Mountain snake? Wow, that analogy didn’t turn out the way I expected it to.” Dumbledore started to reply, but Scott quickly cut him off. “Look, I’m not asking for more people, I’m not asking for logistics, I’m not even asking for your blessing. All I’m asking is that you just don’t interfere. That’s all.”

Dumbledore smiled humourlessly. “How skilfully you’ve backed me into this corner. I must choose whether to chance the lives of innocents or murder the guilty.”

That sounded about right. “What’s it gonna be?”

“I cannot, I will not, sit silent and pretend that responsibility has passed over my shoulders –
despite your best efforts to make it seem that way,” Dumbledore said firmly, making it clear that Scott’s machinations had not gone unnoticed. “You may not be my soldier to command, but when looking back if people should see that I had a chance to prevent this, well… Then let it be known that I chose not to act.”

“So then…”

“For all my grand intentions… and I’ve had so very many…” Dumbledore said with a hint of a well-worn sorrow in his voice. “…it seems I am unable to find a perfect solution. I’ve already accepted that, as in all wars, death will come to those who have done nothing to deserve it. If you can prevent that, even in a small way…” He sighed again, a defeated sound. “I will not stop you.”

It wasn’t exactly license to rampage, but it was close enough. Scott was immensely relieved. Dumbledore’s capitulation would make things much easier. He tried not to sound triumphant or gloating when he said, “I understand.” He was searching for an elegant way close the conversation when the shape provided him with useful information. “Well, I think we should wrap it up. Harry is headed up here.”

“Is he?” Dumbledore sat up straighter, emerging from his dark thoughts. “At this hour?”

“Yeah, and it looks like he has some good news.” Scott could see that Harry was no longer under the effects of the Felix Felicis. Predictably, the universe was beginning to congeal again. He hoped that it was happening slowly enough for him to take advantage of the breathing room that was left. “Whatever he’s got to tell you, it’s important.”

“Dare I hope he has procured the memory?” Dumbledore wondered.

“Given what’s left of his connection to Slughorn, I’d say you’re probably on the money. I gotta jet, later.”

“Farewell for now.” Dumbledore called after Scott as he moved quickly towards the door, still holding the bottle of mead.

Back out in the hallway, he tucked his poisoned prize beneath his robes and contemplated the situation. The discovery of the lethal mead had answered the quandary of why he had been given a directive, but it created many more questions. He tried to logically pare down the problem until he could find the most likely focus of benefit.

It was possible that the mead was a random attempted murder by some unknown enemy of Slughorn’s. The Potions professor went out of his way to prevent hostility but it was sometimes unavoidable. If that was the case then the mead had nothing to do with Scott’s objectives. It was a fluke, like most of what happened around him. Life continued despite the pressure of a UO.

It was a likely circumstance. That didn’t mean it was true, especially taking into account what Dumbledore had revealed.

He’d have to devote some more thought to it at a later time. The universe was falling back into its usual tangle, but before it finished he had some Death Eaters to kill.

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Lila was sound asleep when the phone rang. There was only one person who would call her at night, and she tossed aside her sheets with the intention of giving Scott a piece of her mind. When she picked up the phone, though, his words brought her up short.
“I need fire support.”

As always when dealing with Scott, the first order of business was to determine whether he was joking or not. “Are you serious? Because if you woke me up just to be annoying then I swear to God I’ll-”

“Totally serious. Grab a weapon and meet me in the living room in five minutes.”

That was direct enough. “All right.”

Lila dressed rapidly, choosing darker clothes that would be suitable for concealment. As soon as her shoes were on she knelt down on her hands and knees and crawled into her closet. It was standard contingency to store a variety of weapons around the primary residence during any mission, and this one was no exception. A large, nondescript black case sat behind several shoe boxes. She hauled it out and set it on her bed.

The case had a built in combination lock and heavy steel clasps, and it took her a few seconds to open it. Nestled inside on a snug mattress of foam was a heavy machine gun painted a dull matte black. She withdrew the gun and quickly cleared it and performed a function check.

Scott wasn’t in the living room when Lila entered it, but the sounds coming from his bedroom told her that he was in the house. She settled on the couch and waited for him to emerge.

When he did so a few moments later he was in his adult form, with his underarms showing the slight bulges of his handguns in their shoulder holsters and his favourite rifle in his hands. From his choice of armament Lila surmised that she would be providing cover with her rapid fire weapon while he engaged the targets with a more precise approach to death dealing.

His movements were oddly unsure and his hair was a clumpy mess formed by dried sweat. Lila felt a pang of worry. “What happened to you? You look terrible.”

“I was poisoned; long story. I got better.” He looked pointedly at her firearm. “Isn’t that a little much?”

“You said you needed fire support,” Lila said coolly. “You didn’t say how much.”

“All right, but you’ll wake up the whole damn neighbourhood if you start chopping away with that thing.” Kharan shrugged. “It might actually be better that way.”

“Oh?” Lila paused to allow him to elaborate, but he must have decided that it would be fun to be aggravating because he just stared blankly back at her. She frowned. “You know, I might be more effective if you’d tell me who I’m supposed to shoot at tonight.”

“I doubt it.” Kharan nimbly dodged the kick she sent at his ankle and continued, “But I suppose I’ll humour you. There’s a meeting tonight in Diagon Alley. A group of low level Death Eaters and wanna-be Death Eaters, nobody really big; as far as I can tell they’re running recruitment and possibly extortion. It’s not important. Once they’re gone, Riddle’s operations in the area will come to a standstill. They’re meeting at the house of the highest ranking Death Eater. I’ve already scoped it. There are two exits: one to the street and one to the small yard behind the structure, not counting the windows. The kitchen faces the street but also extends to the back of the house; it’s to the immediate left of the front entrance. I think they’ll sit at the table in there.”

Kharan handed Lila a rough diagram drawn on a piece of paper. She turned it over and was amused to see that it was some homework from Hogwarts on which he had received a zero. Flipping it back, she studied the sketch and memorised the layout of the house and street. “What’s this?” she
asked, pointing to another structure behind the yard that had been circled.

“That’s your position. It’s the roof of a bakery that overlooks the yard. You’ll set up there and cover the back door.”

Lila nodded and handed the sheet back to him. “A simple plan, but a sound one. Maybe if you put this kind of effort into your homework you wouldn’t get zeros.”

“It’s not a zero!” Kharan said, looking offended. “It’s an O for Outstanding!”

“Sure it is.” Lila rolled her eyes.

“No, I’m serious,” he insisted. “It’s not a zero.”

“Okay, whatever. Are we going to go?”

“We’ll have to be fast. The shape is closing down again.”

“I thought it was local,” Lila mused. “How did you find these guys?”

“Luck. I was hoping that I would carry some remnant of the looseness with me and just opened an aperture to the first place I could think of where there might be Death Eaters. They were a pretty obvious ripple of change.” He swung his rifle off of his back and chambered a round. “Okay. Let’s go before we can’t any more.”

He opened an aperture and disappeared through it. Lila followed him in, clutching her weapon and stepping out into the void.

She found herself standing on the flat rooftop of a two story building. To her left was an area of tight, winding streets which were lined by tall and narrow houses backed by tiny patches of backyard. To her right the meandering residential lanes melded into a larger road that was bracketed by a variety of businesses.

“Give me a minute to get in position,” Kharan said. He jumped off the roof and landed on the other side of the nearby fence.

Diagon Alley was dark under a partially cloudy sky. The conditions made the house closest to the back of the building she stood upon stand out quite clearly, as it was the only one nearby with lit windows. It was a squat one story home constructed of old timbers covered in peeling paint. On the other side of the street opposite the house she could make out the dim form of Kharan clambering over the chimney-studded rooftop of a brick town house. He went prone and she followed suit.

From her vantage point she could see through a back window into the cramped kitchen. A group of seven men were crowded around a shabby table. One of them had a bundle of papers in front of him and was looking at each of the men in turn while reading from them. Lila figured he was probably the leader. Only two of the other men were wearing the black robes that identified them as Death Eaters. The rest wore what passed for street clothes among wizards.

Flipping out the bipod on her weapon, she settled it into place and put the stock firmly against her shoulder. The reflex sight mounted on the top rails allowed for quick aiming and lacked any magnification, so she didn’t bother adjusting for range. Instead she settled in and waited for Kharan to open fire. She would ensure that no one got away.

Kharan had chosen his positions well. She had a ringside seat when the first shot rang out. Her
brother’s customary rifle of choice was the venerable M14. Firing the heavy 7.62 x 51mm round with an effective range of 875 yards, the M14 was an excellent weapon for precision shooting. It allowed for accurate and long distance semi-automatic fire.

Round number one entered through top pane of the front kitchen window and hit the man with the papers. Passing cleanly through his head at a speed of 3,200 feet per second, it killed him before either he or his companions heard the shot. The bullet exited his forehead, punctured through the table and lodged in the floor next to the foot of the man opposite him. Since the FMJ round had not stopped on its way through his skull only a minimum of kinetic energy was transferred on impact, and the dead man simply fell face first onto the table.

While the others just began to register that something had happened, the second shot caught the next Death Eater through his temple, toppling him to the floor.

The greater part of bullet impacts from the supersonic weapons they were using were largely invisible, and most bleeding was done after death had already occurred since the heart, ever a stubborn muscle, would continue to beat. A hit was commonly registered as a rapid puff of misty blood, dust and disintegrated clothing. Everything was variable; a bullet interacting with the human body was the most complex of equations. Every type of weapon and all separate forms of ammunition could produce unique destruction. It was impossible to know exactly what would happen when someone was shot. A combatant could witness wounds ranging from dismemberment to nothing visible at all.

In testament to this, the third gunshot was messier. The final Death Eater had begun to stand, and as he was halfway to his feet the bullet penetrated his neck with the bloody gout of a torn artery. The downward angle of the projectile insured that it went through his windpipe and hit the man sitting next to him just in front of the right armpit, sending the bullet slicing through both of his lungs.

All of this had occurred in less than four seconds. Accustomed to the bright lights and long incantations of spell casting, the targets had abysmal reaction times.

The three remaining men had finally grasped that they were under attack. One of them raised his wand and began shouting a spell, an act which served only to make him Kharan’s priority target. He was hit twice in the torso before he could finish. The first bullet cut cleanly through his abdomen and his backwards fall was initially slow until the second bullet caught in his spine, smashing him violently downward.

The other two men ran for the rear of the house. Kharan fired at the back of the slower man, but his retreat had taken him out of direct view from the front kitchen window. Kharan had to anticipate the path of his target; the round passed through the timber above the window and shattered the man’s left shoulder blade, knocking him forward to tumble into the far wall.

Lila watched through her set of windows as the last target ducked out of the kitchen and into the adjoining room. Kharan no longer had a clear shot, and Lila felt that if they were going to have the time to retrieve the papers and anything else they wanted from the house then they couldn’t wait for the fleeing man to try the back door. He passed by the window in the sitting room and then apparently thought better of it, doubling back. She took aim and began to fire at the area of wall where he would be.

Her M240 Bravo machine gun fired 950 rounds per minute at a velocity of 2,970 feet per second. It chambered the same 7.62 x 51mm round that Kharan’s M14 did, and the wooden walls of the house were no obstacle to its fury. Her barrage of bullets slammed through and hit the man inside nine times.
The spent brass and chain links of her belt fed ammunition clattered onto the roof next to her as the roar of her gun faded. The sharp double crack of Kharan’s rifle rang out from the building and let her know that he was inside. Jumping to her feet and lifting her weapon, she leapt off the roof and sprinted across the yard towards the entrance. Lights were beginning to come on in nearby houses and dogs were barking in the distance.

Kharan was rustling around in the kitchen when she kicked open the door. She quickly looked to the left into the sitting room and confirmed that the man she had shot at was now a corpse crumpled in a spreading circle of stained carpet. The kitchen was rapidly becoming a real mess. Kharan’s feet crunched on broken glass from the window as he gathered up the documents from the table, pausing to wipe a few pages on the dead Death Eater’s shirt.

“He bled on them some, but they’re readable,” he told Lila as she stepped into the room. “But check this out, this is interesting…”

He held up the wrist of one of the dead Death Eaters. There, burned into the skin, was a black tattoo of a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth. It seemed to have an unnatural sharpness to it, a supernatural layer of definition.

“Do they all have that?”

“No, just the ranking guys.” Kharan dropped the limp arm. “I’d guess that’s their ticket to the tree house club. Pretty stupid to brand your members in an obvious way, but, hey, Riddle hasn’t exactly struck me as MENSA material.”

“A skull with a snake in its mouth,” Lila muttered, bending down to peer more closely at the symbol etched on the dead man. “How ridiculously phallic.”

“The only snake in Voldemort’s mouth is of the trouser variety.” The sound of a door opening outside drew their attention. “That gun of yours was louder than all hell. Let’s get out of here.”

They fled back to their flat, leaving the scene of carnage behind for the neighbours to discover.

Lila wasn’t familiar with magical law enforcement, and so was unsure of what response their assault would provoke from the government. She was more concerned about the other Death Eaters. “Have you thought about reprisals?” she asked Kharan.

“Yes. That’s why we attacked in Diagon Alley, a Muggle couldn’t have done it. They can’t even go there.”

“And no one’s ever seen you use a gun?”

“Only Ron and Harry,” Kharan assured her. “Dumbledore will know who it was, of course, but he won’t tell anyone.”

Lila nodded, hoping that he was right. His impromptu ambush had been an effective one, but if it caused him bigger problems further down the road then it hadn’t been worth it. “What’s in the papers?”

“You tell me,” Kharan said, throwing them at her. He dropped his gun on the couch and pulled off his jacket and shoulder holsters. “I’ve got to get back to Hogwarts.”

“How convenient,” Lila said dryly, looking at the mess he was leaving behind.

“Yes, I thought so,” he cheerfully agreed. He darted off into his room and emerged a few minutes
later in his teenage form. His hair was sticking out in all directions, a sight that never failed to bug Lila, but when she reached over to smooth it down he dodged out of reach. “Hey!”

“I’m just fixing your hair. You still look like you've been sick.”

“I was sick.”

She reached for him again. “Stand still.”

“Fuck that, I’m outta here!” He opened an aperture and dived through it before she could grab him.

She sighed in exasperation. There was little doubt that Scott hadn’t any real objections to having his hair fixed and had avoided it for no reason other than to annoy her. Well, fine. If he wanted to go back looking like a haystack, that was his bad choice.

Leaning over the back of the couch, Lila picked up the M14. She’d put it away for him, but he’d have to clean it himself. That was how it always worked.
“Well?” Harry said hopefully. Scott tentatively raised the flask to his lips and took a sip. The face he made was enough answer for Harry; he sighed and took his flask back. “That bad, huh.”

“I could make something better in Myrtle’s bathroom with a cheap still and some corn mash,” Scott told him.

They were supposed to be turning vinegar into wine during the day’s Charms lesson, and while Harry had technically succeeded the flavour of his ‘wine’ left a lot to be desired. He stared down into the murky liquid and tried to figure out what he was doing wrong.

“Here, Scott, try mine.” Hermione passed her flask to Scott for testing.

The blond teen took a delicate mouthful of her drink and swished it about his mouth for a few seconds before swallowing. “Supermarket quality,” he said after a moment. “Probably the stuff that comes in a box. And it’s wine, so it’s not even good for getting drunk.” He handed the flask back to her.

“Well at least mine is identifiable as wine,” Hermione said, offended by his harsh critique. “You’ve still got a glass of vinegar.”

“And yet, somehow a better vintage than yours.”

“Then let’s see you do better!”

“I don’t want to make wine. I don’t drink.”

“What?” Harry frowned at him. “You said you were an expert on wine.”

“I don’t drink anymore,” Scott amended.

Harry looked over at Ron’s flask, which was filled with a red substance that at least looked like some sort of wine. “How’s yours?”

“I wouldn’t pay for it,” Ron said. He pushed his flask away and leaned back in his seat. “Hey, weren’t you going to tell us what happened with Dumbledore last night?”

“Oh, right.” Harry set his flask down, the task at hand momentarily forgotten as he ran through the events of the previous night in his mind. It wasn’t easy to summarise such momentous things. He was still feeling a torrential combination of nervousness and excitement, and he stumbled over his words a few times as he tried to encapsulate everything for his listeners, but he did the best he could as he told his friends about the Horcruxes and Dumbledore’s promise to take Harry with him on his next excursion.

Scott, who had the appearance of only half-listening to Harry’s story, broke in at that point. “How do you destroy one of those Horcrux things?”
“Dunno. Maybe I’ll have to use this supposed ‘weapon’ of mine.” As convincing as Dumbledore could be, Harry still wasn’t completely sold on the idea that his ability to love had any use.

“Weapon?” Scott perked up at that, sitting straight in his seat. “What weapon?”

“Well…” Harry struggled to think of some way to phrase the idea. Dumbledore had a way with words that Harry simply did not. “He’s said that my power, the power that Voldemort doesn’t have, is love… That Voldemort doesn't understand or desire love, and that my ability to love is my greatest advantage over him. It's what saved me when he killed my Mum and Dad. It’s what protects me, I guess. Dumbledore thinks it’s my best bet.”

Scott gazed at Harry, expressionless. “That’s the gayest shit I’ve ever heard,” he said flatly.

Hermione looked at Scott in disbelief, her brow furrowing at his tactlessness. “This is not a joking matter!”

Harry shrugged uncomfortably. “I’m still not really sure what he means. I know it used to hurt Voldemort when he touched me, but I think Dumbledore is talking about more than that.”

“Did it?” Scott appeared intrigued. “How much did it hurt him?”

“Bad enough that he couldn’t do it for long.”

Scott’s eyes narrowed in thought. “Interesting. Why doesn’t it hurt him any more?”

Hermione immediately laid a supporting hand on Harry’s arm. “You don’t have to talk about it, Harry,” she said protectively.

“No, it’s all right,” Harry assured her, even though that wasn’t entirely truthful. The memories of that night in the graveyard had lost some of their bite with the passage of time, but never entirely dimmed. “He took some of my blood when he was resurrected.”

“Blood magic, a fairly standard bonding technique,” Scott mused. “How unoriginal of him. Nobody ever stops to consider the role of DNA in magic. You might be interested to know that, theoretically, long term exposure to radiation might restore your ability to damage him through touch.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry looked over at Hermione, who was shaking her head in exasperation. “I take it there must be some side effects.”

“Sterility, cancer, death. Just little things like that.”

“No reason not to try it, Harry,” Ron said, grinning.

“Hey, I just speak – it’s not my fault if you listen to me,” Scott said amiably.

“It’s a wonder we even tolerate you,” Hermione told him.

Scott scoffed at her. “Fine, whatever. As long as Dean still likes me, I don’t need you anyway. Isn’t that right, Dean?” he said, raising his voice and turning towards Dean, who was sitting a few tables away. But instead of giving a rejoinder Dean merely shrugged half-heartedly and looked away.

Scott frowned. “What’s his problem?”

“Didn’t you hear? Dean and Ginny split up last night,” Hermione informed him. Harry felt his
heart jump a little at the news, and he fought to keep any of his elation from showing.

Scott made no such effort. He appeared to be inordinately pleased. “Well, well, well…” he mumbled through the grin that he sent Harry’s way. “How about that. Looks like ol’ Ginny is on the Break Up Express, next stop, Singlesville. Someone really should be waiting at the station, you know, to comfort her… I heard she likes green eyes…”

Fortunately Harry was saved from having to respond when Professor Flitwick came over to observe their progress. He seemed happy enough with the results of their spells (probably because he didn’t have to taste the wine), though he chided Scott for having done nothing. In order to receive a grade Scott raised his wand and almost lazily cast the Charm on his flask of vinegar, proving that he had spent his idle time doing more than just talking. Harry wondered what Scott would do if a professor ever asked him to cast a spell for a second time.

All thoughts of Scott, however, were quickly shunted from Harry’s mind soon after that. Ginny and Dean had split up. That left the question of exactly who had chucked who, but he supposed it really didn’t matter. What mattered was how he felt about it. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to feel, but he knew what he did feel. Elation. And that put him a little off balance.

This was mostly because he didn’t know what to do with that feeling. While the path to Ginny had been swept of one great obstacle, the hurdles in Harry’s way remained substantial. Ron was still the overprotective big brother to Ginny that he’d always been, their fights notwithstanding. Harry didn’t relish the idea of acclimating his best mate to the fact that he was snogging said best mate’s younger sister. The other main obstruction was less likely to lead to violence but was no less daunting.

Harry still hadn’t the slightest idea how Ginny felt about him.

It was a real problem, and one that he currently didn’t feel up to the task of solving. Even though his experience with girls stretched no further than a short and eminently disastrous attachment to Cho Chang, he wasn’t stupid enough to think that moving in on a girl immediately after she had left a relationship was an acceptable thing to do. Only pricks did that, people with no consideration for other’s feelings.

Involuntarily, Harry looked over at Scott and considered the benefits of prickdom.

Scott noticed Harry’s scrutiny and widened his eyes until he was staring back at Harry with a bug-eyed glare. “What?”

Feeling belligerent in the wake of Scott’s comments about Ginny, Harry glared back at him. “I was just thinking that being a total prick has worked out pretty well for you so far. Would you recommend it?”

With anyone else such a verbal salvo would be considered fighting words, but Scott utilised insults the way most people used words like ‘hello’, and, ‘how are you’. He shrugged and responded, “With a comment like that, I’d say you’re just as qualified as me for giving out a recommendation.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Ron said, grinning from the sidelines.

The following week did nothing to assuage any of Harry’s worries about Ginny. After her break up with Dean she treated Harry pretty much the same way that she always did, and he didn’t know whether that was a good or bad sign.
It was a tribute to how central Ginny had become to Harry’s existence that she pushed what would have been even larger concerns to the corners of his mind. Scott had told Harry that the Felix had shed a little illumination upon Malfoy’s allegiances, which was intriguing but not particularly useful. The Room of Requirement had been as obstinate as ever, and no progress had been made towards entering Malfoy’s version of it. Scott still acceded to Harry’s requests to follow the Slytherin and his co-conspirators on occasion, but Harry could tell that Scott was growing tired of it. There was little point in observing the blank wall, Scott had bluntly told him, and Harry was reluctantly forced to agree.

Also looming on the horizon was the ever-present possibility that Dumbledore would find another Horcrux, and require Harry’s participation. It was such a vague and half-understood notion, however, that Harry really didn’t worry over it. It wasn’t like he could know what to expect. What could he possibly do that Dumbledore couldn’t? Surely he would be useless.

It would have bothered him, except there wasn’t much time to think about these things. Quidditch practices swallowed it up, leaving what little breathing space there was left to be filled by thoughts of Ginny.

Even those precious fantasies were cramped. The school had reached a fever pitch of anticipation over the crucial upcoming game, and Harry both relished the opportunity to prove his team’s formidable mettle and dreaded the possible outcomes. He was confident in his team’s abilities, but he was not at all confident in chance. At such times his mind sometimes turned to the Felix Felicis that was secreted away in his trunk, though he could never bring himself to cheat in such a manner and soil the honour of Quidditch. In matters of love, however, his reluctance was not so well entrenched. He often wondered what a sip of Felix would do for his relationship with Ginny.

Of course, luck could only take a man so far. If she felt nothing for him, it would be a wasted effort. The only benefit might be the luck preventing Ron from finding out.

Between Quidditch and his problem with Ginny, Harry began to feel stretched thin. With Ron just as obsessed, if not more, as the rest of the student body over the upcoming match there was no escape from talk of it in the company of his two closest friends. Ron wanted to do nothing but discuss tactics, and Hermione had made it her duty to nag Harry incessantly about keeping up with his homework despite the demands of Quidditch. Tranquillity was a distant concept. It seemed that every student in the school had at some point either offered Harry encouragement or threats of imminent defeat.

So it was that Harry found himself spending more of his time in the company of Scott. The Kharadjai was simply too convenient in this aspect to ignore. For one, Scott was often inexplicably to be found in random corners of the school for reasons unknown to anyone but himself, and the pretence of going to find him gave Harry the perfect excuse to absent himself from the common room without interference.

Secondly, Scott was completely and utterly unconcerned with the Quidditch fervour. While he seemed to enjoy the spectacle of the games well enough (especially the injuries), Harry figured the only reason he regularly attended was to keep an eye on his Primes. Scott’s list of priorities was one that Harry had never understood that well, but at least Quidditch wasn’t even on it.

It was nice, in that way, to spend time with someone who had something else on their mind. That wasn’t to say that conversation with Scott was any easier than it had ever been; Scott either wanted to talk about Voldemort and the war or he would ramble on at great length on seemingly random topics. Whenever possible Harry would nudge Scott in the direction of talking about the Kharadjai, telling stories, discussing the few aspects of Muggle pop culture with which Harry was strongly
familiar or even detailing the function and operation of various firearms, a subject that Harry found interesting.

It was on that subject matter that the ever-volubale Scott was expounding as the two of them made a detour through the familiar seventh floor hallway. There wasn’t much point to passing by the Room of Requirement, but Harry had gotten into the habit of keeping an eye on Malfoy.

His eyes absently scanned the Marauder’s map while Scott talked. “-so it’s more of a close combat weapon, though they’ll work further away than you’d think depending on the choke and ammunition. Part of what makes a shotgun so effective is the radius; you don’t have to be real precise to make someone bleed. You ever seen a three-inch magnum buckshot shell? The shot in that thing is basically a bunch of musket balls. It won’t put a hole in your head, it’ll smash it. I know a guy who lost his left ear, cheek, and about half of his teeth when-”

“Hey,” Harry interrupted. He stared down at the map, not sure of what he was seeing. “Look at this.”

Scott froze in place, looking straight ahead instead of at Harry. “Uh, your pants are still on, right?”

Harry rolled his eyes and shoved the map towards Scott. “Look at this.”

Taking the parchment, Scott complied. His eyes scanned it quickly and his expression remained unchanged. “It’s Malfoy and some chick in a room. So what? At least if he’s getting laid he’s not fucking things up for us.”

“Firstly, it’s a girl’s lavatory,” Harry told him, pulling the map back, “and secondly, it would be quite a trick to shag a ghost.”

Scott grinned. “If anyone’s up for it, Malfoy is. Necrophilia: the last refuge of the unloved. I guess we know why they call her Moaning Myrtle. It is ‘Myrtle’ though, right? You know, I really thought he was gay.”

“Maybe he’s seeing her on the side.” Harry frowned at the labelled dots and shook his head. “Seriously though, what the hell is he doing in Moaning Myrtle’s loo?”

“I hate to say anything that might interfere with our dinner plans,” Scott said, turning towards the staircase that would take them down towards the lavatory, “but there’s only one way to find out.”

Harry followed him, possible scenarios running through his mind. Why would Malfoy, why would anyone, for that matter, want to spend time in Moaning Myrtle’s dank lair? Harry and his friends had used it in second year, true, but that had been for a very specific purpose – and only because they hadn’t known about the Room of Requirement. Malfoy had a far better resource at his disposal for storage and secrecy.

“So you’re totally positive that’s Malfoy?” Scott asked as they hurried downstairs.

“You saw him on the map, didn’t you?”

“Just making sure there’s no way to fool it.”

“No. It’s always known who people really are,” Harry said, remembering the events of his fourth year.

“I just can’t think of any reason for Malfoy to be in a girl’s bathroom. Well… a girl’s bathroom that doesn’t work, anyway. Maybe this is how he gets off. He could be burping the worm in there,
“Myrtle would like that.” Harry glanced down at the map again, glad for once that each figure was illustrated only by a dot. “We made Polyjuice Potion in there during our second year – I’m sure he can think of something,” he concluded darkly.

Upon reaching the right hallway they approached the door cautiously, checking the hall for any signs of adult presence. It was funny, considering the depth and scope of the illicit activities over the years in which Harry had not only participated but often instigated, that entering a girl’s lavatory still sent slight tendrils of nervous shame through him.

Scott moved ahead of Harry with quick but silent steps and slid up against the wall next to the doorway, listening intently. After a moment, his expression morphed into an odd mixture of readiness and cruel amusement.

“The little bitch is crying,” he whispered gleefully to Harry.

Harry didn’t think it was funny, but he did feel a small pang of satisfaction that he tried to ignore. “Let me hear.”

“He’s talking to someone,” Scott said, moving aside so Harry could take his place. “That would have to be Myrtle.”

Unfortunately the crack in the door wasn’t wide enough for Harry to discern anything clearly; he could make out little but the dull echoes of Malfoy’s stifled, watery mumblings as they echoed around the damp tile room. Myrtle’s once-fanciful story about a boy who came to her to cry suddenly made a great deal of sense.

“What are you thinking?” Scott said lowly. “Grab him?”

Harry shook his head. “We can’t with Myrtle there,” he hissed. He had his doubts about the wisdom of attacking Malfoy regardless.

“Well, maybe we can kill her again.”

The problem with such supposedly humorous statements was that Harry wasn’t at all certain that Scott was joking. He decided to ignore the comment and try to get a better look inside. The longer he observed the greater his risk of detection became, but Malfoy’s blubbering offered a tantalising possible glimpse into his actions. Harry found himself utterly unable to pass up the opportunity for his near-obsessive curiosity to pay off.

Malfoy was still sobbing; from his thickly distorted speech tumbled information about something he had to do, and he was afraid it wouldn’t work… but if he didn’t do it soon, someone would kill him. Harry’s excitement ratcheted up by several notches. This was it. This was what Malfoy had been hiding – the task for Voldemort! It had to be. Only a few seconds more, and he’d have confirmation…

Harry eased up to the door frame and peered into the space beyond. Malfoy was hunched, pale and shaking, over one of the sinks. He gripped the side of the basin with white-knuckled hands. Moaning Myrtle hovered close by, crooning words of comfort that she still somehow managed to make annoying.

Silently, Harry willed Malfoy to continue speaking. He was so close. A few more words, a single sentence of capitulation to Myrtle’s urgings, and Harry would finally understand the threat he could recognise but not identify.
At that moment, Malfoy brought his head up with a deep breath. He froze as his eyes locked with Harry’s in the dirty, fractured mirror.

What happened next occurred so quickly that Harry wasn’t sure he actually done any of it until a good few minutes afterwards.

The spells they traded were almost involuntary. In the space of a handful of seconds the two of them ran through their usual school repertoire of offensive and defensive magic, designed to incapacitate or annoy. None of it would have resulted in anything worse than a detention.

Until Harry slipped, and Malfoy began forming the words to a curse that Harry knew all too well. He had suffered its unsubtle tortures at the end of Voldemort’s wand.

Harry panicked.

“SECTUM SEMPRÅ!”

He shouted the spell wildly and did much the same with his wand, half-blind from the light and the noise and the water that was running in his eyes from a spell that had thrown up a geyser close by. Regardless, his spell hit Malfoy squarely in the chest. Its results were as much a surprise to Harry as they were to his victim.

Malfoy’s chest ripped open, criss-crossed with deep lacerations as if he had been cut by the swinging blades of an unseen thresher. Dark blood spattered across the tile walls and the nearby sinks. He collapsed with a crimson splash and lay there, gasping for breath as rivulets of blood coursed up his shoulders and pooled in the hollow at his neck. The water covering the floor began to turn a hazy red tint, a dark cloud that rapidly spread and diffused around the edges.

Harry lay silent, locked in the still life pose of blank shock.

Out of the corner of his eye he dimly registered the sight of Scott ducking into the room. Malfoy lay shuddering and bleeding in the shallow water, and all Harry could think was that things had gone about as wrong as possible.

Scott splashed his way over to Harry and looked down at the wounded Slytherin. “Nice shot!” he exclaimed.

Harry suddenly felt sick.

Scott knelt down over the fallen boy, but instead of giving assistance he gripped Malfoy by his bloodstained throat and pushed his head further into the blood-tinted water. “Did Harry ever tell you that I like stories?” he said in an incongruously conversational tone. Malfoy made no answer except to take another pain-wracked breath, and Scott continued, “Yeah, well, I like stories. And I’d like to hear one now,” he growled, his voice turning dark. “You can talk, or you can bleed out. And that’s a bad, slow way to go.”

“Scott,” Harry said, his voice sounding strained to his own ears, “I think he’s really hurt.”

“He’ll be hurt a lot worse if he doesn’t let me in on the dark in the next minute or so.”

Harry grabbed Scott’s arm to prevent him from injuring Malfoy further. “We need to get a professor!”

“No need,” Scott said. His suddenly alarmed gaze was unfocused and distant, which let Harry know the Kharadjai was seeing something beyond the physical walls. “There’s one coming now.”
“Who?”

“The worst possible one.”

That could only mean one person. Harry felt his heart topple to rest somewhere around his knees. Panic was not a useful emotion, but he knew how much trouble even a first-year would get into for attacking another student in such a dangerous fashion – and Harry was a repeat offender.

“It’s my fault,” Harry said shakily. He gritted his teeth and tried not to think about the consequences that awaited him. “I’ll take the blame.”

A string of emotions flashed across Scott’s face too quickly for Harry to follow. “Revision is not only for homework,” he muttered without explanation.

Then he jumped towards Malfoy and viciously kicked the incapacitated boy in the temple.

Harry gaped at him. “What are you do-” he started to gasp, but before he could say more Scott grasped him by the front of his robes, picked up him as if he weighed no more than a feather, and hurled him through the air up and over the first toilet stalls to land with crushing impact against the far wall of the last stall.

Half-stunned by the blow, Harry lay on his back in the shallow water and dazedly wondered what the hell had just happened.

“Stay down!” he heard Scott hiss forcefully. “And shut up!”

The door to the lavatory opened. Harry stiffened at the sound and for a long moment ceased to breathe. From his prone position he could see a familiar pair of black-booted feet swish through the dirty water towards Scott.

It was nearly the worst circumstances that Harry could imagine. There was Scott, standing with an unconscious and bleeding Malfoy at his feet. It would have been terrible if any professor had walked in, if it had involved any student.

But it was Scott and Snape.

Harry seriously thought that Dumbledore would actually expel Scott this time.

For a long, tense moment that seemed to last for eternity, the two of them faced each other in silence. Harry rapidly alternated between wishing he could see their faces and being glad that he couldn’t.

Then Snape brushed past Scott and knelt over Malfoy. Harry held his breath again – if Snape looked to the left, he would see Harry on the floor. The professor muttered spells as he drew his wand over the deep cuts on Malfoy’s chest. With a flick of the wand, he levitated the boy’s limp form up and towards the door. There, he briefly paused before exiting.

“Stay here,” he ordered in a soft and terrible voice, and then he was gone, the door banging ominously shut behind him.

At least a couple minutes passed after that in absolute silence, and Harry’s bafflement with Scott’s actions did nothing but grow to unbearable levels. He had to know what was going on. He was about to say something when Scott beat him to it.

“Keep low, Harry,” Scott said quietly. “No time to run. And don’t say anything, you understand
me? Just keep your mouth shut.”

“What are you doing?” Harry whispered, ignoring Scott’s demand.

“Saving your sweet Chosen ass. Now I said shut up.”

Snape’s feet reappeared through the doorway and swished their way over to where Scott’s sodden trainers marked his position. The two of them must have engaged in a staring contest at the point, because for a lengthy moment nothing was said. Harry imagined it ended in a draw, since he couldn’t imagine either of them backing down.

“I would ask why you did it,” Snape said contemptuously, breaking the stalemate, “but I don’t care to suffer your excuses.”

“Not a problem – that’s Dumbledore’s job,” Scott said in a tone of voice that was at least as insolent as Snape’s was disdainful. “So why don’t you be an efficient little minion, and take me to your master?”

It’s been nice knowing you, Scott, Harry thought. Slowly, he shifted over onto his left side and put his head down far enough to be able to see up to their waists.

But Snape didn’t explode, though his hand clenched his wand tight enough to make a creak that Harry could hear. “I think that won’t be necessary,” he said smoothly. “The Headmaster has more pressing concerns than your misconduct. It is my concern to find out how a student who can’t summon the skill to boil a pot of water managed to cast such a Dark spell.”

It looked more like a reflex than a real motion; one second, Scott was standing with his hands at his sides. The next, there was a quiet click and he held a wicked looking switchblade balanced between his fingers. “This spell?” Scott said mildly. “It’s quite simple. Lift your chin up a bit, and I’ll show you how it works.”

Harry stifled a sharp intake of breath. Scott was going too far.

Snape’s wand rose a fraction of an inch. “Are you threatening me?”

“I’m instructing you,” Scott sneered, “sort of like I did Malfoy. It’s the most important lesson he’ll ever learn.”

“Then am I to understand,” Snape said slowly, his wand elevating further to point at Scott’s head, “that you assaulted another student with a knife?”

“What would you do if someone was about to cast the Cruciatus on you? Oh, that’s right, I forgot…” Scott waggled the knife at Snape, indicating one of his wrists. “You’d take it like the efficient minion we both know you are.”

Snape flinched and grabbed his wrist. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!” he snarled.

“Then that would make two of us,” Scott spat. He stepped closer to Snape. “You still think we shouldn’t take this to Dumbledore?”

“I don’t care if the Headmaster trusts you,” Snape hissed, leaning in closer to Scott. “Even he can be mistaken-”

“Like about you?” Scott cut in. He matched both Snape’s lean and hiss. “I don’t care if Dumbledore trusts you either… Maybe you have a good reason to be Malfoy’s shadow, holding
secret little conversations in empty classrooms while everyone else is at a party-"

At that Snape recoiled, though it was an action of rage rather than fear. "If you've been spying on me Kharan I'll-"

"You'll what?" Scott stepped in even closer to Snape, filling the gap left by the professor’s retreat. "You think you've got more credit with Dumbledore than me? Perhaps you're overestimating how important it is for him to have one of Voldemort’s ex-boy toys under his thumb. It is ex, isn't it, Snape? Or did you order Malfoy to crucio me?"

There was a period of silence as Snape seemed to gather himself, obviously reeling from the supposedly secret information that Scott was throwing against him. When he spoke again his voice was deadly. "I don't know who you are, what you are, or why the Headmaster has seen fit to give you run of the school-" he grated.

"You don’t know much, do you?" Scott interrupted again. "That’s the price you pay for believing you’re the only person Albus talks to.” With one final step, he brought himself face to face with Snape, no more than a few inches away. “Stay out of my way, Snape,” he said forcefully. “And if Malfoy attacks me again, I’ll kill him.”

The tension in the room hit unbearable levels as the two of them faced each other in close proximity, weapons drawn. Scott figured if it came to violence then Snape was a dead man – his spells would be useless and Scott would kill him with about as much emotion as he would show swatting a fly. After that, there would be no recovery. Dumbledore would get rid of Scott for good, and Harry would have been party to murder. Huddled in the murky water, Harry clenched his fists and fervently prayed that the two of them would keep their tempers in check.

Then, without a word, Snape spun on his heel and stalked out of the lavatory.

The sigh of relief Harry let loose came out in a great rush of stale air that rippled the water near his face and echoed off the walls of the dim stall.

"Close call, Harry," Scott said quietly. "Go ahead and stand up, but don’t come out yet. Give it a minute."

Harry complied, rising shakily to his feet. For the first time he noticed the ache in his back, still damaged from the impact when Scott had hurled him into the stall. He was soaked through to the skin, and very cold. The flooded lavatory, deep within the stone of the castle, was chilly even in warmer weather.

"All right," Scott said after another couple of still minutes. He raised his voice and Harry heard another snap as he put away the switchblade. "It’s safe now."

Harry emerged from the stall in a dripping wet state and slogged his way over to where Scott stood ankle deep in the freezing water. One of the taps, broken during Harry’s duel with Malfoy, continued to spout even more liquid to add to the ever-present pools. Myrtle’s flooded home was living up to its reputation.

"Hey," he said frantically, "where’d Myrtle go? I didn’t see her leave. We have to get out of here before she brings more people!"

“She didn’t see anything. I got rid of her.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open in horror. “You killed her??"
“What? She’s already dead. But no, I didn’t kill her.” Scott rolled his eyes. “Soon as Malfoy saw you I knocked her away. She’s outside the castle somewhere, probably doesn’t have a clue what happened.”

Harry nodded, not bothering to ask for details. It stood to reason that ghosts were some kind of energy within Scott’s ability to affect. He stared at Scott, who met the gaze with an unreadable expression. “I don’t get it. Why did you do that to Snape?”

“I had a good reason.”

Harry knew better than to wait for Scott to elaborate. “Come on, tell me.”

“Snape needed to know who he was dealing with,” Scott explained. “That was probably inevitable.” He grimaced. “No doubt I’ll be having another argument with Dumbledore pretty soon. Anyway, Snape showed up before we could get anything out of Malfoy so I figured we might get something out of him instead.”

“We already knew he used to be a Death Eater,” Harry said impatiently.

“Yes, but what we did learn is that Dumbledore does know about whatever Snape is doing with Malfoy. In fact, it was probably Dumbledore’s idea.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Snape’s reactions. He was only surprised that I knew about the connection; he didn’t appear to care at all if we took it to Dumbledore. He just didn’t want to go to the Headmaster with me. He doesn’t like it that I’m in Dumbledore’s confidences. He was especially upset by the idea that Dumbledore might have shared some things only with me.”

“Has he?”

“I doubt it. Snape doesn’t need to know that, though.” Scott smiled darkly. “He’s under the mistaken impression that I work for Dumbledore, when in fact I only work with Dumbledore. I unsettled him. He’s used to being Dumbledore’s only secret weapon.”

Harry considered that. If Dumbledore was in on Snape’s dealings with Malfoy then that was reassuring, since that meant at least the Headmaster was covering for Snape instead of being in total denial. “So, really, you just lied to him. In more than one way, I mean.”

“Repeatedly.” Scott glanced up at the ceiling, in the direction that Dumbledore’s office lay. “He’ll keep quiet about this, and so will Malfoy. The humiliation will see to that. What he’ll do instead is run to Dumbledore. He’ll focus on the jeopardy Dumbledore is putting their plans in by telling me about them. Dumbledore will deny telling me anything, Snape may or may not believe him; it doesn’t matter. Then Dumbledore will call me up and demand to know exactly what the hell I think I’m doing. I’ll twist this whole thing around against Snape.”

“He won’t buy it,” Harry said immediately, “he trusts Snape totally. He won’t hear a thing against him. I’ve tried, more than once. He just won’t listen.”

“I’ll still try it anyway. An offence is my best bet; I need to play up the self-defence aspect of things to get off the hook. It only has to work enough to deflect Dumbledore’s anger.”

Harry nearly swallowed his next words, but felt compelled to say them anyway. “What will you do if it doesn’t?”
“Take the punishment.”
“I mean if he’s mad enough to kick you out.”

Scott lowered his head and stared at the floor, eyes narrowed. “I’d try a variety of things,” he said finally.

That didn’t really answer Harry’s question but he nodded anyway, as if he understood. It was probably best not to discuss it for the time being. He changed the subject. “It’s all temporary, isn’t it,” he said glumly. “Soon as Malfoy wakes up he’ll tell Snape it was me.” Another, even more horrifying thought occurred to him. “Shite, the team is gonna kill me if I can’t play!”

“He can’t prove it was you, Snape only saw me.”

“Snape will suspect,” Harry warned.

“Snape can suspect all he fucking wants. I don’t think he’d even care it was you.” Scott grinned. “I’m the new guy he loves to hate.”

“I’m pretty sure he can hate more than one person at a time,” Harry said dryly. He brandished his wand and cast a few cleaning spells on himself and Scott, both to improve their appearances and to remove traces of his last few spells from the wand.

“This magic bullshit can be useful,” Scott commented, looking down at himself. “All right, let’s get out of here.”

“Scott, wait.” Harry crossed his arms in an unconscious gesture of defence as Scott turned around with one eyebrow raised in silent question. “You know what happened to Malfoy was an accident, right?”

“You looked at him like you’d never seen blood before, so that was pretty obvious.”

“Okay. I didn’t want you to think that I did it on purpose, or anything…” Harry straightened up and shrugged uncomfortably. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“Not yet,” Scott said, turning away.

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Neville placed the flat of his arm against the glass of the greenhouse door and wiped away the accumulated fog. It wasn’t cold outside, despite the descent of evening, but it was still significantly warmer in the greenhouse and that meant he couldn’t see out when he wanted to. He was checking the sunset to gauge the time, as there weren’t any clocks amongst the plants.

It was only a little past curfew and he had permission to be where he was but he still wanted to get back to the common room so he could finish up some of his homework. He also rather hoped to spend some time with his friends, like he did most nights after classes. Even if they couldn’t find anything to do but sit around and talk by the fire, Scott could always tell them an interesting story, or get a card game started.

He felt sorry for Luna sometimes since she couldn’t always join them in the evening, trapped as she was in the Ravenclaw tower. He knew the other Ravenclaws didn’t treat her very well; he felt a familiar surge of anger at the thought. All she ever got from her own house was derision and abuse. He knew what it felt like to be left out.
He decided to check the greenhouse one more time before calling it a night. He’d always enjoyed using some of his free time to do what he did best. His friends had never scoffed at his affinity for Herbology like some others had, and he very much appreciated that.

There was something about plants that he found fascinating. Most people saw life as a parade of creatures moving against a green background, but they just didn’t understand how alive that background was in its own right. Each plant had a story, a cycle of birth and death. Many had complicated adaptations and defences. They were useful, too. Students of Potions needed to learn to appreciate how much work went into cultivating some of those ingredients. There were any number of plants that were quite intractably dangerous. He grinned with the memory of Scott fighting the Venomous Tentacula. He seemed to go out of his way to antagonise the carnivorous plant during Herbology, a habit which had earned him at least one reprimand.

Neville seemed stuck on the subject of his friends tonight, but they had been very much on his mind ever since Scott had divulged certain revelations. It brought back a feeling that had been introduced to him in the DA, the sensation of participating in a thing of great importance, of truly being a part of something that mattered. Sometimes he still couldn’t believe that they had chosen him as a friend. What could Harry Potter possibly see in Neville Longbottom?

When he’d first come to Hogwarts, he didn’t really think he’d have any friends. After all, he hadn’t before. Why should that change? Short boys with no self-esteem and little magical ability were not highly prized as companions. He had resigned himself to simply surviving in his new environment, if he could even manage that.

Instead, he had not only made friends but they had encouraged him to better himself. If someone had told his younger self that one day he’d be fighting side by side with Harry Potter after breaking into the Department of Mysteries, he’d have thought they were playing a cruel joke on him. But he’d been there. And he had fought.

Some days when he looked in the mirror he wasn’t entirely certain who he saw any more. But he was sure of one thing – that person was a damn sight better than the old Neville who had used to stand there.

The sound of the doors opening behind him brought him out of his reverie. There was a large fern blocking his view, but he knew it was probably Professor Sprout coming in to check on him. “I’ve almost finished,” he called out. “Just tidying up.”

“Oh,” a dreamy voice answered, “and I just got here.”

Neville stepped to the left and pushed the fern aside to see Luna gazing around the greenhouse as if she’d never seen it before. She always had that manner about her, as if every time she showed up somewhere it was by complete accident. “Luna!” he said, surprised. “What are you doing here?”


Luna wasn’t really as hard to understand as some people thought, or at least he didn’t think so. He just had to take everything she said as its own standalone piece of conversation, without any preconceived notions about what she should have said. “Well, what were you doing for, uh, the largest part?”

She turned those wide eyes on him and as always he felt a little nervous under her innocent scrutiny. “I came to find you,” she said matter-of-factly, “because I knew everyone else was in the common room, and I was lonely.” There was no trace of self-pity in her voice, only her own personal brand of unselfconscious truth.
Sometimes Luna could break his heart with a sentence. “You— you know we don’t want to leave you out,” he tried to explain, feeling that his stumbling words were inadequate. “It’s just you’re not allowed out after curfew… Though you seem to be out right now, anyway…” he stopped, confused.

“I left our common room before curfew,” she informed him, answering his unspoken question. “No one will notice that I’m gone.”

Again he felt that stab in his chest. Why did people act that way towards her? Couldn’t they see that she was a friend worth having? “I always notice that you’re gone,” he told her, and then wasn’t sure where the words had come from.

She stared at him silently for a moment, and he found it hard to meet her eyes. “Thank you,” she said simply. “I’ve never heard that before, and it’s very nice to know.”

There was a casual honesty about her that was disarming. Some found it disturbing and strange, but Neville thought it was one of the more admirable personality traits he had encountered. Anyone could lie about themselves. It was honesty that required a special kind of courage. Not for the first time, he wondered why she had been sorted into Ravenclaw. The only people he knew as brave as Luna Lovegood were his other friends, and they were all in Gryffindor.

“Luna,” he said slowly, “I’ve, uh, I’ve got permission to be out here for a little longer, then I’m going back to the tower… Do you want to come with me? As long as you’re with me I don’t think anyone will stop us, I have this paper from Professor Sprout…” he trailed off.

She smiled at him. “I’d like that,” she said, sounding less vague than usual.

“Good, right,” Neville stammered. “I’ve just got to finish up here then, then we’ll go…” He scurried around the tables, completing a few small tasks while Luna silently observed.

Dusting himself off, he looked around to make sure there was nothing else. “I’m done. I’ll just lock up, and then we can go.”

They exited the greenhouse and Neville closed the double doors behind them, fishing out a small key ring from his pocket and locking them both. He straightened up and turned around.

He jumped a little bit when he found Luna standing extremely close to him. She met his eyes and smiled again. “I’m glad I found you, Neville,” she said softly.

Neville’s hands shook slightly as he matched her gaze. “So am I,” he whispered, and didn’t know why he was whispering.

He pulled himself together when she began walking up the path towards the school, and hurried a little to catch up. The sun was almost down behind the horizon but it was still light enough to see. They walked together beneath the faded orange and purple horizon in a comfortable peace, the evening air ripe with the hint of summer’s promise.

Neville thought it would be a good night.

***---~**~---***

The roar of the crowd was deafening, though that was unsurprising considering the stakes that rode on the game. Harry and his team were, as best Scott could judge, at their finest. Harry whirled about the pitch at top speed, dodging Bludgers and swerving around the other players with consummate skill. His ability was reassuring but Scott would still have preferred there to be less
danger to the Seeker. He didn’t have a problem with sports that involved bodily injury (and in fact preferred them that way), but Harry needed to stay in one piece for a very important reason.

Still, he was used enough to Harry’s manoeuvres by this point. Weighing on his mind far more heavily was the crumpled parchment that he continued to crinkle in one clenched fist. It was an importunate note, one that contained a message and a demand. The fact that he was ignoring it for the time being meant he was sending a message of his own. He glanced down at the paper again and frowned, feeling the same anger he always did when he considered its contents.

The Headmaster might have earned the right to summon him, but he would go in his own time. Showing up when he felt like it would make it clear that the two of them were equals. He was not a subordinate.

“Scott?”

He raised his head when he heard his name called. To his left Hermione was watching him with a concerned look. “Yeah?” he said.

“Are you all right?” she asked him.

Scott shrugged and refocused on the game. “Yeah, I guess. Why?”

“You’ve been playing with that paper the whole time.” Hermione looked down at it but he closed his fist tighter so she couldn’t see it clearly. “You haven’t even shouted anything rude yet.”

He grinned. “That was unusual enough for you to notice, huh.”

“Unfortunately, yes,” she sniffed. “So?”

“So what?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “So what’s wrong?”

Scott watched as Ron made a perfect save with one hand, tucking the Quaffle into his chest and rolling with the momentum. “It’s a note from Dumbledore asking me to come up and talk to him.”

“He wants to see you after the game?”

“Actually, he wanted to see me before the game.”

Hermione started visibly. She whirled on him, whipping poor Neville across the face with her hair. “Then what on earth on you doing here? Go!”

“I’ll go when I’m damn good and ready,” Scott testily informed her.

“Scott, while you are a student at this school—” she began hotly, but was drowned out when Katie Bell swooped through the opposing team’s defences and scored.

Scott and Hermione sat and glowered at each other as everyone around them stood and cheered, the shadows of waving arms making the scene look like a staring match held under a forest canopy.

Eventually the surge died down and she resumed berating him. “While you are a student at this school, you have to listen to Dumbledore! He’s the Headmaster!”

She said it as if ‘Headmaster’ was the end all be all of authority, and perhaps for her it was. “I am listening to him,” he told her. “I’m just doing it on my own timetable.”
Hermione sighed and deflated somewhat. He supposed it might have been because she had seen the wisdom of his actions, but it was more likely that she had seen the futility of arguing with him. He wished she saw that more often.

“Scott, I was under the impression that you need to remain here at Hogwarts,” she pointed out. “Should you be doing anything to jeopardise that?”

Okay, so she hadn’t seen the futility at all. She had just chosen a different tactic. “He needs to understand that I’m not at his goddamn beck and call,” Scott said stubbornly. “It’s worth a little risk to make a point. I don’t tell him what to do.”

“Of course you don’t tell him what to do, he’s the Headmaster of this school!”

She was clearly unable to grasp the concept of Dumbledore being Scott’s equal instead of his superior. Despite her incomprehension, her words were troubling. Scott was already reconsidering the possible ramifications of his temerarious impulse.

One of the core problems with being age sixteen was the tendencies it brought with it. He was fully aware of all the developmental, hormonally-based issues that being a teenager implied. Unfortunately, that didn’t make him any less subject to them. He was more excitable, more prone to spur of the moment whims and much quicker to anger. In the heat of the moment it was easy to forget. He found himself wondering more and more which decisions had been the result of calculated reasoning and what was born out of impulsive, temperamental behaviour.

“That he is,” Scott muttered.

Hermione leaned in closer, unable to hear him over the crowd. “What?”

“I’m going to go see Dumbledore,” he shouted, standing up decisively.

“Good! Hurry!”

It took some fancy footwork to slip through the packed stands and exit the pitch. Scott jogged down the path towards the school, the cacophony inside the pitch becoming a distant bass rumble periodically increasing in intensity. It was marvellous weather for Quidditch, and though Scott had no particular investment in the game he still resented being forced to retreat indoors.

As he ran he considered his options. Dumbledore would by now know the truth of what had happened in Myrtle’s bathroom, or at least he would suspect it. Scott figured that would most likely be in his favour. It would be worse for Dumbledore to believe that Scott had attacked another student with a knife than to know it was an accidental spell by Harry which had done the damage. No doubt Malfoy had portrayed the incident as anything but accidental, but Scott could correct that.

It would be harder to gloss over the confrontation with Snape. While Scott might not have gone so far as to slice up Malfoy (however tempting that recourse had been), he had threatened Snape. But, in a way, that was more acceptable. Snape was a sort of equal, a contemporary, and threatening him wasn’t so dire an act as injuring a comparatively helpless student. Plus, Dumbledore was well aware that both of them had antagonised the other, so it wasn’t like Snape could get away with protestations of total innocence. It was conceivable that, given the personalities of those involved, Dumbledore might have even been expecting such a confrontation.

Scott decided to cut to the chase immediately – he’d walk into Dumbledore’s office and toss out a denial and an explanation all at once before the Headmaster could work up any serious anger.
The gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore’s office moved aside when Scott spoke the password he had been given and he rode the odd stone escalator up another floor. Taking a deep breath through his nose, he squared his shoulders and strode forward with a purposeful march. The appearance of righteous anger would be of most use, he thought. He could meet any hostility of Dumbledore’s head on and avoid the appearance of reporting for a scolding.

With a shove, he flung open the double doors of the office and headed straight for the large desk that Dumbledore sat behind. The Headmaster seemed to be calm, though there was a definite frown on his face.

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak, but Scott beat him to it. “I don’t know what they told you, but it’s not true,” he said loudly. “Harry had no idea what that spell would do. I covered for him and I had good reasons for doing it, and if you actually think about it for a second you’ll discover a few of them yourself.”

With that, he collapsed gracelessly into the waiting chair across from the desk and sat in silence, giving Dumbledore an unrepentant look.

Dumbledore gazed back at him, his frown even more pronounced. “That does not change the fact that Harry severely injured another student.”

“And it’s a good thing he did. Malfoy was about to crucio Harry when he got hit – I was there, I heard him.” Scott leaned back in his seat and gave Dumbledore a pointed look. “Bet Snape didn’t say anything about that, did he, even though I told him.” He held his silence for a few seconds, letting that sink in. Then he scooted forward to meet Dumbledore’s eye more directly. “Now you can go ahead and punish Harry if you want, but that’s a pretty backward way to do things. I don’t think you can hold someone accountable for panicking when an Unforgivable is headed their way.”

“That is true. And I won’t be punishing Harry for the incident,” Dumbledore grudgingly allowed. “But the question that must be answered is what the two of you were hoping to accomplish by seeking Draco out in the first place.”

“What are you hoping to accomplish by sending Snape to offer his help?” Dumbledore’s eyes widened slightly. “Oh, yes,” Scott said with a touch of spitefulness that he couldn’t quite repress, “I can put the pieces together. Just because you’re trying to find out what Malfoy’s up to doesn’t mean I can’t take a look myself.”

“And then what? What happens when you discover his plans, plans we both know must certainly run against our interests? You’ll stop him? Kill him? I won’t allow it.” Dumbledore’s eyes were bereft of their usual twinkle, and instead they sparked. “You make the mistake of assuming too much. I am not as unaware as you seem to believe.”

“Uh huh. And your idea of being aware is to put Snape on the job.”

“Professor Snape has my absolute confidence,” Dumbledore said in a quiet but steely voice. “I’m afraid your friendship with Harry has biased you in a way I should have expected. Surely you’re aware of how they view each other.”

“Snape’s actions have biased me against him. He’s an asshole and a sociopath and you need to shorten his leash.” Scott regretted the jab as soon as it left his mouth (because it would only anger Dumbledore further, not because it insulted Snape), but was too stubborn to take it back.

Dumbledore’s eyes flashed. “I have found your behaviour to be questionable lately. I don’t doubt Harry’s innocence in this matter but the fact remains that you threatened Severus, without regard
for his status as your teacher—"

“You’re not mad because I threatened Snape,” Scott scoffed. “You’re mad because I confirmed his suspicions. Now he knows you didn’t tell him the truth about me, which damages your hold on him. And once a traitor—”

“Enough.” Dumbledore rose slightly in his chair, looming over Scott’s smaller form. The sense of his power was palpable. For a moment they held their positions, glaring at each other with hard stares. Then, with a deep breath, Dumbledore sank back into his seat. He picked up and held out a small bowl of candy. “Have a lemon drop.”

Biting back his immediate response, Scott nodded wordlessly and popped one of the confections into his mouth, letting the sour taste take the place of any more harsh words.

“Now, I understand your concerns,” Dumbledore said, his voice even. “But remember that I did not tell Severus of your powers or your purpose here in the same way I have not told you of his own designs. Not all secrets are mine alone to keep.”

“All right,” Scott mumbled around the candy.

Dumbledore closed his eyes and sighed, though whether he was letting go of his vestiges of anger or remembering something, Scott wasn’t sure. “Scott... The reason I accepted your unnatural place in Harry’s life is because I believe the more help the boy has, the better. His is a long and arduous road, a terrible task. I knew, with the friends he has, that he would never face it alone. But if your presence can tip the scales in some unforeseen way...” He paused. “Well. It is difficult to say how you will change things, though undoubtedly you already have. I have bent all my efforts towards seeing Harry succeed... Yet I fear they are not enough. And that is why, ultimately, I do not oppose you, despite your methods.

“And so that is why I ask you – keep him safe. Guide him to his destiny. Protect him from whomever and whatever wishes him harm. Place Severus and Draco and all other such worries at my feet, for if Harry does not confront Lord Voldemort as he eventually must, then these efforts will have been for naught.”

It was a convincing speech, well worthy of the sapient mind that Scott knew lurked behind those half-moon glasses. He only wished it were so simple.

Harry was his primary concern but not his only one. He had other Primes to worry about, people whose actions would decide the shape of fate in ways equally important to Harry himself. If Harry survived while the others failed in some unknown but necessary way then the universe would be forced to crash and reconfigure, over and over again, searching for a new spatiality that would bring Harry and Voldemort together under the required circumstances. The last thing Scott wanted on his hands was a Catastrophe Level Reordering. At least with things as they were he had some sort of grasp on the requisites. A CLR sat with the rest of the worst case scenarios; most of the time the shape rebounded well enough from small deviations and simply compensated in new and unforeseen ways. That didn’t change that fact that such disasters were a real possibility.

He didn’t share any of these thoughts with Dumbledore. He was being handed a way out, so it was best to nod and agree. “I’m doing everything I can,” he told Dumbledore. He saw another opportunity to diffuse the situation that had brought him to the Headmaster’s office, and said, “That’s kind of why I was threatening Snape, you know. I wasn’t aware that you were banking on him so much. I thought it might be best to make him stay away from Harry.”

“It may be for the best, but not for those reasons,” Dumbledore said with a sigh.
“Maybe I shouldn’t be talking since it’s better to keep me away from Snape - whoa!” Scott sat bolt upright and gripped the sides of his chair as several serious changes in the shape made themselves apparent.

Dumbledore’s eyes widened, and he drew his wand with an involuntary motion. “What is it?”

“I don’t know. Something just happened.” Noticing Dumbledore’s alarm, Scott abandoned his concentration on the shape for a moment to reassure him. “Something good. Something that was supposed to happen.”

“But you can’t discern what it might be?”

“It has to do with Harry.” Scott jumped out of his chair and hurried towards the door. “Sorry to cut things short, but I need to check this out. I think we came to an understanding, right?”

“Of a sort,” Dumbledore said wryly.

“Just remember we’re both trying to help the same kid,” Scott told him, and then took off for the Gryffindor common room.

The stone escalator was far too slow for Scott’s impatience, so he leapt off of it and shot out the exit ahead of the contraption. His time spent exploring Hogwarts paid off yet again as he deftly manoeuvred through the halls at top speed.

The only major event in motion was the Quidditch game, Scott thought as he ran. So it was possible that a Gryffindor victory had been required. Then again, it was also conceivable that defeat had been in the making. Either way it had been important and he needed to be near his Primes to watch for any immediate repercussions or determine if it was something that would be felt further down the road.

The common room was in tumult when Scott came bursting through the portrait entrance and skidded to a halt in the midst of what appeared to be a particularly loud post game party. The raucous celebration made it clear that a victory had been achieved. Scott didn’t especially care about the success other than to wonder whether it had been the event which had brought him running. He doubted it.

He sighted Ron amidst a group of awed third years, retelling the game with more than a touch of hyperbole. A glowing Hermione hovered nearby, letting him have his moment. Scott pushed his way over to them.

“Scott!” Ron called out. “Did you see that one save I made-”

“Yeah, it was great,” Scott interrupted. He turned his attention towards Hermione. “What happened?”

She looked blankly back at him. “We won.”

“No, you think?” Scott scanned the room again, but no answers made themselves apparent. “Come here, I need to talk to you.”

Hermione, ever curious, willingly followed him over to a secluded corner. Scott was surprised to see Ron abandon his fan club to go with them, but supposed that he shouldn’t have underestimated the strength of his bond to Hermione.

Hermione didn’t waste any time. “What is it?” she asked eagerly as soon as they were isolated from
the crowds, no doubt anticipating being let in on Kharadjai business.

“I was hoping you’d know. Has anything happened, and I mean anything, between now and the end of the game – I’d say in the last fifteen minutes, actually – that struck you as important?” Scott hastened to clarify when he saw their confusion. “It could be something you noticed and aren’t sure why, anything that caught your eye, possibly involving Harry.”

“Nothing comes to mind,” Hermione said, brow creased in thought. “Ron?”

“We won the game, came back to the party.” Ron shrugged. “That’s it.”

“Nobody said anything to you?” Scott pressed him.

“Everybody said something to me.” Ron grinned. “Nothing strange, though.”

“Huh.” Scott didn’t think it likely that he was mistaken. He did find it unusual that Primes as vital as Ron and Hermione hadn’t experienced at least part of what had felt like a major event.

Felt like, yes… Perhaps that was the key. The vast majority of events, both major and minor, had been obscured from him. It was possible that this unknown event had been one of small impact and it had only seemed severe compared to the usual drought of information.

“Okay,” Scott said. “Just keep this in mind.”

“Wait!” Hermione caught his sleeve as he started to move away. “What are you going to do?”

“Talk to Harry.” Scott frowned, noticing that Harry didn’t appear to be in the room. “Hey, how come he isn’t basking in his glory?”

“He was a minute ago. Where’s that wanker run off to?” Ron wondered.

“An excellent question.” Scott set his sights on the stairway to the boys dormitory, the most likely place for Harry to be. “I’m gonna find him. If you see him tell him that I’m looking for him.”

Scott’s gut feeling, tied to the shape as it was, told him that he was headed in the right direction, so he quickened his pace. The sooner he found Harry, the sooner he could get to the bottom of things. He reached the top of the stairs and headed straight for the sixth year dorms. The door to the room was shut, but he figured that since it was his dormitory too he had just as much right to barge in as anyone else, so he did.

What happened next wasn’t intended. In Scott’s defence, it wasn’t like he had been forewarned of what form the event he was pursuing had taken. He had been following nothing more than a hunch. So when he opened the door to what was, after all, his own room and found Harry and Ginny locked in a furious kiss, he could hardly be held responsible.

The pair broke apart on his entry, still breathing hard. Harry had the beginnings of a blush suffusing his face. Ginny just looked furious.

“Whoa,” Scott said, holding up one hand, “don’t stop on my account.”

Harry’s blush was complete. Ginny marched towards Scott with the air of someone about to slam a door shut in someone else’s face.

“It was beautiful, really,” Scott said rapidly, “but I think you can do better. I want to hear some violins – and I want time to slow down, with wind ruffling through your hair.” He raised his hands
and used his fingers to make a box, as if he was framing them in a camera shot. “I want to see frickin’ white doves _shooting out of my ass_, because the kiss is _so_ hot that it will accept nothing less. Could you do that for me?”

He stepped back just in time to avoid utilising his face as a doorstop.
“It’s such a beautiful day out,” Ginny said in a tone of contentment.

Harry had to agree. May had mellowed in its old age and was eager to share its cloud-free skies, warm sunshine and thick, soft grass.

The Hogwarts grounds stretched out before them, green under the midday sun as the shades of trees danced at the edge of the forest in the rustling wind. The sky was an inverted sea of bright blue, flecked with white clouds like foam in the surf. A cooling breeze rippled over the top of the lawn, stirring up loose leaves and dandelion tufts. It was a day for verdant things to grow. Harry took a deep breath of fresh, grass scented air, and let it shimmer down his spine.

His head was pillowed on Ginny’s lap as they lay in the shade of a tree not far from the lake. The position was beneficial to everyone involved as Ginny enjoyed playing with Harry’s hair and Harry enjoyed placing his head in close proximity to her thighs and more delicate parts. It was sort of like copping a feel, except he did it with his cheek instead of his palm and there was little danger of being slapped.

Nearby the sounds of students splashing in the shallow water mixed with the insects buzzing in the tall grass. It was a warm day, but comfortable enough in the shade and Harry wasn’t willing to give up his pillow in order to play in the lake. The sun occasionally broke through the shifting leaves above him to shine blindingly on his face, so he kept his eyes closed and drifted close to the border between sleep and wakefulness.

“Harry?”

Ginny’s voice pulled him back to the land of the conscious. “Huh?” he mumbled.

“Just checking if you’re awake,” she said, ruffling his hair for the hundredth time.

“I am now,” he said a trifle sullenly.
“Sleep at night, Harry,” Ginny told him heartlessly. “Talk to me.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“Isn’t a beautiful day out?”

He realised that he had never actually answered her, his thoughts on the matter being purely internal. “Yeah, it is,” he said, “and when people talk about the weather doesn’t it usually mean there’s nothing to say?”

“Nice try.” She hit him gently on the head with one knuckle.

Harry reluctantly sat up, feeling dizzy for a moment as he regained his equilibrium. “We could talk about how great the team was last game, if you think that subject hasn’t been done to death.”

“I’m pretty sure it has.”

“I was right, then. There’s no point in talking, so…” Harry closed his eyes again fell back down onto Ginny’s lap.

“Harry!” she laughed, pushing on his shoulder while he stubbornly refused to move. “How long do you expect me to sit here and be your pillow? My legs are starting to cramp.”

“At least another hour.”

“Forget it!” Ginny pulled her legs up to her chest, an act which roughly deposited Harry’s head onto the ground.

“Ow.” Harry pushed himself back into a sitting position and squinted out towards the lake. “Did you want to swim?”

“No, I want to talk, remember?” Ginny settled back against the tree and regarded Harry with a small smile. “You know people are still asking me about you.”

“That’s stupid,” Harry muttered. He shifted over next to her but his gaze was fixed on the ground. He always felt uncomfortable whenever his fame became an issue in his relationship with Ginny. “They’ve had, what, two weeks to get used to us being together.”

“Thirteen days, actually,” Ginny corrected him, “but close enough.”

Harry shook his head, distracted from the current topic by the thought of the date. Was it really May 23rd already? It was only close to a month before school was out for the summer, a prospect he was not at all looking forward to.

“Don’t obsess over it, Harry,” Ginny told him firmly, apparently having deciphered his darkening expression. “We’ve got lots of time yet, and who says you can’t stay with us again after a bit?”

“I’m not ready for the year to end,” Harry confessed. He reached over and grasped her hand a little more desperately than he had intended to.

“That’s very sweet, but I’m sure that I’m not the only reason,” she said lightly.

“I feel like there’s this storm on the horizon,” Harry told her lowly, his eyes moving unconsciously to the real horizon, “and I don’t think I’m prepared. There’s so much more to learn.”

“From Scott?”
She didn’t sound confrontational but Harry still looked at her warily, hoping this wasn’t the start of an argument. Ginny still didn’t seem to really like the Kharadjai whom Harry had come to trust. “I suppose.”

Ginny leaned over and laid her head on his shoulder, a gesture that made Harry relax. “What is it you think that you need to know?”

The Horcruxes were a serious concern, but Harry didn’t feel ready to share that with her. He felt guilty, since he had told Ron and Hermione, but somehow endangering them with the knowledge just wasn’t the same. Ginny remained separate from the war, and though it was probably selfish Harry preferred to keep it that way. “Well, I think Scott could teach me a few things about fighting, you know, in case I get into trouble this summer.”

Her head shot up from its resting place. “What do you mean, get into trouble? What are you going to do?”

“Nothing!” Harry said quickly, trying to retreat from his mistake. “But you know me, I don’t have to go looking for trouble...”

“That’s true. You’re a walking disaster sometimes, you know that?” she sighed, and resumed her reclined position.


She raised her head and looking him in the eye with an unexpected seriousness. “You don’t need encouragement, Harry,” she informed him, sliding one hand around to the back of his head, “you need someone to watch out for you, since you don’t seem to care much for the job.”

“Too much like honest work, I guess,” he stammered in reply, drawn in by her closeness. He tried to glance away from the mesmerising brown of her eyes but failed.

She rolled her eyes at him and looked like she was about to say something, but apparently she changed her mind because she kissed him instead.

Harry hadn’t been on the receiving end of very many kisses until he had entered a relationship with Ginny, but after sharing a number of them with her he seemed to be getting the hang of it. There was a bit of a trick involved in getting his nose into the right position and in making sure his glasses didn’t poke her in the eye, but once the angles were agreeable, instinct was able to take over. He let her lead for the most part and steadily expanded his repertoire of active oral responses.

“OI! YOU TWO KNOCK IT OFF!”

The shout rang out from somewhere behind Harry, startling him. He broke the kiss and spun around to see who was yelling, but before he even completed the motion his brain caught up and he recognised the voice.

“STUFF IT, RON!” Ginny screamed back at her brother, who was standing a ways off with Hermione, a revolted look on his face.

At Ginny’s reply he began striding towards them but Hermione caught his arm and hauled him back. Harry didn’t know what she was telling Ron, but she was nothing if not convincing when she wanted to be. Though Ron was clearly reluctant the pair moved on, Hermione looking back over her shoulder to give Harry and Ginny a small wave.

“I’ll have to talk to him,” Harry said resignedly as he watched them walk off.
“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll be talking to him,” Ginny snapped, her face flushed.

Harry prudently grabbed her hand again so she wouldn’t be able to storm off after Ron. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed. “I can handle Ron.”

“Not very well. You’ll turn it into a big fight and then I’ll be stuck between the two of you when you’re not talking to each other,” Harry said reasonably.

Apparently his logic was unwelcome; Ginny turned away from him with a huff. “I won’t just let him get away with that, I’ve had about enough of his shite when it comes to my boyfriends!”

Harry didn’t like being reminded that she had been in similar situations with other boys before him. He tried to change the subject. “Speaking of people who get you all shirty, here comes Scott now.”

Scott was meandering across the lawn in their general direction, whistling an oddly complicated tune and pausing frequently to kick at clumps of dandelions. Lavender and Parvati shouted a multitude of unflattering things at him as he booted a thick cluster of already sprouted weeds and covered the sunbathing girls with a cloud of white fluff. He nimbly dodged the dirt clods they flung at him in reprisal and jogged away with a malevolent grin on his face.

Ginny got that look, the one she always did whenever Scott was around. Harry knew that she didn’t actually hate Scott – or even really find him unpleasant, for that matter. Not all the time, anyway. But she definitely mistrusted his methods and probably his intentions, too. Hermione did also, but she didn’t seem to make it as personal as Ginny did. Harry had the glum feeling that Ginny’s wariness had a lot to do with him. She didn’t trust Scott to look out for Harry’s interests, or feelings, or whatever, and while Harry sort of appreciated the sentiment he wished she’d have a little more faith in his ability to take care of himself.

“What’s up, jizz mop?” Scott said to Harry as he approached. He nodded towards Ginny. “Ginnycide.”

Harry decided to take a page out of Scott’s book. “Blow it out your arse, prick,” he said by way of greeting.

“Yeah, sod off wanker,” Ginny chimed in, though Harry couldn’t help but think she sounded more serious about it.

Scott chortled gleefully and flopped down into the grass next to them. “So, I have a question for you guys,” he said. “Excepting your sudden plunge into significant other-dom, has anything unusual happened lately? Anything that would stand out and make you take notice? Or, have you had any recurrent thoughts or intuitions?”

Harry knew what Scott was asking, though he didn’t think he’d have much to offer his friend in the way of insights. “No, not lately. Is there a particular reason?”

“Events are accelerating,” Scott stated calmly. “Does that mean anything to you?”

“Maybe...” Harry hedged. Hadn’t he just been talking with Ginny about how he felt there was something on the horizon? While she was still around he didn’t want to be specific as to what that something was. “I think Dumbledore might want to talk to me, sometime soon, and that’s been weighing on me a little...” he said pointedly, hoping that Scott would get the message.

Scott nodded slowly. “Makes sense, Ginny?”
Ginny had been looking at the two of them, clearly suspecting that she was only getting half of the conversation. “What?”

“What about you? Any hunches?”

“I don’t get what you’re asking,” she told him rather sharply.

“Then the answer is no.” Scott sighed and leaned back onto his elbows. “Conflicting information is so disheartening. At least when everyone is worried you know that something is going to happen.” He sighed again and glanced around the lake edge. “So where’s the R Man and Little Miss H?”

“They walked off that way,” Harry said, vaguely waving one arm in the general direction he had last seen his friends.

“Perhaps finding a copse of trees suitable for copulation,” Scott mused, peering off in the direction of the forest.

“Oh, ick,” Ginny gagged. “Shut up, right now. I don’t want to hear anything about them.”

“Are you unfamiliar with the concept? ‘Shagging’, I believe is your colloquial term? I can walk you through the process, but not only would Harry object, I’m pretty sure you couldn’t keep up.”

Scott had that gleeful, mean spark in his eye that meant he would continue to taunt Ginny until she either found it funny or lost her temper.

Harry decided to intercede. “Scott,” he said quickly before Ginny could spit out a scathing retort. He moved over and put his head close to his friend’s ear. He thought he knew the right sensibility of Scott’s to appeal to. “Hey, come on, mate,” he whispered pleadingly, “don’t bollix this up for me. Can’t you give me some time alone with her?”

Harry could almost see the gears in Scott’s head shift from the setting of half-playful antagonism to male-best-friend-mode. “Sorry, man,” he whispered back, “I didn’t mean to cock block.” He jumped to his feet. “I’m gonna go catch up to Hermione,” he said loudly for Ginny’s benefit. “Need to ask her about one of these spell bullshit dealies.”

Scott sprinted off to find Hermione, stopping on his way to knock the breath out of Seamus with a full body tackle that sent both of them crashing to the grass and nearly flattened Lavender, who was sunning herself nearby.

“You cheeky fucker!” Harry heard Seamus shout as he attempted to put Scott into a headlock. He wished Seamus the best of luck, but knew there was little chance that Scott could be bested in even a non-serious fight. Sure enough, no more than a couple seconds later Scott bent Seamus’ arm up in a submission hold and flipped him on his back again.

“What’s gotten into him?” Ginny wondered, watching the altercation as Lavender and Parvati cheered the two boys on. “Is he out looking to pick a fight with everyone?”

That was entirely possible, Harry knew, but he didn’t think it would reflect well on Ginny’s opinion of Scott’s character. “He’s just having some fun with Seamus. He’s not really trying to hurt him.” Harry winced as Seamus’ legs were kicked out from under him and he slammed into the turf face first. “Well, not seriously.”

His most recent impact with the dirt seemed to have knocked the fight out of Seamus, and he slumped onto his back with his hands held up in silent surrender. Scott grinned down at his fallen opponent and then turned to talk to Lavender, though Harry couldn’t hear what they were saying.
“You obviously know how to get rid of him,” Ginny observed. “What did you say?”

“I told him we wanted to be alone for awhile,” Harry said diplomatically.

“I’m surprised he was that considerate.”

“He can be considerate sometimes.” Harry didn’t inform her as to why Scott had been so accommodating, but that was probably better left unsaid.

“Hmmm,” she hummed non-committally. She was still watching Scott closely.

Harry didn’t feel there was anything to be gained by following their current thread of conversation any further. He knew as well and probably better than anyone (with the exception of Hermione) that Scott could be a royal pain in the arse, but he still felt compelled to defend his friend and that wouldn’t sit well with Ginny.

“So what about you? Any plans this summer?” he asked her instead.

“A number, if you should happen to show up,” she informed him with a smouldering sort of look that made Harry’s trousers feel a bit too tight. With Scott successfully banished from the conversation, Ginny scooted back closer to Harry.

Harry swallowed hard but managed to stammer, “Like what? Or do you not want to give it away?”

“I don’t mind giving you a sample,” Ginny said, leaning in towards him again, “since I know you’ll keep coming back for more.”

Over the next few minutes Harry was given an extended chance to further sharpen his osculatory skills.

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“Hermione, let go-”

“No,” she said firmly.

“Come off it, I’m not gonna yell again-”

“Only because you want to go pull them apart.” Hermione tightened her grip on Ron’s sleeve and dragged him further away from the tree where Harry and Ginny were ensconced. “Leave them be.”

“What, and just let them snog in public?”

“Yes.”

Ron continued to grumble but ceased dragging his feet. The growing distance between him and the debilitating sight of his sister and best mate snogging helped make the disgust less immediate, Hermione supposed. She began to regret suggesting that they take a walk. She had known that Harry and Ginny were outside together, and if she had stayed in the common room the encounter wouldn’t have happened.

“Hey! Hermione!” Scott’s strident voice rang out not far behind.

Ron looked over his shoulder. “You know, I bet he’s at least partly to blame.”

“To blame for what?” Hermione asked. “For Harry and Ginny snogging?”
“Yeah. He helped us out, didn’t he? Scott, you poncey bastard!” Ron raised his voice, shouting back at Scott. “It’s your fault I’m scarred for life, mate!”

Scott jogged up to them, chuckling grotesquely at Ron’s sally. “You should see what they do when they’re not in public,” he said.

“No I bloody well shouldn’t,” Ron retorted. “And neither should you, for that matter. Have you been spying on them?”

“What can I say? There’s a shortage of porn at this school. A portage, I suppose.”

“Oh, bloody hell, don’t tell me you’ve been getting off to my sodding sister.”

“Oh, okay, I won’t tell you.”

“I think you boys can have this conversation alone,” Hermione said primly, and turned to leave.

“Stick around, actually,” Scott told her. “I have a question for you.”

“Yes?”

“Remember the night of the game I asked you if you had noticed anything unusual, and you still haven’t provided me with a satisfactory answer.”

“But you found out what it was. Harry and Ginny kissed, and they’re together now,” Hermione said, confused.

“Maybe. That’s what I used to think. The curve of the shape suggests a variety of things, all of them conjecture.” Scott squinted off into the forest, though Hermione wasn’t sure if he was actually looking at anything in particular. “We’re picking up the pace. This is a long term acceleration that can’t be explained by a limited focal event.”

“Right. Now explain it again in English,” Ron said.

“Things are coming to a head.”

Hermione felt a low jolt of apprehension in her stomach. “Are we going to be attacked?”

Scott looked over her with an expression of serious interest, as if she had offered a suggestion instead of a query. “I don’t know. Do you think that’s likely?”

“No, of course not,” she said hurriedly. “Not with Dumbledore here.”

“But it was the first thing that popped into your head, so you must have thought it was at least possible,” Scott pointed out.

“We’re living in dangerous times,” Hermione said nervously, not at all liking where Scott’s mind was going. “It was just an impulse on my part, surely that isn’t significant.”

Scott scrutinised her closely for a few more seconds, but then his eyes lost their searching look and he shrugged. “If you say so.” He turned towards Ron. “And how about you, my firecrotch friend?”

“I think we might get attacked,” Ron said with a straight face.

“How am I supposed to shape with my Primes if I can’t ever get a consensus out of you fucks?” Scott complained.
“Perhaps you shouldn’t rely so much on people who aren’t accustomed to ‘shaping’,” Hermione shot back. “It’s not our fault we can’t feel the same things you can.”

“I know. I didn’t really expect to get anything useful out of you, I was just making sure you were worthless.” Scott grinned at her.

“At least we’re Primes. You’re not necessary at all.”

“You guys are Priority Two Primes, which makes you the sidekick to Harry,” Scott told her, still smiling mockingly. “Or at least, that’s what it makes Ron. I suppose your job is to stand around and look pretty.”

Hermione clenched her fists and only by a supreme effort of will was able to suppress the urge to throw a nasty jinx or two in Scott’s direction. She knew they would have been ineffective anyway, which only made her even angrier. “I know what you’re doing,” she said as calmly as she was able, “and I’m not going to fight with you just because you’re bored.”

“Then who will?”

“Call your sister. She always seems happy enough to oblige.”

“No joke, mate. And I thought that my family know how to row,” Ron said. “You two go at it like it’s an art.”

“It isn’t?” Scott said.

“If that was all you needed...” Hermione moved closer to Ron and took several meaningful steps in the direction that they had been headed before Scott stopped them.

“What, doesn’t anybody want to hang out with me? Am I the only person not getting laid today?” Scott lamented.

“Nobody’s getting laid!” Hermione spluttered.

“Then stop wasting time. You don’t have that many years left to sneak off and screw around in the woods, you know. You’ll be adults sooner than you think and then all the fun will go out of it.”

Hermione had heard enough. It was obvious that Scott had gotten the information he wanted and was now amusing himself at her expense. She had been enjoying a lovely afternoon with Ron before Scott decided to interrupt things and she wasn’t going to allow him to continue.

“We’re taking a walk, because it’s a beautiful day out,” she stated, “and I don’t mean to be rude but you’re not invited. So we’ll see you later.”

Scott slumped against a nearby tree in an exaggerated pose of dejection. “Oh, fine. I see how it is.”

“Good, I was afraid I’d have to explain it to you,” Hermione said brightly. She reached out and gave Ron a firm tug on the arm, leading him away.

“He’s not trying to follow us,” Ron noted as they sauntered off into the trees. “I reckon he knew you were serious.”

“I don’t particularly feel like spending any time with him today, to be honest.”

Ron gave her an easy smile and wrapped one arm around her waist, drawing her closer. “Fine by me.”
Neville stumbled and nearly tripped over the fallen log but managed to catch himself just in time. The bright sun shifting through the forest canopy made the ground sometimes difficult to discern, a mottled pattern of alternating bloomed light and dark earth. He slowed down to step carefully around the remains of what had once been a large tree and then hurried on down the poorly defined path.

The area he was in wasn’t technically characterised as the Forbidden Forest as it was an outlying area with sparser trees and far less undergrowth, a sort of shrub suburb surrounding the forest proper. Hagrid’s cabin wasn’t far away, and Neville nervously tried to keep it in sight. He figured as soon as he could no longer see that he had gone too far.

Luna appeared unconcerned by their relative proximity to the deep and accordingly more dangerous parts of the woods. She meandered about with no apparent destination in mind and frequently paused to examine flowers and other plants which captured her interest. Neville was happy to tell her about the ones he was able to identify, but she seemed more interested in the possibility that they might feed or house mythical creatures than in their practical aspects.

“Are you coming, Neville?” Luna called to him as he fell further behind.

Neville shot a quick glance over his shoulder and was dismayed to find that Hagrid’s cabin was nearly obscured by the trees. “Um, don’t you think we’ve gone far enough?”

To his relief, Luna assented and came back towards him. “I suppose you’re right,” she said absently. “Snorkacks aren’t likely to live where there’s not much sun.”

Deciding not to answer that, Neville picked out a trail and began walking back the way they came. “Watch out for that log,” he warned her, pointing out the obstacle which had nearly sent him sprawling.

“It’s only a log,” she said dismissively, apparently finding it unsuitable as a potential nesting place for any of her favourite creatures.

“Still tripped me up,” he mumbled, taking a detour around the stubborn object.

“That’s not very nice of it,” she commented, and gave the log a chiding kick.

“Nothing like an old log to work out the aggressions,” a loud, cheerful voice rang out through the woods. Neville looked up from watching his feet to see Scott loping his way over to them, an amused look on his face. “What are you guys doing out here?”

“Well, we... er...” Neville shut his mouth, slightly confused. Come to think of it, why were they out in the woods? Luna had simply drifted in that direction and he had followed her.

“We’re out for a walk,” Luna explained, her voice muffled by the bush she had stuck her head into as she examined its innards.

“I don’t suppose you could take a break to answer a few questions? Or maybe just one question?” Scott asked.

“I haven’t answered many questions today.” Luna’s head emerged, her hair full of small twigs. “I’m sure yours won’t be a bother.”

“Marvellous,” Scott said dryly. “In that case, have either of you had any thoughts, or maybe
feelings would be a better term, that have been repetitious? Maybe you’ve felt like something is going to happen, etcetera?”

Neville wasn’t entirely sure what Scott was getting at, but he did his best to answer. “Well, school’s about to end, so that’s been on my mind... But not like you said, no.”

“Things have been a bit quicker lately,” Luna remarked. “I suppose the world has to speed up before it can slow down.”

Scott’s eyes immediately snapped over to her. “Is that so?”

Luna took a moment to consider it before nodding gravely. “Yes, it’s so.”

“Oh huh.” Scott said nothing for a moment, staring at her. “Anything in particular lead you to that conclusion?”

“Oh, we’re *all* moving faster these days. Not just me.” Luna bent over to pick up a medium sized pine cone, which she stuck in one of her pockets.

“If you’re moving the same as everyone else, how can you tell they’re going faster?”

“Well you can feel it, can’t you? It’s quite troublesome and just a bit dizzy.” Luna looked up thoughtfully. “Is it going to rain?”

“No.”

“No,” she echoed with a touch of sadness. “It’s a shame. It might all make more sense if it would.”

“Sunlight is perhaps less conducive to thought.” Scott’s eyes were narrowed and his teeth worried at the inside of his cheek. “Have you ever felt something like this before?”

“Yes, a few times. It seems to happen about this time of year. It was the same before the big tournament in third year, and before we went to that Department last year. That was my fourth year, you know.”

“I do now.” Scott took a few steps forward and bent down slightly to be at eye level with Luna. “Luna, do me a favour – if you feel things get faster or slower, would you come tell me about it?”

“If you’d like,” she said, leaning forward until her nose was almost touching Scott’s. They stayed like that for a handful of seconds until Scott crossed his eyes. Luna smiled and leaned back.

Scott turned to Neville. “Nev, my advice is stick close to this girlie. She knows what’s up.”

As Scott walked away, Neville watched and thought about what had been said. He’d be lying to himself to say he understood all or even parts of it well, but he also wasn’t stupid. The significance was clear enough, even if the particulars left him confused.

“So something bad’s going to happen?” he said to Luna.

“We can hope not, but it probably will anyway,” she told him, sounding unperturbed by the thought.

“Are we-” Neville turned to look at her and was startled when he discovered that she was standing much closer to him than she had been before. Her silvery grey gaze was fixed on him intently, tilted upward to study his face. “Ah, are we going to be ready?”
“We can try,” she said pleasantly.

“Right.” Neville squared his shoulders and tried to look more prepared for what darkness the future might bring. At least after the Department of Mysteries he felt somewhat more like a veteran. He wasn’t at all certain he could survive that sort of thing twice, but he also wouldn’t run away. It was too late for that. For the first time he had found some measure of belief in himself, and cowardice was no longer an option.

He jumped slightly, jolted from his thoughts by an unfamiliar sensation. Luna had placed her small, fine-boned hand in his. The feeling of her soft skin against his palm immediately made him feel jumpy and hot. “You’re very brave, Neville,” she said seriously.

He flushed and tried to look away, but her silvery eyes held him fast. “I- I don’t know about that... I just try to follow Harry...”

She smiled up at him. “Someday you’ll see what I see in you.”

As always, her uncomfortable honesty disarmed him and left him reaching for something to say. Maybe, he thought dimly, there wasn’t anything to say this time? He tightened his hold on her hand and started walking back towards the lake. Luna didn’t say anything else either.

Neville thought that perhaps the future was not so insurmountable as they went hand in hand towards the sunlight.
Scott sat in the back of the library with a book in his lap. The pages were open for his perusal but the words were an unfocused blur since he wasn’t reading them. Pretending to read gave him the appearance of doing something and therefore provide an excuse to sit still and hold on to each minute as it tried to race past.

For a Kharadjai time was an interesting variable. If Scott bent his concentration on the individual moment then it rolled by with regularity, a second for every second and an hour for each hour. But if he let himself move on autopilot, slip into routine, and cease his focus on the here and now, years could blink by. After awhile he would simply get used to the distances between life landmarks. A decade was only a decade if he paid attention to it.

On this occasion he wasn’t consciously choosing to disregard the passage of time and thus had little say in the matter. It was an inevitable side effect of acceleration. Compression was a by-product of speed, a shortening of everything. With the universe hurtling headlong towards some needful event, Scott was along for the ride with everyone else.

The result was that the end of May and half of June had seemingly slipped through his fingers.

He had a full recollection of those days, remembering the important occurrences, but he was haunted by the feeling that there were so few things worthy of remembrance because he hadn’t been paying attention. He was sure if he questioned his Primes they would tell him that over the past several weeks he had been distant, somewhat uncommunicative, and just not quite *there*. That was why he was concentrating so deeply on time itself, slowing it to collect his thoughts and to plan.

Unfortunately, it was with a sinking feeling he realised that by concentrating so hard on his thoughts he had probably just sabotaged his intent. Sure enough, he raised his head from the page to see the sun setting over the Hogwarts grounds. The afternoon had fled while he had tried to count the seconds.

He sighed and tossed the book onto the table. For all his thinking, he had yet to arrive at the requisite number of conclusions. There were many questions and almost as many answers but most of them didn’t correspond, and as the school year drew to a close they weighed on him more heavily.

Where was Snape’s real place, next to Dumbledore or Voldemort, and how come Dumbledore wouldn’t brook any interference in Snape’s orders? Why had Malfoy been spending so much time in the Room of Requirement, and why didn’t Dumbledore stop him outright? What was Dumbledore’s real purpose in allowing Scott to come to Hogwarts? When would the time be right for Harry to confront his Dark nemesis?

Sometimes Scott felt like he had accomplished a great deal. There were many things he had done but all of them were unimportant compared to his principal victory: he had manoeuvred his way into becoming one of Harry’s closest companions. The relationships, the tension between Snape
and Malfoy, the work he had done to help Dumbledore – none of these things were pointless but all were strictly secondary.

Scott had spent an entire school year simply jockeying for position, starting right from the inchoate stages of his ever-changing plan. That was the real truth behind everything he had done. The game itself hadn’t even started yet, and it wouldn’t until he was in direct conflict with Riddle’s forces. Once Harry was ready to find the Horcruxes and take the fight to the enemy, then all of Scott’s effort paid off. He would be right where he needed to be.

The upcoming summer was troublesome, but not overly so. With Lila living near the Weasley’s she would be able to keep an eye on them, leaving Scott free to spend his time with Harry. Hermione, Luna and Neville would have to be checked in on periodically as well, so he was expecting a busy summer.

One aspect of things he felt he might have handled better was Harry’s training. While Scott had never been capable of assisting Harry with anything magic related it was troublesome that there hadn’t been much time for firearms familiarisation. Hogwarts was a poor place for modern weaponry, and even if that hadn’t been the case Scott wasn’t one hundred percent certain that he wanted Harry to be familiar with guns. If the UO had gambled everything on a contest of magic then it could be self-defeating for his main Prime to rely on modern weaponry. The last thing he wanted was to distract Harry from learning some spell that might be vital.

On the other hand, not training Harry in the usage of standard weaponry and tactics was imprudent at best. Perhaps over the summer break he’d take some time and give Harry a crash course in marksmanship. How much training to give Harry would be the fine line that Scott would have to walk, though any amount would likely prove useful in the future conflict.

And there would be a conflict, Scott knew. The chances of divesting the enemy of their will to fight was slim as Riddle seemed to avoid placing himself in the line of fire, obviously content to lead from the rear. Some dying would have to be done before he’d expose himself. It was too much to hope for that the Death Eaters would suffer exclusively.

His Primes were perhaps not quite battle-hardened enough for convenience, but for the most part they were... they...

...What was this?

He sat up straight in his chair, the book and thoughts of time and Death Eaters forgotten. A feeling came on him, a portent, tingling up and down his spine like a slight electric charge. It was the presage of a massive shift, a frightening motion.

The universe had gathered itself and was sprinting towards a milestone, building steam like a train. Like a plummeting object. Leaving him to wonder at what speed terminal velocity would be reached, and if anything would break their fall.

Things were moving tonight. He knew it from the shape and the sparks at the back of his brain.

Quickly, now. But carefully.

He had to keep up.

He walked rapidly through the hallways but he did not rush, taking the time to gauge the shape carefully. It was hurried and sporadic, a flashing mess of a continuum, hurtling headlong towards some major resolution that would aid it in repairing itself. Scott was certain that it was not the
ultimate resolution, but hopefully once it happened things would be become clearer, and the path to that final fork in the road might be revealed.

He reached the portrait entrance just in time to see Harry emerge. “Harry!”

“Hey,” Harry said. He ran towards Scott but instead of stopping to talk sped past. “Dumbledore wants to see me right away!” he called back over his shoulder.

“Is it about those things the Headmaster is looking for?” Scott yelled after him.

“Probably!” Harry turned a corner and went out of sight.

Scott stood there for a moment and considered that. The possibility of a Horcrux hunt seemed imminently probable. It was a major event, large enough to support the upheaval the shape.

“All right,” he muttered to himself. If Harry and Dumbledore were leaving, they certainly weren’t going alone. But he also didn’t want to leave his other Primes to their own devices. He flipped out his phone and dialled Lila.

It rang twice before she answered. “Hello?”

“It’s me. I’m sure you’re aware what’s happening.”

“Is there any way not to be? If the universe wants my attention, there’s no need to shake everything so violently,” she said wearily. “I’m nearly seasick, and you know I don’t get seasick.”

“Grab a bucket if you have to, because I need you here at the school. I’m leaving with Harry and Dumbledore tonight. Figure out some way to get Luna with everyone else in Gryffindor tower and then hold the fort.”

“Obviously we need to fly more often so I can steal some barf bags. I’m on my way.” She hung up.

Lila enjoyed ignoring him and being a real pain in the ass most of the time, Scott reflected, but when he needed it she always came through.

The second decision he had to make was much more difficult. Ageing up would allow him to be fully effective, but it would also limit his range of interactions. The last thing he wanted was his schoolmates to see him as an adult.

Still, by the time Harry returned from Dumbledore’s office it would almost certainly be after curfew, Scott reasoned, making it unlikely that anyone would see him so long as he kept clear of the common room. Plus he would appear different enough that a passing glance wouldn’t give away his identity. Even if someone thought they recognised him, the impossibility of it would insure disbelief.

In the end he felt like remaining a teenager when the shape was in such turmoil was an unacceptable risk, so he opened an aperture to his flat and stepped over space into the living room.

He arrived to find Lila in the midst packing. She had dragged a small, wheeled suitcase out from somewhere or the other and had it open on the couch. She was filling it with clothes and the amenities of personal hygiene, walking quickly between her bedroom and the bathroom.

Scott spread his hands in bewilderment. “What are you doing?”

She glanced at him condescendingly. “What does it look like, Scott?”
“We’re just going to find a Horcrux, you don’t have to gear up for an extended stay.”

“The last time you told me that,” Lila began, pausing to rearrange some pants that were not folded to her liking, “I ended up wearing the same clothes for a week and a half.”

“All your outfits look the same anyway.”

Lila slammed the suitcase shut with more force than was necessary. “No, they don’t.”

“All right, geez,” Scott said, backing away from her with large, exaggerated steps. “So sorry to offer your Highness some constructive criticism?”

“Don’t you have work to do?”

It was unfortunate, but Scott had to admit she had a point. He left Lila in the living room and began to dig out the clothes he wanted to wear for the Horcrux hunt.

He didn’t know where he would be going so he tried to choose an all purpose array. He forsook his usual shoes for a pair of solid hiking boots and, attempting to combine unobtrusiveness with utility, grabbed a dark red button up shirt to put over his t-shirt in order to hide his shoulder holsters. He disliked the faded yellow lines of the flower pattern the tropical-looking button up shirt was adorned with (it was not well suited for concealment) but it would do.

With his adult clothes chosen, he stripped down to change age. It was a quick process and one he had performed many times before, but he still wasn’t quite comfortable with the feeling of it. He felt like he was peeling himself.

Kharan dressed quickly, paused in front of the mirror to ensure his now filled shoulder holsters were hidden reasonably well, and then grabbed an ordinary-looking black and brown backpack from a dark corner of his closet. Settling it onto his back, he tightened the straps slightly for comfort and then walked out into the living room. Lila was gone, so he opened an aperture and stepped back across space into the empty corridor outside the Room of Requirement.

On his way to the Gryffindor tower he encountered no one, the rest of the school having retired to their common rooms for curfew. Outside the windows the grounds were falling dark beneath a sky tinted heavily with orange and purple hues. It was a good time for sneaking around, Kharan thought to himself, and felt a small thrill of anticipation. Maybe tonight they’d really take the fight to Riddle.

He became more cautious when he came closer to the tower, slowing his pace and hugging the far wall so that anyone coming down the main corridor wouldn’t see him. The sharp sound of running footsteps came echoing down one the stairwells and he stood still, waiting. After a moment, Harry came bursting through.

“Harry!”

Harry stopped. “Scott?”

“Over here.” Kharan moved out from the wall. As he came closer to Harry, he quickly became concerned. Harry was abnormally pale, his skin damp and his eyes blinking rapidly. “You all right?”

“Yes – no. Look, there’s no time, I…” Harry took a few more steps towards the tower entrance. “We’re going out, tonight, Dumbledore’s taking me with him.”
“Horcrux?”

“Yeah.”

But that didn’t explain Harry’s unstable appearance. Kharan would have expected excitement from Harry, not this tortured look. “But what’s up with you? What happened?”

“I’d tell you but I have to hurry. Later.” Harry took another step towards the portrait entrance, stopped, and then turned away from Kharan. He stood there for a moment with his fists clenched at his sides, and then whirled around. “It was Snape!”

“It was Snape,” Kharan repeated in confusion.

“He told him! He told Voldemort about the Prophecy!” Harry snarled, the rage in his voice of sufficient to startle Kharan.

The information settled into Kharan’s brain like the last piece of a puzzle, illuminating all the corners of the picture. Dumbledore had always seemed a little too sure of his hold over Snape.

“I just can’t believe… and Dumbledore never even…” Harry ran his hands through his already tangled hair. “What am I going to do?”

It was probably a rhetorical question but Kharan answered it anyway. “Go and get this Horcrux thing. Snape can wait, we know where to find him.”

“I’m not sure it can wait,” Harry said. He looked up at Scott, his face totally serious. “Trelawney got into the Room of Requirement somehow. Malfoy chucked her out but she said he was celebrating something, and you know whatever ever it is, it can’t be good for us. I know we have to get this Horcrux, but shite… If Dumbledore leaves, who knows what will happen?”

That complicated things. “I think you’re right.”

Harry took a deep breath. “Okay, you stay here with-”

“Not happening,” Kharan said, cutting him off. “I go with you, comprende?”

Harry began to look desperate. “You can’t, you have to protect Ginny and everyone else too, remember! Look, I’m going to give them the rest of my Felix but that might not be enough, luck can only get you so far-”

“I plan for contingencies, all right, and I’m not abandoning my other Primes. Lila is going to be here tonight, she’ll stay with them until we get back.”

“Really?” The panic on Harry’s face faded somewhat. “She’s good at, at fighting too, right?”

“She oughta be, I did some of her training myself,” Kharan said wryly.

“Okay… All right, yeah, as long as she stays with them…” Harry started to move again. “We have to hurry, I told Dumbledore I was just getting the Cloak. He’s down in the entrance hall, try to stall him!”

“We’ll be there.” Kharan watched Harry disappear through the portrait and then made his way towards Hogwarts’ front entrance.

With the enormity of the news Harry had just received affecting him, Kharan hoped that the teen was able to keep it together. Harry was a lot tougher than he looked but anyone would be
debilitated by the impact of such a trauma.

Kharan himself wasn’t quite sure what to think. He had never been certain that Dumbledore’s trust in Snape wasn’t misplaced, and Harry’s revelation had only strengthened that position. Dumbledore was a smart man, but that didn’t matter. It was often the smartest people who did the stupidest things. Still, the Headmaster also seemed fairly shrewd as well, and not likely to fall for any lies Snape might tell. It was a tough call to make, but if Malfoy was going to make his move soon then it might be just the catalyst needed to clear up the matter.

The entrance hall was deserted past curfew, its walls dimly lit by candles and the high ceiling lost in shadow. A lone figure stood near the double doors. Kharan approached Dumbledore, acknowledging him with a nod.

The Headmaster did not seem surprised to see Kharan. “I thought you might be joining us. I feel compelled to warn you of the danger, though I suppose that will not mean much to you.”

“My sister will be here tonight to keep an eye on things.” Kharan cut right to the chase. The universal momentum was like a physical pressure, imparting on him a feeling of impatience.

“I see,” Dumbledore said non-committally.

“I don’t think you do,” Kharan said bluntly. “Harry told me about Snape. This school might be a castle, but if you’re just going to let anyone in then what’s the point?”

Dumbledore’s face turned grim. “I believe we’ve had this discussion before.”

“Right, and this isn’t the time or the place. Suffice to say, you go ahead and trust who you want to, and I’ll trust who I want to. I want Lil to be here tonight.”

“Very well. If she is as competent as you then your Primes are in good hands,” Dumbledore said graciously, no doubt trying to smooth things over before they got out of hand.

Unused to being an adult again, it was actually surprising to Kharan how much easier it was to not force the issue. “She’s one of our best.” He changed the subject. “So, where are we going?”

“A cave that Voldemort visited as a child,” Dumbledore replied. “I believe there may be a Horcrux hidden inside.”

“Protections?”

“I’m unaware of any specific protections around the cave, though I have little doubt that it will be guarded in some manner.”

Kharan nodded. “Okay. I’ll lead the way. You and Harry stay behind me and keep a fair distance in case I trigger a trap or two. Just stay within earshot so you can instruct me if I need it since I’m not too good with this magic shit.”

“If you think it best,” Dumbledore said with obvious reluctance.

“It is best. At the very least if I get taken out it will probably give you time to run.”

They were interrupted when Harry came skidding into the hall, panting and with one hand held to his side. “I’m here!” he gasped unnecessarily. “I got my Cloak.”

“Better put it on,” Kharan advised before Dumbledore could say anything. “I’ll follow the two of
you from a distance. Just wait up when you’re about to Apparate.”

Harry looked quickly at Dumbledore as he fumbled with the Cloak. “Sir, I don’t have my apparition license yet.”

“I will assist you again, Harry,” Dumbledore told him. He looked to Kharan. “You will be able to follow us regardless?”

“Don’t worry about me. I go where you go.”

“Let’s be off then,” Dumbledore said.

Kharan followed them out the entrance but slipped away once they were on the road. The twilight had a deceptively normal look and the air was filled with the soft smells of grass and the woods. Most forms of life in the world were unperturbed by the rapid motion of the shape, growing and foraging and hunting regardless of UOs and Primes. There was something comforting about that.

The universe convulsed around Harry and Dumbledore again and Kharan had a sudden falling sensation. He shook it off and kept moving.

By the time he reached Hogsmeade night had all but fallen, and the shadows lent themselves to his designs. Harry and Dumbledore moved quickly down the street, passing by the Three Broomsticks. He could see Dumbledore saying something to Madam Rosmerta but was too far away to make it out. Smoothly jumping a fence and making his way down an alley, he passed them up and secreted himself behind a hedge, waiting for them to reach his position.

In comparison to the raucous atmosphere surrounding the Three Broomsticks the Hog’s Head was a ghost town, devoid of patrons and even casual passers-by. Dumbledore and Harry halted outside the deserted tavern and conferred for a moment.

Moving forward to the edge of the street, Kharan whispered to them from the shadows. “I’m right here. Go ahead and make the jump.”

Dumbledore grasped Harry’s arm, and with a soft pop they were gone. Scanning the area one last time to ensure no one had seen, Kharan opened his own portal and stepped through the void.

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Harry stared out over the undulating waters of an ocean that seemed so large in the darkness, a heaving creature of swells and valleys. It was as if the waves were the pulsating heart and lungs of the vastest monster, pounding in a turbulent sleep. He felt uncomfortably exposed on the bare rock and took a step backwards. Maybe it was that feeling which had attracted Voldemort to the rock. The Dark Lord fancied himself a monster of that calibre.

The place where he and Dumbledore had emerged was little more than a jutting wedge of rock pushing against the ocean. Behind him a cliff reared up into the night, the moon illuminating the wet stone and making it look as if it were coated with glass. Surely it would defy even the most experience of climbers, and Harry could almost feel the terror of the orphans that Voldemort had taken with him down that face so long ago.

Dumbledore had just finished explaining the history of the location and was now looking about in the moonlight. “Do you know how Scott will arrive?”

Harry had a notion that the Kharadjai would simply appear out of thin air, a phantom utilising his unknowable means of travel. However, he had never actually seen it done. “No. I hope he can find
us."

Loud footsteps slapped against the rock, causing both of them to whirl around to face the noise. It was Kharan, purposefully clomping with his feet so they would hear his approach. “This is the place?”

Harry felt a little disappointed. He had wanted to catch Kharan coming out of one of his portals. “Yeah, this is it. Voldemort came here on an orphanage trip to scare some of the other kids,” he explained, quickly summarising for Kharan’s benefit.

“This would be the place to do it,” Kharan commented. “I wonder how he explained to their chaperone why those kids had pissed their pants.”

“There is a cave below, inside the wall,” Dumbledore said. All of them went over to the edge and the Headmaster pointed out the small handholds dotting the slippery face of the outcropping. Harry swallowed hard, trying not to think about what it would be like to fall onto the boulders below.

“Right.” Kharan crouched down and swung his legs out over the precipice, gripping a handhold firmly. “Harry, lose the Cloak. Come down right above me so I can grab you if I have to. I’ll come back up for you, Albus.”

“I know how to climb,” Harry said, feeling a little insulted. It wasn’t as if he were a stranger to heights.

“Good for you. You start right after me, move.”

Dumbledore gave Harry a supporting smile. “Best do as he says,” he advised.

It was only a few seconds after Kharan disappeared below the edge of the rock that he called out, “Come on, Harry. Lay on your stomach and push your legs off.”

The rock was hard and the cold water that pooled over it seeped through Harry’s shirt as he lay down with a wince. Slowly, he backed over the edge, feeling a second of panic as his feet flailed out over unseen space in search of a foothold. He felt a hand grab his right ankle and guide it over to a solid position. Taking a deep breath, he started down.

The wind whipped the spray of the ocean across the rock face, covering Harry with a fine mist. He tried not to look down and mainly concentrated on his hands, allowing Kharan to pick out the best footholds. It was nervous work, but he managed to reach the bottom without incident.

Once on his feet again he found Kharan peering intently into a fissure cut deep in the cliff. The water swirled through it like a funnel, rising and falling against the narrow walls and splashing upwards with an occasional sucking sound. The opening was pitch black beyond the first few feet and looked entirely uninviting.

Kharan looked over at Harry. “Hope you’re wearing your warm underwear. There’s going to be some shrinkage involved with this swim.”

After joining them at the bottom Dumbledore drew his wand, lighting it with a whispered ‘Lumos!’ The reflected glitter off the wet rocks was almost dazzling in the darkness. Harry lit his wand too. Together, the wands illuminated the outline of the crevice more starkly but the dark within still defied the light.

Kharan blew out a breath. “Okay. There’s not any fun way to do this, so let’s just get it over with.” He leapt into the seething water.
Harry tensed himself up and then followed suit, splashing into the torrential pool between the boulders. For a moment he thought that he would be swept away, but instead the current actually pushed him far enough into the crack that he was able to gain enough traction to resist it when it ebbed back out.

The water was so cold that he went numb within seconds. His robes began to drag him down, and he wasn’t so much swimming through the narrow crevice as he was pushing himself along. He wondered if drowning felt similar.

Kharan dropped back to help him, using one arm to pull Harry up and over a large rock beneath the surface. “Look at us,” he whispered a little breathlessly to Harry, apparently not unaffected by the bitter waves, “squeezing through a little crevice full of freezing water after climbing down a wet cliff face. This is some hardcore, he-man shit. You can brag to Ginny about this.”

“What was that you said about shrinkage?” Harry whispered back. “I don’t have anything to brag about right now.”

Kharan snorted in laughter, swallowing a good deal of salt water in the process and then snorting even more as he expelled it. “Maybe Ginny will feel sorry for you – pity sex is still sex.” He paused to shift sideways and used his legs to push himself through a portion of the tunnel that narrowed even further, afterwards reaching back to pull Harry through.

Mercifully, the passage ended not too much further ahead in a staircase. Hauling himself out of the water, Harry waited for Dumbledore to emerge and lead the way up the steps, which emptied into a cave.

“Yes…” Dumbledore murmured almost to himself as he looked around the bare room. “This is the place.”

“Are you sure?” Kharan questioned him, echoing Harry’s thoughts.

Dumbledore favoured him with a searching gaze. “Can you not feel it?”

Kharan looked around the space and then shrugged in answer. Harry tried to feel whatever it was that Dumbledore did, but found himself experiencing little else but the aching cold. He shivered as his clothing dripped onto the stone floor.

Fortunately, Dumbledore noticed his discomfort. “My apologies Harry, I completely forgot.” Harry didn’t know what spell the Headmaster cast, but it worked – his clothes were suddenly warm and dry, though his skin remained clammy and chilled.

“Thanks!” Harry said gratefully. Dumbledore smiled in response and then looked towards Kharan.

“Don’t waste any energy on me,” Kharan said. “I’ll just get wet again anyway.”

“It was a small thing,” Dumbledore muttered in response, but his attention had already returned to the cave walls. He began running his hands over them, mouthing silent words to himself. There was an artistry in the way he seemed to sense the hidden forms and patterns of the magic seeped into the rock, one that baffled Harry. To him one wall seemed the same as another.

Kharan glanced up from where he had been rummaging around in his backpack. “What are you looking for?”

“There must be an entrance here,” Dumbledore said distractedly. “A secret door for Voldemort’s use.”
“Some sort of magical concentration? An energy spot?”

“Perhaps. I doubt the entire room is a gateway.”

“There’s a spot like that behind you and a little to your left,” Kharan said, pointing towards the wall to the right of Harry.

Dumbledore gave him a slightly startled glance before moving to the position and lightly touching his fingertips to it. “Yes,” he confirmed. “Yes, this is it. This is the entryway.” He directed his wand at the spot and a doorway etched in white light grew into being, shimmering against the dark rock. “The question now is how to open it… How to… open…” he said absently, touching the wall again.

Harry looked at Kharan to see if he had anything more to share, but he merely shrugged and continued doing whatever it was he was doing in his backpack. Seeing that Dumbledore would probably require some time to solve the riddle of the archway, Harry approached the busy Kharadjai. “What are you doing?”

“Getting ready.” A sharp click came from the pack as Kharan moved his hands together as if snapping something into place. “Riddle doesn’t seem to be the most inventive guy around, but anyone can strike oil if they go to the well often enough. I’d like to be prepared for any surprises.” With a final decisive motion and answering click, Kharan withdrew a deadly looking weapon and began to attach a strap to it.

“Wow.” Harry looked the gun over, admiring the lethal form. “That looks really, um, dangerous.”

“Oh, it is.”

“…Could I hold it?” Harry asked hesitantly.

Kharan raised his head for a moment with a knowing look in his eyes. Harry felt a little embarrassed, but didn’t renege on his request. With a quick grin, Kharan lifted the gun and handed it stock first to Harry, who cradled it inexpertly in his arms.

“It’s heavier than it looks,” Harry commented, hefting the weapon a little. “What’s it called?”

Kharan grabbed Harry’s hands in his own and adjusted his awkward grip. “It’s a G36c. It shoots fast, it hits reasonably hard, and when I slap one of these babies in there…” Kharan reached into his bag and withdrew what looked to Harry to be two steel canisters linked together, like an infinity symbol. “…It just keeps going and going.”

Grabbing the top of the gun with one hand Kharan slammed the double drum into the receiver and stepped back. The added weight was immense – Harry’s arms, already weak from the climb and following swim, began to shake. Kharan noted his distress and relieved him of the burden. “I’ll let you shoot it sometime. We’ll line up some Butterbeer bottles and make a mess.”

They were interrupted when Dumbledore began saying something about crudity, shaking his head in a sort of odd disappointment while he peered at the glowing archway. Kicking the backpack over to an empty corner of the cave, Kharan came up behind him with Harry.

“It appears,” Dumbledore said, idly brushing his fingers over the stone, “that we are required to give payment in order to pass.”

Harry didn’t like the sound of that. “What sort of payment?”
“Blood,” Dumbledore stated firmly. “The payment is that of blood.”

Harry briefly clenched his fists. He had already given a payment of blood to Voldemort once before and was in no hurry to do it again.

“Crude,” Dumbledore muttered. “Basely and ignorantly crude. Once again our self-proclaimed Lord fails to understand that there are worse things than physical torments.”

“Obviously you’ve never binged on mesquite pork and beans,” Kharan said blandly.

Dumbledore withdrew a small knife from somewhere in his robes and shook back his sleeve in obvious preparation for the act of payment. Harry’s eyes widened in alarm. “Professor, wait!”

“Yeah, hold up.” Kharan grabbed Dumbledore’s arm, preventing him from the self-mutilation.

“Have you just tried knocking?”

Dumbledore smiled a little indulgently. “If I thought Voldemort would stoop to being so polite, I might. Politeness, however, was never his forte. The spells demand blood for passage.”

“At least try it,” Kharan requested. “It’s not like you’ve got much to lose.”

Dumbledore looked at Kharan a little oddly but consented. Reaching out, he rapped three times on the stone archway. Nothing happened, and after several moments it was clear that nothing was going to. Harry blinked in confusion, wondering exactly what Kharan was playing at. Did he really think Voldemort would make a secret door that would simply open when knocked on?

Dumbledore shook his head. “I admire your determination to try other avenues of approach, but I’m afraid knocking simply will not suffice here.”

“Well, yeah, if you knock like that.”

A slight frown creased Dumbledore’s face. “What do you mean?”

“You weren’t doing it right.” Kharan walked up to the door and shook his arms as if he were limbering up. “You gotta tap it in just the right way…”

Kharan leaned back and delivered a powerful kick to the stone entryway. A thin layer of rock split off with a deafening crack. He surveyed his work and, apparently satisfied with the results, gripped his hands together like a hammer and swung them sideways into the wall. The result was a cloud of dust and an impression of his arms and fists that was visible for a moment before it began to crumble. He backed away and kicked at the spot where his hands had impacted, breaking off another large chunk. Then he swung his arms into the wall from a different angle.

Harry watched with awe as, with steady repetition and a variety of different blows, Kharan literally pounded the wall into rubble. Harry noticed that it took some serious effort; Kharan’s face was covered in a sheen of sweat. It was dark in the cave, but Harry could still see the drops of blood that spattered near Kharan’s feet and coursed down his arms.

With a mighty crack, the archway finally shattered and the resulting debris flew back into the opening beyond it. Harry had a ringing in his ears despite the hands he had clapped over them.

When the dust settled, both Dumbledore and Harry were staring at the Kharadjai. He shrugged under their scrutiny. "When in doubt, knock. That's what I always do. Ow. Ow."

"You're bleeding," Harry pointed out, staring at Kharan's battered hands.
"Nah, don't worry about it. Just limestone, you know. Probably would have broken my arms if it wasn't sedimentary. I mean, more, without result. I did break my arms. And the door was still there, technically, just held partially together by magic. Once I got rid of that it was kind of soft. But, yeah, that was harder than it looked," Kharan rambled, breathing heavily.

"Um, it looked pretty hard... If you were going to bleed anyway, why not just give it to the door?" Harry wondered.

"Because it was a trap."

"It was?" Harry looked to Dumbledore for confirmation, but the Headmaster looked just as surprised.

Kharan also appeared slightly confused. "Well, I would assume so... I mean, what kind of evil wizard makes a door that you just have to smear a little blood on to open? I figured I'd just break it. Look, see? I bled on it and it didn't open. It was a trap."

"But you only began to bleed after you had already smashed the spell," Dumbledore said with a pronounced twinkle in his eye.

Kharan crossed his arms stubbornly. "It was totally a trap. Had to be."

"Perhaps it was better to be safe than sorry," Dumbledore mildly agreed, but there was definitely a smile hidden somewhere in his beard.

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Kharan emerged on the edge of a vast underground lake which was contained in a cavern that arched overhead and faded into the distance. Far off, near what might have been the middle of the water, something was giving off a pale green glow but it did little to illuminate the area. The lake was absolutely still, a mirror surface that seemed foreboding in its lack of motion.

While the water was still, the things within it were not. He carefully observed the scattered shapes drifting on the surface. They were indistinct half-blobs, hung motionless, floating in stasis.

These objects were not visible to the naked eye. As far as Kharan knew, Harry had never drawn any conclusions as to how Kharan was able to see him beneath his Invisibility Cloak. Perhaps Harry and the others simply assumed it had something to do with how they were all tied to the shape. And although the shape could be useful for locating people, it was at best precise to only within a few yards. The real device behind the secret was much less complicated. Kharan had never explained it, feeling that the information might be more useful if kept unsaid.

He could see the infrared spectrum, or rather the wavelength that was considered ‘thermal’. His head did not contain any algorithms to change what he saw into contrasting colours which represented temperature – for him, the world seen in thermal emissions was a mixture of greys, whites and blacks of varying brightness. The sheer sensitivity and clarity of his vision made up for that. Even the smallest disparity in emissivity provided a clear contrast between objects that were of comparable temperature. Whatever the things that bobbed on the water were, they were the same temperature as the water itself but did not have the same emissive material properties, and so they were visible as light black outlines on a dark black background.

“Don’t touch the water,” Kharan called softly to Harry and Dumbledore while he rubbed at his aching arms. “There are things in there.”

“What kind of things?” Harry asked, his voice sounding slightly higher pitched than normal.
“Nothing we can’t handle,” Kharan told him, though he didn’t have any idea whether that was true or not. “Keep moving, look around for a way across.”

It was further down the rim of the cave that Kharan felt the nexus. It was a tingling sensation that led him straight to a place that looked just like any other he had seen thus far, except it felt different. There was a spell, or several spells, running along a section of the floor. He could feel them when he placed his hand against it, tickling his palm. They had to be important somehow.

He stood and jogged back towards Dumbledore, who was running his wand over a different part of the rim floor. “There’s a weird energy spot further down,” he informed the Headmaster. “Maybe you can do something. I didn’t screw with it.”

They moved along until they reached the spot that had raised the hairs on Kharan’s sore arms. “This?” Dumbledore said, kneeling down and running his hand along the magic-infused rock. “Yes… this could be what we’re looking for.”

After a few minutes of work, Dumbledore managed to locate and summon a hidden boat, which Kharan felt was pretty cool. Being a Kharadjai meant he could sense power in any form, but that didn’t mean he immediately knew how to manipulate it. While an experienced native like Dumbledore could puzzle through things, Kharan was surrounded by a type of power that he’d had great difficulty grasping.

“Scott,” Dumbledore said, getting Kharan’s attention. “There is a problem. Only one can safely cross in this boat – two if it is me and Harry, since he is under-age.”

Kharan failed to see the issue. “So what’s the problem? You two take the boat and I’ll take a swim.”

“You do realize,” Dumbledore said slowly, “that the water will surely be the focus of Voldemort’s trap.”

“Yeah, probably. If I get caught up in something just get to the island, don’t wait for me to finish. Oh, and here…” Kharan shrugged his shoulder and slid the G36c off of his back. He offered it to Harry. “I can’t use this underwater. Don’t try to shoot anything in the water with it either, you’ll just waste my ammo. If something comes at you on the surface though, go ahead and let loose.” He glanced back at the lake. “I have a few suspicions… I think you’ll want to aim for the head.”

Harry swallowed hard as he took the weapon, but his hands were steady. “All right… If that’s what you want…”

“You’ll do fine. Just keep your finger off the trigger unless you’re going to shoot something and don’t drop it.” Kharan reached up under his shirt and withdrew a blade from a sheath attached to the front strap of his shoulder holster. It was of his military combat blades, a curved one-sided cutting weapon with a short handle and a thick spine, more similar to a machete than a knife.

He stood there for a moment, waiting for them to get in the boat. Dumbledore opened his mouth as if to say something else and then closed it, shaking his head. “I suppose we cannot dissuade you.”

“See you at the island.”

Dumbledore and Harry climbed into the boat (Harry with some added difficulty thanks to his unwieldy burden), which automatically began moving towards the centre of the lake. Kharan watched them for a second to make sure they were okay before firmly gripping the handle of his knife and diving into the black water.
The boat was a slow vessel, moving steadily across the surface of the lake and leaving a wide, lazy ripple in its wake. Harry shifted impatiently in his seat, resting Kharan’s weapon on his knees to take the weight off of his arms and staring into the water. He tried to ignore the Inferi that floated by, stiff and dead-eyed. Despite the Headmaster’s reassurance that there was nothing to be feared from a dead body, he still was very uncomfortable with the presence of the cadavers.

The normally still façade of the lake was being periodically disturbed. Occasional bubbles were coming up. He peered into the depths trying to discern something, anything, but the water remained impervious to his vision.

Dumbledore laid a comforting hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I’m sure he’s all right, Harry. Scott is a capable fighter.”

“I just wish I could see what was happening,” Harry said, recoiling further back into the boat as another Inferi brushed the side. With horror he watched as the corpse seemed to come to sudden life – it rolled over in the water from its face up position and dove downwards, vanishing from sight. Even as he relaxed his grip on the gun and recovered from his momentary panic Harry knew it must have been going after Kharan. “What are we going to do?” he asked Dumbledore, feeling completely helpless to assist his friend.

“Sometimes, though we may will it, we are unable to give help to others,” Dumbledore said solemnly. “We must wait, and trust in Scott’s abilities.”

But waiting was unbearable. Harry remembered the agonising summer he had spent cut off from all outside information, of how angry he had been at Dumbledore before they had set off for the Horcrux. He fought the emotions down, knowing it was neither the time nor the place to give into them. He tried to think about Ginny instead, something that usually managed to calm him down when he felt near to losing control. He realised with a pang that he hadn’t said goodbye to her before he left. What if he died in the cave? He should have given something to Kharan to take back to her… his wand, maybe, or his Cloak. Except he needed both of those things to stay alive in the first place.

He was so sunk in his thoughts that their arrival startled him, the boat knocking into the island with a slight bump.

It was very, very dark under the surface. Swimming strongly, Kharan caught up with the boat without much effort. He remained a good five feet under the water, providing a submerged escort for the passengers of the vessel above. Their wands cast some feeble light in the liquid night, though with everything else in shadow only the boat stood out in Kharan’s vision.

It was no more than a minute before the first pale corpse surged out the darkness, flailing towards him with a gaping mouth full of rotted teeth.

At that point any wizard who had penetrated the cave probably would have either screamed and swallowed a mouthful of water, drowning themselves and providing one more guardian for the lake, or attempted some magical defence that may or may not have worked. As Kharan recalled from his books, these zombies were called Inferi, and fire was effective against them – which meant the water provided an excellent environment for the magically reanimated bodies. There was no question that the sight a bloodless naked dead man emerging out of the underwater darkness was quite horrifying. But a knife through the brain would do the trick just as well as an
open flame or a loaded gun, and it would take more than a soggy corpse to scare him.

The Inferius grabbed at Kharan’s left arm and attempted to pull him into a lethal embrace. He calmly allowed himself to be drawn closer to the creature before reversing his grip on the knife and bringing the blade slamming down through the Inferius’ waterlogged skull. It penetrated easily through the softened tissue, releasing a cloud of decaying skin and hair.

This first enemy had just begun to sink to the bottom when six other Inferi came swimming towards Kharan.

He sighed, an action which while underwater simply translated to a bunch of bubbles being released from his mouth. The Inferi weren’t much of a challenge, but at this rate it would take him awhile to get to the island.

Ten minutes later he was making a tedious but constant progress. In his wake a goodly number of truly dead Inferi floated, a sign of his passage. Aside from a few fresh finger-shaped bruises on his already hurting limbs, he hadn’t sustained serious damage. He wasn’t sure whether he was drawing them from all over the lake or just the immediate area, but he knew he’d better reach the island soon so he could help Dumbledore and Harry.

With a few swift stabbing motions he dispatched another three Inferi and found himself up against a smooth rock wall, the base of the island. Ascending quickly, he reached the lip of the rock and hauled himself out onto (relatively) dry land again. The green glow from the basin in the centre gave some better illumination now that he was closer to it. He noted with some disgust that his knife and the hand welding still had spongy chunks of flesh stuck to them.

Dumbledore was circling a pedestal that stood in the middle of the island, mumbling to himself again. Harry stood awkwardly nearby looking like he wanted to help but didn’t even begin to know how. Standing up, Kharan crossed the stone circle. Harry turned at the sound of his footsteps.

A look of relief washed over Harry’s face. “Scott!” he laughed weakly. “I heard footsteps and thought it was one of… You know, one of them.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.” Kharan grinned as he gratefully accepted his gun back. “Dumbledore still working it out?”

“The Horcrux is in that basin,” Harry explained, “but he’s not sure how to get rid of this green potion covering it. We can’t touch it.”

Kharan moved closer to get a look at the eerie green liquid. Dumbledore acknowledged his presence with a slight smile. “No serious difficulties, I hope?”

“Corpses don’t fight very well,” Kharan said. “I expect it comes from being dead.”

“Yes, death… No, his ego would ensure that he would not kill the drinker immediately…” Dumbledore muttered. “I am almost positive that this potion must be drunk in order to remove it. But it is certainly designed to incapacitate the drinker in some way, to leave them helpless. Voldemort would seek to question whoever found his darkest secret.”

Kharan nodded. “Sounds reasonable. Got a cup on you?”

Harry made a startled sound, and Dumbledore gave Kharan a sharp look. “It is one thing to succeed through physical prowess,” the Headmaster said quietly, “and something else to willingly drink poison. I cannot ask you to drink this.”
Harry nervously stood by on the sidelines, clearly hoping that nobody had to drink it at all. Kharan only rolled his eyes. “Good thing you didn’t have to ask me then. I am, however, asking you for a cup.”

Loosing a sigh, Dumbledore procured a crystal goblet from thin air and handed it to Kharan. “I suppose we must trust that you are stronger than anything Voldemort can conjure.”

Kharan accepted the cup graciously and with a fancy flourish, dipped it into the basin and held in nonchalantly in one hand. “Bottoms up.”

With a gulp, he downed the entire thing.

Then he closed his eyes and stood very still.

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“Scott?” Harry said tentatively. The Kharadjai didn’t answer. “Are you all right?”

Kharan opened his eyes, looked at Harry blankly – and then let loose a tremendous belch. “Well, I’ll tell you one thing–” he said after a moment. “-it’ll never be a best seller.” He scooped and drained another goblet full, making a face after he swallowed.

“Is it affecting you in any way?” Dumbledore inquired, concern etched on his face.

“Chalky.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Quite the chalky after taste. Definitely an inferior vintage.” Filling another cupful, Kharan held it up to the pale light. “Riddle might be good at making zombies, but he can’t brew for shit. I couldn’t export this crap.”

“What does it taste like?” Harry asked curiously. It didn’t seem to be hurting Kharan at all, though Harry was sure that was just because he was a Kharadjai. He wondered if the potion that was giving Kharan what appeared to be mild bloating would have killed anyone else.

Kharan looked upwards thoughtfully. “Like Hi-C Ecto Cooler… if you ground up a bunch of chalk in it and served it with a side of dirty ass.” He paused. “Maybe a hint of lemon, too. But the ass sort of overrides everything else.”

Harry had no idea what he was talking about, but it didn’t matter. If Kharan was making jokes then the potion wasn’t hurting him. “Well, there’s not too much to go.”

Kharan blew out an annoyed breath as he filled the goblet yet again. “One was enough, you know?” He made another face as he swallowed. “God. I can’t think of anything I wouldn’t rather be drinking than this shit.” Downing another cupful he continued, “Well… maybe Pabst.”

A few more dips into the basin and he held out the last cup. “One more for the road, hooray.” With that he swallowed it and then dropped the conjured cup with a clatter onto the stone floor. “Okay, I’m never drinking that again. Now let’s see what we got here.”

A small golden locket lay at the bottom of the basin, looking oddly insignificant in the surroundings. Dumbledore picked it up and held it close to Harry’s wand, letting it dangle in the light. “Interesting… but there will be time to examine it later.” He tucked the locket into his robes and began walking back towards the boat. “We should leave immediately.”
“Sounds like a plan,” Kharan said, standing near one of the edges, “since I think the Inferi want their locket back.”

The water began to roil, pallid shapes visible beneath it. Harry backed away from the lip of the island, his knuckles whitening around his wand.

“I guess they got tired of waiting for me,” Kharan drawled with exaggerated blasé. “You guys get in the boat. I’ll clean this mess up.”

Dumbledore and Harry clambered back into the small vessel, the Inferi ignoring it. Instead they moved in a writhing white mass towards Kharan, who stood supremely unconcerned by their threatening advance. The boat began to move and he threw a casual wave towards the two of them, which Dumbledore gravely returned.

As the boat began to get some distance away, Harry could hear Kharan’s voice echo in the cavern as he loudly jeered at the gathering undead, ensuring their attention was drawn away from the moving vessel. “HEY! HEY, HEY! YOU! YEAH, YOU, THE FAT ONE! GODDAMN, SON, PUT SOME PANTS ON. NO, I DON’T HAVE ANY CHANGE. THIS IS THE WORST ORGY EVER. OOPS! I BASHED IN YOUR NOSE! SORRY. YOU GUYS… YOU LOOK A LITTLE PALE. BUT THAT’S OKAY! IT’S ALL GONNA BE OKAY! DOCTOR SCOTT IS HERE TO HELP! THE PROBLEM IS YOU JUST NEED A LITTLE MORE LEAD IN YOUR DIET.”

The rapid report of gunfire soon followed, and though they were a distance away from the island at that point Harry could still see the splashes as Inferi tumbled back into the water under a barrage of bullets.

Upon docking they both moved to stand against the wall of the cave and waited for Kharan to make his way to them. Harry impatiently tapped a pattern against the stone with his hand, feeling a sort of pent up nervous energy. They had done it! All he wanted to do was set foot back in the safety of Hogwarts again, where he would feel that he had truly gotten away with it.

Dumbledore favoured him with a knowing smile. “The first instinct of the thief is to run. I don’t think we will have to wait much longer. Scott is no longer firing his weapon, so he is probably swimming.” He grew serious then. “Thank you for accompanying me, Harry. I could not have done this alone.”

“I didn’t really do anything,” Harry mumbled, feeling embarrassed. “It was Scott who-”

“You came here,” Dumbledore interrupted him, “at risk to your own life. That is hardly nothing. Don’t downplay your accomplishments, Harry. Greater wizards than you would have feared to tread where we stand tonight.”

Harry didn’t really know how to respond to that, and was spared having to when Kharan emerged from the water about ten feet to their right. Standing, he shook himself like a dog and made his way over to where they stood, for some reason spitting copiously as he walked.

“Refreshing,” he remarked dryly when he drew near, and hacked up another gob of spit which he deposited in the lake. “Just as a note; if either of you two ever find yourselves in zombie infested water – don’t open your mouth.”

Now there was a thought Harry could have done without. “I’ll keep that in mind, thanks.”

Kharan looked despondently back at the island. “I had to leave my gun. It was empty, but… still. Not cheap, you know?” He sighed. “Well, let's go.”
Dumbledore smiled at him. “Lead the way.”

They were nearly back to the entry crevice when suddenly Kharan twisted sideways, fell against the wall, and slid to the floor.

Immediately, Dumbledore and Harry rushed to his side. “Scott? What’s wrong? Did they get you?” Harry asked frantically, searching the Kharadjai’s clothes for some obvious sign of injury, but aside from multiple contusions on his bared skin there didn’t appear to be any blood.

“Two things,” Kharan said, beads of sweat appearing on his forehead. “One, something is happening at Hogwarts. And two, you know that potion I just drank?”

“Yeah?” Harry said, feeling increasingly worried.

“It’s coming back.” With one arm Kharan swept Harry aside and then he leaned forward and vomited violently, expelling an almost incandescent green slush. Harry did the only thing he could think of to help and held Kharan by the shoulders while Dumbledore repeatedly cast cleaning spells. The Kharadjai emptied his stomach and then began to dry heave. After a few hacking gasps, he took a deep breath and leaned into the wall again. “You know,” he said, his speech punctuated by sharp breaths, “I never thought I’d say this, but it tasted better the first time.”

“Scott,” Dumbledore said urgently, grasping Kharan’s arm, “what has happened at Hogwarts?”

“I don’t know. Something did.” Kharan looked like he was about to heave again, but with an effort he relaxed. “I need a minute or two. Maybe three…”

“But can we afford to wait?” Dumbledore pressed him.

Kharan winced and his throat flexed, fingers clenching. He gagged and then choked out, “I don’t know, I don’t know, maybe. Or not. It’s big.” His eyes reopened and there was pain in them.

“Scott, I must know if there is an immediate danger,” Dumbledore said, his voice rising.

“Five minutes, that’s all I need.” Kharan pushed himself up into a sitting position, a reassuring move undermined by his heaving torso and trembling hands.

“If there is something happening back at the school then there is no time.”

Finally, Kharan nodded. “You’re right. Go find Lil; she’ll know what’s happening. You can’t wait for me. I gotta ride it out, no other way. The momentum ain’t helping. It’ll be soon, I’ll catch up,” he said to Harry.

Dumbledore was already moving away but Harry hesitated, taking an unsure step back. “Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

“It’ll take more than some potion past its expiration date to put me down,” Kharan said with a green-tinged smile. Then his face turned serious. “Make sure everyone else is okay. Find Lil, all right? You find her and you’ll find Ginny. Here.” With a shaking hand he flipped a small object in Harry’s direction.

Harry bent over to pick it up, recognising it once he held it. It was Kharan’s switchblade. “Your knife?”

Kharan did a feeble half-shrug. “One of. Could come in handy.”
“Right.” A thought occurred to Harry that sent a thrill of fear through him. “What if Voldemort is there?”

“Let Dumbledore or Lil fight him. If you can sucker shot him in the back or something then go for it, otherwise just run. You’re not ready to – excuse me, hold on—” Kharan retched and splashed a little more of the sickly green potion to the floor. “Go, man, go,” he gasped when he was done. “Get back to Hogwarts and find Lil.”

Harry turned and ran after Dumbledore, leaving Kharan behind in the dark.
So he had made an assumption, and, as so often happened, he was paying for it. In retrospect it was
humorous notion, that, no matter how long he lived, he never seemed to stop making them.
Perhaps that was simply human nature.

Kharan had imbibed the potion with three things in mind: one, that trying to destroy the magical
elements of the potion might harm the Horcrux in an improper manner, two, that the shape seemed
to hint that somebody had to drink the stuff, and three, that he would be immune to the liquid’s
effects. There was no way of knowing if the first supposition had been correct but he had been
partially right on the last two. Drinking the concoction had set things into motion, so it was
important in some fashion or the other, and the potion hadn’t seriously harmed him.

Unfortunately, he hadn’t counted on his body rejecting it in so short a time frame. It wasn’t
something that he could heal because his body was healing itself. Incapable of absorbing the
magically sustained brew, his digestive system was ridding itself of it in the quickest way possible.
That, in combination with the tremendous lurch the universe had undergone mere moments before,
had laid him low at a very inopportune moment.

It had only been about twenty seconds since Dumbledore and Harry had rushed back to the school
and Kharan was already feeling better, at least physically. The shape was locked in a bewildering
cyclone, so mentally he was anxious. He really wished he knew what was happening at Hogwarts.

So why didn’t he just find out? Whipping out his phone with a hurried motion, Kharan hit the
speed dial for Lila. Kharan’s anxiety ratcheted up several notches when she didn’t answer.

A few seconds after it stopped ringing his phone gave the message alert. Flipping it open, he saw a
short text from Lila, probably written in haste. It was in Latin, the usual language for coded
phrases. There was nothing cryptic about this message, however.

Mors cibicidae ad portus.

Death Eaters at the gates.

Okay, time to go.

He was slightly shaky climbing to his feet but he could feel his strength returning with every
motion. Gathering up his backpack, he hurriedly opened an aperture and flung himself through it.

The unplanned nature of the transfer and the disorienting momentum of the shape resulted in a
miscalculation, and while Kharan successfully landed in Hogsmeade he also landed quite literally.
The aperture appeared at a point some ten feet above an alleyway he had passed through earlier
that night and he dropped with a resounding crash on top of several rubbish bins. Fortunately, he
fell feet first and ended up doing more damage to the bins than they did to him.

As he sprinted away from the disturbance his crash had created he began to realise that as bad as the shape had been at the cave, it was much worse near the school.

The moon shone down on the village, sharing its chalk white illumination. Every shadow was inked black on the pale backdrop. Not a single person was in sight. There was an eerie unreality about the scene, especially the stillness. The way the shape was ebbing and then bursting back over the threshold he would have expected a cacophony.

The shape was convulsing and the world was a leaf in a wind storm.

It was difficult moving quickly through such an unsteady traverse – he tripped and barely caught himself. He had to ignore his sixth sense and concentrate on the mundane. The shape was no longer trustworthy, and his eyes and ears would serve him far better. When he looked up into the night sky, the starry expanse revealed the truth of the turbulence.

The Dark Mark hung above the school.

He stared at it, mind racing. Obviously, the Death Eaters had made their move. There wasn’t any time for developing possible scenarios, but no matter. He needed a counter-move, not an explanation. Disarray had been inevitable. The path was always just before his feet – if he looked closely, he could find it.

The cobblestones of the street were sharp and hard. They flashed below him and then gave way to grass, whipping against his ankles and crushing beneath his heels in the cool night air.

It wasn’t hard to think while running. The action of motion was repetitive and broken only by the bypassing of small obstacles. His earlier thoughts revolved in his head like a helix spiral. The current state of unrest would make things difficult. Complexity was the side effect of an ever-evolving shape. There was no telling what limitations might be imposed on him as the real players in the UO rapidly performed their destinies within the storm.

There were many lines rapidly separating from the vertiginous threads and most of them were either incomprehensible or unrelated. However, unique in its cycle one particularly relevant arc caught his mind. It was an ephemeral warning, more of a prompt than a proscription, and not necessarily a possible path for things to come. He couldn’t see to the end, but the consequences of disregarding it were obvious enough even without being able to follow the contour to its completion.

He shouldn’t enter Hogwarts in his adult form. He hadn’t needed the shape to tell him that was a bad idea, but in his hurry he had discarded the subtlety of his integration in favour of having his full powers. Now the faint line had brought him up short. Forced to slow down and consider the matter, he realised that he hadn’t thought of the next year, his second possible stay at Hogwarts. The last thing he needed was everyone finding out he was actually an adult. It would raise a huge amount of unanswerable questions and seriously jeopardise his chances of remaining incognito.

He just hoped his meagre teenage abilities would suffice for the night. If not, Lila would have to pick up the slack.

Kharan sprinted off the path and knelt down behind a bush, stripping off his clothes with frantic speed and making the change of age even faster than usual. His backpack contained a set of his teen clothing, a contingency that he was thankful to have planned for. His loose clothes would probably provide enough concealment for his handguns. They had to. There was no way he could
depend on his wand for attack or defence. He abandoned his backpack and the clothes where they lay, figuring they were hidden well enough.

The path leading up to the main doors had always been on a mild incline but tonight it felt far steeper than usual. Scott wasn’t entirely certain that the way the school seemed to lean towards the lake wasn’t the ground itself and not his vantage. Everything was skewed in the gale, but he managed to keep himself on a straight line.

The doors were closed and the night was still when he reached the entrance, but that didn’t mean much. The thick stone walls of Hogwarts would contain the noise of any violence. Kneeling on the path in light of the moon, he quickly withdrew his handguns and chambered a round in each of them. His right handgun was loaded with the standard .45 calibre, but he had saved something special for the left. The magazine for that gun held bullets marked with a bright blue stripe, just in case.

Then he stood, took a deep breath, and prepared to rush inside.

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Ginny just didn’t understand.

“But why did they go alone? Why can’t we help?” she said, frustrated.

“It’s something that Dumbledore trusts Harry with… not us.” Hermione shook her head. “I wish we weren’t left out too, but we’re just going to have to wait.”

Neville fidgeted in his seat. “Maybe we can’t wait… not if Malfoy is going to try something…”

“I know,” Hermione said, “but we can’t just rush without thinking it through.”

“This is bollocks,” Ginny muttered. “Why Harry thinks he can run off like this to do something dangerous…”

Hermione frowned, obviously thinking hard. “He seemed more worried about us.”

“Of course he would be,” Ginny said darkly. “That’s Harry. Always worrying about everyone but himself.” It was the same thought she had often had before, and it never failed to make her angry.

“Not quite the same this time,” Ron commented from his place beside the fire. The four of them were seated in the common room, sitting away from the other students and speaking in low, hurried tones. It had only been minutes after Harry and Dumbledore had left that they had gathered there to discuss the turn of events and Harry’s urgent warning.

“No, it wasn’t,” Hermione agreed. “He wouldn’t have given us the Felix and the map if he didn’t think the danger was real.”

“If the danger was so real then he wouldn’t have taken Scott with him,” Ginny countered. Harry had always seemed totally convinced of Scott’s desire to protect him and his friends, though Ginny
certainly had her doubts.

Hermione frowned again. “That’s a valid point. Of course, knowing Scott it’s entirely possible that neither Harry nor Dumbledore wanted him to come along. Scott only listens when it suits him.”

They all sat in silence for a moment before Ginny broke it, saying, “So now what, we just stay here until they get back? We don’t know what they’re doing so who knows how long it will take.”

“Right, we don’t.” Hermione immediately said, but she avoided meeting Ginny’s eyes. Ginny’s suspicion that she was being purposefully left in the dark grew exponentially stronger. “We have to do something, though. Harry’s counting on us.”

Ron stood up decisively. “Let’s not waste time, then. We should get Malfoy.”

Neville began to rise to follow him, but Hermione swiftly grabbed both their arms and pulled them back down. “Don’t rush off! Nobody else needs to know, we’ll cause a panic. I checked the map when Harry gave it to me, Malfoy isn’t on it which probably means he’s already in the Room. So, Ron, Neville and I will go stake out the Room and make sure to stop him when he comes out. Ginny, you use the DA coins to get Luna and anyone else who can help-”

Ginny’s anger flared. “Oh, no. You three are not leaving me here by myself to just sit around and worry-”

“Which is good,” a voice from behind interrupted, “because none of you are going anywhere, understand?”

Ginny twisted in her chair to see who it was but recognition had already set in before she completed the motion. The voice was familiar, and the flat feminine tones of its accent identified its owner.

Lila Kharan had entered through the portrait with Luna in tow. She was drawing stares from around the common room, due not only to her adult stature and Muggle clothing but also the fact that she was visibly armed. Ginny didn’t know anything about the functions of Muggle killing implements, but she still recognised a weapon when she saw one.

“You can’t bring those into Hogwarts!” Hermione gasped, staring at the guns.

“Odd. I just did.” Lila looked around the room with a bland expression, meeting all the curious gazes that were being sent her way. “Is there somewhere else we can talk?”

“Our room?” Neville suggested, referring to the sixth year boys’ dormitory.

“Sounds fine. Everybody up, let’s go,” Lila ordered.

Ginny resented being told what to do by Scott’s sister but everyone else was already moving towards the stairs. She reluctantly left her seat and followed. Lila’s presence made it obvious that Scott had taken Harry’s misgivings seriously, or at least seriously enough to send someone in his place.

“Okay,” Lila said once they were all in the dorm, “what’s the situation?”

“Dumbledore and Harry went off to... do something or the other,” Ron said, his eyes darting over towards Ginny for a second. She fumed silently in response. “Harry thinks Malfoy might try something while they’re gone.”
“What have you done about it?”

“We were just discussing that a minute ago…” Hermione said hesitantly.

Lila raised an impatient eyebrow. “Your conclusions being?”

“I – well, we were going to look for him,” Hermione stammered, clearly put off balance by the older woman’s abrupt manner.

“I need to know what Malfoy is trying to accomplish.”

“Nobody knows for sure,” Ron supplied. “Scott and Harry have been watching him, they might tell you more if they were around.”

Lila frowned. “And none of you thought it might be important to get involved?”

“They took it upon themselves, and at the time we didn’t quite believe…” Hermione trailed off as Lila’s expression grew more disapproving. “It’s all rather complicated,” she said defensively.

Lila’s lips thinned and she took a deep breath, looking as if she were making an effort to be more tolerant. “Is it now.”

“I suppose it might be,” Luna said absently. “It’s easy to make things complicated if you think hard about them.”

Lila looked blankly at the dreamy girl for several long seconds before turning back to Hermione. “Do we know where to find Malfoy?”

“He’s been in the Room of Requirement and he’s most likely there now.” Hermione must have realised that Lila might not know what that was and continued, “It’s a room that assumes whatever form you need it to. Harry wasn’t ever able to get inside to see what Malfoy was doing in there, though.”

“At least we know where to start.” Lila turned in a circle, making eye contact with all of them. “Okay, here’s the plan. I’m going to go take a look at this Room and make sure nothing’s happening there. I need one of you to show me where it is. While we’re gone, everybody else needs to sit tight and guard the common room.”

“I’ll take you,” Ginny immediately volunteered before anyone else could speak up. She was not going to lounge around while Harry was out there risking his life yet again. She needed to do something.

“Good, let’s go.” Lila started moving towards the door. “The rest of you get downstairs and watch the entrance. Try not to alarm the other students, and don’t split up. Stay together at all times.”

“Is all this really necessary?” Hermione asked as they hurried after Lila, who was taking the stairs two at a time.

“I don’t know, and apparently neither do you,” Lila said with more than a trace of irritation in her voice. “So until we find out let’s all be careful, okay?”

“I mean that Hogwarts is a very large place we need to be patrolling, not staying in here!” Hermione argued.

Lila stopped halfway down the stairs and rounded on Hermione, making her jump. “What will you
do if the Death Eaters attack tonight?” Lila asked forcefully, her face close to Hermione’s. “Those people will kill you, little miss. Are you ready to fight?”

Everyone froze, startled by the sudden seriousness of Lila’s tone.

Hermione’s posture was tense but her voice was steady when she replied, “For my friends, yes.”

For a long moment Lila stared down at Hermione, and Ginny wondered if Hermione had angered the Kharadjai. But instead of beginning to shout like it appeared she would, Lila instead straightened up and said in a mild voice, “Good, because it appears that’s what’s required of you.”

She turned around and hurried away down the staircase and the group stared after her, exchanging a few bemused glances.

“She’s as barmy as Scott is,” Ron stated in a tone that verged on appreciative.

“It was a test,” Hermione said crossly, looking put out. “Everything with those two always has to be some sort of test.”

Luna reached over and patted Hermione on the arm in a congratulatory fashion. “You passed, though.”

As soon as they re-emerged into the common room all eyes locked on them again, the rest of the Gryffindors obviously wondering what was going on. Ginny followed Lila towards the exit, glad that she was leaving; she didn’t feel like fending off difficult questions from any of her classmates.

Outside in the hallway Hermione suggested that some of them should go to Snape’s office as a precaution, but Lila refused to allow the group to separate. “You’re all coming with me,” she said in a way that brooked no argument. “If you want us to go to Snape’s office then we will, but it’s one or the other.”

“That’s not very efficient,” Hermione fretted. “What if we miss something?”

“Is there a convenient halfway point?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you can use that little dot map of yours to watch both targets,” Lila said, scanning the empty hall with a wary stance. “If we stay halfway between them we’ll have a better response time.”

Ron immediately shook his head. “Snape’s down in the dungeons and the Room’s up here.”

Lila frowned again. “What’s the fastest way down?”

“Staircase near the Astronomy Tower is good way to get to the entrance hall, but it’s downstairs, still a bit of a jog.” Ron scratched his head. “Could be faster or slower depending on where some of the stairs have moved themselves to.”

“You’re right, that’s not convenient at all.” Lila huffed out a short, angry breath. “Fine. Who’s a bigger threat, Malfoy or Snape?”

“Snape,” Ginny, Ron and Neville said simultaneously. There was little doubt of that. When it came to Malfoy, Ginny felt little but contempt. Snape was another matter entirely. The Defence Against the Dark Arts professor was intimately acquainted with the opposite side of his subject, and
everyone knew it.

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“He knows more Dark spells than anyone here,” Hermione affirmed.

Lila’s eyes darted quickly to each of the students in turn, her face intense. She appeared to be making some kind of assessment, though Ginny couldn’t be certain exactly what was being assessed. “It seems to me,” the woman muttered lowly, “that I’ve been handed a whole lot of bad options.”

Ginny bristled at that. “I can handle myself if it comes to a fight!”

“I wasn’t referring to any of you. Can you watch the Room without being seen?”

Hermione glanced over at Ron, he nodded in confirmation. “Yeah, back around the corner, if we’re careful.”

“You, you, you, and you,” Lila said, picking out Hermione, Ron, Luna and Neville with a pointed finger. “Go to the Room. Watch it from around that corner and make sure that nobody sees you. If anything happens, do not engage. Come get me immediately.” She turned to Ginny. “Still ready to live dangerously?”

Ginny met the woman’s eyes with as much hard confidence as she could muster. “Of course.”

“Then lead the way.”

Ginny started to do just that, but Hermione caught her sleeve and stopped her. “Wait!” she blurted. When Ginny looked back in confusion, Hermione held out the vial of Felix with a slightly shaky hand. “Take a drop before you go,” she said hurriedly.

Ginny pushed the vial back towards Hermione, refusing it. “No, you lot split it. I’m with her, I’ll be fine.”

On the way downstairs Ginny’s thoughts seemed to race ahead of her, a partial vision glimpsed just moments beyond the next bend. Without warning she had been thrust into the middle of something she didn’t fully understand, and while it was true that was where she had wanted to be the reality of it was difficult to adapt to. She wished that Harry was with her. Even if he didn’t know exactly what to do, he could always be counted on to react. She felt stiff with indecision, beginning to question whether going with Lila had been the right move.

The stairs were almost endless, but their quick steps brought them to the entrance hall faster than she had expected. Lila paused there, surveying the large room. “How secure is this door?” she asked, indicating the main entrance.

Ginny wasn’t sure. “It’s got loads of protections on it, I think...”

“It won’t matter if someone opens it from the inside,” Lila said, turning away from the door. “Lead on.”

The corridor outside Snape’s office was damp even in the dry weather, a subterranean lair well suited to the Dark Arts professor’s personality. Ginny supposed he and the rest of the Slytherins enjoyed living underground like the snake that was their traditional symbol, though she didn’t understand why. In Gryffindor the students had rooms with a view.
Snape’s door was shut as they approached it. Ginny pointed it out and then glanced over towards Lila, wondering if the woman was going to confront the professor directly. But instead of kicking down the door and assaulting Snape as would seemingly befit her personality, Lila passed the office by without comment. She turned at the next corner and then drew back to stand silently up against the wall.

“How now?” Ginny whispered, feeling that while it was unlikely that Snape could hear her through solid stone it was still better to be careful.

“We wait here until something happens.” Lila’s lips quirked slightly at Ginny’s disappointed expression. “Maybe you should have brought a book or something.”

Ginny leaned against the cold stone and fought her impatience, reminding herself that this had been what she had wanted, after all.

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The front gates were locked and covered with a seething mass of enchantments, but Scott figured there wasn’t any harm in breaking them. The Death Eaters were obviously already inside the castle.

Then again, what if they could be reinforced from the front? Yet another risk. Scott clenched his fists in indecision for a moment. Taking a chance, he opened an aperture and hoped that the whirling shape hadn’t completely impaired his accuracy.

The portal opened in the entrance hall as intended, but lower than it should have been. Half the aperture extended into the floor and Scott had to crawl through to enter, but it had worked regardless.

The high-ceilinged room was deserted, but faint sounds were echoing down from the stairwell leading to the corridors under the Astronomy Tower. Mapping out a rough idea of what was transpiring required several leaps of logic that Scott made as he rushed towards the stairs. The struggle was occurring in the upper levels, which meant that either the Death Eaters were working their way up from the ground floor and had been intercepted, or that Harry and Dumbledore had entered another way. The Astronomy Tower was the best place to land if they had approached by air, though Scott wasn’t sure how they would have managed that.

He was getting close, the three flights of stairs to the corridor flashing past. The detonations of spells were becoming clearer, and at several points he was sure he had heard the crack of gunfire. He thumbed the hammers on his handguns. The shape still wasn’t telling him much of anything, but if Harry had died he was sure he’d know that much.

He burst out of the doorway and raised his weapons, ready for anything.

What he got was total chaos.

The hallway was choked with dust. Spells ricocheted off the walls and floor, blowing holes and cutting gouges in the stone. It was obvious that, unlike the spells he had previously encountered during his class work, these were designed to incapacitate or kill. He stepped quickly to the left to avoid a stray curse.
Two figures cloaked in black became clearer in the dust as he edged forward. They had their backs to him and were trading spells with unseen opponents at the other end of the hall. Scott crouched and raised his weapons, but hesitated. The combatants were difficult to separate in the confusion. He had to avoid causing any friendly fire. He needed to be sure who he was shooting at.

Luckily, the identities of the two persons were revealed in the next several seconds. With a crackle, a deadly-looking spell shot out of the darkness towards the combatants. The robed figure on the left managed to cast a shield in time to block it, but the spell exploded against the barrier with a brilliant flash. In that brief moment of blinding light, Scott spotted a familiar head of bubblegum pink hair at the opposite side of the corridor, and it became clear that the two fighters in front of him were Death Eaters – and they were targeting Tonks.

It was not sporting to shoot a man in the back, but Scott wasn’t feeling very genteel. He tucked his left gun beneath his right shoulder, freeing both his hands for use with the other weapon.

His first shots were fired in a rapid staccato that caught the first Death Eater in the back with an upwards alternating pattern – one, two, three, four. The .45 calibre round was the baseball bat of bullets, sacrificing penetration in favour of a hard hit. The last rounds impacted at the man’s shoulders and the back of his head respectively, but the previous two had already slammed home through the vitals behind his lower spine and his momentum was unalterable at that point. The Death Eater toppled over backwards as his knees gave out.

The second Death Eater only managed a half-turn before Scott shot him three times, once in the right arm and twice in the chest. The man was knocked into the wall and cracked his head against the stone, slumping downwards into a limp approximation of a sitting position. Scott didn’t know if he was dead or not, but didn’t bother to check. He had to keep moving.

He turned the corner and was confronted with a hallway in even worse condition than the adjoining one. A shot rang out from around the next corner, giving him a good starting point in the search for his Primes. It had to be Lil, the crack of her pistol was distinctive. Scott hoped that she had the situation in hand.

He kept low and hugged the wall, using the dust and darkness as cover. He had to locate his Primes before he got totally involved in the fight, it was crucial that they be preserved. To his immediate right, McGonagall suddenly emerged from the dust, locked in combat with a Death Eater who was retreating under her onslaught. The Death Eater backed up within Scott’s reach and he paused long enough to drop the invader with a vicious pistol whip to the kneecap. The man howled and fell to the floor; one of McGonagall’s spells struck him in the chest and he went limp.

“Kharan!” McGonagall gasped, spotting him. “What on earth do you think you’re doing?”

“We’ll discuss it later, professor!” Scott shouted back to her, sprinting further down the corridor.

The amount of spells coming from the turn to his right made it obvious that was where the majority of Death Eaters were. Sliding on his stomach to lay behind some rubble, he poked his head out into the intersection and looked both ways.

Immediately ahead of him was the entrance to the Astronomy Tower spiral stairs. To his left he spotted the blond head of Lila further down the hall, where she was leaning out of a doorway and returning fire. To his right a squad of Death Eaters had taken cover behind sections of collapsed ceiling and were lighting the hallway with incessant offensive spells. The open intersection between the two opposing forces was littered with wreckage and a number of corpses. The cluster of crumpled bodies in black robes near the left side of the juncture made it clear where Lila had done her work.
It was a stand-off. The only clear light in the battle zone was from the spells and the sparse moonbeams coming in through the shattered windows. The thick dust further obscured vision. Scott pushed himself back out of the line of fire and withdrew his phone, dialling Lila.

This time, she answered it. “I just saw you.”

“Lil, where are the Primes?”

“With me.” She paused for a second and Scott heard gunfire through the phone and from the hallway. “I got Ginny, Luna, Neville, Ron and Hermione over here, and a bunch of other people too.”

“But where’s Harry and Dumbledore?” Scott asked urgently.

“They must be in the tower. Just before you got here some of the Death Eaters went up—”

“Suppress those bastards across from you, then, I’m going up,” Scott interrupted her. He leapt to his feet and ran to stand against the opposite wall. “Count of three.” He ejected the magazine of his right gun and reloaded.

“Kharan!” It was McGonagall again, striding towards him with her hair askew and robes covered in dust. “What’s going on? Who are you talking to?”

Lila must have heard her over the phone. “Is that the professor lady? She got separated during the retreat, I thought she was dead.”

“She looks okay,” Scott said, ignoring McGonagall. “Count of three, Lil. One, two, three—”

Scott crouched and leaned out around the corner and began to shoot indiscriminately as Lila released a blistering barrage of fire from down the hallway, expending the magazine in her SMG. A volley of spells followed close behind the bullets, the others down the hallway with Lila apparently joining in.

The Death Eaters quailed under the torrent, returning badly aimed shots half-heartedly from behind their positions. A few of them reacted to being struck and clutched damaged appendages while one luckless Death Eater caught a bullet in the head and crashed lifeless to the floor.

The light of the violent surge had briefly illuminated things and Scott was surprised by the number of Death Eaters holding off Lila and her allies. He counted at least eight, and the casualties spread around suggested a sizeable force had entered Hogwarts.

“Cease fire!” he barked into his phone, then he pocketed it and tensed himself to sprint across the open space, drawing his left gun again.

“SNAPE’S UP THERE!” Lila shouted down the hall as he started to run.

There wasn’t much time to consider it. He was already moving, head low and legs pumping as he rushed the stairs. The Death Eaters didn’t have time to get a clear shot on him.

He ascended no more than five steps before he hit something that he hadn’t seen, a wall of magic blocking the stairwell. Because he had been running his left arm had been slightly extended and the tip of the pistol in that hand entered the field. With a painful jolt his arm went numb and was flung backwards; he barely caught himself from tumbling out into the hallway. His left handgun flew out of his slack fingers and clattered down the steps.
Angry more at himself than at the magic, he lashed out and destroyed the barrier. He didn’t bother braving the open hall to retrieve his second gun; the one he still had would suffice, and within the staircase it was too close quarters to bring the Blue rounds into play. The remaining steps flew underneath him and then he was at the top, the door to the parapet within sight.

The door was slightly ajar, and, feeling that the element of surprise would be useful, Scott didn’t slow down and kicked it open, stepping out onto the parapet with weapon raised and eyes darting for targets.

He came face to face with Severus Snape.

Scott almost laughed. Of course. Of course it would be Snape, damn him. Goddamn the man. All that time wasted, all those days spent wondering whether a pre-emptive strike against Snape wouldn’t be out of order. All those months of relying on third party information to make decisions, of counting on Dumbledore to know what he was doing. Months of feeling like there was more Scott should have been doing.

Well, now he knew. And he also knew what he was going to do about it.

Snape was even paler than usual and had his wand in one fist and Malfoy’s sleeve in the other. It was obvious he had been about to exit through the door Scott had just come through. A cadre of Death Eaters was close behind him, all of them reacting to Scott’s presence by backing away with wands pointed.

All except one, a hulking grey-haired man who took a step closer. He reeked of blood and stale sweat, reason enough for Scott to spare him a glance. Judging by the sharp state of the man’s ragged nails, filed down teeth and predatory stance, he engaged in combat of the closest kind. That was reason enough for Scott to move the man, or whatever he was, to the top of the threat list, but he kept his gun trained on Snape regardless. The Death Eaters were following the professor’s lead. If he moved to attack, they all would.

Dumbledore and Harry were nowhere in sight. That could be a good or bad sign.

“Why, Snape,” Scott said mildly, breaking the short silence. His thoughts had been so rapid that it seemed like he had been holding the gun on the professor for some time, when in fact it had been no more than a couple seconds. “Whatever are you doing here?”

He casually scanned the parapet as if he was looking at the Death Eaters. Harry had still been carrying his Invisibility Cloak so it was possible that he and Dumbledore were simply hiding. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted the huddled shape of Harry, but he wasn’t moving. He was careful not to look directly at the spot. He didn’t understand it, but there was a fading thread of a spell linked to Harry, the energy rapidly dissipating. What spell would that be?

It wasn’t like Harry not to strike when given the chance. Dumbledore might have stopped him, except Dumbledore wasn’t there... He was gone.

The Headmaster wouldn’t have willingly left Harry. Scott had a sinking feeling as he began to assimilate what was most likely the truth.

Well. One more reason to kill Snape. Not that Scott needed another one.

Harry was still alive – that was the most important thing. No doubt it was Dumbledore who was responsible for that. Scott realised that the thin remnants of the spell on Harry had to be what kept him frozen in place.
“Everybody stay right where you are,” Scott said loudly, turning his head towards Harry and emphasising the first word in a desperate attempt to get him to stay put. Harry shifted under his Cloak and sat up, but didn't go any further than that.

“Kharan,” Snape said, his voice dead of all inflection and his eyes hollow, “get out of my way.”

Scott looked coldly back at him. “You really think you’re going to leave here alive?”

Snape’s gaze briefly darted to the barrel of Scott’s gun – it was obvious he knew exactly what it was. “You don’t know what you’re doing, Kharan. You're in over your head.”

“Look at me,” Scott said. He raised his arms slightly, pointing his weapon at Snape’s forehead. “Look me in the eye, and tell me I don’t know how to use this.”

“What’s that he’s got, anyway?” one of the Death Eaters said in a wheezy voice. “He don’t even got a wand. Do ‘im, Snape, and let’s be off!”

“Move, Amycus, and you’ll be the first to die,” Snape told the man, never taking his eyes off of Scott.

“You catch on quicker than I expected,” Scott said. “But really, who’d miss him?”

“He’ll be like the other children,” the hulking, grey haired man growled. “They never have a taste for blood… Let me have him, Snape…”

“No time for a meal, Greyback, we’ve got to get out now!” the sole woman Death Eater screeched.

“You’re outnumbered, Kharan,” Snape said softly, ignoring his comrades. “Kill me and one of them will get you anyway. Stand aside.”

Scott smiled. “You say that like I should care.”

With a swift, sudden movement one of the Death Eaters grabbed Malfoy’s shoulder and shoved him in front of Snape. There the Death Eater held him, a human shield for the traitorous professor. Malfoy’s eyes focused on the gun barrel that was now pointed towards him and he paled even further, his legs visibly trembling.

“What are you doing?” Snape snarled at his compatriot, looking away from Scott for the first time.

“He’s one of Dumbledore’s,” the large man shot back. “He won’t kill the boy.”

Now that, Scott thought darkly, was an interesting delusion. “Why?” he asked.

Then he pulled the trigger.
The silence in the dungeon corridor was stifling and Ginny sighed simply to make some sort of noise. She paced the middle of the hallway, counting the stones set into the floor. The inactivity was maddening when God only knew what was going on upstairs. Had anything happened at all? Had the others run into any professors who could assist them? Or would they all be ordered back to their tower?

Making the situation even more annoying was Lila’s complete calm. The woman hadn’t moved from her original position at the corridor corner and apparently felt no need to converse. She was still as the rock that supported her and completely expressionless.

“How can you do that?” Ginny finally said.

Lila shifted slightly, as if she were emerging from thought. “Do what?”

“Stand there without moving for so long.”

“Training,” Lila answered shortly.

That wasn’t enough for Ginny. She wanted to discuss something, anything. “Why would you be trained to stand still?”

“The human eye is attuned to motion. Now be quiet.”

Ginny sullenly crossed her arms and leaned back against the wall again. The time continued to drag on while her thoughts were anything but slow.

She was afraid for Harry. She knew he’d carelessly put himself in danger and she didn’t trust Scott to do anything about it. Scott seemed to encourage Harry’s suicidal tendencies. It was daft, the way he thought he needed to do everything himself, and now instead of turning to Ginny, Harry seemed to rely on Scott more than he should. It was obvious the Kharadjai had been told things that Ginny hadn’t.

Why was that? Had Ginny not been forward enough with her support? Had she not made it clear enough how much she was willing to help? Maybe no matter how far along her relationship with Harry progressed she would still always be the younger sister, born to be ignored.

Or maybe, Ginny thought darkly, Scott was a better manipulator than he seemed.

Ginny snapped out of her musings when Lila suddenly moved away from the wall, her stance alert. “Did you hear that?” she asked.

“Should I have?” Ginny hadn’t heard anything.
“Apparently not.” Lila edged around the corner and peered back down the adjoining hall. Ginny followed suit but there was nothing to see; the hallway was completely empty. Despite this, Lila said with certainty in her voice, “Something’s happening.”

“What? What’s happening?”

“Let’s go,” Lila commanded. She set off down the hallway at a fast jog.

Ginny rushed to catch up. “Wait, what about Snape?” she huffed out, sprinting up alongside the older woman. “We’re supposed to watch his office!”

Lila shook her head; they reached the stairs and she took them two at a time, leaving Ginny behind. “You Primes are more important,” Lila said, her response echoing back down to Ginny.

Ginny realised she was rapidly being left in the dust. “I can’t run as fast as you!” she shouted. “Wait for me!”

Lila must have slowed down because Ginny caught up with her at the top of the staircase. “You have to be faster,” Lila said.

The Kharadjai began running again, heading towards the main stairs. Ginny was fit and she did her very best to keep up, but she just couldn’t run like that, without any apparent strain. Lila moved effortless ahead in a loping cadence that made full use of her long legs. She didn’t even breathe through her mouth.

That was simply not fair, Ginny thought with frustration. She couldn’t be expected to keep up with someone who could run like that up a staircase. Lila wasn’t even sprinting; she was moving at a pace that was obviously well below her full capabilities. And the best help she could offer Ginny was an order to ‘be faster’?

Somehow, Ginny managed to do exactly that when up ahead she heard Lila shout, “DROP YOUR WEAPONS! HANDS IN THE AIR!”

Ginny’s heart began to race. Surely there couldn’t be Death Eaters in the school... Panting at the exertion but increasing her speed nonetheless, Ginny whipped out her wand and bolted into the hallway Lila had turned into just in time to see the older woman holster her smaller Muggle wand.

“False alarm,” Lila said calmly, as if she hadn’t been screaming a moment before.


“Ginny!” It was Tonks, her bubblegum pink hair moving into view from where it had been obscured behind Lila’s tall form. Remus was right behind her, both of them hurrying forward. “Great Merlin, Gin, what are you doing out of your common room? It’s not safe tonight!”

“Yes, you shouldn’t be down here right now,” Remus said seriously. “We need to get you back upstairs.”

“I know,” Ginny said with a little more impudence in her voice than she had intended. But there they went again, treating her like a child. Lila, bossy bint though she was, at least didn’t see Ginny as the baby of the lot. “That’s where we’re going.”

“No time to chat. Keep moving,” Lila commanded brusquely.

It was the only time Ginny had been happy to get an order from her. Figuring Lila’s commands
superseded Tonks’ and Remus’ annoying desire to protect her, Ginny dutifully followed the Kharadjai towards the stairs to the second floor.

“Wait, what are you doing?” Tonks called after them. She and Remus ran to keep pace with Lila, who was moving quickly again. “Hold up! Aren’t you Scott’s sister? Lara, wasn’t it? What are you doing here?”

“Save the questions. I have to get upstairs and so do you,” Lila told them, and then sprinted ahead to vanish up the stairwell.

So Lila was an equal opportunity bossy bint, then. Apparently adults were not exempt from her self-imposed authority. Unfortunately, that left Ginny to deal with Tonks and Remus.

“Ginny, what’s happening?” Tonks asked as they all clambered up the stairs.

Ginny did her best to condense the situation down to a few sentences, which wasn’t an easy thing to do while running. “Harry told us to watch the school while he and Dumbledore are gone,” she explained in between breaths. “Lila is here to help. We were downstairs and she said she heard something and now we have to meet up with Ron and the rest.” Good enough, she decided. Now she wanted some answers of her own. “Why are you here?”

“Dumbledore told us to watch the school,” Remus informed her. “Harry shouldn’t have endangered you-”

Ginny tuned him out at that point, increasing her pace as best as her aching legs would allow. She was glad that Remus was there to help but she didn’t care to hear whatever he had to say about her right to be part of the team. Until whatever was happening had ended, Ginny was sticking to Lila like glue.

Or at least, like very loose glue. The blond woman had again picked up her speed to the point that Ginny was unable to follow closely. She didn’t bother asking Lila to slow down this time. Instead, she did as best she could and hoped Lila wouldn’t move so fast that Ginny would lose track of her.

Just up ahead Ginny could hear Lila talking again, voice hard. Ginny hadn’t thought anything could make her go faster, but somehow she found the strength for another short burst, afraid of what she would find.

The sight that greeted her when she ran out of the stairwell and into the second floor was only slightly less horrifying than a cadre of Death Eaters – Lila was pointing her weapon at McGonagall.

“Put down the wand,” Lila was in the process of ordering. “Now.”

McGonagall’s face couldn’t have held any more outrage. “I think not,” she said in a voice like a sharp iceberg. “Who are you? Why are you threatening me?”

“Don’t shoot her!” Ginny gasped out, skidding to a halt. “She’s one of us!”

Lila lowered her weapon and slid it back into its holster. “I see. My mistake.”

“And quite a large one. I don’t know how you got in here, but this, of all nights, is not the time for surprises. And you, Ms. Weasley-” McGonagall turned her hard stare in Ginny’s direction. “What do you think you’re doing outside of your common room? Who is this woman?”

Lila was busily scanning the hallway, obviously ignoring McGonagall. She seemed to come to
some sort of decision and gestured towards Ginny. “There’s nothing here. Let’s keep moving.”

McGonagall was not amused. “Neither of you are going anywhere until-”

She was interrupted by the sudden arrival of Tonks and Lupin, both of whom appeared to be out of breath.

“Crikey!” Tonks wheezed, one hand pressed to her side. “I’d forgotten how many bloody stairs there were in this place.”

“Nymphadora! Are they with you?” McGonagall asked, indicating Lila and Ginny.

Or she would have indicated Lila, had the blond woman not already left the group. “Move it, Ginny,” she called back, apparently unconcerned whether the other adults followed or not.

Deciding that she was already in enough trouble that a little more wouldn’t really matter, Ginny sidestepped the thunderstruck McGonagall and ran after the Kharadjai.

“Ginny! Wait!” Tonks yelled plaintively, but Ginny was already starting up the next staircase, chasing Lila’s ever elusive posterior.

Surprisingly, she almost ran right into said posterior. Lila had halted for reasons unknown. “What is it?” Ginny asked.

“Ginny, I said wait,” Tonks scolded, catching up to them. “What in bloody hell are you do-”

“Shush!” Lila commanded in a harsh whisper. “Someone’s coming.”

Sure enough, when Ginny concentrated she could hear the clatter of footsteps echoing down the stairs. Lila pointed to the wall right of the staircase and Ginny understood, reading her wand and pressing herself against the cold stone. Lila did the same on the opposite side, her face blank and her eyes sharp.

Ginny reckoned the woman would probably kill any Death Eaters who emerged. She wasn’t sure if she was ready to witness that, but she also refused to hide. A pair of shadows appeared in the entryway. Ginny held her breath.

The next thing she heard was not the clamour of Lila’s weapon but a short shout followed by a heavy thud. Shortly after a set of worn trainers slid into view, bringing with them the body and pained visage of Neville Longbottom.

“Are you all right, Neville?” Tangled blond tresses shone in the candlelight as Luna stepped down to help him up.

“Luna! Neville!” Ginny gasped. “What are you doing? What happened upstairs?”

“Death Eaters!” Neville yelped, struggling back up to his feet. “They came out of the Room of Requirement!”

Ginny’s stomach dropped like a stone. She reached forward and grasped Neville’s arms frantically. “Neville, where are the others?”

“We all ran,” Neville told her haltingly, clearly short on breath, “they were fine last I saw them, Bill found us. He sent Luna and me to get help.”

That was scant comfort. Ginny whirled toward Lila, who was standing infuriatingly still yet again.
All that talk about moving faster, and then when the danger began to happen she didn't do anything? “What are you waiting for, they need help!”

“Neville, where are the Death Eaters going?” Lila asked, sounding entirely too unruffled for the situation at hand.

“I don’t know,” Neville said helplessly. “We split up on the fifth floor, been running since then…”

“Okay. Everybody group up. That means you too, professor, Tonks, Lupin,” Lila said, gesturing to the other adults. “We’ve got confirmed hostiles in the building and they could be anywhere, so stay on my ass… Arse? Just follow me close.”

Lila didn’t wait for any possible protestations from McGonagall. She set off again, though this time at a more reasonable pace. Ginny was able to stay with her without too much effort, but that did nothing to allay the faint tingling of panic that was beginning to set in. She fought the feeling down, clenching her wand tightly. If Neville and Luna had managed to get away then there was no reason the others couldn’t as well. God, why had she volunteered to go to the dungeons with Lila? Her help was finally required and she had been at the other end of the school.

Ginny was startled out of her inner turmoil when a hand clamped firmly onto her shoulder. She looked up to meet Lila’s serious gaze. “No time to freak out, girlie. I’m counting on you,” the older woman informed her.

Ginny wasn’t sure that made her feel any better, but she nodded sharply in reply and resumed the upward climb.

The hallway into which they emerged was blessedly empty of Death Eaters, though it was unfortunately also barren of Ginny’s friends.

Lila looked towards her for guidance. “Which way to the fourth floor?”

Fourth floor, fourth floor… There was the adjoining hallway and then the staircase by the Charms classroom, but it would be faster to take the narrower staircase towards the Trophy Room just to the— “Right! To the right, this way!”

Ginny started to run forward but Lila caught her by the sleeve and roughly hauled her back. “Incoming, down the hall,” the woman said softly. She shoved Ginny to the opposite wall and crouched down. “Don’t hug the wall, stay low.”

Hopefully everyone behind was following Lila’s example. Ginny gripped her wand and tried to hide herself as best she could behind a suit of armour. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, making some sort of attempt to ease her furious heart rate. It didn’t work, and she was sure if Death Eaters were to come down the hall they would hear the thumping in her chest.

Across the short space between them, Lila began to issue a rapid and hushed set of instructions. “Left doorway, three or four. Staircase is FP. Fire on my lead.”

Ginny had understood maybe half of that. “What?”

“Don’t shoot until I do. Here they come.”

Who ‘they’ were became clear a moment later when Ron, Hermione and Bill came shooting around the corner at full tilt.

“Don’t shoot them!” Ginny gasped, whirling towards Lila, but she needn’t have worried. The
woman’s Muggle weapon was already lowered as she stood up.

“Ginny!” Bill said loudly, skidding to a halt in front of her. His voice was an odd mixture of relief and disbelief. “What are you doing here?”

“It’ll save,” Lila informed him as she stepped forward to retake command of the situation. “What’s happening upstairs?”

Bill gave her a strange look, but answered even though Ginny didn’t think he recognised the Kharadjai. “Death Eaters. Ron says they came out of the Room of Requirement, but I don’t know how. I ran into him and Hermione and we tried to hold them back, but there’s just too many. We delayed them, maybe. Perhaps not even that.”

“Do you know where they’re going?”

“Down, I know that much. A few split off to follow us but we lost them by the Library.” Bill glanced back over his shoulder, his face creased in thought. “If we came through the West end of the castle, we would have been about over the Great Hall when we went back towards the Library. So if they had started straight down from there they’d end up—”

“The Astronomy Tower corridor!” Ron blurted out, coming to the same conclusion as his older sibling. “There’s the other side hallway there with the staircase if they’re going for the Entrance Hall!”

“Ginny, take us there,” Lila immediately ordered, putting a halt to any further discussion.

Bill fell into step next to Ginny in front of the group as they hurried towards the Astronomy Tower. He leaned down next to her ear and said quietly, “So who is this woman, exactly?”

“Scott’s sister,” Ginny informed him, quickening her step. She had to agree with Lila, there would be time for questions later. Right now, they had to stop this invasion.

She rushed up the short set of stairs and into the Astronomy Tower corridor, wand at the ready. She peered nervously ahead, but there was no one else in sight. The corridor was empty.

“This is it?” Lila asked, moving up to stand beside Ginny.

“Yeah, there’s the stairs to the tower,” Ginny said, pointing them out.

“Okay. Everybody spread out!” she commanded, gesturing with one arm behind her to the rest of the group. “Keep your eyes open.”

“Right,” Remus agreed. He nodded his head towards the hallway to their immediate right. “Nymphadora?”

“We’ll go this way and check the Entrance Hall stairs,” Tonks said. She and Remus moved cautiously away from the group.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat slightly. “I want all students to stay put for the time being. Do not wander off.” She gave one last hard look in Lila’s direction, and then moved to follow Tonks and Remus down the other hall.

Bill did the same, pausing to reach over and give Ginny’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “She’s right. If they’re at the staircase, stay here and let us handle it.”
Lila watched them walk off with an unreadable expression on her face. As soon as they disappeared around the corner, she turned back to Ginny. “Let’s move out.”

Ginny blinked. “But Professor McGonagall said—” she began to protest. However, Lila was already several steps ahead by the time Ginny cut herself off, and, deciding the older woman obviously wasn’t going to wait for her, she hurried forward.

“This is it?” Lila pointed to the Astronomy Tower stairs.

Ginny nodded. “Yes, but I don’t see any—”

Three hooded and cloaked men emerged from around the nearby corner. They froze when they saw the approaching group.

Ginny’s heart skipped a beat. She didn’t know what to do. Should she run? Should she attack? She was staring a Death Eater in the face, and all she could think was that she wished she’d had a bit more time to prepare. Beside her, Lila made no movements.

The seconds of stunned silence ended when one of the Death Eaters stepped forward threateningly. “What’s this? Some students out for a walkabout with their pretty little professor?” he said.

His voice was muffled by his mask, but the menace in it was clear. He seemed more amused by their presence than anything else, and in a distant, rational corner of her mind Ginny supposed a bunch of students and a blond woman weren’t the most threatening sight.

The Death Eater focused his gaze on Lila as his compatriots drew up closer behind him. “’Ello, luv,” he leered at her.

“Hello,” Lila mildly replied, and then shot him through the head.

The other two Death Eaters recoiled. Ginny’s wand slipped from her startled grasp and she clapped her hands over her ears, wincing at the sudden pain. She looked on numbly as Lila killed the men in front of her with speed and efficiency.

She found herself not feeling much of anything as she witnessed her first deaths. The shattering crack of the pistol broke against her skin, the force like a slight slap to the face. The Death Eater’s tumbled backwards, twisting as the bullets tore into them. Lila had no expression on her face as she took aim at the last man still standing. He was clutching his chest, reeling from his initial wound. Lila shot him two more times in the chest, and as soon as he hit the floor she leaned forward and placed a final bullet in his temple with a clinical precision.

That same dull, distant corner of Ginny’s mind informed her that there didn’t appear to be any blood, at least not now, and she shouldn’t have any problem seeing the Thestrals from this point forward.

It helped her one last time when it told her to duck into the storage closet doorway nearby, as there were Death Eaters pouring out of the stairwell straight ahead.

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21:25

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The gun jammed.

With a click, the hammer failed to close and the weapon sat still and silent in his hand.

That made a number of things clear.

Scott recognised that he had about a second and a half to decide on his reaction. Given the new information he had just received, it was not as simple a choice as it would first appear.

Scott knew his weapons well, and he took great care to keep them in immaculate condition. The chances of them jamming were minute. That it should happen just at the moment he was about to shoot two of the major figures involved in a UO put those chances in the realm of the infinitesimal.

The message was obvious. Either Snape or Malfoy was not intended to die – possibly both, for all Scott knew. The universe had forced upon him an unsubtle reminder of just how little of the shape he had been able to map.

For the moment, he had to accept. Harry was safe enough where he was, invisible under the Cloak so long as he kept his head and stayed put, so there was nothing to be done there. Scott could try his luck by attempting to kill the other Death Eaters, but Snape might delay his retreat in order to fight. Since Snape appeared to be untouchable for the present, it was dangerous to have him around any longer. No one would be able to harm him if he should attack the students. It was better to let him leave, and try to kill him again some other day.

Scott allowed himself a small smile as the killing spell sped towards him. The Death Eaters’ move had been well played. He appreciated the strike of an opponent who – while still not worthy in Scott’s eyes – had managed to carry a battle.

He’d fold this round.

Harry had never been so angry in his life.

It made the rage he had felt towards his Aunt seem like nothing more than a pinprick of annoyance, a passing fit of irritation. His storming, screaming reunion with Ron and Hermione during the summer before fifth year was a mild bout of pique. Even the raw, sorrowful wrath he had been enveloped with as he had sought revenge upon Bellatrix for the death of Sirius paled in comparison. Perhaps that was because Bellatrix Lestrange would be expected to do something like that.

Snape, however, was a cowardly, snivelling, backstabbing traitor. Oh, how Harry had hated the man even before this, but he still hadn’t expected it. It wasn’t even enough that Snape had snuffed out the life of Harry’s mentor, Dumbledore. No, apparently Snape had to also kill Harry’s friend. It didn’t matter that it was one of his hooded compatriots who had cast the lethal spell at Scott. If not for Snape, none of it would have happened. He might as well have been holding the wand himself.

The anger that Dumbledore’s death had kindled in Harry had already been clawing and ripping at his insides, but for all that it was still a bit numb. Death was difficult to comprehend, hard to come
to terms with. Harry knew Dumbledore was dead, but he didn’t necessarily feel it yet. What he felt instead was a rage that was stained with a sickening horror, diluted and confusing.

That changed when Harry witnessed Scott absorb the killing spell and fall limply out of sight, his gun clattering to the stone floor.

How much was he expected to take in a single night?

Dumbledore. Scott. God only knew who else lay dead down below.

The sheer fury that enveloped Harry at that point was mindless.

It stripped every other emotion from his body with a white hot clarity. It was an animal instinct, an inhuman compulsion. Whereas always before the anger had been a part of Harry, this fury consumed him. His jaw clenched so hard that it creaked, and acid tears coursed their way down his reddened face.

He was going to kill Snape.

It was several full seconds before he remembered to move. Scott’s subtle warning had kept Harry hidden even after Dumbledore’s spell had faded: it had not been easy to remain inactive, but Scott had earned enough trust for his masked caution to be heeded. In Harry’s mind he thought that Scott was just waiting for the right moment. Perhaps the two of them could attack simultaneously, or maybe Scott was trying to manoeuvre the stalemate into something more advantageous.

Instead everything had gone completely wrong, and Harry had found himself frozen once again, this time by shock.

The rush of hatred was just the cure for that. He jumped to his feet and sprinted for the stairwell with the speed of a predator loosed from a cage, taking the stairs two at a time. The walls flashed by him and at the bottom he leapt over a still form that might have been Scott. He didn’t stop to look.

He slipped when he landed, sliding on something hard that skittered across floor and made him drop painfully on his elbows. It proved to be a stroke of luck – the air above him was thick with spells.

In the eerie light of the battle, the object he had fallen on was illuminated in soft reds and whites. It was one of Scott’s pistols, abandoned on corridor stones. Without wondering why or how, he reached forward and grasped it. It was cold in his hand, and heavy.

A spell crashed into the rocks next to him, and the daze was broken. He surged up and forward, running with all his might.

The fighting continued unabated, spells ricocheting about. Out of the corner of his eye, in the half second before he sped out of the intersection, Harry saw the Death Eaters fleeing towards the stairwell to their backs, abandoning their positions. He could hear the sharp staccato beat of Lila’s weapon as it spewed torrents of lead, and he felt a brief surge of dark satisfaction at the thought of her mowing down their ranks. Several people called his name as he charged through, but he didn’t pause. He couldn’t.

Another staircase, this one cloaked in darkness. Deep rumbles echoed through the stone, a sign of the battle above. The only other thing audible was Harry’s own harsh breathing and the pounding of his feet on the steps.
The Entrance Hall doors were thrown open, the night air permeating the room as Harry rushed into it. Just as he was about to reach the doors to the grounds outside a hulking figure stepped out in front of him, wand raised. The black hooded robes of a Death Eater were unmistakable. Without even thinking, Harry raised the gun and, still running full tilt, pointed it at the wizard and fired.

The ungodly shriek of energy that blasted from the gun both deafened and blinded Harry. With incredible force the weapon kicked itself right out of his hand and smashed into his face. He barely felt it. Still retaining his forward momentum, he fell onto his back and skidded on the cold stone. Before he had even slid to a halt he was struggling to get back on his feet.

Stumbling towards the door, Harry’s vision returned enough that he could see a massive hole gouged out of the stone in the left hand wall. A flurry of glowing ash was stirred up by his clumsy footfalls as his equilibrium began to return and he picked up speed. He didn’t know where the gun had gone and didn’t stop to find it. It wasn’t until he was outside and racing across the grass that he spotted the still form of the Death Eater laying not too far from the double doors. The wizard was still intact, and Harry realised that he had missed. He felt a brief flash of something, disappointment or relief, he wasn’t sure, but that was all. He had to keep running.

And then he saw them.

Across the grounds, not too far ahead, Harry could see Snape’s back, robes flapping as he ran. Draco was in front, his bright hair clearly visible in the dark.

Running from the rape of Hogwarts.

The sight lit Harry’s brain on fire. Red-tinged images, in rapid succession, some real, some imagined:

* Dumbledore, crumpled in the grass, his legs bent at awkward angles.

* Scott, prone on the staircase, his sharp grey eyes blank and glazed.

* Neville and Luna, cut down in the corridor, staining red on stone.

* Ron and Hermione, slumped together in an embrace, frozen from the killing curse.

* Ginny, limp on the common room couch, her undergarments torn and a Death Eater’s fingerprints pressed purple on her neck…

Harry didn’t know what would be waiting for him when, or *if*, he returned to the castle. But he did know that someone had to pay for it.

Rage had granted him a gift of celerity. Harry was no more than twenty feet from Snape when he snarled out the first attack. “*Stupefy!*”

Snape whirled around and blocked the spell with a rapid motion. “Don’t stop!” he shouted to Draco.

“*Impedimenta!*” Harry sent the curse towards Draco, but Snape blocked it as well.

“Not tonight, Potter!” Snape jeered at Harry across from the short space between them.

Harry spat out every curse, jinx and hex he could think of. They spilled from his mouth in a torrent, lighting the grass, sparking and snapping through the air. Harmless annoyances, painful afflictions, deadly Unforgivables, it didn’t matter. He said them all, one after another. *Incarcerous.*
Snape stopped them all, blocking and dodging, parrying with counterspells that rocked Harry back on his feet and sent him tumbling into the grass.

And Harry didn’t care. He took the hits, hard and bruising, and kept moving forward, never faltering in his litany of curses. Surely one of them would get through.

He was no more than five feet away when Snape gestured forcefully, dispelling another attempted *Crucio*. The counterspell was powerful; Harry’s feet left the ground and he came down hard. His wand spun out of his hand, landing just within reach.

Frantically, he rolled over and grabbed for it, but Snape was too fast. A Banishing charm sent Harry’s wand flying out into the dark.

*“That is enough!”* Snape snarled, his wand raised as Harry clambered back to his feet. *“You’re done.”*

The red that suffused his vision and the tears that scorched the undersides of his eyes were evidence enough that Harry was *far* from done.

Maybe the wordless scream that ripped its way free from Harry’s throat startled Snape into inaction, or maybe he simply hadn’t expected such an insane tactic; completely heedless of the wand that Snape still had pointed at him, Harry rushed his former teacher like a madman.

Harry slammed into Snape, knocking him backwards in a tangle of flailing limbs. In the first few seconds Harry took full advantage of Snape’s disarray and pummelled the older man, landing several hard punches on his head and neck and kneeing him in the stomach. The hits were satisfying to an overwhelming degree, the only answer to his rage that it would accept. The anger was too personal for wands. Harry savoured the sensation of Snape’s body bending beneath the blows, even as his knuckles split and his fingers ached.

But it wasn’t long before Snape recovered himself and kicked out, catching Harry in the left knee. Harry hardly registered the pain, but it slowed him down enough that Snape was able to follow up with a vicious second kick to Harry’s chest.

The blow knocked the wind out of him and he bent over double on the grass, digging his fingers into the earth. For the first time the agony of his injuries, both magically and physically inflicted, came pounding through the rage. He choked and took a torturous breath, gasping in the cool night air which burned his lungs like sulphur.

“I might have guessed you’d fight like a Muggle, Potter,” Snape spat, breathing hard. He stomped on Harry’s left hand, breaking two of the fingers with an audible snap. Harry yelped and pulled the appendage inward, cradling it. *“You’ve never been much of a wizard.”*

Harry looked up at his tormentor, feeling no fear at all. The fury that held him in its twisting grip didn’t allow it. *“Why don’ you, you kill me, then,”* he slurred. For some reason, his mouth was full of blood. Defiantly, he spat it out over Snape’s robes, causing the traitor to step back in disgust. *“Coward.”*

Snape’s face contorted in fury. *“What did you call me?”* he snarled.

Harry bared his teeth in an aggressive sneer, unaware of how frenzied he appeared with his broken glasses, wild eyes and red-stained mouth. *“Scott was right about you,”* he told Snape. Right about *what?* Scott had said many things about the professor, but the content of them didn’t matter. The
words were designed to inflict pain. “You’re a coward.”

And then Snape exploded, completely lost it in a way that Harry had never seen him do before. His face twisted into features that expressed something uncontrollable and frightening, something akin to what Harry was feeling. “DON’T-” he roared, his wand arm snapping back over his head, “-CALL ME COWARD!”

Harry felt the spell slam into the side of his head; he saw sparks and then the sky as he flipped over limply onto the turf. A jolt of pain rang up his arm when his broken fingers hit the turf and his gritted his teeth to keep from crying out. For a moment he lay there, breathing hard and blinded, until the pain began to reluctantly subside.

When his eyes cleared, Snape was standing over him. The wand in Snape’s hand trembled, and Harry wondered whether he was about to be finished off. He took a deep breath and ran his tongue around his bloody mouth for one final act of defiance. He wasn’t going to die on his back. Releasing an almost inaudible groan, he pushed himself up onto his knees and met Snape’s eyes.

With a distant pang, a thought of Ginny wormed its way up through the anger and hatred. Once again, and perhaps for the last time, he regretted not having said goodbye.

After what seemed like forever, but could have been no more than a handful of seconds, Snape finally turned away with a contemptuous sneer. “Scott is dead,” he said in a voice dripping with scorn. “His opinion means little.”

Without a sound, Harry withdrew the knife Scott had given him, snapped it open, and lunged for Snape’s back.

It was an attack without finesse, powered by a sheer fury that verged on delirium. It was also unexpected. For the second time, Snape was caught off guard by Harry’s suicidal lunge. He had only pivoted halfway to meet the strike when the knife plunged into his side.

Snape screamed. It was a high-pitched, pain-filled scream that sounded out of place coming from his throat, an animal noise. He stumbled backwards, dragging Harry with him.

Harry didn’t pause for a second. Without thought, he stabbed again. Then again. His arm thrust furiously forward into the yielding flesh. At the most basic level, he wasn’t even really trying to kill Snape. He didn’t know how. He just wanted, needed, to hurt Snape. Hurt him the way he had hurt Harry.

Somehow Snape managed to block or divert the next assault and then Harry was yet again slammed violently to the ground as another bludgeoning spell rocked him. Dazedly, he figured this time Snape would kill him for sure.

Instead, he heard the sound of retreating footsteps. Snape was fleeing.

Turning his head made him want to pass out, but with an effort he looked up and straightened his back. He uncurled his stiff right hand and let go of the knife, which he had still been clenching so tightly it hurt. Watching Snape’s staggering form grow more distant, he knew he probably wouldn’t be able to follow. But he still had to try. Exerting all of his remaining strength, he tried to regain his footing.

He was heavy, too heavy for his trembling limbs. His broken fingers refused to cooperate; his knees were loose like hinges. Even as he tried to summon the effort he knew it was too late. His battered body simply would not cooperate. He could not force himself to stand.
When he raised his eyes towards the gate again, Snape and Draco were gone.

A long silence followed. Dimly, Harry began to register the crackling of fire in the distance and the other noises of chaos. As his adrenaline faded the pain took over, and soon the sorrow would follow. In the meantime a pleasant emotional lassitude had fallen over him, a dark vacuum for his heart. He wished the same could be said for his body. The agony every movement sent through him made him question why he hadn’t fallen unconscious already.

“HARRY!” a voice roared out.

Harry dazedly turned his head towards the sound, the world tilting dizzily. It was Hagrid, lumbering across the fire-lit grounds. He opened his mouth to reply but nothing emerged save thick strings of blood and mucus. He choked on it, and spat a crimson glob onto the grass.

“Harry… Oh, Merlin… Harry, what’d they do ter ya…” Hagrid’s voice was hoarse and shot through with terror.

What did they do to him? Harry began to realise how unbelievably sticky he felt. He glanced down and calmly noted that the bottom half of his shirt, most of his pants and his right arm were covered in blood. His right hand was a clotted red mass, the fingers glued together by the rapidly drying fluid. He felt like he was covered in a stinking, watery syrup. He dimly wondered what the rest of him looked like.

He looked up at Hagrid’s worried face and tried again to speak, to tell him that Dumbledore was dead, and it didn’t matter what had happened to Harry. But this time the blackness tugging at the edge of his vision could no longer be denied, and in the absence of rage the pain stepped in to fill the void.

Harry felt Hagrid’s arms encircle him just before everything went black.
But Sleep Came Slowly

26

But Sleep Came Slowly

When the light returned to Harry’s eyes it was like slivers being pushed into his corneas. The pain was sharp and prickly and he tried desperately to blink it away, only to find that his eyelids responded too slowly.

“Harry?”

The voice was familiar. He managed to shift his vision slightly and caught sight of blurry, tangled red locks. Ginny, he thought numbly. He was in a bed. It wasn’t his, so he was probably in the Hospital Wing. The antiseptic-smelling sheets he was wrapped in supported that assumption.

He tried to open his mouth to reply to Ginny, but found that he couldn’t.

She must have seen his jaw muscles flex. “Don’t try to talk, you’ll just make it worse.”

It was already as bad as it could get. Every part of him hurt, including parts he didn’t have a name for. Stubbornly, he fought against the pain and the lassitude and managed to croak out, “Ginny.”

“Yes, it’s me,” she said softly. Harry felt fingers brush against his forehead. “Please don’t talk, Harry, you really shouldn’t…”

“Hurts already,” he said through lips that felt like lead. “Where’s…”

“Ron and Hermione went back to the tower to check on everyone else. Prefect business, you know,” Ginny said with a trace of humour. “They’re fine, they’re all right.”

Even through the agony the relief still broke over Harry like a cool breeze. “Thas’ good.” Another thought wiped it away. “Dumbledore… he’s-”

“I know,” Ginny interrupted, a haunted look crossing her face. “Hagrid found him out on the lawn, after… after he brought you in.”

Harry wished with all his heart that Hagrid hadn’t learned of it that way. He started to close his eyes against the heartache when he heard Ginny sniff, and looked back up to see her in tears.

“Ginny…”

“I thought you were dead.” She said it suddenly, and so quickly that Harry almost didn’t understand her. “Hagrid brought you in, and you weren’t moving and there was so much blood, and… Oh, God, Harry, I thought you were dead.”

Her tears fell freely and Harry was stunned to realise that it was him, not Dumbledore, who was the source of her anguish. “I’m okay,” he managed.

“No, Harry, you aren’t.” She took a deep breath and stared Harry straight in the eye. “If you had seen the way you looked when you came in… Your face, split open like that… I was so scared. I still am. All that blood, and the look on Hagrid’s…”
Harry tried for a reassuring smile, but was unable to manage it. “Not dead, Gin,” he settled for saying.

“I know,” she sighed. She leaned forward and rested her cheek on the top of Harry’s head. “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

*For now,* Harry thought grimly, but didn’t say it. Instead he tried to focus on Ginny’s warmth rather than all of the hurt.


What happened to Scott? The dull ache in Harry’s heart flared back up again. He had been trying very hard not to think about what had happened to Scott. Images of his friend fallen lifeless before the Death Eaters crashed to the forefront of his mind. But he was too damaged, too numb to grieve for either Scott or Dumbledore. That was yet to come.

“He’s gone,” he managed to say in a barren tone.

Ginny’s hands tightened, her knuckles whitening where she gripped Harry’s sheets. “I’m so sorry, Harry,” she whispered. “I didn’t know.”

Harry knew that Ginny and Scott had never been close, but she wouldn’t have wished this on the Kharadjai boy. Her hands went back to Harry’s hair, stroking through it in motions that seemed more reflexive than conscious. He let it lull him, taking all the comfort in her presence that he could. Maybe it was selfish, considering what had been lost, but he couldn’t help but be incredibly thankful that she was unharmed.

Sleep seemed a needed escape when it came to take him, and Harry surrendered to it willingly.

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“Scott, you friggin’ retard.”

Lila’s sighed insult echoed slightly in the stone surrounds. Despite the offence Scott offered no rebuttal, mostly because he was dead.

His pale corpse rested limply in Lila’s arms as she carried him through an empty hallway, trying to remember where the Hospital Wing was located. More importantly, she was also trying to figure out how she would cover things up.

The Astronomy Tower hallway had been rapidly vacated following the departure of the Death Eaters. The arrival of reinforcements from the Order of the Phoenix had evened the odds somewhat, and what had been a retreat turned into a rout. Some of the fleeing Death Eaters had escaped off the grounds and others had returned to the Room of Requirement to make their exit. Lila knew that many were dead or wounded, though there would be time for an accounting of that later. The Order and the professors were diligently searching the castle for any remaining intruders who hadn’t been able to escape, and the students remained confined to the safety of their dormitories.

News of Dumbledore’s death hadn’t made its way around yet. Lila didn’t know if his body had been recovered, or who exactly had been informed. She herself would not have known if it weren’t for the shape and of the two people who might have shed some light on the situation, one was comatose in the hospital wing, and the other was dead in her arms.
“I bet you didn’t even try to dodge,” Lila muttered, giving Scott’s blank face a dark glare. “Now what am I supposed to do?”

It was quite a conundrum, to be sure. She needed to give Scott some time, but she knew that Scott also needed to be with his Primes, even in corpse form. It was important that he not simply disappear only to come back later with no explanation. Unfortunately, being a teen significantly increased the amount of time he would need. Lila didn’t know exactly what sort of time frame she was looking at if she left Scott to his own devices, but she was sure it wouldn’t be fast enough.

Ideally, she would have liked to deposit Scott in the Hospital Wing, leaving him there for everyone to see that he was down but accounted for.

The problem with that plan was Scott’s lack of life. Lila didn’t know how advanced wizarding medical practices were but even a quack could determine if a patient was still breathing. With no vital signs worth mentioning they’d probably have Scott six feet in the ground before he wrenched back.

That brought up an interesting point, though – there was a body to bury. Her brother was most certainly dead, but just as certainly in one piece… which meant there was a possible out. It was a gamble, no question, but a solution all the same.

It had been awhile since she had jolted anyone, and she wasn’t one-hundred percent sure that she remembered exactly how it was done, but it didn’t matter. Scott had gotten her into this mess, and she was going to try to get out of it. If it went wrong, it was his fault.

The aperture Lila opened took her straight back to her apartment, where she carelessly dumped Scott’s body on the couch. Glancing around the room, she tried to think about where she could get what she needed.

The answer, as was becoming readily apparent from her cursory examination, was that she couldn’t. Power was in adequate supply, but not at the voltage she required. Unless… She frowned in thought. Unless… Scott’s teen form was less resistant, as it definitely should be.

Well. There was only one way to found out.

Jolting was not something that was commonly performed. If a Kharadjai still had sufficient strength to revive themselves without delay then they would. If not, then it was best to let them rest in oblivion until their strength returned. The effect jolting created was premature.

Assuming it worked, Scott would be almost completely expended, his already diminished reserves depleted by the heal before he was ready for it. If his corpse had not been fully intact then she wouldn’t have tried to jolt him, as the energy required to replace limbs and organs would have exceeded what he had available. Lila was counting on his death being a result of nerve damage. There wasn’t anything about the body actually easy to heal, but at least that was easier. All of the minor lacerations and bruising she could see would just have to go unhealed for awhile.

There was a caveat. Scott’s healing from his current state might not take as much energy when compared to massive tissue damage, but as a teen he didn’t have much energy to begin with. He might wrench back in a state of absolute exhaustion and immediately die again.

That was a chance Lila was willing to take.

Stripping off Scott’s clothes, she tossed her brother into the empty bathtub with a cheerful, “In you go!” She started to run the water and went over to the kitchen to get what she needed. When she
came back, she held a toaster in her hands. “Cliché, I know,” she said a bit self-deprecatingly to Scott’s unresponsive form. “But it’s a classic for a reason. I think this will work. I’ve got a good feeling about this electrocution.”

Once the tub was filled and the toaster was plugged in, she was all set to give it the old college try. The shock was the catalyst, but she would also have to energise Scott in the shape, if she remembered correctly. Difficult, but not impossible. She didn't have to be precise.

“You’ll thank me for this,” she told him. She lifted the toaster up over the bath and let it go.

The effect was immediate and very dramatic. With a sparking hiss, the toaster fried itself in the water. There was a bright flash and Scott’s body violently seized, his head cracking against the tile wall. Lila thrust out into the shape, trying to impart energy.

All of the lights in the apartment went out, plunging the bathroom into darkness. The smell of burning plastic permeated the small room. Lila wrinkled her nose, but moved forward to check on Scott.

The next thing she heard was a heaving splash, followed by the sound of Scott vomiting on the floor.

“Gross,” Lila said, taking a quick step back.

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuccckkkkkkk…..” Scott didn’t say it so much as he breathed it. There was another splash as he subsided back into the water. He groaned again, this time wordlessly.

Lila leaned against the edge of the sink and waited for him to recover, trying to ignore the stench of melted plastic and puke.

“…Lil?” Scott said finally, his voice gravelly and weak.

“Yeah?”

“What the hell are you doing to me?”

Lila rolled her eyes. “I jolted you, Scott. Has it been that long since your last one?”

“I guess…” There were a few light splashes, and then, “I don’t think I can get up.”

Stepping carefully over the puddle of vomit, Lila pulled a towel from the rack and helped Scott to his feet. He was trembling so hard his teeth chattered, though Lila didn’t think it was related to temperature. She wrapped him in the towel and picked him up, bringing him out to the sofa.

He limply fell onto the couch and just sat there for a moment, breathing hard. Lila frowned as she took in his appearance, better illuminated now by a street light shining through the window. There were deep circles under his eyes, his skin unnaturally pale and his muscles devoid of their usual strength.

“I gotta get back to Hogwarts,” he said between breaths.

“Can you dress yourself?”

“…Maybe. Just hand me my boxers, and we’ll start from there.”

It was a slow process, but Scott managed to dress himself with some assistance. “Am I drooling?” he asked her at one point, to which Lila could only nod an affirmative. He sighed.
Dressing had apparently used up whatever reserves Scott had been clinging to, and he slumped over on the couch. “Element casualty,” he slurred. “Medevac, can you respond?”

“Copy that,” Lila said. “We are Nu Iota, ETA, right now. Go to sleep, Scott. I’ll drop you off at the infirmary.”

“You’re a peach,” Scott sleepily replied, and then his eyes closed and he was out.

Lila was careful not to jostle him on the trip back to Hogwarts, well aware of how close to death he was again. His body desperately required energy. Sleep would do, but it would speed up the process if she could pump some calories into him. Before opening the aperture she had rummaged through her closet to find her emergency box, and had grabbed an intravenous stimpack. The fluid was crammed with nutrients, more than enough to make a normal person extremely ill. Scott’s healing body would rapidly burn through them, and she’d leave some super-concentrated E-ration bars by his bed for when he awoke.

The Hospital Wing corridor wasn’t difficult to find. There was a lot of foot traffic coming and going, no doubt due to all the wounded and dead. Lila resigned herself to the fact that there wasn’t going to be any way to get into the med room without being seen.

As she approached the door she saw a boy standing nearby. He held up a hand for her to stop. She didn’t think much of that, but heeded the warning.

“Another Death Eater?” the boy asked, apparently under the assumption that Lila had been hunting down the scattered invaders. He halted and a look of concern crossed his features once he drew closer. “Oh… Is this a student?”

“Yes,” Lila said simply, not volunteering any further information.

From the boy’s expression, Scott must have looked even worse than Lila thought. “Is he…?”

“Still kicking,” Lila assured him.

“That’s Kharan, isn’t it? From Gryffindor? Thought I recognised him, hope he’s all right…” the boy trailed off. He appeared distressed for a moment, though considering the circumstances he certainly had reason enough to. He shook it off. “This way, please.”

Lila followed him through the double doors. As soon as she had passed over the threshold a strong antiseptic smell assailed her. It was clear that a hospital still smelled like a hospital regardless of whether it was magical or not. The large room had been divided by a low row of wooden barriers that appeared to be repurposed tables, magically welded together somehow to form a makeshift wall. She assumed the wounded Death Eaters were being held on the other side.

She was glad to see that only a few beds were occupied on her side of the divider. She didn’t recognise any of the patients or know why they were there, save for Harry. She spied his shock of black hair out of the corner of her eye as she followed her guide through the narrow corridor between the cloth cubicles. Ginny was sitting next to him.

“Madame Pomfrey!” the boy called out.

A short, harried-looking woman turned from where she had been folding a set of sheets – her eyes widened when she saw Scott. “Oh, my goodness… Anthony, go back to the door and let me know if anyone else arrives.”

“I will,” the boy said solemnly, and left to go back to his post.
“Put him over here, there should be room enough.” Pomfrey went into the closest cubicle and pulled back the sheets on the bed. “Take care when you put him down.”

“He’s okay,” Lila told her. She carefully placed Scott on the bed that Pomfrey indicated.

“The poor dear,” Pomfrey murmured. She passed her wand over Scott’s still form, clucking sympathetically at whatever readings she received. “He’s completely exhausted. Did he take part in the fighting?”

“Yes.”

Pomfrey shook her head. “Terrible times, when children fight our battles… What kind of monsters attack a school?” She put a pair of blankets over Scott and tucked him in tightly, and then extracted a vial from somewhere in her robes and handed it to Lila. “Here, give him half of this now and then the other half when he wakes. Can you sit with him?”

“Yeah, I can stay.”

“Good. It’s always nice for them to see a familiar face.” Pomfrey turned to leave. “I’ll pop back to check on him in a bit, but be sure to shout if he starts to have trouble.”

“Okay.”

With Pomfrey gone, Lila was free to handle Scott’s recovery in her own way. Lifting him up slightly, she tugged his pants down to his knees and slid the needle of the stimpack into a main artery on his right leg. A pull of a tab on the pack activated the pressure mechanic, and she hid it beneath Scott’s shirt and rolled his pants back up. She didn’t want Pomfrey to question exactly what she was pumping into her brother’s veins.

With that out of the way, Lila figured she ought to pick up some of Scott’s slack. She poked her head out into the aisle, and, seeing it was clear, made her way back to where she had spotted Harry and Ginny.

The red-haired girl was slumped in a chair next to Harry’s bed, her hands twisted in the blankets that covered him. At first Lila thought that Ginny might be asleep, but her eyes fluttered open at the sound of footsteps.

“Lila?” she said curiously, her voice hoarse. Up close, Lila could tell that she had been crying.

With Scott temporarily out of the picture it was up to Lila to handle Prime morale. “Hi, Ginny.” She motioned to Harry’s still form. “He’ll be okay. The shape would let me know if he was in real trouble. He’s going to be just fine.”

Ginny nodded, but her expression didn’t change. “I know. It’s just…”

“A lot to take in,” Lila finished. “It was a rough night, to be sure.”

“Lila, I’m…” Ginny took a deep breath, appearing hesitant. “I’m really sorry, about Scott…”

Lila raised one eyebrow in question. “About Scott?”

The look of horror that took over Ginny’s visage was doubly confusing. “You mean you don’t… nobody told you?”
“Told me about… Oh.” Lila understood what the problem was. Apparently Scott’s death had at least one witness, most probably Harry. “Scott’s fine. He’s right down there, I just tucked him in.”

Ginny stared at her. “But Harry said that he’d been killed!”

“As if,” Lila scoffed. “I’ve tried harder to kill him than the Death Eaters did.”

That managed to bring a small smile to Ginny’s tired face. “That’s some good news, at least.”

“Yeah. But enough about that. I came over here to thank you.”

“Thank me?”

“For putting in some good work. You were a great help, Ginny. And I appreciate it.”

“It wasn’t a problem, I wanted to help,” Ginny said, but she seemed pleased by the compliment. It faded when she looked morosely back at Harry. “I don’t get to help that often, and it’s not likely to happen again.”

That was an interesting outlook, Lila thought. “How’s that?”

“They’re planning something. I know they are, but they won’t tell me what it is. I think they’re going to do something about You-Know-Who… And I won’t be invited.” Ginny sank lower into her chair, despondent.

An obvious desire to get back in the fight? Lila was growing to like this girl. “I could use you.”

That captured Ginny’s attention. Her head shot back up. “Really?”

“Sure. I don’t know the culture like you do, and with a little training you could be combat effective. You’ve got the nerves, you just need the experience.”

“Mum would never let me run off to fight Death Eaters.” Ginny bit her lower lip, and then asked quietly, “Do you really think I could be a, um… warrior?”

“A soldier. Warrior is for when we use swords, I think.”

“A soldier?”

“The specifics come with time.” Lila shrugged. “You were looking at death in that hallway, and you stared back. That’s a good place to start.”

Ginny’s eyes were distant in thought and she didn’t reply, instead turning back towards Harry. “You’ll let me know, if… if I’m needed?” she said softly after a long moment.

“You’re a Prime,” Lila told her, standing to leave. “You’re always needed.”

Predictably, Scott was still comatose when Lila returned to his bedside. She didn’t know how much longer he would sleep, but she had the feeling that the stimpack wouldn’t speed his recovery at the rate she had hoped. He was unlikely to wake before morning and she would prefer to not hang around much longer. Without Dumbledore to cover for her, Lila would probably be receiving some pointed questions that she was not in a position to answer.

There didn’t appear to be anything to write on nearby, not that she had a pen, so instead she ejected a round from her pistol, placing it in Scott’s palm and closing his hand around it. If he was confused when he woke up in strange surrounds the bullet would let him know that Lila had been
Hermione had always suffered a bit when it came to admitting a wrong.

Over the course of her life – and, admittedly, it wasn’t the longest of lives, not yet – she had always attempted to be correct. Correct in school work, correct in arguments, in decisions, in her state of mind. It was a need she possessed which she didn’t entirely understand, but knew that it definitely drove her. That was who she was. A problem solver, an impartial intellectual, someone who could be counted on to find the answers required, someone who had the ability to apply research and draw the right conclusions.

Therefore, it was extremely difficult to accept that she had been wrong, completely and utterly wrong, about Professor Snape. And as a result of that, her best friend was in a hospital bed, beaten half to death, and the Headmaster had been killed.

Why couldn’t she have been prepared? Why didn’t she see it coming? That was her role, her purpose, her self-designated task to function as the voice of reason. To pierce through the lies, dispel the disinformation, and deliver the truth to those who needed it. To help her friend through his trials, his difficulties.

And when Harry had needed it most, she had failed to listen and act. She had dismissed him.

She had been wrong.

If only she had prevented Snape from reaching the tower, following his Death Eater cohorts to the top unrestricted. Unimpeded by the very people he had betrayed. When the Death Eaters had come, if she had sent some sort of warning to Lila, stopped the Kharadjai from responding to whatever effect the running battle was having on the shape...

These thoughts were so hard to grasp, sitting by Harry’s bedside in the dark hours of the morning.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Hermione whispered, placing a gentle hand on his. He felt cold, and she worked part of the top blanket free to drape it over his arms. “I let you down.”

She sniffed wetly, fighting the tears. It wouldn’t do any good to cry. Harry would need her to be strong. He would need answers, when he woke up. She had been keeping the sequence of events fresh in her mind, ready to relate and fill in whatever he had missed. She could do that, at least.

Even with the gift of hindsight what had occurred that evening was difficult to understand, and Hermione was not feeling especially rational. She was tired, her eyelids heavy as lead and threatening to close without her consent. It hadn’t been easy to convince Ginny to get some rest and let Hermione take her place next to Harry; even after she had relinquished her position, she had refused to return to the common room. Instead, she was asleep on an unused bed nearby.

Hermione knew that Scott was located a few beds further down the aisle, having visited his still form earlier to assure herself that he was present. During the battle and after the retreat Hermione hadn’t thought of the Kharadjai at all, the entirety of her mental resources devoted to the frantic search for Harry.

She didn’t know what had happened to Scott. Ginny had said that Harry might have witnessed something, but that he hadn’t been specific. Nobody else had seen anything and Lila was nowhere to be found, which left Scott’s state a mystery.
There had been a few clues. Hermione nervously shifted in her seat, thinking of what she had hidden in the trunk by her bed. While passing through the Entrance Hall with Ron she had found one of Scott’s guns discarded on the floor. Ron had been reluctant to touch it, but Hermione had insisted they not leave it there. Scott would want it back, and if it was discovered by anyone else it might raise some uncomfortable questions. Hermione had taken it back to her room, holding it the way she might have held a live bomb, and carefully wrapped it in a towel before placing it in her trunk.

She hoped that Scott appreciated it when he recovered. Keeping a loaded firearm in her room was a safety hazard, to say the least, and she didn’t want it to be there for any longer than it had to. If Harry had been awake, he’d have probably volunteered to hold on to it himself.

If he had been awake. The thought brought Hermione back to the edges of despair. She loosed a tremulous sigh and gripped Harry’s limp hand through the blanket. She knew that he had to rest and heal, but, selfishly, she found herself wishing he was up and alert, if only to reassure her.

Footsteps from the aisle preceded a familiar head of red hair as Ron approached. There wasn’t anywhere else to sit down, so instead he stood next to Hermione and looked down at Harry with a morose expression.

“He wake up at all?” Ron asked quietly.

Hermione shook her head. “Not since he spoke to Ginny.”

“It’s probably for the best,” Ron said stoically, though Hermione could tell that he wished Harry would wake, even if it was just for a minute. “You should get some sleep, Hermione.”

She brushed off his concern with a quick gesture. “You’re just as tired as me, and I don’t see you in bed.”

Ron’s jaw set in a stubborn fashion. “It’s my turn to watch him, anyway.”

“I suppose…” Hermione made no move to stand. “Did you check on Scott when you came in?”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t look like he’s moved. You reckon he’ll be up tomorrow?”

Hermione sighed. “I don’t know.” Harry was currently in no shape to explain and Lila was nowhere to be found, so it seemed as if there wouldn’t be any answers until Scott regained consciousness.

“Look, Hermione… Just go get a couple hours sleep, I’ll sit with him.” Ron placed a warm hand on her shoulder and she leaned into it, a state of exhaustion surging over her.

“All right,” she relented. “But not for too long.”

On the way out of the infirmary she took a detour, peeking into the curtained space where Scott’s outline could be seen in the dim light. Even with the lack of illumination she could tell he was pale, his skin tinted with an unhealthy pallor. Nervously, she approached him and pressed the back of her hand to his forehead. He was warm, and she felt a bit of relief at that.

She couldn’t help but wonder where Scott’s healing factor came in. Of course, she didn’t understand the mechanics of it (for which Scott was to blame, per usual) so she didn’t have any real idea when he would fully recover. She turned to leave, hoping that Scott would be able to talk by morning.
Each step was a mile on the way up to the tower. The effort required made Hermione aware of just how tired she really was. By the time she reached the portrait entrance, it seemed almost too much trouble to go up to her dormitory. The couches and chairs of the common room were an inviting thought, indeed.

When she walked into the common room she wasn’t surprised to see some students still awake, huddled in groups, trading what little information they had. Everyone looked scared and confused. Hermione’s appearance immediately drew attention, but she brushed off their questions with terse excuses and went straight to her bed.

The darkness surged over her the second her head touched the pillow, and she didn’t dream.

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It wasn’t an unusual sight, seeing Harry in a hospital bed, Ron thought with a tinge of humour. But despite its frequency, it was no less affecting.

Harry looked awful, his lower lip and chin marred by an enormous gash and the rest of his face battered as if a set of bludgers had taken turns running into it. He was pale and dirty and despite Pomfrey’s cleaning there were still smudges of blood, mostly around his arms, and his fingernails were ringed red.

Ron didn’t know exactly what had happened to Harry. He’d only heard bits and pieces. He knew that Harry had been up in the tower, that Scott had gone in as well and then Harry had run down by himself, following Snape. Ron had seen that much, had even called out when Harry had raced through the battle. After that, nobody knew except Harry, and he was in no shape to talk.

Ron ran a tired hand through his hair, almost wishing he hadn’t talked Hermione into letting him take her spot. He was tired, but perhaps not tired enough to fall asleep in such an uncomfortable chair. He reckoned he might reach that point if given a bit more time. Sleep was a comfortable alternative to his thoughts.

The way the mind worked was odd, he reflected. All that had happened was so terrible it was nearly overwhelming; he felt like curling into himself and ignoring the state of things. Dumbledore was dead, Harry was badly injured and the school was in shambles. Nothing seemed certain if Death Eaters could enter Hogwarts so freely.

But despite that, all he could think about were the men Lila had killed in the hall.

He had never witnessed a death before. He wasn’t sure how to feel about it, was rather numb, really, though the idea hurt a bit if he concentrated. He found himself actually looking forward to seeing the Thestrals, and wondered if that made him sick. It wasn’t a normal feeling, probably. But the curiosity couldn’t be helped.

Other thoughts were even more difficult to grasp. Most pressing was the question of whether those Death Eaters had deserved to die. How did someone decide that? Who could possibly judge whether or not they had it coming? He supposed that’s what You-Know-Who did all the time. Maybe those men would have killed Ron, given the chance. Or maybe not. Did that matter?

He wanted to believe that it did. He wanted to know that they deserved it, that they were evil and vicious. The first Death Eater had looked at Lila like he’d wanted to… It didn’t bear thinking about. Ron didn’t know much about that sort of thing, but he knew that a gentleman didn’t allow it to happen. That was just how he’d been raised.
It was a bad job, to be sure. He doubted he’d find any sort of closure a mere few hours after the fact, and so he tucked his chaotic thoughts away and focused on his sleeping friend.

He sighed and awkwardly patted Harry’s shoulder through the thick blankets. “You need to wake up, Harry. Everybody’s going mad without you to tell them what happened.”

Harry offered no response, not that Ron had expected one. Harry was in a bad way but at least he was still breathing. There were a number of people who could no longer say the same.

There Ron went, back to the death again. He needed to sleep. His eyelids were soft weights and every breath had a strong chance of turning into a yawn.

He couldn’t leave, though. When Harry woke he might be disoriented, and he’d need someone there. Perhaps more importantly, Ron felt like one of Harry’s friends should be there to see him wake up. It would be reassuring, to say the least. Apparently Snape had really done a number on him.

Snape… By now just about everyone knew the professor had turned traitor, even if the details were obscure. Whatever Harry had to say would clear up some wild rumours. Ron actually wasn’t in a rage about it. Angry, sure, definitely that, but rage? No. More like... vindication.

If, say, Flitwick had brought Death Eaters in to off some students and then fled in the night, Ron would have been shocked. Instead, it was Snape. And in Ron’s mind, who else would it have been? Anyone who was truly surprised had their head up their own arse. It had all been a long time coming, Ron figured. Snape was such a bloody bastard it was a wonder everyone hadn’t expected this.

That was years worth of bottled hate talking. Ron had loathed the professor long before all this shite had rolled around. This was just the cherry on top. One more for the road, on the off chance Ron’s hatred hadn’t already been firmly cemented enough.

“Bloody hell,” Ron muttered. He didn’t like feeling this way. Furious and helpless was an almost unbearable combination. He wished he’d had a shot at Snape.

He slid lower in his chair and tried to push such ruminations away, leaning his head to one side and stretching out his legs. It wasn’t a very good position for his back, but his level of weariness ensured that anything roughly approximating a prone position was welcome.

Perhaps if he just closed his eyes for a bit, he’d be tired enough to fall asleep…

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“I don’t know what to do,” Neville muttered. “But I feel like I should be doing something…”

Luna agreed. There was a quiet flutter of impatience somewhere in the pit of her stomach, a notion that was currently keeping her awake. She thought she might go to the Hospital Wing and see if she had swallowed a small Snutterbug by accident, but that was unlikely. Her restless mind had a much more probable source of agitation.

Dumbledore had been killed. Harry and Scott were in the hospital wing, both decidedly worse for the wear, and the school was in the midst of a full fledged panic. There had been Death Eaters in the halls and many of them had been killed in an awful manner by Lila. Luna had witnessed death before, but she wasn’t pleased to see it again.

It was all quite horrible.
She was sitting on the edge of Neville’s bed observing as he paced back and forth, his expression stormy. She supposed that she ought not to be in the boys dormitories at such an hour, nor in the Gryffindor tower, but Neville had refused to let her out of his sight. In the interests of not upsetting him, she had acquiesced. And, really, she preferred not to return to her own room when she could be with Neville in his.

“Wish I knew where Lila went, maybe I could… help, or something…” Neville mumbled. His shoulders slumped and he sat on the bed next to Luna, his eyes downcast. “Not that I did much, anyway.”

Neville wasn’t being fair to himself, not at all. Luna reached over and took his hand in hers, noting that it was cold. She rubbed his fingers, trying to impart some heat. “I think you did just fine,” she said, and meant it. She was a bit uncertain whether any of her own spells had hit their targets in the hallway. It had been rather difficult to see.

The colour of Neville’s face began to approximate that of a tomato, and Luna wondered if his collar was too tight or if her attempts to warm him had been more effective than she’d thought.

“Th- thanks,” he stuttered, and while he seemed slightly nervous he didn’t remove his hand from hers, which was nice. Luna would hate to think she made Neville uncomfortable.

She smiled at him, pleased that he didn’t withdraw. She had noticed at times that people tended to keep their distance from her. She tried not to take offence, well aware that many considered her a bit odd, but it was difficult not to feel some slight hurt. Neville had reacted like that, at first. But it had been a long time since he had flinched away.

Sitting so close to him, it was hard not to notice how tired he looked. He seemed older somehow, dishevelled and worn. Luna focused curiously on the stubble dotting his chin. It was a surprising reminder that he was not the same boy she had met in fourth year.

She reached out and brushed his face with her hand, feeling the rough texture. He blinked, startled, but didn’t stop her. “I like it,” she decided. “It’s interesting to touch.”

“Wha-… Oh, this?” Neville self-consciously scratched at his fledgling facial hair. “There’s not a lot, yet… I don’t get rid of it often.”

“You should let it grow out,” Luna advised. “Otherwise you won’t know if it’s right for you.”

“Grow out? Merlin, no,” Neville laughed, his face creasing in a tired smile. “It’d be awful, it’s not even all there.”

Oh, good, she’d made him smile. That was a pleasant change from his dark expression only minutes before. Luna was strongly inclined to believe that the world would be a much easier place if everyone remembered to smile regularly. However, she lacked the power to ensure that such a thing came true, so it would have to remain a theory.

Having alleviated Neville’s anxiety in her own small way, Luna turned to the other immediate problem. “Perhaps we should go to bed?” she suggested. “It is very late, after all.”

Neville sighed. “I suppose you’re right. Nothing else to do until Harry wakes up.” He looked over at Luna, a frown creasing his brow. She gazed back at him, hoping to discern the problem with the proper application of staring. He opened his mouth, shut it, and then tried again, hesitantly suggesting, “You could take Harry’s bed, I don’t think he’ll need it for awhile.”
Now Luna understood the problem. He still didn’t want her to return to the Ravenclaw tower. There was a small, toasty feeling somewhere deep in her ribcage at this thought, and while it might have been another Snutterbug symptom, she felt ready to discount this as well. Neville wished to keep her close, and that was a very nice sentiment, indeed.

Still, it didn’t seem right taking Harry’s bed. “I’d rather stay here, actually,” she informed Neville.

“Oh. Okay, I’ll sleep there instead.”

Luna shook her head. That wasn’t fair, either. “I wouldn’t want to steal your bed from you, Neville. I only wish to borrow it.”

Neville was clearly confused. “But, you said that... I mean, I could sleep on one of the couches, if you don’t want me to be in here...”

Luna kicked off her shoes and lay back on the bed. It was quite comfortable, if just a bit too soft. “No, I don’t mind sharing.”

“...So I should sleep in Harry’s bed?”

The canopy over Neville’s bed had an odd wrinkle that looked somewhat like a Snorkack’s crumpled horn. It was an interesting coincidence, and possibly a sign. “I thought we might sleep together,” Luna absently remarked.

Neville made a sound that was something between a cough and a choke.

Luna raised her head curiously. “Are you well?” she asked the spluttering boy.

“Um, yeah, I’m fine,” Neville stammered. “I must have misheard you, I thought you said... Well, something else.”

“I only said I thought we should sleep together,” Luna helpfully clarified.

Neville’s eyes were wide as he gaped at her, mouth open. “…Sleep together?” he said weakly.

Luna began to be worried. Perhaps he didn’t really want to be around her after all; maybe he’d like to be alone? She certainly didn’t want to sleep by herself tonight, but he didn’t appear to feel the same. “I thought we could share, but if that’s not what you want, I understand,” she said, trying not to sound hurt.

“Share...” Neville echoed slowly. “Wait, you mean just sleep in my bed? Um, together?”

“Of course. What else could I have meant?” Luna wondered. As a deep blush began to suffuse Neville’s face, she thought about her previous statement. A boy and a girl in the same room, Neville blushing... “Did you think I meant sex, Neville?”

Neville’s eyes were focusing on the bedside table, the window, anywhere but Luna as he nodded silently.

Sex? How interesting! And flattering, as well. She discovered that she was quite pleased that Neville saw her in such a manner. She hadn’t given much thought to sex with him, but it was a pleasant possibility now that she considered it. She resolved to revisit the subject at a better time.

“We should discuss sex later, I’ve never had it before and I don’t believe I’m ready just yet,” Luna told Neville, letting him in on her train of thought. “I’ve heard it’s quite wonderful, though. I’d like
to find out for myself.”

Neville’s face was practically glowing by this point, and he didn’t appear capable of speech. Luna helpfully leaned forward and took his hand, pulling him back on the bed. She patted the spot next to her, indicating for him to lie down.

After a moment of silence, Neville regained his vocal abilities. “W- we could sleep here tonight, that’s fine.”

Luna smiled happily, glad he’d agreed. “That would be nice.”

It was easy enough climbing into bed and becoming contentedly ensconced beneath the covers, but as soon as the lights went out Luna found that Neville was lying on his back with his arms at his sides, his posture rigid. That simply wouldn’t do. She had requested his presence for comfort, not for mere body heat. How could she be expected to sleep well when Neville was confusing the air with such uncomfortable signals? He needed to relax, or they’d both suffer for it.

She rolled over and scooted closer to him, noting how his breath hitched. “Neville?”

“…Yeah?” he said slowly. In the dim light of the windows she could see him blinking rapidly.

“Are you scared?”

“…Sometimes,” he sighed, closing his eyes. “When I think about it. What are we going to do now that Dumbledore’s gone? What’s going to happen to the school?”

“No, I meant of me.”

“W- what? Of you?”

“Yes.”

He turned his head to look at her, confusion written on his features. “I’m not scared of you, Luna. Why would you think that?”

“Because I’m frightened tonight, and I wanted to be here with you so I could sleep, but it seems as if you don’t like me this close,” she said sadly.

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly, “I’m just not used to… um, sharing.”

“This is my first time, too,” she assured him, and then wondered why that statement had made his eyes a bit wild.

Still, he did roll over on his side to face her, appearing slightly more relaxed. “Good night, Luna,” he said groggily.

“Good night, Neville” she replied, and then closed her eyes and waited for sleep to take her.
Scott was well accustomed to pain. He was also totally resigned to its inevitability. In his line of work pain came quickly and came often.

He was not, however, accustomed to being exhausted. Even while in various states of mutilation the energy which filled him drove him forward, up and over the next obstacle, into the thick of the next fight. Tired, that he was familiar with – a lack of power, a desire to sleep or sit down for a minute. That came with overexertion: multiple heals in a short time or a long, drawn out fight.

But the bone-deep weariness that sank into him the second he regained consciousness... this was something else. This hurt. He had felt it before, but it had been awhile. And he wasn’t happy to be feeling it again.

He felt as if his blood had been removed and replaced with a silt rich in trace metals, pouring through his arteries like warm, grainy fudge. He was heavy. He weighed a ton. And that was a very strange feeling for someone whose innate strength made the mass of his body almost irrelevant. It allowed him to move in ways that normal people couldn’t, lifting himself with a single finger if necessary.

Thus it was something of a novelty to feel so damn heavy. Did everybody else feel that way all the time? He thought he might break through the floor and keep going, compacting the earth until he wound up on bedrock.

Scott swallowed, or attempted to, and realised his mouth contained about as much moisture as a low altitude desert. He needed a drink, and badly. He supposed that was reason enough to try opening his eyes.

It wasn’t bright, which he felt was a good start. His eyes adjusted quickly and he found himself gazing at a blank green sheet. Judging by the muffled sounds and the fact that the cloth walls around him weren’t taller than six or so feet, he knew he had to be in some sort of medical cubicle. The green sheet rippled as someone walked past on the other side.

“Are you awake?” a slight voice asked.

“AGH!” Scott yelped, the sudden query making his heart skip a beat. A small head of strawberry blond hair immediately became visible in the dim shadows. Kylie was seated on a wooden chair, her eyes wide and apprehensive.

“Ah… Sorry, Kylie, you startled me,” Scott said. Or that was what he attempted to say. What emerged was barely intelligible. His voice had become something beyond hoarse.

Wordlessly, the shy girl picked up a glass of water from a bedside table and carefully handed it to Scott.

“Thanks,” Scott croaked. His mouth was so dry that the sudden hydration was actually painful, instantly giving him a sore throat. He drained the glass and put it back in Kylie’s waiting hands.
Even the cup had felt heavy and his arms shook as he extended them. He slumped back on his sheets and took a deep breath, feeling slightly better after the drink.

“You dropped this,” Kylie said. Scott rolled his head towards her in confusion. Had he been holding something? Kylie leaned forward and gently placed a small object on Scott’s chest.

It was a bullet. One of his? No… .357. One of Lil’s. A reminder, most likely. She had been there, even if she hadn’t been able to stick around. No doubt she had her to thank for being conscious so soon after a jolting. He didn’t remember much about it besides the incredible pain, but Lila had obviously done what she could to get him back on his feet.

He shifted his legs slightly and felt the pinch of a needle. Reaching beneath the blanket, he fumbled with his pants. If Kylie thought that was strange behaviour she didn’t comment. He grimaced as he plucked the needle out of his thigh and yanked the deflated plastic bag out of his pant leg. He glanced at the label and noted it was a standard stimpack and not one of the ‘enriched’ combat stims, which explained his lack of nausea. The more extreme variety of stimpacks came loaded with even more nutrients along with massive doses of painkillers, antibiotics and coagulates. Good for extensive healing but rough on the stomach.

Lila would have wanted to supplement the stimpack. “Hey, did my sister leave anything else? Like, maybe food?” Scott asked Kylie.

Scott couldn’t see that far to his right, but Kylie picked something up off the bedside table that crinkled loudly, a plastic sound. “These?”

E-ration bars! Scott excitedly took them from Kylie and immediately ripped one open, biting into it with gusto. As he decimated the first bar, out of the corner of his eye he saw Kylie watching with interest.

He waved the bar at her before taking another bite. “You don’t want any of this,” he told her with his mouth full. “They got the consistency of sawdust.”

“What do they taste like?” Kylie asked curiously.

“Sawdust. Well, no, that’s not true. Sawdust doesn’t taste too bad. Pine sawdust, anyway. Cedar. Have you ever bitten into a vitamin pill?”

Kylie shook her head.

“They taste awful, mostly because they have vitamins in them. There’s a reason the best food in this world is nutritionally void. You’ll notice I’m doing as little chewing as possible.” Scott finished the bar and tossed the wrapper aside. “I can give you a little tiny piece if you really want to try, but not more than that. If you took a bite you probably wouldn’t be able to keep it down.”

That seemed to dim Kylie’s interest in the ration bars. “No thank you,” she timidly replied.

Scott choked down the remaining two bars and settled back on his pillow as the condensed food hit his stomach like gold bricks. “Fuel for the furnace,” he said, patting his stomach in a satisfied manner. “Though eating coal might be more pleasant.” He raised an eyebrow at Kylie. “How long have you been here?”

“That seemed to dim Kylie’s interest in the ration bars. “No thank you,” she timidly replied.

Scott choked down the remaining two bars and settled back on his pillow as the condensed food hit his stomach like gold bricks. “Fuel for the furnace,” he said, patting his stomach in a satisfied manner. “Though eating coal might be more pleasant.” He raised an eyebrow at Kylie. “How long have you been here?”

“Since this morning,” she offered quietly.

He had been dead and he had woken up indoors, so he wasn’t putting much faith in his internal clock. “What time is it?”
“A bit past noon.”

He hadn’t slept that long, all things considered. The stimpack probably had a lot to do with that. More importantly, he was touched that Kylie had chosen to spend her morning and early afternoon watching him be comatose. “Thanks for sitting with me, Kylie. That was cool of you.”

A faint blush tinged Kylie’s cheeks. “You’re welcome.”

Scott took a deep breath and tried to stretch, but quickly realised he was too stiff for it to matter. “Anybody else been by I should know about?”

Kylie nodded slightly. “Trevor was here a bit. And Hermione, too. But that was earlier.”

“Did everybody make it? Through the fight, I mean?”

The small girl shook slightly, as if a cold breeze had brushed her. “The Headmaster is gone,” she whispered.

“Yeah. But nobody you know…?”

Kylie cast her eyes downward. “Trevor is all right. And so are you.”

Scott realised that Kylie probably didn’t have many friends. “Well, I’m glad you’re okay,” he told her, and reached out to give her a feeble pat on the knee. She blushed again. “Anyway, I suppose I should get up, as terrible an idea as that sounds. Let’s hope I’m fully dressed, yeah?”

It took some work to struggle free of the sheets and any movement at all left Scott with a pounding headache, but he managed to get back on his feet. The room seemed to spin around him and he gripped the edge of the bed and concentrated on not tipping over.

He felt a small hand on his arm and looked down at Kylie, who was attempting to help him stand. “My pants still on?” he asked her with a weak smile.

“Yes,” Kylie said, “but they’re not done.”

“Eh. As long as I’m not hanging out.” He limped his way over towards the aisle and pushed the dividing sheet aside. “You know where Harry is?”

Kylie slipped her hand in Scott’s and led him towards the right, confirming his suspicion that Harry was in the infirmary as well.

As they walked Scott used the opportunity to get his bearings. The infirmary was darkened even in the daylight, the shades drawn shut to block out the sun and guard the wounded from its revealing rays. From what Scott could see most of the beds were empty. He wasn’t sure if some of the Order members had been briefly kept for minor wounds and then released or if the staff had overestimated how many injured Death Eaters there would be. It was likely that a number of them had died during the night.

Kylie came to a stop and pointed into one of the cubicles. Scott saw Harry, his trademark wild hair finally flattened by the bandages that covered most of his head, still unconscious in one of the cots. That was worrisome. Whatever had happened, it was apparent Harry had taken a real beating. Though he was no longer in any immediate danger Ginny was keeping vigil, the bags under her eyes a testament to her dedication.

Scott approached her and she looked up blearily when she heard his footsteps.
“So you are all right,” she said softly. Her eyes ran over him, apparently checking for obvious damage. “Harry told me you’d been killed, but Lila said you were fine.”

“I was killed, and now I’m fine. So neither of them was really incorrect.”

“Whatever,” Ginny sighed. She turned back to Harry, either unwilling or too tired to question Scott.

“You should trade out with someone else and get some sleep,” he told her.

“He’s getting enough sleep for both of us,” she responded hoarsely, one hand tightening on Harry’s arm.

“Looks like he needs it.” Scott didn’t know the nature or extent of Harry’s injuries but the swelling around his face looked fairly severe. “A few blows to the head will put anyone down for awhile, he’ll be fine.”

Ginny tiredly pushed her tangled red hair from her face. “I’m not sure about that.”

“You mean Dumbledore?” Scott said it a little more loudly than he’d intended and he heard a stifled gasp from Kylie, though Ginny didn’t react. “It’s not easy, I know. Just be there for him.”

Ginny smiled bitterly. “I will if he’ll let me.”

Scott rolled his eyes, feeling belligerent at the thought. It would be very like Harry to push everyone away. It was an indulgence that the war could not afford. “He can be a martyr on his own time. He has things to do and he can’t do them alone.”

The bitter expression on Ginny’s face didn’t fade. “That’s why he has Hermione, and Ron.” She leaned closer Harry, her hair hiding her visage again. “And he has you.”

“Yes, but I’m not a redhead, I don’t have tits, and I won’t give him blowjobs for good behaviour.”

Ginny whipped her head back in Scott’s direction. “What did you say?”

“Ah, so you are awake,” Scott said blandly. “I thought that self-pity had overwhelmed your system.”

“Do you have a point, or did you just come here to make smart remarks?” Ginny said through gritted teeth.

“Don’t count yourself out of the race yet, Gingivitis. I hope you’re ready to be useful.”

“Useful how?”

“That remains to be seen.” Scott shrugged. “You’re so ready to assume you’ll be left behind that you’re not thinking of what our next move should be. When it comes to my Primes, participation points count.”

“You think I’m scared, don’t you? You think I won’t take you up on whatever stupid, undeliverable offer you’re making,” Ginny said matter-of-factly.

“On the contrary,” Scott said, stepping back out into the aisle, “I think you’ll stand by your man.”

It was good that Ginny was watching over Harry until he awoke, Scott mused as he let Kylie lead him back towards his bed. It proved their lines were already tightening to workable levels. What kind of strength that would lend to Harry was not yet apparent.
He collapsed back into his cot with a groan while Kylie scurried about, tucking the blankets in around him and bringing another glass of water. She never said a word unless he talked to her first, but seemed determined to be of help. Scott was grateful, and also curious. It had never been his intention to foster any major connection with Kylie considering her status as a non-Prime. Had the girl been so starved for any sort of support that she latched onto Scott without reserve? It made him wonder about her home life.

“Kylie,” he said, garnering her attention as she fussed with blankets at the foot of the cot, “do you think your parents will make you come home?”

The small girl froze, her face blank. “I don’t know,” she said in a voice that was barely audible even by her standards.

Scott thought he must have hit a nerve. Whatever was waiting for Kylie at home, she wasn’t looking forward to it. “Cross your fingers, huh? For the record, I’ll miss you if you end up taking off.”

Kylie blushed again. She picked up the glass of water and silently offered it to Scott, making no other reply.

“Save it,” Scott told her, sinking his head into the pillow. Sleep was already clawing at him. “Something to look forward to.”

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When Harry struggled free from slumber the second time, he was greeted by a ghost.

Scott was sitting against the wall next to the bed with his legs splayed out limply. His eyes were closed. He was breathing deeply and appeared abnormally pale, his skin nearly absent of its usual faded tan. In the year they had spent together Harry couldn’t ever remember the Kharadjai looking worse, not even when he had received his bomb injury.

It didn’t make any sense. Harry had seen the deadly spell, saw the green flash rip the life from Scott’s body. There was only one known person to survive the killing curse, and Harry didn’t think he could pull the same trick twice. Scott should have been dead.

And yet, here he was; alive, if not well. It didn’t seem possible, but since the blond haired boy had come roaring into Harry’s life a lot of impossible things had come to pass. Harry wasn’t sure whether he wanted to hug Scott out of relief or punch him for pretending to be dead. Since Harry was in a position to do neither, he’d have to settle for a conversation and some answers.

Despite the extensive bruising his face had suffered, Harry painfully opened his mouth and croaked out, “Scott?”

Scott’s eyes fluttered open, making the dark lines beneath them more obvious. “Ah, you’re awake,” he said, and Harry was surprised to hear his voice sounding exactly the same as it always did. “I thought you might come to about now, so I figured I’d hang around until you did,” he continued with no trace of fatigue. “How do you feel?”

“How do you feel?” Harry countered. Scott didn’t seem particularly fazed by his brush with death.

“I asked you first.”

“Then I feel about the same as you look.”
Scott grinned. “I’m glad I don’t feel the same as you look.”

“Because I look like shite?” Harry presumed dryly.

“Like shite and a half.” Scott placed his hands on the floor and pushed himself into a more upright position. “Not many chairs floating around here,” he explained when Harry gave his seating arrangement an odd glance.

“Scott… why aren’t you dead?”

“Yeah, that…” Scott drawled, as if he were approaching a mildly embarrassing topic. “It would seem rumours of my demise were highly exaggerated.”

Harry was in too much pain to play games. “How?” he demanded.

Scott shrugged. “Magic doesn’t do much for me, remember? I just pretended to die.”

There were a number of questions that brought up. “Then why are you in such bad shape?” Harry pressed him.

“Fuck. You weren’t supposed to ask that. Okay, so what I just said might have been a lie…”

“C’mon, mate…”

Scott sighed. “It’s complicated. Suffice to say, death is a somewhat less permanent condition for Kharadjai. Until it isn’t.”

Even more questions. Regardless, there was only one that Harry had to ask right then. “Why did you let them go?”

“I didn’t have a choice,” Scott said, his voice hard. “I killed who I could, Harry, but Snape and Malfoy were untouchable. My gun jamming wasn’t human error.”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, trying to comprehend but not really wanting to. “I don’t understand,” he said roughly.

“I know. I don’t either.”

So that was that. Harry had about a million more questions, but they would keep. He needed time to understand, and less pain to distract.

He looked out towards the aisle but couldn’t see much beyond the borders of his curtained bed space. He tried to roll over towards Scott but blearily realised that the blankets were wrapped over him so tightly that he couldn’t move. “I don’t suppose you could…” he mumbled thickly and nodded his head to indicate his predicament.

Scott raised a speculative eyebrow. “Pomfrey would kill me.”

That, Harry thought wryly, no longer seemed much of a threat. “If they couldn’t manage it, why should she?”

Scott shot Harry a wide grin composed of mixed glee and cunning that was so totally familiar that for a moment Harry could almost believe the day before had never happened, and it was just another moment of mischief between them.

But then Scott began tugging at the blankets and the pain returned to sweep the moment away.
“Brace yourself,” he cautioned. “I’m working around the broken hand.”

Harry felt the faint tendrils of stabbing pains as Scott shifted the bedding about some more, but whatever potions Pomfrey had dosed him with must have been doing their job. The pain was bearable, the worst moment occurring when Scott lifted Harry up slightly and jarred his head. Harry barely prevented himself from crying out – it felt as if his brain was bouncing none too gently around the inside of his skull.

“How’s that?” Scott draped the now loose blankets over Harry’s legs. “You cold?”

Harry was slightly cold, but he would never admit it. “I’m fine.”

“Good,” Scott said distractedly. He peered out into the aisle with an irritated expression. “What the hell did Ginny do with that chair she had?”

Harry remembered seeing Ginny, but was surprised she had stayed for that long. “Ginny was just here?”

“She was on Harry Watch before me.” Scott smiled down at Harry, though it was a more subdued expression this time. “Naturally, she warned me against any topics of conversation that might cause you distress.”

Harry felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach but tried to ignore it. “Like?”

“Dumbledore, mostly. I’m not supposed to talk about him. About how he’s dead.”

Harry had known that Scott would broach the subject sooner or later, and he had counted on it being sooner. After spending a year ‘working’ with the Kharadjai, as Scott had always put it, Harry knew him well enough to know that Scott would have no issues with confronting the recent dark events before the grief had even begun to pass. He would face what had happened the night before the same way he faced all such delicate subjects: with an almost vicious candour that seemed born more from a lack of patience with tact than a need to clear the air.

Hermione, Ginny, and most of the adult figures in Harry’s life would be horrified by Scott’s mere mentioning of Dumbledore’s death in such a casual manner. But Harry felt like he knew where Scott was coming from. Pretending Dumbledore wasn’t dead wouldn’t make it better. In fact, Harry mused, forcibly meeting the facts was almost a sort of warped tribute to the Headmaster on Scott’s part, because that was what Dumbledore himself would have done.

Though Dumbledore would have been more graceful about it.

Harry let out a snort that was half sob, half chuckle. He could just picture Mrs. Weasley’s face if she had heard Scott’s brutally blunt assessment of what he wasn’t supposed to talk about. How was she dealing with the fact that her children had faced Death Eaters, again, because of Harry?

Harry gritted his teeth, ignoring the pain it caused. He wouldn’t cry, he told himself fiercely. He reached up with his working hand and rubbed fiercely at his eyes, but it did no good. Several hot tears leaked out to soak into his bandages and sting his crusted lip. Perhaps Scott shouldn’t have put any faith in Harry’s ability to deal with things. He felt like his heart was constricting. More than anything else, there was panic mingling with the grief.

Dumbledore was dead.

“What am I going to do now?” Harry said in a choked whisper, and then hated himself for the weakness. He wiped at his eyes with motions that became increasingly angry, swiping at the tears
and all that they represented. But before he could erase them yet again, a firm grip latched onto his wrist, immobilising that arm.

“Better they burn your cheeks than your heart,” Scott told him, holding Harry still.

Harry managed a watery smile at that. “Is that your way of telling me it’s okay to cry?”

“It’s fine to feel loss, Harry,” Scott told him, “as long as you understand that we don’t mourn for the dead, but for ourselves.”

Harry looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“When someone gets killed, it’s a tragedy only because we are the ones who are left behind.” Scott shrugged. “Grief is an elaborate form of self-pity. We miss the dead, but I doubt that they miss us. We’re alone in our sadness and that’s what hurts most of all.”

Harry shook his head and tugged his arm from Scott’s grip. “I don’t think knowing why it hurts helps it any.”

“Of course not. Why do you think I haven’t offered you any platitudes?”

“You don’t do that sort of thing.”

“Okay, I’ll accept that, but it’s also because I know how powerless words are in these circumstances.” Scott shrugged again. “What am I going to say? ‘He’s in a better place now?’ I like to think so, but I can’t make that kind of assurance.”

“You could say ‘time heals all wounds’.”

“I thought you wanted me to stop lying to you?”

Harry took a deep, shaky breath and let it out slowly. “So I should cry some more, then.”

Scott nodded his head slightly in assent. “If you want. But how you feel about reality doesn’t change it. We’re still here and Dumbledore isn’t. He can’t help us any more, and we have to deal with that.”

Harry voiced a gnawing fear. “What if I can’t?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” Scott’s face was completely serious, an expression that seemed so out of place on it. “Harry, I can’t tell you whether this was going to happen or not. I mean, supposed to happen. But I’m sure it’s occurred to you that some things could have been different.”

Maybe it was just the pain and the potions, but Harry hadn’t comprehended a word of that. “What?”

“I failed to save Dumbledore,” Scott said forthrightly. “I don’t know if you blame me for the way the shape tumbled out, but I do know it’s a possibility. So what it comes down to is, if you blame me, can we still be friends? And if we can’t be friends, will you still work with me?”

Harry stared at him, taken aback. He’d just regained consciousness and had barely had time to consider the impact of the previous night’s events on his life, never mind come to terms with them or assign any blame. It had been a whirlwind of terrible events and no one had emerged unscathed. Scott himself had been one of the casualties. “I don’t blame you,” he said weakly. “I couldn’t save
him either.”

Scott raised his eyebrows slightly, looked briefly towards the aisle as someone walked past. “It’s possible that he couldn’t be saved. It’s obvious that he didn’t want you to save him.”

“I thought I’d earned the right to try,” Harry muttered.

“Perhaps he thought your efforts were best reserved for the greater risks ahead.”

Harry didn’t want to think about that. With Dumbledore gone the future seemed dark, indeed. Not that it mattered. For Harry, there was no way out. “I’ll have to keep going.”

“Without question. And this probably isn’t the best time to ask, seeing as how this whole debacle rather pointedly illustrates my shortcomings, but will you still accept my help?”

Harry became angry so suddenly that he almost startled himself. “Will you give me a little more credit?” he snapped at Scott. “You’re fighting a war that’s not yours for my sake, and then you think I’ll turn my back on you after you made the same mistakes as the rest of us? I didn’t know I came across as the sort of bloke who forgot about his friends.”

Scott’s eyes widened. “…Point taken,” he said after a moment of silence. “I apologise.”

“Do you really?”

“I don’t know. I feel like I’m genuinely sorry, but can we ever be totally certain about anything?”

Harry decided to ignore that. “My friends and I are still alive,” he said more calmly. “You had a big part in that.”

“Lil did,” Scott corrected him. “Let’s give recognition where it’s due.”

“Fine, you’re right. You didn’t do anything at all and you’re totally useless. You might as well give up and go home,” Harry said sarcastically.

Scott grinned. “I’m afraid this conversation was something of a courtesy. You’re stuck with me whether you like it or not.”

The name nearly stuck in Harry’s throat, but he managed to say, “Is that what you told Dumbledore?”

“No, but I was thinking it.”

Harry answered Scott’s grin with a half-smile and sniffed back the remnants of his embarrassing tears. “I’m really gonna miss him,” he said quietly, his already small smile wavering beneath the strain of his grief.

“Yeah.”

Harry leaned his head back into his pillow and shut his eyes, ignoring the last couple tears that were squeezed out in the process. “Do you ever get used to losing people? In time?” he asked, uncertain if he really wanted to hear the answer.

“I don’t think you have to worry about getting to that point.”

That was something worth wishing for. Harry didn’t want to see the day that the death of a friend simply glanced off his hardened heart. If it came to that, then he might win the war only to exist as
something no better than the self-proclaimed Lord he had killed. He wasn’t sure he could be like Scott and still have fun in the blank spots between the carnage. For Scott, the previous night had been just a lost skirmish. But for Harry the impact would not fade so quickly.

He was done discussing his own loss. He wanted to hear about someone else’s. “So how many Death Eaters did we get?”

“Indeterminate. They took most of their wounded with when they pulled out, so there’s no telling how many survived the retreat. It’s not really the kind of thing I can ask Pomfrey...” Scott reported. “The kill count came in from Lil, but it’s, uh... speculative. I know I got one of them for sure, and Lil says she killed six. That doesn’t include any casualties they took fighting your little wizard friends.”

Harry felt a small surge of vicious satisfaction that he was unable to suppress. “I bet Riddle didn’t expect things to go like that.”

Instead of agreeing like Harry expected, Scott shrugged. “Maybe. The fact that he sent such a large force tells us he was expecting something.”

“He just wanted to kill as many of us as he could,” Harry said darkly.

“Undoubtedly, but you gotta remember, he doesn’t have an army to waste here. I’d be willing to bet we fought a good chunk of his low level troops last night.”

“Then why would he have sent so many when he had Snape to do the job?” Harry wondered, biting out the hated ex-professor’s name.

“That’s the question. Did he overcompensate, and send a lot of DEs to their deaths when a covert force could have gotten in and out more quickly? Or did he under-compensate, and send them to combat something he only thought they could deal with?”

“There’s no chance he sent them to all fight Dumbledore. None of them would have dared,” Harry muttered contemptuously. “So he must have sent them after the rest of us.”

“Hard to say. We could ask the ones we got, but I doubt they know anything. Riddle is a totalitarian. Information is handed out on a need to know basis, and he’s the only person who needs to know anything.”

A thought suddenly occurred to Harry, one which worried him. “Scott... What about you? Does everyone know, now?”

“Lil only brought me here after I wasn’t dead, and, as far as I know, you’re the only person who saw me eat the curse.” Scott paused and reconsidered. “Well, the only person that matters.”

“But your sister was with the others,” Harry reminded him. “Ginny said she got everyone together and shot at the Death Eaters outside the Astronomy Tower.”

“Right, but I don’t think she ever did anything other than shoot. Muggle weapons are unusual, but not impossible. That wouldn’t be a problem, but...”

“Dumbledore can’t cover for you,” Harry said quietly.

“Yeah. I don’t think we’ll see Lil around for awhile. Best way to avoid questions is to disappear.” Scott squinted thoughtfully. “As for us, I think the best excuse is ignorance. If we don’t know why Lil was here then we couldn’t have been a part of it.”
Harry had his doubts. “That’s not exactly easy to believe.”

“They don’t have to believe it, they just have to be unable to prove otherwise. There is still one outstanding issue, though…” Scott glanced back out towards the aisle. “I’m missing one of my guns. Lil should have one of them, but I don’t know about the other .45.”

“I had one of your handguns, but I dropped it in the Entrance Hall,” Harry said, wincing as he remembered the gun smashing into his face. “I guess it could still be there.”

Scott raised an eyebrow. “What were you doing with my 1911?”

“I don’t even know,” Harry muttered. That night was still a blur, red and black. But he did remember one bright flash of blue. “I shot it at a Death Eater, like an idiot… I missed and it just hit me in the face.”

Scott made the same noise that he usually reserved for spectacular crashes on the Quidditch field. “Your lip?”

“Yeah. I didn’t feel it much at the time, but I sure am now.”

“That was the gun with the Blue HE. You’re lucky they were low yield, anything rated higher would have knocked you out. After it shattered your hand and snapped your wrist, of course.”

“Great.” Harry rolled his eyes. “It smashed my face open and that was lucky.”

“Hey, could have been your eye, dude. That shit don’t grow back. Unless you’re me.”

“I’m not.”

“Yeah, you’re right. If you were me you’d have naked Hufflepuff chicks writhing all over you.”

Harry tried not to laugh, but couldn’t help himself. “Those ‘Puffs did have a bit of a thing for you.”

“Normally this would be where I’d say I was in it for the pussy, but, seeing as how all these girls are under-age and probably not ready to hop in the saddle, I’ll switch it over to tits. A fine pedigree of sweater puppies at this school. Grade-A, firm, perky, and symmetrical.”

Considering the extreme harassment and incessant meddling Harry had endured concerning his love life, he figured Scott had it coming. “Like Sophie’s?”

Scott’s ever-moving mouth shut with an audible snap, and it was incredibly gratifying. “Sophie’s tits,” he said after a moment, “are so perfect you could use them to calculate pi.”

“I’m sure you’ve tried.”

“I wish,” Scott sighed. “I’d love to analyse her Euclidean curves… with my tongue.”

Well, it had been gratifying. Unfortunately, Scott just wasn’t embarrassed about this sort of thing the way Harry was. He decided to get back on topic, and took a deep breath. “Keep that shite to yourself, thanks. More importantly, what’s the next step?”

Scott shrugged and pointed at Harry. “This is your show, brother. I’ve been following you around all year.”

That didn’t mean Harry was ready to abandon all available help. “I’d still like some advice.”
“I can’t speak to the future… Things need time to settle, I can’t tell what’s going on,” Scott said, his eyes going briefly distant. “But I can give you my take on the now.”

“Which is?”

“Obscure everything. Lie, misdirect, refuse to talk, make your excuses, do whatever you have to do so long as it gets everybody off your back. Seems at this point playing twenty questions with the goons in authority is like sending Riddle a detailed memo.”

“That gets us back on the train, but not any further. What then?”

“I don’t know, man. I might be able to work out some sort of game plan once the shape stops being crazy, but it’s still your call.” Scott shrugged. “I mean… all I can say is Riddle is still out there, and we gotta do something about it. I don’t think I have anything to offer right now that you don’t already know.”

Harry did know what he had to do. That was the problem. “Dumbledore would want me to finish what he started,” he said softly.

“Well, all right then. Any ideas on how to go about it? I guess we took the first step already.”

“I have to get that locket back. As for anything else… I’m not ready to talk about it.” Harry had a notion that he wasn’t entirely comfortable with, a foggy plan only just beginning to take shape.

“Ideas are like wine,” Scott said sagely. “They get better with age, but they still taste like piss.”

Now that was a terrible analogy. “How do you taste an idea?”

“I’m getting metaphorical here, Harry, just go with it!”

“You do this too often. I’m tired of going with it.”

A bit later – after Harry had exhausted his voice and Scott limped back to his cot – Harry found himself staring at the ceiling. The potions that still coursed through his veins left him feeling tingly and a bit numb around the face, though a multitude of aches and pains continued to throb with the beat of his pulse.

He knew what was coming. Soon others would arrive to talk to him, pressing for answers he couldn’t deliver. Harry was glad that Scott had been the second person he’d spoken to after waking. The Kharadjai was already aware of all the darkest secrets, and not prone to panic. Their conversation had been only marginally emotional and helped Harry set his head straight.

He would need that perspective.

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Hermione stepped off the stone elevator to the Headmaster’s office and back into the hallway below. There she stood, hands clasped tightly in front of her, frozen in place. She was not reacting to anything that awaited her in the empty corridor, but rather to something she had done several minutes prior. And she could scarcely believe that she had done it.

Hermione Granger... had stolen something from Professor McGonagall!

Or at the very least from the deceased Headmaster Dumbledore, which was hardly any better and perhaps even worse.
She was even entirely certain why.

When Professor McGonagall had called her up to the Headmaster’s office, Hermione understood the summons. Harry and Scott were still confined to the hospital wing and only intermittently conscious, unable to be questioned. Lila had conveniently vanished after the fighting.

That left the Order members and the students who had participated. Undoubtedly, Professor Lupin and the rest of the adults had told what they knew of the story, but that was only a fraction of the picture. Hermione had been present during the fight, and she was close friends with Harry. McGonagall knew this.

So Hermione had been called on to explain. This put her in a very difficult position, as she hadn’t been able to plan out a plausible story with input from the others. She would have to improvise. Luckily, this task would be simplified by the fact that she honestly knew very little about what had happened during the Death Eater attack.

So as Professor (or was it Headmistress now?) McGonagall asked her questions, Hermione answered truthfully... for the most part. She carefully omitted any facts concerning the Kharadjai or the Horcruxes, claiming to know Scott’s sister by reputation alone and that she had no idea what Harry and Dumbledore had been up to.

Lying was surprisingly easy. Either Hermione had become better through practice or Scott had been an even worse influence than she’d assumed.

And then something odd happened. McGonagall turned away to look out the window, sadness etched into the lines on her face. She hadn’t just lost a colleague, but a friend, and Hermione understood at that moment how difficult the questioning was for the Professor. She didn’t know what to say (thought it best not to say anything) and as she let her gaze drift downwards a shiny glint caught her eye.

There was a locket sitting on the edge of Dumbledore’s great, polished desk, glittering in the low light. There was nothing especially remarkable about it. Hermione had never seen it before, which meant nothing. Professor Dumbledore had many possessions, and he’d certainly never catalogued them for Hermione’s edification.

Why, then, could she not stop looking at it? There was an impression about it, so strange and... meaningful. It meant something to her. It meant something to her and she’d never seen it before in her life. Why was she staring at this stupid trinket? What was this bizarre, maddening feeling pressing against the back of her brain?

She reached out and took the locket, tucking it in her robes.

When McGonagall dismissed Hermione she nodded numbly in reply and walked quickly out of the office, the weight of the locket swaying against her side. It was heavy with guilt.

Stopping in stunned horror had done nothing to illuminate things, so Hermione headed for the common room and thought on the move. She didn’t always understand everything, despite her best efforts, but at least she usually understood herself. But this time she was unable to come to grips with her own motivation. What were the possibilities?

She wondered if perhaps she had seen the locket before. There might be something half remembered about the object, latent but not completely forgotten. No... that still wouldn’t explain her need to take it. And since when was she a slave to impulse?
The locket might be magical. *Dark* magic, even, the kind that called to the careless and enraptured. If that were the case, it was possible that her affinity for magic was such she would be drawn to it. However, while Hermione was no Dumbledore, she did know her way around a spell. Magical items were familiar. The locket was not, in any way that she could recognise, magical.

But what if it was important? Important in the way that Scott could understand, rated with a number, just like Hermione was. She remembered the Shrieking Shack outside of Hogsmeade, and Scott’s strange reaction to it. It meant something to him in a manner that it didn’t to the others. He saw a different shade of the world. Hermione had never experienced the shape herself but she had been presented with too much evidence to doubt its existence.

What if... what if *she* had tapped into that plane? The locket might hum and twist with the shape, given importance invisible to the eye but impactful to some unknowable sixth sense. Maybe the pressure she had felt was exactly what Scott experienced regularly, an upsurge of urgency, purpose undefined.

...No. Absolutely not. That could simply not be true. Hermione was no Kharadjai. She had no training, no ability, she hadn’t come from the spaces between the Multiverse. Scott had never even hinted that such a thing might be possible. Everything he had explained pointed to the Kharadjai and only the Kharadjai being able to use such ability (though that was scant comfort when he had explained so little). Regardless, there were no indications that her actions had been anything other than a temporary lapse of sanity.

The sinking feeling that she was trying too hard to convince herself became more pronounced as she drew closer to the Gryffindor Tower.

She abruptly changed course, and went towards the infirmary.

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Harry blinked his way back into awareness just in time to see a familiar head of voluminous brown hair walk into view.

"Harry!" Hermione gasped joyfully. "You're awake!"

"Hey, Hermione," Harry responded hoarsely, his voice a mess of gravel after his long conversation with Scott.

"You sound terrible," Hermione said sympathetically. She approached the side of Harry's bed and pressed a hand against his forehead. "Are you in much pain?"

"No," Harry lied.

"I'm sure," Hermione said with a touch of sarcasm, obviously not believing him. Her face sobered. "I… I came to talk to Scott, actually, but he wasn't awake, so I thought I'd check on you."

"Did you find one of his guns? He's still missing a pistol."

"I did, yes, but that wasn't what I wanted to tell him."

"What is it, then?"

"I… never mind that. I have something here that I found, I wondered if you might know what it is." Hermione reached into her book bag and withdrew the locket from the cave. Harry's eyes widened, and she noticed his reaction. "You do, don't you."
Mutely, Harry held out his hand. Hermione gave him the locket without further question, though her gaze was searching.

The locket looked no different than it had when removed from the cave. Harry hadn't really expected it to – not literally, anyway – but Dumbledore's death seemed to change the filter over past events. What had been the first Horcrux had become the Horcrux Dumbledore had died to retrieve.

"Harry…" Hermione said hesitantly. "Is that…?"

"Yeah," he muttered, clenching his fist around it. It was cold and heavy. "Where'd you find it?"

"In the Headmaster's office," Hermione said. Harry looked up at her, confused, and she hastened to explain. "Professor McGonagall wished to speak with me, and it was on… on the Headmaster's desk, and I thought…"

Harry was impressed. In the past Hermione had shown herself to be daring when the occasion demanded it, but nicking something right off Dumbledore's desk, and in front of McGonagall, no less… "You could tell it was a Horcrux? I still can't see anything different about it."

"Natural intuition, I suppose," Hermione said weakly.

"Now that I have it, I don't know what to do with it," Harry muttered. He flipped the locket over, but the back of it offered no solutions. "I guess we should open it."

He had started feeling around the edges of the locket for a clasp when Hermione's hand shot out and grasped his wrist. "Not now, Harry!"

He immediately felt stupid. Of course the locket could be dangerous. Considering its owner, that was pretty much a guarantee. They would have to deal with the Horcrux properly once they were prepared. "Right. Could you hold on to it for now?"

Hermione tucked the locket back in her book bag. "I don't think it's dangerous so long as we don't tamper with it. We'll take a closer look once you're well."

"Whenever that is," Harry groaned.

Hermione turned back towards him and leaned forward, lowering her voice. "McGonagall had a lot of questions, naturally. I tried not to say too much, but we can't put this off forever. I should go and bring her down, while you're awake."

That gave Harry a start. "No, don't," he rasped.

"Harry, there are things we all need to hear-"

"Please. Not yet."

Hermione's eyes softened. "All right, Harry," she sighed. "I won't. Surely I can tell Ron and Ginny, though, and Neville and Luna?"

"Yeah, that's okay."

In Harry's defence, he really did try to stay awake after Hermione left. He didn't want to disappoint his friends when they arrived, he knew they wanted reassurance that he was fine. He fought the creeping somnolence valiantly, but it was a doomed effort. His battered body refused to remain
conscious, and sleep drifted over him yet again.

“Look, Neville – he’s waking up.”

The first words that entered Harry’s ears when the darkness receded yet again were spoken in a bland, somewhat quizzical tone that he only associated with one person. He blinked rapidly, trying to focus. There was no longer light coming in the windows and he realised that he must have slept most of the day.

Luna was standing to the left of his bed, peering down at him with her wide, silvery eyes. “Are you all right?” she asked.

Harry didn’t feel any better than he had before, but he was more concerned about Luna’s state than his own. “I’m fine. Are you okay? What about Neville?”

“We’re not hurt, Harry.” Neville’s voice came from the right. Harry hadn’t seen him in the shadows. “Well, not bad, anyway.”

“I have a few bruises, but perhaps that’s not what you were asking?” Luna wondered.

Harry relaxed, pushing his head back into his pillow. “How long have you been here?”

“We’ll have been for the best,” Neville said soberly. He looked slightly nervous, and leaned in closer to Harry. “The Minister was here today, asking after you. I think he wanted to talk to us as well, but McGonagall told him we were still recovering…”

“That was a lie,” Luna stated thoughtfully. “But it was quite kind of her to tell it.”

“She can’t stall forever,” Harry said negatively.

“Harry… people are saying, that… that Snape killed the Headmaster,” Neville said tentatively, obviously not entirely wanting to hear an answer.

But that was one fact Harry was totally willing to divulge. “He did.”

Neville’s fists clenched, knuckles whitening. “That son of a bitch,” he whispered harshly. Harry didn’t think he’d ever heard the boy swear before.

“I don’t know why he would do such a thing,” Luna said sadly.

“Because he’s a traitor,” Harry told them. It was time for everyone to realise what he had known all along. “He’s a traitor and a bloody coward.”

Neither Luna nor Neville commented on this, falling silent instead. Which was fine. Harry needed a moment to reign in his anger, sharp and bitter against the back of his throat. He didn’t trust himself to speak without exploding.

“…I think they’re talking about having the funeral here,” Neville ventured, slowly breaking the silence.
That was fitting, at least. Dumbledore deserved to be buried at Hogwarts. Harry shut his eyes when another thought occurred to him. “Are they going to close the school?”

Neville shrugged, a bleak expression on his face. “I don’t know. I’m not sure anyone does.”

“I hope they decide against it. I was looking forward to my sixth year,” Luna said with a touch of uncharacteristic despondence.

Harry watched with dim surprise as Neville reached over and took Luna’s hand in a gesture of comfort. He felt a bit awkward at being present for what might have been a private moment, but he wasn’t exactly capable of leaving. “I’m not going to find anything out in this bed.”

Neville glanced down at Harry’s legs. “Can you stand yet?”

“…Maybe?” Harry tried pushing himself into a sitting position, doing his best to ignore the throbbing in his head. When he finally managed to be upright his vision went dark and he felt so unbalanced he thought he might be passing out.

A pair of hands on each shoulder steadied him as Neville and Luna prevented him from falling to the floor. Considering that the floor was made of stone, he considered himself fortunate that the two of them were present. Collapsing on the unyielding surface wouldn’t have done his head any favours.

Not that their quick action did anything to ameliorate his nausea, intense aches and general weakness. Harry closed his eyes, folded his trembling hands over his stomach and sat as still as he was able, his face prevented from mirroring his distress only because most facial expressions were extremely painful.

“Perhaps this was not the best thing to try,” Luna observed, noting Harry’s obvious distress.

“Do you want me to get Madame Pomfrey?” Neville asked.

“No,” Harry gasped. He was having second thoughts about his mobility. “I’ll just… lie back down…”

Laying back down was almost as agonising as sitting up. Harry would have preferred to be mobile – since when it came to questions it was better to be a moving target than to be hostage to his hospital bed – but it was obvious that wasn’t going to happen. “Guess they could roll me over to a window,” he muttered.

“They aren’t going to have the funeral without you, you’ve got time to heal,” Neville said by way of encouragement.

Time, at this point, was not a welcome commodity. The last thing Harry needed was time to brood, and even he knew it. “Yeah.”

The three of them talked for a bit about less important things, but Harry was sure his friends could tell his heart wasn’t in it. Information had overwhelmed, an intermittent day’s worth of conversations ringing in his ears, numbing him. He wanted to sleep. He was afraid to sleep. He wanted to see Dumbledore. He was terrified of seeing Dumbledore. He didn’t know what he wanted and he was scared of possibilities.

After Neville and Luna left, Harry stared at the ceiling and tried very hard not to think about what was in store.
“Easy does it, Harry,” Ron said, taking more of Harry’s weight on his shoulders.

There was nothing wrong with Harry’s legs – save the inevitable weakness that came with being confined in a bed for several days – but his balance was shaky at best. The past forty-eight hours had seen him regain his ability to stand but not his equilibrium. He managed all right on a flat surface. It was the stairs that were currently giving him trouble.

Regardless, he disliked depending on his friends so much. He shifted away from Ron and put his weight on his own legs.

“Quit being stubborn, let us help,” Ginny scolded him. Ever since Harry had become fully conscious she had been glued to his side as if there were a Sticking Charm at work. Her presence was his greatest source of comfort.

Which made what he had to do that much harder.

No, he thought, pushing that feeling away. There was still a little more time, yet. First things first – he had a funeral to attend.

They were met in the Entrance Hall by Hermione. Her face was pale, and the dark lines beneath her eyes left no question as to how she had been sleeping. She wasn’t the only one with that look, lately. The entire school sank under a cloud of grief and fear, pressed hard into the earth.

Neville and Luna also stood by the door, although Scott was nowhere to be seen. Scott’s frequent disappearances were not unusual, but slightly more worrying in this case. Harry didn’t think Scott would be so callous as to skip the funeral... not that he could say much about Scott with any certainty.

“I’m fine, I’ve got it now,” Harry grumbled, pulling his arm away from Ron when they reached the bottom of the staircase. He thought that might have seemed a bit more harsh than he intended, and softened it with a “Thanks.”

“Are you sure?” Hermione asked, though her question was more subdued than her usual tone.

“I think he’s got it… so long as there’s not a stiff breeze, anyway,” Ron said.

“I’m not that far gone,” Harry groused.

“Not from where we’re standing,” Ginny weighed in. “You’re not well.”

“Well enough.”

“We know, Harry,” Hermione said placatingly in response to Harry’s darkening tone. “We’re just a bit worried, still.”

Harry sighed, trying not to get angry at his friends. They were just offering their help, even if he
didn’t want them to. “Yeah. It’s all right.”

Outside, the crowd had already gathered. Harry was deliberately late. It was yet another delaying tactic, as the last thing he wanted was to be cornered by anyone before the ceremony. By some miracle he had so far managed to dodge questions from Tonks, Remus and Bill, mostly by sleeping a lot. He had even staved off a talking to from McGonagall by pretending to sleep.

Regardless, he knew that it was only a matter of time before he had to start lying. That was unfortunate because Harry was well aware that he was not a good liar. Given the choice he’d have let Scott handle that.

As he approached the chairs outside it became apparent that Scott was handling at least one issue. Most of the gathered mourners were conversing in soft tones appropriate for a sombre occasion. Scott, in direct contrast, was using a voice that was perfectly audible. He was arguing with someone, though Harry couldn’t see the altercation yet.

“No, you can’t sit there either. I don’t care who you are. It’s taken. I don’t ca- do you speak English? English. Habla Inglés? I’m asking because I’ve told you about five fucking times that you can’t sit here. There are others coming. How many more ways can I state this? It’s taken. Reserved. Occupata. Gefüllt. Vy ne mozhete maty tse mistse!”

By the time Harry staggered his way forward to see what was happening, whoever Scott had been lambasting was gone. The reason for the confrontation was obvious; Scott had somehow managed to keep a large number of chairs in his row clear. Harry had no doubt that this was accomplished through conversations not unlike the one he had overheard.

He almost managed at a smile at that, but the cheerless occasion cast a shadow over his thoughts. Even Hermione neglected to comment on Scott’s behaviour. She sat down along with the rest of the group, keeping her silence. Scott, probably sensing the mood, offered no words in his own defence. Not that he needed to. For once, Hermione had far deeper worries than whatever trouble Scott had been causing.

Harry could see many people he knew amongst those gathered. Bill was there, with his soon to be wife Fleur and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, along with Fred and George. Tonks and Remus sat together, and Mad-Eye Moody was close by. They were all in a different section, and Harry noticed that the students had been seated according to their houses. He was not in what was probably his designated seat, having arrived late. The row Scott had saved for them was mixed in with Ministry officials and other guests. Harry didn’t mind. It afforded him a sort of anonymity that sitting with the Gryffindors wouldn’t have.

He leaned slightly to the left and spoke to Scott in a low tone. “Who were you having that row with? About the seats?”

“Huh? Oh, it was that prick from the Ministry,” Scott said, thankfully lowering his voice. Harry reckoned they were surrounded by pricks from the Ministry. “You know, the lead guy. Your Oritorius, except lame. The Minister. Scrim-something.”

Harry wasn’t nearly as shocked as he probably should have been. In fact, he was rather satisfied.

There was a rough part of him, something near the heart, which had been abraded so badly that he no longer minded. He was angry. He was tired. He was scared, nauseous from the potions, still dizzy and in pain. He didn’t care what the Ministry thought. He hadn’t for some time. Now, though… now he just wanted them all to sod off. Now he understood where Scott was coming from. He felt the satisfaction in simple defiance, for no other sake but its own. It was a vicious joy,
but no less pleasing for that.

“Nice,” Harry muttered. “Guess he found someone else to bother.”

“He really wanted to sit here. I didn’t tell him who I was saving them for, but he definitely knew. Wouldn’t take no for an answer. I think he’s gay for you.”

“He is. Wants me to chip in, do my part for the Ministry. Be a good little soldier.”

Scott made a wry face. “I take it that’s not going to happen.”

Harry snorted in contempt, even though it hurt his throat. “Not bloody likely.”

The crowd began to quiet, settling into place, and an expectant hush fell over the green. The white table at the front remained bare, but Harry could tell the ceremony was about to begin.

Harry tried to pay attention, at least initially. His mind continually wandered. What did it matter where Dumbledore’s body was? That corpse wasn’t the man, not really. The sermon being delivered spoke of honouring his life, but how many people would remember his life? Remember it not as they thought it should be, but as it was?

Dumbledore was still a mystery in so many ways. They called him the greatest wizard of his time, powerful and wise. And Harry could see that in him. Mostly, though, Harry thought that wasn’t the truth of the matter.

Above all else, Dumbledore had been a teacher. He had loved Hogwarts, loved the students, the knowledge being imparted, the lives being built. Hogwarts was supposed to be a school, not a fortress. Lately it seemed like everyone had forgotten that. Harry doubted that Dumbledore ever had.

The sky was such a bright blue that Harry could barely look at it, but he raised his head and squinted upwards regardless. Dumbledore wouldn’t have wanted people to be staring at the ground during his funeral, ignoring such beautiful surrounds. Would he have wanted this sort of funeral at all? Given his eccentricities, perhaps not. He might have wanted a party.

Harry suddenly had the remembered image of Dumbledore wearing that ridiculous hat he had gotten out of a party favour. He almost grinned before he caught himself.

“Why fight it?” Scott asked quietly, having noticed Harry’s aborted smile. “If you try to forget him, won’t you forget what he taught you?”

There was truth in that. Harry wanted to remember Dumbledore not as a great wizard now gone, but as full of life and peculiarity. He didn’t think he could forget the man even if he had wanted to. The differences they had experienced seemed irrelevant, now. Harry had learned so much from the old Headmaster. He felt he had hardly scratched the surface of what Dumbledore had offered.

“As for me,” Scott continued, “I’m staring failure in the face, and it’s not pleasant. And thanks to the joys of integration, I can’t even cut my losses and get out of here.”

That was a surprising sentiment. “What, you just want to run?”

Scott grinned. “Nah. I’ve invested too much time in you losers.”

Harry couldn’t suppress the smile that came. Trust Scott to still be giving Harry a hard time at a funeral. He was sure that they were receiving dark looks for their apparent lack of respect, but he
just didn’t care. He knew that Dumbledore wouldn’t have minded. And that was all that mattered.

The funeral wore on. Harry was unfocused for much of it, lost in his thoughts. The tributes of the Centaurs and the Merpeople touched Harry more than any hollow words the politicians had to offer. At least the denizens of the forest and the lake had come out of respect, not obligation. He imagined a lot of those in attendance couldn’t say the same. The gathered students and staff of Hogwarts were an exception, of course. Their sadness was palpable, and Harry joined them in it.

To his left sat Scott, silent and expressionless. Whatever the Kharadjai might have been feeling was not apparent. To Harry’s right were the rest of his close friends. Ginny and Hermione sat next to each other, both with tears staining their cheeks. Ron had one arm around his girlfriend, his face pale. Neville appeared shaken and almost confused, as if he couldn’t believe where he was, and why. Luna looked troubled, but her eyes were clear and when she noticed Harry’s gaze upon her she gave him a little smile.

And then it was over. The crowd began to disperse, grouping into clusters that talked in low voices, making their way off the grounds. The reality of the day seemed to press on Harry’s shoulders like an unseen hand. Everyone was leaving. Dumbledore was not amongst them.

He couldn’t stay near the tomb. He stood and walked away, past the funeral area, towards Hagrid’s cabin and the edge of the wood. There was another pair of footsteps in the grass behind him, and a quick glance over his shoulder confirmed his first assumption. Ginny was following him. He slowed down and allowed her to take his hand.

Behind the cabin the air was cooler in the forest’s shade. Harry felt some of that oppressive weight lift with the absence of the sun’s heat. He leaned against a tree and rubbed at his eyes, feeling awkward. Now that he had arrived at his destination, he wasn’t sure why he had gone there in the first place.

Ginny didn’t bother asking if he was all right. She wrapped her arms around his middle and leaned her head on his shoulder, offering comfort through proximity.

God. Why did she have to be so perfect? Harry knew what he had to do, but each moment in her presence made him question it even more.

“You’re not making this easy,” Harry muttered, breaking the silence. It was a vague thing to say. He wanted to delay the inevitable end of the conversation, giving himself time to be stronger.

Unfortunately, Ginny saw straight to the heart of that statement. Her head shot up and she look at him with a hard stare, eyes blazing. “No!” she scoffed.

Harry felt the first twinge of panic. She had anticipated this. “Ginny…”

“You are not leaving me behind, Harry Potter.”

“There’s no other choice. What I have to do is dangerous, and…”

“Oh, is it?” she asked with cutting sarcasm. “I suppose invading the Department of Mysteries was a bit of a laugh?”

Harry gritted his teeth. “Voldemort is after me, and he’ll use you-”

“Right, because us Weasleys are well out of the line of fire,” she scoffed.

“More than me! This is my fight, I have things to do and I can’t… I couldn’t if I knew you were in
danger.”

Ginny rolled her eyes, dismissing him. “And now I’m, what, a shrinking violet? I can’t handle your life?”

Her refusal to accept this was maddening. Harry’s anger was rising in proportion to his voice. “It’s not about what you can handle, it’s about you staying alive for me to come back to!”

“That’s not me, Harry! You know who I am! I am not going to hide,” she furiously stated.

Harry clamped his mouth shut, swallowing a blistering retort. He had to stay calm and make her see reason. “We can’t be together, Ginny.”

Her eyes narrowed, and Harry immediately knew that his milder approach had done nothing to mollify her. “I suppose I don’t get a say. Funny, and here I thought I was half of this relationship.”

“You are, you’re the better half, my better half, and that’s why-”

“And that’s why you have to abandon me so you can run off and martyr yourself. Do you even hear what you’re saying?”

Harry's grip on his temper was rapidly loosening. “This is not open for discussion, Ginny! I have to leave and you are not coming with me!”

Ginny’s fists clenched and she stepped forward, eyes alight. “If you’re going to chuck me then at least have the bollocks to give me a reason that makes sense!” she hissed.

“Chuck you?! I’m not- this- that’s not what this is about!” he stammered.

Ginny crossed her arms. “So you want me to just wait for you, then? Pine away until you get back?”

“No, I… I wouldn’t ask you to do that…” Harry said sullenly. He hadn’t considered that she might move on. It was not a pleasant thought.

“You just did!”

Harry was having trouble responding to that. “I did not! I was… I never said that!”

“Oh, but it was implied, wasn’t it,” she said bitingly. “I suppose I should start looking at my other options now, maybe line up a bloke or two. I might need a bit of comfort while you’re off getting kill-”

Ginny choked on the word, and Harry was stunned by the tears that began coursing down her face. He opened his mouth to respond, chest aching at the sight, but she cut him off with a furious gesture.

“You know what? Forget it,” she said, her voice wavering with the sobs that shook her shoulders. Her gaze was not softened by the tears, and Harry found himself unable to meet it. “I can see you don’t need me, anyway.”

She walked away and left Harry standing in the ashes of the best thing in his life.

He felt dazed, and this time the potions had nothing to do with it. He turned around began moving with a leaden gait, past Hagrid’s cabin and towards the open green. He knew he couldn’t look back. If he did, he’d never be able to stop himself from running after Ginny and begging for her
forgiveness.

It was the right thing to do, he told himself for the hundredth time. He’d known it would hurt before he did it. But the reality was so much worse. Somehow, he had harboured the hope that she would take it well, that she would understand. He had expected that she might argue the point. Ginny could be reasonable, though, she could be made to see the necessity. Their parting would be sorrowful, but that sorrow would be tempered by the promise of reunion.

He almost laughed. How could he have ever been so stupid as to think that? Ginny was no wallflower. She was not afraid to follow him into battle, or to leave her life and family behind. She’d had an overwhelming number of older brothers trying to shelter her all her life. The last thing she wanted from Harry was more of the same. Even he knew that. Why the fucking hell had he ever even considered that she would understand his need to leave her behind?

Perhaps he had done so because the alternative was so much more daunting.

Regardless, it was over. Harry sat down on the grass and stared into the woods. He’d have to avoid her, just for a little bit. On the train, especially. He didn’t think he could see her again and stay strong. Or stay in one piece, if her anger hadn’t dimmed by then.

“That was stupid. A classic mistake, but no less stupid for its frequency.”

It was distinctly Scott’s voice, emerging from the crest of the slight hill behind Harry. He had that flat tone about him, the one he used whenever he was condescending to make a point, stepping down from his high horse to explain whatever he felt was obvious. As if he was bored with Harry’s ignorance.

And Harry realised that he didn’t care to hear it. “Sod off, Scott. I’ve had a bad day.”

“Made worse by your misstep. I don’t understand why so many people go to this end to remedy a far deeper problem. It didn’t work for anyone else, and it won’t work for you.”

The moments of camaraderie that had been shared earlier at the funeral were forgotten in the rage that Scott’s comments brought on. He was in exactly the wrong place at exactly the wrong time, and Harry’s emotional turmoil had been given a convenient outlet.

Harry stood and whirled on Scott, teeth gritted against the nausea this caused. “Oh yeah? Wasn’t too long ago you were apologising for balling up your own end of this deal! Seems like I’m not the only stupid one around at the moment!”

It was an inflammatory statement, designed to make Scott equally angry. Somehow, it didn’t work. Scott’s face creased into a glare, but he remained cool. “Irrelevant. You’re not even equating the right cause and effect. Dumbledore is dead, so you chuck Ginny. I couldn’t stop Dumbledore from being killed, so you have license to do something equally stupid? Logic so convoluted it’s almost abstract.”

“I suppose you’d know,” Harry sneered. “You’ve never made any sense at all, so maybe it’s my turn now.”

Scott had the unbelievable nerve to grin at that. “Get real, Harry. You don’t understand me well enough to imitate me.”

“Oh, I don’t know, it’s easy enough right now. All I have to do is fail.”

The grin was wiped from Scott’s face with a satisfying rapidity, but Harry still felt a slight twinge
in his stomach. That had been a rather awful thing to say; perhaps he was going too far…

Scott said nothing for a long moment, his face unreadable. When he began speaking again he had resumed his emotionless drawl. “You think you can just walk away from her? Why would you think that?”

“Because my alternative is to drag her straight into Voldemort’s path!” Harry shot back. His motives were clear enough. He didn’t know why Scott was trying to be so difficult, but he didn’t have to stand there and take it.

“Let me explain it to you.”

“Oh, please do! I’m sure whatever it is I can’t possibly understand it without your help!”

“You’re in love with her. That changes the nature of the involvement. The fact that you were ‘dating’ becomes wholly immaterial. You are beyond that. It doesn’t matter if you call it off. It doesn’t matter if you leave her behind. She’s attached to you. She’s in this. You think you’ll miss her less, worry about her less, because you told her it was over? You’re in love. It’s never over. Not like it could have been with a lesser connection. Kid romance. Puppy love. Forget about her before recess; fall in love the next day all over again. It doesn’t work like that any more. You can’t separate her from your life with a sentence, idiot.” The angry edge given to the last word made it clear that Harry’s own insults had not been without effect.

“Then what do you want me to do about it?” Harry snarled.

“Keep her close. If she’s with you, at least you’ll get a chance to protect her. You don’t have any better options. It could go wrong either way. But imagine how much more you’ll regret it when she’s gone and you left her behind. What a great alternative that is.”

God, Harry couldn’t even think about that, wanted to punch Scott right in the face for even bringing it up. For a second of absolute temptation he wondered if Scott was feeling superior enough to let Harry knock him a good one, just to show he could take it. “Why are you doing this? Do you hate her that much? Do you want her dead?”

Harry didn’t actually believe that, even for a second, but it was enough to crack through Scott’s poise. The veneer of distance blew apart and his eyes sparked back to violent life. “What the fuck, Harry?!”

“Scott, please…” Harry said tiredly. Unexpectedly his rage sloughed away, leaving nothing but exhaustion. He had provoked a raw response and apparently that was enough to banish his own fury. “I don’t know why you’re so mad at me tonight, but I can’t take it right now. If you’ve got something to say, just say it. I’ve had enough.”

Scott blew out a breath. “Okay. Bad start. I am… kind of pissed that you broke up with Ginny. And I guess I was a little harsh.”

“Just a little.” Harry slumped down onto the grass and stared at the tree line once more.

Scott gracelessly dropped down next to him with an audible thump and lay backwards with his head pillowed on his arms. “Ahhhh… I’m relaxed now… Totally…”

“I’m glad it’s so easy for you,” Harry said sarcastically, feeling tired but not relaxed.

“You know who Spider-Man is?”
“What?” How often had Harry said that when talking to Scott? More often than not, a flat ‘what’ was the only appropriate response.

“Just run with this, I’m trying to set up a lengthy analogy,” Scott explained.

“Oh, one of those. Yeah, I sort of do. He’s in comic books.”

“Okay, well, let’s pretend that I used to know him. And we fought crime and shit.”

Harry wasn’t going for that theoretical approach any more. “Wait, pretend? Is he real? He’s real, isn’t he. You knew him.”

“Okay, I knew him. Peter Parker. Great guy. A little weedy and hung up on being a ‘virtuous’ hero, but a great guy. You remind me of him.”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah. So, we had a good thing going. He’d swing around the city, find some trouble, start a fight and then I’d run in behind him and stomp the living hell out of everything that wasn’t an innocent bystander.” Scott closed his eyes and smiled.

Harry had a thought that made him snort in sudden laughter. “Did you have a costume?”

“Nah. Couldn’t be bothered. I wore a hockey mask over whatever street clothes I had on at the time and did my damage any way I could. Didn’t have much of a ‘theme’ going, really…”

“So what does this have to do with me?”

“Oh, right. So, Peter had this redhead of his own by the name of MJ. Nice girl, real easy on the eyes. Easy on the dick, too, just to turn the subtext into text. She wasn’t like us though, just a regular girl. Tough, spirited, hell of a temper, but still made of the same stuff as the next chica on the street. Spidey freaked out after she got in the line of fire one too many times, and he chucked her.”

“Sounds sensible to me,” Harry said roughly.

“Yes, but that’s because you’re both retarded. See, here’s the thing: let’s say you ignore everything I’ve already said about you still loving her, still being afraid for her, etcetera. The point is, she’s out of the fight, and your own suffering is irrelevant.”

That was precisely Harry’s point. “It doesn’t matter how much it hurts as long as she’s still alive when I get back.”

“You’re forgetting the same thing that Peter did. The exact same thing when you leave her out of it.”

Fine. Harry would bite. “And what is that?”

“She’s a Prime, Harry.”

Harry felt a cold weight drop into his stomach. His eyes widened.

“She’s never out of it.”

It couldn’t be true. A terrible surge of desperate panic washed over Harry. Scott had to be wrong. It had to be simpler than that. She had to be safe. There had to be a loophole, there had to be
something that Scott could do! It was his job to fix this!

“Funny how that worked. Peter ditched MJ, started living solo, but you know what? Somehow it seemed to come back to her anyway. Always an enemy on that side of town, looking for someone from Spidey’s past. Always her on that one particular side walk when the bad guys came through, keeping an eye out for someone to nab… Hey, how about that redhead over there? MJ got kidnapped by a crazy clone of Spider-Man? How on earth do these things keep happening.”

Harry rested his head in his hands and took a deep breath. Had it been for nothing?

“Unlucky, you might say. Disaster prone. But that’s not the truth, of course. She was drawn into it. Like a moth to flame, like light into an event horizon, like… a Prime, to the action. To the UO. To you, Harry.”

And it all came back to him. “Yeah. Like always,” Harry said, and it came out so bitterly he thought for a moment he could taste it.

“You have a good ear for the higher calling. That’s not always the case with Primes, but you’re willing to face necessity. Ginny is as well.” Scott sat up and leaned in closer to Harry. “Do you really think she’d choose to sit this out?”

“No. And that scares me.”

“We’re all scared, Harry.”

“You’re not.”

“Sure I am. My fears are just a little more esoteric than yours.”

“Like what?”

Scott stood up and started strolling away. “Get a couch, dude, and then maybe I’ll submit to being analysed. Think about what I said. It’s not too often I make a coherent argument – you should appreciate it!”

Harry most certainly did not appreciate it.

But he had to consider it.

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The bottom of the canopy over her four-poster bed was blank and Ginny wished she could say the same for her mind. She lay still on her back, staring upwards in an attempt to calm down, but it wasn’t working. She was furious. And it was all Harry-sodding-Potter’s fault.

She couldn’t believe the nerve of him. It took some bollocks to say what he had to her face, and even more stupidity. At least he had tried not to be condescending, though he certainly hadn’t succeeded. Some part of her had known he would bring things to such a point, had anticipated his words and demeanour, but she had still hoped…

She had hoped that he wouldn’t give in to his hero complex for once in his sodding life. And look where that had gotten her.

Clearly her faith had been misplaced, however minuscule it had been. And so she found herself alone in her room, abandoned by the other girls in her year as well as her supposed boyfriend. The
ones who hadn’t already fled had left right after the funeral, hurried away by concerned parents. Ginny didn’t mind. She wanted to be by herself for a bit.

She had walked away from Harry not out of acceptance for his stupid, stupid ‘plan’ to save her, but rather because if she had stayed she thought she might have slapped the shite out of him. That probably would have made her feel better, but Harry was already in enough pain. He had taken that beating and still thought he could run off and handle You-Know-Who on his own? Barking mad, that’s what he was.

Ginny wondered if Harry would tell Scott that he had to stay behind as well. She very much doubted it, and that made her even angrier.

A gentle knock sounded on the door frame. “Ginny?” Hermione’s hesitant voice called out. “Are you awake?”

“Yeah,” Ginny sighed, sitting up reluctantly.

Hermione approached the bed and stood next to it for a moment, taking in Ginny’s appearance before sitting down next to her. “So he did it, I see,” she said with exasperation, most likely noting Ginny’s red eyes and drawing the obvious conclusion. “I was hoping Scott would… Oh, never mind.”

Ginny frowned at her. “Hoping Scott would what?”

“I thought Scott might talk him out of it… You know how he is about keeping his Primes together.” Hermione glanced at Ginny, and, probably realising that Ginny didn’t know how Scott was, expanded on her statement. “He put in all that work with you two. I guess it was more Lila than him, but… well, Scott wouldn’t let that all go to waste if he could help it. He likes to keep us all close. He won’t be happy with Harry.”

“That I understand,” Ginny said acidly.

Hermione winced slightly. “He’s only doing what he thinks is best, Ginny…”

“Funny how he just seems to know what’s best for me, isn’t it? I don’t suppose he’s told you to stay behind?”

Hermione looked away. “Ron and I haven’t brought it up. We weren’t going to give him the chance.”

Ginny glared at her. “But I don’t get that option, apparently.”

“I suppose not,” Hermione admitted. “I never said it was fair.”

“Because it bloody well isn’t!” Ginny raged.

“I know. It’s really not.”

Ginny gripped her sheets in her hands and squeezed until it hurt. This accomplished nothing, of course, but it did ease her frustration slightly if she imagined the sheets were Harry’s throat instead. She released them and folded her arms over her chest. “I don’t know what to do,” she said through gritted teeth.

Hermione seemed reluctant to answer, most likely wary in the face of Ginny’s imminent wrath. A different voice interceded in the silence.
“Force the issue,” Scott said from the doorway.

Ginny was too angry to be surprised. She wondered, for maybe about a second, how he had gotten into the girls dormitory, but ultimately she just didn’t care. Most of what Scott did was a mystery and she was in no mood to contemplate any of it.

Hermione felt differently. “Scott!” she gasped, clearly scandalised. “You aren’t supposed to be in here!”

Scott shrugged. “So I’ve been told. Still, if they really intended to keep all the dudes out, then why did they make the only countermeasure so easy to bypass?” He tapped his chin thoughtfully. “I think it’s a test of willpower. Like, only the guys who are determined for some pussy are going to get it.”

“I sincerely hope that wasn’t your intent,” Hermione responded coldly, “because you’re going to be disappointed.”

“Well, I am aware how badly you’ve wanted to have sex with me this year...” Scott paused to accommodate Hermione’s cry of outrage. “...But that’s not why I made the trip. I came to tell Ginny to force the issue. And I did.”

“Meaning what?” Ginny asked before Hermione could give another rejoinder.

“Meaning I’ve put Harry on the ropes, but now you gotta knock him out. It’s a set up, see? I can’t do all the work.”

For a red-tinged moment Ginny seriously considered attacking him. “I don’t have the patience right now to make sense of your shit!” she snapped.

Scott let out a loud sigh. When he spoke he enunciated with exaggerated precision. “I talked to Harry. He’s reconsidering breaking up with you. Go to him and change his mind while he’s still confused.”

Ginny scoffed at him, unconvinced. “You don’t think he actually listened to you?”

“I know you don’t have the highest opinion of me, or my skills,” Scott said blandly, “but I can, in fact, be rather convincing.”

“He’s right, Ginny,” Hermione spoke up. “I’m not sure I want to say it for fear of inflating his ego even further, but... Scott can make a solid argument on occasion.”

Scott gave Hermione an indignant look. “What’s with the qualifier? ‘On occasion’?”

“Don’t push your luck,” she warned him.

“Yeah, yeah... Doesn’t matter, I think this will work,” he said, addressing Ginny once more. “Harry’s in the library right now, probably because it’s deserted. Not a bad place for a showdown.”

Ginny glared at Scott with narrowed eyes. “And what do you get out of all this?”

Scott threw up his hands in exasperation. “You know what I get out of this! Hermione straight up told you what the deal is!”

“You get paid, I know. Honestly, I don’t really care about your financial problems,” Ginny said coldly.
For some reason this taunt accomplished what all the others had not. Scott’s countenance immediately darkened, and he strode forward towards the bed. Ginny’s eyes widened in apprehension; she had never actually succeeded in angering Scott before. Considering the fact that he had already killed several people, perhaps it wasn’t the wisest course of action.

On the other hand, her pride was at stake. And after the battle for Hogwarts, Ginny herself was no stranger to death. She wasn’t going to flinch or take back what she had said.

Scott made no move to hit her, but he did get right in her face as he snarled, “I get paid regardless, Ginny. You don’t want to reach out to Harry? Then do whatever the fuck you want. Run off by yourself and get killed. They might dock me four percent. Maybe.”

“That’s enough, you two!” Hermione said hotly. She stood and placed her hands on Scott’s chest, pushing him away from the bed. At first Scott didn’t budge, but when Hermione persisted his shoulders relaxed and he took a couple steps back. “This accomplishes nothing! Ginny, I know Scott is being annoying, but he really is trying to help! And Scott, stop phrasing things in a way you know will make her mad!”

Scott rolled his eyes. “Fine. I guess I’ll let you explain what I’ve done.”

“That would be even better,” Hermione snapped back, ignoring his sarcasm. “Ginny, Harry is in the library. I don’t know what Scott has said to him, but you should go find out.”

Ginny angrily pushed herself to her feet. “Fine, for all the good it will do.”

Hermione rounded on Scott. “And Scott… come with me. We need to go over your plans for this summer.”

Scott made a sceptical face. “Since when do I have plans?”

“That act stopped being convincing about six months ago. You’ll be at Bill’s wedding, I assume. If you’re going to check on me before that I’ll need to know ahead of time. I’ll have to tell my parents something, though I’m not sure what…”

Ginny left them to their animated discussion, wondering how two people who fought so much could get along so well.

The halls were completely deserted as she stalked through them, which was fine, as she wasn’t in the mood for inquiring company. Despite the time required to reach the library, her anger did not ebb. Instead, each step only sharpened it. She had been given the opportunity to examine her rage but not the calm required to see the other side of it. Somewhere, deep down inside herself, she knew Harry had some good points. There were no doubt major obstacles between her and this… this crusade, this whatever it was. This thing she wasn’t supposed to be a part of.

But what did it matter when Harry wouldn’t even try to accommodate her? All solutions were useless when ignored. They might figure something out if he would make the effort, but unless Scott had somehow come through that wasn’t going to happen. And Ginny wasn’t enthralled with the prospect of relying on the boisterous Kharadjai. Still, it wasn’t as if she had a great many options.

At the very least, she’d see if Harry had undergone even a slight change of heart.

The library proved to be predictably deserted. Near the far edge of the room Harry’s shaggy black hair drooped low over a glossy varnished table bare of literature. He hadn’t bothered to disguise his brooding behind books. As Ginny approached him, he didn’t look up. His shoulders were slumped
in a posture of such absolute defeat that for a brief moment she actually felt sorry for him.

The feeling quickly passed. She pulled out the chair opposite of him and sat down in it with a
forceful thump. She glared at the top of his head, willing him to acknowledge her. When that didn’t
work she started to speak. “So have you decided to see reason, or is Scott just wasting my time?”
she asked sharply.

Harry responded with a deep sigh, sagging lower in his chair. “…I don’t know what to do, Gin,” he
mumbled.

Harry was many things, but subtle was not one of them. He had a tendency to wear his heart on his
sleeve and Ginny had a talent for reading it. At that moment, she knew she needed to change
tactics. Whatever Scott had said, it had made far greater an impact than Ginny had dared to hope
for. Harry’s despondence was a clear sign: victory was close at hand.

She switched her tone to conciliatory. “Harry, you’ll get through this. We will get though this,
because-” she raised her voice to prevent Harry from objecting at her intentional plural, “because,
you can’t do this alone.”

“So I should just drag everyone down with me?” Harry replied darkly.

“I didn’t know you considered your friends such a burden!” Ginny snapped back, unable to prevent
her temper from rising again.

“No, that’s not what I-”

“No? Then what were you getting at, that we’re all useless? That we can’t possibly help you win?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth, Ginny!” Harry told her, showing the first flash of anger.

“Then say what you mean.”

“I- I meant… this isn’t your war, there’s no need for you to-”

Ginny closed her eyes tightly. “Harry, I swear to God, every time I think you can’t possibly say
something more stupid,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Voldemort is after me! Why should he bother with you after we split up?”

“Think about this, Harry, think about it just for a single, bloody second before you decide that I’m
safe as houses!” Ginny loved him, she really did, but sometimes the obvious just slipped straight
out of his grasp. “How exactly are the Death Eaters supposed to know about this? Because you
took me aside after the funeral? Was there an official declaration at some point that I missed? And
even if they did know, even if they did, why would that matter? I suppose the bloody Dark Lord
will just assume you feel nothing for me at all because we were broken up for all of a month or
two!”

Harry dropped his head onto one of his arms and groaned wordlessly, a sound of helpless
frustration so genuine that Ginny felt some of her previous pity worm its way back into her chest.

“That’s what Scott said to you, isn’t it,” she ventured.

“No,” Harry mumbled into the table. “He reminded me that you’re actually a Prime, so there’s no
point in keeping you away.”
The thought hadn’t crossed Ginny’s mind; she had been only vaguely aware that she might be considered a Prime. “That’s a good point as well,” she said thoughtfully.

“Fuck,” Harry growled, breath fogging against the tabletop. His glasses were skewed over eyes squeezed tightly shut.

“Why is it so hard to accept that I want to help you?” Ginny asked, but her voice was lacking bite. Harry was just so pathetic that her temper waned as easily as it flared.

“Because everything I touch turns to shit,” Harry spat out.

Now that was just going entirely too far. “God, Harry,” Ginny sighed. “You’re impossible to talk to when you get like this, you know.”

Harry sat up straight, eyes wild. “What am I supposed to do?! I don’t even… I don’t – damn it, Ginny! I just want you to be safe.”

“Well, I’m not. I’m not, Harry, and I never will be. None of us will. We’re not a bunch of evil, hood-wearing wankers and that means we’re in danger!”

“But it’s me they want, they want-”

“They want to conquer the entire sodding country!” Ginny interrupted. “And in case you hadn’t noticed, I live here. And my family is specifically targeted, and I’ve been snogging you.”

The fight drained out of Harry. He slumped forward and rested his head on his hands. “Then what should I do?”

“Let me help,” Ginny said simply. “Leaving me behind is just giving the Death Eaters a better chance to hex me in the arse.”

That got a small smile out of Harry. “It’s a nice arse, though,” he mumbled with half-hearted playfulness.

Ginny knew when triumph was near. She was also totally willing to use her feminine wiles to get her way. She decided that her arse, nice as it was, would be even better (and more convincing) seated in Harry’s lap.

“I know,” she agreed, sliding from her seat with a female fluidity that immediately caught Harry’s eye. “Hard to believe you tried to stay away from it.”

“Tried being the word,” Harry said tiredly, beginning to sink back into melancholy.

She wasn’t going to allow that. Hastening her step, she crossed the space between them and carefully seated herself on Harry’s legs, not wanting to jostle him. The action startled him. He looked at her, eyes wide, his hands tentatively gripping her waist.

“What you’re doing, it will be easier with my help. I know you don’t want to believe it but it’s true, Harry, it is. And besides-” she said huskily, wrapping her arms around his neck. “-there are plenty of benefits to keeping me around.”

“Yeah,” Harry said hoarsely. He was trying very hard not to stare at the breasts so enticingly close to his face, and not entirely succeeding.

Ginny pressed the advantage. “So now that we’ve got that figured out, how about you tell me what
we’re going to be doing?”

Harry looked away from her. “Ginny…”

“Harry…” she mocked him.

“It’s not easy to talk about,” he muttered. “I’ve tried so hard to keep it a secret.”

“Yes, so hard that you told Ron, Hermione and Scott.”

He winced. “Er… Yeah, I did at that. Well, the first two, anyway… I think Scott always knew.”

There would be time to ponder that later. “Harry,” Ginny said gently, placing a hand on his cheek and turning his head towards her. “I’m not going anywhere. I can’t escape this even if I wanted to, and I don’t. I want to be with you.”

He dropped his head and sighed into her shoulder. “…Why?” he asked plaintively in one last stubborn act.

“Because I won’t leave you. We need each other, why can’t you see that?”

Harry was silent for a long time, his breath steady against Ginny’s collarbone. She ran a hand through his hair, cherishing the intimacy of their positioning even as she anxiously awaited his answer.

“I’ll try to,” he said finally. “So, um… Awhile back, Voldemort did some really tricky Dark magic that we have to deal with…”

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The scenery outside the window flashed by in time with the humming clack of the train, familiar in its cadence. The Hogwarts Express usually made Ron think of summertime, and home, but with his forehead pressed against the glass all he could focus on was Hermione’s warmth at his side. She was safe, at least for the moment, and so was everyone else. The tension in Ron’s shoulders had taken up a permanent residence over the last few days, and had only just begun to loosen.

He couldn’t entirely relax, though. Seated directly across from him were Ginny and Harry, sitting close and conversing in whispers. Ron didn’t know what to make of that. Hermione had told him that Harry had broken up with Ginny… so why were they all but wrapped around each other now?

Ron knew that the break up would be rough on his sister, and he didn’t like it, but he also knew that Harry had good reasons. Ginny couldn’t be involved in what was to come, Harry had always understood that. It was a hard choice but one that had to be made.

And as far as Ron knew, the choice had been made. And now unmade? That wasn’t right, surely. Harry would never endanger Ginny, it had to be something else…

But judging from the looks they kept throwing his way, whatever it was, he wasn’t going to be happy about it.

Hermione had to have noticed all this, she always did, but she didn’t seem too concerned. Ron thought that had a lot to do with Scott’s conspicuous absence. Neville and Luna were in the compartment, and even Trevor and Kylie sat next to Harry and Ginny, but Scott was gone. Ron didn’t particularly care what he was up to, but he knew Hermione didn’t share that same insouciance.
Hermione raised her head off Ron’s shoulder and looked towards Kylie’s small form. “Kylie, did you see Scott when you went to the toilet?” she asked, her voice loud against the previous quiet.

Kylie shook her head in response. Her face displayed curiosity, which was a first. Ron had never seen any expression on her but apprehension.

“He probably went to see who else was on the train. You know he doesn’t like sitting still,” Harry said. Hermione shot him a look that said exactly what she thought of that excuse, but Harry only rolled his eyes in response. “What does it matter? He wanders off all the time.”

“And steals something or kills someone,” Hermione retorted. Immediately after she must have remembered that Trevor and Kylie weren’t aware of the full picture, and she subsided without further comment.

Ron had never thought Hermione’s paranoia concerning Scott was entirely warranted. Whatever Scott was doing, it was probably to help Harry out in one way or the other. Still, given the way in which Scott sometimes offered help, Hermione wasn’t wrong to be concerned. Ron could only imagine the look on her face if the next issue of the Prophet detailed a massacre.

At this point, Ron wasn’t sure he’d be bothered. After what had happened at Hogwarts, someone had it coming. It was an ugly thought, and one he wasn’t comfortable with. But lately, it had been an ugly sort of time.

Such dark musings were swept away when Scott slammed the door to the compartment open, startling most of its occupants. “Fuckin’ balls,” he swore loudly, and seated himself next to Hermione with a thump.

“Scott!” Hermione hissed, shooting a meaningful glance at Trevor and Kylie.

“Sorry, sorry…” Scott grumbled.

“What’s your problem?” Harry asked.

“They put me on hold!” Scott said with righteous indignation. “Probably a bunch of assholes calling in reports on how the grass is growing in their universe, watching friggin’ paint dry, and I get stuck in the queue during a combat op. Should have coded in for an emergency; protocol, man…”

“Scott…” Hermione said with warning, still looking at the first years.

“Whatever. Should’ve just jotted in a form, paperwork is slightly better than being put on hold.” Scott stood up decisively. “Maybe Eva can link me with the Colonel, I’ll try that…”

Scott walked back out of the compartment, once again opening and closing the door with more force than necessary. His footsteps faded down the hallway, and the former silence returned.

“That was odd,” Harry said after a moment.

Hermione sighed in a disgruntled fashion. “Do I even want to know what he’s up to?” Apparently she did, because a few seconds later she left to follow Scott.

“Should we all go?” Ron wondered humorously.

“No. They’re probably just going to have a row about something pointless,” Harry said dryly.
“Yeah. With any luck they won’t kill each-”

Ron’s reply was interrupted as Hermione came stomping back into the room. She sat down with her arms crossed. “He was gone and I don’t know which way he went,” she huffed in response to the questioning looks from the others.

“Must’ve heard you coming,” Ron suggested, grinning.

“He had better not be hiding. How childish can he…” she trailed off.

“Very,” Harry supplied.

Ron and Harry grinned at each other, though there was a bittersweet tinge to the exchange. It was hard not to buckle under the darkness that hung over them. Evidence that all humour hadn’t left the world was comforting, if in a small way. Things being what they were, Ron would take what he could get.

He put his arm back over Hermione’s shoulders, holding her to him. Through the window the countryside rolled past in winks and flashes: trees, grass and low stone walls. Nothing looked out of place. The world was still standing, despite everything.

And for a moment, with his friends at his side, Ron thought they might all make it out okay.
Harry was awoken by a sound at his window.

He rolled over in his bed, shaking off the wispy vestiges of a nightmare he could only dimly recall. Something had been chasing him, a shape dark and suggestive of things too horrible to survive his waking. The room was empty, devoid of anything threatening, and for a moment he wondered if the sound had been a part of the dream as well.

A second clink against the glass dispelled that assumption. He pulled his wand out from beneath his pillow and cautiously approached the window, well aware that any magic he performed would bring the Ministry down on his head yet again. He didn’t much care, but considering the odds against him it wouldn’t be smart to invite any more hindrances.

There was nothing directly at the window; unsurprising, considering his bedroom’s position on the second floor. He stood still for a second, waiting. Quick as a shot, a small pebbled flasked upward and clacked against the glass, the rapid shadow darting across the room with a life of its own. Despite the eerie connotations of the setting, Harry felt the pressure in his chest ease. He was pretty sure he knew who was tossing rocks at his window.

When he leaned forward to peer downward he caught sight of blond hair, the owner of which was waving at him. He unlocked the window carefully and slid it open, trying to minimise the amount of the noise he made. The last thing he wanted was to rouse Vernon when Scott was present. Harry had a feeling that confrontation would end badly in a number of ways.

The summer night was cool and calm, the buzzing and clicks of the insects in the bushes rising above the distant sound of cars on the main roads. It smelled like grass and night air, and Harry relaxed a little more. Scott’s appearance began to feel like less of a portent and more of a simple visit.

He knew better, but it was a nice thought nevertheless.

“I’ll see if I can open the front door,” he whispered down to Scott.

“Why?” Scott whispered back. He crouched and lightly jumped up to latch onto the windowsill. Harry stepped out of the way as Scott slid through the opening and rolled back into a crouch, all without making much noise.

Harry shook his head in exasperation and closed the window. When he turned around he saw that Scott had made himself comfortable at the foot of the bed.

“We have to be quiet,” Harry warned him. “Let’s not wake anyone.”

“What, are we having sex? I thought we were just talking. Let’s not rush anything... I have a lot of inner beauty, you know.”

Harry bit back the loud retort that immediately occurred to him and in the same instant understood
that their conversation wasn’t going to work. “Come on,” he told Scott, moving to reopen the window. “Let’s get out of here.”

Scott followed Harry’s lead without comment, dropping back out the window and then pausing to help Harry descend. Harry hung down by his fingers and then dropped, letting Scott catch him. It was briefly awkward to disentangle himself from Scott’s arms, but thankfully their enforced silence prevented Scott from commenting (at length, no doubt) on whatever supposed homoeroticism the moment possessed.

Harry didn’t really know where he was going. He let his feet decide, veering left onto the sidewalk and settling into a steady pace. Scott fell in beside him with an amiable air, looking for all the world like a young man out for an afternoon stroll. The fact that it was well after midnight – and that the only illumination came from the moon and intermittent street lights – made Scott’s cheerful swagger seem entirely out of place.

Harry couldn’t help but laugh, and he knew that’s why Scott was doing it.

“So why are you a teenager again?” Harry asked. It was the first thing that had occurred to him upon seeing Scott’s gangly form on the lawn.

“Familiarity?” Scott hazarded, sounding like he wasn’t entirely certain why he had done it. “Maybe you wouldn’t react well to some dude standing outside your window. You know me like this.”

“I’d know you anyway.”

“I guess... It seemed right. Besides, a grown man and a teenage boy walking down the street at two in the morning would seem a lot weirder than this, yeah?”

“True enough.” A few more concrete sections passed by before Harry continued, “But why did you show up in the first place?”

“I wanted to talk. Figured if the rents caught me during the day it might cause some problems, so that left the night.”

Harry appreciated the uncommon display of tact. “Good on you. They’re having enough trouble going into hiding as it is.”

“Hiding? Oh, yes... Witness protection,” Scott said nonchalantly, though there was something about his expression that was off.

“What, you don’t think it’s a good idea?” Harry said incredulously. “If they stay here the Death Eaters will kill all of them, you know that.”

“Right!” Scott burst out with the tinge of manic excitement that was always present when he thought he had a great idea. Scott’s brain seemed to be several steps ahead of his mouth when he got like that. “And that translates into an interesting opportunity, one I personally wouldn’t be so quick to discard-”

Harry stared at him. “Opportunity?” he interrupted, aghast. Surely Scott wasn’t suggesting what Harry thought he was... “The opportunity to off my unpleasant relatives? For a spot of fun?”

“Nooooooooo...” Scott said, shaking his head vehemently. “That’s a waste! We need to get them somewhere a little more open, out in the country, with limited approaches and good sightlines, and then when the Death Eaters come for them...”
Harry reached over and gripped Scott by the arm before the Kharadjai could extrapolate. “Scott, we are not using my relatives as bait,” he said firmly.

“And deny them this one chance to be useful?”

When phrased that way it was very tempting, indeed. But Harry had principles, and putting what was left of his family – no matter how awful they were – in the line of fire went against more than one of them. “We don’t need them to set traps,” he said, appealing to Scott’s sense of strategy.

Scott sighed heavily, but he let the subject go. “All right.”

It wasn’t a conscious decision on his part, but Harry quickly became aware that his footsteps were leading him full circle – back to the playground, this time in the dark instead of the furious sun. He wasn’t trying to be symbolic. It was away from the Dursleys and as good a place as any to talk.

Scott grinned. “I know where we are.”

“Don’t you always?” Harry said sardonically.

“Yes. But right now I especially know where we are.” Scott pointed down the street, where the outline of the swings was becoming visible in the moonlight. “I’m touched, Harry. Ah, the swing set of our burgeoning first love...”

“Now you’re just making things up.”

“All right, fine, not love... But partnership! An everlasting bond of, of mutual respect and... core competencies!”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“We each have things that we’re good at. And core competencies is pointless business jargon designed to express a very simple concept in a complicated way so that it takes up more time at meetings,” Scott explained.

“I have to hand it to you, Scott,” Harry said with a small smile, “every day you teach me another useless fact.”

“And sometimes not so useless!” Scott said cheerfully by way of counterpoint, though he failed to provide any examples.

The swings were empty and they settled into them, their positioning an eerie midnight reflection of that first day in the sun. The crickets were loud across the green and the street lights shone down through an inky stillness, creating dim yellow circles against the hushed suburban backdrop. The temperature was blessedly cool, the air free from humidity.

“So what’s up?” Harry asked, raking the tip of his shoe through the gravel.

“I was wondering how the plan was coming along,” Scott said.

Harry frowned. “Coming along how? We have to find the Horcruxes. Nothing’s changed.”

“No, but I thought you might have an approach.”

“Bill’s wedding is coming up soon. I thought we’d all meet there, and... I don’t know. Look for clues, I guess. We still have that locket to open.”
Scott glanced over at Harry. “I thought you already opened it.”

“Not until we can all do it together.” Harry shifted in the swing, leaning backwards. “Have you checked up on anyone else yet? I sort of thought I’d see you sooner, actually.”

“I’ve been around,” Scott replied vaguely.

Harry rolled his eyes. “So you’ve either been spying on me, or you’ve been doing other things.”

“Dropping by every now and then to make sure you’re still intact can’t really be called *spying,*” Scott retorted. “You’re safe enough here, I’ve been more worried about Hermione.”

“Is she all right?” Harry asked with concern.

Scott made a dismissive motion. “She’s fine. But she’s out on her own in a Muggle house, not exactly a hard target. Rather than leave her ass hanging in the breeze, I’ve been watching her neighbourhood pretty closely.”

“What about Ron and Ginny?”

“Lila has been spending a lot of quality time with Mrs. Weasley. It’s all very domestic.”

“That’s good,” Harry said. It was a relief to know that the Burrow had some formidable protection close at hand. Lila was a better fit there than Scott, anyway.

Scott shrugged. “Yeah. I almost feel like I’m wasting your time, really... Nothing specific to report. I’m coasting. Waiting.”

“Me too,” Harry muttered.

Scott raised an eyebrow, affecting a contemplative look. “Shall we make some suppositions?”

“Suppose away,” Harry said graciously.

“Horcrux hunting could be difficult. And I don’t mean just finding them, we’ve always known that’s the trick. Those zombies in the cave weren’t a huge amount of trouble but I don’t think we can count on Riddle to repeat himself *ad nauseam*...”

Harry had already considered that possibility. “I’ve always known I probably won’t live through this,” he said quietly.

Scott threw up his hands and made a noise of frustration. “That’s not the point! Any given person might not live through any given day, you put your life on the line by living! You get in a car and someone might cut you out the wreckage with a hacksaw, and when you go to sleep you might never wake up. I don’t need you to grapple with your impending mortality, Harry, I need to you think about how we can stall it!”

All right, fine. Harry didn’t know exactly what this conversation was driving at, but despite the occasional fatalism he wasn’t ready to lie down and die. “We’ll have to hide while we look for these things. I’ve done a little research – well, Hermione did – and the Wizarding world is bigger than you’d think. Depending on where we have to go we can avoid anyone we know and just...”

“Be homeless? Go camping?” Scott suggested dryly.

“If you have any alternatives...” Harry trailed off, fairly certain that Scott did indeed have other ideas.
Scott stood up. Raising his arms, he jumped upward and pulled himself into a sitting position across the top bar of the swings. He glanced around the neighbourhood yet again, then gazed downwards at Harry. “The United Kingdom consists of about sixty million people spread out over 95,000 square miles. A drop in the bucket from a global perspective, and insignificant – as all things are – from a Multiversal perspective, but it’s a very large bucket. The only reason we, as a species, have any regularity of contact is because we give ourselves names and numbers and then let our friends, families and governments have them because there are benefits to being counted. This creates the illusion of a system, of control. But you know what? It’s not that you can’t disappear – it’s that most people just don’t know how.”

“But you do,” Harry guessed.

“And it’s even better this time. We’ve got a country divided into two halves, and we can slip into either at will. We can go off the grid in London. I can integrate us into the facets of the city that the Muggle police have a hard time finding people in, never mind some distant wizard aristocracy.”

Harry believed him. But he wasn’t sure that it mattered. “Yeah. But the things we’re looking for won’t be there. What are we going to do, sit around until Voldemort takes over the whole country?”

“If we have to. But that’s not the preferable approach, no.”

“Then how do we go searching for magical artefacts while we live as Muggles?”

“Well I don’t know, do I,” Scott said, rolling his eyes. “But I can move us through the Muggle world while you figure it out.”

Harry considered that. While it was true that becoming Muggles would be the best way to hide, it would be necessary to go back to the magical places of the U.K. if the Horcruxes were to be found. But Harry didn’t believe there was any foolproof way of avoiding Voldemort’s notice. He would find them eventually, at least so long as they were in the country.

“You have to know they’ll find us anyway,” he told Scott. “They’ll Imperius someone, or you know some of the lower level Death Eaters are probably Muggleborn anyway.”

“Given his own past, it does seem like Voldemort is willing to settle for the pretense of a Pureblood dominion. So yes, I know that we are likely to run into them no matter where we hide. But I’d rather meet them on our terms.”

“You would rather fight them in a Muggle setting,” Harry surmised.

“Yeah. Wouldn’t you?” Scott asked curiously.

Harry wasn’t sure. He supposed the Muggle world was preferable if only because the Death Eaters would be out of their element. However, that brought up another problem. “We can’t start a war in London, Scott. There would be too many civilians caught up in it.”

“A lot more people will die if we get caught and killed, man. And I know that sounds callous,” Scott said, holding up a hand to stop Harry’s immediate protest. “It’s the truth. I can’t change that. Besides, the Statute of Secrecy is the only thing stopping the Muggles from coming down on wizarding society like the apocalypse. Riddle may view them as an inferior species, but I can’t believe he got this far if he doesn’t understand just how precarious the position of the wizarding world is. If he strikes out at the Muggles full force, they’ll kill him and probably every other wizard they can find. He has to know that.”
That, Harry thought, was giving Voldemort more credit than he probably deserved. “And if he doesn’t?”

Scott shrugged. “Then the Muggles will burn the wizarding world to the ground. Problem solved... Well, one problem solved. Ideally we wouldn’t be looking at a second Holocaust, but the Muggles aren’t going to be happy that you could have been curing cancer and AIDS instead of hiding.”

Such events, however hypothetical, were too horrendous for Harry to contemplate. “I... would like to avoid anything like that.”

“And I think Voldemort would too. Coming up against a hit squad in a back alley, sure, I could see that, but he’s not going to tear London apart looking for us. If he ever strikes at the Muggles he’ll do it in secrecy or from a position of unassailable strength.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair, trying to come to grips with the larger picture. He was unsure if such predictions were accurate, but he had to know one thing. “And what if he finds... something, some sort of powerful relic. What if he had the sort of magic that he could take on all the Muggles?”

“You mean...” Scott said slowly, “...what if Voldemort builds an army and actually goes to war with the rest of the world?”

That was Harry’s worst fears realised in summary, for if things reached that point he doubted that either he or his friends would survive to see it. “Yeah. Worst case scenario, I guess. What happens then?”

Scott grinned, teeth flashing in the dark. “Then the game changes. The old rules no longer apply. The war machine steps up, and puts Riddle down.”

“No, that’s what I’m saying. What if all those Muggle armies weren’t enough?”

“My war machine, Harry. Me. Us. The Kharadjai. The game changes – the rules no longer apply. Voldemort steps outside of destiny. He wrecks the future. The Prophecy becomes irrelevant, you, I’m sorry to say, become irrelevant and there’s nothing left but to do things the hard way.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “You would kill him?”

“No just me. Imagine this: divisions of Kharadjai infantry dropping from the sky, the Fifth Fleet in orbit around your planet, and squads of Primares, guys and gals just like me, at the forefront.”

“You couldn’t hide that. There’s no way, everyone in the world would know you were here,” Harry protested.

“That’s right. You think it would be the first time? There are any number of places out there where they know who we are. We’ve occupied planets before, Harry, and we’ll do it again.”

Harry blew out a breath. “Then maybe you should just go ahead and save me the trouble.”

“Sorry, HP. The game hasn’t changed. The shape wants what it wants and fate must follow. Barring a massive upheaval, that’s the way it’s gotta be.” Scott reached over and patted Harry on the shoulder. “Still, it’s nice to know that there’s a backup plan, right?”

“Only in case of a third World War,” Harry muttered. “If Voldemort beats me, you probably can’t do anything about it, right.”
Scott winced. “Ah, well... Yeah. Not immediately, anyway...”

“Great.”

“But that’s not gonna happen, man! Think positive! Hey, I’m here right now, and I’m here to help. And it’s not like I’m the only one, you got all sorts of people on your side.”

Harry tried to overcome to pessimism that had been hanging over him like a cloud, but the trials ahead still seemed insurmountable. “We’ll see,” he said half-heartedly.

“You’ll feel better when we bag the first Horcrux,” Scott predicted.

“We’ll open the locket when we’re all at the Burrow,” Harry informed him. “Out in the woods, probably, I don’t want anyone else nearby.”

“Right on. And then we’ll go from there,” Scott said cheerfully.

Scott always seemed to be in his element when improvising, but Harry would have felt better with a more solid plan for the future. Still, it was a start. And he knew any real plans couldn’t take shape until Hermione had her say. No doubt during their weeks of separation she had developed a multitude of possibilities.

“It’s a start,” Harry said finally.

“And it’s also late.” Scott hopped down from the swings, crunching in the gravel. “Anything further to add before we call it a night?”

“Yeah. Don’t let Ginny leave the house,” Harry told him, only partially joking.

“I will personally chain her to the bed,” Scott promised. “But I won’t personally do anything else to her. She’ll be there when you show up.”

Harry felt horrified, then slightly aroused, then horrified at being slightly aroused. “Shut it, Scott.”

“I only try to help, and the abuse I get in return...”

“So sorry,” Harry muttered.

“Any more questions? Except I guess that was a request, or a demand... But whatever. Fuck English. And grammar and sentence structure! Things to say have more, you?”

Harry glanced over at him. “Actually, yeah. There’s something that’s been bothering me for months, but I always forget to ask you.”

“Oh?” Scott said with interest.

“You’re a Kharadjai, and your name is Kharan.” This fact had been needling Harry ever since Scott had written down the name of his race for spelling reference. “That can’t be coincidence, right? I mean, Sophie’s name isn’t like that. Sophie Strauss.”

“True, but her name *is* alliterative, which is just as good, if not better.”

“So yours really is just coincidence,” Harry surmised.

“Yes... and no.”
Harry sighed. “Stop it and just tell me.”

“They don’t have the same pronunciation, they aren’t phonetically similar. My name is care-ren, Kharadjai is kuh-rahd-jie. They both start with a hard ‘K’ sound, that’s it.”

“Yes, but they’re spelled the same.”

“And that’s the part that isn’t a coincidence,” Scott explained. “My last name is, or was, actually C-H-A-R-A-N. But I got sick of everyone pronouncing it wrong, calling me Char-ran, Charon, or Sharon, or whatever. So I just started spelling it with a K, because then there’s no mistaking it.”


Scott grinned. “And it worked, too. Nobody calls me Mr. Sharon any more.”

“Karen is also a girl’s name,” Harry said dryly.

“But at least it’s mine.”

Harry could understand that. There had been times when he’d wished for a different first name, usually when the standard jokes about where, exactly, he was hairy came up (though, come to think of it, he couldn’t recall Scott ever making a joke based on that obvious pun). But it was the name his parents gave him and he wouldn’t trade it for another.

Harry yawned widely, confirming that he’d talked enough for the night. “Let’s get going,” he told Scott. “I need to sleep at some point.”

Scott scoffed at that. “What, would the Dursleys really care if you slept all day?”

“You try sleeping all day with Dudley thumping about the house.”

“I can sleep anywhere,” Scott boasted. “Great skill to have. Took a lot of practise, but it was worth it.”

Then maybe, Harry mused as they walked back to the house, he really should stay up all night. In a matter of weeks, he didn’t know where he’d be sleeping.

Or if he’d be alive to enjoy such luxuries.
Every body persists in its state of being at rest or of moving uniformly straight forward, except insofar as it is compelled to change its state by force impressed.

— Sir Isaac Newton

Harry's fight against the dark and inexorable fate continues into the seventh year with Vis Insita.
The first few days were busy.

Hermione was too distant, Luna was close to the Weasley's but not close enough for Lila to see her often and Neville's protection was an unknown quantity. Meanwhile the Death Eaters were out there, somewhere, moving through the shadows of the wizarding world, gathering strength. They needed to be studied (and hindered).

But in order to study them, they first had to be found. And Scott just didn't have the time for that. Not yet. Of course, even if he did, he had no starting point. Diagon Alley was a bigger place than the name suggested. Knockturn was an obvious focal point for Dark activity, but perhaps too obvious. He could only go to that well so many times before it ran dry.

At the outset he busied himself with his most pressing concern. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers and strolled down from the church at the top of Hermione's street.

It was a nice neighbourhood, if unfamiliar. The neatly spaced houses lined the road with brick fronts, flowering plants and iron wrought fences. Suburbia was not his natural habitat. Scott had spent most of his life in urban centres and rural communities. The suburban landscape struck him as being an uncomfortable compromise between the two, at least for his purposes. It was not dense enough for crowd concealment and not empty enough to avoid any attention at all.

Hermione's house was a nondescript two-story home with a neat cement walk and a sort of rigid bearing, the architectural opposite of the Burrow. Scott veered towards it and crossed the empty street. Skipping over the kerb, he extracted the letter he had stolen earlier and twirled it. He ran his fingers through his hair, combing it back, and straightened his plaid long-sleeved shirt.

The front of the house appeared solid enough. There was some brick that seemed mostly ornamental, though, and a large three-paned window, which revealed a sitting room, that could be problematic. Glancing upwards, he saw that the upstairs windows were narrower. Judging by the spacing he guessed there was at least one room that had none.

He rang the doorbell, affecting a friendly, open expression and shifting his stance to look a bit uncertain.

The door opened to reveal a middle-aged man with thinning brown hair and a curious expression. “Doctor Wendell Granger?” Scott asked with an Edinburgh accent.

“Yes, can I help you?” Mr. Granger said.

Scott smiled sheepishly. “Hello, so sorry to be a bother. I'm William Granger, not a Doctor and no relation, obviously,” he said, chuckling lightly. “But, I do seem to have received something that belongs to you.” He held out the letter he had taken from the Granger's mail the previous day.

“Oh!” Mr. Granger said in surprise. He reached out and took the envelope. “This is from my office.
“There was a mix up, I suppose?”

“Yes, I found that in my letters yesterday. You weren't far away so I thought I might as well return it myself, though it did get me thinking about my own post. I can't be certain but I think I may be missing a few things – I don't suppose you've gotten anything addressed to me?”

Mr. Granger nodded. “It's possible. My wife put the post on the table yesterday and I've yet to look at it myself, I'll have to check for you. Here, step in for a moment and I'll look.”

“Oh, I don't want to intrude…”

“It's no trouble. Please, have a seat in the sitting room and I'll look through the post for you. Something might turn up.”

“Just for a moment, then.” Scott graciously accepted the offer and sat on a couch in a room with just enough décor to be tasteful. There wasn't a speck of dust on anything that he could see.

Leaning over to the right afforded him a limited view of the kitchen. There was a door there to the back garden, which he noted was solid and not glass. The windows looking out that way were too small for quick access. To his left was the staircase to the upper rooms. He saw no sign of any electronic alarm systems, and while the front door had a deadbolt the back did not.

“Here we are!” Mr. Granger said, coming back from the kitchen. “Seems they did give me one of your letters in exchange; 'To Mr. William Granger.'”

Scott stood. “Much appreciated, Doctor. Thank you for taking the time.”

“Well, hopefully it won't happen again. If I get anything else of yours I'll go down to the post office and straighten things out, make sure it gets back to you.”

“I'll do the same, sir, thank you again. You have a lovely house.”

As soon as he was shown out Scott immediately began retracing his steps back towards the church. Hermione would be returning home with her mother at some point; Scott didn't know exactly when and he didn't want to be around when it happened. His short survey of her domicile had confirmed his assumption that he would need to check on her often. She was just too vulnerable out in the Muggle suburbs.

The next evening he walked the same street, this time trying to catch a glimpse of Hermione through one of the windows. Again he thought about how inconvenient the suburbs were. He couldn't retrace his steps more than once or twice without eventually drawing some unwanted attention. So he kept walking, and when he didn't see Hermione he moved on.

It would be great if he could somehow integrate with the neighbourhood the way Lila had at the Burrow, but he just couldn't think of a way to make that happen in an acceptable time frame. He would have to keep cautiously patrolling.

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Luna's house was far more promising. It sat on a hill like some kind of medieval watchtower, a rearing edifice of black stone with sparse windows and only one entrance that Scott could see. It was a man made cliff, sheer and imposing.

Given proper supplies and an enemy that lacked artillery, Scott figured he could hold it indefinitely against a superior force. The flat expanse of grass and scrub surrounding it offered no protection. If
his position were switched, he would need mobile armour to cross the land without getting shot to pieces. One good sniper on the second floor could turn the grounds into a killing field. An infantry assault would require suppressing fire, maximum rapidity and more than a little luck.

This he could work with.

Death Eaters would be capable of entering from the roof, of course, but that could be trapped. He didn't know what kind of access the roof had; hopefully it was just a ladder. The wards surrounding the entire property seemed to be roughly the same as the ones at the Burrow. He couldn't be sure of that, not with his lack of experience and magical ability.

He was glad he had approached Luna's residence at night. Taking full stock of her home would have been exceedingly difficult during the day if anyone was inside; a glance out the window could reveal his presence. He would have had to camouflage himself and spend hours crawling around the boundaries.

A bit after ten o'clock the last window went dark in the upper floors. Scott stretched his arms and started to extract himself from the bush he had been sitting in. Halfway out he stilled. Something didn't seem right. He had a feeling, like he wasn't alone.

Instincts could be tricky. He didn't know if his vague disquiet stemmed from an overly paranoid mind, a finely-honed sense of situational awareness or something subconsciously gleaned from the shape. He knew better than to ignore it, though. He scanned his surroundings again, this time looking for thermal emissions.

On the other side of the field, past the edge of the garden fence and close to the start of the nearby woods another man was crouched in a different bush. This one was wearing the voluminous robes that marked him as a wizard. There was no way to positively identify him at such a distance, but Scott doubted he had good intentions. It had to be a Death Eater.

Troubling, to be sure. But the Death Eater was just beyond the boundary of the wards, leaving them unbroken. Scott could double back and go down to the road, swing around to where it curved and then enter the woods from behind the man. At that point Scott could do whatever he wanted with him. But killing a DE on the Lovegood property was problematic. The spy, whoever he was, had been sent there specifically. Making him disappear would only bring more attention to Luna.

A single enemy wasn't much threat against a dwelling like the one he was camped near, not in Scott's estimation. But there was no guarantee that Luna would remain there for even a majority of the time. And if they were watching her, it meant she was a possible target. Maybe they thought she was vulnerable, or maybe they understood her place in Harry's circle of friends better than most (surely they didn't understand the threat she represented?). Either way, it wasn't good. Scott needed a solution.

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A couple of days later Scott went past Harry's residence just long enough to confirm it was still impregnable. The massive enchantments over the house remained utterly meaningless to him but they were there, swirling away in an arcane tangle. They appeared as solid as ever, which was odd considering it was his understanding that they would disappear before too long. There was no weakening that he could see.

One train ride and a taxi later Scott was traversing a dirt road in the country, walking along the side under the shade of the trees and searching for the magic boundary that would mark the start of the Longbottom Estate. A cool breeze swept the dust and pollen from the air and left the smell of the
sea from where it blew in just past the forest's end. The sky was darkening when he found the wards, not from the onset of evening but rather the heavy clouds rolling overhead from the west. It would no doubt rain before too long.

He didn't go far. The protections were very old and very thorough. He moved close enough to see the manor house and went no further. There were even more barriers ahead, a multi-layered defence which tested his ability to circumvent the magic. Neville was well defended, indeed. It would take significant force just to reach the house.

And once they did the odds of success for an attacker were not improved. The manor was built of solid stone blocks with a high wall surrounding it. The thick glass windows were deep set and many were covered with storm shutters. Some of the windows on the ground floor were even barred, and the front door was a massive double-hinged construction of iron. Time had modified the layout, but it looked like Neville's house had originally been built to withstand sudden siege.

From the top of the tree he had climbed Scott could see a greenhouse shining in the vast back garden. There was no roof access at the top of the manor, and the many chimneys were too narrow to enter.

All in all, it was damn close to being a fortress. Whoever Neville's ancestors had been, they'd had enemies.

As far as Scott knew, Neville lived with only his grandmother. That left a lot of empty rooms... A lot. Which was interesting. And possibly useful. An idea was beginning to take shape. Neville had the living space, he had a daunting castle of a house, and, most importantly of all, he had the motivation.

The motivation to do exactly what Scott needed him to do.

It would take only a little encouragement; a letter would do the trick. With that in mind he left to return to his flat and get a pen and paper.

Lila was still gone when he arrived. The apartment that was theirs housed its residents only infrequently. Scott didn't know how many nights Lila just stayed at the Burrow, but he was pretty sure it was a solid number. She had been highly effective in her integration there. It was a difficult sentiment to express (nigh impossible as a teen), but Scott was, in fact, impressed. She had done good work.

He wrote two letters: one to Neville, and one to Luna. They would arrive more or less simultaneously. If Neville had trouble on his end it might help things along to have Luna appear regardless. Scott wanted her out of her house for as long as possible by whatever means necessary.

He would have Lil mail the letters for him using one of the Weasley's owls. He remembered they had considered getting an owl of their own at one point, early on in their assignment. With everything else to tend to it had never happened. Well, it wasn't the first idea to be discarded and it wouldn't be the last. Integration was a constant battle to adapt. All plans had to remain fluid.

Assuming his teen form once more he flopped down on the couch for a nap. Lila probably wouldn't have company when she returned, but it was better to be safe than seen as an adult.

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"Primare Kharan?"

Scott roused from his half-asleep slump that he had sunk into upon his chair. The Consistorium had
better ambience than a dentist's office but about the same waiting times and choice of reading material. Every major branch of the military and government was represented within its marbled halls, and they couldn't even stock the polished tables with some kind of technology periodical? He couldn't care less about the latest travails of Core World celebrities. As an Integrationist he didn't even know who most of them were.

“Sorry for the wait, sir. I'm sure you've noticed we've been busy today,” Aspen apologised.

“Yeah, that's fine,” Scott said, trying not to sound insincere. It was his own fault for not just calling in on the mission channels. He had already made a progress report that way, but when it came time to make a logistics request he had thought going directly to the Primarius offices would be the quickest way to get what he wanted. That had been a mistake.

“This way, Primare.” Aspen turned and began walking down one of the many hallways which branched off the central desk.

As a field agent, Scott had never spent much time at the Consistorium. The tall corridors of the Primarius section were lined with narrow windows, the evening Solus sun streaming through and landing upon displays of campaign awards, medals, trophies and pictures of those who had served. There were only a few uniformed people in sight; most were, like Scott himself, in civilian clothes. The real work of the Imperiarchy was not done at the Consist. It was just a front for politicians to feel comfortable in, a more polished façade where forms and calls merely passed through.

Which was what Scott had expected. He had assumed his request could be submitted at the desk, where it would then be forwarded to the ranks of the actual decision makers. He'd needed to check in on his house anyway, so the trip through the Transferral wasn't a big deal. He just hadn't counted on Colonel Diehl being present. One curt order later and Scott had been stuck waiting for the Colonel to be free.

Aspen pressed her hand to the emitter next to yet another nondescript door. “Colonel Diehl? Primare Kharan is here as ordered, sir.”

“Send him in,” came the gruff reply.

Scott stepped inside to find a very bland office containing two chairs, a desk and not much else. It was obvious that the Colonel didn't spend a lot of time there. “Sir,” he said, saluting.

Diehl returned the gesture and then nodded to the unoccupied chair. “At ease and be seated.”

After Scott did so there were a few moments of silence as Diehl brought up whatever documents were relevant. Scott successfully resisted the urge to fidget. The Colonel didn't care for impatience, even though he was often informal in other ways.

“You and your sister are currently integrated, correct?” Diehl said.

“Yes, sir. Possibly long term with multiple Primes.”

“Hm.” Diehl's eyes flitted across the projections, no doubt reading the summation of Scott's ongoing operation. “So I see. Lot of Primes to jump in on.” Diehl's focus reverted back to Scott. “You're here for requisitions?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, Kharan – so why the hell did you think the Consist would be a good place to get whatever it is you want?”
“I didn't know you would be here, sir,” Scott said dryly.

“Neither did I. But there's another round of oversight hearings circling the Council.”

Scott closed his eyes and grimaced.

“That's right. They keep asking for Integrationists to testify, so then I have to keep appearing to tell them that none of you have that kind of time to waste.”

“If they need me to testify, sir, I-”

Diehl interrupted him. “You are always unavailable due to ongoing mission involvements. Understood?”

“Completely, sir.”

“Good. Now tell me what you need so we can get you back in the field.”

“I'd like an addition to my MPC-Router to allow communications through the local phone system.”

Diehl made a few notes. “Is that all?”

“Is there any chance of having a MORC on standby, sir?”

“Maybe. I can't promise anything with the rating on your OP, but if someone else wraps things up I'll see what can be freed. You want Sectus Nanuk again?”

“Yes, sir, if possible.”

“Like I said, no promises. Anything else?”

“The 4010th Lambda Company, attached Raptor wing and a Longbow with orbital strike capacity?”

Diehl didn't even blink. “Keep dreaming.”

“Just the Router addition then, sir.”

“Approved. We'll get the information to you when it's in place. Go back to your Primes before they start to miss you, Kharan.”

Scott stood and saluted the Colonel again. “Sir.”

“Primare.”

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The addition to the router had been completed just in time: Lila had informed Scott that he needed to contact Harry for reasons that may or may not have been explained. Scott had not been paying very close attention when Lila had told him. He'd been more concerned with with finishing his nap on the couch.

It would be simple enough to find out what was going on. Privet Drive was largely empty in the morning when he strode down it towards Harry's place. He didn't see any reason to rock the boat by making his presence known. Instead he grabbed a piece of paper caught in a nearby bush and scribbled a short note down on it. He folded it, wrote Harry's name on it and pushed it through the mail slot on the front door.
There was a chance that Harry wouldn’t get it, but as Scott understood things the Dursleys had been cowed enough not to tamper with Harry’s mail. If not he could always visit.

His assumption was proved correct when he received a call the next day. He wasn't far from Hermione’s house, his usual haunt, and sat down on a bench near the church to take Harry’s call.

“‘Yello!” Scott said jauntily.

Harry's voice came through fuzzily. “Hello? Scott?”

“Oh, hey, Harry. Thought I might hear from you,” Scott said, not that there had ever been any doubt that Harry would call.

“Well, you did give me your number. How does that work, though, did you just buy a-”

Scott had to stop him there; it sounded like Harry was in a wind stream. “Uh, Harry, if we’re going to continue this conversation it would be helpful if you’d take the phone out of your ass.”

“Sorry. Sorry, I…” There was a long pause. “God, I don’t remember the last time I used a phone. I was putting it too close to my mouth. At least I’m not shouting, some wizards will do that.”

“Good thing you’re no ordinary wizard. The Chosen One doesn’t need to shout.”

Harry sighed in disgust. “Right. Like I was saying, did you buy a phone in London?”

Scott supposed he could take the time to explain, but there wasn't much reason to. He could divulge the details some other time if Harry was really interested. “This is a recent setup. Standard, but recent. This number actually just routes to my comm.”

“Okay,” Harry said, apparently not caring enough to inquire further.

Scott waited for a moment. “…So did you call for any particular reason, or is this a cry for help?

“That thing with Lila and Ginny,” Harry explained. “Ginny wants you to take me to the Burrow as soon as you can.”

Of course, it would have to be that. Even after finally entering a relationship with Harry, Ginny was a still a problem. “Why? You changing your mind already?”

“I change my mind about it every other minute,” Harry confessed. “That, and she doesn’t like me being alone out here.”

Scott didn't care how Ginny felt about it. “Tough noogies. Not much longer to go anyway, you’ll be there soon enough.”

“I figured you’d say that. That’s what I told her.”

“Well aren’t I predictable.” Scott looked up, startled, when a loud noise echoed up the street. Two cars had hit each other in a minor traffic collision. It didn't look serious, but it was as good an excuse as any to stop talking to Harry. “Hey, look at that, I gotta go. Keep it real, H.”

Scott hung up with only a brief pang of guilt. Harry might not like his current residence, but for the time being it was secure. Keeping him there was convenient. If he did leave he would have to go to the Burrow or to Neville’s, because the last thing Scott needed was his Priority One out in another unsafe location. Hermione was too vulnerable to be left for any long period, he had to stay near.
The sooner everyone could be consolidated, the better.

More days passed without incident. One evening while loitering near outside Hermione's home he saw her distinctive head of hair through her window, followed by a curious pair of eyes. He left quickly, figuring she had probably seen him. He didn't want to answer any questions, and if Mr. Granger saw him again there would be plenty.

The next week he was sitting on the same bench again. It provided a nice vantage point from which he could look down and see anyone acting suspiciously (besides himself). When his phone began to ring he answered it without taking his eyes off a man walking his dog. It was probably too effective of a Muggle disguise for any Death Eaters to pull it off, but there were no guarantees.

The number listed was for the Dursley family. “This had better be Harry Potter,” Scott said by way of greeting.

Harry sounded a bit startled. “It is me. Why would it be someone else?”

“Just getting ready to threaten someone, if need be. You never know. Somebody else could have broken into your house or stolen this number from you.”

“And you would have done what, exactly?” Harry said, amused.

That was a good question. Scott improvised. “I would have told them that I’d rip their lower intestines out through their urethra unless they let you go immediately.”

“Ugh. Can that actually be done?” Harry wondered.

Scott knew it wasn't anatomically feasible, but it was still an effective sounding threat. “No. But it would be both painful and fatal when I tried.”

Harry didn't seem to know what to say to that. “Uh, anyway… Hermione wrote to me. Were you outside of her house last Thursday?”

So that was the impetus of the call. Scott was pleased that Harry had the foresight and concern to check with him. And it was a damn sight better than another call about whatever Ginny was griping about. “Yep.”

Harry sighed with relief. “Okay, good. I was worried that if it wasn’t you, maybe someone else was looking for her.”

Scott smiled humourlessly. “They’d better not. I wouldn’t like that at all.”

“Me, neither. So everything has been okay?”

A very generalised question, but if Harry wanted a quick report then Scott was willing enough to fill him in. “Ron and Ginny are safe in the Burrow, Lila is still spending a lot of time there. Most of her time, actually. Hermione has been fine at her house, you’ve been okay at yours so far. Neville is holed up in his not-so-humble abode, and there’s so much magic around there I can’t get too close to it, I’m worried I might break something. Luna… Luna is okay for now. I caught a Death Eater sniffing around her place.”

“What?!” Harry yelped. “Already? Why her, she can’t possibly be considered such a threat-”

Scott broke in. “Relax, I took care of it.”
“You can’t be everywhere at once. Why don’t you let me go and stay with her for a while, just until we can all get together?” Harry asked.

“No. You’re staying right where you are.”

Harry didn’t like that answer. “Luna is in danger, I can’t just sit here on my arse!”

“You can and you will,” Scott stated, unmoved. “I told you, I took care of it.”

“ Took care of it how?”

Scott smiled again; Harry would appreciate the underhanded solution. “I told Neville about it.”

“You…” Harry trailed off, considering that. “Ah. I see. Sometimes I forget how sneaky you are.”

“No, you don’t. Luna is now enjoying an indefinite stay in Neville’s hospitality.”

“I’m surprised he could convince his grandmum.”

“I don’t know if he bothered to ask.” Scott watched as the man with the dog moved on to another street. “So, is there anything else, or were you just checking in?”

“I—er—might have told Ron about me and Ginny,” Harry said sheepishly. “With a letter.”

Yes, Scott had already been made aware of that blunder, courtesy of Lila. “I know. Lila is currently having a high old time watching the two of them quietly seethe at each other.”

Harry sounded nervous when he said, “He hasn’t written back to me.”

Scott didn’t bother to be reassuring. “Probably saving his fingers for punching.”

“…Er—about that. Hermione thought it might be best if you talked to him.”

Scott had to laugh. “Hah! Yeah, I bet she did.”

“Would you?” Harry pleaded. “I think he’ll listen to you if you explain everything. Tell him what you told me.”

“And save you from being assaulted?” Scott scoffed.

“Come on. You wouldn’t want your Priority One to take a beating, would you?”

Scott chuckled in appreciation of having his own tenets thrown back at him. Harry could be quite clever at times. “You picked that up quick. I’ll make a Primare out of you yet!”

“So that’s a yes?”

Scott wasn’t capitulating that easily. “That’s a maybe. I’ll look into it. Talk to you later.”

“All right. Later, then.”

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The front garden at the Burrow was in wonderful full bloom, spots of brightest colour spreading against the endless canvas of gently rustling green. The pond sparkled in the midday sun and the rush of the wind, like the tide, ebbed and then returned once again in a whispering botanical cacophony. Scott leaned against the tree he had chosen to serve as his back support and stretched
his legs out further, enjoying the grass tickling his bare feet. It was tempting to just let the wind and water lull him into an afternoon nap. Unfortunately, he was waiting for Lila to send Ron out.

He'd given the matter an appropriate amount of thought and reached the conclusion that Ron should not be given the opportunity to be obstructive. The balance was precarious enough without an overprotective older brother interceding where he wasn't needed. Ginny was coming along with the rest of them, Scott had seen to that, and the sooner Ron came to terms with that fact the easier it would be for everyone involved. Scott had spent too much time breaking down Harry's reticence to allow Ron to do his own damage.

Ron strode across the lawn towards Scott with a wary expression. He stopped a few feet away. “What is it?”

“What's what?” Scott said, in no hurry to get to the point.

“Whatever it is Lila says you needed to see me about. And speaking of her, is she leaving with you? I can't say I ever wanted a big sister.”

“Yeah, me neither. But it's just a temporary change of pace.”

“Is this about Ginny? Because you can fucking sod off if it is.”

Scott lazily turned a half-lidded eye in Ron's direction. “You're opposed to her coming with us?”

“Yes I'm bloody well opposed!” Ron burst out. “You're completely mental, you and Harry!”

“I'd imagine you have your reasons. But to be honest, I don't really care what they are.”

“Right back at you, wanker. I reckon Harry just wants someone to snog while we're sussing out Horcruxes but who cares what you want. You probably think taking her along would be good for a laugh.”

“It might be. More importantly, she's a Prime, like you.”

That brought Ron up short, but he quickly recovered. “So are Neville and Luna, and I don't see you bringing them along.”

“Did I tell you that? I don't remember telling you they were Primes. Regardless, there are tiers of Primes. Ginny is the same Priority as you. That wasn't always the case, but things have changed. Your expectations must change with them.”

“So no matter what I do, you're bringing her with. Is that what you're telling me?” Ron said angrily.

“No. I'm telling you that no matter what you do, the universe is bringing her with. One way or the other.” Scott sat up and looked directly at Ron. “She can get dragged along with us, where we can protect her... Or she can get dragged in some other way, without our interference. You haven't stated a preference, but I chose for you. Deal with it.”

Ron stared at him.

Scott sighed. “Your entire family is inextricable in one way or the other. I know you're afraid for them, but that's reasonable because you should be. Most of them will be kept as safe as we can make them. We can't do the same for Ginny now any more than we can for you. Sorry.”

Ron pointed a furious finger at him. “No you're not, don't tell me you're fucking sorry when you're
enjoying this, you twat, it's what you wanted all along.”

“I find it interesting that you didn't object to Hermione's presence on our little scavenger hunt,” Scott mused.

“You find that interesting, do you? Me and Hermione knew this was coming for a long time, and Ginny's got no part in it.”

“We all have a part in it.”

“Take that shite to Trelawney. She might care about whatever future you think you can see.”

Scott sighed again. “I can't see it. We are afforded glimpses of the path but the destination doesn't exist until we arrive.”

Ron's jaw clenched with frustration. “Sure, yeah, very deep. You're completely mental.”

“Look...” Scott pushed himself up onto his feet. “I've got shit to do. Ginny is coming with us, and the fact that you don't like it is irrelevant. She's too close to the UO at this point and even if I wanted to separate her, I couldn't. She's on the team.”

“Why?” Ron asked plaintively, revealing the fear behind his recalcitrance.

“Harry needs you, and he needs Hermione, but he also needs Ginny. That need used to take a different form, but now... Ginny is one of you, in a way she wasn't before. Closer to the centre. Some of that was my doing; I admit it, and I don't apologise. I would rather have her close at hand, where I can see her and she can support Harry.”

Ron was silent, his face a study in emotional conflict. It was clear that he felt at least marginally the same way, but his horror at having his little (and only) sister dragged into the middle of a burgeoning war was an upsetting prospect. Scott wanted to reiterate his previous point that it was out of Ron's hands, but reminding Ron of his powerlessness wouldn't be the right approach for his personality. Scott needed to focus on the safety aspect of the situation.

“At least this way we can keep her safe,” he said. “We need to remain consolidated. You know that Riddle isn't going to be ignoring everyone but us. You've read about it, you've seen it. His war is against your entire society, not only Harry. Ginny was already a target; she's a Weasley. Getting into a relationship with Harry was just one more reason.”

“You-Know-Who doesn't need a reason to begin with,” Ron muttered.

“Uh huh.”

“Brilliant. That's... complete bollocks, and you're an arsehole.”

Scott closed his eyes again. “It's nice out and I'm too damn relaxed to hit you. Maybe later.”

“Whatever,” Ron muttered, and stomped back towards the Burrow.

His task nominally completed, Scott lapsed back into a doze. He wanted to enjoy the pond before returning his Hermione-stalking bench.

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“You might be sitting in the wet spot.”
“What?” Scott shifted a little bit and glanced down at the couch, but he had no idea what Lila was
talking about. “What did you spill? Fuck, I'm wearing khakis!”

Lila looked affronted. “I didn't spill anything. You're the one that spills things.”

“Which I haven't. Yet.”

“That's where Harry sat when I brought him over here.”

“And what did he spill?”

“I don't know if 'spill' is the right word. Maybe 'leak'. ”

“He was 'leaking'... Like, blood? You're weirding me out. I should be notified if there were injuries
involved.”

“Well, he was sitting there by himself. And then Ginny climbed on top of him. I don't know how
long that went on, exactly, but they were about an inch from frottage when I came out.”

“Oh, that's great, that's...” Scott immediately stood and walked away from the couch, holding
himself stiffly.

“Don't be a baby. I'm much more concerned about the upholstery than cooties.”

“I don't see why we can't be concerned for both, those don't seem mutually exclusive—”

“And anyway, I interrupted before they got any further.”

“Wow, way to cock block.”

“So now you want Harry leaking on the couch? And Ginny, too, if he did his job right?”

“No, no. Never mind.”

Lila shrugged. “I thought they needed a moment alone. I just made sure they knew they weren't
completely alone.”

“I'm going to send him a strongly worded letter,” Scott declared.

“That'll teach him to be in love,” Lila said dryly.

“We can only hope.”

Lila's expression turned severe. “Scott, don't discourage that boy. He's hesitant enough. Have you
conveniently forgotten all the work it took to get him with Ginny in the first place?”

“Do you think 'fuck your balls' should be italicised? Or capitalised?” Scott asked, scribbling on the
back of an envelope he had found.

“Are you starting a new sentence?”

“Oh, I'm using it, like, 'sincerely'. ”

“Then it should be capitalised.”

“Right, right.”
Lila set down her sandwich and glared at him. “Did you hear anything I said before you asked me for grammar advice?”

“Uh, that I should discourage that boy because he's not hesitant enough and needs to conveniently work harder to get with Ginny.”

“I wish you were as funny as you think you are, I really do. You could have become a comedian instead of ruining everyone else's lives.”

“Yeah, there's a pretty slim margin for success in that business. But just think of how many less times I'd get shot!” Scott dropped his pen and pocketed the envelope. “Okay, I'm going to go give this to Harry and get back to Hermione's house. She's not going to stalk herself.”

“You might want to age up first,” Lila called after him as he made for the door.

“Damn it.” Scott spun on his heel and marched back into his bedroom. “I forget sometimes.” It was one of the hazards of switching so often.

“You need to stop changing age so much. They say it can cause memory loss, you know,” Lila cautioned.

“Ehhhh that's never been proven...” Scott said, but he did privately acknowledge the point. There were a fair amount of studies and circumstantial evidence which pointed to frequent age regression causing memory loss. He couldn't remember it ever happening to him, though...

After dropping the note off at Harry's place he returned to Hermione's area, where his bench awaited. The separation of early summer was coming to a close. It would be the wedding which marked the final days of scattered Primes, and not the resumption of classes.

Scott had not expected that when he had first arrived. His integration had proceeded under the high probability of a second year at Hogwarts. It had only been recently when that no longer seemed possible. The direction of events had changed. The mission, however, had not. He had swiftly adapted to the necessity of Horcrux hunting because adaptation was a core tenet of his training and technique; even so, it all came down to the fact that it didn't really matter what Scott was doing so long as it was what Harry needed to be done. If Harry's life had been completely different, and he had been another direction-less young male renting a flat with a part-time job and a little help from the dole, playing video games all night and pub crawling on the weekends then that's what Scott would be doing, too.

His Primes always seemed willing to assume that Scott's capacity for violence was why he had been chosen, and it was a belief he had never discouraged (and even occasionally furthered). But he was far from the only suitable candidate. He had been available. And while violence was now inevitable he had spent months reading books, attending classes and taking exams. Integration was not the art of murder through subterfuge; that was assassination. Integration was exactly what it said on the package, the art of integrating. To become a part of a person's life until the seams were no longer visible from the outside.

He wished he could have helped Harry sooner. Ageing down became more difficult with every increment, but it wasn't impossible. Scott would have loved to enter Hogwarts at the first year. He would have truly become part of the scenery at the school, never the new kid, even his accent unremarkable by mid-term. He wasn't stupid enough to believe he could have prevented Riddle's return, but there were other things he might have altered. Short of a CLR-induced replay, he'd never find out.
He wanted more time. He hadn't needed it – any field agent worth a shit knew how to do what they could with what they were given – but he did want it. Some things just could not be rushed.

Of course, now here he was with time on his hands and he was wasting it in pointless rumination. He stood up from the bench decisively and began walking down the hill. Hermione's safety was paramount. The quiet of suburbia meant nothing. The enemy lived amongst their victims; any street could be a battleground. The front lines were defined by people, not places. All these days of blue skies and gentle breeze were just the calm before a different kind of storm.

Scott had a job to do, rain or shine.

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This chapter was added as a bonus to note the posting of the revised version of That Terrifying Momentum.

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