The Sum of Their Parts

by holdmybeer

Summary

For Teddy Lupin, Harry Potter would become a Dark Lord. For Teddy Lupin, Harry Potter would take down the Ministry or die trying. He should have known that Hermione and Ron wouldn't let him do it alone.

Notes

Disclaimer: Anything and everything recognisable belong to their respective owners. That would be not me.

Author's notes: No bashing, and no obvious pairings beyond a few background references to established stuff. Canon deviates from the end of the last book, so non-epilogue compliant. I've tried to cross reference as much as possible with the Harry Potter Lexicon but kept a few fanon bits, mainly the idea of wards and a couple of spells. There are a few spells I made up myself as well, along with several birth dates not given in canon. If I've messed up somewhere, I apologise in advance. The story has also not been Brit-picked. There are a few OC background characters to flesh out the wizarding world, but no one that will show up all that often. I've followed the Pottermore canon that James Potter's parents were Fleamont and Euphemia but haven't kept up with the rest of the canon there. As in canon, the story is written in third person limited and purely Harry's POV (well, except for the epilogue). This
includes the occasional cluelessness and wrong conclusions.

The story is finished and clocks in at around 133k words. It will be posted on Fanfiction.net and AO3 (both under this username) with a chapter every other day of 10-20k until I run out of story. So if you want to wait for the complete thing to be posted (as you are quite welcome to), that should be in about two and a half weeks.

The rating is for mature topics (e.g. murder and references to Death Eater crimes, among others rape) but not graphic violence or sex. Harry is a Dark Lord in name more than actions, at least to start out with, but he does stir up a hornet's nest and has to deal with the consequences.

There are a few – very few – quotes from canon. Mainly bits of Voldemort's dialogue. When it shows up, it's mostly part of the italics, and should be fairly clear from context.

On a final note, I deliberately didn't write out Harry's Unbreakable Vow. My legalese isn't quite up to par for that.
Harry could pinpoint the exact moment the Ministry went too far.

He could live with the harassment and the not-too-quiet expectations that he would be a Ministry puppet or a living piece of Auror propaganda. He could live with the barely hidden demands that he and Ron and Hermione return to Hogwarts for a proper seventh year and show everyone that all was peaceful and prosperous again. He could even live with the media following him, with the fans and the enemies, and the people demanding why he didn't end it faster, end it sooner, end it before their loved ones died, or their businesses burned down, or someone put them under the Cruciatus, or whatever made them decide that sucking up to Voldemort wasn't in their best interest after all.

The moment the Ministry turned its attention to the werewolves and the vampires and the giants – because they were all Dark and Voldemort supporters, obviously – Harry knew that they couldn't be allowed to continue.

Harry didn't know if Teddy Lupin was a werewolf, and he didn't give a damn. Remus Lupin had his flaws but he was a good man, and Harry would do anything in his now considerable power to keep the last piece of his family safe.

The Ministry had to be stopped. Not even The-Man-Who-Won had the power to do that, but Harry had never allowed a minor thing like that to get in his way.

It was that early September morning in Grimmauld Place, when Harry quietly got up, put aside the offending issue of the *Daily Prophet*, and left the kitchen to blast a dozen conjured statues to pieces, that he realised that Voldemort had won after all.

Harry Potter couldn't change the wizarding world. Dumbledore couldn't change the Wizarding World. Even Lucius bloody Malfoy at his political prime could barely keep the Minister and the Wizengamot from doing something idiotic the moment he turned his back. Voldemort managed to take over due to sheer bloody incompetence and cowardice on the part of his opponents, and not because of anything Malfoy had done.

*There is no good and evil, there is only power and those too weak to seek it.*

There was no fragment of Voldemort now to offer him his parents back. There didn't have to be. Harry had a godson to protect, and he had seen too many good people die to allow this kind of racist idiocy to pass.

The greatest factor for change in the British wizarding world in thirty years had been a Dark Lord.

The greatest factor for change in the European wizarding world in sixty years had been a Dark Lord, too.

Bad changes, sure, but they had been changes, which was more than he had seen anyone else manage.


Voldemort. Grindelwald.

If it would keep Teddy Lupin safe, then Harry would gladly add Potter to the list.
Hermione knew the moment she saw him. After their year on the run together, he didn't think he would ever really be able to keep a secret from her again, she knew him too well for that.

She had only just stepped into the drawing room in Grimmauld Place, Ron behind her, when she frowned in that uniquely Hermione way and then sighed. It wasn't the destroyed statues, he already vanished those again, but he wouldn't put it above her to somehow know about those, too.

The privacy wards that flowed from her wand were second nature to all of them these days, and Ron didn't even blink. Another year at the most and Hermione would be able to cast them wordlessly, just like Harry had the heavy-duty silencing ward on Walburga Black's painting down to an art.

"The Prophet?" she asked.

"The Prophet, the Wizengamot, really, the entire British wizarding world," Harry replied with a shrug. "Tea? I just finished a pot."

Hermione frowned again but allowed him to change the subject. "Yes, please. Don't think you're getting out of an explanation, though."

"Never," Harry agreed fondly. A well-practised spell and flick of his wand sent the pot, cups, and plates along with a pack of biscuits bobbing through the air in a parade from the kitchens below, up the stairs and to the small table. It still felt like an indulgence, to be able to use magic openly and for something so silly. "Ron?"

"Like you wouldn't believe." Ron settled gracelessly in the old couch with the casualness of someone who had claimed the spot countless times before. "I've been helping dad with the Burrow all morning. Mum's ..."

He trailed off. None of them needed it spelled out. Molly Weasley had not taken the death of a son well, and George had all but retreated from the rest of the world.

"If I can help ..." Harry offered quietly.

Ron shook his head. "I wish." He picked a cup from the bobbing line and just looked at it for a moment. "It's nice to have this place. I've still got Doxy bites from the box of tapestries in the attics but it's somewhere ... not home, y'know? I don't have to worry about staying something stupid here. Reckon it'll get better at home in time, but ..."

Harry probably didn't understand as well as he should, but he could still empathise.

"You've got a place here, mate. As often and as long as you want to stay. I still haven't got used to the silence when I'm alone." He glanced at Hermione. "That goes for both of you. If the Burrow ever gets too much."

Ron gave him a tired smile. Hermione reached over and gave his hand a squeeze in silent gratitude.

Comfortable silence settled. Harry picked the teapot and a cup from the bobbing line of kitchenware and proceeded to pour tea for Hermione. Ron picked a plate and the biscuits, and the next minutes were filled with the thin sound of porcelain against porcelain, tea being poured, and the soft tear of the paper that wrapped the biscuits.

Harry considered it a ritual by now. He had the timing down well enough that he'd usually at least put the water on by the time his friends appeared from the Burrow.

Both of them looked as tired as Harry felt these days. All the Weasleys were dealing with the loss of
Fred, and while Hermione had chosen to leave her parents in Australia, they both knew the decision still kept her up some nights.

_They're happy_, she had said when she came back as she had left - alone. _They never were before. I can't - I'm a Witch now. They were never comfortable with me. I can't take that happiness away from them again._

And maybe she couldn't, maybe it was the right choice, but her weariness was still plain, and Harry couldn't remember the last time any of them were truly happy.

Neville was at Hogwarts now, with the castle mostly restored and ready for students. So was Ginny, and Luna, and most of the others. Harry hoped they were coping better than he was.

The silence stretched on.

Finally Hermione put her cup down.

“_You're about to do something incredibly reckless,” _she told him bluntly. “I know that expression. Talk.”

“The only real source of change in the wizarding world the last century has been two Dark Lords. Bad changes,” Harry added before Hermione could, “but changes.”

“Horrible changes, Harry!” Hermione snapped. “Grindelwald was directly involved in World War Two! Voldemort would have continued where he left off – he had already started on the extermination camps!”

Harry took a slow breath. “I know. Believe me, I know. They were the Darkest, vilest bastards in centuries, but not all Dark Lords were. The Ministry routinely labels anyone that goes against them as a Dark. History is written by the victors. Herwald the Treacherous was a Muggle-born Dark Lord claimed to have brought the knowledge of Inferius-creation to Britain, but the Black library has books fifty years older than him that mention the process in disgusting detail. His cause was equal rights for Muggle-borns. That's it. He failed, he was tried and executed for high treason, and Muggle-born rights were set back a century.”

“You'd think 'Dark Lord' would have been enough without the whole high treason business,” Ron muttered. “Not much Dark Lord about fighting for Muggle-born rights, though, is there?”

Hermione looked a little pale. “The traditional punishment for a male convicted of high treason was to have him hung, drawn, and quartered. 'Dark Lord' meant they could strip him of his magic first. That's it. He failed, he was tried and executed for high treason, and Muggle-born rights were set back a century.”

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Hermione looked a little pale. “The traditional punishment for a male convicted of high treason was to have him hung, drawn, and quartered. 'Dark Lord' meant they could strip him of his magic first. There were ... illustrations. I read that book, too, Harry.”

Ron looked a little sick. Harry didn't blame him.

Hermione squared her shoulders and gave Harry a sharp look. “Most of them were evil. They are called Dark Lords for a reason.”

“But not all,” Harry argued. “If he'd succeeded, we'd probably have known him as a hero on par with Dumbledore. He failed and history was written by someone else. If Voldemort had won, he would have made Dumbledore out to be the bad guy – oh, sure, probably couldn't get away with calling him a Dark Lord, but he would definitely have been made an enemy of all of magic in every history book out there. Working against the poor, innocent, righteous pure-bloods, encouraging common mudbloods to steal magic from their betters by offering them an education -”

“That's not what happened!” Hermione hissed.
“Who'd remember after thirty years of Voldemort's indoctrination?” Harry snapped right back. “That's what Malfoy and whatever Death Eater headmaster Hogwarts got would have made it out to be, and you know it.”

Hermione's eyes narrowed to a vicious glare. “So now Grindelwald is a poor, misunderstood victim of political propaganda?”

“No. Grindelwald was a would-be dictator with delusions of world domination, but if that's what it takes to keep Teddy safe, then the wizarding world bloody well had it coming.”

“You can't just take over the wizarding world!”

“Well, I damn well can't let them keep going this way! Look at the bloody werewolf bill. So what if we manage to earn an exemption for Teddy? Who will they target next? Hagrid for being a half-giant? Fleur for being part-Veela? Oh, I know, Professor Flitwick for having a goblin as a great-great-grandfather!”

“And what will happen when the wizarding world objects? Will you threaten the Prophet and the Quibbler? Will you hunt down the dissidents to change their minds? Who will stop you from turning into another Tom Riddle?”

Ron, who had barely managed to keep up with their fragmented argument, got in a, “Bloody hell!” and it was testament to Hermione's state of mind that she didn't scold him.

Under the eyes of his two best friends, Harry felt his anger fade as quickly as it arrived. “The only two people who've been there through everything,” he said softly.

The silence was heavy and thick with tension. Neither Harry nor Ron dared to speak until Hermione's furious stance eased slightly.

“And will you listen?”

She was not convinced, but she was willing to hear him out. Harry knew that expression, too. It was a legitimate concern. Tom Riddle was utterly insane in the end, and Grindelwald helped trigger a World War, but both of them at some point probably believed they did the right thing. Dark magic was addictive, and power even worse.

“I'll make an Unbreakable Vow. I'll swear to stop the moment you say I've crossed the line.”

Hermione went utterly still for a moment. Ron only stared wide-eyed at the both of them as the fragmented argument turned deadly serious, but Harry only had eyes for Hermione's reaction. She was the one he needed to convince, she was the one who would see him succeed or fail before ever trying, and if a Vow was what it took to get her on board with the plan, then he would offer it gladly.

“It would take a while to write,” She finally said. It wasn't quite acceptance yet but willingness to consider.

“At least four feet of parchment, probably, to cover all the loopholes,” Harry agreed with a small, wry smile.

“I will need the Black library.”

“Anything,” Harry promised.

“Hermione?” Ron frowned, and Hermione sighed, a little tired but mostly resigned.
“Apparently we're making a Dark Lord.”

Ron was not convinced. Hermione, despite her agreement, was still frowning, too. Harry had expected it. They both also knew from experience that Harry was stubborn as a mule and near impossible to dissuade from whatever course of action he had decided upon. It was, he knew with a heavy sense of guilt, just a matter of wearing them down. They would follow him, like it had always been with the three of them, through arguments and anger and all, and one day it would probably get them killed.

His idea was stupid, dangerous, and likely to get them into a ton of trouble at best and dead at worst, but how was that any different from the rest of what they had done since they started Hogwarts?

Hermione had not appreciated that argument.

“In Hogwarts, we didn't have a choice,” she argued. “We were fighting against Voldemort!”

“And now we're fighting against the kind of society that created Voldemort in the first place,” Harry agreed. “Tell me you're happy with how the Death Eater trials have gone. Tell me it looks like they won't be making the same mistakes all over again.”

Hermione didn't answer. Ron just sighed.

“Dad says they can't go after everyone. It would gut the Ministry. There were a lot of people that weren't Death Eaters but just went along with it to keep their jobs or protect their families.” He sounded angry and bitter, nothing like the Ron Harry had known for seven years, but they all understood. “We fought and bled and died, just so they can keep their heads down for a few months and continue like nothing changed, just like they would have done if Voldemort had won. Bloody Slytherins.”

“Slytherin had ambition,” Harry disagreed. “They're like Wormtail. Spineless cowards that flock to the biggest bully on the playground and hope for protection, and never mind they have to kiss the robe of a madman or kill a few Muggle-born along the way.”

“You spoke up for Narcissa Malfoy,” Hermione said quietly. “And, however reluctantly, for Draco and Lucius as well.”

Harry was silent for a moment. “I repaid my life debt.” It wasn't quite agreement. It wasn't quite disagreement, either. “She lied to Voldemort for me. She did it in a desire to keep her son safe, but she still lied to Voldemort and saved my life when she did. The Horcrux was gone. I wouldn't have survived another Killing Curse.”

“At least it cost Malfoy a lot of gold,” Ron muttered.

Harry grimaced. “They will have it back again soon, even with the fines. Might slow them down for a while, though.”

“Bloody hell.”

“Ron!”

“It's true!” Ron got up to pace, all anger and restless energy. “They weren't willing to believe the Imperius-excuse twice, but Malfoy still managed to get out of it because he made up some sap about family and Harry was forced to back him up, and then he threw gold at the Wizengamot until they agreed. A lot of Death Eaters managed to escape completely, and we don't even know who half of
Voldemort's forces were. Most of them probably weren't even Marked!

A year ago, Hermione would have reminded them that it was better than innocents being sent to Azkaban, would have brought up painful memories of Sirius, and they would have ended up screaming at each other.

These days they knew better, all of them. They knew the topics to avoid, knew when it wasn't worth it, and most importantly, perhaps, they all knew that the others knew it, too.

"Lucius Malfoy tried to kill us, all of us, at some point or another. Ginny and me in our second year, all of us when we broke into the Ministry, and that's not even starting on the actual war. And he's going to walk free and keep his head down for a few months, and then it's going to start all over again. Just because the wizarding world wants it over with and doesn't want to tear up old wounds.” If Harry sounded just a bit bitter, he personally felt he had plenty of reasons to. “Unfortunately he's too smart to mess up again like this. Probably got rid of everything incriminating he had. Good luck pinning something on him in the future.’’

“Any chance the ferret owes us for saving his sorry hide from the Fiendfyre?” Ron asked.

Harry snorted. “I wish.”

“Yeah, thought so,” Ron said wistfully. “Would have been nice, though.”

Hermione just sighed and Ron and Harry looked back at her, their discussion forgotten.

“That the Death Eater trials seem unfair is not a valid reason to become a Dark Lord to fix it.”

“No,” Harry agreed. “But if it can keep us from fighting another Voldemort in fifteen years, then it's good enough for me.”

Hermione did not approve. Harry was kind of used to it by now.

“There will be no backing out,” Hermione tried again, some days later. “A Dark Lord cannot simply change his mind and decide to retire peacefully. You will always be a target.”

“I know,” Harry agreed. “But I'm also the Man-Who-Won and the Slayer of Voldemort. I'd never be allowed to retire peacefully, anyway. The Ministry wants me as a tame Auror, and any would-be Dark wizard out there will be after me to make a name for themselves.”

“There has been no Dark Lord in living memory that died of old age.”

Harry frowned. “There was ... Arsenic? That Russian one a couple of centuries ago.”

“The Dark Lord Arsenij rotted away in a prison in Russia for twenty-six years before he died,” Hermione hissed. “That was not old age!”

“Technically Grindelwald almost died of old age,” Harry pointed out. “He was, like, a hundred and fifteen.”

“And spent fifty-three of them in Nurmengard before he was killed by Voldemort, defenceless in his cell.”

“Right, that part sucked for him,” Harry agreed. “Some of them lived pretty long, though.”

“Until someone killed them!” Hermione did not seem to appreciate Harry's cavalier approach to his
future. “If it wasn't their enemies, it was their followers that betrayed them. Several of them died to
curses specifically designed to kill them, to ensure there was no known counter!”

“Voldemort should have looked into that. He didn't have much luck with the Killing Curse.”

“Harry!”

Harry sighed. “Hermione. Do you honestly think I ever had a chance of dying peacefully of old age?
Does it matter if the spell comes from the wand of an Auror or a Dark wizard?”

Hermione swallowed. “It matters to me.”

Harry felt something in his chest twist and he got out of his chair and crossed the room to kneel next
to Hermione. Her fingers entwined tightly with his the moment his hand touched hers and let him
know just how affected by the argument she was.

They simply stayed there as minutes ticked on. Then Hermione made a soft sound.

“I don't want to have to stop you.”

“I know,” Harry agreed quietly. “And you don't have to. We can find someone else to hold the Vow.
We can find another way to make a fail-safe. Whatever you want.”

“No.” Hermione took a shuddering breath. “No. I don't want to, but we have to, and if you make me
use that, we will never forgive you.”

She would never forgive herself, either, Harry knew that without it ever being said.

“I'd surrender first.”

“To a lifetime in Azkaban?” Hermione asked quietly. “To the Kiss? Or the Veil, now that they're
trying to remove the Dementors? Or just long enough to finish the job yourself?”

Harry didn't answer. He wasn't sure what the answer would actually be.

“How would you even do this?” Hermione asked, another few days later. “We are only three people,
each with six years of Hogwarts' sometimes dubious education to our name and a year of Horcrux-
hunting to supplement it. What could we possibly hope to do against the Ministry? About centuries
of institutional racism?”

“I don't know.” Harry sighed. “Learn what I can. Try to give them a voice somehow, the
werewolves and the Muggle-born and the part-humans and all. Force the Ministry to listen to them
somehow. Hunt down the remaining Death Eaters and unmarked Voldemort supporters – that would
get rid of a good deal of the worst Wizengamot members right there.”

Hermione was silent for a long time. She probably assumed he intended to hand those people over to
the Aurors. Harry was pretty sure now wasn't the right time to correct her. “And afterwards?”

“I don't know.” He leaned back in the couch and stared at the darkened wood of the ceiling above
them, old and tainted by a century or more of Dark magic. “I haven't given it much thought. I kind of
assumed I'd be dead or outed as a Dark Lord by then.”

“Harry.” His name was little more than a sigh from her lips.

“My childhood was crap,” Harry said softly, “and the wizarding world was no better. We should be
out there, celebrating and dating and being stupid, not flinch from Apparition sounds and wake up from nightmares. If this can help keep Teddy safe, then that's what I'll do.”

“It could backfire. Spectacularly,” Hermione warned.

“They're voting on the werewolf issues this month. Even if it fails they'll try again, with families like Malfoy and Parkinson and Nott on the Wizengamot, and they'll keep trying until they succeed.”

“And you believe that taking them down would solve the issue?”

“Maybe.” Harry shrugged. “Or maybe the Ministry will be too busy worrying about me to make that kind of idiocy a priority.”

Hermione didn't look particularly pleased. Harry supposed he could have found a nicer way to put it.

Hermione wasn't the only one who tried to talk him out of it. Ron did, too.

“You sure you're all you, mate?” he asked the following afternoon, when Hermione's arguments had gone nowhere. “No ...” he trailed off and made a complicated sort of hand gesture that probably referred to Voldemort and his Horcruxes.

“I'm pretty sure,” Harry agreed. “But then, if I had a bit of Voldemort still stuck in me, I probably wouldn't know it.”

Hermione shifted uneasily. “Have you tried speaking in Parseltongue since – since the Battle?”

“Once.” Harry hesitated. “Luna found a snake in the Forest and made me try. Well, suggested it. I think she was a little disappointed, honestly. I – it feels different, now. She said I don't speak it and I believe her. It used to sound like English to me. Now I know I speak English. I can't explain the difference but it's there.”

He still wasn't sure how to feel about it. Overwhelming relief, mostly, but somewhere, hidden so deep that he almost didn't acknowledge it, was a slight bit of regret, too. Death would have been worth getting rid of the piece of Voldemort's soul stuck in him – the thought of it still gave him nightmares – but the Parseltongue was ... different. He hated the wizarding world's reaction to it but he had liked talking with snakes, and he still had a soft spot for the boa constrictor he had met at the Zoo so long ago.

Something about his hesitation made Hermione frown. “Harry?”

“I miss it sometimes,” he admitted quietly. “Not the bit of Voldemort but the Parseltongue. I don't speak it anymore but I understood most of what Luna's snake was talking about. A lot of it is gone, though.”

Hermione was silent for a moment. “Professor Dumbledore understood Parseltongue,” she finally said. “He just couldn't speak it. It would make sense your knowledge of the language stayed, even if you don't possess the magic to speak it anymore.”

Harry wondered briefly what else of Voldemort's had stuck around before he violently pushed the thought aside. It wasn't something he wanted to think about, and it definitely wasn't something he wanted to bring up. The Horcrux was gone. Compared to that, very little mattered.

They met up frequently, just about every day, but they had good reasons to meet, at least. No one
questioned why the Gryffindor *Golden Trio* spent so much time together. Harry hated that name, hated every last idiot that alternately praised and cursed him – them – depending on the day of the week, but in this case it at least had a use.

Of course they spent time together. They were war heroes, veterans, and while it was odd that none of them returned to Hogwarts with the rest of their year, that was understandable, too. The Weasleys had lost one of their own, after all, and Ron was such a dutiful son to turn down his proper seventh year to help his father and his family rebuild. And Harry, faithfully restoring a piece of wizarding heritage to its former glory – the *Prophet* had run a two-page article on that on a slow news day.

Mainly he worked on Grimmauld to have something to do, something to distract himself with, but that wasn't what anyone wanted to hear.

No one had mentioned Hermione much. Apparently, not even being a war heroine could make a Muggle-born interesting enough to write about unless there were scandals involved, except for a brief mention that the three of them planned to take a few N.E.W.T.s over Christmas with the homeschooled students, and a few articles romantically linking her to Ron.

At least all their names had been spelled right. Harry considered that a small mercy.

A far greater mercy was the fact that Rita Skeeter still behaved. She toed the line but Hermione's threats of exposure still seemed to hold her back from anything too damaging. Harry held no illusions that it would last, but for now it kept her acid quill reined in.

Part of the time they spent together was spent trying to make Grimmauld inhabitable. It had taken damage during the war and they worked through it slowly, one room after the other. Kreacher might have been a help, but Kreacher had killed himself in the days following the final fall of Voldemort. Harry had found his body in front of Walburga's portrait, and good riddance to him.

Part of the time was spent on lists. Hermione might not like what Harry had planned but she had reluctantly gone along with it, and that meant her analytical mind was working hard on the problems they would face. There were lists, Harry knew, long, detailed lists under brutally efficient security measures, and those lists grew longer every day.

“You will need to learn Occlumency,” Hermione told him bluntly one quiet afternoon, after they had waged a minor war against something bad-tempered and with entirely too many teeth living in a curtain. “Short of insanity, that is the only thing that will keep this secret. The Veritaserum-antidote and Memory Charms both take too much preparation to risk, and both can be tested for.”

Memories of *lessons* with Snape, of Voldemort in his head, of nightmares and visions, and Harry nodded. “I'll find a way.” They had the whole of the Black library at their disposal. Somewhere, someone had to have written something down. If anyone needed a way to get around Veritaserum questioning, the Black family had to be it. The Blacks or the Malfoys, and Harry wasn't about to go to them for any kind of help.

Hermione hesitated. “If you do this, you will have to fight against friends one day. Sooner or later, someone will find out what you're doing and the Aurors will come after you.”

She wasn't talking about Occlumency anymore, but Harry had grown used to the sudden changes in subject and followed her easily. It wasn't the first time a discussion about something or another had derailed into yet another attempt to change his mind.

“I know.”
“Ron isn't interested in the Aurors much anymore, but he wasn't alone. Susan Bones will likely join next year. There will be others, too. Students from the DA. People we fought side by side with.”

“I know.”

Hermione pursed her lips. “And when they come after you? When their orders are to capture or kill at any cost? Will you be able to curse them back? People who stood up to Voldemort for you?”

“Probably not,” Harry admitted. “But that doesn't rule out non-lethal means. It's a pretty stupid Dark Lord that relies on the Killing Curse after it went wrong twice already.”

“Harry!”

“What do you want me to say? No, I won't have a problem cursing the hell out of the Voldemort collaborators in the Auror force. No, I won't be able to do the same to people I actually care about. No, I probably won't be able to deliberately hurt Susan or Neville or Ginny unless they threatened you or Ron.”

Hermione watched him for long seconds.

“That may get you killed one day.”

“I know.”

She sighed. “You'll make a horrible Dark Lord, Harry.”

He grinned. “I know.”

“Prat.” Hermione took a deep breath. “All right, then. Occlumency.”

“I'll find a way,” Harry repeated. “I'll figure it out.”

“We'll figure it out,” Hermione corrected softly. “We're in this together.”

Somehow he had managed to convince Hermione Granger of something. He wasn't even sure how.

In late September the proposed werewolf regulations came to vote and failed to pass. There were a lot of current and former Hogwarts students who remembered Remus as one of the only good Defence teachers they'd had and who were more than willing to help campaign against the current idiocy of the Wizengamot.

The regulations were tarred and feathered in the court of public opinion through liberal use of heartfelt letters, tear-jerker articles, and hand-picked pictures of Teddy Lupin, Son of a Werewolf, at his most adorable.

Teddy was safe – Teddy, and Bill – but Harry knew it was only a short lull in the proceedings. Eventually they would try again, with werewolves or vampires or something else entirely, and eventually they would fail to find a sufficiently beloved poster-boy to counter it with.

The Ministry was licking its wounds and would take a while before they risked it again, but Harry doubted they had more than half a year at the most. They would want to act while the memory of the war was still clear. For now the Ministry of Magic was trying to build up goodwill through whatever cheap gestures they could.

Not for the first time Harry wished the Ministry would burn to the ground, but for once he was
With the werewolf vote out of the way, Harry turned his frustration to something more productive – the continuous renovation of Grimmauld Place. For the moment it was mainly his own task, with Ron and Hermione's help, but he didn't mind. Kreacher would have helped, but as far as Harry was concerned, a bit of extra work was a small price to pay to be rid of the deranged house-elf.

The first few things on his list were already fixed, but there were months of work ahead of him still. One of the things near the top of the list was the décor. The house-elf heads, the creepy decorations that lingered everywhere, and – most importantly – the portraits.

All but one of the Black family portraits were easily removed. It only took a few hours to wrap them in some of the horrible, old curtains and move them to the attic to shout their indignity at the treatment where they wouldn't bother the living occupants. The portraits had ignored them for months on end. Harry frankly didn't care if some of the portraits were distant family if that was the sort of people they had been.

The only portrait left was Walburga Black, hidden by the tattered velvet curtains and kept quiet by the strongest *Silencio* they could manage between the three of them. Nothing the Order had done had helped. Nothing Dumbledore or Sirius had cast had done a thing to move her.

Now, armed with a detailed list of the spells used in the construction and expansion of the Burrow, they were ready to try again with significantly more violent methods.

Ron, who had helped his father with the Burrow over the summer and George with the shop in Diagon Alley, knew the spells like the back of his hand. They flew easily from his wand in bursts of violet and blue and blinding white that danced across the wall and vanished into the cracks.

“The front's not a load-bearing bit,” he finally concluded. “We've got about a yard on either side before it gets touchy. There's reinforcements behind. If we get rid of the first inch or two, that should do the trick. Bit of spare rubble from the back yard should patch it up afterwards.”

“The honour's all yours. You've got more experience with the finer points of it, mate,” Harry said. “Hermione, you want the portrait or the reinforcement spells?”

Hermione's lips pursed as she considered it. “Portrait,” she finally decided. “The reinforcement spells can be strengthened if she tries anything, and you can do that faster than I can.”

Harry nodded. “Two inches deep?” he asked.

“That should handle the Sticking Charm,” Ron agreed.

Harry focused on the wall, tried to picture to himself the layers of material, the depth of the plaster and the bricks, and when he had as clear of an impression as he could, he raised his wand.

“Contineo!”

A purple ball of light hit the wall and spread out like a cloud of fine powder, then seemed to seep through the wallpaper. Ron waited a moment before he raised his wand as well.

“Adrado!” he said sharply.

The wall around the portrait moved like small waves. They started on the outer edge of the part Ron had targeted and vanished beneath the frame. Then, with a loud crack, the plaster crumbled and the
painting fell in a cloud of debris.

“Locomotor portrait!”

Hermione caught it well before it hit the ground and for a moment it just hovered there, still covered in ageing curtains and with a thick layer of plaster and wallpaper stuck to the back. Then, almost reluctantly, it floated in front of Hermione as she led it to the backyard and out of Grimmauld Place.

Ron banished the rubble and finished the last of the spells to keep the rest of the wall in one piece until they were ready to fix it. Then Harry carefully let go of the reinforcements spells.

The wall stayed where it was supposed to. Ron took a relieved breath.

“Don't know how dad does it. Merlin, it takes enough focus out of me just to do a bit of a wall, and he put up an entire shed in a weekend.”

With one last glance at the gaping hole in the wall, the two followed Hermione outside.

They found her in the back of the small yard, wand aimed at the portrait. A moment later Harry understood why. Laying in the sunlight, the painting seemed to leech the last summer warmth from the air and cast shadows through the garden. He had never noticed it inside, with Grimmauld Place already plenty Dark and gloomy, but outside in bright sun and clear air it was obvious.

"Fiendfyre, Basilisk fang, or Killing Curse?" Harry asked, only half joking.

The three of them stared at the painting for a heartbeat longer. The shadows seemed somehow darker.

Ron swallowed. "I'll get the fang."

"I'll raise the containment wards," Hermione agreed.

They moved swiftly, with the long practice of teamwork. By the time Ron came back with one of the fangs they had managed to salvage, the wards were up and both Harry and Hermione had their wands aimed squarely at the portrait.

"What -?"

"The grass started withering," Hermione said hoarsely. "It slowed down when we raised the wards."

"You want the honour, mate?" Harry asked. "For all the blood-traitor insults?"

Ron's eyes narrowed as he started at the painting. "You sure?"

Harry nodded. "For Sirius and the insults and every last miserable moment we spent in her company. If Basilisk venom was good enough for Voldemort, she should be honoured to share the fate of a bit of his soul."

Ron gripped the fang tightly and crossed the distance to the painting. The wards shimmered when he passed and Harry saw him shudder. Something dark flickered through the sunlight but Ron had obviously seen it, too. Before Harry could shout a warning, Ron grit his teeth and rammed the fang through the painting and into the rubble behind.

The world stilled.

A deranged, female scream cut through the air, breaking through even the silencing part of the
wards. The ancient Black wards flared like Fiendfyre in Harry's mind for an excruciating second, then came down on the abomination in the painting. Ron stumbled backwards as writhing, black smoke rose into the air and imploded on itself, then turned and fled beyond the wards, wide-eyed and shaking.

"That thing was a Horcrux. She had a bloody Horcrux. We slept in the same house as a Horcrux. Everyone in the bloody Order saw this painting all the time. How did no one know?"

Hermione looked deathly pale. "Two. We slept in the same house as two Horcruxes. The locket and this painting."

"At least," Harry said quietly, wand still aimed at the smouldering remains of the painting. The Black wards still vibrated with excess energy around them, and the feeling was making Harry jittery as well. "At least two. This is the Black house. How do we know there isn't more of them?"

As one, they turned to look at Grimmauld Place, rising tall and dark and ominous.

"Bloody hell," Ron said hoarsely. "No wonder Kreacher was mad as a hatter."

And Sirius, Harry mentally added, although he would never say it out loud. Sirius had spent a long time around his mother's Horcrux and he had already been damaged by Azkaban. He had never stood a chance.

"Did the wards react?" Hermione asked with a glance at Harry.

"Not until Ron stabbed it."

Hermione bit her lower lip as she stared at the house. "So until we attacked it, the wards thought the Horcrux belonged here. We'll need to go through everything to make sure. The library alone ..."

They fell silent. Then Harry squared his shoulders. "I guess I found a new hobby."

He was regent of the House of Black and his godson was not going to go through Grimmauld Place one day and find a Horcrux. Not while Harry was alive to stop it.

Two spells and a bucket of rubble from the growing pile of junk in the yard was all it took to fix the wall. The wallpaper still had a gaping hole, but they needed to replace that, anyway. Preferably with something that didn't look like it had been bought in the nineteen-thirties.

Harry knew that Grimmauld Place would never be light and he was all right with that. A little bit less dust and depressive decorations would be a big improvement, though.

"Lunch?" Ron eventually said when it was well past noon. Even he hadn't had much appetite after the Horcrux.

Harry's stomach rumbled at the reminder, and Hermione gave them both a fondly exasperated look.

"Boys."

"Eh. I've got bread and leftovers?" Harry offered. "Butterbeer, too. I can cook something, but that'll take a while. Or we can try the Cauldron?"

"Leftovers are good," Ron decided. It remained unsaid that none of them wanted to deal with the crowds and the attention they would inevitably draw.
Harry opened the door to the kitchen, and stopped so abruptly that Ron almost walked into him.

“Oi, mate.”

“There's a door.”

“What?” Hermione pushed her way past the two of them and stopped just inside the kitchen, too, staring at the wall opposite the entrance. The wall and the dark wooden door that hadn't been there when they had gone for tea that morning.

The three of them exchanged a look, and three wands came up in perfect synchronisation. Harry and Ron kept a close eye on the door as Hermione cast every detection spell she knew of until she finally lowered her wand again.

“Nothing,” she said. “No curses that I can detect, no traps, just the echo of some spell or another that's already fading.”

“Could it have been tied to the portrait somehow?” Harry asked.

“Most likely,” Hermione agreed. “It - I don't know what spell kept it hidden, but it must have been tied to the portrait's destruction. It's too much of a coincidence.”

Ron took a step forwards.

“Ron -”

“Just a look,” Ron said. “You said the door was safe. Just going to open it, see what's there.”

Hermione didn't look happy but didn't object, and both of them kept their wands safely aimed at the door as Ron gripped the handle and it moved with a soft sound.

They paused. Then Harry and Hermione cautiously joined Ron's side as he pulled on the handle.

The door opened soundlessly. There was the top of a narrow, winding staircase but the worn steps vanished into inky darkness that swallowed the bright light from the kitchen.

The trio looked at each other, then Ron held out his wand.

"Lumos!"

The darkness pulled back sluggishly, almost as if it were alive. Harry took a cautious step forward, wand at the ready, while Hermione jammed the door thoroughly open behind them. None of them were about to trust something that had been hidden by a Horcrux.

"Harry?” she asked.

"Nothing from the wards,” Harry replied. Just the usual faint presence of old wards with the first whispers of a personality. Whatever was down there, the wards didn't consider it hostile. Then again, so far they had encountered two Horcruxes that the wards didn't consider hostile, either, so he didn't know how useful that information was. The Black wards were just a little too friendly with Dark magic to be all that helpful.

The staircase looked old but stable. The steps were wood and dark with age but they were solid and didn't creak when Harry took a careful step down.

A murmured Lumos lit up his wand as well and he continued downwards before he lost his nerve.
The sound of slightly heavier steps behind him revealed Ron was there, too, and then finally a huff from Hermione before she followed as well.

It felt reassuringly familiar, enough that Harry actually smiled.

“I thought we were done messing around in mouldy, Dark, dangerous places after Voldemort finally died.”

“Harry!” Hermione sounded a little scandalised and not entirely serious, and Ron laughed.

For a moment it felt normal again, before Voldemort, before Fred, before Cedric and Remus and Tonks. For a moment something in him eased a little.

Then their Lumos illuminated the room beneath them fully, and Harry was pulled back to the real world.

The basement was clearly magically expanded beyond reason and looked like the final resting place of a century or more worth of junk. Towering piles of old books appeared to balance through magic alone and a myriad of chests and boxes became the walls of a claustrophobic maze. The headless hide of a house-elf with greying skin was draped on the top of an antique-looking desk, while ancient jars and bottles of potion ingredients threatened to spill out of an old crate. Several of the bottles were murky brown, and one of them had what looked like finger bones peeking out of the sludge in it.

Harry kept down the bile and made a note to look up cleaning charms. Possibly get a house-elf. A house-elf sounded good right now.

The floor was bare stone. The sound of their footsteps was swallowed by the clutter, and the towering piles sent a shiver of unease down Harry's back. On the floor, dwarfed by the mess, it would be so easy to get lost, even in a relatively small room. The paths between the piles of junk were barely big enough to fit a human, and Harry suspected that only house-elves had ever actually set foot there.

There was no dust anywhere, but the the smell of stale air and old books and Merlin knew what else lingered heavily in the room as they carefully moved through it. None of them dared use the Bubble-Head Charm. If something in here was toxic after sitting around for this long, the smell might be their first and only warning.

Harry poked at a mangy-looking fur coat ... robe ... thing with his wand. A chunk of fur fell out and slid to the floor, leaving a bare patch behind. He wondered if the Black family had ever actually thrown anything out, other than disappointing family members.

"This book is from the library," Hermione said from a few stacks over. Her voice sounded as if she spoke through a blanket, like it was pressed down by the heavy sense of stale magic. "I recognise it. It was one of the books Mrs. Weasley was going to throw out. Even the damage on the back cover is the same. Kreacher must have hid it. Most of this pile has the Black coat of arms on them."

"Bloody hell! Over here!" Ron shouted from further ahead. Hermione dropped the book and was only half a step behind Harry, wands ready as they ran towards Ron's voice as far as they could through the maze of clutter.

They found him on the other side of an wall of chests, several of which had old robes spilling out from the top. For a moment Harry saw nothing but the wall in front of Ron, then he spotted what had made his friend yell for them.
At their feet, covered by a locked latch of heavy iron bars, was another staircase, as narrow and winding as the first. And, though the thick darkness beneath, the rusty chains just barely visible in the bright light of Ron's *Lumos*.

Ten minutes and a number of strong locking spells later found them in Sirius' old room with a bottle of Firewhisky and three large glasses.

Ron had gone bottoms-up on his first glass without flinching and was well into the second glass before he spoke.

"Sirius' family was insane." His fingers had stopped shaking after the first glass but he still looked rattled. "You reckon there's bodies down there?

Hermione's hands, already white from her tight grip on her glass, tightened further. "The house was empty for - for a long time. I don't think Kreacher would have fed anyone down there unless his mistress ordered it and Walburga Black never would have. If there was anyone down there it would just be skeletons by now. Mummified, maybe, if the air down there was ..." she trailed off and took a large swallow of Firewhisky. The flush from the heat of it just barely gave her pale face a bit of colour back. "Or Kreacher might have disposed of them," she added faintly.

Harry emptied his own glass before he could think too much about the images that brought up. He still shuddered when he poured another glass.

"I say we get blind drunk and deal with it later."

Two sick-sounding agreements joined his suggestion.

Harry made the Vow on Hallowe'en. It was dark and dreary outside, perfectly suited for his mood on this specific day of the year, but it felt right to make it tonight. Maybe it was asking for something to go wrong, or for the Vow to mutate in some strange, supposedly-impossible way, but Harry was determined to see it through.

On this day, the Veil between the living and the dead was at its thinnest, and Harry wanted his parents and Sirius and Remus to know. Maybe this was a stupid idea, maybe this would get him killed and his name cursed for centuries, but he wanted them to know that he had tried.

They had sneaked out of the Burrow after Molly Weasley's birthday dinner with the woman's reluctant permission. The Weasley matriarch believed that Harry wanted a little time to himself to speak with those he had lost and that Ron and Hermione were there for support. Harry did not correct the assumption.

Headmistress Minerva McGonagall had sent the students of Hogwarts home for the weekend. Few families had come through the war unscratched; even fewer did not have lost friends and companions to remember. She firmly believed that those that survived needed to face the memories together and in their own way, that was what Harry, Ron, and Hermione now did.

As Hallowe'en approached, even bright, bustling Diagon Alley seemed to fall silent. The same heavy, oppressive silence had settled over Grimmauld Place when they entered the door. The rooms seemed dark and unfamiliar and the ambient magic – already Dark on a good day – felt almost alive in every breath that Harry took.

Maybe it was an omen. Maybe it was the Black magic's way of blessing their endeavour. Harry had never been one to back down when he had committed himself to something, though, and he wasn't
about to start now.

They had long since picked the spot, and they ascended the stairs in silence. Harry knelt with Hermione on the faded, old rug in the library where they had both spent so much time and felt a strange calmness settle even as his heart raced. Ron stood above them, shoulders squared in the way that meant he wasn't happy about it but he'd go along with it, and they better be bloody sure they knew what they were doing.

Harry held out his hand and Hermione clasped it with no hesitation. Only the slight tremor in her muscles betrayed her nervousness.

“What if I got something wrong? What if -”

“You didn't,” Harry replied with quiet conviction. “Ron?”

The third of their trio touched his wand to their joined hands, and Hermione took a steadying breath. It had to be done, they all knew it. They couldn't risk another Tom Riddle, and for all that they would all argue that Harry would never become another Voldemort, he was also able to cast unfamiliar Dark spells with disturbing ease. Harry, at least, would sleep easier knowing that there was a fail-safe, should it all fall apart and he crossed that line.

They hadn't focused on specific spells or crimes to ban, both of which left too many loopholes, but on intent and – far more important – on Hermione and Ron's safety from him. Those had not been pleasant conversations but they had been necessary and they all knew it. If he went off in the deep end and managed to hide it, the worst case scenario was a second Voldemort determined to rid himself of the Vow and Hermione's influence and willing to do anything to see it done before they discovered his betrayal. Harry, who had known Voldemort's mind better than probably anyone, had gone through every suggestion Hermione had made and ruthlessly torn them apart. It was a careful balance between their protection – and anyone Harry might use against them - and Harry's own ability to defend himself if attacked.

The final Vow took up a foot and a half of parchment and took the better part of fifteen minutes to go through. They had written and rewritten it, gone through it so many times that Harry could recite it in his sleep, and Hermione did not falter as her words wove the first thread of magic around their hands.

At the end of it, their clasped hands glowed brilliantly red from the fine threads of the Vow, and Harry could feel the magic press against them.

“- answer truthfully and completely without evasion or omission should I ask it of you, through word, magic, or any other means?”

Hermione finished the last part of the Vow and Harry felt their joined magic in perfect clarity.

“I will,” he said firmly and bound the last thread.

Hermione swayed slightly from the flood of power that sunk into their hands, and Harry felt the heavy weight of the Vow tighten around his magic.

Ron helped them back to their feet, both unsteady, and for long moments they simply stood there and breathed. Slow and steady, one breath after another until the world stopped swaying and the magic settled.

His magic would never be quite the same again. He had never realised until that moment how light and carefree magic truly was, not until the Vow had settled around him like a criss-cross of thin, unbreakable chains. Never heavy enough to hamper him and never light enough to ever quite be
forgotten. He also knew that this was only true as long as he kept the Vow. Should he break it, those same chains would tighten until they killed him. If he was lucky, they would at least be quick about it.

It was a horrible burden to put on someone, especially a friend, and he would never be able to make it up to Hermione. He could only hope to make it worth it somehow.

“Thank you,” Harry breathed, and put a thousand unsaid words into that one breath. *Thank you, I love you, I won’t let you down, I swear, and, I’m so sorry.*

Hermione knew him and heard them, anyway.

“Until the end,” she said quietly. *I know,* her words agreed, *and I forgive you.*

Ginny cornered him in the Burrow the morning after Hallowe’en, shortly before she had to leave for King's Cross and Hogwarts again.

The Burrow was a loud, chaotic mess like always, even with just one child about to leave, and Ginny took the opportunity to find him alone in a room, away from all the chaos below. Harry had come to see her off but he needed to be alone sometimes, too overwhelmed to handle it all, and she knew it.

Ginny closed the door softly behind her and squared her shoulders. “Kiss me.”

Harry blinked. They had spoken very little since the Battle, both too busy with other things, and he realised with some unease that he had barely thought of her. He had broken up with her for her own good. The threat was gone now. He ... should have done something, shouldn't he?

“Kiss me,” she repeated, softer and more tired. “Please.”

“I - all right.” He crossed the small room in two steps and took a moment to admire the fiery being in front of him. Then he leaned in and kissed her.

Her lips were soft and warm, and she smelled faintly like the cinnamon from the leftover apple tarts that she had stolen a bite from earlier. There also seemed to be something missing and Ginny obviously agreed as she broke the kiss and gave him a resigned smile.

“I had to know.”

Harry felt a little like something in his chest was suddenly missing. But mostly he felt relieved.

Peace settled in the Burrow again. Diagon Alley came to life once more and normality – what passed for it now – took over.

Harry, driven by new-found determination sparked in part by the Vow, started plotting.

Dark Lords had some specific requirements to properly claim the title. Magic – powerful, skilled magic, preferably Dark, and an abundance of it – followers, and money.

Harry wasn't altogether sold on the *followers* part, and they were still trying to figure out what to do about the goblins that flat-out hated them, but magic he could do. Magic he could work on.

That was the reason why the three of them were working their way through the Black library, one book at a time. Some were easily dismissed, like the dozens upon dozens of books about pure-blood
families and genealogies and dubious wizarding history. Some, like the books on herbology and astronomy, were noted down for later use, but wouldn't be of much help in their current quest.

They were left with a pile of books that ranged from common household charms to one particularly nasty treatise on soul-enslaving curses that they had salvaged from the cellar. The books had been sorted roughly by subject but the towering stacks were still enough to make even Hermione hesitate.

The first bookcase alone had left them with a potentially-useful pile taller than Harry. Even split up into smaller stacks, it still looked intimidating. As Harry stared, one book in the charms pile yawned and caused a small book avalanche.

Hermione pursed her lips and glared at the book like it had just personally offended her. Then she looked at Harry and Ron. “This isn't working. We need a better system.” Her eyes narrowed and pinned Harry. “We need to know what we have to work with.”

Harry didn't offer his first response – which would have been ‘magic?’ - since he was pretty sure that wasn't what she was looking for. Ron was smart enough to do the same. He also seemed to have at least some inkling of what she was aiming for, because the look in his eyes went from bewildered and to the slightly distracted expression Harry was so used to seeing whenever his friend played chess.


Two pairs of eyes focused on Harry with unnerving accuracy and he felt a little like a specimen in a Potions class.

“Defence, definitely. Can't really call it 'against the Dark Arts' if we're making a Dark Lord, but definitely Defence. It's sort of a branch of Charms and Transfigurations, though, innit? I mean, Dumbledore used Transfiguration when he fought,” Ron said.

“He was a Transfiguration prodigy, though,” Hermione interjected. “And I'm sorry, Harry, but you're not.”

Harry felt he probably should object to that but it was kind of hard when it was the truth. Instead he just sighed and joined in, having figured out what Hermione was aiming for.

“Yes to Defence. No to Potions, Transfiguration, and Charms. I never took Arithmancy and Runes. I do need to learn to cast as many spells as possible wordlessly. Wandless, too, if I can manage. Mind magic – not Occlumency, but I can throw off the Imperius, and Veela magic didn't do much, either. That might count for something. The Patronus is a charm but it never felt much like one to me.” He swallowed. “Dark Arts ... I didn't have any problems with the Imperius, and the Cruciatus just needed the proper motivation. Sectumsempra worked on my first attempt. Fiendfyre takes a bit more focus but I can cast and control it pretty easily.”

Hermione's eyes narrowed dangerously. “You what? Alone?”

“If I lost control, I didn't want you two to get caught up in it,” Harry said honestly. The memories from the burning Room of Requirements were still entirely too vivid and had provided all the motivation Harry needed to do it alone.

“You could have died!”

There wasn't really anything Harry could say that wouldn't make her more angry and he wasn't going to lie and apologise.
“I know,” he agreed. “It had to be done.”

Ron had stayed quiet as Hermione had chewed him out but Harry could almost see his mind at work, examining the bits of information and trying to piece together the puzzle.

“Reckon it had to be something pretty serious to warrant Fiendfyre and we're flat out of Horcruxes,” he mused. “The Elder Wand or the Resurrection Stone? Haven't seen you use anything but your normal wand since the Elder Wand got it fixed up.”

“The Wand,” Harry said. “There's a broken replica in Dumbledore’s tomb. Elder wood is common, and there's a herd of Thestrals at Hogwarts. Thestral tail hair was easy to find. I know roughly where the Stone was lost, and that's where it'll stay.”

Ron nodded and seemed to understand. Hermione's inner conflict was plainly visible, torn between relief and loss of the chance to examine the fabled Deathly Hallows more closely.

In the end relief won out. “It's better that way,” she agreed.

“They're old, powerful items, but that's it. And at least two of them are all but guaranteed to kill their owner.” Harry hesitated. “You know the history of the Wand. The Stone ... I saw my parents, Sirius, and Remus when I walked to my death. They told me it wouldn't hurt, it would be over in a moment, I was so strong and they were so proud of me ... sure, that's what I needed to hear, but were they actually the spirits of those I knew, or illusions meant to lure me to my death?” He glanced at Ron with an apologetic look and knew there and then that his friend understood. He focused on Hermione again. “Imagine George with that Stone in his hand. Imagine hearing Fred tell him the same.”

Hermione looked a little pale. She could imagine it just as well as Harry could.

“How many knew I possessed the Stone?” Harry asked. “Us? Dumbledore? That's about it. Hagrid knows where I died. Once you know that, you can make a guess of the path I took and spend months in the Forbidden Forest casting Summoning Spells, but in the end I'm the only one who knows the location for sure. The Stone stays lost and the secret dies with me.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ron finally said and closed the matter before Hermione could argue. “Defence, mind magic, and Dark Arts, then, to begin with.”

“And power,” Hermione said softly. “Ridiculous amounts of power. Adult witches and wizards have trouble leaning the Patronus Charm, never mind a thirteen-year-old.”

“The DA learned,” Harry objected.

“They learned,” Hermione agreed. “They didn't chase off a hundred or more Dementors with it.”

“Powerful spells, then,” Ron said. “Sorry, mate, but you're kind of useless with the finicky spells.”

Harry shrugged. There wasn't much he could say to that, either.

Hermione turned back to the books. She picked up the yawning charms book and placed it back firmly on its shelf. “That should cut down on them,” she said satisfied.

There would still be a lot of books to go through and a lot of new spells to learn, but it was a start.

With the magic-issue being worked on, money was next. The goblins were still a problem they
weren't sure how to deal with. They could just walk right in but none of them would wager money that they would be walking back out again without some insurance to keep them safe. Harry had some Galleons outside of Gringotts, and they had found quite a bit more hidden away in various places in Grimmauld, proof that the Black family had been very careful about leaving little nest eggs in case of unpleasant situations. Until they figured out how to handle the goblins, however, the Potter and Black accounts were out of their reach.

Luckily there were other approaches for the moment, as Hermione had pointed out with a bit of a vicious expression.

Augustus Brookstanton was a greying wizard with a scarred wand hand and a pronounced limp. He was a pure-blood who had lost his half-blood wife in the first blood war and held a significant grudge against the Ministry for being effectively useless against Voldemort. He was also an experienced solicitor and came recommended by Andromeda Tonks. Harry had paid in advance for two hours of his time, with the understanding that a more formal arrangement could be agreed upon later, if both parties wished it.

"Mr. Potter," he spoke. "How may I be of assistance?"

His voice was dry as parchment but strong, and while the office was packed with books and documents, it was meticulously clean and well-organised. Harry had a cautiously optimistic feeling about it all.

"There are a number of fictional books that use my name and likeness," he started, quoting the specific phrasing Hermione had used. They had spent a while considering how to approach it. "None of them have my permission to do so. I want compensation and for the production and sales to cease and desist, effective immediately. I know I can't do anything about the so-called factual books and articles unless it crosses into libel, but I refuse to let the same people who spent years calling me an attention-seeking liar earn money off of my name. I am open to the idea of appropriately licensed products by people I actually approve of, but only with my prior explicit, legal permission."

Brookstanton nodded slowly. "That should be doable, Mr. Potter."

Harry hesitated and continued, dropping the Hermione-voice as he did so.

"I need to have a new fund set up - the Evans-Lupin Foundation. It will provide legal help and representation for Muggle-borns, Muggle-raised half-bloods, part-humans and non-humans with just cause and without the means to do so themselves. I want the compensation and all future profits to go that cause. I need trustworthy people to handle it, too. If you are able to recommend anyone, as well as possibly a solicitor willing to work for it, I would be grateful, sir."

Brookstanton's eyebrows arched slowly and Harry saw the first flicker of interest in his expression.

"That, too, should be doable, Mr. Potter," he said slowly, measuredly. "You will, however, be likely to face some negative repercussions once the lawsuits potentially starts building against ... certain entities."

Harry took a deep breath. "The Ministry, sir? I know. I don't care. Most of the Muggle-born and part-humans and unacceptable half-bloods that had their property claimed by the Voldemort regime still hadn't had them returned, and no one in charge seems to care. It's all 'we're working on it' and 'legal issues, you know'. The only reason their vaults aren't gone, too, is because Voldemort didn't have enough time to crush the goblins. The Ministry is too busy passing laws to keep werewolves out of jobs or arguing how much non-human blood makes someone a sub-human being to do a thing about it. This isn't what I fought for, sir. This isn't what any of us fought for. If they come after me,
so be it. I’m not leaving my friends and last bit of family behind just to see Britain fall into an abyss of racism and pure-blood politics."

The solicitor nodded slowly once more. His granite face hadn’t changed but the look in his eyes and the slight way he leaned across the desk to watch Harry belied his sudden interest.

“Then, Mr. Potter, it is most certainly doable ... and a very worthwhile endeavour.”

Relief followed the words. Harry hesitated for a moment but brought out a unsealed scroll from his robe. In for a Knut ...

“My Will. In the event of my death, half of my gold will go to my godson, with the rest split between a number of friends and family. Can you serve as witness if I sign? I can’t to go through the Ministry. They made enough of a mess of Professor Dumbledore’s will.”

“Witness and validator, Mr. Potter. It will be registered with my office, although keeping a few copies around may not be a bad idea in your case,” Brookstanton said. “Should one or two of them happen to be unfortunately ... lost if the Ministry took interest in the case.”

Right. Harry unrolled the scroll and re-read it once more. He knew the words by heart but he needed to make sure one last time that he had taken everything – everyone – into account. Then he handed it over and waited for painfully long minutes while Brookstanton read it through.

“It fulfils the legal requirements,” the solicitor finally said and put the unrolled scroll on the desk. He held out a quill. “Your signature, Mr. Potter.”

The quill felt heavy in Harry’s hand, the whole thing suddenly strangely real. His parents hadn’t had a will. He was eighteen and about to sign an incredibly dry legal document in the knowledge that the next time someone read it, he would be dead.

He signed swiftly, before the quill could grow heavier still, and pushed a small amount of magic into his name as he wrote.

Harry handed the quill to Brookstanton, who signed the will with the calm efficiency of someone well used to it.

A whispered spell later and the ink was dry. Harry rolled up the parchment and closed it with the Potter seal, then finally added another bit of magic to that. He handed over the scroll, a strange calm settling over him.

Signed, sealed, and delivered into hopefully trustworthy hands. He had done what he could.

Brookstanton accepted the scroll. It glowed muted gold once, then returned to its normal appearance. Another whispered spell, and two sealed copies rested on the desk. “Your copies, Mr. Potter. I recommend one goes to your vault and one to a trusted friend.”

Harry winced. “My vault would be a problem at the moment. We still have ... outstanding issues with the goblins.”

“Keep one with a trusted friend, then, and another somewhere safe,” Brookstanton conceded. “And do make sure you have a heavy arsenal at your disposal when you do approach the goblins, Mr. Potter. The law on its own will not be enough, should they have taken a particular disliking to you for whatever reason. The Gringotts vaults are untouchable but the owners themselves? Unfortunate accidents have happened.”
Harry sighed. “That's what I was afraid of. Can you recommend anything?”

Brookstanton hesitated. “I would suggest a competing bank, Mr. Potter, but in all truth that is well beyond my area of expertise. Gringotts has worked hard to keep the British wizarding world ignorant of the virtues of other financial institutions. To my knowledge Gringotts has the monopoly in France as well, along with a number of other European nations. The dwarves have the Northern European countries and a good part of Eastern Europe. Constantinople holds a large section of the Mediterranean. Beyond that the travel distances would start to become far more than reasonable. Be aware, also, that there are a number of lesser banks in Europe. How many of them that have the ability and willingness to cross the goblins, I am unsure of. Some of them may even choose to simply work with Gringotts for a reward instead.”

It wasn't a solution, Harry figured, but at least it was information, and he would bring that back with him.

It was mid-November by the time Harry bought a suitable house-elf. There were few of them available at the best of times and he could not bear the thought of one that reminded him of Dobby. Winky, still working in the Hogwarts kitchens, might have been an option, but she carried the same painful memories with her.

Add to that the fact that he wanted one with experience with Dark magic and the options were limited.

Then the Lestrange home was sold in late October, what with Bellatrix being dead and the two surviving Lestranges being sentenced to life in Azkaban in absentia. Their former house-elf was promptly dismissed from service by the new owners, who wanted nothing to do with a Death Eater's elf. For once the Prophet was good for something, as they carried a small article near the back detailing the work to be done on the 'horrid, Dark place' and mentioned the elf in an off-handed sentence.

Harry deliberately waited several weeks before he approached the Office of House-Elf Relocation to avoid drawing too much suspicion.

The Office was hidden away in a corner of level four of the Ministry and Harry was greeted by perpetually surprised-looking older man.

“Mr. Potter?” he greeted and shook Harry's hand enthusiastically. “Such an honour, sir! I'm Nuttley, Mr. Potter, Almerick Nuttley. What can our humble Office do for you?”

Harry, almost used to the unsettling amount of attention he still attracted, shook the man's hand. “Good to meet you, sir,” he greeted, having also learned that being polite and personable tended to get him out of the awkward situations easier. “I'm looking for a house-elf. I need to do something about the Black home before my godson can visit, and the Black house-elf died shortly after the Battle.”

Died, killed himself – minor detail when it came to Kreacher, as far as Harry was concerned. As long as he was gone, Harry was happy. “I need a good, mild, hard-working house-elf to take care of the house and my godson when he visits.”

“Good, mild, hard-working elves – we have nothing but, Mr. Potter,” the man said proudly. “We have seven to choose from at the moment.”

They arrived the moment Nuttley finished the sentence, like they had been waiting for it. They
probably had. It sounded to Harry like it was the usual way of showing them off to potential buyers.

He felt a sharp pain in his chest when he found himself facing seven pairs of enormous, hopeful eyes, and he wished he could buy them all. He wouldn't have near enough work for them, and they were expensive, but they would have a good home, at least.

Harry pushed the emotions aside, determined to see it through, and really looked at the elves beyond the desperately hopeful looks.

Four of them looked positively ancient and Harry wrote them off immediately. They would be too old to handle Teddy through his childhood, and Harry didn't want his godson to face the pain of losing a beloved house-elf as a child.

He hadn't been sure how to recognise the former Lestrange elf, but the moment he saw her, he knew. She was paler and thinner than the others and hunched over like she was trying to hide herself. She was also missing most of her left ear and Harry didn't for a moment believe that had been an accident. Not with people like Bellatrix Lestrange around.

Harry crouched carefully in front of her and made sure not to make any sudden moves.

"Who is she?" he asked softly, glancing at Nuttley.

The man cleared his throat. "That's Mute, Mr. Potter. She's, ah, the former Lestrange elf. No name, they never cared, so we gave her one, we did. A timid little thing but I assure you, she's a hard worker. She just – she can't speak, you see. They removed her tongue."

Merlin. Harry looked at her again, small and frightened and looking so lost and hopeless, and his heart broke for her. He had planned to buy the former Lestrange elf pretty much no matter what, short of another Kreacher, but there was no way he would let her stay in Ministry hands now.

"Has anyone else shown interest in her?" Harry asked quietly.

Nuttley shook his head. "Not when they find out about her tongue, sir. A house-elf that can't speak unnerves people. Add that she was the Lestrange elf and ... well. She could be here for a while."

The pain in Harry's chest tightened again when he saw the small elf flinch at the words. He was not leaving her there. "I'll take her."

Wide eyes, hopeful and terrified, looked up at him, and Harry had to swallow a lump in his throat. "I have an old home," he said. "Lots of maintenance. I hate cooking, too, and I have a godson that's going to be walking soon and leave a mess everywhere. Would you like to be my house-elf?"

The large head nodded frantically, and that was the end of it.

Harry Potter was the new owner of a house-elf that was probably as damaged as he himself was, and he was just fine with that.

His first point of order with his new elf – beyond thorough instructions to never share what she learned with anyone, in any way, and making sure she understood she was never to punish or harm herself – was to do something about the basement.

They had worked a little on it, the three of them. The dungeons did not hide the remnants of previous occupants, but the stone floor and walls of four cramped cells were stained suspicious brown in places, and no amount of lighting spells seemed able to fully chase the dark away from the corners.
There were dozens of trunks filled with old clothes. Most were robes and shoes, along with a number of dresses, and most of it was so hideously out of date it made Ron's robe for the Yule Ball look positively fashionable in comparison.

The potion ingredients had looked even worse up close and even Hermione had agreed to leave it to a house-elf to sort through, as it presumably would have a much better idea of how to go about it. Harry certainly wasn't going anywhere near ... whatever was floating around in some of those bottles under long-expired preservation spells.

The house-elf hide had been burned. A stuffed crow that had looked entirely too lifelike for anyone's comfort had joined it, and not a moment too soon. It had come alive with an otherworldly screech when it caught fire and been torn to pieces a moment later by one unified *Reducto* from three different wands. They all cursed first and asked questions later these days.

They had moved as many books as they could find, and cleaned what they could, but the basement was still dark and unnerving and downright disgusting in places. Mute thankfully didn't seem to mind.

"Return any books to one of the empty bookcases in the library and put anything else that's harmless and potentially useful in the attic," Harry instructed her. "Toss the ruined things you find, and anything Dark or dangerous or you're not sure about, you can leave here and I'll sort it. Anything enchanted goes in one pile. Be careful. Don't trust anything in here – this was all collected by the Black family and they were as Dark as can be."

Mute nodded frantically and popped away. She didn't want thanks or acknowledgements, Harry had already learned as much. She preferred to do her job out of sight and out of mind. If Harry had lived in the same house as Bellatrix Lestrange for years with no way to defend himself, he would have wanted to be invisible, too.

Harry settled down in the office he had claimed for his own with a stack of papers from Brookstanton. A number of things needed his signature and the lawsuits were the least of it. Setting up a foundation apparently required a lot of paperwork, and all the more so when its stated mission included dealing with non-humans.

It was a few hours later, when Harry was wrapping up the last of the papers, that Mute reappeared. She wrung her hands anxiously and looked at Harry with worried eyes. If he hadn't been worried what else he might see in her mind, he would have wished he knew enough Legilimency to tell what she wanted.

"You found something?" he half guessed, and Mute nodded frantically in agreement.

He doubted she would have wanted to disturb him without a good reason to, which was all the incentive he needed to leave the paper for later and follow her to the basement.

One corner had been cleared entirely and revealed the grimy floor and probably centuries of dirt and stains to the world. One trunk of what looked like plates and particularly hideous goblets had been set aside – Harry could practically feel the Dark magic seeping from them – and leaning against the wall, in a heavy, ornate frame, was the portrait of a middle-aged woman with greying hair.

She looked like a Black, dark haired and with sharp eyes that narrowed as he approached. She wasn't the mirror image of Andromeda or Bellatrix that he almost expected from a portrait of a woman of the Black line, but there was enough of the same features that the relation was impossible to dismiss.
Then he spotted the small, grimy plate beneath her and could barely make out the name.

_Dorea Potter._

Harry recognised the name from the Black tapestry and felt his mouth go dry. Dorea Potter, married to Charlus Potter, and actual honest-to-Merlin family, however distantly related they might might be. The woman pursed her lips.

“You look familiar,” she said sharply, then peered closely. “Who are your parents, boy?”

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat. “James Potter and Lily Evans. They died in eighty-one. And – we're family, I think.”

Dorea Black was definitely of the Black line. She was also family – distant family, but _family_ – and Harry didn't care if it was technically by marriage. The Potter line had intermarried with the Black family several times before and that meant that somewhere, generations in the past, they shared several common ancestors.

The closest Harry had been able to find was Cygnus Black, father of four children including the disowned Isla Black, who married a Mudblood and whose daughter married into the Potter line, and Phineas Nigellus, Dorea's grandfather.

Harry had brought the painting to the dining room where it would be easier to talk with her, and he had thanked Mute as much as he could before she popped off once more to continue her cleaning of the basement.

“They never approved of the marriage,” Dorea explained when Harry had wondered why her portrait was hidden away. “The Potters weren't of _proper_ blood, they claimed! They weren't Dark, and Charlus and Fleamont were the grandsons of a Mudblood. Grandsons! Better the grandson of a Mudblood than an inbred squib, I say! Wanted me to marry a Crabbe, of all people!”

She sniffed a little haughtily. “Didn't have a problem with Callidora marrying that Longbottom, now did they? And Lucretia – married a _Prewett_, if you would believe that. I'd swear myself a Hufflepuff if there's a drop of Dark in that family.”

“And the Potters?” Harry asked curiously.

Dorea cackled. In that moment she sounded unnervingly like Bellatrix. “Potters cared about power. Dark or light, it never mattered to them. Your namesake, Henry – oh, he was a Muggle-lover and married a half-blood, but that just meant he didn't have any pure-blood sentimentalities. People underestimated him and paid bitterly for it.”

She peered at him closely. “A little scrawny but you'll fill in. Make sure your house-elf feeds you proper. And power – you'll do, child. Oh, you'll do.”

Her smile was a little sharp and the glow in her eyes just a little unnerving but she was family, and she approved of him, and that was all Harry cared about.

_Harry introduced his two best friends to Dorea when they showed up the following day. It had long since become routine that they met him at Grimmauld Place if nothing else demanded their attention. They seemed to have reached a silent consensus that this was their refuge, their place to hide and rant and laugh and cry as they needed to, and the wards recognised Ron and Hermione as family._
“Hermione, Ron,” Harry said as he stopped in front of the portrait. “Dorea Black, my great aunt. Mute found her portrait in the basement yesterday. Dorea, this is Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley. My family.”

Hermione squeezed his hand in response, then took a small step forwards.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Potter.”

“Dorea, child,” the portrait corrected her. “My grandnephew claims you as family. To you and young Ron, my name is Dorea.” The sharp eyes focused on Hermione. While Harry couldn’t read her mind, he was pretty sure she was trying to work out if Hermione was descended from anyone she might know. Family mattered a lot to Dorea Potter.

“Muggle-born or half-blood?” Dorea asked after long moments. “I don’t recognise your features but some lines could have intermarried since I died,” she conceded.

“Muggle-born,” Hermione replied, a little defiantly.

“And a Gryffindor,” Dorea stated, seemingly not bothered by Hermione's bloodline or their Hogwarts House. Harry was relieved. “None in Slytherin, and Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff don't have that stubborn fire. Oh, they all have their uses, but I married a Gryffindor. Brave and boisterous on the outside, but relentless and merciless as can be.”

Something about the answer nagged at Harry, until it finally clicked. “Did my grandparents have a portrait done? My parents?”

Dorea stilled for a moment. “Your parents died young, child. Few wizards and witches have portraits done young. My Charlus refused. So did your grandparents. The Potters didn't do living portraits. They refused to be remembered as the pale echo in a portrait.”

If this Dorea was ‘a pale echo’, Harry had to wonder what she had been like when she still lived. Her and her husband both. He had seen no images of the man but he got the impression of someone stubborn and proudly defiant.

He had hoped there had been portraits somewhere, some fragment of his parents still left, but a part of him had known it to be a fool's hope before he even voiced the question. It did not make it hurt any less.

Dorea turned her attention to Ron, and this time there was clear recognition in her eyes.

“No doubt about the Weasley blood with that hair and freckles,” Dorea said, although she didn't sneer the name like most pure-bloods had liked to do before the Final Battle. “The Prewett family had the red hair but not the freckles. Related to Cedrella? She married Septimus Weasley and was blasted from the family tapestry for it.”

Ron glanced at Harry, who shrugged in return. Ron shrugged back, but still answered. “My grandparents.”

Dorea pursed her lips. “My cousin. We're family, then. I'm pleased to see a generation of Black and Weasley ignore the blind fools. Pure as can be and a magically powerful man, Septimus Weasley, but say one kind word about a Muggle-born and you would be forever labelled a blood traitor.”

“Still are,” Ron said a little bitterly. “Bloody Malfoys.”

Dorea made that haughty little sniff again. “Inbred upstarts. How many siblings do you have, boy?”
Harry could see the moment the memories of Fred hit, the tightness in Ron's stance, and he put a hand on Ron's shoulder in silent support. “Six,” Ron said without flinching, head raised in silent defiance of anyone who dared say otherwise, though Harry and Hermione never would, and Dorea didn't know the story. “Five older brothers and a little sister. And all of them stood up to Voldemort.”

“Seven children, powerful and pure of blood! And the Malfoys barely manage one!” Dorea snapped. “Haven't had more than one child in generations, that family! Hyperion, Abraxas, Lucius? Not a single sibling between them. Seven magical children is a sign of powerful parents. Don't let the slippery little sycophants claim otherwise.”

Harry didn't know Hyperion Malfoy but it sounded like Lucius Malfoy's grandfather. Abraxas sounded vaguely familiar as the elder Malfoy's father, at least.

“Draco Malfoy is an only child as well,” Hermione added. “He is the son of Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black.”

Dorea's expression twisted like she had tasted something unpleasant. “Yes. Cygnus approved of that union. Malfoy had money and power, everything Narcissa desired. Never liked getting her hands dirty, did she. There has never been a proper woman of the Black line that couldn't put the fear of Morgana into any man that crossed her. Had decent gifts, did she, but little desire to bloody her own hands when she could make her husband's money solve those problems instead.”


It was not a request. Harry followed her as she pulled both of them into the kitchen and raised the usual privacy wards.

“Harry James Potter!” she hissed. “What were you thinking? She was in the basement and you brought her up here? And talked to her? Alone?”

Anger flared in Harry, bright and vivid, and latched eagerly on to his emotions.

“She's family!” he snapped back. “She's my great aunt and a cousin through the Blacks, pretty much the only blood family I have left that's not a Dursley, and you're angry because I talked to her?”

Hermione took a deep breath. Harry could almost see her try to calm herself. “She could be a Horcrux. Walburga was.”

The denial was instant and past his lips before he knew it.

“Walburga was insane!” Harry hissed. “She even felt Dark. It was all 'Mudbloods' this and 'Blood-traitors' that.”

“Voldemort's Horcruxes weren't,” Ron said quietly. “They were charming. Slytherin. Ginny got lured in by the diary, and the locket ...” He trailed off.

The argument on Harry's lips fell silent before he could voice it. Yes. The locket.

Voldemort had been insidious. Charming, seductive, and able to smooth-talk his way out of just about anything. Only the Headmaster seemed to have been on to him.

Dorea was family. Dorea was part of the very small bit of decently close blood family he had left, even if she was a portrait, and she cared about him. Or, at least, he conceded, she pretended to very well.
He didn't know what he would do if she turned out to be a Horcrux. It took a horrifying crime to make one, but she was family. She was on their side. So many things would have been different if they'd had a Horcrux of Dumbledore to ask for help, wouldn't they?

The thought was abhorrent but if it could have saved lives, should that not have counted for something?

"Is there a way to find out?" he finally asked hoarsely. "One that doesn't involve destroying her portrait?"

Hermione took a deep breath and Harry knew it would be bad news. "Not that I have found. We could have identified Voldemort's Horcruxes a lot faster if there had been."

"She's family."

"I know,"

"She knew my father. My grandparents."

"I know."

Something in him snapped. He turned and slammed his hands against the wall, the sharp sound ringing through the kitchen. The sudden pain settled into a stinging burn and melded with white-hot rage, and he hit the wall again.

"Fuck."

"Mate -"

"No."

"No."

"No."

"No! I don't care! It's always something, isn't it?"

Something in the kitchen rattled. Harry ignored it. "Here's your godfather, Harry," he mocked, "he's a fugitive and an innocent man who's half insane after twelve years in Azkaban, and he'll live just long enough to give you hope for a family before he's killed by Bellatrix Lestrange. You're a wizard, Harry, and free to leave Privet Drive ten months of the year, and oh, you're famous for surviving your parents' murder and we all expect you to kill the most powerful Dark Lord in centuries, when we're not busy calling you a delusional liar. We found a way to defeat Voldemort, Harry, and all you have to do is walk to your bloody death to save an ungrateful, useless bunch of cowards!"

The kitchen was deathly silent. The rattling had stopped. Every plate and cup in the kitchen was hovering an inch above the shelves, and the air was thick with the pressure of barely restrained magic.

Hermione's eyes were wide. Ron, already pale from early winter, looked downright sick.

Harry took a slow breath and tried to get his anger back under control without shattering every bit of china in the kitchen. Slowly the pressure eased. The cups and plates settled with barely the whisper of sound.

Hermione swallowed nervously. Ron seemed to regain a little colour.

"I don't care," Harry repeated, calm and utterly unyielding. "She's family. I don't care if she's a bloody Horcrux of Voldemort himself. She's helping us, and that's more than anyone else has ever cared to."
Hermione took a deep breath. Harry could see the need to argue in her eyes but then she hesitated and her shoulders slumped ever so slightly. “All right,” she conceded softly. “I – all right. We’ll keep an eye on her and on you, that’s not up for debate, and you have to make sure you don’t spend too long talking to her, but – all right. She doesn’t feel like Dark magic, and ...”

She trailed off. Ron picked up where she left off. “The Potters were never one of the Dark families. And she sounds a lot more like a Potter than a Black.”

Actually she sounded like both to Harry; a Potter when she was calm and explaining something and a Black when her emotions came to the fore, but he figured that wouldn't help the argument and so he stayed silent.

“Thank you,” he said, and the last lingering magic straining the air finally faded.

Ron and Hermione still looked a little uneasy but for now, at least, the portrait of Dorea Potter was safe.

Potential Horcrux or not – and Harry was leaning towards 'not', since she didn't have anything like the Dark feeling that Walburga's portrait had – Dorea Potter was a fountain of information. A significant portion of what she knew was long since outdated – her knowledge of politics, for one, was twenty years or more out of date – but far more wasn't.

Magic did not easily get outdated. Sure, new spells were invented, and sometimes old ones fell out of use when better ones were created or someone found a counter for a curse, but most spells did not simply stop being useful. Hermione had been quick to point out that most of the spells they learned at Hogwarts were centuries old. The first Blood War had seen a number of new spells on both sides of the war, but most of those had been combat-oriented, Dark, or both. Most new spells in general dealt with specialised areas and weren't likely to be of use to the common witch or wizard.

Dorea Potter couldn't demonstrate the magic she passed on to them, but she could share the knowledge, and Harry was a fast learner when it came to his favourite subjects.

Dorea Potter had also grown up in a house saturated by Dark magic and that knowledge was priceless. Hermione, for all her reservations about the portrait, agreed.

“We hoped to find a book that taught Occlumency,” she explained to Dorea a few days later, when the initial excitement had settled down. “It's one of the few things that can negate the effects of Veritaserum. We hoped ... if anyone had a book about it, the Black family would be it.”

“There's not a Black worth the name that mastered Occlumency,” Dorea stated. “Occlumency requires you to be the master of your emotions. Hardly effective against the Black madness. The Black family knew how to avoid Veritaserum – they used their gold and influence to get out of it. That's the secret right there.” Her expression softened a little as she looked at Harry. “You're a Black, child. A Potter by name, but Isla Black was as mad as can be. She married a Muggle-born as the fourth child of a pure-blood family at a time when heirs had been disposed of for less. Your father had that madness, your grandfather and great uncle had it, and your great-grandmother before that. It's not as strong as hers, I'd say, but it's there. You will never master Occlumency.”

Hermione took a deep breath. Harry could almost see her many mental plans shift to accommodate this new information. “What about the Veritaserum-antidote?”

“Decent enough, if one has the chance to drink it and can act the part to fool the questioners. They can test for it, but that potion is expensive to brew, and the antidote uncommon, and the Ministry is
run by miserly little fools at heart. Both should be in the library. Mad about potions, was Pollux. Couldn't brew a first-year potion to save his life but the theories fascinated him. The antidote is fiendishly hard to brew and toxic with prolonged exposure, but if you're questioned under Veritaserum and need to lie, that should be the least of your worries. That was the one I knew of. A better version may have been invented since I died. Plenty of Death Eaters with secrets to keep, I'm certain.”

“You brewed Polyjuice in our second year,” Harry reminded Hermione under his breath. “It's an option.”

Hermione nodded slightly, her focus still on Dorea. “What about keeping the important secrets under an Unbreakable Vow?” Then her eyes narrowed. “But even if it kept the secret, they'd know you were hiding something and they would keep asking around until they found something.”

Dorea's answering smile was sharp. “Indeed. Wizards have tried, child. And some of them died gruesomely when something finally slipped from just the right question and just the wrong wording. Unbreakable Vows were meant to bind actions, not secrets. If you use it to block Veritaserum, make sure it's a secret worth your life. If the only alternative is Azkaban or the Kiss, it may even be an advantage. A swift if painful death is preferable to a Dementor.”

Harry took a deep breath, starting to feel a little lost as every option was shot down. “I can throw off the Imperius,” he offered. “Would that do anything?”

Dorea's attention shifted to him in an instant. “As cast by a competent wizard?”

Harry stood a little straighter, defiance seeping into his stance. “Voldemort himself in my fourth year.” And Barty Crouch, Jr., but that had been nothing next to Voldemort's.

Dorea cackled again. “He was an imposter, Riddle, but by Merlin he was a powerful one.” She turned thoughtful, the shift in mood almost enough to give Harry a whiplash. “Doesn't hurt to try, I think. You sound like a competent girl, Granger. Dose him and make him spill every secret. Then keep doing it until he learns to hide the truth or you give it up as a lost cause. Feed him the antidote, too, and maybe he'll learn to replicate the effects on himself. There's your solution.”

They checked the library, of course, but in the end found nothing that said any different from Dorea.

Harry had a feeling there would be a number of awful potions in his future.

The vial of Veritaserum could have been mistaken for plain water, as the properly brewed version should be. Harry wasn't surprised; Hermione had been the one to brew it, after all. The antidote was an unappealing pale milky green that looked a little like milk gone off. Harry had the dreadful suspicion that he would end up drinking a lot of it in the weeks and months to come.

Ron took a sniff of the antidote and grimaced. “Smells like a Quidditch locker room.”

Harry snorted. “Thanks for the support.”

“Eh, you've had worse in Snape's classes. Especially those we messed up.” He accepted the vial and the dropper from Hermione. “Now sit. Tongue out, mate. Here's the little Quidditch broom.”

Harry rolled his eyes but did as he was told. Three drops of potion landed on his tongue. He tried to pinpoint the exact taste of it, to recognise it if he was exposed to it, but it could have been plain water for all he could tell.
Then the effects hit and the world fell away around him. There was nothing around him, no emotions within him, just a peculiar sound that he distantly recognised as a familiar voice.

"What is your name?" Hermione's voice sounded as if it came across a wide void, almost hollow but strangely clear. A part of him knew he should try to lie or refuse to answer but he couldn't remember how, and his lips were moving even as he tried to figure out how to stop them.

"Harry James Potter." It didn't sound like his own voice to himself, and he wasn't aware of speaking. But his lips had moved and he wasn't sure anymore how to stop when he wasn't speaking in the first place. Was he?

Something landed on his tongue, a drop of something sour and bitter, and the fog lifted from his mind. It had been nothing like the Imperius, nothing obvious to fight, just a perfectly smooth wall between his mind and his desire to lie and not obvious weakness to target to stop it.

Hermione looked worried. Ron looked resigned.

Harry rubbed his face and tried to get the last bit of haziness to go away. "This is going to take a long time to learn."

"No more than two or three times a day for the Veritaserum, and once a day at the most for the antidote," Hermione said. "And we need to take regular breaks or the toxic effects will build up." She sighed. "I'll brew more of both. We still have a few vials of Veritaserum left, but it won't last long if we keep this up."

Ron paused. “So did it taste like Quidditch locker room?”

“Ron!”
Chapter 2

The three of them were accumulating a number of things they didn't want to become public knowledge, and they all knew they would eventually need a place to keep it. The plan had been simple – Grimmauld Place was already Unplottable and had been under the Fidelius once, so they knew it could be done.

They didn't know how to cast it, but they did know a way around it. A letter to Headmistress McGonagall got Hermione permission to visit Dumbledore's portrait to ask about it – because it was Hermione and everyone familiar with her knew she wanted to know everything – and she returned long hours later with pages and pages of scribbled notes.

“I got everything from Professor Dumbledore,” Hermione greeted them. “We can cast it on the basement or the house. The bad news is that the Fidelius can't be layered. The magic considers the dual protection a sign of lack of trust in the Secret Keeper and thus void. The spell is complicated and demands a lot of power but it should be possible. Harry has the magic for it, and I know the ritual now.”

“We need a place to keep the Dark things we didn't get rid of,” Harry said. “We're going to need the space for ... later, too. Training, at the very least.” He didn't voice what else they might need it for. None of them really wanted to think too much about what they might have to do in the months and years to come.

“Basement, then,” Ron said. “We can ward Grimmauld with everything we have but if someone's looking for incriminating stuff, we're going to need a place to hide it. Most people don't know about the Fidelius in the first place and it's not like we're at war anymore, is it? Sure, Hermione asked the Headmaster about it because she's Hermione and has to know, but it's not like we need to ward a house against Voldemort anymore. Hiding the house entirely would just make people suspicious.”

“Basement,” Harry agreed. “It's big enough for the stuff we need to hide, and no one but us knows about it. We can find somewhere in the middle of nowhere to learn the more destructive spells.” He hesitated. “I'll cast it. Who's the Secret Keeper?”

Ron and Hermione looked at each other. Harry wondered if Fidelius would always be synonymous with betrayal to them, too, or if he was the only one who would always hear 'Secret Keeper' and remember Wormtail.

“Hermione,” Ron said grimly after their silent discussion. “She has problems with trusting authorities too much, but I have the bad temper. She holds the Vow, too. Realistically, if you can't trust her, you're going down, anyway.”

It was solid reasoning. Based on Hermione's tight expression she didn't appreciate it being put quite that way, however true it was, but she shook her head and ignored it.

“The notes,” she said instead and gave him the papers. “Read it. Memorise it. All of it.”

Harry didn't bother pointing out that there were at least a dozen pages. Hermione had written them; she knew exactly how long the ritual was. Then again, if he couldn't memorise a Fidelius Charm, what chance did he have at some of the more esoteric things he had spotted in the Black library?

At least this piece of obscure magic didn't come with forced proximity to Severus bloody Snape.
There were thirteen pages in total. Hermione had numbered them. He didn't know if the number was accidental or some deliberate magically-powerful-number thing, but it did leave him with a lot of material to memorise. There were diagrams, too, but most of it was Hermione's familiar handwriting, far more delicate and precise than he had ever managed.

Every day they left that basement exposed was another day someone might stumble across one of the many Dark artefacts they still had. Harry hadn't stepped on too many toes yet but he had learned to expect the worst. Now that they had a solution, the inner drive to see it done was relentless.

It took three days of hard work before he could recite and recreate everything to Hermione's satisfaction. The ritual itself took half an hour, not counting the two hours they had spent beforehand setting it up and carving the runes, or the hour Hermione had spent checking and double-checking the set-up and her calculations.

It also left Harry swaying and pale from the sheer amount of magic it had demanded. He felt like he had run a marathon, like his lungs had expanded far beyond their size and his every muscle was burning. The half an hour of constant focus had been fine and was something he had become used to. The pull of magic as the ritual had reached its crescendo and the Fidelius had spun into being was something else entirely, and he understood now why Dumbledore had been the one to cast it originally.

Ron pressed an Invigoration Draught into his hand and Harry drank it gratefully.

“You okay, mate?”

Harry shuddered as the potion took hold and the room stopped spinning. “Yeah. Just … need a moment.”

The last of the fatigue vanished. Harry straightened and looked at his two friends. “Did it work?”

It was the most peculiar feeling of knowing he had cast the Fidelius and having no idea of what he had cast it on, and he did not appreciate it in the least. Why had they cast it in the kitchen, anyway? There was nothing worth a second look there.

“The basement of Grimmauld Place is in the kitchen,” Hermione spoke clearly, and the missing piece fell into place.

The wall parted before their eyes as the secret settled. The door to the basement appeared once more and Harry felt a rush of elation that had nothing to do with the potion in his blood.

They had done it. They had bloody well done it. And if they had the skills and abilities to learn this, there was nothing stopping them from trying a dozen other useful spells from the Black library that he had his sights set on.

With the basement turned into a safe storage room for the more questionable items, Harry's attention drifted back to the goblins. None of them were willing to risk just walking into the bank, not with the way they had last left, and a letter to Gringotts has been almost gleefully clear that they due to 'irregularities' would only be able to accept withdrawals in person.

If that wasn't a trap, Harry didn't know what was.

“So hypothetically,” he asked his great aunt one morning. “If we robbed Gringotts during the war to get our hands on one of Voldemort's Horcruxes, threw around Imperios like candy, proceeded to escape on dragon, and wrecked a good part of the building in the process, how should we handle our
finances? I already wrote them and they made it very clear that unless I show up in person, nothing is coming out of my vaults.”

Dorea smiled fondly at him. “That sounds like the Potter blood. He didn't have the temperament for the more subtle arts, my Charlus, but he was magnificent with destructive spells. Of course that didn’t help much in politics, but the threat was good to have.”

Not for the first time Harry wondered about his family. The image he was slowly building was that of a skilled family, powerful and utterly ruthless, far from the image of the careless prankster he had been given of his father and the harmless Muggle-lover his grandfather was supposed to have been. But then, his parents had died young, not much older than Harry's current age. Who knew what his parents could have become if the Prophecy hadn't put them all in Voldemort's path?

“I'm not sure how well they'll respond to threats, though,” Harry said dryly. “Although I can cast a very good Fiendfyre.”

Dorea sniffed. "We will be dealing with another goblin rebellion soon enough. Utter lack of respect for their betters. Claim your vaults - by blood and law, don't let the miserly little beasts cheat you, they'll use every loophole they can - and transfer it elsewhere immediately. Make sure you claim any and all vaults as well as regent of House Black. The Wizarding Bank of Constantinople is acceptable. Contact them and request a banker to be present at Gringotts to keep the little creatures from any funny business. Durmstrang swears by the dwarves, but they require far more effort than they're worth."

She made it sound so easy. "I'm still not sure they're not going to kill me on sight."

Dorea made a dismissive gesture. "They respect only power and gold. If you have both and prove willing to use it, there is little they can do once your wealth is out of their hands. If they demand compensation, demand the same in turn for their treason and collaboration with the imposter Riddle. Do not yield. You are a Potter and a Black, victorious in battle against a Dark Lord, and you will act as such. If you flinch, they will bleed you dry."

In essence, be an arrogant snob of a pure-blood. Harry didn't like the thought in the least, but he also knew that was the way politics went and he might as well get used to it.

"Power might be a problem. I can't draw my wand in Gringotts and my name is either cursed or praised depending on the day of the week."

There was a hint of something deeply vicious in Dorea's sharp smile. "We will deal with the useless public later. In time you will learn a degree of wandless magic. Until then, you will draw your magic to you when you approach. They're sensitive to magic, goblins, and they know power when they see it. Be a towering thunderstorm unto them and make them yield."

Something gave Harry the distinct impression that his great aunt didn't like goblins much. Possibly, just possibly, it was the glint of raw Black madness in her eyes. It should probably have worried him more than it did, but Dorea Potter was family and she was on his side. That was more than he could say about just about anyone else he knew.

More importantly, perhaps, Teddy Lupin was the Black heir. If anyone would be on Harry's side in forcibly fixing society until said young heir was safe, it would be the woman who was both a Potter and a Black.

Harry sent an nondescript barn owl to the Wizarding Bank of Constantinople the next day, asking
how he would go about moving his vaults from Gringotts. In the interest of full disclosure, he added that getting the vaults from the goblins might very well prove a problem due to his strained relationship with them.

Two days later he received a reply, a short letter expressing the Bank's pleasure at his business as well as a request for a suitable time for their representative to visit him in order to settle his Gringotts business.

Harry, having much to demand his attention these days but nothing rigidly scheduled, offered to be available at any time during the Thursday two days later – and, should the notice be too short, any day that might suit them. He wanted it done, and he wanted it done fast.

Grimmauld Place was no longer under a Fidelius and so there was nothing stopping him from sending the address along. It still bothered him a little that he couldn't layer another Fidelius on top of the one in the basement to cover the rest of the house. The Black wards were strong and vicious but Harry's sensible paranoia still wanted more.

The responding letter promised a representative at his door by ten o'clock. According to the imposing grandfather clock in Harry's study, the wards stirred with the arrival of a visitor that Thursday at ten on the very second.

The banker sent by the Wizarding Bank of Constantinople was tall and thin and looked a little like a caricature of an undertaker. While Harry didn't recognise his heritage, he would wager all the gold in Gringotts that it wasn't fully human. Probably not vampire, since he was out in broad daylight, but that didn't narrow it down much.

The Black wards shuddered slightly as he stepped inside on Harry's invitation but they did not consider him a threat, whatever he was.

“Greetings, Mr. Potter,” the man spoke. His voice was monotone and his accent was slight but unnervingly strange. He also did not seem to know – or care – who or what Harry was, or about the many unwanted titles the British had stuck him with, which was one point in his favour. “I am your representative from the Wizarding Bank of Constantinople. The Bank acknowledges the fickleness of the goblin race and sends appropriate representation for its client.”

Harry swallowed. He definitely wasn't asking about the man's heritage – he was not about to risk messing up relationships with another bank – but he made a note to read up on anything he could about his new bankers. 'Wizarding Bank' obviously did not include just humans.

“Thank you,” he finally said and gestured for the man to follow him to the study. “I appreciate it a lot. I – what should I call you?”

“Representative” shall do, Mr. Potter.”

“Representative,” Harry repeated. “Thank you for coming.”

He closed the door behind them and gestured for his guest to take a seat, then settled down in the imposing chair behind the desk. “May I raise privacy wards?”

Not that Grimmauld Place wasn't secure, but it was second nature to all of them by now. None of them trusted a privacy ward they hadn't raised themselves – or seen cast by someone they trusted implicitly.

“A sensible precaution.”
Harry took that as permission. The spells flowed easily, half of them unspoken and cast by will and experience alone.

Privacy ensured, he took a deep breath. “What is the Bank’s stance on criminal convictions in other countries?”

“The Bank cares little for the politics of others. There is no treaty with the British Ministry,” the banker said in that disturbingly emotionless voice. “Should they sign one, there are several large vaults in Gringotts that we would very much wish to discuss.”

He made the last word sound somewhat ominous even with his monotone delivery. Harry didn’t want to ask any further but suspected there were probably a few important people who had messed up abroad if the Ministry didn’t want to sign that treaty. That, or they were just their usual idiot selves. In any case, it worked in his favour.

“ Anything we discuss here is confidential?” Harry asked to be sure.

“We are client and bank, Mr. Potter. Such dealings are sacrosanct.”

Harry hesitated and tried to find a good way to put things into words, then gave up and settled for the Gryffindor approach.

“I’m about to make a number of enemies,” he said bluntly. “I have made my godson, Teddy Lupin, the heir to the Black name. He will inherit the vaults upon his Hogwarts graduation or my death, whichever comes first. I need that inheritance to be invested safely. I want his future to be protected whatever happens. What is the normal salary of your investment bankers?”

“Eight percent of annual net profits for vaults of the Black and Potter size.”

Harry nodded. “I will pay fifteen for the investment of the Potter vaults. I need money to fight a war and I need it fast. I don't care what you invest in or how risky it is, as long as it is profitable.”

“The Bank shall see it done.”

Harry hesitated for a moment, then brought out a sealed scroll from his robe.

“A copy of my will. I am unlikely to survive long enough to settle down with a family. In the event of my death, half of my gold beyond the Black vaults will go to Teddy Lupin. Invest it safely as well. The rest will be split between a number of people of age to handle their own finances. Place it in a vault and leave the choice to them. The will is validated and witnessed by the Office of Augustus Brookstanton here in London. They will handle my estate. The Ministry has no legal right to get involved but they will likely try, anyway.”

The representative accepted the scroll with a slight nod. “The Bank shall ensure the legalities are kept.”

Harry sighed. “Thank you. About Gringotts – I’ve angered a number of goblins in the course of the war. We – two friends and myself – broke into a high-security vault for an item vitally important to the defeat of Voldemort and managed to escape. We are very likely to be met by armed guards when they see me.”

“The Bank will manage. The Bank will persevere,” the man intoned.

Harry desperately hoped he was right.
Harry had spent a while in between waiting for the Bank’s replies to learn from his grandmother how to draw his magic to him. It was much like trying to build up magic and focus for a powerful spell and just not releasing it, and it took him little time to pick up the trick. It also served no real practical purpose but to try and intimidate others, but if that was what it took to make the goblins listen to him, then that was what he would do.

Voldemort, Harry realised, had used it often enough – it would explain some of his terrifying presence. He suspected that Dumbledore had used it on occasion, too, if nothing else than to make people listen when he spoke.

Harry's own newly-taught abilities were nothing compared to those two, but he still saw the crowd in the Alley shift uneasily and part as they passed. With a glamour on, most of the attention had been on the representative next to him, but now it shifted to Harry instead. He would probably have a headache by the time they were through the Alley, from the constant focus demanded by the combined glamour and the pull of his magic, but that was what potions were for.

He sped up, towards the dubious safety of Gringotts, and some wizard or another scrambled out of the way with wide eyes.

Harry frankly felt a little sick. Was this what it had been like for Dumbledore and Voldemort? Watching people scatter around them like sheep?

The representative at his side made a low, rattling, inhuman sound that sounded somehow amused. Harry grit his teeth and told himself to get over it. This was just a cheap parlour trick and if people were intimidated by that, they deserved to be scared.

The immense doors of Gringotts came into view before them, complete with the usual guards just inside the building. Harry dropped his glamour a few steps from the building, as close as he dared use it without drawing even more attention from the doubtlessly already unhappy goblins, and he felt the adrenaline buzz of impending battle settle in his blood. His magic sang and with part of his focus freed up again, the storm-like pressure of power increased as he pulled it closer like a cloak.

The guards by the door shifted. One of them hissed something in their guttural language but none of them made a move to approach him, and Harry strode into Gringotts with the unyielding defiance that had sent him up against Voldemort time and time again. This enemy was less dangerous, perhaps – if not by much – and held no small chance of death as well. After seven years in the wizarding world, Harry was well used to it.

They were met by an unfamiliar goblin before they were even halfway across the room.

“Mr. Potter,” the goblin bit out, and made his name sound like an insult.

Used to the acerbic moods of Snape, Harry just smiled – a sharp, unpleasant smile that did not reach his eyes. “Goblin. We have accounts to discuss.” A heartbeat, then Harry glanced pointedly around at the attention they had gathered. “In private.”

The goblin bared his teeth in an equally sharp and disturbingly pleased smile. “Yes, wizard, we do. You wish to bring your companion?”

“My representative from the Wizarding Bank of Constantinople.” Harry smile turned decidedly vicious. “They were very accommodating.”

The goblin’s smile vanished and the look he sent Harry’s companion was full of loathing.

“Follow me, wizard,” he snarled. He did not pause to see if his two guests kept up, but led them
straight into a maze of hallways and offices beyond an almost invisible door to the side of the room.

For all that Harry was a good bit taller than the goblin, he still barely managed to keep up, and by the time they finally stopped, he was well and truly lost. He didn't doubt it was on purpose. The goblin led them into an office, followed by two guards that took up positions by on either side of the door.

Harry settled into one of the uncomfortable chairs. The silent representative at his side did the same, and Harry could have sworn he saw the tall man somehow blur out of the corner of his eyes. Like his shadow was out of sync with his body and was half a step behind him in settling down.

Definitely not human. Harry was starting to suspect he didn't want to know what the non-human part was. No wonder the man did not seem at all concerned about walking into the heart of Gringotts with a human who was firmly on the bad side of the goblins.

“We have been waiting for your arrival, human,” the goblin said from his place behind the imposing desk. He seemed to relish every word.

“Imagine that,” Harry said blandly. The goblin did not offer his name. Harry did not care enough to ask. “I'm afraid it's going to be a terribly disappointing meeting for you, then. Transfer my vaults to Constantinople, goblin. All of them, by law and blood. Potter, Black, and anything else out there that might have been left to me in any of my positions, including that of regent of the House of Black and godfather of the Black heir.”

It probably wasn't the wisest approach, but Harry couldn't bring himself to care. Sucking up to them obviously wouldn't do a thing to help, and he had not forgotten his grandmother's command. The goblins didn't seem to be affected by the heavy pressure of magic in the room, but that didn't mean they didn't just hide it well.

Harry stretched deliberately, every bit the arrogant pure-blood facing an inferior, and focused harder on the pull of magic. His fingertips tingled uncomfortably and he felt the hairs on his arms stand on end, but it was worth it to see the goblin freeze.

Harry gave him a mocking little smile. The goblin bared his teeth. For a moment Harry wondered if he was about to get an axe in his back from one of the guards and found himself remarkably indifferent to the idea. Then the goblin snarled and Harry knew he had won the first round.

“There is still compensation to discuss, wizard, for your casual destruction of one of the most important buildings to goblin-kind. Expensive compensation.”

“Of course,” Harry agreed mildly. “As soon as we discuss compensation for your blatant treason and cooperation with Voldemort.”

“You can prove nothing, wizard.”

Harry shrugged. “I've got a number of incriminating memories and a very unhappy public looking for a scapegoat that says otherwise.”

Pure maliciousness glowed in the eyes of the goblin.

“We can kill you before you ever leave this room.”

The guards by the door shifted ominously. The representative by Harry's side remained unmoving, seemingly not concerned.

The threat would probably have a lot more effect on someone who had not gone willingly to his
death not six months prior. As it was, Harry just raised an eyebrow.

“I'm sure that will go over well with the public,” he said blandly. “They're just looking for someone to take out their anger on. Another goblin rebellion will be just the thing. I'll be dead, sure, but Gringotts will be a smouldering ruin and goblins just a footnote in the book of extinct magical creatures. Sounds like a fair enough trade to me.”

For long second the office was utterly silent as Harry met the goblin's hateful glare without flinching. He didn't know if they had some goblin type of Legilimency and he didn't care all that much. All they would find was calm acceptance of his own potential death as well as information they would have no way of revealing without letting on that they had a way to read minds – and, in turn, bring a paranoid wizarding world down upon them.

Then the goblin snarled and his claws dug deep into the desk.

“We will transfer the vaults. Step foot in Gringotts again, wizard, and you will be executed where you stand.”

“Excellent. Pleasure doing business with you, goblin,” Harry said, just a little spitefully.

He had half been expecting a goblin rebellion to break out. All in all, he figured it had gone surprisingly well.

“I moved my vaults to the Wizarding Bank of Constantinople,” Harry said when he saw his two friends again that afternoon in Grimmauld, after the paperwork was done and the representative had left. “Dorea's portrait recommended them. They got the Black and Potter vaults out of Gringotts and me out of there alive. I recommend you do the same. We're not exactly welcome in Gringotts. I'd move the other Weasley vaults as well. It's just a matter of time before we have to deal with another rebellion.”

For a moment neither of them reacted. Then Ron rubbed a hand across his face.

“Bloody hell, I need a Firewhisky,” he said, and -

“Harry James Potter!” Hermione hissed a moment later. “You went to Gringotts alone?”

Harry shifted a little uneasy. Hermione Granger was not pleased. “I had a representative from the Bank of Constantinople with me. I don't think he was entirely human,” he offered, not sure if this would help on her anger but willing to give it a try.

Hermione made a frustrated sound and no, this wasn't good at all. It took a lot to get Hermione to a stage where she was reduced to sounds instead of words.

“So did we just start a new goblin rebellion?” Ron asked only half joking.

“I … don't think so,” Harry said carefully. “I mean, I got out of there alive.”

“If they start a rebellion and blame it on you, you're dead, mate,” Ron said, and this time there was no joking in his voice. “It's just a matter of whether it's the goblins or the wizarding public that get to you first.”

Harry sighed. “I know. And no, I'm pretty sure they would have started a rebellion while I was still there so they could target me, but we'll keep an eye on the Prophet to be sure. I can't enter Gringotts again, though. I'm dead if I do.”
“Oh, Harry.” Hermione sounded a little disappointed but mostly resigned. Harry just shrugged. There wasn’t much he could say to it and frankly, the fact that he had come out of it alive and unharmed was more than he had been hoping for.

Hermione frowned slightly. The expression was familiar to both Harry and Ron as her thinking-expression, and they both stayed quiet and let her work through whatever she was thinking about.

“I don’t have a lot in Gringotts,” she finally said. “My trust fund is in a Muggle bank, and I withdrew most of my Galleons before we … left.”

“Not worth the risk, then,” Ron said quietly. “I’ll let mum and dad know so they can get their Galleons out. George, too, what with the shop and all. Bill hasn’t returned to Gringotts yet, so he probably knows something’s coming, but I’ll tell him, too.”

“And I’ll owl Neville and Luna,” Harry finished. “Just in case.” There were probably others that should know but those were the ones who had stood by him in the Ministry. Those were the ones who had trusted him even then. He couldn’t warn the world, no one would believe him and he would probably trigger a new goblin rebellion just by doing so. Let everyone else manage for themselves. He had done more than enough for them already.

Hermione took a steadying breath. “Well, then. We have officially made an enemy of the Goblin Nation.”

It remained unspoken that there would be plenty of other enemies to come.

The Tonks home always felt silent and oppressive to Harry these days, even with a toddler in the house. The memories of the dead hung heavy in the air and made him feel like an intruder in a tomb. He still visited as often as he could to spend time with Teddy and do what he could to help Andromeda.

This afternoon Teddy had settled down for his nap and Harry had settled down with a cup of tea with Andromeda. The silence around them had settled, too, like a cloak of guilt that Harry couldn’t shake.

“I moved my vaults out of Gringotts,” he finally said when the silence and the unnerving loud sound of porcelain against porcelain became too much.

“Sensible,” Andromeda said quietly. “The dwarves?”

“Constantinople,” Harry replied. “I – Dorea, my great aunt’s portrait recommended them. I moved the Black vaults, too, and left instructions to invest it safely. Teddy – whatever happens, Teddy will be taken care of. I swear.”

Andromeda nodded slightly. “She never liked non-humans,” she mused and seemed a little lost in old memories. “Constantinople, at least, employs some humans. A long way to travel to see your vaults, though. An unpleasantly long journey by Portkey.”

Harry shifted a little uneasily. Andromeda always made him feel like a child, even if she didn’t intend to. “I can Apparate with a stop in Vienna. I don’t like Portkeys much after ...”

He trailed off. He seemed to do that a lot around Andromeda.

Another slight nod of acknowledgement. “An impressive distance. Do you have your license?”
Harry snorted. “I didn't even have to take the class. The Ministry handed them out like chocolate frog cards to anyone of the graduating classes who could prove they had the ability after – after things had settled. I think they had other things to worry about.”

Another slight nod. “I will see about moving my vaults. To the dwarves, perhaps. They are not human, but they have not delved into the breeding experiments that Constantinople has.”

Harry swallowed and was forcefully reminded of the unnerving non-humanness of the representative they had sent. “Breeding experiments?”

“No one speaks of it, of course. I doubt any but the Darkest of families dares imagine that they have done anything more than hire skilled part-humans, which is hardly a crime. Vampires were too mundane for them. Too well known, too many weaknesses. They imported Lethifolds instead and bred them with unwanted magicals. Thieves, murderers, Mudbloods. We have a common ancestor who assisted them in the sixteen hundreds. They kept diluting the blood until they reached a useful stage.”

Harry took a large mouthful of tea to wash down the bile in his throat and felt it settle like lead in his stomach. Andromeda politely refilled his cup.

“How do you even breed a human with a Lethifold?” he asked and instantly regretted the question.

“Magic is capable of incomprehensible wonders,” Andromeda spoke softly, “of equally Dark and light.”

Harry stared at the delicate tea cup in his hand and wondered if he would ever truly know the world he now belonged to.

The trio had slowly fallen into a new routine. Ron and Hermione spent most mornings at the Burrow or handling whatever errands they had. Come noon they would head to Grimmauld. Sometimes they brought food, and sometimes Mute would cook for them.

Then Hermione would bring out the familiar vials of Veritaserum and its antidote. Harry would be dosed twice – once after lunch, and once more before Mute appeared with late afternoon tea, just to see if there was any difference in how he reacted to it with a full and a mostly-empty stomach. Some days he would be given the antidote after the first questioning, sometimes after the second, and the taste never got easier to handle.

There was no difference depending on the time of day that he had noticed, and absolutely no progress. The effects were still as strong as the first dose and remained so until they let the effects wear off or fed him the antidote. They kept up the questioning twice a day for a week, then stopped for a week before they began again. It was as close as Hermione was willing to cut it, and Harry didn't argue. Not after he had ended up with a pounding headache on the seventh day of the first week as the toxins built up.

They would study after lunch and more or less until it was time for Ron and Hermione to leave for the Burrow again. Sometimes it was books. Sometimes it was wizarding laws. Sometimes it was new spells, sometimes old spells cast faster or wordlessly or more accurately.

Sometimes they just talked, surrounded by tea and snacks and a mountain of research materials in the library. Sometimes light banter, sometimes nostalgic trips down memory lane, but over the months it had with increasing frequency become the time to discuss the heavier topics.

On this particular afternoon, Harry brought out two official-looking scrolls and handed one to each
of his friends. “Brookstanton drew up the paperwork. All it needs is your signature, and you'll be members of the board of the Evans-Lupin Foundation. Paid and everything. It's not charity, Ron, it's putting two people I trust implicitly in a position where they can make sure the money won't vanish into someone's pocket. I know your mum's been worried about what you plan to do.”

Hermione had already starting reading. Ron simply stared at the scroll in his hand. “You sure about this, mate? I don't know a thing about boards and legal things.”

“But you know what it's like to have nothing. You've seen what people like Remus had to deal with. You know what it's like to see someone like Malfoy throw money at problems until they go away, while you're at the mercy of a legal system that's useless at best. You know if the people who apply are the kind of people we actually want to help.”

Ron opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again. Then, reluctantly, he started to read the scroll as well.

“This is generous pay,” Hermione said softly.

“The job will be a headache, I've been told. The lawsuits are still being prepared, but one of the publishers has already agreed to a settlement instead of taking it to court,” Harry said, quoting the most recent update he had received. “It might take a long time to get it all through the courts, but the compensations will be invested and keep the fund running. The Prophet is going to drag my name through the mud, I'm sure, but nothing new there. They'll likely try to do anything they can to discredit the Foundation, too.”

“Then you might want someone more experienced than us,” Hermione warned.

“There will be.” Harry ran a hand through his hair restlessly. “There'll be experienced people but there need to be others, too. People who know how it is, who get it and won't judge the people they're supposed to help. We're aiming for five people in total, and two of those will work as solicitors, too. The compensations and investments will be able to fund it. Not perpetually but hopefully we shouldn't need that. Just long enough to make a difference.”

“And what about you, mate?” Ron asked pointedly.

“I can't be involved. It has to be completely out of my hands.” Harry took a deep breath. “Sure, it's technically my money, but we've made sure it stops being mine the moment it hits those vaults. It's just a donation, nothing more. If I were on the board, someone might find a way to go after it, anyway, but the risk is a lot less if I'm completely out of it.”

“Someone being the Ministry,” Hermione stated.

“People like Malfoy, too. And the publishers Harry's about to drag to court, and Merlin knows who else,” Ron said. “Once Harry starts shaking things up, someone'll go after him, Saviour-Who-Won or not. They did it to Dumbledore, too.”

Hermione made a frustrated sound. “It shouldn't be like this. We did our part. We fought battles that no child had any part in, all because the wizarding world was too busy hiding. We paid enough for peace. We shouldn't have to do this.”

Ron rubbed his face. “No. But who else is going to?”

The signed scrolls went to Brookstanton. The lawsuits carried on. Things settled a little, became a little more what passed for their new normal.
Christmas came and went in an awkward, chaotic mess of uncomfortable silence, grief, and the overwhelming sense of loss where the dead should have been.

Harry spent his time in the Burrow along with the Weasleys and Hermione as they all tried to make the holidays as easy for everyone as they could. Andromeda and Teddy came over several times as well, and the toddler lit up the mood a little for everyone.

The three of them stayed just as long as they had to, then fled to Grimmauld. The Black house was still Dark and uncomfortable, but at least it was a change in scenery. They had the excuse of their N.E.W.T.s, at least. None of them had talked much about it, though Harry knew Hermione had studied and had probably nagged Ron into doing the same.

The actual two days of examinations felt somewhat anti-climatic. There were few students, mostly home-schooled ones, and Harry easily ignored what attention he drew. All three of them took Defence, Charms, and Transfiguration, if only for the sense of closure. Hermione added Runes, Arithmancy, and Potions. There were several others she could undoubtedly have passed, too, but she had just shrugged a little uncomfortably when Harry had asked.

“"It doesn't matter much anymore, does it?” she had finally said, in a voice that had sounded tired and resigned and bitter. “Special allowances would always have been made for us if we'd wanted a Ministry career, and if I'd been a normal Muggle-born and not a Hero of Hogwarts, no amount of N.E.W.T.s would have seen me promoted to anything past assistant to some minor official even after a lifetime of hard work. These are the classes that matter to me. What good would the rest of them do?"

Their grades were decent; Hermione's outstanding. That all three of them earned an Outstanding in Defence was to be expected as well. None of them cared all that much anymore, but at least it would get people off of their backs a little.

The day before New Year, Hermione carefully placed a thick, ominous-looking book on the floor amongst half-empty tea cups and piles of notes and picked up her wand. Harry knew it was going to be bad when she opened the conversation with a series of privacy wards that would put the Ministry's to shame. It was confirmed the moment she spoke.

“Remember,” she said with steadying breath and the quiet defiance that had put her in Gryffindor, “this is not the Dark Mark.”

Ron stared at the half-eaten biscuit in his hand, then put it down. ""Couldn't you have waited until after we finished tea to spring that on us?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, but her expression was a little fond. ""Then it would be dinner, wouldn't it? You're never not hungry, Ron."

Harry reached out to pick up the book. It was heavy and old, and something about it made him want to wipe his hands. It looked clean and well-kept but the magic felt vaguely … slippery to him. Some of the books had soaked up the ambient magic like a sponge. They had been in the library for a long time and had been frequently used as well. This book was clearly one of them.

The leathery cover and spine were blank, with only intricate patterns impressed into the surface, but he found the title on the first proper page. “Mind magic?” he asked.

“"I found it a while back when I looked for Occlumency and Legilimency,” Hermione explained. “It didn't have much about that, but there is a chapter on the Imperius Curse, and,” she swallowed, “a section on a magical connection through a mark, the details of which served as the eventual
inspiration for the magic behind the Dark Mark.”

Ron stared, food forgotten. Harry wasn't entirely sure what to say at all, utterly speechless. Hermione took their silence as a chance to continue and explain the rest before an argument could start.

"Like the Dark Mark, this Mark is focused on a physical marking – these days it would usually be a tattoo. The connection is in the magic bound in it, not the symbol, so they can be whatever motive and colour we want them to be. The Mark enables a mental connection through thoughts and emotions with enough practice, and it can serve as an Apparition marker. Shy of something like the Fidelius or strong Apparition wards, we'll always be able to Apparate to each other." She visibly swallowed again. “Unlike the Dark Mark, no one is the 'master' of the bond and no one should be able to control the others. We won't be able to pull on each other's magic or cause each other pain.”

Ron opened his mouth, then closed it again when it seemed like he didn't quite know what to say. Harry tried to push aside the memories associated with the Dark Mark and look at it as impartially as he could.

"All right. If we did do it, the Vow should keep me from running roughshod over you, even if there's something the book conveniently left out," Harry said, running through the wording in his head. They had to think like Snape and Voldemort and Dumbledore to cover all the loopholes, and the potential abuse of the bond was thankfully covered by several clauses already. It was a little unnerving, to have to think like a Dark Lord, but after years of visions, he was uncomfortably familiar with it. "If it ties us that closely together ... what happens if one of us die?"

Hermione hesitated. "A lot of Marked Death Eaters are still alive. The Dark Mark didn't kill them when Voldemort died. The theory should be the same with these. The - the loss would hit harder," she continued, "but it shouldn't kill."

"And with the Vow?" Harry pressed on mercilessly. He had to know. Even if it was just Hermione's best guess, it was a lot better than nothing.

"I ..." Hermione trailed off, and the pain in her eyes made Harry feel like he just tore out his heart. Then she squared her shoulders, Gryffindor to the end. "It would kill you but it shouldn't touch us. And don't you dare, Harry James Potter, or I will bring you back and kill you myself!"

"Full name. Sucks to be you, mate," Ron stage-whispered, but he looked a little paler than before as well. Harry didn't blame him. Hermione was talking about binding themselves to a Dark Lord in the making. He'd be more than a little worried in Ron's place.

“You'd know, wouldn't you?" Harry stage-whispered back. Then he sighed. “An Apparition marker alone would be priceless, and not just for us. It sounds suspiciously useful for people like the Aurors, too, even with the bad associations. Yet no one, not even the Order, has ever looked into it that we know of. What's the catch?”

There was always a catch. Ten years with the Dursleys taught him that, and seven years of Hogwarts assured him the wizarding world was no different.

“Ten years in Azkaban.” Hermione said grimly. “It's soul magic. The Dark Mark itself isn't illegal, Malfoy always managed to block that, but casting it is. It didn't matter much compared to everything else Voldemort did, but it was still Dark magic.”

Harry knew there and then that this was the moment when their plans went from technically legal ideas and could-bes to outright rebellion. So far they had done nothing really wrong. They had researched some questionable things, complained and plotted and planned and practised within the
safety of the Black wards, but they hadn't crossed that line yet.

He closed his eyes briefly and when he opened them again his eyes were every bit the colour of the Killing Curse and every bit as unyielding. “I'll cast it.”

“Mate -” Ron started while Hermione chewed on her lower lip, and Harry raised a hand to stop the argument before they could start.

“If they find out, I might be able to stay out of Azkaban for now.” Neither of the other two could claim the same. Hermione was a Muggle-born and Ron’s family didn't have the money for bribes. Harry hated his titles, hated The Boy Who Lived or The Man Who Won or whatever they were calling him these days, but if this was what it took, those titles might as well be good for something. In a fair world it shouldn't matter, but he wouldn't be doing this if the wizarding world was fair.

Besides, he’d already cast two of the three Unforgivables and carried a soul fragment of a Dark Lord around for most of his life, he’d been researching and practising questionable magic for months, and he was about to start a brand new career as a Dark Lord himself. If someone, somewhere was keeping score, he was probably damned already, and a bit more Dark magic wouldn't make much of a difference.

“You think I'm going to let you bugger off to Azkaban alone? Hermione'll find a way to break us out.”

Hermione sighed. “Honestly, Ron.” She looked a little less worried, though. Of the three of them, they all knew Ron was the one with the most objections to the darker magic they researched.

Harry stared at the book, then looked up to meet the eyes of his best friends.

“Are you sure about this?”

Hermione huffed. “Would I have brought it up if I weren't? Honestly, Harry.”

Good point. “Ron?”

Ron ran a hand through his thick hair and just rested it there for a moment. Then he made a tired sound. “If you’d asked me a year ago? Bloody hell, no. Now?” Ron looked up. “I – no, I'm not sure, but we'll need everything we can get if we want to change this bloody mess of things, and we'll need the Apparition marker. Yes. Cast it. Merlin damn it, we've already thrown our lot in with a Saviour-turned-budding-Dark-Lord, and if this'll help what we're doing, then that's all I need.”

Harry swallowed against the lump in his throat. “You don't have to. Neither of you do.”

“Yeah. We do. Because you're our best friend, mate, and we're not letting you do this alone. Gryffindors are supposed to be impulsive hotheads. We spent seven years getting into trouble together; no reason to stop now.”

Harry gripped his hand tightly and Ron gripped it back like his life depended on it. They stayed like that for an endless second, then let go.

Ron cleared his throat to hide his slight flush of embarrassment. “So, what's it going to look like, then? And if you say a snake, I'm going to hex you stupid.”

“Borromean rings,” Hermione said immediately. “Three linked rings where removing any one ring results in all of them being unlinked.”
Ron blinked. “Blimey. You just thought of that?”

Hermione shifted, a little embarrassed as well. “Once I found the spell, I tried to consider what we might use for it. It's a geometrically simple symbol, easy to draw, and unlike the triquetra, it doesn't have a number of meanings attached to it. It can pass for a simple Muggle tattoo and it … seemed appropriate.”

“Somewhere not on our arms, though,” Harry said and noticed he wasn't the only one who deliberately didn't look where the Dark Mark had been on the arms of Voldemort's most trusted followers.

“The shoulder?” Ron suggested. “I mean, we could do the chest, but, uh …” He trailed off and flushed red before he could finish his gesture in the general direction of Hermione's chest.

Harry and Hermione looked away at the same time, and while Hermione didn't blush the bright red only a Weasley could, Harry suspected that his own ears were getting there. Even months on the run together hadn't ruined the last of that awkwardness. He wondered if it were different when it was just the two of them alone at the Burrow but promptly pushed the thought aside again. He really didn't want to think about their relationship like that.

Harry cleared his throat. “Shoulders sounds good. It won't be noticeable.”

“Right.” Ron rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “Uh. Colour?”

“Black,” Hermione said. “I know it's the same colour as the Dark Mark but let's keep it simple. It'll be just like another Muggle tattoo, nothing ominous in that. We went through a lot together and wanted something to symbolise our bond. Besides, with robes on no one should see.”

Harry stared at the two of them, not quite able to wrap his mind around their willingness to bind themselves to him like that. Then he looked back at the book, resting innocently between them.

“Give me a day to learn the spell proper.”

The new year was welcomed by spectacular fireworks, and no place more so than in the wizarding-heavy areas. Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes had sold their entire stock of fireworks shortly before Christmas, and had sold the excess they could produce as fast as they could get it packaged.

The Burrow was the centre of a whirlwind of colours and sound and light, of bright dragons fighting in the sky before exploding in a cascade of sparkles, and rearing, winged horses that took off in trails of multicoloured light and set off fireworks with every beat of their wings.

When the celebrations had faded away and the guests at the Burrow had started to retire, Harry, Ron, and Hermione returned to Grimmauld. They greeted the early hours of 1999 in the library under heavy silencing spells and familiar privacy wards. No words were spoken. Harry wasn't going to insult them by asking if they were sure, and neither of them were going to let him.

By silent agreement Ron went first. None of them had touched a drop of alcohol or potions of any sort, wanting to make sure nothing went wrong.

Ron took off his outer robe and shirt without a sound, then took a deep breath and knelt on the floor.

He glanced at Harry and nodded, and Harry rested a hand above his right shoulder-blade. He would cast the spell and thus be the focus for the bond. They would all be tied together, but the magic would go through him.
The spell had no words – the book had been downright derogatory towards the idea of 'putting words unto such a sacred act of trust' – but required an unnerving familiarity with soul magic. Harry was uncomfortably aware that if it hadn't been for his unwilling experience with Horcruxes and possession, he would have been unlikely to be able to cast it without far more practice.

Harry closed his eyes and went through the spell, one wordless step at a time. He felt the magic gather between his palm and Ron's shoulder, felt his own body as a glowing entity next to Ron's distinctly different one and, in the knot of magic in his hand, the strange meld of the two of them. On a whim he grabbed Hermione's hand in his free one, felt the brightness of her magic join their already melded one until it glowed like a small sun, and then he forced the magic down.

Ron gasped and Harry's eyes snapped open. In an instant the Mark was burned into his skin, and beyond it, beneath it, Harry saw the joined magic enter their friend's body like strands of light that entwined with Ron's own light and made Harry's faded scar burn with the familiar feeling of soul magic.

Harry pulled back his hand as if burned but the Mark was already there, three flawless black circles, and then Hermione's other hand was gripping his, and he was somehow sitting down without any recollection of doing so.

“Breathe,” Hermione said, low and urgent, and Harry did so. One breath after another, slow and steady, until he could finally focus again.

“Mate?” Ron had turned to watch them, a worried look in his eyes. “Was it the spell?”

Yes. No. Harry wasn't sure what to answer and couldn't find the words for it. He finally tried, anyway. “Soul magic. My scar hurt.”

Hermione looked deathly pale. She was casting a moment later, a string of medical spells aimed at his head. Then, reluctantly, she lowered her wand again.

“Nothing seems to be wrong.”

Harry shook his head. “It didn't feel like the Horcrux. I – I think it recognised the feeling of soul magic and reacted to it.”

“It could be,” Ron said, a little uneasy. “Sometimes scars from Dark spells will act up around other Dark magic. Bill told me once.”

“The magic version of the stiff old knee that can tell when a storm's coming?” Harry asked. Ron didn't seem to get the reference but Hermione nodded slowly.

“Maybe,” she said. “Should we ...” she trailed off.

Harry shook his head. “It was the surprise more than anything. I – it felt like being back in fifth year for a moment. The spell worked fine, I saw it settle into Ron's magic.”

Hermione pursed her lips. “We continue, then.” She hesitated for only a moment before she took off her own robes and blouse, leaving only her bra and trousers on as she sat down on the floor.

Harry carefully did not look and closed his eyes the moment he had placed his right hand on her shoulder and gripped Ron's hand with the other.

The second time was much easier. The bond with Ron was already in place and the magic responded eagerly. Their combined magic burned bright and seared into Hermione's body and soul in an instant,
and this time Harry didn't flinch from the sharp pain in his scar.

Hermione winced when the magic sunk into her skin but didn't move, and Harry opened his eyes to look at the Mark. It was identical to Ron's, and Hermione let out a slow breath when Ron nodded at her.

Then Ron glanced at him. “Harry?”

“Right.”

Harry considered the easiest way to do it, taking into account his experience with Ron and Hermione's Marks, then settled on his knees between them. He felt exposed without his robe and shirt on, but it was nothing more than Ron and Hermione had already done. It was nothing they had not already seen in their year on the run.

He hesitated, then reached over his shoulder as much as he could. His hand might not be in the exactly right location, but it would be far easier to create the Mark with something to focus on. He didn't want to try without that focus unless he absolutely had to.

Ron and Hermione's hands twined with his without him needing to ask and for a moment that was all he focused on. Two warm hands in his own, their joined heartbeats, and then he reached for his magic for the third time.

It was different but familiar, the joined magic from the three of them gathering beneath their hands, and then he pushed the magic into himself. For one blinding moment all he could feel was the intense pain of the Mark as it sunk into his shoulder and settled deep in his magic. Then the burn faded and he released the breath he did not know he had kept in.

Their hands parted. Soft fingers brushed against his still-tender shoulder.

“It looks perfect,” Hermione said, and the words had a strange echo in his mind.

The magic, while painful, felt perfect now, too. Like it had been missing something that had clicked into place as the third part of their bond joined.

He felt different, too. Not much, but it felt like there was more to him now than there had been before, two veiled parts of his awareness that he had never known before. Harry focused on those two new bits of not-entirely-him and pushed a thought towards the dual bonds.

Did it work?

The gasp from Hermione and the wide eyes from Ron was all the answer he needed. He was still greeted by wonder from Ron and a relieved feeling from Hermione.

Yes, she said, delighted and amazed and thrilled all at once. Merlin, yes.

Harry's first experience with Veritaserum after the Mark was an unmitigated disaster.

Three drops of potion, one painfully familiar opening question - What is your name? - and Harry was on the floor, throwing up until there was nothing left but bile. His frantic heartbeat was thunder to his ears and he felt like someone had jammed a knife into his brain and twisted.

He was distantly aware of hands on his shoulders and a drop of sour bitterness on his tongue as someone held his head back, and then, faintly, a man's voice speaking words he should probably
"-arry! Harry!

A litany of spells somewhere in panicked female voice and magic against his skin followed.

"There's nothing wrong with him according to this, I - Harry? Harry!"

Something cleared in his mind, slow and sluggish like molasses. He opened his eyes carefully - had he closed them? - and groaned. The light was painfully bright and everything was too clear and the colours too vivid.

"Head hurts," he rasped. "'at happen'd?"

"Harry!" Hermione's voice was quieter this time. "Merlin, Harry, you scared a decade off of us."

A damp cloth appeared in his field of vision, held in a rough hand. Harry pressed it against his forehead and clung to the blissful coolness like a lifeline. A small bottle appeared as well and Harry swallowed the potion without question. It tasted like a headache reliever.

Things started to ease. The pain faded. The light became bearable.

"Harry?" Ron asked.

"The Mark," Harry said hoarsely. His throat felt like he had been screaming. "When Hermione asked my name. The magic was confused. I'm Harry but part of the Mark is Ron Weasley. Part of the Mark is Hermione Granger."

"And the magic is new and hadn't had time to settle," Hermione finished and bit her lip. "Harry -"

He already knew what she was about to say.

"No. I'll give the magic time to settle," he hurried, before she could argue, "but I have to learn. At least it's different. Maybe this is the break we've been looking for."

Hermione didn't look convinced. Harry couldn't blame her. He didn't feel particularly convinced, either.

Two days later, after giving the new Marks time to settle, Harry cast the Fidelius for the second time.

They had searched for a suitable location to practice the more questionable and destructive spells they had found and had eventually settled for an uninhabited island of Orkney. Its main qualifications to Harry's mind was that it was decently far away from other humans and had very little that might attract tourists.

Grimmauld Place was too risky a place to cast some of the spells he wanted, and the island was within Apparition range – if barely, in Ron and Hermione's case. If it came to it, there were plenty of places they could use to break the trip in two. They all had lots of experience with the English countryside. The weather was no worse than they were used to at Hogwarts, really, and they had magic to keep them warm and dry.

The area they had picked, a nice, reasonably flat section of mostly-grass, took most of the day to ward proper. Muggle-repelling charms, followed by the usual defences, and then several hours of setting up the Fidelius. By the time they were ready for the final part of it, the sun had long since set, and all three of them were getting tired.
“Sure you're up for it, mate?”

Harry glanced at Ron. “Better than having to come back tomorrow and have to redo the set-up. Got the potions?”

Ron lifted a small bag, and Harry sighed. “All right. Let's do this.”

Hermione looked like she wanted to argue. Then she shook her head, very familiar with Harry’s particular brand of stubbornness.

Raising the Fidelius was easier now that he had tried it before, but the amount of magic it took was enough to leave him dizzy. The surge as the Fidelius settled over the empty land was far more than what the basement in Grimmauld had demanded. The requirements definitely depended on the size of the area, Harry thought distantly, and maybe, just maybe they had been a little too ambitious in the scale of things.

A potion bottle touched his lips and he drank without thinking. A flush of energy followed and made the world sharpen, and when the second bottle appeared, he reached out to hold it himself. It tasted like a headache potion, and quickly eased the heavy throbbing behind his eyes.

“Thanks, mate.”

“Better?”

Harry nodded in agreement, and Ron grinned. “Let's give it a look, then. Harry's Hideaway is on the island of Fara.”

Watching the grassy island somehow seem to stretch like a piece of elastic to make room for another bit of land was decidedly surreal. This, however, was not what got Hermione's attention.

“Harry's Hideaway?” she demanded.

“Secret Keeper makes the secret, that's the rule,” Ron said cheerfully.

“*Harry's Hideaway?*” Hermione repeated.

Harry just laughed.

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It was mid-January when Harry got around to handling something he had been procrastinating about. He had tried to find the best approach to it and in the end decided that there was no easy way around it. Thus he found himself in Diagon Alley on a dreary Saturday, a heavy piece of parchment in his pocket, and on the hunt for George Weasley.

His target was not behind the counter at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. Lee was manning it, looking rather tired. Perhaps from the crowds, but Harry suspected it was due to another reason, especially since Lee lit up a little at the sight of him and waved him through to the back rooms with a grateful look.

The 'Employees Only' sign winked at Harry before the door opened to the twi- to George and Lee's workroom, Harry mentally corrected himself.

George Weasley was bent over the table, a monocle in front of one eye as he examined something. He glanced over at the sound of the door, then put down both the small mechanical-looking something in one hand and the monocle in the other.
“Harry?”

Harry drew his wand carefully to avoid startling a fellow twitchy war veteran and cast the usual, well-practised privacy wards that all three of them had down to an art.

Privacy ensured, he sat down in one of the few chairs in the shop that weren't somehow jinxed, hexed, or cursed and put the folded piece of parchment on the table between them.

“This is an offer for you to buy back my share of the shop for the original loan, no interests. It has to include the loan to make sure it's completely covered legally, but that's it,” Harry said softly. “If you want it, it's yours.”

George's expression had turned from bewildered to lost, hurt, and a little betrayed, and Harry felt his heart clench at the expression.

“Harry?” he repeated, and this time there was a tremble in his voice.

“I know. Hear me out,” Harry pleaded. “This is Fred's legacy. This is your shop, the two of you – Lee's here now, and Angelina, but this was your idea. Sooner or later I'm going to make myself pretty unpopular. I don't want the shop to suffer for it if anyone finds out I'm a partner.”

George's eyes narrowed. “Do Hermione and Ron know about this?”

“They shop and the offer, no,” Harry admitted. “The rest … yes.”

He had been careful to block it from them and none of them could intrude uninvited. The bond was not that strong.

George twirled his wand between two fingers for a moment, then added an additional privacy ward on top of Harry's. “Talk.”

“This summer, when they started to talk about stricter rules for non-humans - we managed to convince the Wizengamot to leave the werewolves alone and keep Teddy safe, but what's next? Vampires? Veelas? Part-humans? Is it going to target Fleur or Hagrid next time? Lucius Malfoy is worming his way back into power, Muggle-borns are still discriminated against, and some idiots are starting to talk about the poor, innocent Death Eaters being led astray by the half-blood Tom Riddle, and that the impure magicals out there are the real problem.”

George was silent. Harry took a deep breath. “This isn't what we fought for. This – this isn't what Fred and Remus and Tonks and Dumbledore and all the others died for, and if no one else is going to do something about it, we will.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a revolution,” George said with deceptive mildness.

“It probably is.” Harry hesitated before he raised his head in a silent challenge and continued. “The only people that seem to get any changes done are Dark Lords. Bad changes, but changes. Even Dumbledore couldn't get much through the old windbags in the Wizengamot. If that's what it takes to stop another blood war, then that's what we'll do.”

Silence settled. George watched him for long moment.

Then he raised his wand and turned the parchment into ash with a swift Incendio.

“I want in,” he said, for once deadly serious. “I want even.”
And the conspiracy gained another member.

Winter carried on. It wasn't a particularly harsh one, but it was wet and dreary, if unusually mild. Snow would probably have improved the appearance of Grimmauld and made it at least a little nicer to look at, but rain did not, and the back yard looked damp and miserable whenever Harry glanced outside. He also found himself busy patching up the issues with Grimmauld that had appeared with the colder, windier months, and he had roped Ron into helping him.

With two thirds of their trio busy with Grimmauld, and Hermione in need of potions ingredients and several books, she had gone to Diagon Alley with Neville as company. The returned seventh-year students had been given an additional measure of freedom on account of their age and had been allowed to leave over the weekends as long as their school work didn't suffer. Neville, being a Prefect, needed his occasional breaks and had gladly agreed to accompany Hermione.

Harry had too much to do to come along and had reluctantly admitted that between the two of them, they should be pretty safe. Instead he had sent her a fond thought and hopes for bearable crowds, and continued his lessons in wizarding house repairs with Ron.

He regretted it two hours later when Hermione's sharp mental presence cut through his mind.

*Death Eaters in Diagon, six to my count, low level fighters, no competent leader. They cast an Anti-Apparition and Anti-Disapparition Jinx but nothing else.*

Harry had pinpointed her presence before she finished the thought. The wards in Grimmauld had all three of them keyed in, and if they hadn't, he would gladly have torn them down and redone them later.

*On our way,* Ron spoke for both of them, trusting Hermione and Neville to stay safe, but not about to let them face it alone.

Harry spun on his heel, followed the Mark that led to Hermione, and was gone. The Black wards yielded to him, and he was not about to let some useless Death Eater stop him from getting to his friends. He tore through the hastily-cast Anti-Apparition Jinx on Diagon Alley with all the care and finesse of an enraged Horntail and landed at Hermione's side in the shock wave of the collapsed spell. A particularly vicious burst of magic took care of the Anti-Disapparition Jinx as well.

Ron was there a heartbeat later, wand in hand. “Figured I'd let you go first and deal with the Apparition thing.”

“I punched through it,” Harry told Ron when he had got his bearings. The junk shop, almost as far from the Leaky Cauldron – and the most likely arrival point for the Aurors – as they could get. “Tore the other one down, too. Probably put a bit more power in it than I needed.”

“Oh, not like they wouldn't notice when the spells came down, anyway. Hermione?”

“We're fine,” Hermione said quickly. The first sounds of Apparition could be heard outside, in between shouts and spell-fire. The shop they were in was utterly empty, and Hermione didn't need to hear the question spoken. “The owner fled as soon as trouble started. I think by Floo. Merlin forbid he tries to help anyone else to safety.”

Hermione sounded disgusted, but Harry wasn't surprised. Then again, his opinion of the average British wizard and witch was a lot more pessimistic than Hermione's, too.

“Any idea of what their goal is?” Ron asked.
Neville shook his head. “Avenging their dead master? Didn't look too organised to me.”

Chaos, then. Kill a few Muggle-born customers, maybe, although Harry had no clue how they would tell the difference. Maybe they were just out to make the world somehow pay for their master's defeat.

They had all been keeping an eye on the door as they talked but even then, they only got a second of warning. Dark figures appeared just beyond the shop windows, distorted by ancient glass, and then the door exploded in a hail of splinters and shards.

Four *Protegos* snapped into place before the shrapnel could reach them, and Harry sent a Cutting Curse at the first of the masked figures an instant later.

There was blood, and a gurgling scream that cut off brutally, but before Harry could cast again, the second Death Eater had collapsed right inside the shop, taken down by a trio of Stunners from Hermione, Ron, and Neville.

Wands at the ready and keeping a careful eye on the empty street outside, the four of them approached the two bodies.

The first Death Eater had been killed pretty much instantly. Harry's Cutting Curse had been aimed at the man’s throat and hadn't missed. The curse had cut deep and left the man almost decapitated.

Hermione and Neville looked a little pale at the sight but no one spoke.

The Death Eater that had taken the trio of Stunners was comatose but still alive. Hermione added an *Incarcerous* on top, just to be sure. Further up the road were the first sounds of Aurors arriving, conveniently late as usual, but in that one moment there were no witnesses but the four of them. Ron and Harry glanced at each other, reached the same conclusion in that same instant, and turned to Hermione.

*We have Veritaserum and the basement at Grimmauld,* Harry said.

*We need the information,* Ron added.

Hermione pursed her lips. *I - all right. Go.*

Ron grabbed the still-breathing Death Eater and was gone in the sharp crack of Apparition, leaving Harry and Hermione to face Neville. In that moment it wasn't their slightly clumsy friend and classmate they faced, but the man who had been the potential bane of Voldemort.

“I trust there will be explanations later?” Neville asked in a mild voice that was betrayed by his narrow-eyed expression.

“Yes,” Harry said and didn't even consider lying. “Grimmauld Place, as soon as we get out of here.”

Neville nodded. If he had any opinions about their strange behaviour, he did not let them show.

It took long hours before they could finally meet up again. They had to give their carefully coordinated statements again and again, and had to wait around for hours in the unlikely case they were somehow needed, but finally, mercifully, the Auror in charge let them leave. There was nothing else they could do. Harry had clearly acted in defence of himself and his friends, and the dead wizard had been a Marked follower of Voldemort. It was as clear-cut as it could be.
Mute met them at Grimmauld with tea and biscuits and vanished again before anyone could speak, and Harry sank into a soft chair with a tired sigh. Ron had gone to the Burrow to reassure his family after leaving their captive in a cell, but he had let them know he would be along shortly, now that they had finally escaped the questioning.

Harry was grateful. He did not want to face that sort of conversation without both of his closest friends there.

Neville took a slow sip of tea, then another as the uncomfortable silence stretched on.

There was a soft crack of Apparition in the entrance hall, and a moment later Ron appeared.

“Sorry. Took a while to convince mum that we were all fine. She sent snacks, though.” He put a large pack of sandwiches on the table and grabbed one for himself before he settled gracelessly in the couch.

In the face of Molly Weasley's cooking, even explanations could wait a little. The sandwiches, enough to feed a minor army, were divided, and the silence of Grimmauld was broken by a small recreation of lunch at Gryffindor table.

Eventually even the mountain of food was gone. The tea had gone cold and been replaced. Hermione shifted uneasily.

“Is this going to be a repeat of the end of our first year?” Neville asked mildly. “I get the strangest impression you've all done something incredibly reckless again.”

The man had come a long way from the clumsy boy who had stood up to them that night in the Gryffindor common room. He was the potential other child of Prophecy, a Hero of Hogwarts, and Harry wondered unbidden if he was looking at his own future downfall.

That prophecy had been fulfilled but they could be finicky things, and who was to say there wasn't another one out there, among the countless shelves in the Hall of Prophecy?

“How! Harry called. “Would you bring me the copy of the Vow I keep in my desk?”

He had the parchment in his hand before he could finish the sentence. Mute, as always, was gone again before he could thank her.

By mutual, silent agreement it seemed like he had been elected spokesperson. Considering that it had been his idea in the first place, he kind of deserved it.

“This isn't the society we fought for,” Harry said bluntly. “No one's changed a damn thing even after two blood wars in as many decades, the Wizengamot is useless, and most people in the Ministry are too busy taking bribes and not paying attention to get anything done.

“Ignoring their goals and policies for a moment – Dumbledore tried to change society with politics and failed. Voldemort almost succeeded until he managed to bounce a Killing Curse off of me. Grindelwald almost succeeded, too – if he didn't still have a weak spot for Dumbledore, it's doubtful he would have lost their duel. Seems to me like the only way to get a bloody thing done around here is to be a Dark Lord, and if I have to pin the Potter name next to Grindelwald in the history books to keep Teddy from growing up in this mess, then that's what I'll do.”

“The Dark Lord Potter?” Neville's voice was calm and even, and he seemed willing to at least hear them out. Then again, Harry had just seen the man take out Death Eater rejects with that same calm air about him.
Harry handed over the parchment. “We have contingency plans. Wouldn't be a reluctantly Hermione-approved plan if we didn't. But yes. I'm not out to target innocents. I don't want all-out war. But if I'm going to make myself unpopular and stomp on most of the Ministry laws – and I will, make no mistake – then I'll do so in my own name.”

The sound of parchment being unfolded was the only thing to interrupt the silence that followed. Harry watched as Neville's gaze quickly went through the wording of the Vow once, then slower on his second read-through.

Finally the man looked up again.

“This Vow could probably have kept Voldemort leashed.” Neville did not stumble over the name, but he did stare at Harry like he was really seeing him for the first time. It was a vaguely unsettling feeling when the person doing so had taken on Voldemort himself with nothing but a sword and a burning hat.

“That's what we were going for,” Harry agreed when it became clear that his two bondmates still weren't going to speak. “I'm still me, Nev. I haven't gone mental from the Battle. I'm not about to take over where Voldemort left off. I'm still me, and if I ever cross the line, Hermione can stop me with a word.”

Permanently if necessary, he did not add. There might have been a loophole somewhere they missed but Harry doubted it. They had been exceptionally thorough in the wording.

Neville nodded slowly. Harry did not speak but allowed their former classmate – and hopefully still friend – to think through everything.

“You've been busy while the rest of us have been at Hogwarts.” This time the words were aimed at all three of them.

They exchanged a glance and by silent agreement chose Hermione as their spokesperson.

“We don't really belong at Hogwarts anymore,” she said softly. “We considered it but …”

“Most of the students have nightmares, even the first years,” Neville confided just as softly. “Nobody says it out loud but we've all spent a lot of nights comforting the younger years. The Prefects can't do it alone. The teachers have enough to deal with in the reconstruction of the school. The worst got repaired over the summer, but there's still a lot to be done, and they can't deal with hundreds of students with these kinds of issues.”

The story was painfully familiar to all three of them. Hermione and Ron in the Burrow at least had some comfort together, but the mental bond had left all three of them all too aware of each other’s nightmares. They had spent the night in Grimmauld Place at times but that was mostly for a change in nightmares. Physical closeness seemed to keep some nightmares at bay, but the old house brought its own bad memories with it.

“Bill Weasley warded the Burrow with everything he could legally cast under the current laws. Ron and I still sleep with proximity alerts and expect an attack when someone moves around at night. Mute is under orders to never pop into Harry's room for whatever reason while he is asleep. Even under the Black wards, his first instinct is to attack, and he is perfectly capable of casting a Reducto in his sleep.” Hermione sighed. “I wanted my last year at Hogwarts. The truth is that we're all a danger to our surroundings.”

Neville nodded. “We've all got plenty of practice with our Reparos. Even some of the second years
can cast it now. The bathroom door in Ginny's dorm had to be entirely replaced last month.”

Ron winced. They could all imagine how powerful a spell had to be to make a solid door a lost cause to repair.

“One of her dorm-mates had a breakdown in there, and the locking spells she used took too long to dismantle,” Neville explained before they could ask. “It turned out to be the anniversary of her younger sister's death – she died in Azkaban.”

Neville took a slow breath and pinned Harry with an unrelenting stare. “If you start another blood war, I will take you down. Pure-blood or Muggle-born side, it doesn't matter. Even the Man-Who-Won is not invincible. I don't care if it kills me; I refuse to let another generation of children grow up without their families.”

Neville's voice was perfectly calm, perfectly accepting, and all the more grim for it.

Harry nodded. “Only if Hermione or my own magic doesn't get to me first.”

That uncomfortable silence settled again as Neville watched them. Then the man sighed. “This is an incredibly stupid idea even for you, but … what do you need? You've got an in at Hogwarts for another half a year in me. This is a stupid idea and it's probably going to blow up spectacularly in our faces, but you have a point that politics won't do any good with the Wizengamot and the old pure-blood guard in the way. What do you need?”

“You don't have to do this, Neville,” Hermione said quietly. “We're grateful for any help, but you don't have to do this.”

Neville gave them a long-suffering look. “Yes, I do. It's a Harry Potter-plan, Hermione. Merlin knows he's the only one insane enough to get that idea in the first place. You'll need all the help you can get.”

Ron snickered. Harry just looked a little betrayed but really, there wasn’t much he could say to argue against it, and he knew it, too.

Afterwards, with Neville out of the house with promises that they would contact him if there was anything he could do, Hermione sat silently and stared at the parchment with the Vow.

Harry and Ron glanced at each other, then Harry gestured towards her and arched an eyebrow. Ron shrugged and turned to her.

“Hermione?” They had both learned it was safer to ask out loud than try to mentally interrupt her thought processes.

“We need a way to keep this safe if we keep picking up more people. I trust George and Neville, but there will be others. Eventually we will make a mistake. Dark Lords have followers, allies, whatever we want to call them, and someone will try to slip in spies amongst them. Someone will change their minds and decide to work against us. Someone will decide we have gone too far and go to the DMLE with what they know. Eventually we'll be out in the open and it won't matter but until then …”

“Even the Dark Mark and frequent Legilimency attacks didn't stop Snape from working against Voldemort,” Harry said and shuddered. “Something like the DA contract, maybe? I don't want forced loyalty, I just want to keep this safe. If people want to – to join later, we can figure out what to do then. This is just for secrecy. I've seen enough Dark Marks for a lifetime and if I never have to use
Legilimency on a friend, it'll be too soon.”

“Our tattoos are technically related to the Dark Mark,” Hermione pointed out.

“Far enough removed that I can live with it, but it doesn't mean I want more people running around in my head.”

Ron made a face. “And it gives the wrong impression. Everyone would see it as a brand like Voldemort's. A contract is better. Everyone knows what they're getting into, and no one can claim we changed the terms later. Someone doesn't want to sign it, that's what Obliviate is for.”

Hermione flinched almost imperceptibly, but they knew each other well enough to pick up on the small things. Ron closed his hand over hers and squeezed it in a silent apology. She took a shuddering breath, then seemed to focus herself again.

“I'll make a first draft,” she said. “Some of the Black books I used for the Vow had a number of ways to make a contract far stronger than the DA one was. Some of them could protect against mind magic as well. We don't want to enslave anyone but we need to keep this safe until we're ready to have it made public. It needs to be iron clad. What should the penalties be?”

“Death.” Ron's voice was grim. Hermione looked like she was about to argue, especially after seeing the mostly-decapitated Death Eater earlier, but Ron carried on before she could. “No, Hermione. When this comes out, Harry's facing Azkaban or the Veil. All three of us are. Even if he's done nothing yet, even if it's in name only, just calling himself a Dark Lord would be enough to condemn him. If it gets out before we're ready to defend ourselves, that's the end of it. The penalty for breaking the contract has to be bad enough that no one will try. We're not talking about forcing random people to sign up. Everyone will know what they're signing and what it means. I don't like it any more than you do, but either it's death or curses bad enough to make anyone think twice, and none of us want to do that.”

Hermione was silent. Harry stared at the book in front of him, an old, worn copy from the library that dealt with human anatomy and clearly didn't have healing in mind. He didn't like this, didn't like any of this, but a part of him had known it would come to this, even if he hadn't been willing to acknowledge it. If it had just been him, it would have been different, but he had got his two best friends tangled up in the whole mess, too, and he needed to protect them. They were there because of him, because of his insane ideas, and he would do anything to keep them safe. He owed them that.

“I agree,” he said softly. “Swift, painless death if possible. Don't put in a clause about losing their magic, either. Death - death is enough of a deterrent. It'll make the contract easier to accept, too. We need to protect ourselves but we're not Voldemort. We don't torture or kill for sport, and we're honest about the conditions.”

Hermione glanced between them, then at the parchment in her hand, hidden beneath Ron's larger one.

“I'll write it up,” she finally said. “And then we'll rewrite it until we're sure it's as safe as can be for all of us.”

Harry closed his eyes. “Thank you.”

They still had a Death Eater to deal with in the dungeon. None of them wanted him there for any longer than absolutely necessary, but they still waited several days to be sure that someone wouldn't show up to question Harry further about the raid on Diagon Alley. Nobody seemed to care much
about Hermione beyond her initial testimony, but the chance to speak further with the Man Who Conquered – and to a lesser degree Neville – was apparently not something they were going to turn down.

On the third day, Ron went to visit George at the shop in Diagon Alley and happened to invite him over to Grimmauld for some decent lunch away from the pressure of the Burrow, like the concerned brother he was. George whined and dragged his feet about leaving his current project but eventually came along, like the caring brother he was as well.

George had been keyed into the wards on Grimmauld and they appeared in the hallway together with the sharp crack of Apparition.

Harry and Hermione met them there, their expressions as grim and serious as Ron and George's had become the moment they were safe under the privacy of the wards.

“We have a Death Eater from the Diagon raid in the dungeons and Veritaserum to make him talk,” Harry stated, not bothering with niceties.

George's expression grew sharper, with a hint of the hardness he had never shown when Fred had been alive. “I want in. They targeted our shop.” Their shop, and a dozen others, but that didn't matter now. The Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes had definitely been a priority target and only the heavy protections on the shop had kept it safe.

“I thought so.” Harry glanced at Ron. “Ron's staying up here in case something happens and to give us advance warning if someone shows up. Hermione's got experience with Veritaserum, she'll handle that part.”

The old George and Fred would have asked, would have joked, would have demanded the story about the know-it-all bookworm having practical training with Veritaserum, or even what they meant about dungeons. This George only nodded once, sharply, and accepted it. “Where is he?”

Hermione gestured for him to follow. Ron nodded once and gave them an unspoken good luck, then vanished into the nearest sitting room while George followed Hermione and Harry into the kitchen.

Hermione took a slow breath. “The basement of Grimmauld Place is in the kitchen,” she spoke clearly.

As Harry watched, George's eyes widened as the secret sunk in and the Fidelius lifted to reveal the hidden door before them. “Bloody hell,” he breathed.

“We found it after we destroyed Walburga's portrait,” Harry said softly. “We think the enchantments were tied into her.”

Hermione just nodded slowly and followed as they descended into the darkness. The basement was much cleaner and lighter than it had been, but it was still clearly the remnant of a century or more of Dark magic and all that came with it.

The climb into the dungeons was the worst of it, dark and unnerving even with the few steps it took, and the sight that greeted them was little better.

They had ensured the man had food and water, and they had cast a Scourgify once a day, but the cells were claustrophobic at best, and the restraints were melted into the walls and gave very little yield. Three days chained to a wall with only the company of Merlin-knew-what that lived the shadows had left dark circles under his eyes and a haunted look on his face.
He was under the strongest silencing charm they had been able to find, and Harry only released it once the man was safely tied to a conjured chair against the wall and dosed with three drops of Veritaserum. None of them wanted to listen to whatever else the man had to say.

Outside the cell, an enchanted quill wrote down every word and sound of what was about to happen, so they would be able to go over it again later.

The man's expression grew slack and emotionless, and he stopped struggling. Only then did Hermione speak.

“What is your name?” she asked clearly.

Harry closed his eyes for a long moment as countless memories of that same voice questioning him flickered through his mind, always starting with that one, same, endless question, and then the Death Eater spoke.

“Diocletian Blishwick.”

The bond with Hermione trembled slightly. They didn't know who he was, hadn't even heard of his family, but she clearly felt the memories of Harry's interrogations-slash-training sessions as vividly as he himself did. Harry had never been restrained but the question was the same, the emotionless tone was the same, and for a moment it had been Harry there in Blishwick's place.

Hermione took a deep breath to steady herself.

“Did you willingly and without coercion join the Dark Lord Voldemort?”

“Yes.”

There was no doubt, then. They had seen his Dark Mark, he had been part of the raid, and by his own admission, he had done so freely and willingly. There had been no one holding a wand to his family, no one threatening torture and death if he refused. Just another Death Eater like a hundred others. Now they needed to find out just what he had done in his master's name.

“Have you ever committed any crimes?”

Blishwick stared unseeingly at empty air. “No.”

His voice was flat and monotone, his body-language every bit what someone under Veritaserum should be – and they would know, having seen Harry under it fifty times or more already – but the answer didn't match with what they knew.

Then the Knut dropped.

“Voldemort's Ministry made the Unforgivable Curses legal,” Harry said softly. “They wouldn't have been a crime.”

“Same with hunting Muggles and cursing Muggle-borns,” George agreed, his focus on the chained Death Eater. “The scum probably still thinks the sun shines out his dead, scaley arse. How many Muggles have you killed, Death Eater?”

“I am unsure.” Blishwick seemed to blink slowly. “My Lord let us hunt them freely in our raids. I Crucioed a male to death before his family. I raped a pair of females and burned their hovel afterwards. I cast Reducto on a child when -”
“Stop!” Hermione’s voice cut through the toneless list of crimes. Blishwick fell silent.

Hermione clenched her hands. The quill was still scribbling away on the parchment on the table. She looked pale but her voice was steady when she spoke again.

“Have you killed or harmed any Muggle-born, half-blood, or pure-blood?”

“I killed a Mudblood beggar. He attempted to steal my wand. My Lord only permitted his pure-blood followers to go after the half-bloods and blood-traitors.”

“Oh, that’s rich, Death Eater. You’re a Mudblood yourself?” George demanded.

“My blood is impure.” If a Veritaserum-victim could sound ashamed, Blishwick did. “My father was a Mudblood. My Lord gracious took pity on my flaws and allowed me to seek greatness by his side.”

The room fell silent. Blishwick didn’t move. By Harry’s estimate, they still had at least another half an hour worth of Veritaserum in the man.

George glanced at him with a grim expression, then at Hermione in a silent question. He’d seen the same thing that Harry had, then.

Harry cast a quick Muffliato, then turned to the one friend he trusted to be his conscience. “Hermione?” he said quietly. “You should go keep Ron company.”

Hermione’s attention turned to him with the speed of a Snitch. “Harry -”

“You already know he's guilty,” George agreed grimly. “Death Eater scum of the worst kind. You don't need to know the details. We'll question him, get what information we can, get it written down, but you don't have to listen to this.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “We need to -”

“Need to what?” Harry asked. “Hand over the evidence and incriminate ourselves? Veritaserum isn't trusted in court. There are no witnesses. Any good solicitor could probably get him cleared of most charges without solid evidence to send him to Azkaban, and he's not one of the infamous Inner Circle.”

Hermione hesitated. “We could Obliviate him,” she said, but didn’t sound convinced. “Harry -”

“Memory Charms can be broken. At the very least someone would spot that he was missing three whole days worth of memories. He attacked you, Hermione. You and Neville. He didn't succeed because you're both bloody scary with a wand. but he was casting lethal spells. If we let him go with a Memory Charm, he'll try again, and next time he might get lucky.”

“You can't just kill him in cold blood!”

“Well, then, would you feel better if we made him hold a wand first?” George snarled.

He will be allowed to fight -

- give him back his wand.

The memory hit Harry with the force of a Bludger.

Bow to death, Harry.
He clenched his hands and forced aside the whispered words and memory of a reborn Voldemort. It wasn't the same. One was the sadist's game of snake and prey. This was little better, maybe, but at least they were going to make sure that there was one less Death Eater out there roaming the streets.

“It's still murder!”

“Then give us an alternative,” Harry said softly. “Because right now there isn't one. He's a murderer and a rapist, and if we let him go, he's not only never going to be convicted, but he'll probably do it again. Should we Obliviate him back to childhood? Leave him in St. Mungo’s like Lockhart and hope no one traces it back to us? Keep him locked up until he dies of old age right here in these cells?”

Hermione's eye flickered to the bound man, then back to Harry, George all but forgotten for the moment.

“You're not a murderer,” she said softly.

“I killed Voldemort,” Harry corrected her.

“That was different.”

“How?” Harry sighed. “How is this anything more than finishing up what I started when Voldemort finally got put down for good?”

Hermione stayed silent. Harry glanced at George again, then back at Hermione.

“Dark Lord, remember?” he said softly. “Why do you think I made that Vow?”

Hermione's hands were clenched so tight they were almost white and her voice trembled faintly when she spoke. “I can stop you.”

Harry spread out his hands, wand resting on his palm. “You can,” he agreed. “Say the word and I'll lay down my wand.”

Not that George would, and they both knew it.

“He's a murderer and a rapist, a bigot of the worst kind, and a willing follower of Voldemort,” Harry pressed on. “Tell me I've crossed the line and I will lay down my wand and leave him be.”

A moment passed. Then two.

“Go keep Ron company,” George said quietly. “You don't have to see this.”

Hermione closed her eyes briefly. Then she took a shaky breath, straightened, and left the room.

Like Ron, she didn't ask who cast the Cutting Curse. And like George, Harry didn't tell.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Quick A/N: By request, I've shorted the chapters a bit, so the next three (at least) will be 10-12k instead. The rest may or may not get shortened, too, if I can find a good place to end a chapter early. That will also extend the posting schedule by a few chapters.

Quick A/N 2: Dorea Black's portrait is not necessarily a reliable source of information, and Harry (and by extension Ron and Hermione) don't always get things like others' motivations and motives right.

Back to the regularly scheduled fic, and thank you for reading!

It took several days before Hermione would look at Harry without a vaguely hurt, disapproving look in her eyes. On the third day she deposited a heavy stacks of books in front of Ron on the floor of the library where they usually did their research, and Harry risked a cautious question.

“Hermione?”

“Healing spells,” she explained. She seemed a little reluctant to continue but did so nonetheless. “You'll have to learn, Ron. Harry doesn't have the finesse needed, and I'm – I don't work well with those kinds of spells. Some of them have to be released at just the right time to work, they won't work if you force them every step of the way, and – I don't think I can do that.”

Ron looked a little worried but picked up the first book, a heavy tome full of spells and wand movements and pages upon pages of what might go wrong. “I know a little from home, mum knew the basics with seven kids, but this is ... these spells can go really wrong. They're restricted for a reason.”

“The Black library had a few. I hunted down a few more.” Hermione bit her lower lip. “One of us has to learn, Ron. Preferably not Harry, since he's probably the one who'll need patched up. We'll all learn the basics but one of us has to know the advanced spells.”

“St Mungo's -”

“Won't be an option,” Hermione told them bluntly. “Voldemort couldn't walk into St Mungo's for treatment, and sooner or later, Harry won't be able to, either. I don't think any of Voldemort's marked followers save for Malfoy and Professor Snape would have been able to. Malfoy could because he was acquitted and the Professor because the Headmaster vouched for him, but even then they never did. The Professor went to Madam Pomfrey and Malfoy used a personal Healer. Right now we have neither. Mrs Tonks has most of the training of one, but we don't know how she'll take Harry's new choice of career.”

It wasn't something Harry had ever considered but Hermione was right. The right to treatment in St Mungo's didn't exactly include Dark Lords.

Ron seemed to have realised the same as he rubbed his hand down his face. “Merlin. I – all right. I'll need someone to practice on, I guess. I – Merlin,” he repeated.
“The small injuries are easy to practice – some kind of a numbing charm and then cast whatever spell you're trying to learn the treatment for,” Harry said. “I guess ... the bigger stuff we'll consider when we get to that?”

He glanced at Hermione and halfway expected to get a disapproving look in turn for suggesting that sort of thing. Instead she looked a little tired and resigned but mostly determined.

Ron looked at the books and sighed. Then he picked up the first one and started reading.

The first unwanted publicity from the lawsuits hit in early February. The first publisher had made a deal to keep it out of the media. It was a minor company and only had a few books in the line of fire, and no one had paid much attention when those books had vanished. Most seemed to have assumed they were merely sold out due to Christmas.

The second publisher was far larger and had far more invested in the Boy Who Lived fantasy, and they had decided to bring it to the court of public opinion.

Perhaps the owner had expected Harry to cave at the thought of being vilified in public. Most people apparently failed to comprehend that Harry was already used to being slandered by the press and had stopped giving a damn about the public a long time ago.

The public was very supportive of the tireless defender of free speech (and provider of Boy Who Lived fairytales) at first. That opinion changed somewhat drastically when it became public knowledge that the owner of said tireless defender was a member of a pure-blood family that had escaped Voldemort's time in power entirely unscratched. They had paid their expected 'contributions', of course, and had to remove their stock of books related to Undesirable No. 1, but that did nothing to endear them to a public that had suffered through a Death Eater reign of terror and the loss of family and friends.

The Office of Augustus Brookstanton, Harry discovered, could be ruthless.

Around the same time, the first of the lawsuits against the Ministry of Magic began. The Evans-Lupin Foundation had chosen it carefully. Glaedwyn Blythe was an elderly half-blood who had owned a small toyshop in a side-street to Diagon Alley for most of his life. He was a gifted enchanter whose toys – expensive, unique, and all hand-crafted – were remembered fondly by several generations of pure-bloods.

Both the shop and the stock itself had been claimed by Voldemort's Ministry early on. It was apparently inappropriate for a half-blood to hold such a place of relative importance to pure-bloods, not to mention that proper pure-blood children should be preparing for their place in Voldemort's empire, not play with childish toys.

Blythe himself had escaped with his savings to a relative in Ireland but wanted nothing more than to return to his lifework in London. He had not the gold, influence, or strength left to do anything about the Ministry's abysmally slow response, but the Foundation did.

The resulting publicity was a slaughter. The most surprising supporter of the lawsuit, to Harry's mind, was Narcissa Malfoy. She had written a waspish letter to the *Prophet*, wondering if the Ministry was so pressed for gold that they would take generations of joy from children, and made it quite clear that should she not be able to buy those toys for her future grandchildren – toys that she had bought for her son, and had herself grown up with – then a lawsuit from a minor foundation would be the least of their problems.
Harry didn't know if it was a way to improve their reputation, make life difficult for the Ministry, or something else entirely. He didn't care all that much, either. Two days and some rushed paperwork later Glaedwyn Blythe had received full compensation, along with an apology for his trouble.

The Evans-Lupin Foundation received his heartfelt gratitude and carried on with the next lawsuits – a set of three, all chosen as carefully as Blythe had been. It would take time, Harry knew. A few more lawsuits every time, each one with only marginally more issues than the previous one, until they had established solid precedence and could really get started. There was a long way from the half-blood Glaedwyn Blythe's established name and straight-forward case to the poorest part-humans and Squibs, but the Foundation was patient.

Two weeks into February the second publisher caved after a week solid of borderline harassment in the *Daily Prophet*. There was a lot of dirt to dig up on some of the companies that had managed to thrive under Voldemort's reign, and the Office of Augustus Brookstanton had been extremely thorough.

Paying salaries that depended on blood purity and political influence might have been appropriate a year ago, but few people were willing to put up with it now – and nobody was willing to admit to it. Doing so when some helpful soul had found photos of the owner of said business cozying up to Walden Macnair during Voldemort's year in power was a public relations nightmare.

The gold from the settlement went straight to the Foundation's vault with the dwarves without passing through Harry's Constantinople vault first. It would be no secret where the money came from, but once donated it was entirely out of Harry's hands and he was just fine with that.

“We spoiled him, your father,” Dorea reminisced the last Saturday of February when Harry was babysitting Teddy for the morning. The toddler's favourite blanket was sprawled across the floor, littered with toys, and Dorea's portrait had been moved so she could follow along as well. “Far more than we should. We all knew that Fleamont and Euphemia would have no more children.”

“Oh?” Harry glanced at his great aunt's portrait. Teddy took the chance to make a half-crawl, half-lunge at his favourite toy, but Harry caught him with practised ease.

“Careful there, Teddy. Floors hurt,” he said and handed Teddy the enchanted plush dragon.

The toddler laughed and waved his arms as he babbled cheerfully. He was close to his first word by now, and both Harry and Andromeda kept an ear out for it, but Harry caught him with practised ease.

When Harry looked at the portrait again, Dorea was smiling fondly.

“You have seen the Black family tapestry. Blacks have not lived long lives during the past few centuries. Nowhere near what an average witch or wizard should live. Some fell to enemy weapons or temperamental magic they could not control, of course, but the inbreeding demanded its price most of all.” Her eyes sharpened. “You carry the Black madness yourself. A mere echo of it, but you still bear it four generations later.”

Nothing like the mad, impulsive recklessness of Sirius. Nothing even close to the raw insanity that had been Bellatrix. But it was there, and months in Grimmauld Place had forced Harry to accept it for what it was. The single-minded stubbornness and insistence on heading straight into danger had been cultivated by a school career of useless, unhelpful teachers, a Ministry full of Voldemort collaborators, and a wizarding public of spineless cowards, which meant that if anything needed to
be done, he would have to bloody well do it himself. The core of it had always been there, though, that same reckless abandon he had seen in Sirius. His teenage years had merely strengthened it.

“Like Teddy and Tonks,” Harry agreed and stroked Teddy’s soft hair. The boy was too young to change the colour of it at more than a slow pace, but he was improving week by week, month by month. “There hadn’t been a Metamorphmagus in the Black family in two centuries. Not until Andromeda married a Muggle-born. But the ability was always there, waiting for the right time.”

“Powerful new blood,” Dorea said. “It fixed some of the problems of the inbred magic, at least. I found it difficult to conceive. Our son was stillborn. Euphemia’s family had an abundance of children, but they had still all but given up hope when she did conceive. That is the Black blood. There are ways to … encourage the conception of a child, but the methods are not without drawbacks. The Black family has used them liberally, but Charlus was very clear that he would accept what magic would give us. No more and no less.”

They were both silent for a while, watching as Teddy thoroughly tasted every bit of the plush toy. Harry wondered if it was a werewolf thing or just a normal toddler thing. He’d never been around little kids much.

“I wish I had known them,” he eventually said, a little wistful but mostly resigned. “Not just my parents, but all of them. There’s so much family I never had the chance to meet. Just my mum’s sister and her whale of a husband and son. All I have is stories, and most of the ones I got were about pranks that my dad was involved with. People keep comparing me to my parents, but it doesn’t make sense. I never knew them. No one ever taught me how a Potter or an Evans or a Black is supposed to act. And when someone tells me that my parents ‘would have been proud’, it’s always when I’ve done something they personally agree with. It’s never ‘Mr. Potter, I am severely disappointed and you’ll have detention for a month, but your mother would have been proud’. It’s ‘Excellent decision, your parents would be proud’ or ‘We left you to face Voldemort alone again rather than do anything useful, but you survived! Your parents would be so proud’.”

Teddy made a happy sound and turned huge, inquisitive eyes back to Harry who winced.

“Your grandmother will kill me if your first word is ‘Voldemort’. Please say ‘grandma’ instead. Grandma. Grandma.”

Teddy laughed and squirmed a little to discard the plush dragon in favour of a brightly-coloured wooden block.

“I never knew your mother,” Dorea said when Teddy had settled down again, “but the Potters and the Blacks were both about family. In different ways, but they had that in common, at least. The survival and good of the family above all. Family first and power a close second. The Blacks were about Dark Arts while the Potters embraced all aspects of magic, but both valued power.”

“My parents have always been held up as the shining examples of light magic.”

Dorea laughed sharply. “Your father was a Potter of the Black bloodline. I never gave up the Dark Arts, and Charlus never expected it. Isla Black taught her daughter the Black arts and she in turn taught her sons. Your father was given a solid grounding in all kinds of magic, not merely what Hogwarts teaches. He was a Gryffindor, certainly, but that does not rule out the Dark Arts. He had little talent for it, but he was taught nonetheless, as any child with the Black blood should be.”

It was a strange thought, trying to merge the image of the Gryffindor prankster with a descendant of the Black line, but what little Harry had seen also showed that James Potter had the Black recklessness to him and a vicious, ruthless edge against anyone he took a disliking to.
“Do you think they would have been proud of me?”

He felt vulnerable all of a sudden, wanted to know as much as he feared the answer, but this was his great aunt and she had known her nephew better than anyone still alive at Hogwarts had. She couldn't answer for his mother but Harry still had to know, the one and only time he would ever ask, and the only opinion he would ever give any credit to.

Not Dumbledore, or the insidious Resurrection Stone, or a hundred people claiming to have known them or taught them or worked with them. His family, and no one else.

“Your parents died to protect you,” Dorea said softly. “So fiercely did they love you. All you have done since Riddle’s defeat has been in the defence of your godson and those who do not have a voice of their own. I think they would have been proud beyond belief.”

Harry took an steadying breath. “Even of a Dark Lord?”

“Even of a Dark Lord. And never let the fools of the wizarding world tell you differently.”

Harry arrived at the Burrow the last Sunday of February like he usually did – with the crack of Apparition. He had a long-standing feud with the Floo and Portkeys were little better. They had disabled and disconnected the Floo at Grimmauld for security reasons but they were perfectly capable of creating illegal Portkeys. Harry just preferred to stay clear of them if he could.

Ron and Hermione greeted him by the door like they usually did, too – like they hadn't seen each other in weeks and hadn't spent pretty much every day for the past year and a half together.

Harry didn't always manage to make it to the Weasley Sunday dinners, but he joined in as often as he could. Ron and Hermione usually spent Sunday at the Burrow, and instead of the two going to Grimmauld to meet him, Harry joined them there.

Molly looked better week by week. A little bit at a time, but it was improvement, and everyone was relieved. This Sunday she greeted him with a tight hug – like always – and then held him at arm’s length to look at him proper.

“Oh, it's so good you could make it, dear. You look a bit peaky.”

“Andromeda had an appointment, so I had Teddy yesterday morning and most of today,” Harry explained. “Then I spent the rest of today childproofing everything. I don't know how Andromeda does it every day.”

It was partially true. He couldn't very well explain that part of it was sheer exhaustion from trying to browbeat a new Dark spell into submission the previous afternoon, with Ron and Hermione ready to help if something went hideously wrong. He had managed, but he had also been given a brutal reminder that some spells were borderline sentient and not too happy to be ordered about.

“Necessity, dear,” Molly Weasley said fondly. “You can't do anything else with children in the house.”

Then Bill and Fleur arrived, back in the Burrow for the first time since Christmas, and Molly's overwhelming hugs found two new targets.

Eventually they managed to move to the table that almost groaned under the amount of food, and several hours later found them happy and full. There were leftovers, but not many. Weasleys in general, Harry had noticed, seemed to have impressive appetites, but between Ron, Charlie, and Bill
Harry had noticed Bill glancing at him and Ron and Hermione several times but thought nothing much of it. The man hadn't been back since Christmas and had apparently been somewhere in Greece with Fleur for a job, leaving little time to catch up with the family.

He was forced to take it somewhat more seriously when Bill put a hand on his arm as they got up from the table and gestured towards the stairs. “I need to talk with you,” he said in a low, pointed voice. “Alone.”

Harry nodded and followed. There was nothing else he really could do – there was no obvious reason to say no, and no way to refuse without causing a scene and generating far more questions. Suddenly the memory of the glances during dinner became somewhat more ominous.

Bill led them to Ron's old room and locked the door. The privacy wards that followed were utterly foreign to Harry and powerful enough to make Hermione envious. Harry knew, he could feel her in his mind. He had opened the connection to both of his friends the moment Bill led him away.

The oldest of the Weasley brood – *oi, mate!* – watched him for a long moment, and even Ron had no idea of what he was thinking. It wasn't the hard hostility Harry had seen him show in battle, or the casual friendliness of almost-family. Harry imagined that this was the way Bill approached a particularly dangerous, unexplored tomb, and he was starting to wonder if this was a mistake.

Then Bill seemed to reach a decision and he moved, a swift, smooth gesture that turned his wand around in his hand to offer it to Harry instead, handle first.

Harry shifted uneasily – he definitely had a bad feeling about this, all three of them did – and then he accepted the wand gingerly.

Bill took a small step back and held out his hands, palms flat and empty, and Hermione explained before he could ask. *It's an informal request for parley that you just accepted. It's not a Vow but...* she trailed off and Harry swallowed.

It was not a Vow, but it was still a borderline surrender.

“Bill?”

“I am a curse-breaker,” Bill started carefully. “A strong sensitivity to magic is all but a requirement to make it in this line of work. Would you like to tell me why my youngest brother, his girlfriend, and you have all got proto-Dark Marks on you?”

Harry's heart skipped a beat. The sudden flood of adrenaline and cold, clammy fear kicked it back into motion, and he could feel the echoing emotions from his bondmates. Worry and apprehension from Hermione and stubborn defiance from Ron, and he silently repeated his promise to himself. He would protect them, no matter what.

Hermione's reasoning skills had already kicked in – *he is in the Order and has experience with Dark magic. He probably recognised the feeling of the Marks from the Death Eaters, and, I heard mum argue with Dumbledore about Bill once, she didn't want him reading those books from Grimmauld, from Ron – and Harry took a slow breath to calm himself a little and gather their thoughts before he answered.*

“Dumbledore had you researching the Marks. That's why no one else has caught us yet. You need the sensitivity and the experience, and most people don't have even one of those. Why approach me about it? Why not Ron?” He didn't try to deny it. He was pretty sure that would be a lost cause.
Bill's hands were still held out, the perfect image of non-aggression, and that was the only reason why Harry still had his wand angled slightly downwards and not aimed straight at Bill. "Ron's the tactician. Hermione is the brains. Neither of them would do something like this without your agreement."

The long silence in his mind was a little uncomfortable, but none of the three could think of anything to say in disagreement to that.

"It's not a Dark Mark," Harry finally corrected him, using knowledge that Hermione offered him. "Voldemort further corrupted a slave mark created by a Dark Lord in the fifteen-hundreds. This isn't a slave mark. It's a mental bond and a connection as equals."

"It's still soul magic," Bill pointed out mildly.

"And I will testify under Veritaserum that Ron and Hermione broke no laws. Neither of them ever cast the spell. I've stepped on enough toes that no one would question it. They'll be more than willing to pin it on me. We've all seen wizarding justice in action."

"That's ten years in Azkaban."

Harry snorted. "Not for 'the Saviour'," he disagreed, just a little bitter about yet another title. "I'd be sent through the Veil or acquitted, depending on whether I was currently a Dark Lord in the making or a tragic hero bravely risking my life to protect my friends."

Bill nodded slowly, expression unreadable. "And are you?"

"Dark Lord or tragic hero?" Harry's lips twisted, not quite in amusement. "You'll have to be a little more precise, Weasley."

Someone in his mind – it felt like Ron – took a sharp breath that echoed as emotions through the bond.

Mate ...

Definitely Ron.

No. I'm done. If he wants an answer, he can ask. Neville had the guts to do it, a Gringotts-trained curse-breaker can do the same.

Bill's eyes narrowed. That answer alone had probably been plenty to work it out.

"All right, Lord Potter. Do you really expect the wizarding world to just go along with it when we only just got rid of the last Dark Lord?"

"I don't know," Harry snapped back. "Do you have any other convenient Chosen Ones to dump the job on? His name was Voldemort, Tom Riddle if you want to be accurate, and based on how the wizarding world reacted to him, I bloody well expect them to roll over and obey, because that's what they did the last two times."

"And you roped in my brother and his girlfriend."

"I tried to talk my two best friends out of it, but you should know how well that works on a Gryffindor."

Bill's hand twitched. Harry wondered if the man was starting to regret giving up his wand, but he
kept a tight grip on it and a shield a heartbeat away.

“Says the _Gryffindor_ Dark Lord to be.”

Harry's answering smile bordered on malicious. “The Hat wanted me in Slytherin, and Voldemort
would have rewarded you with a _Crucio_ for talking back. Terrible Gryffindor thing to do to someone
you think is a Dark Lord, isn't it?”

_Harry!_ Hermione this time. Harry ignored her, his full attention on the possible threat in front of him.

"You wouldn't attack an unarmed man."

Harry tapped the two wands against his hand. “You sound awfully sure about that.”

Bill took a sharp breath, the gesture painfully similar to the way Ron reacted sometimes, and this time
the insistent words in his mind got through.

_Bloody hell, Harry, what are you doing?_

_Pushing him, _Harry said bluntly.

_Harry!

“Ron and Hermione wouldn't follow a new Voldemort.” Bill almost didn't hesitate when he spoke
the name. Harry was reluctantly impressed.

“I might not have given them a choice. Gryffindor impulsiveness and all. So easy to lead around as
long as you give them a cause to fight so bravely for.”

It was easy to find the words, easy to goad the oldest Weasley son. Harry had spent far too long
listening to Snape and the visions of Voldemort, and the Slytherin mindset came easy to him now.
He would never be the silver-tongue that the young Tom Riddle had been, would never have the
razor-sharp insults of Severus Snape, but he at least had other people's expectations to play on. Their
expectations and their reactions when he failed to live up to them. He didn't have to sound perfectly
like a Dark Lord. More likely than not, any listener would add the needed venom and undercurrent
of threats to his words themselves.

Bill's expression sharpened. Harry's grip on the two wands tightened when he felt a whisper of a
movement in them.

“Wandless, wordless magic, Weasley?” he said with deceptive mildness. “I thought you were here
under parley.”

“Accidental magic,” Bill answered blandly.

“At your age? How embarrassing.”

“Forgive me for being a little startled hearing the Gryffindor Golden Boy talk like a would-be Dark
Lord.” Bill snorted. “Nice job baiting me, though. I know Ron better than that, at least, and I like to
think I know Hermione well enough to call bull on that, too.”

For long seconds the room was silent as they watched each other carefully.

_We can't Obliviate him, _Hermione said. _Who knows how long he's been suspecting us?_

_He's trustworthy, _Ron disagreed. _He's a Weasley. Even Percy turned out all right in the end._
Hermione didn't feel convinced. *Enough to trust him with this?*

*He was a member of the Order. He helped protect Harry, protect all of us. I bloody well trust him. We trusted George and Neville, too.*

*And we know George and Neville a lot better than Bill, too. He's your brother, but Harry barely knows him and I've only spoken with him a few times when he has visited.*

*He's Bill! He bloody well fought in the Battle! If that's not good enough, what is?*

Harry didn't speak but let them argue, watching Bill all the while.

“Ron is arguing for you,” he finally said. The mental argument stopped instantly. “Hermione isn’t sure, but she's also aware a quick *Obliviate* is not an option. Who knows how long you have suspected us, much less what insurances you decided to bring with you to confront me?”

Bill nodded slowly. Harry was impressed he hadn't felt the wand strain against another unspoken summoning spell. He could imagine himself in Bill's place, his fate being discussed by an unseen council and his weapon in the hands of someone who had openly admitted intentions of Dark Lordship, and not knowing if he would have to duck a Memory Charm or worse any moment. He doubted he would have been able to look as calm.

That, or Bill was that secure in his own abilities. Harry wasn’t about to underestimate someone hired by the goblins, but he was also well aware of his own strengths and weaknesses thanks to Ron and Hermione.

*George has incriminated himself with us,* Harry said. The slightly frigid feeling from Hermione let him know she did not appreciate the reminder of their dead prisoner. *Neville hasn't, not to the same extent, but he has offered to help us. How is the contract coming along?*

Hermione hesitated. *I need a little while longer to work on it. We can't risk a mistake.*

*And if we don't have that?*

Ron took a deep breath that echoed through the bond. *Tell him that if you're going to Azkaban, I'm going with you. Tell him I said that.*

*Ron -*

*I know you're stupidly self-sacrificing and would probably do something incredibly dumb to keep us out of it, but that doesn't matter. If he rats on you, he's condemning all of us. Tell him that. I trust him, but ... tell him that. He's a Weasley. He won't like it, but he won't turn his back on me.*

*He could be convinced I'm controlling you and decide to do something about it,* Harry pointed out, quite reasonably.

Ron paused. *Maybe. But he knows me and he knows I'd do it. Tell him.*

Harry nodded, even if his friends couldn’t see it. Bill's stance shifted in response.

“Ron says he trusts you. He also says that if I'm going to Azkaban, he's going with me, and to tell you that.”

Bill stilled for a moment. Then his shoulders dropped slightly and he sighed. “He would. Weasley stubbornness at its finest. All right, Potter. What are your goals?”
No harm in revealing that, and it could potentially see Bill somewhat more positive towards their cause.

“A safe society for my godson.” It sounded so simple when he put it like that. A little obsessive, too, and maybe that was the Black blood in him talking. Even half-mad from Azkaban, Sirius had been relentlessly single-minded about his few causes – the death of Wormtail and the safety of Harry himself, for what little he had actually been able to do as a wanted man.

Bill watched him carefully. “Very altruistic for a Dark Lord.”

Harry shrugged. “It doesn't make me any less of a Dark Lord when the Ministry, the Wizengamot, and a number of backwater wizarding prejudices stand in my way. Make no mistake. I've spent seven years witnessing the best wizarding justice and politics had to offer, and I'm not impressed. Even if Teddy isn't targeted by werewolf legislation now, what sort of society will he grow up in? As a second-rate citizen for being part-human, even, since Remus was a werewolf? Condemned to reservation, maybe? That's what they were planning for werewolves in the original vote, after all. Maybe he will have a proper pure-blood as Charms teacher, if he's actually allowed at Hogwarts. Professor Flitwick is part goblin, after all, and we're overdue another rebellion. Can't have someone related to those spiteful little creatures teaching children, after all.”

Harry's mockery of a pure-blood supremacist rant seemed to hit a little too close to home. Bill's eyes narrowed again.

“It doesn't have to be like that. Veela in France have the same rights as humans.”

“And here they don't,” Harry said bluntly. “I'm surprised Fleur is willing to visit this country at all but if she's smart, she keeps an eye on politics. Get advance notice before they decide that part-Veela are Dark creatures, too. Hagrid's a good man but too stupid to realise he'll be a target sooner rather than later for having giant-blood.”

That definitely hit too close to home. The wand in his hand shifted again and Harry felt a charge in the air from barely restrained magic.

“We didn't fight Voldemort twice just for another Dark Lord to take over, no matter how supposedly good his reasons are.”

“No,” Harry agreed. “You tried and failed to defeat him twice, left the job to my mum and me, and then proceeded to continue with the same damn thing that resulted in Voldemort in the first place. Blatant discrimination and racism. You're right, that's so much better.”

The charge between them burned sharper and snapped with an audible crack as the magic grew too heavy. Harry’s silent Protego slammed into place a half-second later with the merciless instincts of someone used to fighting for their life, and Bill took a sharp breath. His wand was still in Harry’s hand and he held out both hands, palms up and empty.

“Bloody hell,” he breathed. “I forgot how good your reflexes are. I supposed I should thank you for not cursing me.”

Harry held the shield and let long seconds tick onwards before he finally lowered it. “Ron trusts you, and you haven't tried to kill me yet.”

“No Crucio?” Bill sounded only half joking.

Harry swallowed. “I am not Voldemort.”
“No,” Bill said softly. “But if you want to change wizarding society on such a fundamental level, you may well have to be. And then we will meet on the battlefield. I can't support that, no matter how good the cause is.”

Harry ... Hermione trailed off and he knew what she was asking.

“Talk to Ron. Talk to Hermione. We have contingency plans in place.”

Bill paused. “All right. I will.” A heartbeat, then - “My wand?”

Harry held it out, handle first like Bill had done, and the curse-breaker visibly relaxed as the wand changed hands once more. Then he took down the wards with practised ease, nodded once at Harry, and left the room.

I ... guess it could have gone worse?

Hermione just sighed.

It wasn't all hard work, practising spells under the Fidelius. Some spells demanded more than Ron and Hermione could manage – the Fidelius would remain the prime example – but a lot of them they learned together.

The weather on Harry's Hideaway wasn't always the best but they had spells for that, too, and they had come to look forward to some of their more spectacular attempts. Muggle-repelling wards took care of any interest that they might draw.

“Muniminis!” Ron cast on lazy Tuesday in early March with the cheerful enthusiasm of a first year.

The ground around him hiccuped in a perfect circle before it settled again.

“You need more of a jab at the end!” Hermione shouted from where she watched the proceedings with Harry, well away from Ron.

Ron jabbed. The circle of dirt wobbled and sunk back into place.

“Muniminis!” he tried again with a little more care in his motions, and this time the ground responded proper. A circular wall of dirt some seven feet tall rose straight from the ground around him. They couldn't see Ron behind it, but they definitely saw the effects when the wall detached itself and started to spin while moving outwards. As it pushed out further, it became clear that the wall was getting thinner, too, and by the time it had been pushed a good thirty yards away from Ron, it looked more like a slowly spinning tornado made up of lumps of dirt and grass.

Inside the construct, through the web of dirt, they saw Ron move his wand in circles above his head and the wall sped up, faster and faster with each circle.

It was a visually impressive defence, not as durable as stone but a good foundation to build on, and it worked brilliantly until Ron seemed to spin his wand just a little too fast and the dirt shot upwards as if fired from a cannon.

The great cloud hung above them for an impossibly long second. Then gravity pulled it back and only three hastily-cast Shield Charms kept them from being covered in dirt and plant bits.

A cascade of debris landed around them and were deflected by the shields. The sound of wet dirt hitting equally wet grass was just another reason for Harry to be grateful for magic and the wonders
In the middle of the mess, Ron looked on with a wide-eyed expression. Then he looked at Hermione and opened and closed his mouth a few times.

“I, uh -” was as far as he got before Hermione interrupted him.

“You were supposed to keep focusing!”

The last few small leaves drifted down and settled on Harry's shield, and he laughed even as Hermione proceeded to chew out their friend about the dangers of rogue spells. There was no possible way they weren't going back to Grimmauld covered in mud and plants that evening, magic or not.

It was entirely worth it.

The Goblin Rebellion of 1999 began the last Friday of March, right before Hogwarts sent the students home for Easter. Harry had no doubts the timing was deliberate. He was only surprised they hadn't decided to wait until the last day of the school year, or the day the Hogwarts letter went out, just for added chaos.

Hogwarts itself would, for the first time that anyone could remember, close entirely for Easter to continue the ongoing reconstruction. From what they had heard from Ginny, Neville, and Luna, though, even the fifth and seventh year students would have been likely to go home, anyway, rather than stay and study. The memories of Hogwarts were still dark and imposing, and all the more so in a mostly-empty castle.

The goblins, spiteful little bastards that they were, knew perfectly well that there was about to be an influx of students coming home and thus families in need of Galleons to go shopping with their offspring.

Gringotts closed its massive doors on the morning of the 26th of March, two hours before the Hogwarts Express was due to depart for King's Cross.

The Ministry of Magic responded by sending a small delegation of one so-called 'goblin expert', a Ministry official, and two Aurors to clear up the obvious misunderstanding.

Gringotts responded by slaughtering the four of them and leaving the decapitated bodies on the steps before the bank.

Less than eleven months after the Last Battle, wizarding Britain was officially at war again.

The goblin demands were published in the *Prophet* the following day. The Ministry had apparently not been happy with that, but since the original list had been left on the doors of Gringotts itself, there was little they could do about it.

Harry could sort of understand why the Ministry didn't want the list to be public knowledge. The demands were plain, sharply worded, but summed up to 'equal rights'. The right to a wand. The right to representation in the Ministry. The right to live beyond the tunnels under Gringotts. Everything a good part of a soft-heated public would be very understanding of when the alternative was another war so shortly after the last one ended. Sure, the goblins were a little angry and unpleasant, but certainly that would improve with a little respect? And it was so very inconvenient not to have ready access to Galleons.
The demands were complete and utter bull, in Harry's not particularly kind opinion. The goblins by their very nature didn't give a damn about living above ground, but it would give them an excellent opportunity to set up fortifications to use in a future rebellion. Representation in the Ministry was useless, as a number of part-humans could attest to, and the goblins had to know that, too. It would, however, give them access to the Ministry buildings, which was far more than they had now.

Only the right to a wand wasn't complete bull, and they'd been fighting for that right for as long as they had been in Britain. Considering that they had fought the wizarding world to a standstill repeatedly, without wands, giving in to that demand was tantamount to suicide.

The goblins knew it, the Ministry knew it, Harry knew it, but a good amount of the wizarding unfortunately did not, or simply refused to acknowledge it.

Harry was frankly surprised that his dead body wasn't on the list of demands. Then again, he was still the Saviour and Man-Who-Won and whatever else they called him these days, and demanding his life – or even just blaming him for the rebellion – was likely to backfire spectacularly.

Those people still sympathetic to goblin demands of equal rights would be significantly less sympathetic if the demands included the heads of perfectly respectable wizards or witches.

It didn't mean he wasn't a target, and he knew that. It felt strangely familiar, knowing that a powerful force was after his life again. He was already a target of the remaining free Death Eaters and assorted crazies of the wizarding world. Having the goblins actively out for his blood and not just a standing threat of execution if he set foot in Gringotts wasn't that much of a change.

The Hogwarts Express had arrived the prior evening under heavy security. Ron and Hermione had been there with the Weasleys to greet Ginny and their friends. Harry, sensibly, had stayed at home and spent the day checking the protections on his house.

When he saw his friends again on Saturday evening, they arrived with a packed dinner from Molly Weasley and an enormous treacle tart for dessert.

“Mum says thank you,” Ron greeted him as they settled their cargo on the floor between them. Molly Weasley did not believe in shrinking food unnecessarily. A feather-light charm, certainly, but food just didn't taste the same when it had been shrunk.

“They got everything out of Gringotts?” Harry knew Ron had brought it up to them, but he had no idea if they'd actually done it.

“Yeah, they moved it to the dwarves. Bill had warned them, too. Bit of a travel, dad says, and the goblins weren't happy, but better than having no Galleons at all.”

'Unlike a lot of other wizards and witches in Britain' went unspoken. Why keep more than you had to at home when Gringotts was far safer? Harry wondered briefly how families like the Malfoys fared. For all that Binns went on and on about goblin rebellions, most people had seemed quick to assume it was a thing of the past. The Malfoys, at least, had a heavily-protected manor and intimate experience with the fickleness of politics and the dangers of risking everything on one bet. Harry wouldn't be surprised if they had a generous amount of Galleons hidden away for those unpleasant little surprises.

For the moment the situation was tense. Once on-hand gold started to run out, it would get worse fast. Ministers had been toppled for far less, even popular ones like Shacklebolt.

“I'm guessing Bill's permanently out of a job.”
“Mum's kind of happy,” Ron admitted. “She never liked the dangerous stuff much. Charlie's bad enough.”

“Fleur mentioned that he's already got other offers, though,” Hermione added. “Gringotts isn't the only ones to employ curse-breakers, they're merely the biggest employer in Britain. He made a lot of contacts in Egypt, apparently, and Fleur knows a number of interested people in France.”

“Yeah. That part, mum wasn't happy with.”

“Might be better for them, though,” Harry said. “France has equal rights for Veela. I don't know about Egypt, but France would be a lot better for them than Britain would, what with Fleur being part-Veela and all.”

There wasn't much any of them could say to that. Instead they brought the massive basket to the table and set up dinner. Harry enjoyed the company and suspected that after a full day of Weasley chaos, Ron and Hermione enjoyed the silence.

The food was everything Harry loved about Molly Weasley's cooking and even with Ron's appetite, there were plenty of leftovers.

The treacle tart was amazing, and it was only when most of it was gone and all three of them had eaten far more than they should, that their conversation drifted to heavier topics again.

“It'll be bad,” Ron said when the plates had been removed by Mute, and a bottle of Firewhisky opened and tasted. “When the Ministry steps in. They have to, it's just a question of whether the goblins attack first or they do. Couple of days and the outcry will start. Then the stupider people will start to hammer on the door and demand to be let in.”

“And then the Aurors, when the goblins strike back,” Hermione said softly. “If you had taken up Shacklebolt's offer of acceptance in the program, you would have been preparing for war again.”

“We already are,” Harry said equally soft. “Just not in the Ministry's name.”

Ron picked up the bottle and refilled his glass. The Firewhisky bubbled and burped a small blue flame. Ron tapped the glass a few more times, just to see the dancing flames. “He's going to show up, anyway. Shacklebolt. You know it, Harry. You're still the Hero of the Wizarding World and all that. You're not an Auror but they'll want every wand they can get, and it'd be great publicity. You know, as long as you didn't get killed.” He paused. “Actually, even if you got killed. Sorry, mate, but it's true. A martyr's a lot easier to work with.”

“Ron!”

Harry snorted. “What? It's the truth. I don't know if they're calling in the trainee Aurors, too, but you can bet that if Ron and I had signed up for the Aurors, we would have been right in the middle of it, trainees or not.”

“Probably gonna blame us, too. Just because,” Ron added. He drowned the Firewhisky and grimaced at the burn. “Bloody hell. And we were so sure the world would be fine after Voldemort kicked it. Get the chance to be stupid for a while and celebrate, settle down, get a job. Get married. Raise a Quidditch team worth of Cannons fans.”

Harry glanced at Hermione before he could stop himself. She sighed and reached over to grab the bottle from Ron. “It's going to be one of those nights. Give me that.” A shot of Firewhisky later and she passed the bottle to Harry and slumped back in her chair. “It didn't work. The first months were great. Then we started to argue about stupid, inconsequential things. About books. About laundry.
About table manners. Merlin, we argued about the *Prophet*.”

“That's when we both figured it was a lost cause,” Ron agreed quietly. “Then we tried as friends, and it worked a lot better.”

Harry nodded slowly and wasn't sure how he felt about it. It wasn't like he had talked to them about Ginny, either, although it seemed to be pretty common knowledge that they weren't dating these days. He poured a large shot and passed the bottle to Ron. It seemed the proper thing to do.

“We haven't told anyone,” Hermione admitted.

“We haven't even told mum.” Ron stared at the bottle. “Everyone expects us to marry. Everyone expects me to become an Auror or something, and Hermione to change the world. Bloody hell, this time last year we were fighting for our lives. We share a room and that's it, but no one's as much as noticed.”

Harry winced slightly. He had been wondering a little but he didn't have much experience with relationships, and he'd had a lot of other things to worry about. He hadn't figured it was his place to barge in. Now he regretted it a little.

The Firewhisky seemed to have opened a floodgate, and Ron seemed relieved to finally talk with no expectations hanging over him. “Mum expects a proposal and marriage. What happens if we tell them it didn't work out? They wouldn't kick out Hermione, but mum would make her sleep in another room because it wouldn't be proper, and we still can't sleep alone with those nightmares. Then she'd start setting us up with people. Good, proper witches and wizards for her baby boy and adoptive daughter, and all they'll see is the chance to hook up with a war hero and make a little fame from it.”

Harry was silent for long moments. Then he sighed. “I kissed Ginny the day after Hallowe'en. She wanted to know, she said. So I did and ... something was missing, I guess. She knew it would never work, and I think I knew somewhere, too. She's – she has the chance at Hogwarts to be something more. Have a boyfriend that doesn't wake up from a nightmare and destroys the door because he thought it was a Death Eater. Someone who won't have his whole bloody life dictated by prophecy.”

The Firewhisky looked downright nice now. Harry downed it and grimaced as it burned all the way down. He had probably poured a lot more than he should have.

Hermione made a sound that was half laugh and half sob. “Merlin, we're a great team.”

Harry's hand closed over hers only half a second after Ron's did, and for a long time they just sat there, hands clenched tightly and not speaking. Then Harry cleared his throat.

“You can move in here. I know you wanted to stay at the Burrow but – if you want it. Most of the house is repaired and I have more rooms than I'll ever know what to do with. It's not particularly nice and it'll probably be raided by Aurors one of these days, but it's warded and it's yours for as long as you want it.”

Hermione wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her free hand. “You have such a way with words. I – Ron?”

Ron looked up, and in that moment he looked so tired and so relieved that Harry's heart twisted in sympathy. “We wanted to stay for mum, but she's doing better now. We – I needed the company but it's getting too much. Yes. Merlin, yes.”

“Yes. And thank you,” Hermione said softly. She took a shuddering breath and let go of their hands.
again. “After Easter, when Hogwarts starts up again?”

“Give mum time to get used to the idea?” Ron asked. “Yeah. Maybe at the end of April is better.”

“It's yours,” Harry agreed. “Whenever you want it.”

The rest of the night vanished in a haze of Firewhisky. But the promise remained and Grimmauld Place felt just a little more like home.

By Monday morning, when Gringotts remained a silent, locked-down fortress, people had started to become worried. Harry personally thought they should have been worried the moment Gringotts closed its doors, but no one had ever accused the wizarding world of being sensible.

A few particularly foolish or desperate people had hammered on the doors to be let in, unaware – or simply not caring – that they were standing in the same spot where goblins had left four decapitated bodies just days prior. Fortunately for their future health and well-being, no one had responded and they had left again eventually, complaining all the while.

A few dozen people had gathered in the Ministry Atrium to protest, according to the Wireless. Harry wasn't sure what they possibly hoped to accomplish, but the Aurors had quickly and firmly sent them on their way.

Shoppers skittered around Diagon Alley like mice in an owlery. The atmosphere felt like the minutes before a thunderstorm. The *Prophet* brought out their biggest fonts, probably in an attempt to make people not notice that the only pictures they had were of the closed doors of Gringotts and some unhappy looking Aurors.

Harry was resoundingly unimpressed.

By Wednesday morning, the last day of March, Grimmauld Place received a most distinguished visitor. The Gringotts situation had turned from an annoyance and somewhat of a concern to an increasingly large problem by then.

Thursday morning the Ministry salaries would be due. They would be able to hand out the appropriate payslips, but that would do little good when no one could get to Gringotts to exchange it to decent, reliable gold. Few wizarding stores were willing to accept credit. Fewer still were willing to do it during a goblin rebellion without massive compensation for the risk they would take on the gold.

Negotiating had done nothing. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had all kept up with the situation as much as they could through the biased views of the *Prophet*, and after days of absolutely no news of progress, the paper had started to fill up with a number of letters from its readers. They ranged from raving pro-goblin demands to agree to everything to open Gringotts again, to equally raving anti-goblin demands to see the entire Goblin Nation driven from Britain. All of them presented an increasingly pressing issue for the Ministry.

Perhaps, then, it should not have been surprising to find Grimmauld hosting the grand presence of the Minister along with a small guard detail. There had been little notice given, merely a request for a meeting and the Minister arriving mere minutes later.

Shacklebolt looked visibly tired, but Harry would have been surprised otherwise, what with everything that was going on. His guard detail, four Aurors, looked somewhat on edge – though in their defence, Grimmauld was still noticeably Dark – but let Shacklebolt raise a privacy spell around himself and Harry nonetheless.
Harry wasn't about to assume they wouldn't be told everything, anyway, but he supposed it was a nice gesture. It wasn't like he wasn't broadcasting everything to Ron and Hermione, anyway.

"The three of you successfully broke into Gringotts and escaped during the war.” Shacklebolt skipped straight past pleasantries and right to the point.

Harry didn't respond to that. It was a somewhat well-known fact that most people dismissed as an exaggerated rumour, in part because the goblins vehemently denied it and Harry had never talked about it.

“We have very little information about the interior of Gringotts beyond the publicly accessible areas. What we do have is a fifty years or more out of date.”

“I can't imagine they didn't increase security after what we did,” Harry said. “I didn't notice anything last time I visited, I had other things to worry about, but they would be idiots not to. I'd say you would have better luck with someone like Bill or Fleur Weasley, who've actually worked with the goblins.”

Kingsley looked a little pained. “We tried. They refused. Their contracts carry heavy penalties for betraying the trust of the Goblin Nation, even after their employment is over. The Ministry's previous information came from a human clerk. When the goblins discovered it, his property was seized by Gringotts, and he vanished in the middle of the night. The official story was that he fled the country. Unofficially, his family used the Dark Arts to track him. The trail let to Gringotts but was extinguished before actions could be taken.”

That sounded like a very polite way to say 'killed'. Gruesomely, too, knowing goblins.

“That doesn't exactly encourage us to help.”

“You're not under the same contracts.”

“No. We are, however, on incredibly bad terms with the goblins. We'd prefer not to make it any worse.”

Half truth, half lie. Harry didn't want to deal with a Goblin Nation actively out for his blood and not just banning him from Gringotts under the pain of death. There were still people out there he would cheerfully have pissed off the goblins for; the Minister just wasn't one of them. He understood on some level why Shacklebolt had approached him but he didn't have to like it. They had done enough already, all three of them, and Harry had absolutely no delusions that the goblins wouldn't somehow find out he had been involved. When it came to secrets, the Ministry was as secure as a broken locking spell and half as useful.

Shacklebolt watched him for a long time. Then he nodded slowly. Harry was a bit surprised the man hadn't pulled out the 'We could save a lot of lives with that information' tactic, but he supposed Shacklebolt knew better. He had always been good at reading people.

“There have been a number of lawsuits,” the man said, abruptly changing the topic. “Every time one compensation is settled, two more suits are filed. Are you planning to bury the Ministry in paperwork?”

Harry shrugged. "The Foundation is out of my hands, Minister."

"You have nothing to do with the Evans-Lupin Foundation?” Shacklebolt asked dryly, stressing the name.
"I funded it, I signed the paperwork, and then I handed it into capable hands. I wanted the settlement money to do to a good cause; the Foundation ensures it happens."

"We have enough to do with a goblin rebellion without fighting another war in court."

"Then perhaps the Ministry should have handled the compensations sooner."

"You seem to think it's a matter of deliberate stubbornness. The paperwork alone has taken months to go through. Would you prefer we just handed out Galleons and property to whoever argued the loudest and simply ignore it later when it turns out they were lying? Everything after the first fall of Voldemort was a rush job. I would prefer to avoid making the same mistakes," Shacklebolt said pointedly.

_I would prefer not to see another innocent in Azkaban_, he didn't say and didn't have to.

Harry stilled. Magic roiled right beneath his skin, under a paper-thin sheet of ice. "And how long will you use that excuse?" Harry said with deceptive mildness. "The trials finished in September. If you can ensure obviously fair and unbiased trials over just a summer, how long did you expect us to simply accept that it's different when the Ministry is the one supposed to pay and not whatever Death Eater you handed out a fine to?"

Shacklebolt was equally still for a moment. Harry wondered if he regretted visiting yet. "There is very little the Ministry can do to convince you of its good intentions, isn't there?" he stated more than asked.

"Can you blame me?"

Shacklebolt watched him for a long time. "Even knowing that people you trust are working to improve it now? If not me, will you trust people like Arthur and Percy Weasley?"

"I trust them not to approve of legislation that will potentially see my godson reduced to a second-class citizen."

Shacklebolt closed his eyes for a moment, and Harry hadn't noticed until then that he looked far more tired that he used to, even when the war was at its bloodiest. "I don't control the Wizengamot. I can't control the Wizengamot."

"True," Harry agreed. "Still doesn't make me trust the Ministry in the slightest. Most Muggle-born had their property confiscated and have yet to have it returned. The rest managed to get what they could out in time and kept it elsewhere. Their Gringotts vaults were supposedly safe, but that didn't matter much if you couldn't get to Gringotts safely in the first place. A number of them still keep their gold elsewhere in case things go bad again. The remaining Gringotts clients, as I understand it, are mostly pure-bloods, half-bloods that managed to keep their head down during Voldemort's occupation, and the occasional Muggle-born that should have known better. Tell me, Minister – why am I supposed to care about one group of Voldemort collaborators squabbling with another?"

"Some. Not all. There are innocents caught in the middle."

Harry shrugged. "I warned the people I care about."

"I notice it didn't make it into the Prophet. Remarkable discretion."

"I am eighteen years old, Minister. I fought in the war against the darkest wizard of this century from the age of eleven. I willingly walked to my death at seventeen for a useless, ungrateful wizarding public. I've done my part. I don't see what I owe to the same people that gleefully called me a
delusional liar last time I brought back bad news. It would probably have triggered a goblin rebellion right there, and then it would have been blamed on me, as always."

“I assume you have no gold caught in Gringotts, then?”

Harry snorted. “What do you think, Minister? They have made it quite clear that they will kill me if I ever set foot there again. I claimed every vault I could, on my own and Teddy's behalf, and had them transferred immediately.”

There was a bit of genuine curiosity in Shacklebolt's dark eyes. “Where did you move it?”

It was almost the Shacklebolt Harry remembered from the war but not enough to make up for trying to manipulate him into being a tame pet for the Ministry of Magic.

“Elsewhere,” he said blandly. “Well out of the Ministry's reach. I've heard great things about the dwarves, though.”

Shacklebolt frowned. "Harry -"

"The Headmaster was big on forgiveness and second chances," Harry said firmly. "I am not Albus Dumbledore."

“No,” Shacklebolt said quietly and with a bit of that grave disappointment that the Headmaster always excelled in, “you're not.”

A year ago, that disappointment would probably have made Harry cave. These days, he found he gave precious little thought to it.

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Was that smart? Hermione asked worried in the back of his mind, when Shacklebolt and his guard detail had left. Making enemies this soon?

I find, Harry admitted, that I'm rapidly losing my ability to care.
Chapter 4

Thursday morning arrived with the heavy pressure of an impending thunderstorm.

_When Will the Ministry Act?_ The Prophet demanded, conveniently not mentioning that they themselves were unable to pay their people, too. The entire front page was a thinly-veiled demand that someone put those 'miserable creatures' in their place, and the pro-goblin letters had been delegated to somewhere between the Weekly Wizard Wanderer – this time detailing a disastrous visit to a Muggle pub – and a mostly-incoherent rant about the current prices of potions ingredients.

The Ministry apparently expected a large number of angry wizards and witches to descend upon the Atrium, and warned them on the second page of the Prophet to stay home, as showing up would do nothing to help. Harry wasn't surprised, and he wasn't stupid enough to even consider going anywhere outside of Grimmauld's wards.

Ron and Hermione arrived shortly before noon with a basket from Mrs. Weasley. Both looked somewhat grim.

"Dad's staying home today. He says his job isn't worth his life. Mum's happy."

Mr. Weasley, Harry knew, was in a position where he could do just that and where he had a good chance of a new job if he did get fired for it. Far from everyone in the wizarding world could claim the same.

Harry was still grateful that the kind man was out of harm's way, should everything blow up today.

"What about George?"

Ron's grim expression tightened. "In Diagon. He's not leaving the shop."

There wasn't much Harry could say to that. And so he didn't.

They spent the afternoon in the library, eating huge slices of Mrs. Weasley's exceptional Victoria sponge cake and generally not doing much of anything. Harry couldn't focus and judging by Hermione's fidgeting and Ron's restless shifting, he wasn't alone.

"It's weird, not being in the middle of it," Ron finally said, when the silence became too much. "We've always been at the centre of everything, whether we wanted it or not, and now we're just ... waiting."

"It might not happen today," Harry pointed out, though he knew it was a lie as soon as he said it.

"If they wait much longer, the Ministry will get toppled." Hermione didn't look happy. None of them
did. They didn't like the goblins, but they didn't have much better experiences with the Ministry, either. It didn't mean they wanted that inevitable bloodbath to happen, when the Ministry finally stepped in. “They have to act. People are out of money. Even with support from some of the lesser banks ... they're out of time.”

“I don't get it.” Ron looked bothered. “I – it makes no sense. The goblins, I mean. They must have known it wouldn't work.”

Harry poked the last bite of cake with his fork. “Stubbornness?” he wondered. “And ... it's goblins, I guess. Maybe they thought the Ministry was weak and would cave to avoid another war.”

“Not all of the goblin rebellions had ... sensible reasons behind them,” Hermione said, searching for a nice word. “It could be that history was written by the victors, but sometimes they went to war over the slightest of reasons. And most times they fought the wizarding world to a standstill, at the very least.”

Harry took her word for it. He hadn't paid much attention in History of Magic as it was, as his grades could attest to.

“Confidence?” Ron considered that. “Well, I reckon that's as good of a reason as any.”

None of them mentioned the number of people likely to be in Diagon Alley despite the tense situation. George was there, too, and Lee and Angelina, and whoever else was manning the shop, but at least they could protect themselves. The shop was as close to a fortress as it could get while still keeping up the appearance of a joke shop. Few others were likely to be anywhere near as prepared.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had all been forced to learn a number of painful lessons over the years and one of them was that you had to pick your battles. Harry would have blamed himself once. He still felt unreasonably guilty about a situation he had nothing to do with and could do nothing to change, but he was getting better. Ron and Hermione ensured that.

The room fell silent again. Hermione made an effort to at least try to focus on a book, but both Harry and Ron merely sat there, staring into empty air.

A whisper of magic was all the warning they got before the room lit up in bright silver from George's Patronus.

“Aurors and Ministry people showed up outside a couple of minutes ago – they vanished by Portkey or Apparition. Pretty sure I saw some Unspeakables, too. We just started to hear fighting from Gringotts.” Message delivered, the spell faded and left the room a lot darker.

Hermione stared the spot where the Patronus had been. “It's going to be a slaughter.”

“With that sort of fighting? Both sides are going to be bleeding people,” Ron agreed.

Bleeding people for utterly pointless reasons. Because few beings could hold a grudge like a goblin. Because the Ministry had a centuries-long history of oppression and discrimination. Because every goblin rebellion left the two sides with more resentment towards each other, and Harry knew better than to believe that would ever go away.

He raised his wand and focused on happy memories and the feeling of his own Patronus. A moment later Prongs pranced into existence. “If it comes to it, Grimmauld is open. I know it's the shop, but worst case it can still be rebuilt.”
We can't lose anyone else, he didn't say. Not you, too. If not for us, then for your mum.

They waited in silence. Then, a long minute later, George's Patronus reappeared.

"They'd have better luck breaking into the Ministry than these wards. We made them to keep Death Eaters out. More than the bloody Ministry ever managed."

The best they could hope for, Harry supposed. George would never leave the shop to burn.

"I wish – I hate not doing something." Ron's frustration spoke for all three of them. "We spent so long wondering why it always had to be us, why no one else did a thing – I don't want us to be in the middle of that thing, but now I wish we could do something. Trained us well, didn't they?" he added bitterly. "None of our business anymore, now innit, but we're still here wanting to help."

Harry's answering smile was tired and every bit as bitter. "Not like anyone else will do much, is it?"

"They'll wreck the Alley, probably. Gringotts will be a tomb. Themselves and the goblins both; goblins know the place and have the numbers but we've got wands and Aurors with a grudge from the war. Probably pretty evenly matched, I'd say."

Hermione gripped Harry's hand blindly, and he knew without reaching for the bond that it was time to end that line of conversation.

Ron wrapped his arm around Hermione's waist, and Hermione's fingers entwined with Harry's, and they simply stayed there for long minutes until Hermione made a soft sound and broke the silence.

"They're never going to stop."

Harry didn't ask if she meant the Ministry or the goblins. The answer was the same, anyway.

Ron grimaced. "Letting the goblins win even once would have be suicide, and goblins never forget a loss. They'll get even, doesn't matter if they have to wait a century to do it. They hate the Ministry. They have to work with them, but they hate it. Bill told me he almost didn't get hired at first because dad is a Ministry employee. They only changed their mind because – well, we're pretty sorry excuses for pure-bloods."

He glanced at Harry. "The only person they'd be less happy to deal with would probably be Harry."

Which probably meant that when he was done forcibly fixing the wizarding world, he would have a goblin rebellion to deal with instead. Maybe even both at the same time, if they saw their chance while he was busy elsewhere.

Hermione was quiet for a long time.

"I thought ... if we could fix society, we could fix the Ministry, and maybe then things would be better," she confessed. "We'd fix the discrimination, and the pure-blood-centric laws, and – I supposed I thought that would be it. But it won't be. There will always be someone – be something that won't be happy. I knew the wizarding world wouldn't approve but ..."

"You thought the magical beings, at least, would appreciate what we had done," Harry finished quietly.

Ron cleared his throat. "Most of them would be, I think. Goblins are just – different, I guess. The werewolves and vampires and those kinds, I think they'd appreciate it. Just ... goblins, I guess," he said again with an awkward shrug.
Harry had accepted that he would live the rest of his life at war the moment he had told Hermione and Ron his plans. He had hoped, for a while. Allowed himself to wonder what it would be like to have a family, and a home, and a steady job somewhere that wasn't trying to kill him. He had also accepted that it would never happen. He would always be the Man-Who-Won, and that would always make him a target. Now, he was just a target for something he had actively chosen.

Harry had accepted it. Hermione, he realised, hadn't until now, and it hurt more than he thought it would to see her struggle with it.

With a glance at Ron, they both moved closer, holding Hermione tight as they simply waited in silence for news to arrive.

The Goblin Rebellion of 1999 ended on April Fools' Day with an uneasy truce after six days. The terms were not hashed out until late that evening, and both sides paid for it in blood. It was not a long goblin rebellion, but it had caused plenty of damage still.

Harry saw the list of those injured or killed in the *Prophet* the following morning and was grateful he didn't recognise a single name. They didn't name the goblins, of course. All they mentioned in that regard was a throwaway sentence of '... As well as seventy-six goblins of Gringotts.'

Considering that it was the *Prophet*, Harry was impressed they mentioned even that much.

Luna appeared on the doorstep of Grimmauld that Saturday, but it wasn't the Luna that Harry remembered. Her robes were sunshine yellow but the pattern almost subdued, and her earrings were small and metallic and blandly traditional. Her large silvery eyes focused on the air somewhere above Harry's right ear, but then she seemed to force herself to look him in the eye.

Harry let her inside, concern growing by the second. "Luna?"

"Harry." She made an awkward curtsey. Harry took her hand gently.

"Luna. We're still your friends. Please."

At the top of the staircase, Hermione and Ron appeared, drawn by the worry in their bond.

"Luna?" Hermione took a step down the stairs, looking as worried as Harry felt.

He felt Luna's hand tremble. She made a soft sound and then she collapsed in Harry's arms, sobbing brokenly as Harry held her helplessly.

"My father is encouraging a relationship with Rolf Scamander," Luna whispered half an hour later, when they had managed to calm her down enough to speak again. She had a mug of hot chocolate in her hands and a conjured handkerchief courtesy of Ron. She looked better, but her eyes were still ringed with red.

Hermione frowned slightly as she tried to pinpoint the name. "From *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*?"

"His grandson." Luna hesitated. "He is a very accomplished naturalist."

Something in her voice made Harry's heart twist painfully. Ron's frown left no doubt he had picked up on it, too.
"I don't recall his name from Hogwarts. How old is he?" Hermione asked carefully.

Luna looked down at her mug, a far cry from the somewhat strange but surprisingly blunt girl they had known at school. "He will be thirty this year. He was a Ravenclaw. He is a very kind man, and he will be a loving husband."

It sounded like she was dutifully reciting a line she had heard a dozen times before.

"He's almost twice your age. That isn't right, Luna." Hermione's house-elf crusade might have died a quiet death, but her stubborn refusal to accept the unfairness of the wizarding world hadn't. "You don't have to marry someone just because your father wants you to."

Luna's hand trembled. Hermione reached out to cover it with her own, and the younger girl calmed a little again. "The Scamander family is well to do and we are not," she admitted softly but brutally honest. "Father is old-fashioned. He wants to find me a husband that will be able to proper care for me, and very few proper pure-bloods want to marry Loony Lovegood. Rolf is far better than being broodmare to a man four times my age."

"What about The Quibbler?" Harry asked.

"Father barely makes enough to support himself. He can't afford to have me stay at home for much longer. My grandmother had put aside gold for my Hogwarts supplies. I would not have been able to attend otherwise." She hesitated again, and Hermione squeezed her hand a little tighter in silent support. "I can't stay. Father is - he was never well after mother died. There is no job that would pay enough to support me on my own right out of Hogwarts. Nobody wants to hire Loony when there are dozens of other normal, sensible, clever Ravenclaws around with better grades applying for the good jobs. Rolf is a kind person," she repeated, no less unconvincing. "I am very fortunate."

The three of them exchanged a glance as Luna focused on her mug again.

Even half a year ago, the Ministry would have been an option. Harry didn't want to be the sort of person that relied on his fame for everything, but for Luna he would gladly have pulled what strings he could to get her a Ministry job. That approach had been firmly closed after Shacklebolt's visit.

I've got the emotional range of a teaspoon, Ron reminded them. Don't ask me.

Hermione rolled her eyes and looked pointedly at Harry. He sighed soundlessly and tried to figure out what to say. This wasn't the Luna they were used to. This wasn't the Luna who randomly showed up and talked about strange creatures that -

"Does he believe in Nargles and Wrackspurts?" Harry asked, grasping on to that thought. "Will he hunt Crumple-Horned Snorkacks with you?"

Luna stayed silent, staring at her mug. That was all the answer Harry needed.

Grimmauld wasn't a particular nice place but there were rooms to spare and most of them were even suitable for humans these days. It might be awkward with their plans and research if Luna lived with them, but Harry trusted her to keep a secret. He just needed his two friends' agreement.

Grimmauld - he began, but was interrupted by Ron.

"The Burrow," he blurted. "Bloody hell, can't believe I forgot about that. Just – give me a moment."

Ron left the room in a half-run, throwing a distracted gesture of 'stay' in their direction. Luna looked up, confusion in her huge eyes. Hermione shrugged a little in a silent 'your guess is as good as mine'.
They could have asked him, but Harry figured they would know soon enough.

They stayed in uncomfortable silence until Ron's footsteps returned at a more sensible pace – followed by another set. Harry looked up to see Ron step inside, followed by Mrs. Weasley. Harry wasn't sure how much Ron had shared but judging from the worried expression and slight frown, he assumed it had been enough.

“Oh, you poor dear.” Mrs. Weasley say down next to Luna and tugged a stray lock of blonde hair back behind her ear. “It'll be all right, just you see.”

Luna trembled and a moment later she was clinging to Mrs. Weasley, sobbing again as she let go of the pain and stress and fear.

Hermione slipped soundlessly out the door, Ron and Harry on her heels. They closed the door quietly behind them, and let the two have some privacy.

_Mum – we have lots of room in the Burrow now that most of us have moved out, and mum – mum's not good with being in a quiet house_, Ron said. _Luna will have a place to stay and someone to support her, and mum will have a little more life in the house._

It wasn't a perfect solution, maybe, but Harry was rapidly realising that very little in the wizarding world was.

Hogwarts classes started up again Monday the 12th of April. The Hogwarts Express had departed the day before under heavy security, taking with it all of the students, and life beyond Hogwarts settled down once more.

That Monday also became the day when Harry received the visit he had been expecting for a while.

The wards alerted him to visitors shortly before eight that morning. He had already been up for a good few hours by then, woken up by nightmares like so often before, so at least he was dressed and had already finished breakfast when someone knocked loudly on the front door.

Mute appeared by his side, her eyes wide and terrified, and Harry knew there and then just exactly what sort of visitors he had. Mute was a timid creature, afraid of most things, but Harry had discovered that few things terrified her as much as Aurors. He suspected it had been part of the training the Lestranges had given her, and that wasn't something he wanted to linger on.

Harry put aside the charms book he had been reading and made his way to the door with forced calmness. Everything illegal, everything even overly questionable had been hidden in the basement under the Fidelius. It still didn't stop him from feeling like he was about to face an enemy in battle.

He opened the bond to Ron and Hermione with a thought and felt the comforting warmth of their presence.

The sight that greeted him when he opened the door was six Aurors in those familiar red uniforms. The one in front wore the rank of Captain and had a formal-looking piece of parchment in his hand.

Mute wrung her hands but vanished to somewhere else without Harry needing to tell her. He had given her strict instructions never to interfere with Auror business unless he specifically told her to. The potential punishment if she attacked one of them, even in defence of him, was not something he was willing to risk on her.

*Be careful, mate,* Ron said. *Dad says they've been a lot rougher lately, since the goblins and all.*
“Harry James Potter,” the Captain spoke. “By order of the Ministry we have a warrant to search for Dark artefacts on the premises.”

He held out the warrant. Harry accepted it and remained silent as he read through it carefully. He was used to legal documents now, and he wanted to make sure everything was in order.

Several of the Aurors shifted uneasily, though Harry couldn't tell if it was because of who he was or the reason for the warrant. He let the silence stretch a few seconds longer, just to add to the discomfort.

“I believe we got rid of all of it,” he finally said airily, “but it is the Black family home. Perform your search, Captain, but I will be watching the proceedings. There will be no one left to wander alone in my home.”

The Captain frowned. “It will be faster if we split up, sir. This is just a formality.”

“Of course,” Harry agreed. “Unfortunately I have had a number of unpleasant experiences with the Ministry in the past seven years. You will forgive me for being less than trusting.”

One of the Aurors stepped forward and spoke something hurriedly in a low voice that Harry couldn't hear. The Captain's face soured a little.

“Understandable, sir. We can work around it.”

Harry nodded and gestured to the door leading further into the house. “Then after you, Captain.”

Shacklebolt. Hermione's anger and betrayal flowed clear through their bond.

_Probably_, Harry agreed with surprisingly little bitterness, most of his attention on the Aurors. _Or someone else has it out for us. But you'd probably need to go pretty high up in the system to get a warrant to search the home of 'The Slayer of Voldemort'_.

The Aurors started with the hallway and brought out a number of instruments, half of which Harry didn't even recognise.

_Detectors. Dark magic detection spells are useless in the older manors, with so many years of Dark Arts in them, Hermione said quietly. You never mentioned to anyone that you finished clearing out the house. As far as Shacklebolt knows, Grimmauld is still full of Dark artefacts from the Black family._

The betrayal echoed in Harry's bond now, too, sharp and bitter. _Ron?_

_Couple of reasons I can think of, their third answered. Only two that really makes sense, I figure. One, he's hoping to give you a good scare, use it to make you fall more in line with the Ministry. I'm sure he's got a speech all picked out for when he calls you to his office and reassures you that he knows it's all a misunderstanding, and he'll of course handle this for one of the great heroes of Hogwarts. Ron hesitated for a moment and Harry knew it wouldn't be good. Two, he's decided you're a threat, and this is a genuine attempt to get you into trouble. This is what they did to suspected Death Eaters, too._

_Either way, the Ministry officially became a threat, Harry summarised._

His two friends didn't answer. They didn't need to.
The search took six gruelling hours and found nothing. Grimmauld Place had been expanded far beyond its size and the Aurors were thorough, leading Harry to suspect that they had expected to find something.

The Fidelius held.

They didn't find the basement.

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*Man-Who-Won's Home Raided by Aurors: Dark Lord Rising?*

It wasn't Rita Skeeter's name on the article, but Harry recognised the style of the words, anyway.

*I suppose it was too much to hope for that she wouldn't try to find a way around it,* Hermione said resignedly. She hesitated for a moment, mainly because she was reluctant to give up blackmail material as useful as that – none of them had any pity for Rita Skeeter – and then she sighed. *I'll send an anonymous tip to the DMLE.*

Rita Skeeter was arrested two days later.

An unregistered Animagus with no prior record and a useless form could, with some luck, end up fined a significant amount of Galleons but avoid prison.

Rita Skeeter, who had stepped on some very influential toes and had an Animagus form that lent itself exceptionally well to gathering information no one wanted shared, faced the full Wizengamot. That it happened in the wake of a goblin rebellion only made the punishment all the harsher.

She tried to take a number of people down with her, chiefly Hermione for blackmail. Without Veritaserum and with no witnesses beyond Ron and Harry – who would both gladly and willingly lie to the entire wizarding world for Hermione's safety – there were few people willing to listen to her, and even fewer willing to believe that the war heroine bookworm was even capable of such a thing.

The *Prophet*'s editor-in-chief earned a steep fine. Rita Skeeter earned two years in Azkaban.

In Grimmauld Place three glasses of Firewhisky clinked together in a silent toast.

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Ron and Hermione moved to Grimmauld Place the last weekend of April. Molly Weasley wasn't altogether convinced about the whole thing, but she had also never liked Harry living alone there, and in the end she had relented.

Crookshanks was a little displeased – he had enjoyed the broad expanses of open land around the Burrow according to Hermione – but even he eventually deigned to settle down on the couch by the fireplace.

There wasn't much to move, and when they stood there with a few trunks worth of shrunken items, there was a moment of awkward silence.

"You can have any bedroom you want," Harry said. "Alone or together, I – it's up to you. Mine's on the second floor."

"The master bedroom?" Hermione confirmed. She glanced at Ron and seemed to reach some silent agreement. "Good. It's big enough for all three of us."
Harry blinked. “Wha-”

“No,” Hermione stood straighter, daring him to argue. “I'm tired of nightmares, and I know Ron is, too. We can transfigure a decent bed for tonight and find a proper sized one later that fits all three of us. We're miserable apart and to be crude, none of us are dating, anyway. Give it one night, Harry. We already have a bond and have seen each other naked last year. Our nightmares are less when we're together. Give it one night to see if it's true when all three of us share a room. Just sleeping. Nothing more.”

There wasn't much he could say to that. And after the best sleep he'd had in months, in a bed that took up half the room, there wasn't much he wanted to argue about the following morning, anyway.

They cracked the hurdle of Veritaserum in early May.

It took a combination of their bond, crude Occlumency, and a lot of practice on Harry's part. With Harry's experience to draw on, both Hermione and Ron would likely master it much faster, and with Hermione's well-organized mind, none of them doubted that she would have it down in no time.

The familiar haze settled around Harry's mind one quiet Tuesday afternoon in Grimmauld, and Hermione's endless question reached across the distance to him.

“What is your name?’

Harry reached towards one side of the bond and blocked all other things from his mind, until all he was, all he knew, was the familiar presence of his first friend. The whole thing took an instant and he spoke before he was entirely aware of it.

“Ronald Bilius Weasley.”

Something crashed to the floor. Somewhere along the bonds was a flare of surprise and excitement that came through even the effects of the Veritaserum. Hermione's voice when she spoke again was calm – barely.

“Have you cast the Fidelius?”

Harry blinked slowly.

“No,” he said truthfully, because Ron Weasley had not.

“Are you male?”

That one was easy. Harry almost answered until the other side of the bond reached him and he was surrounded by the alien sense of knowledge, endless, meticulously organised knowledge, and he knew the answer then.

“No,” he said equally truthfully, because Hermione Granger was not.

“Merlin.” Ron's voice whispered in the distance. “We did it. We bloody did it.”

“Maybe,” Hermione's voice said grimly. None of it was a question, though, so Harry did not answer.

“Who was the Bonder of Harry Potter's Unbreakable Vow?” Hermione asked for the fourth time, and this time there was no out.

Both his bonds knew, just as Harry himself did, and if he hadn't been surrounded by the strange
otherworldliness of the potion effects, he would have felt disappointment settle where elation had been a moment before.

“Ronald Bilius Weasley,” he spoke. He felt someone tilt his head back, and the familiar taste of the antidote filled his mouth a moment later.

“It's not lying,” Hermione stated, “but it is selectively choosing the truth. You looked just like any other time you've been under the potion.”

“It felt like it.” Harry accepted the glass of water from Ron and took a swallow to get the sour after-taste of the antidote out. “I couldn't fight it, but I could focus enough on one of you that I could speak the truth as you knew it.”

“I felt the tug on the bond,” Ron said. “Focus on the part of the bond that we need and block out the rest? It should work ... as long as there’s always one of us that stays out of whatever it is.”

“Only in those situations that might prove a problem,” Hermione said. “And we can take turns if we must. You had no problem switching between us, did you?”

“Very little,” Harry confirmed. “And I think it'll get easier every time.”

Hermione nodded. “Again, then. And when we're sure you can do it in your sleep, you teach us in turn.”

With the end of the Hogwarts year quickly approaching, owls had flown between Neville and Hermione almost daily. Hermione knew the Hogwarts and Black libraries, knew what they had and what they still needed and what exactly Neville could get his hands on, and she ran her book-hoarding mission like a military campaign.

The Black library was massive but there were still a number of subjects either lacking in books or where the material was severely outdated. With access to Harry's accounts, Hermione had gone hunting to find what they needed. Some books they bought. Some they borrowed and copied from the Hogwarts library through Neville. The wizarding world had a number of protections against copying, but those charms wore off after a number of years and generally weren't cast on much, if only because the spells to actually copy a book were devilishly difficult to cast.

Hermione had mastered them with unsurprising ease, and she had proceeded to teach Harry as well. She had drilled him mercilessly in the spells until he finally managed to her demanding standards, and the only reason she hadn't made Ron learn, too, was because he was busy with healing spells instead.

Hogwarts, Hermione had quickly discovered, did not have protections to stop someone from sending a book home. Pince only cared that the book was returned on time and in pristine shape.

As a result, a number of shrunken books found their way to Grimmauld Place where they would be duplicated and sent back. The spells required parchment and ink to work with, as well as unwavering focus. Copying those books had, more than anything, taught Harry the focus he would need to pull off a number of other spells flawlessly. It took a solid week of practice in March before he had managed to create a copy that wasn't somehow flawed. By May he had it down to ten minutes. Between the two of them the holes in the Black library were filling in fast.

The Blacks had cared little for light magic, and Hogwarts had that in abundance. The Blacks had preferred subtle, insidious magic, while Neville found a number of books in Hogwarts that dealt with the sort of high-power magic that had been used during the Final Battle.
Hermione had told Neville what they did and didn't have access to already, and Neville had provided. In return, they duplicated a number of the books for him as well. Some were hideously expensive. Some were the sort his grandmother refused to spend good, decent gold on – herbology, for the most part.

Even the limitations on books from the Restricted Section – which were not supposed to leave Hogwarts – were easily subverted between Hermione's knowledge of spells and Neville's permission slip from Professor Sprout.

Between research, trying to be there for Andromeda and Teddy, leaning any useful spells he could get his hands on, brewing potions and duplicating books with Hermione, and the relentless Veritaserum-sessions, Harry could count on one hand the number of nights he'd slept more than five hours since March. Ron and Hermione were doing little better, with the added work from the Foundation on top. They kept a permanent supply of Invigoration Draughts in the potions lab, and all three of them had learned to drink coffee out of bitter necessity. Neither option was particularly good for their mental focus, and the Draught was a flat-out hazard, but they didn't have much of a choice.

Anyone in Hogwarts they knew and could trust enough with any of their plans would graduate come June – Neville, Ginny, Luna, and pretty much everyone else they had really come to know during their school years.

By the middle of June at the latest, the Hogwarts library would be permanently out of reach. And so they pushed on as time ticked down mercilessly.

In the third week of June, the Hogwarts Express returned to King's Cross and the students returned home to the summer holidays or their first steps into the wide world beyond Hogwarts.

Harry had arrived with Ron, Hermione, Andromeda, and Teddy to meet the rest of the Weasleys. Molly wanted the whole family there for Ginny's arrival, and none of them wanted to argue. Molly was finally becoming more of her old self again and less the pale ghost she had been for so many months, and if she wanted the family there, the family would be there. Even Bill and Fleur and Charlie had managed.

Harry hadn't been social much for the past year beyond his friends and the Weasleys. As a result, it was only when he arrived at the platform at King's Cross with Teddy held protectively in his arms that he realised how much he had changed. Close to a year of researching, planning, and throwing himself head first into any useful magic he came across had left a very different person than the Harry he had once been.

He hadn't grown taller, and had long since accepted that he would always be shorter than most, but he had filled out a little, his shoulders were broader, and he let his magic stretch its wings freely these days. He didn't care much for the intimidation factor, but he had learned that it was a useful way to improve his ability to focus for prolonged periods of time, and that was all he cared about. Teddy seemed to like it, Hermione encouraged it, Andromeda understood, and the Weasleys seemed to mostly ignore it. There weren't too many other people out there whose opinion Harry cared about these days.

Harry was spotted almost immediately when he arrived on the platform. Then the whispers started. Harry brought up more of his magic, ready to cast a shield in an instant, and the closest of the crowds backed away, cowed by the pressure bearing down on them.

Teddy made a small sound and gripped at Harry's robe. He wasn't much for strangers at the moment,
and that made the gossiping crowds unforgivable as far as Harry was concerned.

Andromeda had seen her grandson’s reaction, too, and pursed her lips. Harry didn’t doubt that only sheer willpower kept her from an acerbic comment about the upbringing of the common witch and wizard. As it was, her displeased expression was enough to make people keep at least a bit of a distance to their small group. Andromeda might have married a Tonks, but she was of Black blood and bore enough of a family resemblance to Bellatrix Lestrange that most people were smart enough not to push their luck.

Between the two of them, nobody would get near Teddy Lupin who didn't have a bloody good reason to.

A cluster of red hair further on told them where to go – bless the Weasley and Prewett lines – and Molly Weasley's perpetually worried expression eased at the sight of them.

She hugged them tightly when they reached her. Harry was pretty sure it wasn't just his imagination that the hug was tighter than it usually was when they visited. He clearly wasn't the only one a little unnerved at being outside among so many people.

Teddy's grip on Harry's robe eased slightly at the sight of another somewhat familiar person, and Harry shifted his grip a little. Teddy was getting heavy but he was not about to let his godson walk on his own in a crowd like this. Molly got her first good look at Teddy's current looks and her breath hitched just a little.

His hair was black for the moment – from Harry, from Andromeda' father, and genetically from Tonks as well, according to Andromeda – but his eyes had changed during the day from mimicking Ron's warm blue colour to the bright green of Harry's instead. Teddy's features were more Black than Potter, but he still looked like Harry's son by blood.

“Such a handsome young man,” Molly said softly. Teddy, feeling the scrutiny, hid his face against Harry's neck, drawing a wry smile from his godfather.

“He’s a little shy right now.”

Harry didn't glance at the crowds as he said it, but he didn't have to. Molly turned to the closest people with a disapproving frown and several of them shuffled back a little, destroying the ruse that they weren't paying close attention to their group.

Andromeda gave them a disdainful look to match Molly's, then pointedly ignored them. Harry kept an eye on everything, and he knew Ron and Hermione did as well. Fleur looked radiant as ever but the tension in her body showed that she was probably as uncomfortable there as Harry himself was. Bill certainly didn't look very happy.

George was a given. He was only there for his family's sake and would much rather have buried himself in work.

When Voldemort had died, Harry had allowed himself a bit of hope that things would eventually return to normal. That there would be Quidditch and dinners and family and plain, boring life. A year on had taught him that they were all veterans of a war they’d had no choice but to fight in and no training to rely on, and they would all pay the price for a long time. Most of them had a shield ready to cast a moment's notice. Harry was just the only one of them who was obvious about it.

The distant sound of a familiar steam locomotive brought a hush through the crowds. Then the equally familiar sound of the whistle pierced the air, and excited voices picked up again.
It had been several long months since the students had last been home, and that break had taken place under the shadow of a goblin rebellion. Harry didn't blame them for wanting their children home again.

“Let me hold him,” Hermione said quietly, more for the others' benefit than Harry's. She knew he wanted his wand-hand free, especially with the Hogwarts Express arriving with an influx of students, and she worked smoothly to make sure only she and Ron would be aware of his unease with being essentially defenceless with a child in his arms. Harry glanced at his godson and Andromeda and then nodded and transferred the toddler to Hermione's arms instead.

Harry stroked his hair fondly. “Be good for your aunt Hermione?”

Teddy grinned widely, showing off his first few teeth, and latched on to her with all the stubborn determination of a fourteen-month-old. He was still a long way from being able to pronounce her name – for now his vocabulary consisted mostly of mama, a name that Andromeda had readily accepted despite the pain it had to cause her – but he knew her, had played with her frequently, and felt perfectly safe with her.

Teddy was a quiet child, but he was happy and Harry hoped that was all right. He knew little about children, and he still worried that there would be something horribly wrong with Teddy one day, and he wouldn't discover it until it was too late.

Up ahead, the Hogwarts Express arrived in a cloud of scarlet lines and billowing steam and came to a stop with a relieved sigh.

The doors opened and the first of the students spilled out of the doors in a chaotic mess of robes and luggage and noise. There was shouting and talking and laughter, the sounds of footsteps and running and trunks against stone and the motion of a thousand or more people in one location.

Hermione's grip on Teddy tightened, and Ron drew closer to both of them, and Harry wondered if there would ever be a time again when he saw a crowd like that and did not instinctively look for threats.

The younger students seemed to be the first ones out, all of them unfamiliar to Harry. Then the older students appeared at a more relaxed pace, talking to friends and making plans for summer before they split up to find their families.

Bright red caught Harry's eyes – no Weasley would ever be overlooked in a crowd – and Ginny made her way through the thick crowd to the cluster of them, waiting by the wall where there were slightly fewer people.

A stuffed vulture bobbed above the crowds further down the platform and was gone again. It looked familiar enough that Harry suspected it was Augusta Longbottom's, which meant Neville was probably over there somewhere, too. Not for the first time he cursed his lack of height, but the complaints by now were half-hearted at best, used to it as he was.

There were glimpses of other faces he recognised, students and former students and people who had fought at Hogwarts, but they remained glimpses and were gone again a second or two later.

With one last push through a cluster of people Ginny appeared and ran the last few steps to her mother, trunk forgotten behind her. Luna, a little more meandering, came into view a moment later.

Molly hugged her daughter tightly, let go for a second to get a good look at her, then hugged her once more. Ginny bore it with the patience of someone used to it. Then Molly let go of her and
wiped her suspiciously wet eyes before she turned to look at Luna.

Luna seemed to hesitate for a moment, unsure of what to do, until Molly pulled her close and hugged her tightly as well. “You poor dear,” Harry just barely heard over the noise of the platforms. “We have a room for you, and it's yours for as long as you need it.”

Some of the tension in Harry eased just a little, so lightly that he had not even been aware of it until then. Luna would be all right. He had known, of course, but it was different to actually see it. There would be people who cared and a roof over her head, and she wouldn't need to marry someone twice her age in return.

Luna's huge eyes seemed as suspiciously wet as Molly's when they parted again.

“Thank you, Mrs. Weasley.”

“Molly.”

“Molly,” Luna conceded softly, and Molly gave her a warm smile.

The sudden feeling of relief and hope from Ron was almost overwhelming, but both Harry and Hermione politely ignored it. They both understood, and every little bit of progress was one step closer to the Molly Weasley she had once been.

In the time it had taken to find each other, the Hogwarts Express had emptied and the billowing clouds of steam eased a little. The first families had left already, by Floo or the King's Cross entry, and Harry was slowly starting to look for an excuse to nudge his family and friends to do the same. Teddy was starting to look uncomfortable, and it would be a relief for him and Harry both to get back home again.

The twin sounds of Apparition, so close together they could be mistaken for one, should not have been audible above the cacophony. The arrival, while extremely rude – one did not Apparate into the middle of such crowds, there were designated Apparition points for that – should not have been enough to make a stable, well-adjusted person even flinch.

Harry had cast a shield before he could consciously decide to, hair-trigger paranoia reacting before reason could. Ron and Hermione followed before he could even finish the motion.

Bill turned, a question on his lips -

- and further down the platform, the steam flared terrifying familiar green.

Someone screamed and the mass of people started to move in blind panic. Harry saw flashes of colour, something that could have been shields – for all the good that would do against the Killing Curse – and plenty of other things that felt like curses on a level Harry could not explain.

Bill and Fleur seemed to move as one, pushing the closest of the family up against the wall, clear of the panicking crowds, and Harry felt more than saw Ron and Hermione do the same to protect Andromeda and Teddy.

Green again, closer this time – Harry could see nothing, had only the two sounds of Apparition to go by, and the crowds were too heavy and panicked to leave any chance of seeing what happened further down the platform.

Cold fury settled in Harry, as much from the sheer cowardice of the wizarding world as the instant threat against his family.
I'll hold the shield, Ron said, and the circle of his magic expanded outwards and strengthened even as Harry released his. It would do nothing against Unforgivables, but it would keep them from being trampled.

Their only warning was the first syllable of the Killing Curse, clear even through the screams. The crowds, seeming to instinctively understand the danger, scattered and fled, leaving a clear shot in their wake.

Hermione reacted instantly.

“Muniminis!”

The platform around them shattered in a perfect circle, following the outer curve of Ron's shield. Rabastan Lestrange's Killing Curse impacted the wall of rubble a heartbeat later, right where Teddy and Hermione would have been.

Harry was already retaliating, having moved outside the shield the moment he felt Hermione's intent. He caught a brief glimpse of Teddy's raw terror before the rubble-wall went up, and he used that anger to fuel his magic.

George appeared from behind – Bill's? Fleur's? - shield already casting, joining Harry's string of non-verbal spells. They both stuck to legal ones, if barely. There were too many witnesses around to risk anything else.

Harry's mind blocked out the screams and the near-misses, not even bothering to shield against most of it. He trusted magic and instincts to keep him safe, and threw himself head-first into the fight instead.

A flicker of sickly yellow was all the warning he got before Rodolphus Lestrange joined the chaos. Harry met the spell with a hailstorm of rubble and knew he'd got it right when he saw the stone and concrete dissolve into black ash. Then George was retaliating, letting Harry focus on Rabastan. The spells came increasingly fast, Harry's fury matching Lestrange's viciousness blow by blow. The air between them, heavily charged by magic, became wobbly and molten before Harry's eyes as the spells came swift and brutal, the next cast before the first could hit.

Harry spotted the first weakness in Lestrange's defence, dodged a purple spell by a hair's breadth, and cast the strongest Cutting Curse he could.

It punched straight through Lestrange's hastily-cast shield and only the man's quick reflexes meant it hit his arm rather than the centre of his chest. His *wand-arm.*

Rodolphus Lestrange realised it at the same time Harry did. George forgotten, Rodolphus cast a Killing Curse at Harry and forced him to retreat. Seconds of delay at the most, but enough for the Lestrange brothers.

Rodolphus shielded his brother. Harry, recognising an escape when he saw it, made a split-second decision.

A wordless Summoning Charm tore Rabastan Lestrange's ruined sleeve clear from his robe and into Harry's hand. The moment later the two Death Eaters vanished simultaneously by Apparition.

For a moment it was utterly silent. Nothing on the platform moved. Then Harry pressed the bloody sleeve into George's hand.

“Keep this under stasis, we'll need it to track them.” He spoke urgently and quietly, before anyone
could approach and discover what they were doing. “Then check on Teddy, use that as cover. Go.”

George nodded once and vanished in the sharp crack of Disapparition. Then time seemed to start again, and the wrecked platform came back to life in a cacophony of sound as the aftermath of the battle took over.

To one side Harry spotted the crimson robes of the Aurors, conveniently late as usual. Two of them split away from the others and headed in Harry's direction, and he dug deep for what little patience he had left as he mentally prepared himself for several hours of questioning.

Teddy was safe. His friends, his family, they were all safe. That was all that mattered.

It was five hours later and well into the evening before Harry could leave the Ministry. The Aurors had brought him back as a witness and proceeded to question him thoroughly on what happened, over and over as if they were looking for inconsistencies. Harry didn't know why they bothered. They clearly weren't doing much to capture the rogue Death Eaters, anyway, so any information they got wouldn't be used, anyway.

He had been in contact with Hermione and Ron the entire time, letting them know everything that happened and passing it on to George. None of the Aurors seemed interested in bringing any of the others in for questioning, at least. Harry had explained that he had sent George off to check on Teddy, as he assumed he would not be able to himself for a good while, and nothing was closer to his heart than his godson's safety. A quick check with Andromeda Tonks revealed an angry, sharp-tongue witch demanding to know exactly why they were keeping her grandson's godfather away, and George Weasley scowling behind her with a crying Teddy in his arms. They had ended that line of questioning rather fast.

Eventually they let him go, because he had done nothing but defend himself, and they couldn't justify making him repeat the same explanation over and over for any longer than they already had.

Harry Apparated the moment he was clear of the wards. He was met at Grimmauld Place by Hermione, Ron, and George.

“Teddy?” he asked as the first thing.

“Upset but safe,” Hermione said immediately. “We're all safe.”

Harry nodded and felt the tension drain from his body. “What's the damage?”

“Eight dead and about two dozen in St Mungo's from what I heard,” Ron reported. “Won't know until the Prophet comes out tomorrow with the official statement, though.”

Harry nodded again. He could find out the details tomorrow. The people he cared about were safe, that was what mattered.

He glanced questioningly at George and received a nod in return. Then he looked at Ron and Hermione. “You should go out tomorrow. Spend some time with Ginny and the others, reassure your mum that you're safe.”

“Harry -” Whatever Hermione was about to say was cut off when Ron interrupted.

“We will.”

Hermione stared hard at them. Then she nodded once. “All right. Just – be careful. Ron? I'm going to
bed,” she told him pointedly, giving Harry no chance to answer.

Ron look at her retreating back, then at Harry, then back again. “Good luck,” he finally said and vanished with her upstairs.

George glanced at him. “The shop, tomorrow?”

“I'll be there.”

George smiled. It was not a nice expression.

The back office in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes contained several heavily-warded boxes. Having seen the magic put into those protections, Harry could safely say that their records and trade secrets were probably better protected than just about anything in the Alley save for Gringotts.

The best protected one was embedded in the floor and protected by a Fidelius cast by Harry, with George himself as the Secret Keeper. This was the one that George opened to bring out the bloodied sleeve, kept safe in a glass jar under a stasis charm.

“Nice little souvenir,” George mused. “Shame his arm survived. You sure this is enough to find them?”

The blood was as fresh as it had been the day before, glistening against the dull black of the Death Eater robes. There was plenty of it, and it was more than recent enough to work. Harry really didn't want to do it, but his own distaste of the spell he was about to cast was more than outweighed by the knowledge of the threat they posed to Teddy.

“It should be.” He hadn't spent a lot of time on the Dark magic that dealt with blood. Most of the spells were disgusting at best and required a lot of preparation, but a few he had remembered. One of the most simple tracking spells was one of them.

“I don't know how long we'll have. Somewhere between a few hours and a few days before the trace disappears. Probably closer to hours than days in this case.” If Harry had the ability to keep his own magic from attacking the foreign blood, or if they'd had more blood to use, it would have been longer. As it was, they would be lucky to get a day. “Ready?”

“All packed for a little hunting expedition.”

Harry didn't ask exactly what sort of things George had felt would be useful to pack. If he needed to know, he would find out. Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes had a number of products that never saw their way to the shelves.

They were both ready, and he had run out of reasons to stall.

Harry transfigured a small glass, then opened the lid of the jar and pulled on the blood with his magic. There were no words, just will, and the blood was slowly wrung from the fabric in thin strands like parasites reluctant to let go.

With the cloth wrung dry, Harry guided the blood to the glass. He murmured the tracking spell under his breath, more sound and magic than actual words, then picked up the glass and raised it at George.

“Cheers,” he said, and downed it before he could change his mind.

The taste was thick and metallic and disgusting, but it had nothing on the flood of foreign magic that
followed. Highly hostile and extremely incompatible foreign magic.

Harry gagged, but the spell kept him from vomiting up the blood. Instead he dry heaved until his throat felt raw and his lungs burned, and then finally, mercifully the feeling let up.

George pushed another glass into his hand. Harry glance at it for just long enough to identify it as plain water, then he downed it gratefully.

“Thanks,” he managed hoarsely.

George grimaced. “Better you than me. When you said 'tracking spell', I thought you meant something you cast with a bloody wand.”

“This will find them through anything. It gives me a direction to follow.” With his coughing fit over, Harry could already feel it – a strand of uncomfortable, nagging magic pulling in a northerly direction. “It won't get us through a ward or a Fidelius, but we'll know exactly where they are, even if we can't see the building. It'll get us as close as possible.”

“What way?” George was all business, well aware that they were on a countdown now.

“North. A little to the west, maybe, I can't tell yet.”

“I'll get the brooms.”

They followed the trace to a small, old manor a good bit outside of Leicester. It was not a particularly nice flight but neither of them cared. It was the fastest way to follow their prey, and an uncomfortable broom ride was the least of the issues they would face.

The Muggle-repelling ward stretched out well beyond the nearby land and kept the entire area wizarding property, and the manor itself was even better protected than Harry had expected. The far more solid defensive wards surrounded the manor alone, prioritising strength over range, and while they seemed more like a temporary measure, they were still strong – very strong. A temporary hide-out, but very well protected one.

Between the two of them, it took little time to raise their own wards to keep their prey from fleeing. Harry's tracking spell showed that at least Rabastan hadn't tried to flee, though whether it was because Harry and George hadn't been spotted, or because the two Death Eaters planned to fight their way out was anyone's guess. Only two life-forms showed up when they cast a detection spell, so at least they weren't facing an army.

“So, your Lordship,” George mused as they stared at the hide-out's defensive wards from a safe distance. “Any ideas?”

Harry thought about it. Neither of them were good enough to take down the wards without alerting the people inside, but then ...

“They probably know we're here by now.”

“Probably,” George agreed. “In their place, I'd wait with an attack until they're sure we're on to them. We might not know whether they're even there. Sure, we set up our own wards but that's just a sensible precaution if we're planning an attack for when they return.”

Harry couldn't take down the wards silently, but when he didn't have to worry about being stealthy? That opened up a wealth of opportunities, especially with comparatively temporary wards like these.
Harry went through the options and easily settled on one. They had attacked his godson, had targeted a one year old child – and that Teddy was now around the same age that Harry himself had been orphaned at did not help in the least – and Harry was not particularly inclined to play nice.

He breathed a word, and Fiendfyre flared to life in a roar of destruction. The first time he had cast it had been a battle for control. Command of the living, treacherous magic came far easier now. Fiendfyre would never stop fighting, would always try to turn on its wielder, but Harry didn't mind.

He spread his arms and the wall of flame parted. Two massive pillars rose and twisted and turned into twin Basilisks as Harry watched. One turned and roared at Harry, then turned back to the house as the pressure of will forced it to obey. Harry turned his palms upwards and the two creatures rose higher, entwined so tightly that they looked more the part of a two-headed monstrosity than common Basilisks. The fire strengthened and more animals appeared at the base – a monstrous bird that was crushed against the ground before it could even take off towards George, a dragon that spread enormous, white-hot wings and took flight towards the manor – and only then did Harry let the twin Basilisks fall.

The entwined beasts hit the defensive wards almost dead centre and explored in an inferno of smaller creatures. The wards lit up in a multitude of colour as they fought against the onslaught. Then, with a triumphant roar, the dragon struck and the wards trembled and collapsed.

The shock wave tore apart the dragon and the smaller remnants of the Basilisks before it faded and reached Harry and George as only a whisper of magic. The last surviving bit of Fiendfyre fought viciously against Harry's command before it yielded and vanished with one last bright flare.

Harry breathed in the familiar smell of wood and soil incinerated to less than ashes and underneath it, the less familiar smell of ozone that lingered from two powerful forces of magic colliding in a battle to the death.

“Bloody hell,” George breathed. “If they didn't already knew we were here, they'd know for sure now.”

Harry smiled and his eyes glowed with the last embers of Fiendfyre. He could feel the magic against his own, but he let it and embraced the last whispers of raw power that still lingered. “It took care of the wards.”

“Right.” George's smile twisted. “My turn, ickle Harry.”

He brought out a fist full of delicate looking marbles with a swirling grey and black mass inside. “We were working on something called Nightmare Nibbles. We had Daydreams Charms already, you see. We wanted something for the prankster that wanted something a little more vicious. A delicious bite of nougat and chocolate with an aftertaste of your most embarrassing nightmares. Just a taste, though. The potion turned out entirely too strong and volatile so we saved it for ... other purposes.”

As he spoke, the marbles expanded to the size of the glass ornaments Harry had seen on the Hogwarts Christmas tree and floated in the air before them. At their full size, the swirls of grey and black had turned into a roiling, ominous-looking mass within each globe, and the fist full of marbles had become fifteen full-size spheres.

“If they were smart, they would have attacked us by now. But they're Death Eaters and cowards, the lot of them, and they prefer to stay in their little hidey-holes until you force them out.” George had snarled the last part, and no sooner had he finished before the spheres shot towards the manor with the force of a Bludger.
Three hit the windows and did no damage. Someone had been smart enough to spell them unbreakable, and all that happened was that the glass spheres broke against them. The walls had obviously not received the same treatment, as the remaining spheres punched their way through solid stone and inside the house.

“I reinforced them, of course. Wouldn't do any good if they break at the wrong time,” George said conversationally. “Would you look at that?”

The shattered spheres outside had fallen to the ground, but the fumes they had contained had no intentions of staying there. The roiling mass started to expand into thick grey and black clouds that sought out every crack and hole in the walls like a living thing. When it found one, the smoke flowed inside, while the rest spread around the house like impossibly thick smoke.

Harry only just managed to see the light behind the windows turn dark grey from the sheer amount of smoke from the other spheres inside, then the clouds closed completely around it.

There were flickers of colours – red, yellowish, horrifying familiar green – and the sound of stone being blasted to bits.

Then the screams started.

“Like I said, far too strong and volatile,” George said. He sounded vicious and cheerful at the same time. “There's a cauldron's worth in those marbles. A lifetime worth of nightmares.”

He raised his wand and a brisk wind picked up. The churning clouds seemed to resist for a moment, then simply fell apart and were blown aside. George waited until the air was clear and bright again. Only then did he allow the wind to die down.

The manor had a number of holes in the walls from the spheres, and several far larger chunks missing where Harry assumed the spells cast from the inside had hit. A gaping hole in one corner. Splintered rock where a window should have been. It had left enough of the building exposed that even the smoke inside was gone.

The screaming had not stopped.

“Bloody hell,” Harry whispered, echoing George's words.

George's smile was all sharp teeth. “We were proud of that invention. Couldn't sell it, of course, but it has other uses. After you, your Lordship?”

Together they crossed the last distance to the manor. Harry had a shield spell ready but nothing greeted them beyond increasingly hoarse screams. The room beyond the door was dusty and empty, and the wallpaper draped from the top of the walls. Harry's tracking spell led straight ahead, but the screams – now clearly distinctive as two voices – came from two different directions.

Harry gestured towards the room that his spell pulled him towards. George nodded and gestured towards the left where the second voice originated.

He should probably have been more cautious stepping into the room – a shield charm wouldn't protect against a Killing Curse, and he had no idea where in the room his target was – but the screams were too terrified to be a trap.

The sight that greeted him reminded him just what kind of ruthlessness the Twins had kept hidden underneath a cover of harmless pranks.
Rabastan Lestrange was curled up on the floor in his black Death Eater robes, his eyes wide open and unfocused as he screamed at something only he could see. His wand was held in a death-grip, so tight that Harry was surprised it hadn't snapped. It was no wonder the spells from the manor had stopped as the full effect of the potion fumes had hit.

Harry silenced him with a spell. Only then did he notice that the other screaming voice had been cut off, too, plunging the building into sudden, unnerving silence.

Lestrange screamed soundlessly and clawed at the floor with his empty hand. Harry's expression twisted into a snarl.

“Expelliarmus!”

Like Fiendfyre, the Disarming Spell was one of those spells that adapted to the power put into it. As a result, Harry's venomous command tore the wand out of Lestrange's grip with enough force to tear the skin from his fingers with it and send his body into the wall with the sharp crack of broken bones.

A silent pair of spells followed and left a Stunned and restrained prisoner in their wake. A flick of his wand, and Harry floated his Death Eater cargo behind him. He found George in the next room standing over an equally disarmed and restrained Rodolphus Lestrange. Restrained and utterly hairless. He glanced at George, and the man smiled sharply.

“A little spell to get his attention. It rips out the victim's hair. All of it. It's missing a numbing component, too. Can't imagine what someone was thinking, inventing a spell like that.”

“Maybe they had special cases like Roddy here in mind.”

“It certainly worked.” George said. “Right beautifully at that. Grimmauld Place with these two?”

“A cell for each of them.”

Harry cast several detection spells on the two Death Eaters and the house both but got nothing back. The building was silent and bore plenty of evidence of having only recently been taken back into use. A few more spells took care of any magical evidence from the fight, just in case the Muggle-repelling ward should fail before the traces had faded. The rest of the damage didn't matter much to Harry.

They found two massive chests in one room, a mix of medical supplies, clothes, food, and gold – plenty for the Lestranges to have hid out in the small manor for months. The chests were bulky and hard to shrink with the touchier potions among the medical supplies but were perfectly suitable for a feather-light charm.

“There's nothing else here,” Harry finally said, when George had sent the chests ahead by Portkey. “We'll get the rest out of them with Veritaserum.”

They grabbed a prisoner each and vanished with a sharp crack, leaving the old building empty and abandoned once more.

Unlike Blishwick and a number of other low-level Death Eaters, Harry did not doubt that the Lestranges had learned some measure of defence against Veritaserum. The easiest way to get around that was to dose them while they were still unconscious.

They started with Rodolphus Lestrange and a list of questions four pages long. Unlike Blishwick, there was little doubt about the fact that he was guilty as hell. It was simply a matter of how much he
had done, and how much additional information they could get from him.

Even with the Veritaserum administered with the man unconscious, Lestrange still seemed to have some degree of defence. He was significantly less talkative than Blishwick, even with every sign he was completely under the potion, and getting complex answers from him was all but impossible.

They would ask him to list other Death Eaters, and he would mention one and stop until they prompted him for more.

They would ask him to list his crimes, and they would have to specify under which version of the Ministry laws, and keep prompting for more answers.

Even though it was a bloody headache, Harry was still reluctantly impressed. It was another way to get around at least part of an interrogation, and he would have to remember it for the next time it was his turn under the potion again.

It took four solid hours before they finally seemed to have pulled as much from his reluctant mind as they could. They both knew there was significantly more hidden away that would be extremely useful to know. Some things they didn't know the right questions for. Some things were simply too complex for Lestrange's particular brand of Veritaserum-resistance.

There were ways around that, though, and Harry's reluctance to suggest it came only from the fact that he was genuinely not bothered by those curses anymore rather than any moral objections to the idea.

“The Imperius, then?”

George gave the Death Eater a disgusted look. “He's probably got some way to fight that, too. He's a Lestrange. Not like Voldemort would need to put him under it to get him to follow along like a deranged puppy, so it would be in his best interest that Roddy here wouldn't obey someone else.”

Harry swallowed. His heartbeat kicked up a notch, anxiety and unwanted anticipation settling into vague elation, and he knew even as he spoke that if George ever drew a line before Harry did, now would be it.

“There are ways around that,” Harry said quietly. His pulse fluttered like hummingbird wings. “Voldemort's Imperius was merciless. It wasn't just his will alone. The after-effects of the Cruciatus made it a lot harder to resist. It would have been so easy to fall into that blissful, painless state.”

George's breath sounded like a drawn-out hiss. “Would it work? They're used to Voldemort's Crucios.”

Harry's lips twisted into an unpleasant smile. “Not for more than a year. I can't match Voldemort's skill with it, but I don't think we need to.”

George was silent as seconds ticked on. Whatever he was thinking, it didn't show on his face, and Harry simply waited for his friend and partner in crime to make a decision. Killing an unarmed Death Eater had been one thing but somehow the Unforgivables felt different, and Harry understood. Casting them in the heat of battle was very different to the cold, calculated approach Harry had suggested.

Then George nodded slowly, eyes never leaving Lestrange. The potion had worn off and the man Stunned again, but didn't mean he was harmless.

“Rennervate, Crucio, Imperio, then. I'll leave the last two to you. Ready?”
“Rennervate!” George snapped, and the man on the floor groaned. Lestrange shifted, eyes still pressed tightly together – he probably had a pounding headache, Veritaserum could do that sometimes – and then Harry raised his wand, and the world seemed to still.

He remembered Teddy's wide-eyed terror, the screams and the smell of blood and smoke, and beyond that the horrors of the Battle of Hogwarts. He remembered Hedwig's death, and Sirius falling through the Veil, and the Department of Mysteries, and he grasped every last bit of hate and desperate, fanatic need for revenge.

Then he focused on Lestrange, and the world sped up once more.

“Crucio.” It was more a hiss than a word, so low it could almost have been mistaken for Parseltongue, and Lestrange screamed.

Magic sang to him, bright and vivid and impossibly light. Every sound from Lestrange was a delight, every note of hoarse scream a wonder, and then Harry ruthlessly pushed it aside and stopped the curse.

His world plunged into darkness. His magic, bright and warm a moment ago, felt lost and freezing.

George had not moved.

Harry looked dispassionately at Lestrange, faintly, irrationally annoyed that the elation of the Cruciatius was gone, and then he snapped the second curse.

“Imperio!” This time it was a command, sharp and merciless, and his will bore down on Lestrange's.

The man fought hard, even disoriented and wrecked by Cruciatius after-effects as he was, but for all that he had experience and age on his side, Harry had raw power and relentless will. They were frozen for an instance, perfectly matched, and then Lestrange's defences utterly crumbled.

The Imperius was a low, warm, pleased murmur to the bright, vivid wonder of the Cruciatius, but the magic was every bit as insidiously pleasant.

“Tell me about your safe-houses, Rodolphus,” Harry said almost gently and forced the order into the very foundations of his will with nothing more than a thought.

And Rodolphus spoke.

It approached the early hours of the morning before they finished with Rodolphus and Rabastan both. The Veritaserum-Cruciatius-Imperius combination had proved extremely useful and left them with pages and pages of information to go through. The Lestranges had been careful people. They'd had to be, to avoid the Aurors for so long. Among the many pages there was information about two small, heavily-warded safe-houses, hidden funds, lists of contacts, allies, sympathisers, mercenaries, and it made every last Unforgivable worth it.

Blishwick had been all but useless, just one more bit of cannon-fodder among Voldemort's forces. The Inner Circle, though ... the Lestranges had been a goldmine.

Both Harry and George were running on Invigoration Draughts. There would be time to crash later.

The Lestrange brothers, both Stunned and restrained, had been left on the floor. George gave them a
disgusted look. “Finish with a couple of Cutting Curses, then get rid of the bodies? Reckon we've got everything we can out of them.”

Harry froze. The memories were still raw and all too detailed. The screams, Hermione's shield, Teddy's raw terror -

“No. No,” he repeated a little stronger when George gave him a surprised look. “Not after what they did. Without proof, people will still think they're out there, even a decade down the line. They need to be publicly, visibly dead.”

He couldn't tell Andromeda or the Weasleys that the Lestranges were dead and not expect questions. And he wasn't going to let Teddy grow up with even the slightest bit of fear that the widower and brother-in-law of his deranged aunt Bellatrix would show up one day and finish what they had started in King's Cross.

“We'll have to get rid of any evidence,” George finally said. It wasn't an objection. “Portkey them to the Atrium in the Ministry of Magic, maybe. They've got a spot left unwarded for Portkey travel. Less traumatising than Diagon. There might be kids around.”

Harry nodded, but his focus was still on the two unmoving figures.

“Harry?”

“They shot a Killing Curse at my godson.” And there it was, the last motivation he needed. Not the hatred of the Cruciatus or the raw will of the Imperius, but the merciless desire to see someone dead.

A Cutting Curse would do the job just as well, but that wasn't the point anymore. The Cutting Curse had other uses. The Killing Curse did not and in that moment, Harry wanted nothing more than to see the Lestranges dead from the same curse they had cast around so freely themselves, and he wanted it badly enough that it made his magic burn.

George took a sharp breath and stepped back, and Harry brought up his wand.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Bright poison green lit the room, and his magic soared.
Chapter 5

The Longbottom Manor wards greeted Harry cautiously, but they weren't outright hostile. Harry let them do their job and waited patiently at the entrance to the stately old building. There were a number of garden supplies resting against the wall by the door; a good indication that Neville was home. Harry had heard him sigh often enough about having to leave his gardens to a house-elf for most of the year. Harry didn't get it, but Neville had always been adamant that it just didn't look the same when he didn't do it himself.

Eventually the door opened and Neville looked at him with a vaguely startled expression. “Harry?”

“Hey, Nev,” Harry greeted. “Got a place to talk? It's sort of family business.”

Neville's surprise was replaced by cautious curiosity. “Sure. I – this way.”

Harry followed Neville into the depths of the sprawling garden surrounding the manor, and part of him wasn't actually surprised that a safe place to talk, to Neville, meant the garden rather than the stuffy, claustrophobic old manor. It was fine with Harry. He was in no real rush. The Lestrange bodies had timed Portkeys on them that wouldn't trigger for another hour or so, which left plenty of time to talk with Neville.

They passed through a neatly trimmed arch in a silvery hedge, into a perfectly circular clearing with an old bench in the middle.

“Thornleaf. They don't take kindly to being touched, and they remember who waters them. They make a very good eavesdropper deterrent.” Neville cast a series of privacy spells and waited for Harry to add a few more before he turned his attention back to his guest.

“Good enough?”

“Yeah.” Harry took a slow breath, then offered two wands to Neville, who accepted them cautiously. He stared at Harry, then down at the wands, and back at Harry again.

“Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrange are dead,” Harry said formally. “The Lestrange family is no more. Your parents have been avenged.”

Neville's breath caught and his hands tightened around the wands, looking like he was torn between tossing the two pieces of wood far, far away and never letting go of them again. “Harry?”

“They went after Teddy.”

Neville nodded once. Nothing more needed to be said. Then he stood a little straighter, every bit the imposing war hero he had been at Hogwarts.

“The Longbottom family offers its gratitude ... Lord Potter,” the man stated, as formal as Harry had been. Then, softer, “thank you, Harry.”

Neville held out his hand. Harry grasped it without hesitation.

Harry was brought in for questioning three days later. They had nothing to pin on him, no evidence, nothing in the slightest, but the Lestrange brothers had been found dead and the last anyone had seen of them, they had been fleeting after targeting Harry's extended family.
If they had only been found dead, perhaps that would have been the end of it. That they had been found dead, with traces of at least two of the three Unforgivables on them? The DMLE was very determined to find out who had done it.

Enough so that someone far up in the system had authorised Veritaserum questioning. It wouldn't be good in court, but it would give them a place to start their investigation and an idea of where to dig for evidence. They hadn't bothered to check his wand, but Harry wasn't surprised. There were a number of Hogwarts students out there who had learned to clear the spell-record from their wands out of sheer necessity. Harry's own wand would show nothing but ordinary spells.

Kingsley Shacklebolt wasn't there, but someone had brought in Minerva McGonagall – not as Headmistress of Hogwarts, but as leader of the Order of the Phoenix after Shacklebolt's job as Minister had made it impossible to continue as leader. The Order hadn't met since the war, but it had technically not been disbanded yet. Harry wondered if Shacklebolt was the one who had called her in. For support or something else, who knew?

“Headmistress,” he greeted as he sat down in the chair in the interrogation room. He had not bothered arguing or asking to contact his solicitor. The British wizarding world did not believe in bringing in solicitors until someone had been formally charged.

It was yet another thing on Harry's long list of issues that needed fixed one day. The only good thing he could say was that the chair didn't have chains on it.

“Mr. Potter,” McGonagall sighed. “A trouble magnet as usual.”

Harry gave a wry smile. “I was one of the last to see the Lestranges alive, when they attacked Teddy and Hermione. In their place, I'd question me, too.”

McGonagall didn't answer as one of the Aurors appeared. Harry didn't recognise him, but he was too old to be one of the small post-War clutch of new recruits, and he moved with the calm, economical motions of a trained fighter. Behind him was a far younger man, who looked visibly nervous – or, at least, visibly nervous to someone who had grown as used to looking for that sort of thing as Harry had.

“Mr. Potter?” the older of the two greeted. “I'm Auror Toke, and this is Auror Trainee Lochrin.”

The Toke name was vaguely familiar to Harry, but not as anything more than a vague reference to wizarding families in several of the many books he had gone through. Lochrin was utterly unfamiliar to him.


In a different world, it might have been him at Toke's side, learning from a more experienced Auror. The Ministry had been more than ready to fast-track him through Auror training.

“We need to test you for the Veritaserum antidote and Memory Charms, then we will continue with the questioning,” Auror Toke explained and glanced at McGonagall. “Headmistress McGonagall is here upon the Minister's request.”

“We worked together during the War,” Harry answered the unspoken question as vaguely as he could. “If I had been the one to kill the Lestranges, there would be a number of other questions she'd have to ask, to ensure the safety of a number of people.”

McGonagall nodded slightly. Harry figured it meant he hadn't said too much, then.
Auror Toke cast a string of wordless spells that Harry didn't catch, then handed Harry a small bottle of a bright yellow potion. “You have no sign of memory spells or the antidote, but just in case, that potion will flush out any effects of the antidote.”

Harry was used to foul potions and knocked it back without flinching. It tasted somewhat rancid, but there was a glass of water on the table to rise out the taste. The potion settled as a warm feeling in his stomach, but nothing else happened. The two Aurors watched him for a long minute before they finally seemed satisfied that he wasn't under the antidote.

“We are going to give you three drops of Veritaserum and ask you a list of questions,” Auror Toke explained clinically. “You may not be aware of answering; some people are not. Once we have the answers, we will give you the antidote and bring you back out of the effects. Do you have any questions?”

“No.” He just wanted it over with. He had learned to hide it, but he could feel the adrenaline in his body and the nerves that had just kicked in. They had learned to bypass Veritaserum to a degree, but this was the first time it would be more than training. This was the first time it was deadly serious. And, he knew painfully well, there were plenty of questions he would not be able to use his bonds to get out of.

Not that he regretted it. Not for a second. The dead Lestranges had sent a message to the rest of Voldemort's old followers, and Harry wanted them to see it.

He let the Auror feed him the three drops of Veritaserum, and the world fell away around him in the familiar, unnerving way.

“What is your name?”

Even through the Veritaserum, Harry's nerves still kicked up a notch at the familiar question.

“Harry James Potter,” he answered truthfully.

“Did you kill Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrange?”

Harry reached for his bonds in an instant and his world became brighter and warmer.

“No,” he answered truthfully, because Ron Weasley did not.

“Did you participate, assist, or were you in any other way involved in the murders of Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrange?”

“No,” he answered truthfully, because Ron had not.

“Do you know who were involved in the murders of Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrange?”

“No,” Harry answered truthfully, because Ron did not. Strongly suspected, yes. Knew beyond doubt? No. They were very careful about that, and Ron's world could be awfully black and white when he put his mind to it.

It took a while longer before the next question came.

“Have you ever cast an Unforgivable Curse?”

“No,” Harry answered truthfully, because Ron had not.

Minerva McGonagall's eyes narrowed. Harry was not consciously aware of it, but if he got out of
this safely, he had explanations to give.

Harry felt his head tilted back and then the familiar taste of the antidote. The world cleared up and his emotions returned. He took a deep swallow from the water to rinse out the after-taste, then glanced at the Aurors.

Auror Toke's expression was the same smooth, unreadable professionalism, but the Auror trainee looked faintly surprised. Then he spotted McGonagall's expression. It was almost hidden, but Harry had been in trouble often enough to recognise the slight frown.

“That should be all, Mr. Potter,” Auror Toke said. “Thank you for your cooperation. We may contact you again if we have further questions, but that should be it for now.”


Whatever he had done, might as well get it over with.

“You may, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall spoke. “Shall we?”

Harry swallowed. Time to pay the piper.

Almost a year of researching and practising all kinds of spells had left Harry with a well-honed sensitivity to magic. When he had last seen Hogwarts in person the summer after Voldemort's defeat, he had felt only warm familiarity and the overwhelming sense of loss.

Now Hogwarts' defences greeted him like a wall of charged air and sharp, prickly power that left him with goosebumps on his arms and a throbbing headache. Then they were through and the power faded to a low murmur that left only the faded remnants of the headache behind.

Minerva McGonagall at his side glanced at him with an unreadable expression. “Mr. Potter?”

“A mild headache,” Harry answered truthfully. He wasn't sure what she was looking for, and she had all too much experience with lying students for him to even attempt to evade the truth. “I've lived and practised magic in Grimmauld Place since last summer and managed to pick up a sensitivity to magic along the way. I never knew the wards here were that powerful.”

“We never removed all of the added defences we put in place before the Last Battle,” the headmistress explained. “We want the students to feel safe, even with Death Eaters still on the run. Hogwarts was once the safest place in Britain, Mr. Potter. It has become so once again.”

Harry was never the most observant of people, but he got the undercurrent of that remark just fine.

“You wanted to see how I reacted to it.” He wasn't sure how to feel about that. Hogwarts was the first home he had known. Even now, when she felt different and strange and he felt more like an intruder than anything, he still loved her and would defend her with everything he had. The thought that he had changed enough that Minerva McGonagall had doubts about his intentions left a feeling like lead in the pit of his stomach.

“You successfully lied under Veritaserum, Mr. Potter.” Her voice was tightly controlled. “We are both well aware that you have successfully cast at least one Unforgivable Curse, as most of us have after this war. You were tested for Memory Charms and the Veritaserum antidote, which leaves only exceptional Occlumency skills as an explanation – and for all that Severus Snape was forced to stay cloaked in lies, I believe him when he stated that your Occlumency skills were lacking at best.”
“Maybe I had an easier time learning it now that I don't have Voldemort poking about my head and giving me migraines and nightmares ... ma'am,” he added, when his brain caught up with his mouth. “Or maybe it's because Voldemort's Ministry didn't consider them bloody Unforgivable.”

“Perhaps.” McGonagall did not sound convinced, and they settled into an oppressive silence as they walked the long path towards the Headmistress' office.

Hogwarts had felt strange from the outside – the Hogwarts he had known and still so different in ways he couldn't quite pinpoint – but it only got worse once they stepped inside the Great Hall. The cavernous room was still and utterly silent. The tables were cleared and the benches lined up with military precision. The massive hourglasses were empty, the points reset once the year ended, and the sound of their footsteps felt almost like sacrilege. Like speaking in a cathedral or setting foot in an ancient tomb.

In a way it was. The memories lurked right below the surface, of death and blood and curses, and Harry swallowed against the bile that rose in his throat.

Mate? Ron asked through the bond, with Hermione's concern right behind it.

It - I'll be fine. He shuddered but followed McGonagall along silently. He hadn't considered how bad it might be, hadn't considered how many memories still lingered, and Hermione had been there alone to research the Fidelius for them with no bond to support her. How did you do it?

Hermione was silent for a long time. There were students then, she finally said softly. I avoided the - the memories as much as I could and I focused on my task. And I think Professor Flitwick knew. He was the one who met me at the gate, and he talked to me the entire way. It helped. Afterwards we had tea and discussed the Fidelius and Charms theory and ... it made it easier. Leaving. It distracted me.

In that case Harry owed their old Charms Professor a lot of thanks for being there for Hermione when they hadn't been. He didn't know the man all that much, even after six years at Hogwarts, but he would find a way to return the favour. Somehow.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry returned to the outside world again and was surprised to find himself staring at the gargoyle that guarded the Headmistress' office. He wasn't normally this distracted when he talked with Ron and Hermione, and he quietly promised himself it wouldn't happen again. It was too much of a risk even here.

"Memories." It was only partially true but seemed to do the trick as McGonagall's expression softened slightly.

"Indeed. Campanula rotundifolia," she told the gargoyle, and it moved aside with the grind of stone against stone.

Harry had no idea how Hermione had done it. The stairs leading up to the second door felt claustrophobic, and stepping into the brightness of the office was harder than facing Veritaserum with multiple murders on his conscience had been.

It was orderly. Harry noticed when his eyes had grown used to the bright sunlight that streamed in from the windows. Like Dumbledore's office, there were plenty of books, but they were neatly sorted and lined up. The two on the desk were bookmarked and set aside to leave room for parchment and a Gryffindor-red quill. The numerous trinkets were gone, replaced by a few, carefully
chosen decorations instead. It was both a relief to see the office so different, and a loss all the same.

Most of the portraits were asleep, but there were a few exceptions, and the first one Harry spotted made his breath catch.

"My dear boy," Albus Dumbledore spoke. His voice was as layered as it had been at times when he had been alive, affection and regret and something Harry couldn't identify, but his painted eyes sparkled gently. Harry had a lot of issues with Dumbledore still, but those could wait for now.

"Headmaster." He was vaguely proud that he managed to keep his voice steady against visions of Snape and Malfoy and Killing Curse green, but half of the credit went to Ron and Hermione and the silent support he still felt through the bond.

"You've grown, my boy," Dumbledore said, sounding a little like a bemused grandfather. "I was worried when I heard you had turned down the Auror program and settled alone in Grimmauld, but ... you look well, Harry."

"Ron and Hermione moved in with me in late April," Harry offered, McGonagall ignored for now. "It's easier, with the three of us together. It keeps Hermione from vanishing into the books, Ron from lazing about too much, and the memories away from me. I - it works, sir."

Someone to his left snorted, and Harry turned his head to find himself staring directly into the dark, pitiless eyes of Severus Snape's portrait.

The world stilled. Ron's heartfelt Oh, bollocks overlapped with Hermione's I had no idea, he wasn't there when I visited, Harry, I - Harry?

The world restarted with what felt like a sharp jerk. Harry took a slow breath. Then he raised his head defiantly. "Headmaster. I'm surprised to see your portrait."

"Oh, yes, the Saviour would hardly want the Death Eater bat of the dungeon among such illustrious headmasters as Phineas Nigellus Black. I assure you, Mr. Potter, that it was through no choice of my own." Harry didn't know when the portrait had been made, but they had managed his acerbic voice almost perfectly. Still, something seemed to be ... missing, somehow.

"Severus." McGonagall sounded disappointed and a little unsurprised. Then again, she knew exactly how Snape and Harry's relationship had been.

Harry took great satisfaction in turning around to look at his host again, very deliberately turning his back on Snape. The man may have been instrumental in the defeat of Voldemort, but so had a lot of other people, and Harry was not required to like him in the least. "What can I do for you, Headmistress?"

Something flickered through McGonagall's eyes. "So formal, Mr. Potter."

"You wanted to see my reaction to the wards," Harry pointed out. "Or possibly the wards' reaction to me. Either way, that's generally not a sign of friendly territory."

McGonagall nodded. "A reasonable assumption. Would you like to tell me then, Mr. Potter, why you positively reek of Dark magic to the wards?"

"Harry -" Dumbledore began in that familiar disappointed voice, but Harry ignored him.

"Perhaps because I have spent a year renovating and living in Grimmauld Place, the home of the Black family and about a hundred and fifty years of Dark Arts?"
"Your presence is Darker than that, Mr. Potter."

Disapproval and judgement, like countless other times throughout his school years when his professors were effectively useless, and something in Harry snapped.

"Those are very convenient wards, Headmistress. I wonder why they weren't raised after my first year, when bloody Voldemort got inside the school!"

"Mr. Potter!" McGonagall looked furious. Harry didn't care in the slightest.

"Perhaps I feel Dark, Headmistress, because I carried around a Horcrux for sixteen years. Since Professor Dumbledore didn't bother raising those wards, how do you know I didn't feel even Darker at eleven? Or at fourteen, when Voldemort was resurrected? Because it's bloody easier to believe the worst, just like the rest of the wizarding world."

There was the vague idea that maybe he shouldn't be so insulting to the Headmistress of Hogwarts in the heart of her realm and under her wards, but that idea vanished like wisps of smoke when Snape's portrait spoke again.

"You insolent boy! Learn your place and respect your betters!"

"You're dead, Snape," Harry bit out spitefully. "I am no longer required to just take it when you insult me. Your living self was a spiteful, petty man, and he would have torn you to shreds for being a barely-passable imitation of himself. Enjoy eternity in a painting."

That was the moment when Harry understood the family he had never known, understood why he did not want to be remembered like the pale echo in paint and canvas. This wasn't Snape, just a caricature of the vicious, ruthless man who had repeatedly stepped in to try and protect Harry, despite hating him to the depths of his soul.

Harry Potter would never sit for a wizarding portrait, and he swore there and then that Snape's portrait would burn the first chance he got. He didn't think he could get away with it when McGonagall was watching, but she wouldn't always be around to stop him. He didn't claim to know the toxic mind of Snape, but even he knew the man would not have wanted a tame portrait sitting in the Headmistress' office for centuries to come. Harry owed him that much, at least.

"Harry ..." Dumbledore sounded disappointed.

"No." Harry turned to watch McGonagall again. Her expression left no doubt that if he had been a student, he would have been in detention until Christmas.

"I willingly walked to my death, Headmistress. I've paid any imaginary dues I might have had to the wizarding world. I don't owe you or Hogwarts or anyone but my family a bloody thing." He stood a little straighter, acutely aware that he was still shorter than McGonagall. "Kick me out of the Order if you want. Voldemort is dead; it's not like there's much use for it now. Would that be all? I know Ron and Hermione are waiting for me."

The Headmistress watched him with a severe expression. None of the portraits spoke; all the proof Harry needed that his family had been right about them, and enough to make him wonder once more what Dorea Black had been like in life.

"You've changed, Mr. Potter."

"Probably, yes." Harry saw no point in denying it.
McGonagall's lips pressed into a thin line in disapproval.

“Yes, Mr. Potter. That would be all,” she finally said.

Harry nodded once in greeting and left the office to make his way back to Grimmauld.

As expected both his friends were waiting when he arrived with a soft crack of Apparition. Unlike what he expected, neither of them looked particularly pleased. He also, he noticed, couldn't feel them through the bond anymore.

“You owe us an explanation, Harry,” Hermione told him bluntly.

“The meeting with McGonagall?” Harry was a little confused.

“The Lestranges. But you're quite right, I want answers about your deplorable behaviour at Hogwarts, too. We've been very careful not to ask about those articles in the Prophet, but you owe us that much. The Cruciatus? The Killing Curse? Harry!”

Harry didn't bother asking if they were sure they wanted to know. Hermione had undoubtedly thought everything through, including the fact that it would remove Harry's way of getting around Veritaserum. Whether it was because they were sure the Aurors wouldn't bother questioning him under it again or as a sort of - punishment? Reminder? - Harry didn't know.

"All right," he agreed. "Can I ask why, at least?"

Ron glanced at Hermione. It had been her decision, then.

"Because I won't let that bond be a cover for cold-blooded murder." She pursed her lips and looked very much like McGonagall in that moment. "They already questioned you once. They won't bother you about that again." Hopefully, Harry mentally added but didn't correct her. "You have been very good at keeping us out of the loop to keep your secrets safe from Veritaserum, but I don't approve of what I see. I want the truth, Harry."

She probably hadn't meant it as an order, but the Vow took it as one, anyway.

The only warning he got was a sharp burn around his chest and throat, a smouldering thread of magic that tightened underneath his skin, through bone and muscle until it wrapped around his lungs and windpipe and twisted.

Harry inhaled sharply at the sudden constriction, hands instinctively grasping for the magic that went right through his fingers. The magic tightened the instant he tried to reach for it and he stopped, forced down the panic, forced himself to not move as much as an inch -

- And, slowly, the Vow eased enough that he could breathe again. Barely.

"-arry? Harry!" Hermione's voice cut through the haze, enough to make him focus on the world beyond his burning lungs. Harry wondered distantly if she had actually felt the magic as the other half of the Vow.

Both she and Ron had their wands out but neither seemed willing to cast. Worried, maybe, that it would make it worse.

One breath, then another. Just enough yield to keep breathing as long as he didn't try to fight it again.

"Right. The Vow." He took a shuddering breath. "I guess I deserved that." The thread eased another
fraction of an inch. The next breath came a little easier.

“Harry?” Hermione, worried and a little frightened. “It wasn't an order, you don't have to answer. Harry?”

Except it was, even if she hadn't meant it like that, and the Vow took it as such. Her words did nothing to ease the constrictions or the vicious compulsion to answer whatever she asked.

Harry closed his eyes and simply focused on the magic of the Vow and each careful breath he took. "I used blood magic to track Rabastan Lestrange. We found them in a safe-house. I brought down the wards with Fiendfyre, and George used one of their failed prank experiments to take them out." The magic eased as he spoke, just enough that he could keep talking. It still felt like it was a heartbeat away from choking him again. "We brought them to the cells to interrogate them, but they proved partially resistant to Veritaserum. They couldn't lie but they volunteered no additional information. Every answer was like pulling teeth. I suspected both of them had training in resisting the Imperius Curse, but I've learned from experience that resisting is a lot harder when you're suffering the after-effects of a Crucio."

Someone took a sharp breath. Harry wasn't sure if it was Ron or Hermione, and he didn't want to open his eyes to find out. The Vow felt almost like a living thing, and he didn't want to take a wrong step now.

"I cast both spells on them - the Cruciatus and the Imperius - and wrung everything useful out of them. George suggested a Cutting Curse afterwards but it wasn't enough. They had targeted my family, terrified my godson, and I wanted them dead more than anything." The words had flowed easily, encouraged by the Vow, but now he still hesitated. "I cast the Killing Curse," he continued, "and we Apparated the bodies across England. Then we left a timed Portkey that would send them to the Ministry Atrium several hours later, when our trace was cold. I gave Neville their wands. It felt like the right thing to do." Another heartbeat. "I cast the curses, and I suggested them in the first place. George had nothing to do with it."

Finally the magic eased enough that he didn't feel like he was being strangled, and he took a deep, relieved breath and opened his eyes again. The burn in his lungs remained, a vicious reminder of the Vow.

Ron was frowning and looked torn between bloody hell and they deserved it. Hermione ... she frowned just a little, her lips still pursed, but Harry couldn't read her beyond that.

"I didn't think 'hunt down Death Eaters' meant cold-blooded murder," she said. "Blishwick was supposed to be an exception."

"I know." The coil of the Vow tightened again in not particularly kind encouragement, and Harry continued. "You wouldn't approve, so I didn't tell you."

The magic loosened again. Breathing became easier. The slightly more analytical part of his mind could appreciate the difference between Veritaserum and the Vow, but that did not make it any more pleasant when the Vow bore down on him.

"What does it feel like?" Ron asked with morbid curiosity. "The Vow, I mean," he hurriedly added, before the Vow could decide that he was curious about the Unforgivables instead.

"Almost normal when my reply is thorough and honest." Harry hesitated but continued before the Vow could force him. "Somewhat like being strangled by magic if it decides I've left something important out. I wouldn't even try to lie."
Hermione made a small sound and covered her mouth with her hand, eyes wide and horrified again. "That wasn't what I wanted. It wasn't even an order."

Ron shifted a little uneasily. "I don't think anyone really knows for sure how Unbreakable Vows work. I mean, the simple ones, they're easy, but the longer ones ... sometimes they get a mind of their own, dad says. Harry swore to answer truthfully and without omission if you asked him to. You really wanted an explanation, and the Vow probably picked up on that and took it as an order.

"I -"

"Hermione," Harry said tiredly. "Ask your questions. All of them. I don't want to do this again any time soon, so I might as well get it over with now."

"I ..." Hermione trailed off. All of them were silent as she seemed to think everything through, worry and concern warring with distaste as her expression changed. "I don't like this."

"It's no different from Veritaserum."

"Veritaserum won't kill you!"

"No," Harry agreed. "I suppose it won't. Ask your questions. You both deserve the truth."

Hermione was silent for a long time. Then she made a soft sound.

"What is your plan for the Death Eaters still at large?" She sounded like she suspected the answer but wasn't sure she wanted to know for sure. The Vow, however, did not leave much of a choice.

"Hunt them down and ... ensure they won't be a problem again." The magic tightened almost imperceptible in a silent warning.

"Kill them, you mean."

Harry nodded. "Most likely." The magic tightened fractions of an inch more and he shuddered. "Hand some over to the Ministry, maybe, but yes. Capture, interrogate, kill. Get everything we can from them, information, gold, anything, and make sure they won't be a threat again. With the Dementors gone from Azkaban, how long before the first Death Eaters imprisoned there manage to escape? I don't want my family and friends to live in fear."

“That's murder.”

“But they won't hurt anyone else again.”

Hermione was silent. Harry felt a little like one of Crookshanks' snacks under her scrutiny.

“The Dark magic is affecting you.”

“I know. I'm - sorry.” It wasn't a lie, either. The Vow would not permit it. He wasn't sorry for what he was doing but he would regret for the rest of his life what it might to do Ron and Hermione.

“This isn't who you are.” Hermione swallowed. “The anger. The – we heard you arguing with the Headmistress.”

“I don't know,” Ron said wryly. Harry couldn't feel anything through the bond, but it seemed like he was starting to come around. “He was a pretty moody berk in sixth year. You didn't share a dorm with him.”
“Git.” Harry threw a Stinging Hex at him. “At least I don't snore like a dragon with the sniffles.”

Ron shifted just enough to dodge it, looking entirely too cheerful about it. “Sorriest excuse for a Dark Lord I've ever seen. He's got a nose and everything, he doesn't own a black robe that isn't from Hogwarts, and his hair looks like Norbert nested in it.”

“Ron!” Hermione almost managed to hiss the name.

This time it was Ron's turn to sigh. “Merlin, Hermione. It's still Harry. Yes, he's an impulsive, reckless prat with the temper of a disgruntled nundu and about half the charm, but that's not Dark magic. That's Harry. He's just a little more obvious about it these days.”

“It is affecting me,” Harry admitted with the unsubtle encouragement of the Vow, “but not as much as you think. The temper was always there. I've had to keep my mouth shut a lot of times, I just didn't have to this time. The magic – my emotions feel stronger, like everything is amplified, but they're still mine.”

Hermione didn't look entirely convinced. Harry sighed.

“I can't lie.”

“No, but we don't know if the Vow considers it the truth if you whole-heartedly believe something that's wrong.”

It was a good point. Harry only shrugged. He wasn't an expert in that sort of thing, although he didn't doubt that Hermione would research it the first chance she got.

“Why did you decide to do this? Become a Dark Lord?” she asked instead and changed the topic again.

“For Teddy. I won't let him grow up as a second-class person. Voldemort had won, anyway,” he continued, encouraged by the Vow. “It wasn't like anything I could do would make it much worse.”

He tried to stop there, but the Vow twisted and he hissed sharply as it tightened around his neck. “And madness runs in the Black family. It's the inbreeding or the magic, maybe both, I don't know. My dad had it, my grandfather had it, all the way back to Isla Black. Dorea believes I got it, too. Not as bad as Sirius, but I got the recklessness and impulsiveness.”

“What do you mean, 'Voldemort had won, anyway'?" Hermione demanded.

“Back to the same old racism, the same old blood politics, the same old society. Sure, Voldemort is dead and they got rid of the most insane of his laws, but an entire war later, and we're back where we started. Tell me how exactly we managed to win a damn thing.”

“Voldemort is dead!”

“And Malfoy is alive. Malfoy, Avery, and who knows how many unmarked supporters still in the Ministry or St Mungo's or Hogwarts. You saw how many of the traditionally Dark families chose to distance themselves from any Marked member of their family and made a lot of noise about how disappointed and horrified they were. Do you really think it was all one little black sheep or two in those families? That they didn't have the support of the rest of them? Nott's father is in Azkaban. Is his brother or uncle any better, except for not being Marked? Is he? They sacrificed one or two of their own to continue the way they always have.”

Hermione looked unhappy. “You don't know that.”
“No. But I'm pretty damn sure.”

“Sure enough to risk killing innocents?”

The Vow tightened before Harry could even consider anything but the truth. “- Yes,” he managed, and the magic eased. “Because if they were all that horrified, they should bloody well have done more and not left it to us!”

Hermione froze. The Vow froze with her, enough of a sign that her emotions were running the gauntlet from horrified to angry to concerned and understanding, even if her expression hadn't made that abundantly clear. She had the ability to stop him with a word, but if even she didn't know what she wanted, the Vow had no chance at all.

Harry chanced a glance at Ron. He was frowning, although Harry couldn't read his expression enough to tell what exactly he was frowning about, and the bond was little help. He hadn't starting yelling yet, though. Harry figured that was a good sign.

“You can't kill innocents.” Hermione seemed to have found her voice again. The fact that he could still breathe seemed like a good sign, too. "You – it doesn't justify killing innocents. And it's not just them. They have families. Loved ones."

"Is that why the wizarding world was so willing to leave everything up to children?" Harry felt tired, tired and weary and done, finally putting words to a question that he had thought about all too often over the past year. "I'm an orphan with no close family to speak of, your family is all Muggle and hardly counts to the average wizard or witch, and Ron - well, he's a pure-blood, but the Weasleys are blood-traitors and have plenty of sons. I suppose the youngest one would be expendable in that case. If we'd failed, we wouldn't have pulled anyone down with us."

Ron's expression went from frowning to furious to flat in seconds. Then, long seconds later, it eased into plain tiredness.

"He's right."

"Ron -" Ron sat down heavily and sighed, sounding as drained as Harry felt. “People told Percy the same, y'know? That the rest of us were blood-traitors but that he was of pure, proper stock and would return the Weasley name to its place of prominence when the rest of us had been put in our place.”

Killed, he didn't need to say.

“They might not have sat down and thought about it like that, but it's true. Muggles don't matter to most, Harry was easy to distance themselves from when it got a little too dangerous, and I'm just another Weasley. You only need to keep a couple of those around to carry on the family name; everyone knows we breed like common Muggles,” Ron finished bitterly. “Malfoy told dad that often enough.”

“Ron.” Hermione turned his name into a soft, sympathetic sound. Harry stayed quiet, feeling the distinct need to stay out of it.

“I can't – I won't kill people in cold blood,” Ron seemed to search for the right way to explain. “Battle is one thing, when someone's casting curses at me. I can't do it when I have to think about it. I don't want to be able to, but I'm not going to condemn Harry for it.”

“It's murder.”
Ron shrugged. “Dark Lord,” he said with his usual lack of tact. Blue eyes flickered to Harry before they turned to Hermione again. “I trust him. Can't say I'm sorry to see the Lestranges gone.”

“And if it's not Death Eaters one day?”

The interrogation seemed to have turned into an argument between the two of them, Harry ignored for now.

Ron shrugged again. “Then I trust he had a good reason for that, too.”

Hermione fell silent and simply watched Ron with the focused expression Harry associated with her being deep in thought.

Harry supposed she had a point. Ron's answer was all it came down to in the end. Ron had decided to trust him and back him to the end, stubborn, loyal Gryffindor to the core. He had made that decision a long time ago, and Harry shouldn't have been this surprised to see him brush aside cold-blooded murder, even if the victims had been the Lestranges.

Harry supposed that was why Hermione held the Vow, too. She questioned things that Ron shrugged off and accepted.

In the end she simply sighed. The lingering threat of the Vow eased as it returned to its usual passive state.

“I don't like it,” she said, and put a hundred different meanings into the words and their bond.

“I know,” Harry agreed.

Hermione hesitated, then took a step forward and hugged him, clinging to him tightly. “Oh, Harry,” she said softly and let him pick up the accompanying emotions from their bond. Regret and love and worry, and beneath it all the sadness that this was necessary at all, and the fear of what price it would eventually demand of him.

Ron joined them, wrapping his arms around both of them, and they simply remained there for a long time, soothing the lingering pain from the Vow and the borderline-interrogation.

Harry had won their argument, but it felt equally like he had just lost something precious he would never get back.

“You'll need to learn some way to defend your mind,” Harry told George when things had calmed down a little and he could risk a visit. “Veritaserum, too, but we've only managed a small workaround so far.”

George's eyes sharpened. “Occlumency? We ... overheard some of the Headmaster and Snape's discussions.”

“Only if you have some idea of it already. I'm crap at what little I know about it, and my Legilimency is all blunt force,” Harry admitted. “Hermione searched through the library but didn't find much. The few things we found all mentioned that to get it right you need someone to actually teach you, and according to Dorea's portrait the Black madness doesn't work well with Occlumency at all.”

George nodded slowly. Harry could almost see his mind at work. “Anything else in that library that might work?”
“The theory behind Occlumency. Hermione found a chapter about that, for what good it does. She's worked on it but hasn't made much progress, and I don't want to risk my Legilimency on her to test it.”

Another nod. “I'll owl her. We might be able to work something out together. Veritaserum?”

“The bond gives some degree of protection,” Harry said. “The truth-aspect of the potion still allows us to use a truth that isn't our own. Ron could honestly say that he didn't know who killed the Lestranges, so I could do the same. He suspected it, yes, but he didn't know. They tested me for the antidote and Memory Charms before they dosed me, so that's out. I've been put under Veritaserum regularly for close to a year, and those are the only protections we've found so far. Otherwise we're back to Occlumency, and ...” he trailed off with a shrug.

“Another thing to discuss with Hermione, then.” George's eyes narrowed. “I get the strange impression there's something you're not saying, ickle Lordship.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair, one of those nervous habits that he still occasionally caught himself doing. “The Imperius-defence.”

“Wouldn't work if they used Veritaserum.”

“It would if I cast the Imperius on you,” Harry said quietly. “And as long as they weren't too specific about when the curse was cast.”

For a long time George simply watched him, his expression blank. Then he reached out and flicked Harry sharply on the nose.

Harry didn't doubt he looked as startled as he felt. “Wha-”

“Bad Dark Lord. Bad! No biscuit,” George said. Then he smiled, a little wry and a little tired. “I won't let you take the fall when I'm the one cheerfully working with a Dark Lord. You can't defend yourself under Veritaserum. Why should I?”

“I have the bond.” Well, as long as they didn't ask the wrong questions. Minor detail, that.

“And I'll probably have Occlumency. Me and Hermione, we'll work it out.”

He sounded so confident, it was almost like having the old George back. Harry was reasonably sure he could have managed an Imperius before George could have dodged it, but he wasn't going to try. George had made his decision, and Harry was going to respect it. And he really didn't want to be the sort of person who threw Unforgivables at his friends against their will – even if it was for their own good.

In early July, Hermione received a letter from Professor Flitwick inviting her to Hogwarts for tea and Charms discussion.

“We started talking when I visited Professor Dumbledore's portrait to learn the Fidelius.” Hermione sounded exasperated. “We've exchanged letters about it and general Charms theory frequently since. He's been gone since the end of the school year and only recently returned to Hogwarts. Not everything is a trap, Harry!”

“Right after McGonagall threw a fit about my turning Dark? That's awfully convenient.”

Hermione glared, probably mostly because he didn't refer to the Headmistress by her proper title, but
Ron cut in before she could retort.

“No to sound like Mad-Eye,” he said carefully, well aware of the dangers of Hermione in a temper, “but he's got a point. McGonagall didn't sound happy, but everyone knows that Harry's stubborn as a Hippogriff if he doesn't want to talk. If you can't get through to him, me or you would be the second choice, then, and I've got no reason to visit.”

“He's Professor Flitwick,” Hermione snapped. “He's a respected teacher and a master of his art, not a cleverly disguised Death Eater!”

“At least try to see it from our point of view,” Harry tried. “Please.”

Hermione's tight expression eased slightly. “We have the bond. We'll be able to communicate.”

“Let one of us come along. We'd feel better if you weren't alone.” In potential enemy territory, Ron refrained from saying with a surprising amount of tact.

“Because I'm a girl?” Hermione's glare was back at full strength.

“No, because I'll be damned if I let you face down a potentially hostile force alone,” Ron said bluntly, his brief visit from tact forgotten. “We let Harry go alone, and we bloody well shouldn't have. We didn't think it would be a problem, because it was Hogwarts and McGonagall, and look at how that turned out.”

Hermione glanced at Harry and her expression softened. Harry would have felt a bit offended being used as the example if it hadn't been true. He would have felt a lot better with someone physically there to have his back. He couldn't go back and change it, but they could keep Hermione from ending up in the same situation.

“All right,” she relented. “Harry, then? He was the one who cast the Fidelius, and they'll know something is up if Ron Weasley volunteers for hours of tea and academic discussions.”

“And Professor Flitwick won't wonder about me?” Harry asked dryly.

Hermione shrugged. “Well, of course, but you were the caster, and everyone will assume I nagged you into coming along. Will that do?”

Harry and Ron exchanged a glance. It went unsaid that Ron would by pure coincidence find himself in George's shop while they were off at Hogwarts, conveniently near reinforcements should something go wrong. Neither of them felt like telling Hermione that, though.

“You may want to warn him that the Headmistress and I parted on less than ideal terms, but ... “ Harry ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “No objections from me.”

They arrived at Hogwarts a bright and early Monday morning. The weather was mild, and the Forbidden Forest stretched on forever, and the wards somehow felt a little more forgiving than last time. Possibly because Flitwick was the acting Headmaster this week, with McGonagall out of the country on a brief vacation. He had told them as much when he had invited them for Monday, sparing Harry any unpleasant further confrontations with the Headmistress or the portraits.

Filius Flitwick met them at the gates and led them to his office, talking about inconsequential little things until they were safely behind privacy wards and out of view of any portraits. Harry wasn't sure if it was a consideration for Hermione and himself, both well known for being somewhat paranoid these days, or because Flitwick himself felt safer with those precautions.
There was tea waiting for them along with small pastries. Books of every shape and size seemed to be the dominant life form around, crowding the floor-to-ceiling bookcases that lined nearly every bit of the wall, and encroaching on the low desk as well as the windowsill. It was Hermione's natural habitat, too, and even Harry had grown to appreciate it, having spent months upon months in the library at Grimmauld.

"It's a delight to see you again, Miss Granger," the Professor smiled when they'd all had the chance for a cup of tea. "Though I'm surprised you managed to convince Mr. Potter to come along."
Considering the topic or the fact that he was on somewhat bad terms with the Headmistress, Flitwick didn't clarify. Harry assumed it was both. Ravenclaws could be almost as good as Slytherins when it came to subtle questioning if they wanted to be.

"I know better than to argue when she's got an idea." Harry's fond voice took any possible sting out of his words. "The wards felt different this time," he said mildly. "A little less suspicious and intrusive."

Flitwick nodded slowly. The normally exuberant expression on his features had been missing already, but now his smile turned a little resigned, too. "I informed the wards that you were my guests and not a potential threat. I am sorry to say that they had not been given the same instructions upon your last visit."

He did not specify if it had been deliberate on the part of the Headmistress. Harry was polite enough not to ask.

“They sound like extremely powerful wards, Professor. Why didn't Professor Dumbledore raise those wards earlier?” Hermione asked hesitantly. Harry didn't need the bond to tell him it was her reluctance to potentially criticise an authority figure that was rearing its head again.

“I doubt anyone but Albus Dumbledore himself knows for certain,” Flitwick answered tiredly. “But I believe it to be a political issue. Minerva is fortunate. She has a mostly tame Board of Governors. Few people are foolish enough to interfere with the protection of the school, and certainly not this shortly after the end of the war. Albus Dumbledore faced a Board of Governors with Lucius Malfoy as its chairman. Even after he was dismissed, the Board remained ... traditionalist. The current wards are invasive enough that the Board would never have accepted it, and Fudge could easily have been convinced that raising them was Albus' first step in claiming control of wizarding Britain."

“It could have stopped Ginny's possession. It could have stopped Crouch Jr. from entering the school as Mad-Eye. It could have weeded out the Marked students.”

Flitwick nodded. “Very likely, yes. It would also have been a severe breach of privacy. Though against Voldemort, such concerns would matter very little.”

“Breach of privacy?” Hermione frowned.

“As Deputy Headmaster, I have access to the wards in Minerva's absence this week,” Flitwick said mildly. “And may I say it's an intriguing Mark both you and Mr. Potter wear on your shoulders. The Headmistress would not have noticed it, she does not have the sensitivity for such delicate work, but to a Charms master ...”

Panic, brief and painfully bright, forced aside by the icy chill of sitting in the office of a highly-competent potential enemy, and then Hermione gripped his hand so tightly it hurt.

*The Professor can sense our Marks*, she told Ron.
They both felt his echoing worry, followed by grim determination. *Need a hand?*

Flitwick hadn't moved. Hermione's grip eased.

*I - no. If he wanted to act on it, he could have done it earlier, before warning us,* Harry answered for both of them.

He took a calming breath but didn't quite manage to push the sudden rush of adrenaline and fear aside.

“Point made, Professor.” His voice sounded even, if barely. Harry would take what he could get.

“If it's any comfort, it was not easily spotted, even for powerful bit of Dark Arts. I only noticed it because I already had my suspicions. I am old enough to have seen the rise of another Dark Lord ... although that one was far less benign.” Flitwick took a sip of his tea, seemingly unaffected by the sudden tension in both Harry and Hermione. Harry certainly wasn't stupid enough to assume he hadn't noticed. “It was mostly confirmed by Mr. Potter's presence here. You have been here previously alone without issue, Miss Granger, and I know Mr. Potter has little interest in the theory of Charms work. I could be mistaken, of course, but he acts and moves like a protector ... and there are precious few reasons I can think of why he would see your presence here as a threat to you.”

Another calm sip of tea.

“I would be quite surprised if the youngest Mr. Weasley was not waiting somewhere should it prove necessary, likely with reinforcements.”

Hermione's glance at Harry turned into a glare at his vaguely guilty look.

*George's shop,* he confessed.

*We'll talk about that later.*

"If it's that easy to spot a would-be Dark Lord, I'm surprised no one saw Tom Riddle's reign coming." Harry's voice might have been just a little spiteful, but he figured that he had the right to be. A lot of problems could have been averted if someone had stepped in before Voldemort became the sheer force of terror he had eventually turned into.

"I think they did, Mr. Potter, but no one wanted to see it, and the wizarding world is very skilled at ignoring that what it does not wish to confront. He was handsome, powerful, and charming, and had the backing of highly influential people. No one wanted to cross that sort of man." He fell silent as he watched his two guests. "You do not have quite the same backing or, indeed, his insidious charm, but you do have the notoriety of the Man-Who-Won. You may not have noticed it yourself, and certainly not since you have shied away from the public the past year, but to those who know you, the changes are obvious. You were never studious, yet you have clearly thrown yourself into the pursuit of knowledge. You feel remarkably Dark to the wards, far more so than the seventh year students of traditionally Dark families. You have lost the Quidditch tan, and you have grown far more confrontational than you ever were before. You have all but isolated yourself, and the few people you are seen with - your godson and Miss Granger, for instance - you are obviously ready to defend with lethal force."

"Not necessarily the signs of a Dark Lord." Harry watched him carefully, ready to move should he prove to be a threat after all, and Flitwick arched an eyebrow in response.

"Indeed. I do notice the lack of denial, however, and - whatever else you may think, Mr. Potter - I am well aware that you have both the magical power and the dissatisfaction with the state of things
required to see it happen."

The Professor fell silent. Harry felt Hermione's hand tighten around his again, and he squeezed it lightly in support. Then Flitwick spoke, looking far more tired than they had seen him before.

"Hogwarts failed you dreadfully, Mr. Potter. We failed a number of students, but few as badly as you. I doubt you will hear this from the Headmistress, as she was Albus' understudy for far too long to believe him capable of mistakes, but I believe it's the truth. We failed you in a number of ways, as much as we failed a young boy named Tom Riddle, and it is only by the grace of magic and your own strength of character that you did not simply pick up where he left off."

Hermione had taken a sharp breath at the sound of Voldemort's birth name. "Harry isn't -"

"Voldemort? No, Miss Granger, he isn't." Flitwick made a tired sound. "But I also refuse to believe an eleven-year-old child could be irredeemably evil. At sixteen, certainly, the murder of poor Myrtle proved that, but at eleven? I wonder sometimes how many lives could have been saved if someone had given that child a proper chance and guided his ruthless ambition towards something far less horrendous."

The man paused. "In truth, I doubt it would have worked, but – sometimes I wonder. Hogwarts, it seems, has begun an unpleasant track record in regards to powerful young orphans with no one to speak up for them."

It was the same thing Harry himself had wondered, when sleep meant nightmares, and his mind kept going over every mistake he'd ever made, telling him he could have done more, done better. Hogwarts had failed miserably with the young Tom Riddle. Why had they learned nothing from it? Why had they let Luna be bullied year after year? Why had they let Hermione be mocked for her blood, and Ron for being a blood-traitor? Why had they looked at him, another dark-haired, powerful, isolated orphan, and kept doing the same thing that had seen the birth of Voldemort?

"He asked me once to join him." Harry spoke before he was aware of it. The words felt like a lump in his throat. "I was eleven, and he was possessing Quirrell. He offered me my parents back if I gave him the Stone. Looking back, I suppose he would have killed me, anyway, if I'd agreed," he added clinically.

Flitwick looked pained. Harry hadn't been sure if Dumbledore had shared that story. Now he suspected he hadn't. "Perhaps not. As a beacon of the light, you would have been a priceless asset in the enemy camp if he trained you right."

Good point. Harry tried to imagine himself like a male Bellatrix Lestrange and couldn't make the mental image fit. He forcefully kept his thoughts away from Wormtail.

"I don't suppose it matters much. He never asked again." Maybe Quirrell had been desperate. Maybe Harry had just been that much less of a threat at eleven. He doubted he would ever know.

"It matters, Mr. Potter. No child should have had to face Voldemort, much less make a choice like that. Not at eleven, not at twelve, and not at any other time we left it to children to stand against the darkness." The professor fell silent for a while, lost in his own thoughts. Harry wasn't in any hurry to interrupt him and neither was Hermione.

"I am surprised," Flitwick eventually said, "to find Miss Granger go along with this idea. Surprised and strangely heartened."

Because Hermione was the brain behind the operation or because her moral compass seemed more
reliable to Flitwick than Harry's, who knew. Harry certainly wasn't going to ask.

“It took a while to convince me.” Hermione raised her head, a little defiant. “He made some good points, though.”

Flitwick nodded. “Equal rights, I assume? Remus and young Teddy Lupin – you were made his godfather, were you not, Mr. Potter?” It wasn't really a question, so Harry didn't answer. “Has he shown sign of his father's ... affliction?”

“No. Not that it would matter to the purists in charge. Remus Lupin was a werewolf. Teddy would be tainted by association.”

“You know the wizarding world, Professor. This is the same kind of blood purist beliefs that gave birth to Voldemort, the same kind of prejudice that gave him the support of so many of the Dark creatures and left generations of Muggle-born struggling to even find a job. Nothing Professor Dumbledore did after the First Blood War helped,” Hermione pleaded. “Nothing Shacklebolt has done now has genuinely changed anything. We have to try, because no one else seems willing to do so. This can end with Harry.”

“It could,” Flitwick conceded. “It could also throw our world back into decades of war.”

“Does it matter when we'll still have another Voldemort or Grindelwald in fifteen years at the most?” Harry was becoming depressingly familiar with that argument. “A Muggle-born or part human with a grudge and too much power, or a pure-blood out to eradicate the tainted blood of the wizarding world. I don't suppose it matters much which one.”

“A lot can change in fifteen years.”

“At this rate? Nothing good.” Tired of the argument, Harry leaned back in the chair with a confidence he didn't feel. “You're about a year too late to convince me that the British wizarding world deserves anything other than to be picked apart and rebuilt into something useful. I'm sure the Headmistress and Snape's portrait will be happy to tell you all about how stubborn and impulsive and bullheaded I am. I've made up my mind. I will quite happily damn myself and nail my colours next to Grindelwald's if it lets Teddy grow up in a better world. I don't particularly want to be a Dark Lord but then, no one asked me if I wanted to be the Chosen One, either. And I have plenty of visions from Voldemort to draw on.”

“Harry!” Hermione was not happy. Flitwick just looked a little resigned.

“Dark magic will bring out recklessness, Miss Granger, and Mr. Potter already had it to spare. Grindelwald was known for his wild nature. Voldemort had his obsessiveness and utter belief in his invincibility.”

“And Harry will be known for his recklessness and poor impulse control.” Hermione sighed. “Oh, Harry.”

“Nothing for it, I suppose.” Flitwick simply watched Harry for a long time, looking for something that Harry wasn't sure about.

“You will meet resistance. You are not the first person to have decided to change the Ministry by force. So far they have weathered all challenges.”

“The Ministry caved to Voldemort.”

“Voldemort fell,” Flitwick said bluntly. “And the Ministry stands once more as it always did.”
Perhaps I should have let Voldemort keep it, then, Harry didn’t say, because he knew he didn’t mean it the moment the thought had formed. There was a lot of the wizarding world he could do without, but the bits he loved would have been the ones to suffer the most. That alone had made Voldemort’s final defeat a necessity.

“A Dark Lord is a force of nature, boy. Utterly merciless and unrelenting. Your determination will be tested soon enough. I will test your magic. A Protego horribilis, if you please. Preferably small enough to fit the room. A personal shield will do.”

Hermione bit her lip. “Professor, that’s -”

“- The least I would expect Mr. Potter to know, should he stand any chance of surviving this,” Flitwick interrupted. “He wouldn’t be the first powerful wizard to use a Protego horribilis as a personal shield. The headmaster of Durmstrang during the rise of Grindelwald quite favoured it, I’m told. A useful shield charm, although there are terribly few who can cast it. There is a reason we don’t teach it at Hogwarts. Well, Mr. Potter?”

Harry glanced at Hermione, then stood. He took another look around the room to get the dimensions right and raised his wand. This was a test, and Flitwick was right. It was a powerful, demanding spell, brutal in its demand for magic and eager to claim all you had to give to strengthen the shield. It was also capable of taking an obscene amount of punishment in the hands of a skilled wizard, and Harry knew it, too. It had not been brought out by Flitwick in the defence of Hogwarts for nothing.

Harry could cast the shield without any issues verbally, but stubbornness kept him silent now. It was a test, and Harry wasn’t about to back down.

He raised his wand, went through familiar motions – not an inch too much to the left or right, only a little too much of a curl at the end of it like he always did – and felt more than saw the shield snap into place around him. It was a perfect sphere above and below ground, large enough to cover the three of them completely but with plenty of space to the bookcases on either side.

The shield was almost invisible, but when Harry moved his head he saw the flicker of sunlight from the window hit the transparent shield and the shimmer of what looked like heat waves.

“Ah, Mr. Potter – don't forget to release it.”

Right. That part, he was still learning to do a lot faster. Harry took a slow breath, fixed the shield in his mind and carefully lowered his wand.

Flitwick stood up on his chair and jabbed at the inside of the shield with his wand. The heat waves seemed to shimmer a little more but didn't move. Then he moved outside and tried again, jabbing a little harder. The shield stayed where it was, and Flitwick's expression lightened just a little.

“Very nice,” the small professor complimented him. “Good, good – solid, with perfect spell passage outwards. You know, Miss Granger, this sort of shield won me several duels. Marvellous shield, it is. Now, go ahead, boy – cast a spell, let's see how you hold it.”

Harry could feel the shield as a whisper at the edge of his awareness. It felt harmless now that the initial rush of magic was gone, but he knew from experience the whisper could become a roar when sufficiently powerful Dark magic hit it and the shield demanded more magic from him.

He wondered what spell to use, and then found himself casting it before he had consciously decided.

“Expecto Patronum!” The memories were warm and glowing in his mind, and the silver stag that appeared from his wand was familiar and welcome.
Prongs leapt to the edge of the shield and huffed at the construct, leaving little wisps of ethereal silver in the heat shimmers. Then he tossed his head and faded away, leaving the room just a little colder and less welcoming again.

Flitwick made a delighted sound. “Excellent, excellent!”

The small professor turned, wand still in his hand, and a wall of blindingly purple energy slammed into Harry's shield with the force of the Hogwarts Express before he had even registered that Flitwick had cast a spell.

“Harry!”

Blind panic hit, followed instantly by blind rage, but he still had spots dancing in his vision and he couldn't cast without risking Hermione's safety.

Then Hermione was in his mind and the world cleared. *Harry!*

_Bloody hell – Flitwick?*_ Ron did not sound happy, about the spell or the thought of having to fight their way out of Hogwarts, but the few seconds of clarity made Harry realise something else.

Flitwick had cast once – a spell Harry hadn't recognised, but which clearly meant business – but he hadn't cast again.

“A test?” Harry was surprised to find his voice come out hoarse.

“One which you barely passed. But the potential is there, I suppose. Your shield held. Miss Granger, as I assume you and Mr. Weasley are his primary training partners – his reaction time needs to be significantly improved, in both defence and offence. A true idea of his skills will be impossible outside of actual combat, but he needs to be faster. I could have cast that spell another three or four times in the time it took him to do something.”

Flitwick climbed down from the chair and walked slowly around Harry.

“Your wand movements need to be more accurate – the end of the spell was barely acceptable. Being a Dark Lord is no excuse for sloppiness, boy. If anything, it's all the more reason to cast flawlessly. Dark Arts are forgiving only when it works in their favour. Some will turn on you at the slightest chance. You are not training for the Aurors or to pass Defence. A Dark Lord may have followers and resources, but in the end he must be prepared to stand alone against a wizarding nation. You are a Gryffindor, Mr. Potter. Honourable and brave and whatever other drivel that Hogwarts installs in you. Are you prepared to do that? Stand alone when all others turn on you and you become the villain that you have been taught to fight?”

Harry's grip on his wand tightened. “Ron and Hermione won't turn on me.”

“*Gryffindor!*” Flitwick spat the word like an insult. “They may die. They may defy you when you turn from righteous to ruinous. Then what, boy? When your careful strategies and hiding places fail and you stand before an army?”

“Then I fight. Every last one of them if I have to.”

“A lost battle? For what purpose, boy? To satisfy your foolish Gryffindor ideals? Dark Lords have been mostly Slytherin for a reason!”

Something in Harry snapped.
“Because if I kill enough of them, then maybe there won't be enough old blood left to rebuild the same useless society as before!” For long seconds the air in the office was utterly still and silent and heavy with barely contained magic. Flitwick's expression was inscrutable. “And the Hat wanted me in Slytherin,” Harry bit out. “If it matters a damn thing.”

“More than you think,” Flitwick eventually said. “And less, perhaps, too.”

He stopped his walk around Harry. “You'll do. More Grindelwald than Voldemort, and I suppose that's all we can hope for. Go, Mr. Potter. And don't return unless Hogwarts is under your command. The Headmistress is pure-blood and human. She would be far less understanding than I am.”

It wasn't a blessing, but it was close enough.

“Thank you, Professor,” Hermione said softly for both of them.

Flitwick made a tired sound. “End it, Mr. Potter. I don't see anyone else who will.”

Harry's nineteenth birthday sneaked up on him like a particularly persistent Doxy. They didn't celebrate it. Like Ron and Hermione had when their birthdays had rolled around, Harry much preferred the quietness of Grimmauld.

There were presents and cards from friends and what little family he had left. There was a cake from Molly Weasley, who insisted on baking birthday cakes for all of her children. She understood if they didn't want to celebrate, but cakes were a tradition and traditions mattered. There were some additional greetings from strangers who apparently kept track of such things – those he asked Mute to put aside. He would respond with a thank-you form letter at a later time.

Like Hermione's birthday, like Ron's birthday, they ended up in the library in Grimmauld with a bottle of Firewhisky the evening before his birthday. It probably wasn't a sign of a healthy way of coping with their experiences but none of them particularly cared. Tomorrow they would have birthday cake and open presents and enjoy the sunshine, and people would drop by and visit for a little while. Tonight was just for the three of them.

From the depths of the old dining room, they heard the first heavy chime from the grandfather clock. They listened unmoving as twelve chimes rang through the house and fell silent, leaving only ghostly echoes behind.

Only then did Ron raise his glass with an unusually solemn expression. “To friendship.”

“To family,” Harry spoke around the lump in his throat.

Hermione raised her glass to theirs. “To the end,” she softly said.
They started to work their way through the information from the Lestranges on the first day of August. In between learning new spells and mercilessly drilling Harry in the ones he already knew, a few days of sitting around in the library reading sounded great even to Ron. Two weeks of near non-stop trying to put Flitwick’s advice into action had left all of them tired and sore and utterly sick of some of the spells.

Harry liked learning magic. It stopped being fun when he spent hour after hour drilled in the same wand movements, just to gain a few more seconds of speed or a fraction more precision in his casting.

They all needed the break, and they needed to decide what to do with the information they had.

Harry had read briefly through all of it but didn’t remember hearing most of it himself. He had been too busy holding the Imperius and had let the enchanted quill do the writing for him.

Some of it was all but useless, some of it was priceless, but between Harry and George, they had wrung every last bit of information out of Rodolphus and Rabastan. The final result was a stack of parchment that would take days to go through properly. Blishwick had been useless. The Lestranges had been a goldmine.

The quill had picked up every bit of the interrogation, including the discussion between himself and George. Harry had removed those parts. He would gladly own up to his own words, but he had no right to expose George the same way.

There were two small safe-houses that Harry did remember clearly. He had already fished out those particular sheets of parchment and put them aside in the ‘useful’ pile. The pile grew fast over the course of the day, and Harry wasn’t sure if he was relieved to have his use of the Unforgivables slightly validated like that. It would make it easier to use the curses again next time but then, he didn’t need much help when it came to that. Those spells were entirely too useful to give up.

“We’ll need to put the safe-houses under the Fidelius, but the wards are solid. Not as good as the ones on the house we already dealt with but perfectly acceptable. Both houses are from after Voldemort’s defeat and supposedly no one but the Lestrange brothers knew about them,” Harry told his two co-conspirators when lunch rolled around. “Small houses, but they kept them stocked with everything they’d need to stay out of sight for a couple of months. Food, potions, even Galleons. With three of those houses to hide in, no wonder the Aurors couldn’t find them.”

“They were bloody paranoid.” Ron put a bundle of parchment on the table between them. “About everything.”

Hermione picked up the notes, and Harry knew from her sharp breath the moment she realised what she was looking at. The diagram on the front page had already told Harry exactly what it was.

“The Malfoy Manor ward scheme and defences.”

“In every last detail.” Ron looked up from the parchment in Hermione’s hand. “And several plans for how to get past it.”

“They intended to make the Malfoys pay for betraying their master, and the Weasleys for Bellatrix’ death,” Harry said quietly. “Molly was the target at King’s Cross. Not us. Not Teddy or Andromeda. Molly. Bill's wards were strong enough they didn't want to risk an attack on the Burrow, but
everyone knows when the students arrive at King’s Cross, and it was no secret that Ginny was at Hogwarts. I don't know how accurate the Malfoy ward scheme is. I don't know if Malfoy has changed the wards again since. But the Lestranges believed it was accurate enough to risk once Malfoy stopped looking over his shoulder.

The feeling of dread and relief was clear through the bond and was as much from Ron as from Hermione. The Weasleys had been a target before but that had been war-time. Not like this.

“You want to use this.” Hermione's hand trembled slightly. “You could get arrested or killed. Lucius Malfoy was one of Voldemort's most trusted. Narcissa Malfoy is a Black. The public backlash if you were seen -”

“He could always claim the Imperius,” Ron interrupted bitterly. “Worked great for them last time. I don't see why we shouldn't be allowed to do the same.”

Hermione ignored him. “Harry. The plans – this would be cold-blooded murder.”

Harry didn't object to her assumption that he would be going after Lucius Malfoy with the intent to kill. The Vow had given her a swift, brutal lesson in the lengths that Harry was willing to go to.

“And killing the Lestrange brothers wasn't?” Sure, they had attacked first, but that didn't change the fact that it had been an execution, plain and simple.

“They tried to kill us.”

“And Lucius tried to kill us in our second year,” Harry pointed out, quite reasonably in his own opinion.

“Narcissa Malfoy saved your life. She lied to Voldemort for you.”

“For Draco,” Harry corrected. “And I'm not going to go after her.”

He should. Every bit of common sense told him that. But Andromeda still considered Narcissa family despite it all, had told him about the occasional afternoon tea together as they got to know each other again as sisters, and Harry couldn't take that from her. He still had a slightly soft spot for Narcissa Malfoy for saving his life, for all that he had long since repaid his debt, but that would not have stopped him. For Andromeda and Teddy, though – he would give her a chance. One, and no more.

“And Draco?”

“I won't deliberately go after him.”

Hermione didn't look like she entirely trusted his reasons. She didn't demand an answer, though. The effects of the Vow still hung heavily between them, and she had been very careful with her words since.

Draco Malfoy was an arrogant, bigoted arse, a pale shadow of his father, and even with the Malfoy money and influence behind him, he had never shown any signs of having inherited his father's political abilities. Far more important to Harry, killing Draco Malfoy would leave Narcissa Malfoy as the last living member of the Malfoy family. With a lot of gold and influence, and a Black's compulsive need for revenge at all costs.

A still-living Draco Malfoy would be insurance. Even if Draco himself didn't understand it, Harry had no doubt Narcissa would. If Harry could somehow get past their defences to kill Lucius, he
could do it again to kill Draco. She would still want revenge if it ever became common knowledge he was behind it, but with Draco's future well-being to consider, there would be limits to the risks she could take.

Hermione gave up on that route of questioning and started on another instead. “They'll have house-elves.”

“The Lestranges took it into account.”

Hermione pursed her lips, obviously suspicious. Harry handed over the relevant page before she could hunt for it herself.

“Kill them?” she demanded.

“A strong Stunner should do the trick,” Harry defended himself. “I don't want to kill house-elves. Hopefully we won't even need to do that. Even house-elves sleep sometimes.”

Hermione was frowning, but she still returned the page to the pile. She knew him well enough to know that he wouldn't hurt the house-elves unless he didn't have a choice. She didn't like the idea of stunning them, but Harry didn't see what the alternative was.

Ron had been reading through the relevant pages while they had been arguing and only spoke up when it became clear Hermione was done with her objections for now.

“The plans are meant for two people.”

Harry nodded. “I'm going to ask George.”

Hermione's frown deepened. “Harry -”

“No. I don't even know if he wants to help, and we'll need to train the spells until we have them down to wordless casting if he does, but ...” He hesitated and tried to find a way to explain that wouldn't get him chewed out. In the end he settled for the truth. “I know George won't hesitate. I don't – I trust you, I'd trust you with anything, but I don't want you to have to do that sort of thing. We have enough nightmares between the three of us.”

“But you're fine with George getting his hands bloody?” Hermione did not sound happy.

“No,” Harry admitted. “But I'm not going to stop him. He wants even, and I'm the last person to refuse that. Is it healthy? Probably not. I – if he says no, I'll find another way.”

“He never would,” Ron said a little resigned. Not after Fred, he didn't need to say.

And there was yet another reason on the long, long list that Harry kept of just why he was doing this. Because the sort of world that took Fred from George and George from Fred because its adults couldn't fight their own wars was no world worth keeping.

It wasn't healthy, no, and Harry genuinely feared he would end up with George's death on his conscience one day, but George wanted revenge and Harry would never refuse that. Because it gave him someone powerful and trustworthy at his back, because it was George's life to use as he chose, and because if anyone Harry understood the need for revenge. He had a failed Cruciatus Curse in his fifth year to show for it.

Uncomfortable silence settled between them. When it finally grew too uncomfortable, Harry cleared his throat.
“Ron?”

“I don’t like it,” Ron said bluntly. “It’s murder, plain and simple.” He took a steadying breath, and when he breathed out again, his shoulders slumped a little. “It’s also Lucius Malfoy. He tried to kill Ginny. He’s the strongest financial backer in the Wizengamot, and he’s bribing his way back into more power even with a Dark Mark on his arm. The gold would go to his family, but the ferret doesn’t have old Lucius’ political skills. He’d be a lot less dangerous. We shouldn’t have to do this, but no one else is going to do a damn thing to stop him. Yes. Merlin damn it – yes.”

Both of them turned to Hermione, her eyes focused on the parchment but with an expression that said she was seeing none of the words.

Neither spoke, giving her as much time as she needed.

“When I was petrified ... there were first-years in the library when we left that day,” Hermione eventually said, never looking up from the parchment. “If it had been anyone else – if I hadn't used a mirror, if we hadn't realised what sort of creature the monster was -”

It was a thought Harry was already painfully familiar with. Judging from Ron's carefully blank expression, he wasn't alone.

“He could have killed dozens. Hundreds,” Hermione whispered. “And he knew it, or he didn't care when he found out, because it would just be the impure ones. And no one did a thing about it, because he is Lucius Malfoy, and he has enough gold and influence to be untouchable.”

She finally looked up and met Harry's eyes. “It will be premeditated murder. You can't get caught.”

“I know.”

She took a shuddering breath. “I don't like what it will make you and George.”

Harry sighed but couldn't argue with that. “I know.”

She held his gaze for long seconds, looking for something Harry wasn't sure what was. Then she sighed as well. “There is nothing I can say to stop you, is there? You have a list, even if you've never shown it to us. You would like us to understand, at least, but you would do it alone if you had to.”

“Pretty much,” Harry admitted. “They had their second chance, and some of them their third, fourth, and fifth as well, and the rest of us got to deal with the consequences. I'm done. This ends here. I'm not letting Teddy's generation grow up in another blood war. If this is what it takes, that's what I'll do.”

“You could stop the remaining Death Eaters but become the cause of the next war yourself,” Hermione pointed out.

“I know.” Harry had spent too long considering just that.

Hermione sighed again. Then she nodded. “I don't like it,” she finally said. “But I won't stop you.”

And for now, Harry knew, that was as much as he could hope for.

Harry met George in the back office of the shop the following morning, carrying a heavily protected bundle of parchment.

“The Lestranges' plans. I'm going after Lucius Malfoy.”
George accepted the bundle with a sharp smile. “I've been waiting for it.”

In the middle of August an owl arrived with a letter from Susan Bones. The wording was a simple request for tea and catching up with an old schoolmate, a very Hufflepuff thing to do. Harry could read between the lines just fine, and he knew better than to underestimate the niece of Amelia Bones. The responding invitation included the address for Grimmauld Place and a promise to be available at any time that suited her.

She took him up on the offer the following afternoon, barely giving the owl time to arrive with the notice to him. A quick talk with Ron and Hermione had sent them off to the Burrow for the day. If Susan wanted to discuss what they thought she would – and the letter had been far too innocent to not be a blatant hint that she had questions she did not want intercepted – then the three of them there to face just her would look borderline hostile. They didn't need to be physically present to follow the conversation, anyway.

The woman that greeted him when he opened the door was very different from the Susan Bones he had known from the DA. Like him, she had grown, and like all of them, she bore the scars of the war. Her face had grown harder, her eyes wary, and she had the physical build of someone who kept themselves in shape. She had plans to become an Auror last Harry had heard, and it showed.

“Harry,” she greeted.

“Susan.” He stepped aside, and she followed him into the house after only a moment of hesitation. Neither of them spoke. Outside wasn't safe, and Susan was probably as paranoid as Harry was about privacy wards. Most of them had learned the hard way during the war.

“Dining room or office?” he asked.

Susan watched him for a moment. “Office.”

Harry nodded and led the way. The room held his desk and chair, as well as three softer, more comfortable chairs and a small table. It was a little cramped, but the three of them had spent plenty of time there. With just two people and a sleeping part-Kneazle, it left room to breathe.

Susan settled down, and Harry cast the usual privacy wards. The way she tensed almost imperceptibly when he drew his wand said everything he needed to know.

Mute appeared with tea and biscuits and was gone again an instant later. Susan's brow arched slightly.

“Her name is Mute,” Harry said. “She's the former Lestrange house elf. The new owners of the house didn't want her, and she would probably never have found a new owner. The Lestranges cut out her tongue to keep her from speaking.”

Susan's lips became a thin line. “Charming.”

“Isn't it? A lovely example of wizarding behaviour.”

An uncomfortable silence settled as they poured their tea. Then Susan sighed.

“A number of us had plans to join the Aurors after this year.”

“They should be grateful to have you,” Harry said quietly. “They won't find a lot of applicants more qualified.”
“And that is the problem.” Susan took a sip of her tea and seemed to consider how she should continue. “A lot of that credit goes to you. You ran the DA. You taught us. A lot of us owe our lives and our families to those lessons.”

She paused and just stared at him for a moment, hard brown eyes meeting unflinching green ones. Then she sighed again and the weight of the world seemed to settle on her shoulders. “You stepped up when no one else would, even when most of us didn't believe you about - about Voldemort. You taught us to survive. We don't want to face you in battle, and I have the sinking feeling we will.”

“Not necessarily,” Harry said, and knew it was a lie when he spoke the words.

Susan's lips twitched. The amusement didn't reach her eyes. “And is that Harry or the Dark Lord Potter speaking?”

It was unnerving to hear the title from a friend. It had been one thing with Neville, who knew what they were up to. It had still sounded strange, but nothing like hearing it spoken with the heavy seriousness that Susan Bones gave it. Then again, he couldn't blame her. Not when she was sitting in his home, under his wards.

“To those who fought by my side it will always be 'Harry',” he said, and didn't quite answer the question. “Whatever happens.”

“I can't support Dark Lord.”

Harry merely nodded. “I know.”

“The Ministry will come after you with everything they have. If we become Aurors, that includes us. They will not show mercy. Not after two Blood Wars within twenty years.”

Harry took a slow breath. “I know. For what it's worth, I give you my word I will never go after you with the intent to kill, whatever your orders are. You, and anyone else who stood by us in the war. I owe you that much. In return you will extend the same courtesy to Ron and Hermione.”

_Harry -

_No. Fair's fair. Let me do this much for you, at least._

Susan's expression was unreadable. “Not you?”

Harry spread his hands. “Dark Lord. I'm a legitimate target. A swift _Reducto_ would be preferable to Azkaban, anyway. Ron and Hermione only got involved because of me.”

“Bloody hell, Potter.” Susan put down her tea and simply sat there for a long time, staring at the delicate china. Then she looked up. “Why?”

Harry got up and brought a piece of parchment from his desk, along with a quill.

“Harry?”

“Hermione based it on the DA contract,” Harry said and put the parchment in front of her. “I've said too much already. I trust you, I wouldn't have answered you at all if I didn't, but this isn't just about me.”

“Ron and Hermione,” Susan stated more than guessed.

Harry did not respond, and Susan picked up the parchment and started reading. He could tell by the
movement of her eyes when she reached the end and started back from the top again, reading slower this time.

“Veritaserum? Compulsion charms and similar?”

“There was no way to make an exception for Veritaserum. We think the magic of the contract will protect the secret from most spells but not from Veritaserum. Probably not from the Imperius, either, you'll need to be able to resist that one yourself, but that's all we can offer.” There had been no way to make an exception for Legilimency, either, but that was an exceptionally obscure kind of magic, and Hermione was almost sure that having the knowledge taken and not given would keep the contract from seeing it as a breach. Almost. They were equally almost-sure that having the information ferreted out by Veritaserum would be seen as a breach and punished accordingly.

Susan hummed softly as she finished the contract again. “Risky to sign. Will anyone be able to see the signatures?”

“She who created it, and anyone she allows. No one else. I won't make you sign. We won't make anyone sign it. I guess ... we let ourselves be selfish for once. I know the contract might end up killing someone, but I won't risk Ron and Hermione. We'll burn it when it doesn't matter anymore, but until then ...”

“You grew up while the rest of us were in Hogwarts.”

“We all did. None of the returning seventh years are children anymore, either. The war saw to that.”

Susan nodded. Then she picked up the quill and swiftly signed the contract. Harry saw the parchment flare slightly and felt the magic shift to adapt to the signature. “Why?” he repeated her question. “Because I want a safe world for my godson. Because having a werewolf father doesn't make him worth any less than a pure-blood. Because not a bloody thing changed after the war and at this rate, we'll be facing another Voldemort in twenty years at the most. Lucius Malfoy is bribing his way back into power even faster than he did the first time. The Ministry is full of Voldemort collaborators that no one will do something about because it'll mess up their nice, orderly lives, and can't we just forgive and forget? Kingsley Shacklebolt got so tangled up in politics that he's effectively useless, the Wizengamot is more interested in restricting part-human rights than doing anything to fix society, and when I refused to be the Ministry's pet Auror, I became a problem instead.”

“And you think you can do better?”

“I don't know. But I'm willing to try.”

Susan nodded. “You do know that a safe, just world of equal rights would see you put on trial next to Voldemort's Inner Circle.”

Harry gave her a wry smile. “Well, I'd hope, as a Dark Lord, I warranted a little more than just another trial.”

“Harry.” She made his name sound like a sigh.

“I know. I just don't particularly care.”

Susan sighed. “I noticed. Where does this leave us, then? I signed the contract. How much will you permit me to share with the others?”
Harry paused. “Who, exactly, are they?”

“I'm here on behalf of Dean Thomas, Anthony Goldstein, Ernie Macmillan, Hannah Abbott, and myself.”

That was an … eclectic list. Three potential Auror candidates, and - “Hannah and Ernie are considering the Aurors?”

“Not Hannah, but she's a dear friend and she wanted to know. Ernie ... a lot of things changed that year with Voldemort in power.”

Harry nodded. He knew that Hannah and Neville were stuck in an awkward little dance of maybe-mutual interest, and with Neville's friendship with them ... she had good reasons to want to know what her possible future boyfriend was involved in. Ernie had been in the DA. Harry had always seen him as somewhat stuffy and stuck-up, but the war had changed a lot of them, and he had always been decent with a wand.

“Tell them that they will need to sign a contract but once that's done, I will answer any question they have. Feel free to tell them that the contract is for secrecy alone and contains no other demands. Don't tell them the penalty. They'll see for themselves before they sign and if they don't agree, I may need to remove the memories.”

Susan nodded. “A reasonable precaution. Anything else?”

Harry hesitated as he tried to find a way to word it that wouldn't potentially come back to bite him later, if one or more of Susan's friends turned out to be untrustworthy. He doubted it, but ... “Tell them that I have my differences with the Ministry of Magic, but that it isn't my business what they choose to do, and I will hold no hard feelings if they join the Aurors. I assume they suspect as well?”

“We pieced it together as a group. We've met and trained together over the year and became close friends in the process. We approached Neville. He in turn told us to go to you. You're not as subtle as you think. You've mostly isolated yourself and have grown significantly more powerful and skilled over the last year, you've sunk a lot of money into a Foundation that, at its core, is set up to challenge the Ministry, your home has been raided for Dark artefacts, and you've been brought in for questioning for the Lestrange murders. It may not be the actions of a classic Dark Lord, but it's very different from the Harry we knew in Hogwarts.”

Harry nodded, accepting that. “Tell them that whatever happens, I won't raise my wand against them with the deliberate intent to kill. They fought with us at Hogwarts; I owe them that. Tell them I expect the same consideration for Ron and Hermione from them. Should either of them be targeted, we’ll see just how creative I can be with the Black library at my disposal.”

“I will let them know.” Susan let out a slow breath. “Thank you, Harry.”

Harry gave her a wry smile. “Any time. Tea?”

Susan just laughed.

When Susan Bones and Dean Thomas joined the Auror program in September, there were four new signatures on the parchment beneath Susan's name.

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Werewolf Terror in St Mungo's!
The headline in the *Daily Prophet* the morning after the full moon in late September was as sensational as Harry would have expected, but for once it did the story justice of sorts.

One werewolf in St Mungo’s on the full moon was all it took to destroy a year’s worth of campaigning for better rights for Dark creatures – and, Harry suspected, part-humans in general by extension.

One werewolf, eleven dead, two newly-infected Aurors – they would turn by the next full moon, there was no hope they wouldn’t – and a number of staff and patients that would, at best, carry their scars for life.

By nightfall, Dark creatures and those with Dark creature blood had been permanently banned from St Mungo’s by order of the Ministry. Teddy Lupin, with a werewolf father, was one of them.

The Evans-Lupin Foundation received an interesting request in early October. Harry found out through Ron and Hermione.

“Lavender Brown wants to start a business,” Hermione said, “but even just being 'tainted' by a werewolf, without being one herself, is enough that no one is willing to lend her the money and that the Ministry refuses her a permit for a shop. Especially – especially now.”

“You want the Foundation to fund it?” Harry was genuinely curious. Lavender Brown had never struck him as having much ambition at all. But then, they had all been forced to grow up, and she had lived with the visible scars of a werewolf attack for a year and a half. Even without the curse itself, she would still have faced all those charming wizarding prejudices. Bill, at least, had been abroad and had had the sort of career where gruesome scars were commonplace. The same had not been the case for Lavender.

“Her business plan is sound, and the idea goes well with the Foundation's purpose of helping those the wizarding world discriminates against.” Hermione hesitated. “She wants to create clothes with protective spells in them that don’t go to the same extremes as Auror uniforms and the like. Protection for those who can't cast a strong shield, for one. Squibs and children. Witches and wizards who didn't have the magical skills or gold for the supplies to attend Hogwarts. She's in contact with a part-human that can do the spell-work and knows the tailoring side of it herself. I think – it looks like a good idea to me.”

*Especially now,* she didn't add. Especially with a rising Dark Lord, even if only a few people knew. None of them wanted innocents caught in the crossfire, but they all knew it was unavoidable.

“People might shun it for being made by 'tainted' magic.” Harry didn't quite manage to keep the bitterness from his voice. There would still be customers, though, Harry's practical side knew that, too.

“Some will,” Hermione agreed. “We're still looking it over, but we want to give her a chance. We can afford it. The Foundation will hold the loan and the permit. The Ministry won’t be able to do a thing about it.”

Something in Harry's body eased a little, the same way it had when the Foundation had received its first donations that had not come as a direct result of Harry's lawsuits. The Foundation was finding its feet and – step by little step – stretching its abilities beyond what Harry had initially imagined.

They were baby steps, but each made it just that little bit more likely that the Foundation would survive past his death.
If nothing else, Harry hoped this would be his final gift for Teddy. Someone – something – with the gold and influence to fight for his place in the wizarding world if Harry himself failed.

The Foundation was not the only thing taking up their time. Between the daily spell-practice with Ron and Hermione, there was research and planning, spending time with Teddy and the few people they still socialised with, and frequent practice sessions with George. The attack on the Lestranges had been one thing. Going up against the defences of Malfoy Manor, even with the Lestranges’ plans to guide them, was a daunting task. The list of spells they would need to be able to cast was some two dozen long, a good half of which had to be done silently to keep from drawing attention by noise or magic both.

In between it all, Harry had also found a small cottage in a reasonably isolated part of Wales. It was an older wizarding home that had been on the market for a few years and needed a bit of renovation. More importantly to Harry, it was several miles from the nearest neighbour, would pass quite well for a home, and it was priced very reasonably.

The three of them knew it was only a matter of time before whatever home Harry claimed would be a target, and they all preferred if that place wasn't Grimmauld.

Potter Cottage would be their decoy home. Realistic and homey enough to pass for the real thing, but a small enough investment that it wouldn't be a disaster if anything happened to it.

Grimmauld Place itself was put under the Fidelius on Hallowe'en with George as the Secret Keeper, being the only one of the four who spent enough time away from the place to fulfil the requirements of the spell. It took significant amounts of magic but surprisingly little time. After placing the Fidelius over the two Lestrange safe-houses already, Harry had the casting down to instincts.

They shared the secret with those that mattered – family and those friends close enough that it made no difference. When Harry gave the small slip of paper for Arthur Weasley to read and burn, the man closed his eyes and when he opened them again, his face was no longer the slightly confused Ministry official with a fondness for Muggle objects but a tired, weary veteran of two wars.

“Be careful,” Arthur said quietly. “Molly can't lose anymore.”

Harry didn't try to claim the Fidelius was for protection, or privacy, or any of the other excuses they had ready. Instead he just nodded.

“We'll try.”

That was all he could promise. Judging from Arthur Weasley's resigned expression, he knew it, too.

Luna cornered him in the orchard behind the Burrow one lazy Sunday in early November. The weather wasn't great, but Harry had needed a break from the chaos of the weekly Weasley get-together, and magic would keep him warm and dry.

The soft sound of steps among wet leaves made him turn around to see Luna approach him, the lights of the Burrow far behind her.

She looked good, he had noticed that before. She still looked perpetually surprised, but that was just Luna. Staying with the Weasleys had done wonders for the broken girl that had sought them out during Easter, and with Ginny still living at home and training for the Quidditch try-outs the following autumn, she was never really alone, either.
For a long time they stood there and watched each other, protected from the elements by spells. Then Luna lowered her eyes and curtseyed.

“My Lord.”

Harry took a step forward. “Luna ...”

She straightened and silenced him with a finger on his lips. He noticed absently that her nails had been painted a rainbow of colours, most of them clashing.

“Ginny still remembers Tom Riddle. She loved him, too.” She tapped her finger against his lips as a little reminder before she lowered her hand again. “You are not him, but Wrackspurts like Quidditch players. She already has a flock of her own. The Harpies will like her.”

Luna took a step back and smiled, a little dreamily. “I will stay with Ginny. She was my first friend, and she shouldn't be alone. But if you find the Minister's army of Heliopaths, I would very much like to meet them.”

Harry was still trying to figure out what to say long after Luna had meandered back to the Burrow.

Dean Thomas dropped out of the Auror program in late November. Officially he wanted to pursue a career that allowed him to focus more on his love of art. The unofficial story Harry got the following afternoon in Potter Cottage when Dean came to visit.

With the four of them, Ron, Hermione, Dean, and himself, it was a little like Gryffindor Tower again.

"It's all politics," Dean said after the first glass of Firewhisky. They had all decided it sounded like one of those days. "Oh, there's training and classes and laws and Merlin knows what else, but at the end it's all politics. Even now when they're trying to replace the people they lost and the ones that got encouraged to retire after being a little too cosy with the Death Eaters. Knockturn Alley? Eh, who'd need a warrant for that place? Malfoy Manor? Better ask the Minister first, and give them a bit of warning, wouldn't be proper otherwise."

"Just like the old days," Ron said, a little bitter but mostly tired. "Dad tried to get them to search the Malfoys for years, he knew they had illegal things hidden, but nobody ever listened. And when they did, Malfoy got enough warning to have the time to hide it all. They didn't even bother giving Harry that."

"We'd finished cleaning up that place a few months before but hadn't told anyone. The Black family had a lot of questionable stuff, and the Aurors seemed like they were expecting to find something," Harry clarified at Dean's questioning look. "If we hadn't spent most of the autumn and winter renovating and clearing out the Darker stuff, I would have had a problem."

The Fidelius was a peculiar and powerful bit of magic. The article about the raid on Grimmauld was still there, but Ron and Hermione had tested it before George had shared the secret, and even seeing the article, they hadn't been able to make the connection between Grimmauld and Harry's home.

Dean grimaced. "Charming. Much better use of Auror resources than hunting the remaining Death Eaters, right." He swirled the glass in deliberately jerky motions and made the drink burp flames in a staccato beat. "They didn't look at blood status when they picked the recruits, at least, just our skills, but they're about the only Ministry department that doesn't. And even then you need political connections to get to the top. Susan could probably make Head Auror one day, she's got the name and the connections. Even if I wanted, it would never happen."
"How is she doing?" Hermione asked quietly. "Susan?"

"Officially, she's thriving. The instructors love her. Between the DA and what Amelia Bones taught her before the War, she's top of the class and a bloody terror to fight. Unofficially? She's just as disgusted with the politics as I am but..." Dean took deep breath. "We agreed that one of us should stay. You need an in with the Aurors, and she's a lot more likely to make it through than I am. Besides, she's a Hufflepuff. Everyone trusts Hufflepuffs."

Harry downed his own drink in a sharp motion. It burned all the way down but didn't help the unease that had settled in his stomach. "You don't have to. Not for me."

Dean shrugged. "We're not idiots. How many Death Eaters and Voldemort supporters have the Aurors brought in since the trials last summer? How many are still wanted? And the ones they got, half of them got released with a slap on the wrist because the higher-ups don't want to deal with the consequences. Some Aurors aren't even trying. They cleared out the worst of the sympathisers but they missed or ignored a lot. Nott's got an older brother in the force; Voldemort boot-licker if I ever saw one.

"I've seen the Lestrange case files. I don't know how you did it, mate, but I know you had something to do with it. I'm not looking for a confession," he continued when Harry looked like he was about to object, "and I've kept from asking you because it was too risky as an Auror recruit, but give us a little credit here. The Lestrange brothers attack King's Cross, specifically targeting the Weasleys and the last members of the Black bloodline. Two days later they're found dead, looking like someone did a lecture on the Unforgivables on them. There's been no mysteriously injured people in St Mungo's, no rumours about who did it, and no reports of unexplained spell-fire. This is after the Aurors spent a good while trying to hunt down those two, because the Inner Circle are some of the few ones they've actually put aside the manpower for."

"I've already been questioned under Veritaserum."

"Which isn't foolproof." Dean shrugged. "As said, not looking for a confession, but even with that Veritaserum defence, you're at the top of the suspects list. They just can't pin it on you. Frankly, even with the Unforgivables in play, the wizarding public would be more likely to reward you for taking those two down than want you punished, especially after King's Cross. You need an in with the Aurors, because you're apparently the only person making a bloody effort to finally end this, and even if all we can do is warn you before a raid, then that's what we'll do."

"I'm a Dark Lord, Dean." As he should know, having signed the contract, but Harry needed to remind him, anyway. Because right now he sounded too much like a Gryffindor, like this was just another adventure, and Harry didn't want to risk any more friends than he already had.

"Yeah." Dean swirled the Firewhisky again, then downed it when the flames had died down. "We talked about it, afterwards. When we'd signed. And you know what we decided? When Harry bloody Potter decides to become a Dark Lord, then maybe it's time to reconsider the side we're on. And not for power, or revenge, or whatever Dark Lords want these days. You're damning yourself to protect a toddler that happens to have a werewolf father. If that's what you have to do to keep him safe, what chance do the rest of us have against the Ministry and the pure-blood elite?"

To Harry, who'd never quite understood why they had been so ready to sign that paper, it was a sobering thought. Sobering and terrifying.

Harry Potter never wanted to be a symbol. All he wanted was to be normal, with a normal life and a family and a job. And when it came clear he would never have it, he had decided to do what he could to make sure that Teddy would have the chance instead. He thought he had been done being a
leader after Hogwarts. It was becoming increasingly clear that he had been very, very wrong.

With St Mungo's no longer an option for Teddy, Harry had been forced to look elsewhere for medical care for his godson. The toddler had been unusually tired two full moons in a row, and Harry and Andromeda both knew better than to assume it was coincidence.

Doctor and Doctor Dunsfell were a husband-and-wife partnership located in a run-down part of Birmingham. The clinic was small and cramped and a little run-down, too, but the wards that greeted him were some of the strongest he had encountered outside of old estates.

He had found them through the Evans-Lupin Foundation, who had in turn found them through several of the non-humans they had come into contact with. The two doctors used their Muggle job title to stay unnoticed and served as one of the few doctor's offices in the wizarding world willing to deal with all kinds of non-humans, supplementing their income with a small potion brewing store on the side.

Teddy squirmed as they settled down in the waiting room – little more than a narrow hallway – and Harry reluctantly put him down.

"Don't go anywhere," he said quietly.

Teddy, perhaps a little unnerved by the unfamiliar smells, nodded. There was only one other person waiting with them, a pale man with dark circles under his eyes and a tremor in his hands, but he merely kept staring tiredly at his shaking hands, never looking up.

He reminded Harry vaguely of Remus Lupin and wondered if the man was a werewolf, too, but he dismissed the thought again almost immediately. He could be human for all that Harry knew – not everyone had the ability to get to St Mungo's, and the Knight Bus was about the last kind of transportation any sick person would choose.

The air was still, and the silence downright oppressing, and it was a relief when Harry heard the soft sound of a door opening.

An elderly woman in robes stepped out, followed by a younger woman dressed more like a Muggle doctor than a St Mungo's healer. They exchanged a few, strangely muffled words – Harry suspected a privacy ward – and then the elderly woman smiled tiredly and left, carefully making her way through the cramped hallway.

The female Doctor Dunsfell was a wiry-haired blonde even shorter than Harry. Being a witch, she could have been anywhere from mid thirties to early fifties, but Harry supposed it didn't matter much. She touched the shoulder of the pale man gently, and he looked up and shook his head slightly before he went back to staring at his shaking hands.

The doctor didn't seem surprised, but turned to look at Harry and Teddy instead.

“Mr. Morris and son?”

Harry nodded and got up, Teddy's hand held securely in his. He felt the privacy ward as they stepped inside the office proper – a strong, secure one – but he doubted he would ever really be comfortable with a privacy ward he hadn't seen cast himself.

The office was light and airy. A little small, a little worn, with several chairs, and with things packed tightly on shelves and two floor-to-ceiling cabinets of nothing but drawers, but it was clean, and everything Harry knew about doctors and hospital wings told him it was a decent place.
Doctor Dunsfell picked up a new piece of parchment and gestured for Harry and Teddy to take a seat.

“You can release your glamour if you wish, Mr. Morris. It can't be pleasant holding it.”

Harry hesitated for a few seconds, then conceded and let the magic dissipate. He didn't want them to be recognised in the waiting room, but he was about to trust Teddy's health to this doctor. If he couldn't trust her enough to show who she was actually dealing with ...

“The wards?” he guessed.

To her credit she merely glanced at him, eyes flickering briefly to his forehead before she answered the question.

“I wanted to be a warder,” she said, “until I learned that no one in Europe would even look at anyone who hadn't graduated from one of the three major schools. St Mungo's wasn't as picky as long as you had the right grades for it. They couldn't afford to be, with the small number of qualified applicants they got. Warding remained a hobby. The clinic is a target. We would not have remained in business without additional security.”

Harry understood all too well. Another item on a long, long list of failings in the wizarding world.

Dunsfell knelt on the floor and held out her hand to Teddy.

“Hello,” she greeted softly. “I'm Amanda. I'm a doctor.”

Teddy looked to Harry for permission, then back at his nod.

“Teddy.” He pronounced the name very carefully – he was very proud of his name, Harry had found – and Doctor Dunsfell smiled.

“A proper little gentleman.” She glanced up at Harry, a question in her eyes.

“He has his inoculations so far,” Harry began, “he's not due for the next round of wizarding ones until he's four. He always gets tired around the full moon but it has grown worse the last two months. He doesn't change, but his father was a werewolf and his mother a human Metamorphmagus, and no one has been able to tell us what that might mean later on. Eating raw meat seemed to help, but there is only so much he can eat.”

Dunsfell didn't react to the 'werewolf' bit beyond a nod. “You don't see human-werewolf couples very often,” she agreed, “and the wizarding world cares little for half-breeds.”

She drew her wand and cast a series of spells, a few of which Harry recognised from his frequent visits in the Hogwarts infirmary. At her side, hovering in the air, a quill faithfully scribbled its way across a piece of parchment.

Eventually Dunsfell lowered her wand again. “He's generally in good health,” she said. “He does have several vitamin deficiencies, though, primarily iron. We can repeat the spells later, but I suspect he will always need more iron in his diet than the average wizard, and certainly while he's still growing. I will give you the names of a few potions – you're a Hogwarts graduate, you will likely be able to brew them yourself, or I can suggest a few places – and then I recommend another check-up in a few months to see how he responds to it.”

She smiled at Teddy, then glanced at Harry again. “He does not register as a werewolf. Save for those who know about his father's condition, or highly specialised medical spells, he will register as
human. The vitamin deficiency showing up now is a result of being a growing boy and a Metamorphmagus himself, not because of his werewolf legacy waking up. He will probably enjoy his steaks rare, his teeth and nails will be a little stronger, and his hair will grow a little faster than normal, but that should be all.”

Doctor Dunsfell stood and plucked the hovering parchment from the air. She gathered a few more papers, collected it all in what looked like a Muggle medical journal, and handed Harry the slim folder. “We don't dare keep patients' files here. If you need to return, bring the file with you. It will speed up the process.”

“Thank you.” Harry understood and appreciated it.

The small pouch he gave her in payment contained far, far more than the visit had cost. It was still far, far less than what Teddy's health was worth.

There were several ways to get past wards intended to keep intruders out. Some were fast and spectacular. Some were slow but could, with skill, be done quietly enough to remain utterly unnoticed.

Any ward was only as secure as its weakest point. The Black wards had ignored two Horcruxes, one of them while Harry – who, if any, should know about them – held the wards. Even the Fidelius was only as strong as its Secret Keeper.

Voldemort had favoured the direct approach. He had been powerful enough to simply overwhelm most wards and cut off all means of escape in the process. He had also liked his victims trapped and terrified, as Harry knew entirely too well.

The Lestranges hadn't had that sort of power available to them, nor had they wanted the sort of attention it would bring. Instead they had used the kind of spells that required intimate inside knowledge of the wards, and they'd obviously had that information. Once you knew the layout, you could start working with the wards and figure out the conditions. Once those were clear, it was just a matter of skills and patience to match those conditions well enough to pass. Effectively invisible to the wards and those that relied on them – human or house-elf. The method was insidious and effective, pretty much what Harry had come to expect from those Death Eaters that had actually been competent.

Once they had the spells down, Harry and George had taken turns casting wards and getting past them using the knowledge they had been given from the other. The Malfoy wards would be far more difficult, but the principle was the same. There was the risk that Malfoy had changed the wards since the Lestranges got their information, but Harry was willing to take the chance. If they got it wrong it would be obvious almost immediately and would give them time to escape.

Harry could very likely have taken down the wards with brute force. He knew better than to even consider it. The wards on the Lestranges' hideout had been one thing. These were far more powerful, and even the smallest misstep could bring the full might of the manor's defences down on them. That wasn't even taking into account that this was the home of a respectable, important member of wizarding society. The Aurors would likely be there within minutes of Malfoy's summon.

If he hadn't been trying to spare Narcissa, if he knew the wards to cast to block Floo and house-elves ... maybe. Fiendfyre for the wards, and once more for the manor. Even then, it would very likely have taken long enough that the Malfoys would have been able to escape.

Harry and George struck the second week of December, on a common weekday with absolutely no
social events that could have kept Lucius Malfoy out of his home, or any overnight guests to complicate matters.

They began their task shortly before midnight, when the manor seemed to have fallen quiet. It took the better part of three hours to get right, piece by piece until they had the ward-signature down perfectly. Even with two wands, power to spare, and everything but the actual blueprints for the wards it was gruelling work. Making it work with their Disillusionment Charms definitely hadn't made it any easier. Life had been a lot easier in Hogwarts, when they had all been small enough to huddle under the Invisibility Cloak together.

They passed through the wards easily, stopping right inside of them. The manor up ahead remained silent. The wards didn't make a whisper. As far as they were concerned, Harry and George both belonged on the property.

Harry let out a breath he hadn't even noticed he'd been holding. “Well.”

“Through the gate?” George murmured.

“Yeah. If the Lestranges got it right, it shouldn't even notice us.” And it was a much better option than trying to get across the tall hedge. They didn't want to cast any more magic than they had to until Lucius Malfoy was dealt with. Their disguise would not hold up to prolonged spell-casting.

They slipped past the gate with only the softest whisper of sound and found themselves in an utterly still garden. Utterly still, utterly immaculate, and more than a little eerie.

“If we got it wrong, something should have happened by now,” Harry finally said, when the manor remained silent.

George's smile was sharp in the moonlight. “Lucius, then?”

“Lucius.” Harry's responding smile was no less sharp.

Malfoy Manor was as creepy and opulent as Harry remembered. He forcible shoved aside the memories that threatened to take over and focused on the mental map he had memorised from the Lestrange plans.

The house-elves were likely in the kitchen, hopefully asleep. The bedrooms were upstairs, and they sneaked past one sleeping portrait after another, the dates beneath the names ticking upwards as they reached the long hallway lined with doors.

They both had their wands out, ready to cast at the first sign of movements, but the hallway remained as it was – dimly lit and silent as a tomb.

The master bedroom was the fourth door to the left, a large room with a balcony and a view of the gardens according to the information the Lestranges had. Harry didn't know how they knew – he assumed Bellatrix Lestrange had told them at some point, being Narcissa Malfoy's sister – and he didn't particular want to think about it. The level of some of the details in the information had been disturbing.

There were no further defences on the door, nothing but a few spells to silence the room and an easily-disabled spell to alert the occupants to visitors, and it opened soundlessly to Harry's touch. The unnatural silence of the hallway was broken by the slow, deep breathing of sound sleep and settled again as they slipped inside and closed the door behind them.
Two figures rested on the enormous bed, and Harry would recognise that platinum blond hair anywhere. He held out his hand and counted down with his fingers from three -

- Two, one -

“Stupefy!”

Twin flashes of magic lit the room. Harry froze, waiting to see if the wards – or the house-elves, or anyone – reacted. Seconds stretched on and finally they dared move again.

George cast a second spell at Narcissa Malfoy – Harry vaguely recognised it as a more obscure variation of a Stunner – then joined Harry on the other side of the bed.

“What in case,” he murmured. “No need to risk anything. Legilimency?”

Harry nodded and mentally prepared himself. They didn't have time for a full interrogation, couldn't risk that Lucius might be tracked if they brought him with them – it wasn't the most reliable solution, but his brute force Legilimency was all they had. If that failed, he would try Veritaserum and the Imperius and get what he could from the man, but that would take more time than they could afford. They couldn't risk lingering. They had to be out again fast.

The Lestranges had planned to simply kill everything in the manor, starting with the house-elves and Lucius Malfoy, and then take their time to be creative with Narcissa and Draco elsewhere as revenge for turning against Voldemort. They would have left no one to alert the Aurors. Harry and George would not have the same luxury.

A silent spell from George forced Lucius' eyes open and Harry raised his wand.

“Legimens!”

Harry's mind plunged into a maelstrom of thoughts. Memories flashed by almost faster than he could spot them, spinning around and around, starting somewhere far below him and continuing into the distance high above; so far away Harry could not see the end of them.

He focused harder, concentrating on what he needed – on politics and Death Eaters and secrets, ignoring the memories of family and decadent indulgence – and the memories switched and slowed. Some were flickers, gone before he could see them. Others lingered long enough that he could pick them up, memories of power and gold and death and -

- He pushed further on, aware that they were on a definite deadline.

Harry tore ruthlessly through the memories, snatching what he could with no care for the damage he left behind. It wouldn't matter and he didn't care, not after everything Lucius had done, not after Hermione's petrification and his utter indifference to the deaths the Basilisk could have caused.

He was distantly aware of Malfoy's presence, of the mostly-unconscious mind that fought to keep him out and tried to struggle against the Stunner. The man definitely had Occlumency training – and so did Draco, the memories told him, taking from the Malfoy side of the family – but Harry had raw power and no inclination to be subtle.

With one last vicious push against the few remaining defences he felt Malfoy's mind crumble and fall away beneath his assault. Something felt like it snapped – dark red and sharp pain in the back of his skull, pressure and numbness and the heavy throb of a heartbeat. Then there was only vertigo and darkness and fragments of what had once been a person, and Harry retreated so fast that he could feel the mental whiplash.
Empty grey eyes met brilliant green. Two lines of bright red blood flowed from Malfoy's nose and down his face to soak the pillow. The man was still alive. Barely.

Merlin.

Harry stumbled back. Then George was there, supporting him even as Harry dry-heaved once, twice, trembling like the aftermath of a Crucius.

“Harry?” George's voice was low and urgent.

“... I broke his mind,” Harry whispered when he could speak again. “He was an Occlumens. Some part of him was still awake. I pushed until I broke through it and his mind just ... crumbled.”

George's expression warred between worried and satisfied. “... Nothing he didn't deserve,” he finally said. “We need to get out of here.”

Harry straightened. “Yeah. I'm – I'll manage.” He glanced at the – at Lucius. “Do you want the honour?”

George twirled his wand between his fingers. A flicker of indecision crossed his face. Then the expression hardened. “Well, if you're offering, your Lordship...”

The wand stopped and came to rest aimed perfectly at the unmoving body. “For every time you tried to kill a Weasley,” George spat. “For every time Ginny woke up screaming. Dirimo!”

Lucius' body jerked. Then it was still, not even breathing anymore.

“Ronniekins found it in one of the Black books. It tears apart whatever inside bit of the body that happened to annoy you,” George murmured. “I'm afraid old Lucius' heart is in several pieces now.”

Definitely Dark. Not Unforgivable, although Harry was pretty sure it could easily have been up there. A Killing Curse at least was quick and painless, as long as you weren't stupid enough to survive it.

Several more spells took care of any traces they might have left. With Lucius dead and Narcissa out of it, they just needed to keep an eye on the house-elves and Malfoy the younger. They could risk using magic a little more freely now.

They still left the manor as swiftly and quietly as they could and crossed the gardens at a run, Apparating as soon as they were clear of the wards.

The uproar, Harry knew, would be massive. They had not made Lucius' death look like natural causes in the least. It might have worked, but they had decided against it. Harry wanted the rest of Malfoy's kind out there to fear. He wanted them to know that someone, somewhere was targeting Death Eaters and was able to get through the Malfoy wards unseen. They had left no hint of their identity, but he still wouldn't be surprised if he was brought in for questioning. Not with the sort of interest the Aurors had started to take in him.

Harry returned Grimmauld Place shortly before four that morning. On the couch he found Ron and Hermione, both asleep and likely waiting for him.

He absently cast the charm to clear the spell-record on his wand. Then he gently expanded the couch and conjured a blanket before he settled in to sleep, careful not to wake up his two best friends.
“I ... found some Occlumency theory,” Harry told Hermione quietly that morning, when they were all awake and mostly rested.

Ron was in the shower. Hermione had brought out a book that could have doubled as a bedside table. Both of them had very carefully not asked him anything about the night before beyond making sure he and George were both all right.

“I'll write it down for you,” he continued. “I – won't be able to test you.”

Hermione had made him practice occasionally. They had been very careful, but it wasn't until now he understood the sort of risk they had run repeatedly. He would never do it again. Not with the memories of Lucius Malfoy's mind breaking beneath his spell. Not with the nightmares he would have of a human being reduced to little more than a Dementor victim from nothing more than the force of his magic.

He could cast it on enemies, sure. He would break his Vow and bear the consequences before he ever cast it on a friend.

Hermione watched him for a long time. Then she nodded.

“All right.”

She didn't ask. Harry didn't offer.

The Malfour death – murder, Harry readily admitted – did not make the morning *Prophet*. They made up for that with a special evening edition dedicated to nothing else. A reformed pillar of society, brutally murdered in his own bed, behind some of the best defences available to wizarding kind? The *Prophet* would milk the story for weeks. Months, Harry figured, if they managed to dig up some particularly juicy details or got inside information on the investigation.

They had a number of pictures of Lucius Malfoy looking important and respectable, along with pictures of his family. A few of them featured Draco as new head of the Malfoy family, looking paler than he ever had at Hogwarts. There was a long article about Lucius' many contributions to wizarding society, and an equally long, sympathetic article about his 'youthful struggles' and 'sacrifices for his family' and 'resilience in the face of opposition and prejudice'.

The fact that Rita Skeeter was in Azkaban hadn't improved the *Prophet*'s journalism much.

There was a surprising lack of details about the murder itself. Harry suspected that was Narcissa Malfoy's doing, since Auror information made the circuit only slightly slower than Hogwarts gossip.

The letters in the *Prophet* were mostly supportive and full of shock and indignant rage. If anyone thought Malfoy had it coming, they wisely stayed quiet about it.

The going theory was revenge, rogue Death Eaters out to get even with a brave man who stood strong against their master when others had faltered. That one got a small smile from Harry. In another world where they hadn't gone after the Lestranges, it could very well have been the right theory, too. As it was, Harry and George had stolen their plans wholesale, so he supposed 'rogue Death Eaters' did play a big part in it.

There were a number of other crackpot theories but none that Harry paid attention to beyond making sure their names weren't brought up.

He went through the memories from Malfoy the best he could and let a dictation quill write
everything down as he spoke for hours about everything he could remember. His dreams the following nights were an unpleasant mix of those memories and his own nightmares. A Pensieve would have been extremely useful, but the only one they knew of was in Hogwarts and well out of reach. Well, technically Harry knew about two, now, but the second was in Malfoy Manor and very much out of reach as well. Instead they made do the best they could.

One thing they did act on almost immediately was the memory of the Malfoy 'country house' – or, more accurately as Harry noted, a convenient place to house lesser visitors or the occasional mistress a respectable number of miles away from the proper estate. Lucius had made little use of it himself, and the memories were of a small, stuffy manor house with stale air that was only rarely visited even by house-elves.

Lucius Malfoy’s memories meant that the wards – far weaker than those on the proper Malfoy Manor – were easily bypassed without alerting whoever held the wards now. Narcissa or Draco, Harry didn't know, nor did he particularly care.

An hour later the house and the small surrounding garden were gone, whisked away by the Fidelius like they never even existed.

Days passed, then a week. Harry knew better than to assume the silence was good news. Ron and Hermione's tension told him they agreed.

Susan’s Patronus arrived eight days after the murder.

“They want to bring you in for questioning.” Then, softer - “Good luck.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged a look.

“Potter Cottage?” Ron asked.

“Better than waiting for the wards to alert us,” Harry agreed. Probably less suspicious. They weren’t about to move into the cottage, but it still had to be able to pass for somewhere they actually lived. A number of spells had been put into place to give them advance warning of any visitors but even then it was minutes at the most.

Harry Apparated to Potter Cottage alone. He didn't want to draw the Aurors' attention to Ron or Hermione. They didn't like it, but they all agreed that it was better to have backup in Grimmauld if he needed it.

A flick of his wand made the cold fireplace come to life. Another few flicks, and a teacup had settled on the table, along with the morning's copy of the Prophet. In the kitchen, the kettle had woken up as well. A few minutes and the cottage looked and felt like an actual home again, the faint smell of wood-smoke mingling with tea.

He was in the middle of the Prophet's crossword – 8, down: The unfinished musical composition banned since 1902 – when the wards alerted him to guests.

Three, by the feel of it. Harry put aside the paper, finished his tea, and got up to meet the Aurors at the door.

Harry didn't know the Auror with the Veritaserum, nor did he particularly care. He could sense Shacklebolt nearby, though, even if he couldn't see him. The man was strong and his magic familiar. He was observing the questioning, probably. Harry supposed he should feel flattered the Minister
took time out of his busy schedule for that sort of thing.

The Auror went through the usual test of antidote and Memory Charms, then fed Harry the three drops of potion.

The world fell away around him. Only the warmth of his bonds and endless months of exposure to the potion's effects remained as a grounding force in the emptiness and gave him some control.

“What is your name?”

“Harry James Potter,” he answered truthfully. There was a quill scribbling down every word they spoke, for all the good that would do.

“Did you kill Lucius Malfoy?”

Harry did not even need to use his bonds for that question.

“No,” he answered truthfully. Broke his mind, yes, but he hadn’t cast the final curse.

“Did you participate, assist, or were you in any other way involved in the murder of Lucius Malfoy?”

Even to his detached mind the questions felt familiar. He supposed they had rules about questions and how to phrase them.

The question was straining the limit of the bonds. They had known the plans, but they hadn’t helped, hadn’t even talked about them since that first day they went through the papers, and that was enough that Ron, with his wonderful black and white view of the world, could truthfully say -

“No.”

“Do you know who were involved in the murder of Lucius Malfoy?”

The compulsion of the Veritaserum strained against the bond. Worse than Voldemort's Imperius and without the pleasant desire to simply give in, only endless training runs with Ron and Hermione kept the answer from crossing his lips before he could stop it.

Hermione would be no help, her mind was too analytical, too happy to question everything. Ron was the one who could stubbornly take things at face value if he had to and stick to his version, come hell or high water.

Ron was very, very sure he knew who was involved in the murder, but he hadn’t asked and he had no proof, and for all that he knew there might have been others involved, too. And that was enough to appease the compulsion – barely.

“No.”

Harry could feel relief even through the effects of the potions, the adrenaline of a barely dodged Unforgivable.

“Where were you on the night of the murder of Lucius Malfoy, Tuesday the seventh of this month?”

Only the fact that he was not the Secret Keeper kept him from blurtling out the name of Grimmauld Place when he pulled on Hermione's bond. Distantly he wondered if he could have named it, if he had bonded with George as well. “Asleep. At home,” he stated, keeping Ron and Hermione's names out of it.
“Where?” The Auror sounded more insistent this time.

“I am not the Secret Keeper.” Truth. Let them make of that what they wanted. He didn't like giving up the knowledge of the Fidelius, but he would be surprised if the Headmistress hadn't told Shacklebolt about Hermione's interest in the spell after Harry's behaviour in Hogwarts. She had probably told him about Harry's apparent ability to lie under Veritaserum, too.

The unnatural silence of a spell settled around him, blocking off all sound. He felt both Ron and Hermione in the back of his mind, as anxious as he felt.

He was almost sure what the next question would be, they all were, and he knew just as well he couldn't lie his way around it through the bonds. How much would Shacklebolt let them get away with? None of them knew anymore. He couldn't lie about the identity of the Secret Keeper since all three of them knew, but there were other options. Harry would find a way to keep his mouth shut if it came to that. He had enough training with the potion that he might be able to stay silent, when it was something this important to him. Otherwise ... well, hard to talk without a tongue.

The silence stretched on. Finally the spell was lifted and the antidote administered.

The haze cleared. Harry looked up to meet Kingsley Shacklebolt's dark eyes.

“Potter Cottage isn't under a Fidelius.”

Harry didn't answer. Shacklebolt made it sound like an important piece of information, but they both knew it said very little. The Fidelius could have been cast on part of the property. It could have been another place entirely. It didn't even necessarily have to be Harry's property he was referring to.

“They wanted to ask the identity of the Secret Keeper,” Shacklebolt continued. “I refused permission. It goes far beyond what they're allowed to during a normal questioning, and I don't think any of us want to find out what lengths you would go to to keep the name safe.”

Probably sensible. Ignoring what it might have done to Harry himself, the fallout if a well-known, influential person like him came to harm in Ministry hands during a routine questioning would be ... significant.

Harry stayed silent, though, and Shacklebolt sighed. “That was all. You're free to leave.”

Harry stood. Only then did he speak. “Thank you, Minister.”

Something flickered through Shacklebolt's eyes. It might have been concern. It might have been suspiciousness. Harry was too exhausted to care.

Christmas hit with the force of a Bludger. They had all had other things to worry about, and it came as a genuine surprise to open his eyes one morning and realise that it was Christmas.

They spent it in the Burrow, there had never been a question about it. The whole family and every honorary member out there showed up. Charlie was back from Romania for a full week. Bill and Fleur – four months pregnant and practically glowing – would stay for the Christmas days. Percy and Audrey, who had been introduced to the family before but would be exposed to the full chaos of a Weasley Christmas for the first time.

Andromeda was there with Teddy, having refused to let her grandson spend his first real Christmas in the silence of the Tonks home. Ginny and Luna, still living at home. George, and Lee – dragged along when George realised that Lee's family was out of the country for the holiday, and that just
wouldn't do – and even Neville had managed to convince his grandmother to let him visit for a few
hours.

“We wrote him,” Hermione said quietly, when they had found a quiet spot on the outskirts of the
light and noise and warmth. “Ron and I. We wanted everyone here.”

Most of it could very likely have been for Molly's sake, Harry knew, but not Neville. Molly barely
knew him. Neville was there for Harry, and all of them knew why.

It hung over all of them, the heavy feeling of a world about to go mad again. Not just Ron and
Hermione and Harry, but all those in the know. Harry could see the same stubborn determination in
Neville, to enjoy the holidays while he had them, to enjoy the warmth and laughter of a crowded
house. He could see it in the tension in George's stance, in the way he never really relaxed entirely.
He could see it in the lingering glances from Bill and Fleur, and in the way Ginny avoided him and
Luna kept her distracted.

*We wanted everyone here, Hermione didn't say, because this could be the last time we'll have the
chance.*

Harry had already drawn too much attention. The Aurors were already too interested in him. It was
only a matter a time now.

“You don't have to do this,” Bill said, low and urgent in the brief seconds they happened to be alone
in the kitchen. “You can still back out.”

“No,” Harry said. “I can't.”

Bill looked like he wanted to argue more, but the door had opened and Molly had arrived and the
chance was gone.

Neville gripped his shoulder tightly when the rest of the Weasleys had said their goodbyes and
Christmas greetings and Harry had followed him to the edge of the wards.

“Call us. We'll answer,” he promised, stubborn and defiant.

“Bloody hell, Neville,” Harry breathed. “This isn't your fight.”

Neville shrugged. “It is now. We're Gryffindors, Harry. No common sense between us. The
wizarding world expected you to fix everything when we were in Hogwarts. They can't complain if
you do the same now.” He glanced back at the Burrow, bright and inviting. “Would I have liked a
little more peace before it all started again? Sure. Life's full of disappointments like that. Go back
inside, Harry. You'll have to be Lord Potter soon enough. Just – remember that we'll answer. And I'll
make Ron hex you if you forget that.”

Harry gripped Neville's hand tightly in return. It was all the answer he needed to give.

They celebrated the New Year together, just the three of them. They fell asleep on the couch in a
mess of pillows and blankets, listened to the muted sound of celebrations outside, and allowed
themselves the rare luxury of simply sleeping in.

The wards on Potter Cottage pulled Harry out of sound sleep shortly before noon on the first day of
the new year.
A few quick spells got him dressed and presentable, and Hermione pushed an Invigoration Draught into his hand. “Go!”

Apparition brought him from Grimmauld to the cottage with just enough time to down the potion and vanish the bottle. The grogginess of sleep left, replaced by the sharp clarity of the potion.

Three people by the door according to the wards. Harry opened it to find a trio of Aurors on his doorstep, one a bit older than the others. One of them looked familiar, too – enough so that Harry could say with absolute certainty that it was Theodore Nott's older Auror brother. His sharp smile did not promise good news.

“Harry James Potter,” the older Auror spoke and held out a sealed scroll. “By order of the Ministry, I have a warrant for your arrest for the suspected murder of Lucius Malfoy. You will surrender your wand. Your solicitor, should you have one, will be contacted by the Ministry. Any attempts to refuse these orders will result in your arrest by force.”

Time stood still, frozen solid in that one instant. To Harry it felt like balancing on a cliff's edge and not sure which way was solid ground and which was empty air and a terrifying fall.

Auror headquarters were warded. There would be no way out but fighting. The Aurors had no proof, George and Harry had both made very sure of that, but they had strong enough suspicions to arrest him, and he had too many secrets he could not protect under Veritaserum.

Going with them was almost certain to see him sent to Azkaban, and Ron and Hermione with him. Resisting would turn him into a wanted fugitive and would be all but a confession of guilt.

But then, they always knew it would come to that.

A spark of Fiendfyre sprang to life.

If he was about to condemn himself, then he would do it right. Prove that it was not just a moment of panic or an unfortunate misunderstanding.

_I am Harry James Potter and I choose this willingly._

Time moved again, slow and sluggish. Harry watched calmly as the Aurors aimed their wands and fired a trio of Stunners in painfully drawn-out motions. He had an eternity to act, and he didn't even bother to shield, merely sidestepped the spells and moved backwards inside the cottage in the same motion.

Harry raised his hand and breathed magic into his Fiendfyre. Flames exploded and time snapped into place, and the oldest of the Aurors had just enough time to see his end approach. A monstrous owl took flight on wings of fire and swallowed his scream before he could form it.

Intense heat struck Harry, bit into his skin and burned away his sweat before it could form, but he didn't flinch. The cottage was burning already, even with the Fiendfyre reined in; cinders turned into ash turned into nothing before it could touch him, and a single moment of inattention would see the spell turn on him.

An infernal phoenix rose from the flames, spread its wings gracefully, and descended upon the second Auror.

Nott screamed once, embraced by burning wings and white-hot feathers, and not even ashes were left.
The last Auror seemed to be frozen in terror at the wall of Fiendfyre, and Harry reined it in before it could claim its third victim. He forced it to part and stepped between twin pillars of fire where the outer wall and door had been, watching the Auror all the while. Something collapsed behind him – likely the staircase – and a cloud of embers surged into the room and was gone again.

Harry was honestly surprised the man hadn't Apparated yet. Then again, Fiendfyre wasn't something most people had grown used to dealing with, and certainly not seeing someone incinerated by it.

He waited until the man actually focused on him with wide, horrified eyes. Only then did he speak, sharp and precise to make sure he would not be misunderstood.

“I have had quite enough of wizarding prejudices and rampant racism. Go back to the Minister, Auror. Tell him that if takes a Dark Lord to change it, then a Dark Lord he will get.”

The man visibly swallowed, still frozen. Harry idly raised his wand. The pillars of flame rose with it with the roar of malevolent magic. That was enough to snap the Auror out of it. He Apparated with a sharp crack, and Harry was marginally impressed that he managed to do it without leaving any body-parts behind.

Burning wood groaned behind him. The walls had cracked from the heat and the air was heavy with the smell of fire and magic and death.

His bond was unnaturally silent, Ron and Hermione's familiar presence vivid in his mind but none of them speaking.

Harry took one last look at the doomed cottage. Then he lowered his wand, released the Fiendfyre to run rampant, and Apparated to Grimmauld with a sharp crack as the world around him became a living inferno.
Chapter 7

Dark Lord Potter! Kills Aurors and Declares War on the Wizarding World!

The Daily Prophet the following morning brought out fonts as large as the ones that had declared Voldemort's final defeat little more than a year and a half prior.

There were photos of the burned-out cottage – or, Harry supposed, the scorched, dead earth where it had stood. The Fiendfyre had raged until there was nothing left, and only the fact that the cottage had been miles from anything else had kept it marginally contained. Even then the damage seemed to stretch forever in every direction.

Most of the issue was dedicated to him. Sensationalist articles about his 'fall from the light', one conspiracy theory after the other, suggestions that he'd had a hand in a number of Death Eater murders – several of them true – and only the newness of it all kept the issue from being full of letters condemning him.

The Ministry had a statement, as bland and professional as Harry had come to expect, talking about everything and nothing, but assuring the public that they would get to the bottom of this at any cost, and someone with Auror-grade information had talked about the number of times Harry had been a person of interest to them.

There were photos – a few from his early Hogwarts years and the Tri-Wizard Tournament, but mostly from the time after the Battle of Hogwarts. He had looked tired and grim but determined in those photos, and he supposed that was why they brought them out. It wasn't like they had photos of him being all Dark Lord-ish.

Most important to Harry, though, were the articles mentioning Ron and Hermione. Not as his school friends and fellow war heroes, but as potential followers. Potential allies. Potential targets, when Harry himself proved too hard to find. Their last known address had been with him at Potter Cottage, as none of them wanted to risk the Burrow becoming a target when they put Grimmauld under the Fidelius again.

Eventually he put down the paper and simply stared at the front page for a long time.

“I'm sorry.” For getting them involved. For making them a target. For taking away their chance of a normal life. For getting them into something that had been his choice, and his alone, and which they had only gone along with because he was their friend.

Ron shrugged. “Eh. Didn't want a Ministry job, anyway.”

There was more to it than that, there had to be, but it was also Ron. Ron, who was stubborn and temperamental and proud and loyal to the end. Ron, who had made up his mind and didn't see the point in debating it any further. Harry envied him that utter certainty.

Hermione made a soft sound from the couch. Harry looked at her and felt worry settle heavily in his mind. Ron made up his mind and rarely changed it again. Hermione made up her mind and rarely changed it – but that did not stop her from wondering or arguing or second-guessing it all.

“I suppose I always hoped it wouldn't come to this,” she confessed. “It was going so well. The Foundation was getting somewhere. Until St Mungo's happened the Ministry had begun to listen. I just ... assumed.”
She trailed off, staring at the paper neatly folded in her lap. “The Dark Lord Potter.”

“Mrs. Weasley won't be happy. I'm surprised she hasn't shown up here yet.” Her first reaction would probably have been a howler, before the war. Now Harry almost missed the thought of it.

Not that it would have gone through. The wards destroyed any howlers or other unpleasant surprises. The Fidelius and wards protected their home. Separate spells cast the moment their secret was out in the open kept the three of them untraceable by owl, which meant that only those that had been let in on the Fidelius could send an owl directly to their home. An owl box had been put in place a while ago, and the address given to those they didn't want to trust with Grimmauld itself. Only the Patronus messenger spell didn't care and worked through everything, the Fidelius included.

Andromeda had made due with a plain letter, making it clear that she expected Harry's presence at his earliest convenience, and that there would be explanations given. Harry was not about to argue with that.

Hermione shook her head. “I owled her yesterday and told her we would visit today and explain everything.”

“I'm surprised she didn't visit for that,” Harry said dryly.

“We told her the wards wouldn't let her in today for safety reasons.” Ron this time, sounding vaguely sheepish. “Mum's – she worries, but we're both adults, and we all had other stuff to deal with. We said we'd explain everything in person instead.”

Harry didn't like the sound of it – it was family, he trusted the Weasleys, but it could still be a trap and everything in him told him to stop it – but he forced himself to push through the immediate worry and trust his friends.

“Owls aren't completely safe,” he merely reminded them instead. “I – if anything happens, tell me. Anything. I'll be there.”

*Because you're a target now, and they will come looking at the Burrow,* he didn't say. He trusted them to understand what he meant, and Hermione reached over to squeeze his hand.

“We know.”

He didn't have to like it, but he would trust them in this. Trust them, and be ready to descend upon the wizarding world like an enraged Horntail if he had to.

Ron and Hermione left for the Burrow shortly before lunch.

Harry was torn between staying at Grimmauld to be ready, should anything at the Burrow go wrong, and visiting Andromeda to get it over with.

In the end he settled for Andromeda. He trusted the Weasleys, and so far he had felt nothing bad through their bond. Worry, and a bit of anxiety – they were about to explain to Molly Weasley why they had taken up with a Dark Lord, after all – but nothing bad.

Besides, he owed Andromeda an explanation, and he didn't want her to lose her patience.

He half expected to be greeted by Aurors when he arrived with a sharp crack but then, Andromeda was a Black, and they always had different ideas than most about – well, most things.
Her expression was cool and utterly unreadable beyond that, but she let him in, anyway. The house was unnervingly quiet, and it must have shown, because Andromeda arched one aristocratic eyebrow. “Teddy is out for the day.”

It hurt, for all that Harry had expected it, but he nodded his acceptance. Teddy's safety had always been paramount to both of them. That Andromeda now felt that he might be one of those dangers to her grandson ... Harry supposed he had only himself to blame.

“Would you feel more comfortable if I didn't have my wand?”

Andromeda's expression remained coolly detached as she considered the offer. “I suppose that would leave only wandless magic to be concerned about.”

Harry didn't like the idea, less because it left him vulnerable and more because that in the event of trouble at the Burrow, he would be delayed by getting his wand back, but his bonds still felt reassuringly calm. He held out his wand handle first, and Andromeda accepted it and put it away in a drawer. That would rule out retrieving it with an easy wandless Summoning Charm, at least.

The tension in her shoulders eased just a little, and then she sighed.

“Harry James Potter.” She packed a whole conversation's worth of exasperation, tiredness, and resignation into those three word. “What could possibly have made you decide that this was a good idea?”

Harry offered a wry smile. “Black madness?”

Andromeda's lips became a thin line. Harry got the distinct impression she did not appreciate his attempt at humour.

“Four generations removed? From someone who can resist the Imperius, I find it hard to believe.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, I got the recklessness, at least.” He ran a hand through his hair and saw Andromeda's grip on her wand tighten. “I arrived at eleven knowing nothing about this world, or my family, or what was expected of me. The one thing I've learned since then is that might makes right in the wizarding world. A few fought against Voldemort, but most were happy to stay quiet and hope for the best.”

“Your point, Lord Potter?” Andromeda said coolly, saying the title much like Snape had said _Gryffindor._

“My point? My point is that I have a godson who will, at best, be subtly discriminated against all his life. Right now he isn't allowed in St Mungo's. How long before his name is removed from the lists at Hogwarts? Even if he graduated, how long before he can't be hired anywhere just because Remus was a werewolf?”

Andromeda's expression tightened. Harry figured he had hit a sore spot.

“The Foundation does what it can to help, but it'll never succeed with the number of pure-blood supremacists and Voldemort supporters in charge. The wizarding world taught me that might makes right. I'm putting that lesson to good use.”

“And will leave my grandson with his godfather dead or in Azkaban, in the grand tradition of the Blacks.” Andromeda said waspishly.

_Sirius._ The pain had dulled but would probably never go away entirely. He hadn't known the man
that well, but he had spent a lot of sleepless nights haunted by the could-have-beens.

He hoped Teddy would understand one day when he was old enough, but he was just as aware of the notoriety the boy would face as the godson of a Dark Lord. Harry had been the godson of Sirius Black, but he had also been the Boy Who Lived. He had been used to that sort of attention already.

Harry’s decision would change a lot of lives, for better or for worse. Teddy would become a target just by association, but if Harry did his job right, then maybe that threat would be less than it could have been. Different, at least. Maybe they wouldn't care about his blood, just his association with Harry.

“I'm not godparent material,” Harry said flatly. “The only reason I don't have nightmares every night is because I have Ron and Hermione there. I can't advise Teddy about classes or careers or whatever else a godfather is supposed to do, because I only ever had one task, and I'd either be dead or famous enough afterwards that I'd be able to get pretty much any job I wanted.”

Andromeda looked like she was about to argue – or agree, probably – but Harry cut her off.

“What I do have is enough magic and influence behind my name that I'm a legitimate threat. And if I do this right, the worst of the bigots and Death Eaters will be gone and maybe we can get some decent laws in place for the Muggle-borns and part-humans. That, or I'll be enough of a threat that they’ll focus on me and stop bothering the werewolves and the Squibs and the vampires and the Muggle-born, and all the others without a voice of their own.”

“And if you don't?” Andromeda's expression was unreadable. Harry met it without flinching.

“Then I tried. And I'll do my best not to drag anyone else down with me.”

For a long time they stood there in silence, Andromeda watching him and Harry staring back with every bit of the stubborn defiance that had brought him there in the first place.

Andromeda moved first. Tiredness replaced the cold detachment and she looked her age, her age and every last one of her many losses.

“Oh, Harry.”

And maybe, just maybe it would be all right between them.

“Mum's worried. And not too pleased. And you better visit, young man, because we are still your family even if you – oh, Harry. A Dark Lord?” Ron recited dutifully when he returned along with Hermione that evening.

Harry smiled wryly. “I will. I promise.”

“Worried,” Harry said. “And not too pleased, either, but she didn't ban me from seeing Teddy. He won't be able to visit, but ...” he shrugged. “Probably safer that way, anyway. But she knows she's still welcome, and that Grimmauld is safe if they're ever in danger.”

They settled down in silence. Mute appeared with tea and was gone an instant later. Eventually Harry glanced at Ron. “It's just a matter of time before the Ministry starts to look closer at the people around us. Eventually they'll come looking for your family.”
Ron's expression turned grim. “Yeah. Mum and dad know, too. We already let everyone in on the Fidelius, though, so there's somewhere to go if it comes to that. George is the only one who incriminated himself with us. I mean, Bill can tell them he knew sort of what you were planning, and mum can tell them we're in contact with you, but that's not illegal.”

Yet, he didn't say, but Harry and Hermione picked up on it just fine, anyway. The Ministry had a history of changing the rules when the words 'Dark Lord' started getting thrown about.

“George knows how to avoid the Ministry and if anyone, people seem more likely to believe we were involved in Lucius' murder along with Harry. We're the Golden Trio after all,” Hermione said, a little bitter. “Well, used to be, I suppose.”

“Might keep George out of the spotlight, then. Nev?”

“Hasn't been seen around us enough to be interesting,” Ron said. “If they try, all they'll get is that he he offered to help and sent books from Hogwarts library to Hermione, and that you gave him the Lestranges' wands. They won't be happy with him, but there shouldn't be anything illegal enough that they can actually do anything.”

“They'll learn about the Vow if they ask the right questions.” Hermione frowned. “If they use Veritaserum ... they would need to ask some fairly specific questions, but they could find out. Bill knows, but he lives abroad. No one else knows about it. Just Neville.”

“Which would make you a target.” Harry winced. “I'm -”

“Harry James Potter, if you dare apologise for that, you will go to sleep with snakes for hair!”

“It's the truth,” Harry said stubbornly.

“And I chose to do it! So don't you dare imply that I didn't know what I was getting into!”

Furious brown eyes met equally stubborn green ones in a familiar battle of wills. Harry backed down first.

“If he knew Occlumency ...” Truce?

“George and I have made decent progress with the notes you ... found. One of us could teach him what we've learned so far, if he agrees.” Truce.

It wasn't near the sort of Occlumency Snape had to have mastered to lie to Voldemort's face, but at least it was more than Harry had managed. Hermione had tried to teach him what they had learned now and then, but no amount of effort had helped much. He knew enough to stay a little more clear-headed under Veritaserum, but most of his defence against the potion was a combination of their bonds and constant exposure. It had taken a long time, but he could feel the effects of that training. He didn't think he could lie, but he was a lot more aware under the potion these days, and he could delay his answers slightly. With enough motivation, they suspected he would be able to refuse to answer at all.

Occlumency was useful, but they had also accepted it would do Harry little good. A year later and Dorea Black's prediction about his blood still proved true.

“What about the contract?” Ron spoke up again, now that the immediate argument was over.

Hermione frowned. “We will burn it next time we see them. I would want to see it done, were I in their stead. It's served its purpose. It's just a risk to them now. No, Harry,” she said before he could
argue. “Even the wizarding world isn't stupid enough to believe you're doing this alone. They know we're involved. There is nothing in it worth risking Dean and the others for anymore.”

Harry didn't like it, but he liked the idea of risking his friends' lives pointlessly even less. The secret was out in the open. There was very little point in trying to rein anything back in.

A number of letters arrived by owl or owl box that day.

The most entertaining one to Harry was the one from the Ministry, demanding he present himself for arrest or notify the appropriate authorities of his whereabouts, so that they could arrest him there. He assumed it was some sort of legal requirement, as he doubted they could possibly believe that would ever work. He hadn't told them about the owl box in the first place, but he supposed they had access to the records of its creation. It wouldn't help track him down or intercept his mail, but it obviously gave them a way to owl him.

He had halfway expected a letter from McGonagall, by way of Andromeda or Mrs. Weasley if nothing else, but Hogwarts remained silent. Then again, she probably wasn't surprised after their last meeting. He would have expected her to be angry, but more likely she had written him off as a lost cause already then. Flitwick ... wasn't against them but had made it clear that he would not get involved.

Hagrid ... Harry owed him an explanation, at least. Hagrid would never agree with what he was doing, but Harry owed him that much, for all that he would have to make due with a letter.

The letters from the people he knew personally were worried more than anything. He supposed they wanted to hear his version before they would believe the Prophet, then. All in all, considering his prior experiences with the Prophet and his schoolmates, that was more than he had hoped for.

He wrote back that day in his office under the watchful eye of Dorea Potter's portrait. When the last letter was sealed and handed over to Mute, he leaned back in the old chair and just breathed. One slow breath after the other, the tension in his muscles easing bit by bit.


“I suppose,” Harry answered softly, “that it's one thing people can't say I got from my parents.”

His mother's eyes but oh, why didn't he have her studiousness? He father's looks and such a troublemaker – definitely his father's fault. Their skills with magic, and their courage, and their selflessness, and sometimes Harry hated it. The reminder of what he would never have, what he never knew. It was never stories, just appropriate bits of their personality someone brought out to make him follow along with whatever they wanted him to do.

Maybe this would remind them he was his own person. Maybe, when they were done telling everyone how they always knew he was a Dark Lord in training. Maybe, but probably not.

Dorea watched him for a long time. “Any regrets, young Lord?”

A hundred. A thousand. None that it would make any sense to linger on, with the point of no return long since past.

“No. Not anymore.”
George risked a quick visit that day, too. Long enough to get a good look at the three of them and make sure they were okay before he had to return to Diagon. A hug for Hermione, a quick ruffle of Ron’s hair, and a long look and a deliberately solemn nod at Harry.

“We've kept your name out of it,” Harry said when George stayed unusually quiet. “They might still raid the shop for being owned by a Weasley, but we'll keep your name out of it.”

“Thank you ... Lord Harrykins.”

Harry laughed, George clasped his shoulder, and he knew that at least this one thing hadn't changed.

A letter from Brookstanton arrived via owl box the same evening, written in the intricate cursive Harry had grown somewhat familiar with.

*Lord Potter,*

*Must you make it exceedingly difficult to run a Foundation on your behalf? I suppose this explains your unwillingness to have a place on the Board yourself.*

*Augustus Brookstanton*

It wasn't a notice to inform him that Brookstanton's office was severing all ties to him, at least. Knowing the man, it sounded almost approving.

They received an invitation to Longbottom Manor on the morning of the 3rd. It arrived by Patronus, as Neville knew better than to risk putting anything into writing. The risk of anyone intercepting Neville's owl was small, but a Patronus messenger was all but impossible to interfere with.

The invitation was for that evening and, should they agree, Neville would try to get a couple of the others there, too. Some explanations, they all knew, were better done in person.

They glanced at each other, and Hermione sent her Patronus off with their reply. It could have been a trap, of course – and Harry would probably have to learn to suspect everything, friends included, now that their scheme was out in the open – but this was Neville, and they would trust him. He had trusted them often enough, and with far less information to go on.

They arrived at Longbottom Manor well into the evening with the single, sharp crack of perfectly synchronised Apparition. Harry had a shield spell ready to cast, even if he doubted he would need it. It was a good habit to get into.

Nothing moved on the grounds. A detection spell from Hermione revealed nothing, either. Just the Manor itself, protected from any such magic.

Neville met them at the door. If he felt the least bit worried about meeting with them, it didn't show.

Harry broke the silence with a wry smile. “Hey, Nev. Happy New Year?”

Neville let out a sharp laugh. “Bloody hell, Harry.” Tension broken, Neville greeted the three of them – Hermione with a polite half-hug, Ron and Harry with a clap on the shoulder.

“You grandmother?” Hermione asked.

Neville waved them inside. “In the library. Writing a strongly worded letter about the shortcomings
of Hogwarts’ most recent choice in history books, I believe. She left strict instructions she does not wish to be disturbed about anything short of the second coming of Merlin.”

Translation: Augusta Longbottom did not approve but was not about to involve the Ministry in what she probably saw as Neville’s personal business, either.

Harry wondered briefly if that was how the Death Eaters had begun. With meetings hidden as merely catching up with old schoolmates, and the people around them very deliberately Not Seeing anything. It wasn’t a pleasant thought.

“I told her about the Lestranges and showed her the wands,” Neville added. “After the stuff in the Prophet ... it was enough that she let me explain.”

Harry didn’t mind. Augusta Longbottom deserved to know, and if it worked in their favour so much the better.

They followed Neville through the main house to one of the smaller, more homey sitting rooms. On a couch in the warm glow of the fireplace Susan and Hannah were waiting, with Dean in one of the heavy chairs. All three got to their feet when they noticed Neville’s return.

Privacy spells in place, Susan seemed to have been elected their temporary spokesperson. While Hannah looked worried and Dean just a little tired, Susan’s expression was unreadable as she stopped in front of Harry.

“Lord Potter, then?”

Harry straightened a little at the coolness in her voice, so similar to Andromeda’s.

“To those who fought by my side ...” he said softly, echoing words from months before.

He didn’t know if she would remember, but the gamble paid off when Susan smiled slightly and her voice warmed just a little, too.

“Harry.”

“Harry,” he agreed and repeated his promise. “Whatever happens.”

Dean clasped his hand, and Hannah gave him a brief hug, and for a few minutes they were just seven schoolmates catching up on life.

“How are Ginny and Luna?” Dean eventually asked when tea and Firewhisky had arrived on the table and cups and glasses had been handed out. With four of the Ministry Six there, it was a reasonable question.

“Not involved in this,” Ron stated. “They know. They stay out of it.”

No other explanation was needed. Dean merely nodded and the topic was closed. His two months of Auror training or the painfully swift growing up they’d all had to do with Voldemort’s return kept him from asking further.

Hermione broke the silence before it could become awkward. “I brought the contract along.” She placed it on the table and waited long enough for Susan, Dean, and Hannah to read it.

Susan looked up again. “Why?”

“Incendio!” The contract flared brightly and was gone, leaving only ashes in its place. Hermione
lowered her wand.

“I release you from any and all obligations we agreed upon,” she said formally. Then she shook her head. “I would have wanted to see it done myself, if I had signed it. Let the others know, too, please. It’s served its purpose. There is nothing worth your life in there anymore.”

“Hermione has started to learn Occlumency. It's mind magic, one of the few ways to get around Veritaserum,” Harry explained. “Nev ... if you'll agree, you should give it a try, too.”

“The offer is open to all of you,” Hermione added. “It requires trust, though. The best way to learn is to practice against a Legilimens – essentially, someone who can read your mind. I'm teaching Ron already.”

She kept George's name out of it by mutual agreement. Between the two of them they were slowly cracking the idea of Occlumency, working far faster than they could have alone. No one else knew about George, though, and they planned to keep it that way for now.

Hannah's eyebrows arched high. “You can read minds?”

“I'm a novice. I learned though a lot of trial and error. Dumbledore was a master.”

“Snape, too,” Harry muttered, if loud enough for the rest to hear. “He was supposed to teach me. That went bloody brilliantly. Occlumency let him lie to Voldemort's face and get away with it, but he was a crap teacher. Didn't help he had it out for me.”

Dean looked a little sick. Probably at the thought of Snape reading his mind. Harry understood completely.

“You must have learned eventually.” Susan's eyes were sharp. “You managed to get through a Veritaserum questioning with at least one murder on your conscience.”

“Four,” Harry admitted. “If your definition of murder is anything that can't be considered accidental or self-defence. A Death Eater from the Diagon Alley attack in January, the Lestrange brothers, and Malfoy.”

A minor lie when it came to Malfoy but close enough to the truth. It also let him dodge the actual question.

Susan's expression grew harder. “I'm an Auror in training. I don't want to know this, Harry.”

“No, but you should, anyway.” Harry stood and paced, anger and restless energy taking over. “I'm a Dark Lord, Susan. Dark Lord, as in capable of casting all three Unforgivables with ease, committing cold-blooded murder when it suits me, and throwing Fiendfyre around like bloody Hallowe'en candy! This isn't some great adventure. This isn't the DA. I didn't claim that title because I intended to fight by the rules. I claimed that title because if I have to paint every last brick in the Ministry with blood to get my point across, then so be it.”

Harry stopped. No one spoke. It could have been his rant, but he suspected it was more due to the ominous rattle of the teacups. He took a slow breath. The rattle faded and the heavy feeling of magic faded with it.

“Dean seems to be under the impression this is one of those heroic, self-sacrificing things I got into at Hogwarts so often. That might very well be the case. It doesn't change the fact that the only way every last 'reformed' Death Eater in the Ministry and Wizengamot isn't stone cold dead by the end of it is if they get to me first.”
“Us,” Ron corrected with a hard expression. “If they get to us first.”

Susan looked at Hermione. “And you agree with this?”

Hermione looked pained and a little resigned. “No. I don't like what it will do to Harry.” Her expression hardened. “But it's still Harry. Ron put it quite well – if they get to us first. I don't agree, but I'll support him to the end.”

Harry didn't know what he had done to deserve friends like them, but he would never stop being grateful for it. Grateful, and determined to do everything he could to keep them safe ... much, he admitted, like they would do for him. It was a little hard to protect them when they were just as stubborn about being right there with him.

“How Hufflepuff,” Hannah murmured, but there was a small, tired smile on her lips. “We always figured Hermione was the wrongly sorted Ravenclaw.”

“No, she broke too many rules to be a Ravenclaw,” Ron said cheerfully. “She'd have ruled them with an elder wand within a week. Better be Gryffindor.”

“Ron!”

Hannah laughed. The sound seemed to make Susan ease up, too, and Dean with her. Neville took the chance to offer the bottle of Firewhisky before the heavy discussion could start again.

A round of full glasses later Neville raised his drink. “To fruitful discussions?” he asked dryly.

“Works for me.” Harry looked at Neville, raised his glass in turn, and deliberately downed it in one shot before Neville could touch his own.

He knew Neville got the message when the man stood a little straighter and downed his own drink as well.

_I trust you not to poison me._ He supposed that since he'd just shot right back up to Undesirable No. 1 again, Neville would understand the weight that actually carried.

Warm fondness carried through the bond from Hermione. Ron just shook his head a little, but Harry felt the fondness from his side of the bond as well. Both of them got it, too, then.

The Firewhisky eased the lingering tension. For a long time they just sat there, each with a glass and simply enjoyed the warmth of the fireplace and the alcohol. Then Susan sighed and Harry knew the discussion was about to start again.

“You made a mistake when you targeted the Aurors they sent to arrest you,” she said. “Nott wasn't well-liked, but he was an Auror, and Hipworth was friendly with most. Kill an Auror, and you will have the entire force after you. You killed two, and the Minister is a former Auror himself.”

“Voldemort didn't seem to have that problem.” Harry shrugged. “Maybe he had the right idea. Sway half the force to your side and keep the other half too cowed or bogged down in politics to be useful.”

Dean winced at that. Neville and Hannah didn't look too comfortable, either. Susan looked downright furious.

“Harry. Most people don't like being told Voldemort had a point.” Hermione sounded resigned. “Especially not by a newly declared Dark Lord.”
“They should stop proving him right, then.” If Harry sounded just a little annoyed, he figured he had
every right to. “The useful Aurors were targeted by Voldemort because they would be an actual
bloody nuisance to him. The ones he killed were the good ones. He didn’t have a reason to bother
with the rest, since they just rolled over and obeyed whoever happened to be in charge.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to kill innocents!” Susan’s Firewhisky flared sharply in response to
her anger. “Yes, Nott was a Voldemort toady that only avoided punishment because he wasn’t
Marked, but Hipworth wasn’t! He had a wife! He had a family!”

“Unlike a dozen of our schoolmates, the two of us included, who have no one left because the
Ministry and the Aurors failed when we needed them and left the wizarding world in Voldemort's
hands. I won't target innocents,” Harry hissed, “but I will bloody well defend myself when I have to.
That includes not going meekly to Azkaban. If I cross that line, I have three people willing to take
me down, and I can absolutely assure you, Auror Trainee Bones, that they stand a much better
chance at success than anyone in your department ever will.”

A hand on his arm – smaller, lighter; Hermione – cut through his anger. The roar in his ears, of fury
and raw magic in his blood, mingled with the roar of the fireplace where the flames burned
unnaturally bright and tall.

It was easy to lose control of his magic these days. He wasn't sure if it was his emotions or his
magic’s simple delight in stretching its wings. Both, probably.

The inferno died. The stinging heat eased and the room returned to a comfortable temperature. A
sharp wave of his hand saw the soot vanish where it had overwhelmed the protective spells. Susan
met his stare without flinching although he could tell by the tightened grip on her wand that she had
seen the wandless magic he had cast.

“And when those same people refuse to stop you because they agree with you? Do you expect me to
trust that three confidants of a Dark Lord can tell when he's crossed the line?” Susan's fury had
settled into cold anger.

“If you don't trust Ron and Hermione, then trust Neville.” Harry glanced at the man, then back at
Susan. “For what it's worth, there were two possibly children of the Prophecy. Only chance made
me the Boy Who Lived instead of Neville.”

“The Dark Lord's equal,” Neville murmured, if loud enough to be heard in the silence. “You'll
forgive me if I'm glad that job fell to you.”

Hermione's hand tensed on his arm. Ron on the couch tensed with her. Less than a second, but
enough that Harry spotted it.

The Dark Lord's equal. The words settled like lead.

It referred to the Horcrux he left in you. Hermione's presence was instantly there, warm and bright.
She knew him better than he knew himself in some regards.

Ron grimaced. Divination is a woolly subject, mate.

Maybe, or maybe they just didn't want to consider the alternative. Harry shoved the thought aside to
answer Neville.

“I'd have thought the same thing if our roles had been reversed,” he admitted. “As it was, you still
had to deal with Nagini.”
“Kill the snake?” Neville remarked wryly, echoing words they had spoken that day in Hogwarts that felt like a lifetime ago.

“Kill the snake.”

No one else got the reference, though Ron and Hermione had a pretty good idea. Harry didn’t mind.

Susan watched the exchange with an unreadable expression. Dean seemed to be okay with Susan as their spokesperson and stayed quiet. Hannah, Harry was starting to suspect, was the key to Susan’s acceptance. She didn’t speak, but she listened and Susan seemed to take some cues from her.

Harry knew better than to underestimate the two just because they were Hufflepuffs. Sneakiness was not just a supposedly Slytherin trait.

_Susan is their front. Hannah is the one we need to convince._

Ron’s eyes flickered to Hannah. _Yeah. Looks about right to me._

Hermione took a moment longer to reply. _I think they're counting on Susan to distract us and make us reveal more than we planned. She gets whatever information she can from you, and Hannah goes through it while Susan keeps us busy._

Harry nodded slightly. _Do we call them on it?_

_Yes. Ron’s response was almost instant. We can’t do much with the information, and we need to prove we can do this. Everyone saw Professor Dumbledore as omniscient. It didn’t matter if it was true or not, as long as they believed it. It was the same with Voldemort. Even before the Taboo and when he was supposed to be dead, people still refused to speak his name because they were afraid to draw his attention. We need to pull off the same impression._

Made sense. Harry turned his attention to the woman in question.

“Hannah?”

She arched an eyebrow in a silent question. Harry glanced at Susan, then back at her. “You’re the deciding vote between you and Susan. A nice little game of good Auror, bad Auror. If you have doubts, I’d like the chance to explain, at least.”

Susan’s expression turned a little rueful, and Dean barked a short laugh. “I told you they’d figure it out.”

Hannah just smiled, a pretty little curve of her lips that made Neville sneak a hand over and entwine his fingers with hers. The awkward little dance of maybe-mutual attraction seemed to be going somewhere, at least.

“My grandmother was a Slytherin. I was always a Hufflepuff, but she taught me to be sneaky.”

“The Hat told me Slytherin,” Harry said dryly. “I decided to beg for Gryffindor when the alternative was sharing a dorm with Malfoy for seven years. Besides, all everyone had told me was that Slytherin was for Dark wizards.”

Not that Gryffindor or Slytherin made much difference to Harry anymore, and certainly not when he had long since accepted that he would never know how much had been him and how much had been the Horcrux on that day of the Sorting. Other people still cared, though, and he accepted that, too.
“Can't say I blame you.” Dean made a vaguely disgusted face. “Don't think I could share a dorm with the Ferret without punching him every time he opened his mouth.”

“A Gryffindor-Slytherin Dark Lord.” Susan watched him carefully. “I don't think there's ever been one of those before. But then, you would have been the first Gryffindor Dark Lord that we know of, too. Most of them have been Slytherin, with an eclectic mix of Ravenclaw thrown in. Hufflepuff has too much of a support network that we allow it to get that far, and most Gryffindors avoid Dark magic.”

“It makes sense.” Hannah again, watching him just as carefully as Susan did. “You're not lying, but you've done your best to frighten us. Ambitious enough to do whatever it takes to win, but stubborn and loyal enough to do your best to keep us out of it for our own good. One question, Lord Potter.”

“Harry.”

“Not in this case, Potter. You claimed the title yourself. Get used to it.” Hannah's eyes narrowed. “You're a powerful wizard. Do you really believe that any of the people around you would stand a chance if they had to stop you?”

“Yes.” He didn't even need consider that reply.

“There are contingency plans in place, then,” Hannah concluded. “Or you wouldn't sound so sure.”

“... Yes.” A little more reluctant this time but an honest response none the less, for all that he would not go into details. Even confirming it was a risk in this case, but one they were willing to take.

Hannah didn't seem to want those details, either. Instead she looked at Susan. A silent conversation seemed to happen between them, punctuated by little gestures and changes in their expressions. A glance at Neville, followed by a nod from him. Only then did she speak.

“We can't condone the murder of innocents. Neville trusts you for now, though, and we trust Neville. Dean spoke up for you, too. We'll give you the benefit of doubt.”

“Occlumency lessons would be a good idea, though,” Susan added. “For all of us. We know some fairly incriminating things.”

Harry nodded and felt some of the tension drain from him. They weren't entirely on board, but they were willing to not go straight to the Ministry. That counted as a victory, too.

*We need a place to meet for lessons*, Ron said silently. *Grimmauld isn't an option.*

_The Norfolk safe-house?_ The smaller of the former Lestrange safe-houses, it was also the more comfortable one. If they were going to practice Occlumency for any period of time – and it took practice, lots of it – Harry wanted them to have somewhere decent to do it. They still had the second safe-house as backup.

Hermione didn't answer but nodded and wrote the Secret to the Fidelius on a conjured piece of paper. She slid it across the table to allow the others to read it. A swift _Incendio_ later and it was gone again. “Nothing the Ministry will not figure out eventually. If you still want to, we do have a place to meet. It's under the Fidelius, obviously, so it should be safe. We can Side-Along you the first time. We won't have to risk meeting somewhere unprotected, then.”

“What about Ernie and Anthony?” Harry asked.

“Anthony's little sister was sorted into Ravenclaw this year but transferred to Beauxbatons over the
holidays. It was too late to transfer her effective from the beginning of the school year by the time he signed the contract. He's still in France to make sure she gets settled.”

Get her clear of Britain before the next Dark Lord went on a rampage. Harry couldn't blame him. Especially not when he had advance warning.

“Ernie's interning at St Mungo's, and they like to keep their new trainees working the late shifts,” Susan explained. “They're both waiting for our verdict, but they will probably need Occlumency lessons as well if it's possible.”

To Harry it sounded like an awful lot of effort to put into protecting information the Ministry had a pretty good idea about, anyway. Then again, they had secrets of their own to keep. Susan had warned him that Aurors were on their way to question him – enough to kick her out of the Auror program and earn her a pretty hefty fine, at the very least. Neville had been their contact at Hogwarts, and while Dean hadn't done anything illegal, he had still all but declared his support of a Dark Lord.

Anthony and Ernie had been very careful about not saying anything that could incriminate them later. If they kept their heads down, no one would expect them to have known a thing. That they would need lessons ...

“What is Anthony up to these days?” he asked mildly. “He wasn't sure what his plans were when I asked him.”

Susan gave Harry a considering look. “Anthony is a former Ravenclaw Prefect with excellent grades and one of the defenders of Hogwarts,” she said idly. “When a position as junior assistant with the Floo Network Authority opened up in November, they were very pleased to hire him.”

Harry wasn't familiar enough with the finer details of magical government to know the importance of that. Ron, with a father in the Ministry, caught on instantly.

*The Floo Network Authority has access to all Floo addresses in the country. Name, owner, and physical location for everything but Unplottable places.* Ron swallowed. *Merlin. If we had access to that -*

*If. Hermione was their voice of reason as always. We can't just assume that he would help.*

“An important position,” Harry said just as idly, “with potential access to a lot of information.”

Susan stayed silent. Finally Harry caved.

“Why? He would run a serious risk if anyone found out, and you know what I would use that information for.”

They had all seen the damage a Voldemort sympathiser could cause with access to that information. The Floo would be warded, of course, but a physical address was far more than they had now for a lot of the targets Harry had in mind.

“The Carrows went to Azkaban. Macnair, Rookwood, Dolohov – all of them got life in Azkaban. Nott, Selwyn, and Rowle let a single Marked family member take the fall. Those low-level Death Eaters we actually caught after the final battle got anywhere from fined to life, depending on their crimes. Malfoy, Avery, and Travers had the gold to plead the Imperius and bury the courts in enough legal loopholes that it went through – helped, in Malfoy's case, by the fact that you spoke up for him.”

Harry arched an eyebrow. “Your point?”
“For every Marked Death Eater we caught, two more escaped. For every family who gave up one of
t heir own to take the fall, two more unmarked Voldemort supporters hide in the shadows to carry on
his work. That's not counting the silent supporters that never officially joined, like the Parkinson and
Burke families,” Susan said.

“Neville, Ernie, and I – our families are all considered to be among the Sacred Twenty-Eight and in
good standing, unlike the Weasley family.” Hannah's expression darkened. “That I'm a half-blood
can apparently be ignored because no one has bothered to update the Pure-blood Directory since the
nineteen-thirties. We might not have been Dark families, but we were of proper, pure blood and that
made us acceptable company. We all grew up around the purest of the pure. Not all Dark families are
bad, but the core of them – if they had it their way, Muggle-borns would have no more rights than
house-elves, half-bloods and blood-traitors wouldn't be allowed in any position of importance, and
Merlin help you if you had non-human blood in you. They revel in their status as some of the last
truly pure families and intermarry to keep the Muggle taint away.”

Hermione looked thoughtful. “The Gaunt family was on that list, wasn't it?”

“Extinct now, but yes.”

“Voldemort descended from that line. Tom Marvolo Riddle, only child of the Muggle Tom Riddle
and pure-blood Merope Riddle, born Merope Gaunt,” Harry said flatly. “She was nearly a Squib.
The Black family was one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, too, and they had all sorts of issues from
inbreeding.”

“Was?” Hannah frowned “Your godson is the Black heir, isn't he?”

Harry's answering smile was just a little vicious. “The half-blood son of a werewolf, and the
grandson of a disowned Black. I doubt the Sacred Twenty-Eight want anything to do with him.”

Dean coughed. It sounded suspiciously like an attempt to hide a laugh.

“... Was, then,” Hannah conceded. “The point is – we know these people. We grew up with them.
No amount of arguments and campaigning will make them change their mind about those of lesser
blood. Even those of pure blood were only safe from them until they became a problem. Neville lost
his parents. I lost my mother. Ernie's uncle is a warder, and they only stayed safe due to the highly
illegal wards he raised. Most of the other families supported Voldemort or kept their heads down
due to the rest of the wizarding world.”

“So murder is all right as long as Harry goes after families you don't like?” Hermione's expression
had gone from frowning to furious. Harry was vaguely reminded of her house-elf crusade.

“No.” Neville's voice carried through the room. “No,” he repeated. “But two wars have changed
nothing.” He swallowed and looked up, meeting Harry's eyes without flinching. “We're saying that if
this is what we're supposed to aspire towards, the future of the wizarding world, then maybe we
deserve another Dark Lord. You won't target children. You won't deliberately target innocents.
That's more than what Voldemort or Grindelwald did. Merlin, that's more than what Fudge’s
Ministry did.”

Harry looked around. Susan's expression was grim, but she didn't argue. Hannah just looked tired,
but her tight grip on Neville's hand betrayed her nervousness.

“Dean?”

The Gryffindor grimaced. “You three always made it look so easy, you know. Run straight into
whatever insane danger got into Hogwarts that year and come out of it bruised but victorious. I know it wasn't that easy looking back, but it was still intimidating sometimes. This is – we're not interrogating you for the hell of it. We had to be sure. We're not you. We're not used to taking those leaps of faith and hope we land on our feet. Bloody hell – if you'd been Voldemort, this would have been the point where we talked about taking your Mark.”

Harry felt a chill down his spine.

“Dean -”

“No, Harry -” Dean stopped himself and started over. “Lord Potter. You're the best chance we have to make the wizarding world a place we want to live in. Is it perfect? No. But you're the only one willing to do what it takes. We want to help, and if all we can do is pass along information or make sure you have a properly trained healer available, then that's what we'll do.”

“Call us,” Neville said, as stubborn and defiant as the first time he had made that promise. “We'll answer.”

Hermione's hand found Harry's and gave it a squeeze. On his other side, he felt Ron's hand on his shoulder.

Harry swallowed against the sudden lump in his throat.

“I won't answer to 'my Lord',” he said hoarsely.

Neville gave him a wry smile. “And that's why you'll probably earn it, anyway. Let us help, Harry. Please.”

Against that, Harry supposed there was very little left to argue about.

Hagrid,

If no one else will fix the stupid blood-purist ideas that allowed Voldemort to rise in the first place, then I will. My godson will not be a second-class citizen.

I'm sorry.

Harry

Harry sent the letter and the address for his owl box off to Hogwarts with an anonymous-looking post owl the following morning.

It wasn't much of an explanation, but it was all Harry could give. All that his reasons came down to in the end. He didn't doubt McGonagall would see it. Shacklebolt, too, probably. Harry was okay with that.

The wizarding world, once they had actually believed it, had reacted to Voldemort's return with their usual resilience and dignity.

The Ministry had panicked, Fudge had been busy trying to save his own career, and the Aurors were caught between too many influences and contradicting orders to be of much use to anyone.

The Ministry under Shacklebolt might still have been corrupt and bigoted, but it had clearly been whipped into shape.
The Burrow, Longbottom Manor, the Tonks home, and Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes were raided on the morning of the 4th in a perfectly synchronised strike.

“Start with the most obvious places,” Ron said afterwards, when Patronus messengers had arrived from all four places. “If they had been lucky, you would have been stupid enough to stay there. Since you weren’t, it’s a message that they’re going after your possible support base, and that you won’t be safe there. They will hunt you down, and they want you to know it. Anything related to the Weasley family is obvious. Same with the Tonks family. Neville – he was part of the Ministry Six. They would probably have gone after the Lovegood home, too, if Luna didn’t live in the Burrow now.”

There had been pointed questions, too, of course, but no one had been brought in for formal questioning. Later on the DMLE could probably get away with that, but for now those entirely unfounded suspicions and random spells in the dark were not enough to get someone interrogated about Harry’s potential whereabouts.

Harry would apologise when he saw them in person. Beyond that there was little they could do but hope the Aurors wouldn’t bother them again any time soon.

“We should probably start carrying bezoars, too,” Hermione mused that afternoon in the library. “And brush up on spells to detect potions and such in our food.”

Harry blinked. “If anyone got close enough to do something like that – would they really be stupid enough to use something a bezoar could work against?”

“It is wizarding Britain.”

Point.

Harry stared at the book in his lap. It was a heavy compendium of shield spells that he would normally have found genuinely interesting, but today he was stuck reading the same four paragraphs over and over.

“Did we do the right thing?” He finally put words to the gnawing worry that had bothered him all day. “Accepting their help?”

“We can’t do it alone.” Ron, pragmatic as always. “We’d have tried but we’re just the three of us. Five, counting George and Neville.”

Hermione shifted uneasily. “There will be more of a risk that someone will betray us, too. They’re our friends, and I trust them, but there will be others. You won’t admit it, but you know it just as well as we do.”

“I won’t Mark them.”

“I know,” Hermione agreed. “A contract set up for – for actually being involved and not just for the secret could be an alternative, if we wanted that. They don’t know much right now the Ministry hasn’t already deduced. Even if one of them found a way around the Fidelius on the safe-house, we can afford to lose it. That might not be the case later. What if you have to rely on their information? What if you have to trust someone at your back and they turn on you?”

“You and George,” Ron interjected. “It’s both of you running the risk out there.”

Harry leaned back until he rested on the old carpet, staring at the darkened ceiling high above.
“Snape got around the Dark Mark easily enough. He could probably have found a way around pretty much any contract, too. Honestly? If it had just been me, I’d probably have been a Gryffindor about it. Trust my best judgement and if it failed ... deal with the consequences, I guess, and hope that whoever it was at least had a good reason to betray me.”

“And now?”

Harry turned his head just enough to see Hermione. “I don't know. I'll ask George what he thinks. We've managed to keep his name out of it for now. We've got a while before it becomes a problem.”

A contract with the sort of penalty they played with was risky. Harry wasn't altogether sure he wanted to use it when there was no guarantee it would be foolproof. Keeping information secret was one thing. Actively helping out opened a whole new set of loopholes to watch out for.

Voldemort hadn't cared what his Mark might do to his followers. Then again, Voldemort was dead. That said a lot about his strategy right there.

_The Headmistress thinks yer dabblin in Dark magic. I knew yer supposed te be a Dark Lord now but yer a good kid, Harry. Take care of yerself, hear?_

Harry read the letter twice and burned it, but his heart felt a little lighter afterwards.

They risked an unannounced visit to the Burrow the following day.

Given Andromeda's reaction Harry hadn't been sure what to expect, but Molly Weasley hadn't sounded like she was about to hand him to the Aurors. That was a start.

Molly Weasley opened the door and froze, a startled expression on her face. Then her surprise fled to be replaced by relief. “Oh, Harry. We were so worried.”

The next few minutes were a flurry of hugs and worried exclamations, in between frowns and wobbly smiles. Eventually they found themselves inside, settled in a comfortably worn couch and with a slice of cake and mug of hot cocoa each. Harry took a careful sip and then sighed happily. Absolutely perfect, like everything Molly made.

The sound of soft footsteps on the staircase announced the arrival of another person.

“You don't very Dark Lord-ish to me,” Ginny noted.

“I don't feel very Dark Lord-ish,” Harry admitted. “Hot cocoa?”

Ginny smiled. There was a little wariness in the gesture, but she settled down on the couch with them under her mother's approving smile. “Luna is out today. She's visiting her father.”

“That's all right.” Harry eyes flickered to Molly. “I – owe your mum an explanation. An apology, too. I'm sorry about the Aurors, Mrs. Weasley.”

“Molly,” she corrected him. “And never you mind them. I told them what was what, and they'll be a lot more polite about it next time, I'll tell you that.” Her smile wavered just a little. “Oh, Harry.”

A number of people in his life felt the need to tell him that. All of them, Harry noted, could put all kinds of fond exasperation and concern in those two words.

Harry stared at his mug of cocoa before he forced himself to look back up. He would not be
ashamed. He owed her an explanation – he owed the entire Weasley family an explanation – but he
would not be ashamed. “Ron and Hermione explained most of it, didn't they?”

“About poor Teddy Lupin and the Foundation you set up, they did. But you still owe me an
explanation, young man. Dark Lord? You'll get yourself killed! Where would you even get that
foolish idea? The Potters were the lightest of the light.”

“Not that light,” Harry offered. “They interbred with the Blacks a couple of times. I...” He trailed
off, aware that he was stalling. Everyone needed a slightly different approach. Molly, in many ways
the closest thing to a mother he had ever known, still saw them as children, and he would have to do
something about that first.

In the end he decided for brutal honesty. Andromeda Tonks, a Slytherin and a Black, understood
power in all its incarnations. Molly Weasley, a Gryffindor and a Prewett, needed the truth of the
situation hammered home.

“Mrs. Weasley, the wizarding world raised me to be a killer. The Prophecy stated I would have the
power to vanquish Voldemort – effectively that it was him or me. It never stated that the wizarding
world should lean back, pretend nothing was wrong, and wait for me to fix all their problems. The
Order fought. Those few Aurors not on Voldemort's side or tied up in bureaucracy fought. How
many others can say the same?”

Molly's eyes looked suspiciously blank. “Molly, Harry. And people tried. So many lives were lost.”

“Most didn't. They expected me to take care of their problems. I was a pariah when I told them
something they didn't like, and a Saviour when Voldemort was breathing down their necks. Now
Voldemort is gone, and the wizarding world is no better than it was when I first arrived. They raised
a killer to keep their own hands clean. They can't complain when I decide to fix the rest of the
problems they have.”

Molly Weasley was silent for a long time. She wasn't shouting at him, and she hadn't kicked him out
yet. He supposed that was a good sign.

“Oh, Harry,” she sniffled. “You already gave so much already in the war. You're a good boy, and
they will hunt you down like – like a Death Eater.”

Harry smiled wryly. “I've been chased by much worse than them.”

“And he's not alone,” Ron said stubbornly. “We're with him.”

It apparently wasn't the right thing to say, because Molly's eyes turned tearful and she turned aside to
blow her nose.

“Ron!” Ginny whispered sharply. Ron looked a little chastised, but the stubborn look remained.

Molly sniffled again and dried her eyes. “No, no. It's – my little boy. All of you. But you haven't
been children in so long. We failed you all so horribly.”

Hermione, sitting closest, reached over and held her hand. “Not you, Molly. Never you. Not the
Weasleys, or the Longbottoms, or the Lovegoods, or all the others who tried to keep us safe. The
wizarding world failed, and now we're trying to fix it. For Teddy, and Hagrid, and Bill and
Lavender, and all the others the people in charge don't think are human.”

Molly looked at them, from Hermione's earnest sympathy to Ron's stubbornness and finally to
Harry's own quiet defiance.
Then the tears reappeared. Ron, obviously panicked, blurted out the first thing he could think of.

“The Cannons might make the finals this season!”

It didn't make the tears stop but Molly managed a watery smile, so Harry considered that a victory.

Ginny hugged him tightly when they left. “Be careful. Please. And ... thank you.” For Malfoy, she didn’t say.

“I'll try,” Harry promised. He'll never hurt you again. Him or Riddle. Not anymore.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

There are a number of made-up first names not given in canon in this chapter and the ones to come.

Occlumency lessons started a Saturday in mid-January when all schedules managed to match up. They still kept George's name out of it, but Hermione brought Ron along and that made it a little easier with both of them there.

George and Harry spent the time alone in Grimmauld planning their next moves.

Harry had a list of Death Eaters and Voldemort sympathisers in the Wizengamot to hunt, and what he assumed was a running countdown before he slipped up, and the Ministry got a lead on him. He didn't doubt that the smarter ones among his prey knew they were hunted now, too.

“The Lestrange line is extinct. With Alecto and Amycus in Azkaban, the Carrow family is clear. No worse than your average Slytherins, at least. Malfoy – I'd put them cautiously on the clear list, too,” Harry mused. “At least until we see how the ferret handles himself. Narcissa holds the Wizengamot seat, but the ferret will probably get involved in politics as well when he's old enough.”

George scratched the names from their long list of possible targets, although he did add a question mark besides Draco Malfoy – Marked and Narcissa Malfoy – unmarked – Wizengamot.

“The Nott family? The runt of them was in your year, wasn't he?”

“Yeah. Malfoy and Parkinson got most of the attention in Slytherin, so I didn't know him well.” Harry frowned. “He comes from a family of Death Eaters and unmarked Voldemort toadies, though. I already killed his older brother. We need to get rid of his uncle, too. Nott himself ... another wait and see, I think.”

A mark joined the list by Dougal Nott – unmarked – Wizengamot, along with a question mark by Theodore Nott – unmarked.

“Avery? Real piece of work, that family. Marked, plead the Imperius – twice – and got away with it because he had enough gold to tie the DMLE up in solicitors for years if he had to.” George's expression was hard. “His wife holds their Wizengamot seat while he recovers from the trauma of licking Voldemort's boots. They have a son, he'll be Hogwarts age in a few more years.”

“Avery senior is Marked.” Nothing else needed to be said. Another mark joined the list. “His wife ...” Harry stared at the list. “Cautiously no until we know more. I don't want to leave another orphan.”

George watched him, expression unreadable. “And if she's just as much of a piece of work as her charming husband?”

“Then I'll cast the curse myself.”

George nodded. Aglaea Avery – unmarked – Wizengamot was joined by a question mark.
Harry came along with Ron and Hermione for the second Occlumency lesson. He would leave once they started, but Susan had wanted to speak with him, and that was the easiest place to meet.

They were early, as they’d told Susan they would be, and she was the only one waiting for them.


“Susan. What can I do for you?”

“I'd like to train with you sometimes, if you'll let me,” she said bluntly. “You're the best Defence teacher I ever had, my aunt's Auror guards included. You're not the only Dark wizard out there that the Aurors are after. Our combat instructors are good, but I learned more from fighting Death Eaters than I ever did from them.”

*It might be a good idea*, Ron said. *You're getting too used to how we fight. It'd be good for you to train against someone else, too.*

*Susan has always been a good fighter*, Hermione agreed. *It will be useful for both of you.*

Harry nodded slightly. *The Hideaway, then.*

“We have a place,” he told Susan out loud. “Ron can show you later. Let me know what times work for you and I'll be there.”

Harry didn't want a new version of the DA, but it would help keep her safe next time she ran into a Dark wizard that didn't want to come along quietly. That it helped keep him on his toes and would give him an idea of the current level of Auror training was only an additional advantage.

If she was determined to become one of his – his followers, then that was the least he could do to protect her. And if she one day decided to use that knowledge against him, he could accept that, too.

“We retired from the Foundation,” Hermione said quietly one morning. “Sooner or later someone would find out we were still on the Board, and it would suffer for it.”

It was same reason why Harry had kept himself entirely out of it in the first place. They had all three known it would come to that. It still didn't keep him from feeling a sting of pain when he let go of the last bit of influence he had on the Evans-Lupin Foundation. Harry's lawsuits were settled and the gold donated. He had done what he could. The Foundation would stand or fall on its own merits now.

With no new attacks, the uproar in the *Prophet* had quieted down a little. Harry was surprised to find that while the articles had been sensational and the theories about his reasons increasingly more outlandish, the paper hadn't started a smear campaign. He had expected it based on the summer after Voldemort's return, but either the *Prophet* had two braincells to rub together and genuinely worried what he might do in retaliation, or the Ministry kept them in check.

The second option wouldn't even be a surprise. Shacklebolt was a smart man. Smart enough to know that a Harry Potter backed into a corner was one with nothing to lose – and, consequently, a very dangerous, unpredictable one.
There were also a surprisingly lack of quotes – good or bad – from the people he had attended Hogwarts with.

“You taught a lot of them in the DA,” Ron explained when he wondered about it, “and a lot of them used that to save themselves or their families. They owe you. A lot of them probably even still trust you, Dark Lordness and all included. The rest ...” he shrugged. “They can't really prove anything yet, but everyone agrees you're the one who killed Malfoy and probably the Lestranges, too. The people you didn't train were mostly Slytherins, Death Eater spawn, or both. Even if they don't have the brains to shut up, you can bet the last thing their families want is for them to open their mouths and piss off someone who can get through the Malfoy wards and kill Lucius Malfoy in his sleep. You were safe to slander back when Fudge didn't want to rock the boat. Can't do the same with a Fiendfyre-happy Dark Lord.”

Huh.

Harry glanced at the Prophet's headline again. Did the Ministry Fail Us? The image that accompanied it was one of himself and Shacklebolt at some event or another after the Fall of Voldemort. Harry wasn't sure which. He didn't remember most of those days as anything other than a blitz of people and demands and grief, one day indistinguishable from the next. It looked like it had been taken in the Ministry, though. Maybe during one of the Death Eater trials.

The article itself wasn't particularly positive, but it did raise the question of why the Saviour had gone from being on first name basis with the Minister to declaring war on the same Ministry within a year and a half. They danced very carefully around calling him mentally unstable, but they did remark that even then, it was a suspiciously quick turn-about unless something had happened to push their Saviour over the edge.

There had been those who had brought up theories about Polyjuice or the Imperius. As the days passed with no word from Harry and – more importantly – no sign whatsoever that he was being held anywhere against his will, those voices had died out again.

“We're going to need back-up wands,” he eventually said. “I can go outside with a glamour or Polyjuice, but everyone knows my wand. The Prophet printed bloody pictures of it.”

Ron frowned. “That might be hard. I mean, a lot of wizards and witches are buried with their wand, like Dumbledore was. George mentioned old wands sometimes show up in second-hand shops, but the odds of finding one that'll work for you ...”

“Ollivander is too risky.”

“Abroad, then?” Ron suggested. “I don't know where Bill and Fleur are right now, but her family's French and they're all magical. They have to know where French kids get their wands. Can't be as good as Ollivander's but we can't be picky, I reckon.”

It sounded reasonable, but Harry wasn't convinced. He trusted Bill and Fleur to a degree, but it still felt a little too close to home. The fewer people in the know the better, and the French Ministry was on acceptable terms with the British one last Harry heard. If they kept a record of wand-purchases ...  

“... How about Vienna?” Harry suggested. “They have a decent-sized magical population, and the Austrian Ministry hasn't been on good terms with the British one since Grindelwald.”

“Portkey?” Ron grimaced. “Bit far but it'll have to do. The three of us and George?”

“For now,” Harry agreed. “If anyone else needs a new one later ... we'll deal with it then.”
Two days and fifteen hundred miles later Harry was the brand new owner of an aspen wand with a
dragon heartstring core. He had been warned it would never be a perfect match as long as he had his
original wand, but it worked just fine, and that would have to do.

Better than the insidious lure of the Elder Wand, at least. Sure, the Elder Wand would have been a
better match, but as far as Harry was concerned, the world was better off with that thing destroyed
for good.

The Wizengamot met in early February. The meeting schedule was erratic, but the Longbottom
family held a seat – currently in Augusta’s care – and Neville passed the information on to them.

Hermione had not been pleased to find that the Wizengamot debates were not open to the public.
Harry had frankly not been surprised. The British wizarding world was still a century or more from
democracy and transparency.

A number of people on Harry's list were Wizengamot members. There would be no guarantee he
would be able to get to any of them, and no chance to choose exactly which ‘reformed' Death Eater
to go after, but Harry and George both felt it would be worth the risk.

No one on that list was innocent. Worse to Harry's mind, every last one of them was a future threat to
Teddy.

Harry's glamour was an anonymous-looking, middle-aged wizard. A few wrinkles, greying brown
hair, and dark blue eyes. His robe was an equally anonymous dark blue, a little worn but still
respectable. With his new wand to finish the disguise, it was a perfect stranger staring back at him in
the mirror. It wasn't foolproof, but he would be able to keep it it up when casting everything but the
most demanding of spells. And, unlike Polyjuice, the glamour was easily changed if needed. That he
avoided the disguising taste of Polyjuice and the unnerving sense of changing shape was just an
advantage.

A specific section of the Ministry Atrium next to the many fireplaces had been reserved for
Apparition and Portkeys once the threat of Voldemort was gone. Harry was very sure it wouldn't
stay that way for much longer. Escape by Floo would have been too slow, too much of a risk, but
Apparition? Apparition made it risky but doable.

They knew roughly when the Wizengamot meeting was supposed to end. Harry and George spent
that afternoon in silence with just a clock for company, minutes ticking slowly by. He had sent Ron
and Hermione off to practice Legilimency. Both of them knew what Harry and George were up to
but had allowed themselves to be sent upstairs with grim expressions.

Half an hour before the scheduled time Harry got to his feet. Nerves had set in hours ago, and his
pulse raced with jittery anticipation. A wave of his wand made his glamour settle. The instant
discomfort that followed let him know he had done it right.

George gripped his arm. Harry mirrored the gesture.

“Happy hunting. Come back in one piece,” George said seriously and let go of him again.

Harry nodded once. Then he focused on the Ministry and was gone, the vice-like squeeze of
Apparition moving him to the Ministry Atrium with only a thought.

The first thing he checked was his glamour. Once he confirmed it was still in place, he moved out of
the way of other arrivals and found a quiet spot by the wall. It was near the end of the workday and
the Atrium was decently crowded. Inconvenient, maybe, but it also made it easier for Harry to stay
unnoticed. He had a name and a back-story ready, but he preferred not to draw interest at all.

Twenty minutes later the crowds had thinned a little. From the golden gates the first figures in plum
coloured robes appeared. Some of them were familiar – from his list or as family of housemates or
people he had met in the Ministry at one time or another – but most were not. Harry knew the full list
of members, but he had focused his attention on the ones that mattered.

Some Wizengamot members went straight to the fireplaces or the Apparition point. Others lingered,
to talk or be seen.

Augusta Longbottom brushed past with a pinched expression on her face. A pinch of Floo Powder
and a snapped “Longbottom Manor!” and she was gone in a flurry of green fire.

Two unfamiliar witches, neither a day under a hundred, passed by with a much more dignified pace.
A few greetings and last remarks for the day and they were gone with the crack of Disapparition.

Harry's eyes flicked between the various plum-clad wizards and witches, picking out his possible
targets. Not all were there. Some might have had other business in the Ministry or used one of the
private Floos. Some might not even have shown for the meeting.

A cluster of three wizards in the middle of the room caught his eye. Two were familiar from the
Death Eater files they had put together but the last, recognisable as the man turned around, was all
the incentive Harry needed.

Peregrine Travers sneered as a young Ministry employee scurried past, eyes lowered and keeping
well clear of Travers. A half-blood or Muggle-born, probably. Travers' opinions were well-known,
for all that he had managed to avoid Azkaban.

Travers turned back to his two companions – Ormond Wilkes and Domenic Selwyn, both unmarked
– and Harry knew he would never get a better chance.

He moved as swiftly as he could without drawing attention, slipped between several Ministry
employees and moved out of the way of another. A dark-clad witch passed between him and his
target, black blocking out the plum of the Wizengamot robes, and then she was gone and Harry had
perfectly clear line of sight to the trio. The noise of the crowds faded, muted to a dull murmur as his
focus narrowed down to his targets and the world slowed down.

Travers started to turn, another sneer on his lips. Harry didn't doubt all three of them carried every
sort of protective magic money could buy, not with how unpopular they still were in most circles. It
didn't matter against the sort of magic Harry planned to use.

Marked Death Eaters like Travers were good, but the war had been over for a year and a half, and
the man obviously felt safe enough in the Ministry to let his guards down.

Harry's aspen wand did not respond as readily as his holly wand did, but the small delay meant
nothing. The window of opportunity was narrow, but all he needed was one clear shot in the midst
of the crowds.

“Imperio!” Low, sharp, the word protected by a few seconds worth of silencing spell, and no one
around him as much as looked his way.

The faint, pleased feeling was still there, but – different, somehow. Calmer and less personal than the
Lestranges had been. A difference in wands or simply because he did not have the same years of
carefully nursed revenge to back him.
The result was instant. So fast that Travers barely even stuttered when the spell struck him in the middle of a sentence. The man's will was as easy to subvert as it had been in Gringotts so long ago.

Harry turned and vanished into the crowds again, following the flow towards the departure points. The spell was a little harder to hold with a wand less suited for him, but it wouldn't need to hold for long. They had talked about it – the possibility of keeping one of the Death Eaters permanently under the Imperius – but had decided to keep it as a future option. This would be a test run as much as a bit of much-needed pest removal. Harry's first genuine experience with the Imperius as a lethal curse.

He stopped just inside the Apparition point and turned to look at Travers again, politely keeping out of people's way like the low-level Ministry official he obviously was.

The three of them hadn't moved, still deep in conversation. Harry mentally followed the Imperius, from his mind through his aspen wand and across the room to Travers' blissfully subdued consciousness.

*Kill them.*

Travers' mind yielded and embraced the thought as his own. The man stopped mid-sentence and raised his wand. Selwyn frowned and opened his mouth, about to speak -

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"Avada Kedavra!
"
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- And collapsed on the floor like a puppet with his strings cut.

The crowd had frozen at the bright flash of poisonous green. Someone screamed at the sight of the body, and that seemed to snap everyone else out of it, too.

Wilkes had started to move – to cast or escape, it didn't matter, he was far too slow to make a difference either way. Travers cast the spell again without hesitation.

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"Avada Kedavra!
"
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Someone shoved past Harry and Apparated, then another. Every fireplace was lit, people pushing and shoving to get to them, away from the man who had just killed two colleagues in cold blood.

Harry did not move.

*Look at me.*

Travers turned, blissfully indifferent to the chaos around him and the Aurors that had appeared at the door.

*Finish the job.*

Travers turned his wand upwards until it rested against his throat. There was a flicker of resistance as something deep in Travers' mind recoiled at the order and tried to fight him. Harry easily crushed the attempt.

One of the Aurors shouted something, drowned out by the crowds that Harry no longer even noticed. Another one raised his wand to cast, forcing his way past the golden gates, through the people that tried to flee back inside the Ministry. Harry was a few seconds faster.

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"Avada Kedavra!
"
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He lifted the Imperius and his glamour both the instant Travers cast. For fractions of a moment
Travers’ eyes were clear and horrified. Then his face was obscured by the bright green of the Killing Curse and he simply collapsed, all life gone.

Harry and George had wondered if the Killing Curse would be effective if an Imperius-victim cast it on themselves. The answer was a resounding yes.

Harry met the eyes of the Auror across the room, just long enough for recognition to sink in. Then he Apparated, gone before anyone could act.

He Apparated twice more through Scotland and Wales before he returned to George in Grimmauld. Apparition couldn't be tracked, but he didn't want to risk anything.

He stumbled when he arrived, adrenaline and elation doing nothing for his long-standing feud with magical transportation. He would probably have ended up on the floor if George hadn't been there to catch him.

“Harry?” Urgent and worried and – that wasn't George. Harry looked up to see two redheads and a frowning brunette and he blinked, surprised.


Then his world narrowed down to Hermione's tight hug and Ron's presence by their side, arms wrapped around both of them.

“I know you know we don't like it, and I know you want to protect us,” she whispered, “but never again. If we can't come with you, then let us be there for you afterwards.” She sounded like she had been crying. Harry just held her, a silent apology that he knew she would understand.

“What she said, mate,” Ron added. “Waiting for you after Malfoy was bad enough. At least you had George with you there.”

George's hand on his shoulder made him look up and see the agreement in his eyes.

“All right,” he agreed. “All right.”

Hermione nodded. She let go and dried her eyes, first with her sleeve and then with a quick wave of her wand at Ron's nudge. “... Was it worth it?” she finally asked. “You'll probably never be able to Apparate out of the Ministry again. They'll put an end to that now. They'll have to.”

“Travers, Wilkes, Selwyn,” Harry breathed. “Yeah. It was worth it.”

George gripped his hand. Harry gripped it back, an endless minute of panic and adrenaline and magic in that one gesture.

Three more names could be scratched from their list that afternoon.

The outcry in the *Prophet* was ... well. As much as could be expected, when the topic was a Saviour and War Hero turned Dark Lord and murderer, Harry supposed.

No one had caught a picture of him in the act, but the *Prophet* had a very nice picture of the Minister looking grim and concerned, as well as one of the post-Battle ones of Harry that they had recycled from several previous editions.

The articles had lost any vaguely positive slant they might have had left, along with any suggestions that Harry had been framed or was acting under the Imperius. Several 'anonymous sources' pointed
out that he had been able to resist the Imperius when he was just a student. Harry suspected said sources were former classmates, very likely Slytherins.

The letters page was full of outrage. Harry had expected that, too. No one wanted to draw attention to themselves by appearing to agree with him. If anyone approved of his Death Eater hunt, they kept it to themselves. He didn't doubt most of the wizarding world was horrified, just as he didn't doubt there were quite a few people out there – many of them those who had suffered under Voldemort's regime – who were just as satisfied to see something done, even if that something was murder.

Wanted posters went up in Diagon Alley again, part warning and part promise of reward for any information that led to his capture. Ron and Hermione, known associates even if no one could pin a real crime on them, were wanted for questioning.

It was a familiar feeling, being hunted again. Harry hadn't missed it, but it was nothing he couldn't live with, either.

He did apologise to Ron and Hermione – who might have wanted to visit Diagon Alley as themselves again one day – and got a Canary Cream with his breakfast for his trouble.

When he had managed to get mostly back to normal, Hermione sniffed. “Honestly, Harry, you need to practice your detection spells.” Then she sighed. “When did any of us last go to Diagon for anything other than to visit George? None of us liked the attention in the end. Not even Ron.”

The Muggle world didn't care, at least. Polyjuice or the occasional illegal Portkey to the continent took care of any magical shopping they had to do.

Most of their time was spent in Grimmauld, at Harry's Hideaway, or with careful visits to family or friends.

All in all, being hunted again was little different from their normal life after the Battle of Hogwarts.

Their five new co-conspirators and Neville took a lot better to Occlumency lessons than Harry himself did. It would take years to master it, but with Hermione and George's experiences to draw on, they had the basics down fast. The rest would be practice until they had it right. For months if they wanted any chance of lying under Veritaserum – and for the rest of their lives, if they wanted to keep their skills sharp.

Hermione added Veritaserum sessions to their lessons for those who wanted to test their progress. Harry's own sessions had been changed from the normal regular ones to having random drinks and food dosed. It kept him on his toes and gave him plenty of experience with various detection spells as well. If he managed to dodge those attempts long enough, Hermione simply put the small bottle next to his plate instead. It wouldn't do to let his progress lapse, after all.

Neville joined in on Susan and Harry's training sessions in mid-February. Harry didn't want to turn it into another DA, but none of the others approached him about it, so it worked as far as he was concerned. Their sessions were erratic and mainly based on Susan's trainee schedule and Harry's own business, but it was worth the headache. Susan was at the top of her class and knew Auror strategies. Harry – well, he figured he had abilities of his own to offer.

He couldn't use anything lethal in their mock-combat sessions, but that was no different from training with Ron and Hermione. Susan and Neville didn't have the incredible teamwork that Ron and Hermione did, but they did have the advantage of Harry not being used to them.

Harry did have a bad feeling about the careful, considering look Hermione gave the duo after their
second session. He could hold his own against two of them. He did not have a good feeling about four.

Before their third session – and before Hermione could start on any interesting ideas – Harry sat the four of them down in a conjured couch in the middle of their training ground.

“How’s your resistance to the Imperius?” he asked bluntly. “I need to train Ron and Hermione. Do I need to bring the two of you up to par, too?”

To Hermione's credit she only arched an eyebrow. Ron didn't even do that. They both knew it was necessary. They would probably learn fast, but that didn't change the fact that they did have to learn. Harry didn't particular want to cast the Imperius on them, but they needed to learn to resist it, all of them.

Susan and Neville exchanged a look. Neville spoke first.

“We could resist the Carrows pretty well by the end of it.”

“The Carrows,” Harry murmured. Something about his voice made Hermione sigh and send him an exasperated feeling through the bond. Ron just looked a little amused. They both knew him too well.

“Well, I can't match Voldemort's Unforgivables, but I'm fairly sure I can best those two.”

Harry took a slow breath. His magic was at the tip of his fingers and rose obediently at his command, an electric feeling against his skin and little sparks in the back of his neck.

Magic bore down on the five of them, stronger and darker even to himself than it had been when he had used it in Diagon Alley. Ron and Hermione were familiar with it and didn't visibly react. Susan's grip on her wand had tightened, and only Neville's iron-grip on her wrist seemed to have stopped her from casting something. Neville himself looked just a little paler than he had before, but he met Harry's eyes without flinching.

“Impressive parlour trick. That doesn't prove anything.”

Some part of Harry's brain was aware Neville was baiting him. The other, far stronger parts ignored it and delighted in the excuse to show off. He raised his wand. Only a small tick along Neville's jaw revealed he was anything but perfectly confident in the situation.

“Imperio!”

Harry had been aware that Neville had come a long way from the clumsy, shy boy he had been. He didn't appreciate just far until the relentless force of his Imperius went up against Neville unyielding stubbornness.

He recognised the resistance from the Lestranges – probably the familiarity that came from repeated exposure to the curse – and while he felt a flicker of annoyance, mostly he felt pride. Neville was a friend and an ally, and that made Neville's strength both priceless protection and a valuable asset.

Harry pushed the curse further, felt Neville's stubborn resistance slip -

- And he retreated before the Imperius could take hold, the magic gone in an instant.

Neville closed his eyes and took a shuddering breath. Only then did he look at Harry again.

Harry smiled and couldn't quite hide his pride. “Good enough.”
“Right.” Neville took another breath, less unsteady. “Right,” he repeated. “Good enough. Bloody hell. If you'd kept the curse on me -”

“I didn't want to.” Harry returned his wand to its holster. Susan's expression eased a little with the gesture. “You're my friend. You can resist it enough that it should be fine. I can't match Voldemort's skills with it, but if we're lucky, it'll be generations before someone can.”

Susan and Neville exchanged another look. Then Susan spoke.

“I'll need to learn. Neville is a lot better than I am.” She looked a little grim but mostly determined. It was a useful thing to learn for an Auror, too.

“I'll work out a schedule,” Hermione promised. A pointed look at Harry reminded him of why they were actually there. “Now, practice. Precise casting, Harry. For every sloppy spell you cast, Ron will join in to help Susan and Neville for a minute. If you do it again before the minute is up, I will join in as well.”

“And since my casting gets sloppier the more exhausted I get ...” Harry didn't need to finish his dry observation.

Hermione smiled sweetly. “Incentive.”

Sadism, more likely. But Harry knew better than to say that one out loud.

Harry received a detailed annual statement from his bank in mid-February as well. He already knew that they had made his gold breed – the preliminary statement in early January had been brief but did give him an overview, for all that he'd had a lot of other things to worry about when it arrived – but the detailed report, several dozen pages long, told him the finer points in excruciating detail.

The handwritten note from his banker on the first page was enough to make him decide not to share the report with Hermione.

_The Muggles do love their wars. The Bank has excellent expectations for your investments in the coming year._

Skimming through the detailed overview of his investments only reaffirmed that decision. He had gold to fund a war with – it was not enough, it would probably never be enough, but at least the previous year had seen higher profits than expenses – but he doubted Hermione would approve of the sort of investments that gold came from. Frankly, Harry didn't particularly approve of most of them himself. The early investments had been a little worrying. Now they were clearly branching out, backed by the success of the earlier investments.

He had told them he didn't care where they put the gold as long as it multiplied. They had taken his words to heart.

“Of course. Gold hardly breeds by catering to the squeamishness of weaker families,” Dorea told him with a haughty little sniff when he brought it up. “Gold is gold. The goblins, vindictive little creatures, understand that. Even Muggles understand the profitability of war.”

“It's a little worse than that,” Harry bit out. “And I don't particularly approve. Tell me why I shouldn't just move it to the dwarves. I doubt they can be any worse than this.”

That disapproving sniff again. “You need gold to fight a war, boy. Plenty and continuous. The dwarves have forgotten their past. Even in my time, they would turn down perfectly decent
opportunities for risk of *offending* someone.”

“Perfectly decent opportunities?” Harry hissed. “I'm funding *slavery!*”

Dorea's expression was hard and unyielding and very much a Black. “Gold or morals, boy. Choose one. Do you think the dwarves could make your vaults breed this fast? You're a fool, then. The goblins? They would bleed you dry out of spite. It wouldn't be the first time it happened to a family that offended them.”

“Half of this isn't even legal in the Muggle world!”

Dorea gave him a cold look. “The wizarding world hardly cares for Muggle follies. Do you want to change that? Then you need gold. You lost any right to whinge about moral considerations when you claimed your title, *Lord Potter*. You are a murderer, a wanted criminal, and an enemy of the wizarding world. Nothing will change that. Do you wish to make it worth that price? Then you will see it through to the end and change those offending laws when you have victory in your grasp. And that, boy, takes gold.”

For long seconds Harry didn't speak, merely stared right back at her, every bit as stubborn as she was.

“I don't like it.”

Dorea's expression softened just a little. “That was never a requirement. You just have to accept it.”

And he would. Reluctantly. Guiltily. But he would accept it. He didn't have much of a choice.

The Ministry made their next two moves in late February. As the first move they ordered Harry's vaults frozen – a gesture that was utterly useless as Harry hadn't kept gold in Gringotts for the better part of a year and a half, but he couldn't blame them for trying, nor Kingsley for not believing that he had already moved everything out of goblin hands.

The second was to further increase security in the Ministry. There were no wards that could protect against Polyjuice, but there were several strong ones that would strip any glamour off of anyone who passed through them, and summon the Aurors to the scene at the same time.

The ward was raised in the Ministry Atrium with no warning, to the embarrassment and anger of several people caught using minor glamours.

Neville tested out this new and improved security feature the following day. He did so with the help of an impressive hickey from Hannah and an utter refusal to look even the least bit embarrassed when the Aurors showed up.

Harry wondered how long it would take them to get tired of being called out to false alarms like that. Presumably people would learn not to use glamours in the Ministry. Eventually, anyway.

“You have surprisingly lax security for a Dark Lord,” Ernie noticed one Saturday evening in early March when they all managed to get together for dinner in the safe-house as a belated birthday get-together for Ron.

Mute was a very decent cook. Harry didn't doubt she would have been long since disposed of by the Lestranges if she hadn't been. A year and a half in his service had seen some of her timid skittishness fade, but even then he rarely saw more than a quick glimpse of her as she worked.
“Voldemort Marked his followers, flesh, magic, and soul. Snape still managed to betray him and spy on him for Dumbledore for years without ever being discovered,” Harry replied. “There’s probably nothing short of a flat-out slave brand that could stop that sort of thing and even then ...”

“Even then, Snape would probably have found a way,” Neville finished.

Harry shrugged. “Wouldn't doubt it. Narcissa Malfoy is unmarked. She lied to Voldemort's face as well. Nothing we could do would be foolproof, and I wouldn't want it to be. If you disagree with what I'm doing, if I've gone too far, or you have any issues with me, I want you to tell me. I won't force anyone to follow me. If you want out, you can walk away. I'd prefer an Unbreakable Vow or a contract in that case to protect everyone else, but I won't start throwing around Unforgivables.”

Not against someone who had fought by their side, at least.

“And without a Mark, no one can tell one of yours from anyone else,” Hannah said softly. “It was only the Death Eaters' influence that kept it from becoming illegal to take the Dark Mark the first time around.”

“That, and those sob stories about people forced to take the Dark Mark against their will.” Susan sounded angry and bitter. “Every last one of them took it freely and willingly, but the hypothetical stories about a deeply ashamed 'friend of a friend' backed by Malfoy's gold did their job.”

Malfoy's gold had been a lot less effective the second time around, but it had still worked. One more line on the long, long list of Harry's issues with the wizarding world as it was.

Anthony cleared his throat. Susan stopped glowering at her glass. The interplay seemed instinctive enough to both of them that they had probably gone through those same motions plenty of times before. “Ernie's got a point, though. If nothing else, we need a way to contact each other. A Patronus is a little conspicuous and yours is well-known.”

“Something like the DA coins?” Hermione's eyes took on the a distant look that Harry knew meant she was thinking about something. She Summoned a quill and parchment and began to write. “More secure, of course. Some of the books had several spells we could use. Bind it to its owner, for one.”

“Something less likely to be lost, too,” Dean suggested. “Jewellery, maybe? It won't have to be identical, either. I'd guess the spells can be cast on pretty much anything, and no one looks twice at a ring or a necklace.”

“It won't draw attention, either,” Hannah added. “A Notice-Me-Not might draw attention if the Ministry puts up wards against that. If we use a piece of jewellery we already have, it'll look perfectly normal.”

“Make it an Apparition-marker, too,” Ron joined in. Their bond gave the three of them a way to Apparate to each other, but the others didn't have that advantage. “It should be something that can pass on more information than the coins could, too. Bit like the Two-way Mirrors, maybe?”

Hermione frowned. “That wouldn't work with jewellery, though, and it would be useful if we could communicate unnoticed. We may need to contact someone else while in public. Some of the spells I found could mimic a bond of sort. I'm not sure if that would work with actual communications, though. Those spells were mostly intended to echo emotions between those connected to each other.”

“A Two-way Mirror without the mirror, then,” Ron conceded. “And with something to keep everyone else from hearing it, too.”
Fifteen minutes later and with very little input from Harry and Neville – and only marginally more from Susan, mainly Auror and security related – Hermione had stack of of notes and a research-date with Anthony to go over the relevant spells together.

A small part of Harry – a very small one that really knew better – couldn't help but wonder if it had been the same with Voldemort's original Death Eaters. If they had sat around the same way and worked out the magic of the Dark Mark or if it had been Voldemort's creation alone.

He doubted it. Even if Voldemort hadn't been too paranoid and obsessed to let anyone but himself know that sort of magic, he couldn't imagine Death Eaters simply sitting around as friends talking magic. If nothing else, Voldemort would have put a lot more control into those spells.

In the weeks it took to get the combination of spells right, they picked out the jewellery they would cast it on.

Susan and Hannah chose matching silver rings that would easily be mistaken for friendship rings. Hermione went for simple gold earrings. Ernie, who would need his hands and arms free of jewellery as a healer, went through his family vault and found a pendant with the Macmillan family coat of arms. Anthony bought a bracelet in the Muggle world, while Dean designed and created a matching pair of bracelets of his own – one for each wrist, to be worn as a set. Ron took his cue from Hermione – and probably Charlie as well – and got a single earring with a chip of Basilisk fang hanging from it.

Neville settled for a commissioned silver torc that curled around his neck to become two cinquefoils at the ends. They were, Harry would later learn as they got proper sloshed together one evening, Alice Longbottom's favourite flower ever since a young Frank Longbottom had offered her handful of freshly picked spring cinquefoils and nervously asked her out for the first time.

Harry considered asking Dean to create his as well, but in the end he went to a goldsmith in Muggle London with a design. The end result was a torc somewhat heavier than Neville's, comprised of eleven thin metal ropes twisted together. Six silver for Neville and the others who insisted he was worth following, three evenly-spaced gold ones for Ron, Hermione, and himself, and a pair of entwined red gold ones for George, because he would never be able to think of George as anything other than one half of a whole. Maybe there would be others later, but these were the first. These were the people who had been there when it began.

Hermione, Anthony, and Dean cast the spells. Hermione and Anthony had the knowledge and the precision, and Dean had the artistic touch needed to make the spells work together just that bit better. The core of it would be blood magic – willingly given, from all of them – but compared to what else they were involved with, a small bit of highly illegal Dark Arts mattered little.

The sheer amount of magic left the torc feeling surprisingly comfortable against his skin. He wasn't sure if it was possible to physically feel magic like that, but either way he liked it. It was both a reminder of duty and responsibility, and that he wasn't alone. That they weren't alone. That there were other people out there willing to stand by them even now.

Communicating through their jewellery would come fast to Harry, Ron, and Hermione, used to the bond as they were. It could come slightly slower to the others, but Occlumency-training served them well. It took some focus since one moment of inattention would break the connection, and they would always struggle with longer sentences, but the magic worked.

When it was just the three of them at Grimmauld again, Hermione enchanted one more piece – two entwined strands of red gold, meant to close and never open again, and leave no sign of beginning or
end in the metal. It was tied to the three of them and George, and no one else. That was George's decision and Harry would abide by it. Maybe later George would change his mind. Until then, the necklace remained as it was, as a bond between the four of them.

Teddy managed his first bit of accidental magic in late March. He had learned the meaning of the word 'no' and the location of Andromeda's freshly baked cookies, and he did not approve of those two concepts in the same sentence.

His magic pulled down a bag of flour, several jars of spices, as well as most of the cookies on the counter before Andromeda could step in and stop it.

She did let him keep a cookie.

“"It will encourage more magic,” she explained as Teddy devoured the cookie – a werewolf comparison might have been in bad taste but Harry saw definite similarities right then – and she cleaned the kitchen with a wave of her wand. “It's the proper way.”

She slowly lowered the wand again and looked a little wistful. “Nymphadora was the same age when she showed her first sign of magic. The sign of a strong child.”

Teddy finished his cookie and looked back to the counter. His hair cycled from reddish to vivid orange, the sort of colour Harry had learned to associate with being up to absolutely no good.

He suspected there would be a lot of accidental magic in Teddy's future.

Dean announced his apprenticeship with a clockmaker in the magical side of Zurich in early April. Harry didn't know much about that sort of career, but Ron nodded thoughtfully when he heard, and Harry supposed that meant it was a good thing.

“I can't Apparate in one go, I have to do it in two steps, but it's still better than the Tube,” Dean told them one evening in the Lestrange safe-house when all their schedules lined up for dinner together. “Wizards and witches like their clocks unique and enchanted. The spellwork is finicky, and I'll be apprenticed for at least five years before I can try to make it on my own, but the pieces are beautiful. Works of art, all of them. And once you know that trade, it's easy to get into jewellery making as well.”

“The Weasley clock was made by a clockmaker,” Ron said. “Wedding gift, mum said. It would cost a fortune if we had to replace it.”

“The magic is interesting, the design lets me have a little fun, and it's a lot better than the Aurors.” Dean glanced at Harry. “It's kind of your fault, mate. He made me cast a bunch of spells to see how I cast them and how precise I could be. When I finished with my Patronus, he decided that if I had the patience to learn that, I had the patience for clockmaker-spells, too.”

As it turned out, the Patronus was a surprisingly useful spell. It had earned Susan extra credits in Auror training, too.

Harry raised his glass in part acknowledgement, part silent toast to Dean's future success. Dean cheerfully followed suit.

Harry had received a number of letters from friends and former schoolmates once he was outed as a Dark Lord, and to his surprise, that number had not decreased all that much over the months.
Some wanted an explanation. Some refused to believe the Prophet without hearing Harry's point of view. Some had been carefully neutral, a surprising amount had been as close to understanding and supportive as anyone dared to put in writing, but very few of those friends and acquaintances had been obviously against him. He supposed that those who flat-out disagreed with him weren't exactly about to risk drawing his attention by obviously telling him so. No one had told him flat-out they wanted to join in on his crusade of sorts, but he could read between the lines just fine. Enough to know that if he had asked, if he had shown any interest at all in recruiting so far, a number of them would have readily agreed.

Without the owl wards he would undoubtedly have received a number of unpleasant letters, but with the owl box warded against magic and their home restricted to very, very few people, there had been a blessed lack of howlers and the like.

He still corresponded regularly with a number of people. As such it was no surprise to find a letter in familiar penmanship one quiet Sunday afternoon.

Lord Potter,

Germanus Pilliwickle has been spotted regularly in Knockturn Alley. He seems to frequent The White Wyvern.

Augustus Brookstanton

__________________________________________

It's risky, helping me.

Brookstanton didn't seem to have a problem with signing his name on potentially incriminating letters. Harry still figured it was smarter not to sign his letter back – if nothing else, he didn't want to risk it ending up in the wrong hands.

__________________________________________

Lord Potter,

If they made consorting with Dark Lords illegal, half of the Ministry would be shipped off to Azkaban. All of them would richly deserve it.

Augustus Brookstanton

Harry supposed he couldn't really argue against that.

__________________________________________

“Scabior's second-in-command,” Susan said when they talked before their training session that evening. “A piece of scum, through and through.”

“He's on my list,” Harry agreed. “We couldn't find that much about him, though. An announcement of his birth and a few mentions and pictures during the Death Eater trials, but that was all. It doesn't really matter, he's still one of the highest-ranking Snatchers at large, but it was weird.”

Susan's expression darkened. “I'm not surprised. Did you know he's the great-grandson of Justus Pilliwickle? He was one of the most famous heads of the DMLE in a century or more. Most of their family have been Aurors ever since. Apparently Germanus flunked out of Auror training and blamed everyone but himself. He upped and left shortly after. The only reason he wasn't reported missing was because he owled his family every now and then. My aunt was a trainee at the time. She told me his father covered it up. Better to never mention him again than admit he couldn't live up to the family standards.”
Harry did a quick mental calculation. “Right at the beginning of the First Wizarding War?”

“That would be implying things.” Susan sounded bitter. “Can't admit the great-grandson of Justus Pilliwinkle might be a Voldemort supporter, that won't do at all. Even now they're denying it. His father died in the first war, but the rest of the family insist this isn't their wayward child. He's obviously an imposter who took the name to spite them. They'll call for your head for being a Dark Lord, but don't doubt they'll be pleased if you take care of that unfortunate little issue of Germanus. Dead wizards tell no tales.”

Harry was silent for a long time.

“It's not just the Ministry, is it?” he eventually said.

“It's generations of idiots in charge of the wizarding world, and traditions that are even worse. The Ministry is just the most obvious problem.” Susan glanced at him, dark fire in her eyes. “They failed us, every last one of them, and they left children to fight their war for them. And then they wonder why we're angry. Why we won't just settle down and let things go on the way they used to be.”

Harry swallowed. Something about the words settled heavily in his mind.

“When you say 'we' ...”

“I'm saying that there's a generation of Hogwarts students who learned the hard way that nothing we grew up with could be trusted. That every last one of those authorities and elders and politicians we were taught to respect left us to face Voldemort alone to save their own hides.”

Susan sighed and the intensity in her eyes faded again. “Hannah and Neville and the others – we weren't the only ones who noticed, we were just the only ones who did something about it. Dumbledore was the symbol of his generation. Voldemort, for better or worse, was the symbol of his. I know you don't like it, but you're ours, Harry. You're the only chance we have. We can settle down, do what we're supposed to, and just ... carry on. And in twenty years I'll be in aunt Amelia's position and a member of the Wizengamot, and I'll be just as useless as the Ministry I grew up with. Neville will spend his time handling his estate and greenhouses, Anthony will be just another mid-level Ministry employee, and Draco Malfoy and his ilk will run the wizarding world again.”

It was not a nice picture and all the worse for how vividly he could imagine it, every bit of fight and defiance ground out of them until they followed tradition like proper little wizards and witches.

“I won't let that happen.” The words were out before he could stop them but he didn't care. He'd stand by them.

Susan smiled, a genuine, relieved smile that reached her eyes and pushed away the tiredness for a while. “I know. We all do. That's why we'll do everything we can to help. We've all stood alone too many times. It'll be nice to stand together for once.”

Together. As more than just himself and Ron and Hermione, or an army in the final battle, when they had no other choice. It was a strangely comforting thought.

Harry and Ron did reconnaissance two days later. Ron, because he insisted and because George had to be careful about how often he was missing. Even if George himself didn't care, Harry did.

Polyjuice and plain, dark robes served as their disguise. Knockturn Alley was home to plenty of people who preferred to stay out of sight, and another two unknown wizards wouldn't draw much attention.
Knockturn Alley had been a scary place when they had been younger, full of rumoured Dark wizards and vampires and cursed items waiting to attack them around every corner. Now it was still a vaguely unnerving place, if nothing else for the narrow alleyways and towering buildings that left the place in perpetual shadow, but the fear was long gone. They had been easy targets as children. They weren’t anymore, and their confidence showed in their movements.

It was late, with most of the inhabitants of Knockturn long since at home or inside the warmth of one of the small inns and pubs that dotted the place. Most of the shops were closed for the day and the few people they encountered ignored them without a second look, clearly having business of their own to handle.

They were only a few buildings from the White Wyvern when someone spoke from the darkness of a cramped alleyway.

“Sickles for some clothes, good sers?” The voice was female and old and raspy, and in the shadows Harry spotted a barely visible figure that could only be a hag. “They're Muggle, they are, but fine clothes if ye'r huntin' beyond.”

Harry stopped. Ron stopped with him.

“Mate?”

“Just – give me a minute,” Harry said quietly. He wasn’t sure just what had made him stop, but he stepped closer. The light from the few windows barely made it into her corner of the alleyway, but his eyes adjusted fast.

The hag stepped a little to the side to reveal a handful of clothes carefully laid out along with a pair of shoes. Male by the looks of it. Adult, thankfully, he realised belatedly, remembering the many stories about hags. “Where did you get them from?”

The hag frowned and moved back again, hiding the clothes from view behind her own bulky robes. “Didn't steal 'em, I didn't. One of the leeches left a Muggle, it did, just drained it dry an' left it 'ere, all fresh an' dead. I found it first, I did.”

Harry didn’t ask where the body itself had gone. Very few bodies remained in Knockturn Alley for long enough to be found by the Aurors. Even if he had his doubts about the accuracy of some of the books in Grimmauld, Susan had plenty of stories to share. No hag was strong enough under normal circumstances to attack a wizard or witch, but there were stories of children gone missing and murder victims found missing flesh and entire limbs. No proof, of course, or he didn’t doubt that hags would have been hunted to extinction years ago. But stories. Plenty and gruesomely detailed in some cases.

As far as Harry was concerned, anyone who hurt a child deserved to die, and he didn’t care if the child was Muggle or magic or not human at all. It didn’t mean that he had any right to assume this hag had done just that, and while the thought of said fresh and dead body left a bit of bile in his mouth, was it really that different from vampires drinking blood? At least that body had been dead already.

The hag he had seen the summer before his third year had been kind of frightening, even disguised as she had been. This one was probably little different, but after years of Voldemort and fighting for his life and facing down far worse things, she seemed surprisingly normal. He wouldn’t say pitiful, not even huddled up as she was, but she was not the savage creature from the various Defence books in Grimmauld.

Mostly she looked cold. Cold and tired and hungry.
Before Ron could do anything other than stare, Harry dug a handful of Galleons from his pocket and pressed them into her hand.

Dark eyes stared at the gold, then back at him like she didn't quite believe what she saw. Then she hid them away in one of the many folds in her clothes before anyone else could spot them.

“... Thank muchly, me Lord,” she whispered.

It could have been a title of respect, to please someone who had been so generous and might be so again, but something in her expression told him otherwise.

The hag raised a crooked finger to tap by her eye. “No hag got the magic of them finer folks, but I see. I see potions an' magic, me Lord, and ye reek a both.”

Harry got the impression that reek was somehow meant as a compliment.

The hag glanced at Ron behind him, then back to Harry. “Ye'r huntin'.” It was not a question. Her dark eyes narrowed and took on a more sinister, eager appearance, and her voice lowered. “Who's yer quarry, me Lord? Old Propola knows the Alley, she does.”

It was a gamble that could easily backfire, but something in Harry made him go with his first impulse. “Germanus Pilliwickle.”

“Snatcher.” Propola spat on the ground. “Lurking 'round, 'e has, among decent folks.”

“In The White Wyvern, from what we heard,” Harry agreed.

“Wyvern an' the whorehouse, now that 'e in't got 'is victims anymore to get it from.” She bared her teeth. “Not good enough ta live at 'is Lord's mercy but 'e took what 'e could from 'em first. Comes out at night, 'e does, when 'e can hide with the rats.”

More unpleasant memories of Wormtail. Harry wondered if he would ever hear the word rat and not think of the man. He turned his focus back to the hag, trusting Ron to watch their surroundings. “Do you know where he stays during the day?”

“Comes an' goes, 'e does. But 'e likes 'is drinks most nights an' 'is whores when 'e has the gold for 'em.”

The Wyvern would be their best bet, then. They would take a look at the place tonight and be back as often as possible until they had an idea of the place and Pilliwickle's habits. It was unknown territory to all of them, and they would need to take their time. Make sure that the man would have no way to escape, and that they wouldn't be blind-sided by unfortunate surprises such as unknown allies.

Harry nodded. “Thank you. I appreciate the help.”

Propola's answering smile was vicious and full of teeth. “No thanks needed, me Lord. But I'd be much obliged if ye'd find it in ye to leave 'is body around. 'E made a lot of enemies, 'e did, an' they'd like their turn.”

The bile in his mouth was back. Harry swallowed, trying to get rid of the taste. The thought was ... well. There would be no evidence, at least, he supposed. Not once Pilliwickle's enemies were through with his remains. Was it really that different from vanishing the body or leaving it somewhere for the Aurors to find? “I'll ... see what I can do,” he managed.
He slipped her a few more Galleons. She nodded once and vanished into the shadows of the alleyway, leaving Ron and Harry alone again.

Ron didn't speak, but the feeling Harry got through the bond felt a little sick. Harry didn't blame him in the slightest.

Harry and Ron spent every night for a week solid in the White Wyvern under Polyjuice and learned a number of things in the process.

Germanus Pilliwickle would usually arrive no earlier than midnight and leave before the first light of dawn. He was never alone, always accompanied by at least two others. Hired protection by the looks of it, but not particularly good ones. They were hard-looking and scarred, but they left blatant holes in their defences, and their reaction-time the second night when a fight had broken out had been abysmal. He favoured the cheapest drinks they had – some sort of knock-off Firewhisky that could have peeled paint; Harry tried it once and didn't finish the glass – and enough people at the Wyvern seemed to be wary of him that he was left alone, despite the number of enemies he undoubtedly had even there.

Pilliwickle himself seemed to go from one extreme of paranoid and angry at the beginning of the night and loud and boisterous by the end of it, after a good amount of alcohol. He looked like the most recent picture they had been able to find, if somewhat more haggard. He also kept his wand in a holster within easy reach at all times – he didn't trust his protection, or he knew he was a wanted man; Harry suspected a combination of both.

The pub was crowded most nights. Most of the customers were humans, as far as Harry could tell – wizards for the most part, and the occasional witch – but he spotted a number of other beings, too. Werewolves and vampires could be a hard to tell from plain humans, especially in bad light, but some of them were blatantly obvious about it. They could afford to be, Harry knew. No one cared much in that part of Knockturn. Werewolves and vampires, several hags, and a number of beings that Harry didn't have the first clue about.

Even with perfectly anonymous disguises, Harry and Ron had drawn a few looks the first night – it wasn't surprising, since they were complete strangers – but the White Wyvern saw enough strangers that people had stopped paying them any mind by the fourth night.

They acted the eighth night, before Pilliwickle decided to change his habits. For the first time it was Ron at his side instead of George, as he had been the one to come along for the reconnaissance missions and knew the place.

George was waiting at the second Lestrange safe-house with Hermione and a bottle of Veritaserum and would be backup if they needed it. He hadn't been all that happy about it, but he also knew the reasons. Ron could vanish every night for a week in a row without drawing attention. George Weasley, shop owner in Diagon and potentially friend to a Dark Lord, could not risk the same. One night, sure. Maybe two. Any more and it would draw attention when he wasn't there to man the shop as he always had. Lee and Angelina knew what he was involved with and would cover for him without hesitation. That wouldn't do any good if the Aurors caught even a hint of George Weasley's mysterious disappearances.

Most of the crowds in the pub would leave before dawn. By the time the sun had fully appeared, the Wyvern would be all but empty. It never closed entirely, but daylight hours saw mostly the overnight visitors that stayed in the few rooms above the pub, as well as the slow lunch rush that stretched for several hours.
By the time Pilliwickle left that night, a good number of the pub-goers were long gone. Not all, but another hour or so would see the place mostly deserted.

The man left accompanied by two of his hired muscle and Harry and Ron slipped outside unnoticed behind him. A few spells later and they were entirely invisible. Pilliwickle had vanished around a corner, but they knew his preferred route – the man was cagey but still didn't have the sense to change his route much – and they had plenty of practice staying unseen.

There was the slight risk they were about to step into an ambush, but with the low level of skill they had seen from the trio, neither Harry nor Ron had much fear of that. The alley was mostly deserted, but that, too, wouldn't have been much of a concern, either. People in the alley were polite fellows for the most part and didn't get involved in other people's business. As long as their spell-fire didn't hit any bystanders, no one would even look twice.

Pilliwickle and his two guards were halfway down a small side street to the alley by the time Ron and Harry turned the corner. The two men didn't as much as turn to look at them, which said everything Harry needed to know about their skills. The invisibility spell they had finally settled on was advanced, true, but the utter lack of awareness of their surroundings the duo showed would have seen any Auror recruit chewed out by their instructors something fierce.

"Left for me, right for you?" Harry asked.

"Works for me."

Two perfectly synchronized Stunners took down the men, strong enough to go through most common defensive spells. Pilliwickle stumbled and was taken down by a third Stunner, only a heartbeat after the others.

Harry and Ron worked fast, crossing the distance at a sprint. A series of detection spells revealed a Portkey on Pilliwickle, quickly disposed of, but nothing else in the way of tracking or escape methods.

Leaving the two bodyguards unconscious was not likely to result in anything good for them, and just working for Pilliwickle wasn't enough to make them deserve to die. The two men hadn't seen them, not even their Polyjuice disguises, and they had left no evidence behind.

Maybe the two had done enough to deserve death as well, but Harry didn't know, didn't have them on his list, and he would have enough blood on his hands at the end of it all without adding possible innocents to the count.

Ron glanced at him questioningly.

"Let's go," Harry said through their bond. "I'll Rennervate his guards."

Ron nodded and Disapparated with Pilliwickle. Harry threw a silent Rennervate at the duo on the ground and followed the instant later, his list one name shorter.

Harry had wondered how resistant Pilliwickle would be to Veritaserum. The answer, as it turned out, was 'not at all'. He was nowhere near as useful as the Lestranges had been, but he still knew plenty of things about unmarked Voldemort supporters that had managed to avoid detection. Most of them were small fish not worth going after for the moment, but that could still change. It was still valuable information worth keeping.

Halfway through the second round of Veritaserum, they had learned all they could from him. The
man fell silent when the questions stopped, still under the haze of the potion. He simply stared straight ahead, unseeing.

Harry watched Pilliwickle for a long time, wand resting lightly in his hand. George did not speak, merely waited with crossed arms for Harry to make a decision.

Ron was the first to break the silence. He had watched the interrogation along with Hermione – he with a grim expression, Hermione with quiet determination. Both had refused to leave when Harry had suggested it before Pilliwickle was dosed.

“You're thinking about the hag.”

“Propola,” Harry corrected absently. Pilliwickle didn't move.

George snorted. “Can't say I blame her for wanting a piece of him.”

Neither could Harry, not after the answers they got out of him through the potion. There would be a long line of people that wanted to get even with the man. Snatchers had been given leave to do pretty much whatever they wanted, as long as they left proper people alone. Most of them had taken full advantage of that.

Harry spun his holly wand slowly between his fingers as he considered their options. No matter what, Pilliwickle was dead. Harry simply hadn't got around to finishing the job yet.

Let the residents of Knockturn have a bit of revenge, dispose of the body, or leave it somewhere as a message? He didn't have to be discreet. It wasn't like there was a point in covering his tracks anymore.

Pilliwickle had kept Knockturn Alley in an iron grip, controlled through his place as Scabior's second-in-command and his willingness to send his Snatchers to handle anyone who might object. Even after Voldemort's defeat, most had still been unwilling to cross him. He wasn't a force of politics anymore, but he was still a vicious, vindictive man and most beings in Knockturn did not have powerful positions in the wizarding world.

Pilliwickle's body would make for a strong message, but Harry understood the need for revenge just as well.

Decision made, his expression hardened. “Cutting Curse. Then Portkey the body to the middle of Knockturn. Let magic decide.”

Ron and Hermione did not stay to watch the curse cast. Three Apparitions and a Portkey later had erased any tracks Harry and George might have left.

The body of Germanus Pilliwickle was never found.
In late April, Harry received a letter from Fleur Weasley about meeting for coffee in Muggle Marseilles. Harry was a little surprised but readily agreed. Fleur offered a Portkey as well, but assured him she would understand should he prefer to arrange for transportation of his own.

The three of them had taken a little longer to decide on that offer, but in the end the consensus had been simple: Fleur was a Weasley. A Weasley by marriage, but a Weasley.

Harry accepted the offer of a Portkey. It deposited him two days later in a small, magical shop in what was presumably Marseilles. Fleur was waiting for him, hugely pregnant but still every bit the Veela, even when she grimaced a little as she got up from her chair.

“'Arry.” She greeted him with two kisses and led him outside, small talk postponed until they had found somewhere to sit.

The weather was sunny and a lot warmer than London – it wasn't summer, but it was a nice change from the British spring that Harry was used to.

The small café Fleur guided him to was perfectly Muggle and perfectly elegant. The prices that Harry spotted were set accordingly, but Fleur did not seem to mind, and ten minutes later saw them with two cups of some coffee or another, as well as a number of small pastries. The chairs were extremely comfortable, though, and Fleur sighed in bliss as they settled down and raised a privacy ward.

“When are you due?” Harry asked. He thought he remembered something about May, but that was about it.

“The end of May.” Her accent was still there but far weaker than it had been, back in Britain. “My mother, she gave birth early both times. Hopefully it shall be the same for me.”

Harry didn't blame her. She didn't look comfortable, and if she still had a month to go, she might get even bigger. Harry hadn't been around pregnant women much, but he assumed it was normal. Fleur didn't look worried, at least.

“You wonder, I know, why I invited you,” she continued.

“I assume it wasn't for the coffee,” Harry agreed. “It's very good, though.” The pastries, too. Light and flaky, and with the perfect amount of sweetness to them.

Fleur nodded. “I am part Veela,” she began. “My child, she will be as well. I can feel the magic. Her godmother shall be Gabrielle, who is part Veela herself. I would like you to be the godfather.”

Harry paused, delicate china cup halfway to his mouth. He put it down carefully before he answered.

“I am flattered,” he said quietly. “I am also not likely to be much use as a godfather, you know that.”

She sniffed. “Perhaps. You cannot See the future. You had dreadful marks in Divination.”

Harry's lips twitched in amusement, just a little. “Point. I'm also a Dark Lord. Even if I manage to live long enough to see her grow up, what good would I possibly be as a godfather?”

“You would see the world burn for your godson.” Fleur looked at him, and she was no longer the
glowing mother-to-be or flirtatious part-human but the Veela, strong and relentless and utterly inhuman. “My daughter will be part Veela, ‘Arry Potter. How strong, we shall not know until she is grown. If something should happen to us – any fool can raise a child. Few are strong enough to raise a child of Veela blood and respect what they are. That is what I wish. William's friends, they are weak-willed and would cave to her every demand. My daughter, she will need a parent and a protector, not a slave.”

Harry was silent for a long time, just staring at her. The odds that he would outlive them were ... well. Even with the both of them working as curse-breakers, the odds were small. If he did, though – it would be difficult, but he understood why she wanted it. Fleur's daughter would not be completely human, and he had seen how the Hogwarts population had reacted to Fleur during the Tournament. He would make it work somehow. She wasn't looking for a traditional godfather, and he could work with that.

“On one condition,” he eventually said. “No one can know. Teddy will always have the notoriety of being a Dark Lord's godson. If it comes to that, Merlin forbid, yes, I will do whatever I can to protect her and raise her, but if it never becomes necessary ... growing up as a Veela will be hard enough. Don't make her bear the shadow of a Dark Lord as well.”

Fleur nodded slowly. “Gabrielle must know, as the godmother.”

“Gabrielle,” Harry conceded. “No one else.”

“Agreed,” Fleur said softly. “And thank you.”

The Aurors raided a number of places in the early evening of the first Tuesday of May. The timing was clever enough, Harry supposed. A perfectly average day, right in the middle of dinner. That would hopefully catch people off-guard and find the majority of people home as well. If Harry had to meet with anyone in secret, evening would be the right time to do it.

Harry was frankly surprised they had waited this long. Then again, he hadn't killed any pure-bloods in good standing in any crowded, public places in a while, either.

The Burrow was raided, of course, as was George's shop in Diagon as well as the Tonks residence. Longbottom Manor wasn't targeted this time, but the Leaky Cauldron and several other places with rooms for rent got a visit from some very brusque Aurors. Nobody bothered Gringotts. No one wanted to trigger another goblin rebellion, and it was well-known by then that Harry Potter no longer kept anything within Gringotts' walls, under his own name or any other.

Gran wants a meeting, Neville told Harry through the blood-bond of their torcs. It took focus to send anything coherent, and their communication was brief by necessity. It was still much more secure and less conspicuous than a Patronus messenger.

When?

Soon as possible. Before Wizengamot. Here, nine tomorrow morning?

Harry didn't even have to consider that. Sure, the Aurors might still decide to raid Longbottom Manor, but he was willing to take the risk. He had no real worry that it was a trap. A small part of him knew it was a genuine risk every time he went somewhere on the suggestion of someone else. A much larger part trusted Neville completely and also trusted that he, at least, did not believe it to be a trap. If he was wrong ... well, he trusted that Neville would have a reason for that, too.

Agreed.
A flicker of gratefulness through the bond. Then Neville moved his focus away and the bond was gone again.

Harry stared at the tattered Dark Arts book in his hands. Then he got up to tell Ron and Hermione about the latest development.

“I am surprised you agreed to this, Mr. Potter. It could easily have been an Auror ambush.” Augusta Longbottom's expression was cool and somewhat detached and reminded Harry a little of Andromeda. Augusta Longbottom was older than Andromeda, but her eyes were still sharp and her presence was powerful. Harry wondered briefly what Frank Longbottom had been like, with his mother and his son as powerful as they were.

It was just the two of them, Neville dismissed by Augusta, and while Harry's bond with Ron and Hermione was open, he still felt a little exposed. She was a formidable witch.

“I trust Neville.” It was all the answer Harry needed to give, all that mattered to him. Augusta seemed to understand that, as she nodded slightly.

“And if it had been a trap? Would Longbottom Manor have fallen to Fiendfyre as well?”

“Then I trust Neville would have had his reasons, too. I would still have fought,” he conceded, “and would have genuinely regretted if this place came to harm, but it would not have stopped me.”

“The best we could hope for, I suppose,” Augusta said. “No Dark Lord worth the name would have done otherwise.”

Harry stayed silent. It wasn't a question and he wasn't sure what to say to it.

“The Wizengamot will meet again soon,” Augusta continued. “You have ... allies among us. Some degree of support. A number of us find the creature laws abhorrent and wish to see them abolished. A return to the laws from before the St Mungo's Massacre to begin with, but preferably more than that in time. I assume you agree with these goals. You have been quite outspoken about this in the past.”

Harry nodded. An unsettled feeling crept up his spine in a way that told him quite clearly that something bad was up.

“Excellent. I tell you this as a fair warning. I do not approve of your methods, but the Wizengamot is led by fools. If threats are necessary to make them see sense, then we shall accommodate them. We will cast your name in darkness, Lord Potter. We will speak of you in the same breath as Riddle and Grindelwald. You will be the Unforgivable against which all measures can be justified. And against that, against another Dark Lord aided by werewolves and vampires, even creature laws can be repealed.”

*If I have to pin the Potter name next to Grindelwald in the history books to keep Teddy from growing up in this mess, then that's what I'll do.*

The memory flickered through his mind – from himself or his bond-mates, he wasn't sure.

He had spoken those words to Neville what felt like a lifetime ago. Time to put his Galleons where his mouth was.

Harry nodded slowly. Calm determination settled where unease had been, now that he understood why she wanted to meet. “Is there anything I can do to make your task easier?”
Surprise flickered through Augusta's eyes. The coolness shifted into calculating curiosity instead.

“I am pleasantly surprised. You are little like the Gryffindor you are supposed to be. Or, perhaps, you are far more so than most these days. You would see your legacy tarnished without a fight? Shroud the Potter name in darkness for a century or more?”

Harry met her gaze without flinching. “For my godson? Gladly and willingly.”

Augusta watched him, grey eyes unreadable. “They will come after you. The wizarding world destroys that which it fears and your name, Lord Potter, will be draped in terror.”

“They will try. We all saw how successful they were against Voldemort.”

“They will try,” Augusta conceded. “Fudge was a spineless worm. Scrimgeour was blind, if well-intentioned. Thicknesse was worse than useless. We will see how successful the Ministry will be under Minister Shacklebolt.”

Under someone who knew Harry before he became a Dark Lord. Someone who had personal experience with his opponent.

“I do not agree with your methods, and that gives me no right to make requests of you. Act upon your own conscience. We shall adapt our words accordingly.” She hesitated slightly. Harry got the impression that did not happen often. “The Longbottom family owes you a debt of gratitude for your execution of the Lestranges. You will have sanctuary within our halls.”

From a family as old and politically powerful as the Longbottoms, that promise carried serious weight. Harry responded with the respect it deserved.

“Your offer is appreciated, but your grandson has stood by my side more times than I can count. The Longbottom family owes me nothing it has not already given me a dozen times over.”

Augusta watched him for a long time.

“My grandson is a shy boy turned into a strong, stubborn man I am proud to call a Longbottom. I may not agree with his decisions, but at least he chose an acceptable Lord.”

It was the closest thing to a blessing Augusta Longbottom would ever give. It was still more than Harry could ever have hoped for.

The Wizengamot met five days later and – unusually – again the following day. The most recent Dark creature restrictions were not just lifted but loosen even further by the evening of the second day by the slimmest of margins.

Equal right to inheritance, for one. Harry felt vague ill when he realised that if Bill had become an actual werewolf, he would have lost any right to inheritance, simply by virtue of having human siblings that could inherit instead. The Wizengamot pushed the bill through on the force of the two Aurors who had been turned and forced to retire because of the St Mungo's Massacre, but it would benefit all of them.

“You-Know-Who had the werewolves and vampires. The Wizengamot will not repeat former Minister Fudge's mistakes and allow the Dark Lord Potter to have the same. With reasonable precautions, these unfortunate creatures will be able to become productive members of our society as well,” Hermione quoted from the Daily Prophet the following morning. She looked up and Harry didn't need the bond to read her feelings on the matter. “They're turning you into the new
Harry shrugged. “It's working, at least.”

“The repeal of the Dark creature restrictions or their smear campaign?” Hermione was not happy, but Harry knew her well enough to know she was angry with the Ministry and not him, not really.

“Both,” Ron spoke up and drew their attention. “That's why it's working. Harry wouldn't be as effective of a threat if people didn't genuinely believe he could do it.”

Hermione's grip on the newspaper tightened. “This is the Ministry we're supposed to trust? The same institution that can only do a genuinely good thing like repealing blatantly discriminating legislature by using a scapegoat? Any other modern government would celebrate it as a victory for human rights and equality, not use a Dark Lord to excuse its necessity. All they've done is fix their own idiocy and let Harry pay the price.”

“No different from Hogwarts, I reckon.” Ron's expression was grim. “Useless, the lot of them. Left it to us every time. I don't see why the Ministry should be any different. Remember Fudge and the Toad?”

“That doesn't make this a valid solution!”

“It's a start.”

“And when you stop being a threat?” Hermione's expression was as grim as Ron's had been. “When you're dead or in Azkaban? What will stay their hands then?”

“A lack of pure-blood supremacists to vote for the return of those restrictions.” Harry settled for the truth. The memory of the Vow's choke-hold on him was enough to make his mind skittish at even the thought of lying to her. “And maybe if werewolves and the others had equal rights for long enough, there'd be enough of an outcry if they tried to restrict those rights again that they would have to give up. If the Foundation still stands, they would fight for them, too. This is a first step. If it keeps improving, maybe we'll see part-vampires or obvious werewolves in Hogwarts one day.”

“That's a lot of ifs.”

It was. It was also the only sort of plan he really had, so it would have to do. One way or another.

The reward for Harry's capture or information leading to him rose somewhat significantly shortly after. Whether it was due to Augusta Longbottom's use of him as a blatant threat in the Wizengamot or because they'd had little luck with the reward as it had been before, Harry wasn't sure.

The reward was still lower than it had been under Voldemort's Ministry, though not by much. Large enough that he didn't doubt a number of people would be tempted. Large enough that it was time to invest in lightweight armour and wear it every time they stepped outside Grimmauld, comfortable or not. Harry could easily protect the three of them with a shield, but that wouldn't help much if he wasn't there with them. It wouldn't help if he saw the spell too late to shield at all.

It wouldn't stop an Unforgivable, either, but then, neither would armour.

The reward for information about Ron and Hermione's whereabouts went up as well, if less drastically. Everyone seemed to agree they were part of whatever he was doing, but without even a hint of evidence that they had actually been involved, it was limited what the DMLE could do so far. Harry was wanted for a number of crimes – preferably alive, though at this point he noted that dead
was acceptable, too – but Ron and Hermione were still only wanted for 'questioning'. It wasn't much
comfort, but at least neither of them had done anything that would put them in the same league as
Harry and George. Allied themselves with a Dark Lord, cast a number of Dark spells, but they hadn't
killed. They hadn't tortured.

Azkaban-worthy crimes, certainly, but not something that would justify the Veil or one of the
remaining Dementors. People could be broken out of Azkaban. It had been done before. It was
practically Dark Lord tradition by now.

Fleur gave birth to a healthy baby girl on the fourteenth of May, two weeks early.

Victoire Weasley was born in the heavily-warded Delacour home as per Fleur's wishes, with only
Gabrielle and a midwife for company. Veela put a lot of importance on tradition, and tradition stated
that only females should be present at the birth of a child with Veela blood. Even then there should
only be a minimum of people present.

From what Harry had heard, Molly Weasley was not pleased that Bill had not been allowed
anywhere near his wife during labour, but there hadn't been much she could do about it.

The morning of the fifteenth found Harry at Delacour manor, a stately old building with wards that
fairly glowed to Harry's magic.

“'Arry!” Gabrielle greeted him brightly at the door. Harry was pretty sure she hadn't turned fifteen
yet, but she looked several years older than that and every bit as beautiful as her older sister.

“Gabrielle.” His smile was genuine, honestly pleased to see her again, and he let himself be pulled
inside the warmth of the entrance hall.

Gabrielle babbled a mile a minute as she led him through the silent halls of the manor, French
mingling with accented English. Harry didn't mind. He caught the gist of it and she seemed pleased
to have someone to talk to.

They stopped by a room on the second floor. The door was partially open and Gabrielle did not
bother knocking before she stepped inside, dragging Harry along.

Fleur was resting in a large chair, a tiny figure asleep in her arms and her husband by her side. Fleur
lit up at the sight of them and Bill got to his feet, his expression a little wary but mostly resigned as he
spotted Harry.

“Lord Potter.” Bill's greeting was a little formal and more than a little awkward, clearly not sure
exactly how to handle the situation. The title still sounded strange to his ears.

“William Weasley,” Harry greeted back, as formal as Bill had been.

The man grimaced. “Too formal? I'm not exactly used to this.”

“To anyone who's fought by my side, it will always be 'Harry'. Whatever happens.” He had told
Susan and the others, and it was no less true for Bill or any of the other Weasleys.

Fleur had made her way out of the chair by then and kissed Harry's cheek lightly. Less than a day
after the birth of her daughter and she looked as beautiful as ever.

“'Arry.”
“Are you sure about this?” Harry asked her quietly. “If you want another godfather for her, it's okay. I'm not the only person out there who can resist her magic.”

He aimed the question at Fleur, as he didn't doubt the choice had been solely her decision.

“Oui. I wish for a protector for her. Gabrielle shall spoil her, as Veela should be. Should something happen to us, I wish her to be safe. Between a Veela and a Dark Lord, she shall be.”

Harry glanced at Bill. He looked resigned but not about to object. The man seemed to notice the brief glance because he shifted again, a little awkward.

“I don't like it,” Bill admitted, “but I understand the reasons.”

Fleur smiled softly at her husband. Then her attention was back at Harry and she held out the tiny bundle in her arms.

“Hold her. Let her greet your magic. Her Veela blood, it is still strong. She will learn and she will remember you. To her, your magic will be safety.”

Harry was proud that his hands almost didn't tremble as he accepted Victoire from Fleur's arms. He had horrible visions of dropping her – she would start squirming, or he would stumble, or any of a dozen other horrific possibilities – and his magic rose in response to settle protectively around her.

Victoire made a small sound. It sounded content, but Harry still looked at Fleur with the expression of a deer caught in the headlights of the Hogwarts Express.

“She approves.” Fleur sounded pleased.

Harry's panicked grip eased slightly and he risked a look at the newborn. She was incredibly small and almost bald and her eyes were closed and her face was a little scrunched up. He had no idea which one of her parents she took from, she looked like a normal baby to him, but he assumed Fleur because of the Veela blood.

He touched her hand gently and marvelled at the tiny fingers. So small. Had he ever been that tiny? Had Teddy? Teddy had been older and bigger when Harry had first seen him.

“She shall be your goddaughter, 'Arry,” Fleur stated more than asked. “She shall be Teddy Lupin's godsister. You will protect her.”

“With my life,” Harry promised and meant every word.

I need to update my Will. Are you still willing to represent me?

Harry didn't sign his name. Brookstanton knew his handwriting, even if he hadn't been able to guess based on the letter and lack of name alone.

Lord Potter,

I would hardly trust the Ministry in a matter of such importance. I do recommend meeting elsewhere but my office, though. I shall bring the necessities.

Is there a location that would be acceptable to you?

Augustus Brookstanton
Harry didn't want to risk a meeting anywhere in Britain, for his own sake as well as Brookstanton's. In the end he settled for a Portkey to a nice hotel in the Muggle side of Vienna where he had rented the use of a conference room for the afternoon.

Brookstanton arrived alone, as Harry had requested, and if he was in any way worried about meeting Britain's most recent Dark Lord, it did not show.

“Lord Potter.” His handshake was firm and unwavering, and Harry's paranoia eased a little. “Shall we get down to business?”

Half an hour and a handful of spells later, and Harry was left with two updated copies of his Will while Brookstanton kept the last. One would go to Harry's vault in Constantinople. The other would stay in Grimmauld for now.

It wasn't a big change, but it mattered to Harry. He was Victoire's godfather now and while a good amount of his gold would go to Teddy, a respectable amount had been set aside for Victoire as well. If it ever came to that, there would be enough that she would be able to leave and settle somewhere more friendly to part-humans. Just as there would be for Teddy.

“My sister contacted me about you.” Andromeda calmly poured a cup of tea, looking to all the world like she hadn't just dropped a Blasting Curse in the room.

Harry didn't need to ask what sister, since Bellatrix Lestrange was long dead. He knew that Andromeda and Narcissa still met for tea, usually on neutral grounds somewhere, but he had no idea what they talked about.

Harry knew Andromeda well enough to tell when she wasn't done talking, and so he stayed silent and let Andromeda finish the usual tea rituals.

“She wished to know your intentions.”

Not quite in those words, Harry assumed. Narcissa Malfoy was a consummate Slytherin and a master of subtle word games. At least Andromeda could translate for him.

“I told her.”

Harry nodded. He trusted that she had her reasons and knew how to stay safe and not get arrested for conspiring with a Dark Lord.

“She does not care for part-humans or Dark creatures, but she cares even less for the thought of her son in the spell-sight of a Dark Lord. The enmity between you and the younger Malfoy is well-known.”

“And Dark Lords are known to hold considerably grudges. I can't say it hasn't crossed my mind,” Harry admitted, “but he hasn't done anything to really earn that sort of thing. Not enough that it would be worth it.”

“Yet.”

“Yet,” Harry agreed. Malfoy had seemed noticeably quieter and more subdued the few times Harry had seen him in the Prophet since Lucius Malfoy's murder, but that didn't rule out a return to old idiocy. He didn't blame Narcissa for wanting to protect her only child.
He did not point out that the two remaining Malfoys already lived at his whim. The Fiendfyre at Potter Cottage would have made it abundantly clear that if he had wanted the lot of them dead, Malfoy Manor would have burned to the ground. Once inside the wards, nothing could have stopped him. Narcissa undoubtedly knew it. He didn't doubt that Andromeda did, too. They might not know his reasons, but they knew it had been deliberate.

“She wishes to reach an agreement.” Andromeda watched Harry closely, probably curious about his reaction – for her sister more than herself, he suspected. “She wants your guaranteed safety of her son and herself. In return, she will not bring the resources and weight of the Malfoy name into the hunt for you.”

Harry was silent for a while as he considered the offer. In its own way, it was a generous one. The Malfoy coffers were deep and Narcissa was a Black. Willing to go to any length for revenge, beyond all reason and common sense. So, unfortunately, was a part of Harry. Tempered by the Potter and Evans blood, perhaps. But there, without question or doubt.

“On the condition that she steps aside. Her and her son both. I won't ask them to vote in favour of the laws I want to see passed, but they will abstain. That is non-negotiable.”

Andromeda nodded. “I told her as much. She agrees.”

“And wouldn't have felt the need to, had I not brought it up.” Harry felt his lips twitch in amusement, almost in spite of himself. He didn't like or agree with the Malfoys, but Narcissa Black was a magnificent witch. “Tell her I agree. I won't go after them. They won't go after me. We'll stay out of each other's way. You consider her family, and I will respect that. She may want to explain that to Malfoy junior a few times to make sure he gets it. I can't guarantee anyone else, of course, but I won't raise wand, word, or magic against them unless they do so first.”

“I will pass on your message.” Something in Andromeda seemed to ease a little. Worry about her sister, Harry imagined. Even if she had been disowned, Narcissa was one of the last bits of family she had left.

Harry picked up the tea cup. Then he smiled as another thought occurred to him. “She will, of course, bring the full force of the Malfoy name down upon my head, should I be stupid enough to get caught.”

“And of course,” Andromeda agreed quite reasonably. “You did kill her husband. Biscuit?”

Harry couldn't help it. He laughed.

The DMLE made their next move in late May. Harry wasn't sure if it was because the increased reward still hadn't yielded any results or if they wanted to attack from several directions. Maybe both.

Their first warning was a bright flare of anger-fury-betrayal from Susan, so strong and clear that Harry honestly couldn't say if she had intended to broadcast that at all.

A few seconds later her mental voice followed.

Superiors want set trap. Meet later. Will contact, Susan told them, her thought-words even more fragmented than usual. The anger smouldered beneath, and Harry hoped she would be able to hide it from her superiors and colleagues. He didn't want her to end up a suspect, too.

Meet later, Harry agreed for all of them. Be careful.
A flicker of fond amusement from Susan – really, words of caution from *Harry Potter* of all people? - and then the connection was lost. All they could do now was wait.

The afternoon dragged on, slowly and painfully. Finally the connection with Susan flared to life again.

*Surveillance spells near home. Well-hidden, Auror-grade. Haven't covered yet in training but have heard about them. Can't take too close look, might alert them, but look like set up to track arrival and departure.*

*Trap.* Hermione, sharp and to the point. *To see if you contact Harry?*

*See if trustworthy?* Dean had the advantage of some months of Auror training as well and he put that to use now. *Makes sense. Could be security or ambush for Harry, but set up now risks spotted by him if suspicious. Sounds like meant for Susan.*

The first one of his friends – his followers, he supposed – to be targeted for suspected association with him. It could be a test to see if she was in contact with him, it could just be a precaution, but either way she had just become a subject of interest. Judging by the sudden silence through the blood-bond, all of them knew it.

*Can't risk meeting. Will Floo Hannah, Susan said. Visits frequently, nothing suspect. Can pass on information safe.*

*We talk about everything,* Hannah agreed. *Home in another hour. Talk then.*

*Talk then. Nev, watch wards. Friends of Harry's might be targets, too,* Susan cautioned.

*All of you,* Harry added. *We'll go over the spells together. Watch your backs.*

Agreement from the bond along with silent feelings of caution and wariness. The torc around Harry's neck felt heavier than it had just a few minutes before. It was one thing being hunted on his own, or with Ron and Hermione at his back, who had both tried it before and refused to leave him alone. Now the rest of them had potentially become targets, too, whether the Aurors suspected them or not, and the knowledge settled heavily on Harry's shoulders.

It had been their choice, sure. He still wasn't convinced that they knew exactly what they had gotten involved with when they agreed.

Hannah met them late that evening in the smaller Lestrange safe-house. Most of them had managed to be there. Susan couldn't risk it and George still preferred to be kept a secret, but the rest of them had managed, one way or another.

Hannah's expression was very different from the friendly Hufflepuff she usually was. Her lips were a hard line and her eyes were furious.

“They want to use Susan to bait a trap,” she said, straight to the point – and no wonder, then, that both she and Susan were that angry.

“Harry's definitely the quarry, then,” Dean concluded. “There's no one else right now it would make sense to use an Auror trainee to trap.”

“A Gryffindor or a known friend would have been better, but they don't have any of those in
Ministry hands they can use. Since Dean left, she's the only one of our year-mates in Auror training.”

She ... was? Huh.

“I always thought there would be more,” Harry said, a little bemused.

“If you'd joined, there probably would have been.” Ernie this time. “Anthony and I both considered it. I know several other 'Puffs did, too. Nowadays we're all a little disillusioned with the Ministry. Most people assumed you would become an Auror. When you didn't ...”

“Some of the Ravenclaws talked about it,” Anthony added. “Even if most of us had developed a healthy distrust of the Ministry ... if anyone could have had the perfect career there, it would have been you. Everyone figured you would have been on track to become the Head Auror. Some even considered Auror training because well, even if leadership now wasn't the best, they would very likely spend most of their career with you as their boss. It wasn't a guarantee, but if it came to pass, the general consensus was that you might be a Gryffindor with all that it implies, but you are also the type who would have backed your people no matter what, politics and Ministry corruption included. That you turned down that opportunity was telling.”

He trailed off. “That you turned it down to become a Dark Lord instead ... well, we hadn't quite covered that possibility.”

Neville snorted. “You didn't seem all that surprised when you lot showed up to interrogate me.”

Anthony looked a little embarrassed. “To most Ravenclaws, that issue of the Prophet still came as a complete surprise. The Dark Lord Potter has been a serious topic of Ravenclaw discussion since then. I think the general impression is that it was obvious in retrospect, and we should have seen it coming but then, we hate admitting we're not all-knowing. I wouldn't have had a clue if Dean and Susan hadn't worked out most of it. Hannah, too. Neville spent an awful lot of time in the library and exchanging packages with Hermione all of a sudden.”

This time Hermione was the one to look embarrassed. “Most of the books in the Hogwarts Library aren't protected against permanent duplication spells.”

“Those spells are difficult.” Anthony sounded admiring. Ravenclaw to the bone.

“Not with proper practice. I made Harry learn, too.”

Silence. Hannah was the one to speak what most of them were thinking.

“You made a Dark Lord copy library books for you.”

“Hogwarts library books!”

“Hogwarts library books,” Hannah agreed. “You made a Dark Lord copy Hogwarts library books for you. You're right, that makes all the difference.”

Dean was the first to lose it. He started giggling, cast a look at Harry, and then collapsed in helpless laughter. Maybe he had mental images of Voldemort diligently copying first year school books. Harry certainly did now.

Neville offered a rueful smile. “There were some very expensive herbology books among them, you know.”

“... It does sound a little silly, when you put it like that,” Hermione admitted, a little flushed. “But he
“Didn’t object!”

“That’s because we all know better than to argue,” Harry said fondly. “And it did teach me to focus
for longer periods at a time. Even the herbology books.”

That was enough to make Hannah lose it as well, closely followed by the others. When the laughter
finally died, it had taken a good part of Hannah’s tension and anger with it, and when she spoke
again she was far calmer.

“They want Susan to contact you. You weren’t close friends at Hogwarts, but she was a part of the
DA and she fought in the Battle of Hogwarts. She’s the closest thing the Ministry has to someone
you might actually listen to.”

“And they expect me to just trust an Auror trainee that contacts me out of nowhere, even if we
fought together?” Harry asked. “I think I’m offended.”

Hannah’s expression darkened. “No. They expect you to trust the slow descent into darkness of a
young Auror trainee dissatisfied with the state of the Ministry and disillusioned with everything she
thought being an Auror was about. A few cautious letters at first. Then a hesitant request for an
explanation. A few secrets and bits of information they can afford to give away, to make you believe
that Susan is being swayed by your beliefs and is willing to incriminate herself in an attempt to help
you. A safe first meeting when you would expect it to be a trap, was she truly a spy. Then another
and another, until you trust that she is genuinely on your side and you let down your guard. You
haven’t started a reign of terror like Voldemort did yet. They have time. All their other attempts have
failed so far. If this could work, it’s worth however many months it will take to gain your trust.”

Harry’s mild offence at the thought that they believed him quite that gullible was replaced by a small
chill down his spine instead. It would have taken hard work and months and months of patience but...
... it could have worked. There would have been no guarantee, of course, but while Harry wasn’t
about to trust people blindly, he did have a soft spot for his comrades-in-arms.

It made him wonder if any of the other people he regularly exchanged letters with had the same sort
of ulterior motives. Probably not, as none of them had pushed for a meeting, but still. The thought
was there.

That sort of trap was also against everything Hufflepuff stood for, and Harry understood their anger.
Using Susan as bait was bad enough. Using her as bait against a somewhat-friend, Dark Lord or not,
and expecting her to spend months worming her way into his confidence before she stabbed him in
the back... that went against everything Susan was. Everything she believed in.

For a long time no one spoke. The raids on potential hideouts and the reward for Harry’s capture had
been one thing. This was the first time they had been confronted with those sorts of methods, and
they all knew it would not be the last. If this didn’t work, the DMLE would find something else, and
they would keep trying until something succeeded.

Anthony shifted uncomfortably. “I’m surprised they didn’t demand an Unbreakable Vow or a
contract from her, if they’re serious about that plan.”

Hannah shook her head. “When we were younger, Susan and I spent a long time talking with
Susan’s Auror guards whenever we were home. They had that same problem during the War against
Voldemort. If you start demanding that sort of thing left and right... any witch or wizard with even a
bit of common sense would think carefully before they agreed, much less someone trained as an
Auror. They know exactly how many ways that information could be taken from them by force and
leave them to pay the penalties. You’re supposed to trust your fellow Aurors. They put up a battery
of privacy wards, but something like a Vow or Hermione's contract would be more trouble than anyone wants to deal with.”

Harry supposed he understood, for all that he found it incredibly annoying. Voldemort could have done a lot less damage if the Auror department hadn't been as leaky as a sieve. He could probably even have been stopped with a lot less bloodshed.

“So what do we do, then?” he asked.

“We play along.” The answer came from Ron, drawing the attention of the others. “We can always cut it off if it becomes a problem. Dark Lords are paranoid by nature, so you wouldn't need much of a reason if it came to that. If we play along, it helps establish Susan as trustworthy. She might only be a casual acquaintance as far as they're concerned, but she's still the casual acquaintance of a Dark Lord. She's already a little suspect based on that alone. If we don't play along, it'll only make it worse.”

Harry glanced around and saw only small, slow nods of agreement. A few frowns, but no one seemed to disagree.

“All right. Play along it is. Let Susan know?”

Hannah nodded. The informal meeting broke up soon after.

The first letter arrived via owl box two days later, accompanied by a grim feeling from Susan. Harry replied with the appropriate caution of a Dark Lord to an Auror trainee and accepted that whatever they wrote, it would be dissected relentlessly by a number of people ready to throw Susan at the non-existent mercy of the Saviour Turned Traitor.

The surveillance spells around Susan's home remained. All of them learned to check for them but for now, she was the only one the Ministry seemed to watch.

In early June, Andromeda agreed to let Harry babysit Teddy again. He wasn't sure what had changed her mind enough to make her suggest it, but he was grateful. He didn't ask, because he didn't want to risk her changing her mind, but he did broach the topic with Dorea's portrait when Teddy had settled down for a nap.

“A child of Black blood, under the Black wards and a Fidelius cast by a Dark Lord,” she mused when Harry had told her what he knew. “There are few places safer for him to be.”

“It's the same wards as January,” Harry objected. “But ... all right. There have been several Auror raids since. I wouldn't trust Teddy near that, either.”

“Perhaps she wanted time to see that you remained ... stable.”

The pause was enough to make Harry pay attention, an unpleasant feeling settling in the pit of his stomach. “Stable?”

“She may deny the Black madness as a cause for your actions, but that makes her no less familiar with the ... unfortunate effects.” Painted eyes, uncannily sharp, focused on Harry. “It would not have been unreasonable to want to be sure that your ascension as a Dark Lord was not followed by a steep descent into Black madness.”

Right. Harry glanced at the couch where Teddy had fallen asleep curled up next to Crookshanks and felt the words settled hard. He had mentioned the possibility to Andromeda herself, for all that she
hadn't bought it. He had mentioned it to Ron and Hermione, too, the inherited fickleness of the Black bloodline. He just hadn't ever really sat down and considered what it actually meant.

“Stable,” Harry repeated. “... I suppose I passed, then.”

Teddy's presence on the couch should have been proof enough of that. Harry still felt a little like he had just dodged a particularly nasty curse.

George contacted them a Wednesday in mid-June.

*Avery in Diagon. Just entered Gringotts.*

There were a number of people still left on Harry and George's list of targets. Weland Avery was very nearly at the top of it.

They moved swiftly, all of them aware that the chance might not appear again. They had a number of plans for a number of different scenarios, and one of them was the chance encounter of a Death Eater. Harry was glad they had those plans now, for all that they probably wouldn't ever need most of them.

It meant that he was in George's shop ten minutes later, bottle of Polyjuice ready and clad in common, dark grey robes.

George met him in the back office. Angelina was with him. She took one look at his appearance and her eyes widened just a little. Then her attention flickered briefly to George before she turned her attention back to Harry. She met his gaze and then slowly and deliberately lowered her eyes, just long enough to make the gesture obvious. She had known about him and George for months, her and Lee both – George had been clear that he would not keep secrets from them – but Harry supposed it was different to see him in person after everything that had happened.

Angelina's attention turned back to George. “I'll go help Lee,” she said in a low voice. She put her hand on George's shoulder when he nodded and then she was gone, back into the chaos of the prank shop.

“We don't know how long he'll be in there,” George said, straight to the point. “Angelina spotted him. He could come back out any moment, or he could be in there for an hour discussing whatever Death Eater business he has.”

“It shouldn't matter. I've got enough Polyjuice for several hours,” Harry replied. “As long as no one pays too much attention to me, it won't be a problem.

George clasped his arm briefly. Harry returned the gesture. Then he took a mouthful of potion and grimaced at the feel of the transformation.

Long seconds later an utterly average middle-aged wizard stood in Harry's place.

He left the shop and found a decent spot to wait, a little out of the way of the crowds but close enough to Gringotts that he could get there fast and had enough of a vantage point that he would be able to spot Avery.

It took close to thirty minutes before the man reappeared on the steps of the bank. It took less than thirty seconds for their plan to be put into action.

Harry, utterly nondescript under Polyjuice, walked towards Avery with his wand mostly hidden by
his long sleeves. He had risked his holly wand again, unwilling to take the risk with the slightly worse fit of the aspen wand. A narrow silencing spell around him kept his words from being overheard.

The crowds were a little dense and Harry let himself be pushed close enough to Avery that their shoulders bumped and the man turned around with a sneer.

“Imperio!” Low and sharp, their bodies so close that no one even had the chance to see the glimpse of holly before it was gone again. Unlike the Lestranges, Avery offered little resistance, and Harry felt the spell settle with that familiar glow.

*Continue, act normal.*

Avery gave him a look of disgust before he turned around and continued, every bit the pure-blood Death Eater. The connection remained.

Harry made his way to Knockturn Alley and Apparated back to Grimmauld with a few detours, keeping a mental eye on the Imperius connection the entire time.

Only once safely back in the house with Ron and Hermione did he smile.

*They know about you. That worthless scum your Lord used for spell fodder. They have evidence. They will go to the Aurors and cut a deal for a reduced sentence, and you will be in Azkaban.*

Harry could have simply ordered Avery to obey, but he didn't want to. The more Avery agreed with those mental commands, the less likely he was to fight against it. The more the man cooperated, the more use they would get out of him. Harry doubted they would get a second chance.

Avery had no reason to go after his former allies. If Harry made man develop a particularly vicious sense of paranoia, however ...

*They envy you. They envy your blood. They betrayed your Lord. They weren't worthy. If they had been stronger, more loyal, you would have won. And now they will help the Aurors take down the last worthy remnants of your Lord's reign. Worthless scum. Traitors.*

They couldn't get to Avery's gold – sending him to Gringotts was asking to have the Imperius lifted – but Harry had far more valuable plans for him.

The connection was surprisingly easy to hold but then, he supposed it would have to be. Voldemort and his followers wouldn't have been able to keep as many people under the curse for so long otherwise. It took little conscious effort beyond his mental commands and once the curse was cast, Avery had no real way to keep him out. If distance affected it, it didn't show. Travers had been their proof of concept. Avery would make it worth it.

Harry went through his usual routine of sorts with Ron and Hermione that day and the day that followed. The Imperius remained no less powerful, and he kept up his litany of insidious thoughts to Avery, inspired by years worth of insight into Voldemort's twisted mind.

*They will come after you. They will come after your family. They make a deal with the goblins. Those filthy little creatures would do anything for gold. The blood-traitors want you disgraced and imprisoned, and your family reduced to poverty. All because you dared stand up for pure-blood ideals.*

He was careful and didn't practice any spells that took an unusual amount of power or focus but even
then, the spell didn't waver. Ron and Hermione deliberately did not ask. They knew but they didn't ask, for their own sake as much as Harry's.

_They will go to the Aurors and plead for leniency like the dogs they are. They will set up traps, they will hunt you down like a Mudblood, they will drag you to the Ministry in chains so that everyone can witness your humiliation._

The warm glow of the Imperius had faded soon after he had cast it, but the echoes remained as a constant reminder of its presence.

_They will tear apart everything you worked for. You must stop them. There is no other way to be sure. You must kill them. For your Lord, for your family, for yourself. The Aurors will not care. They will blame their deaths on Potter._

_You must kill them before they go after you._

_You must kill them._

_Kill them all._

Weland Avery made his move on the third day. He had little resistance to the Imperius, but he was a skilled if brutal fighter – as most of the Inner Circle had been – and had a dark, twisted mind.

Avery knew people, a lot of people, and some truly insidious magic. He knew manors and homes and secrets and Harry watched as he put it all together slowly and methodically. Avery's plans were more reckless than they would have normally been thanks to Harry's influence, but they were still thorough and likely to succeed.

Even Avery had potential targets he could not or dared not approach. The two remaining Malfoys. The Nott family. Peregrine Travers would have been on the list as well, had Harry not killed him already.

Swithin Rowle died in a horrific Floo accident on the fifth day. A string of spells cast in secret when they met in the Wizengamot offices saw the man step into one of the Ministry fireplaces and spat out in the other end in charred pieces.

_He would have betrayed you. You saw the look on his face; greed and disgust, a smug turncoat, fresh from a deal with the Ministry. He will not betray you now and in his last moments, he learned the price for siding with the blood-traitors._

Two days later, while the _Prophet_ was still busy milking Rowle's death, the Burke home was levelled in a supposed potions accident. Supposed, because Harry had watched as Avery had used a combination of potions and spells to send an animated bird through the wards. The potions inside were harmless when kept separate and the creation could be coaxed through the defences with some effort. Those same potions combined to devastating effects when the enchantment reverted some ten minutes later.

Four people died that night, the _Prophet_ would report - Caelinus Burke, his wife and adult son, and his younger brother. Only Caelinus and his brother had been active Voldemort supporters, but Avery cared little for collateral damage. Avery expected the Burke seat on the Wizengamot to go to a cousin. Harry didn't care as long as said cousin turned out to be less of a rabid pure-blood supremacist than the rest of his family.

_Sycophants, the lot of them. They will follow the strongest wizard and forget the oaths they swore the moment the tides of war turn against them. Your Lord was wise not to Mark them; spineless worms_
that they are. They would have seen you crushed for their own survival, you and anyone else still left alive and loyal to your Lord.

Domnall Yaxley died in the middle of the Ministry, the victim of a Dark curse that crept though his veins and coagulated his blood everywhere it went.

Avery was getting reckless in his race to eradicate anyone who might have evidence against him. Harry didn't stop him.

He should have gone to Azkaban for your Lord. He did not have the gold to force the Ministry to accept the Imperius-defence. What did he trade, then, to walk free? How many loyal servants of the Dark did he sell out to save his own worthless hide? And you would have been next.

Avery's usefulness came to an abrupt end another two days later. Paramonos Parkinson had either grown suspicious of the string of sudden deaths – and he wouldn't be alone; the Prophet blamed Harry – or he simply had a far better sense of his surroundings than Avery's other victims had.

Avery spotted Parkinson in Diagon Alley by pure coincidence but had no problem taking advantage of the opportunity. He approached the man, wand close at hand but hidden; the spell was already in his mind as he prepared to cast -

- and Harry's eyes snapped wide open as the connection was abruptly cut. He choked on nothing and coughed until his throat hurt and his eyes watered.

He took a raspy breath. Then another. Only then did he feel Hermione's hand on his back.

“What happened?”

“I lost Avery. I think he died. It didn't feel like the curse was lifted.” It felt cold and dark, like his skin was a little clammy and the air just a little too cold and someone had turned off the sun, but he didn't think Hermione would appreciate quite that much detail. More of the Imperius effects had remained than he had thought.

Hermione looked like she wanted to say something. In the end she only nodded.

Weland Avery was reported killed in the Prophet the following day, struck down by Paramonos Parkinson when Avery attempted to curse the man in broad daylight in front of a number of people.

The predominant theory was the Imperius, a theory that was helped along by anonymous sources in the Auror department. Harry was widely – and correctly – speculated to be behind it as well, not that it bothered him in the least. Just one more entry on a list of crimes that would already earn him the Veil.

At the end of it, Harry and George could scratch five more names from their list. That justified most means to Harry's mind.

Harry and Susan kept up their Auror-approved correspondence through July. It was a peculiar many-layered sort of letter-writing. Susan would write something as the Auror trainee she was supposed to be, trying to cultivate a friendship with a Dark Lord with the intent of betraying him, all while keeping him up to date through their blood-bond and doing her best not to draw suspicions to herself. Harry would respond as the still vaguely suspicious Dark Lord he was supposed to be, all while keeping Susan up to date in turn as well.
Harry would be the first to admit it got a little confusing sometimes, remembering who wrote what, when, and why. He had taken to keeping copies of the letters on both of their behalves for that reason.

By late July, through two months of diligent letter-writing, Auror Trainee Susan Bones had the tentative trust of the Dark Lord Potter. Not enough to meet, of course, but enough to listen to her. Enough to open up a little to a potential follower and kindred spirit.

Her superiors were quite pleased.

She had been given a few bits of information to feed him – mainly progress on the hunt for him; all outdated to the best of her knowledge – and every letter had been carefully crafted with the help of several senior Aurors.

The letter that arrived for Harry on the morning of Monday the thirty-first of July contained a piece of parchment with an address and two lines of text.

*The Nott family has been forced to make their location public due to an Auror investigation. Happy birthday, Harry.*

A quick mental question for Anthony had the address checked and confirmed against the Floo registry where it had, true to Susan’s word, appeared less than a day ago. This did not make Harry feel any better about it.

Susan didn't have any knowledge of a trap, but her suspiciousness was enough for Harry. It wouldn’t be a stretch to imagine they would keep it a secret for her, too, especially if they still had a few doubts about her.

“The Nott family has kept their location secret for generations,” Ron told him bluntly. “Now their Floo location suddenly became public record, and Susan was ordered to share it? No one just has to make their address public knowledge because of an Auror investigation. There are Death Eaters in Azkaban whose homes are still Unplottable and so heavily warded that no address exists in their files. You know it's a trap.”

“A location, even, that doesn't match the the impressions I pulled from Avery's mind,” Harry agreed. “According to Anthony, a Floo can be unlisted, but the information still exists in a few places, even just as references. The fact that the information was nowhere until yesterday? Definitely a trap. If I had to guess, I'd say they were forced to make a deal, and they used a decoy home for it like we did with the Cottage. Maybe a country house. I can't imagine they would have gone along with this voluntarily. I'm surprised they've decided to try and trap me through Susan this soon, but it might have been the thing with Avery. If I got one of them with the Imperius with that kind of results, it would make sense they'll risk a trap this early if it can stop me from trying that again.”

Something in his expression made Ron sigh. “You're going to go anyway, aren't you?”

“If George agrees? Yes, we are. Best chance we'll get, I think. They're a lot more cautious than most of the others were. We could wait for years and never get a better chance.”

“The Notts might not even be there. You know that.”

Harry shrugged. “Appear a good distance away and take a close look first. If they want to make it a proper trap, they need the bait to actually be there. It smells too much like a set-up otherwise.”

Ron didn't look too happy. George, a few hours later, looked little better.
"We're walking into an Auror ambush."

"Not if I burn the entire place to the ground from a distance," Harry disagreed.

"They're not that stupid," George corrected, although he didn't look entirely convinced by that argument himself. "They'll want backup elsewhere, especially for you. That's not even mentioning the Notts. If I had to be bait for a Dark Lord with a grudge against me, I'd want every bloody protection known to wizardkind, legal or not."

"If they have backup outside the estate, there will be someone I can Imperius to tell us what we need to know. Someone, somewhere will be vulnerable. They're good but not that good, not even under Shacklebolt. Not this soon after the war."

George didn't look too happy – about the trap, or Harry's casual use of the Imperius, or very probably both. Then he sighed.

"You're sure it's worth the risk?"

"I wouldn't have suggested it otherwise. I'm not that much of a Gryffindor. I – it's the Nott family."

George was silent. Nott's name was on the list – Dougal Nott at the very least, and Theodore Nott as a maybe – but it was a gamble. Harry acknowledged that. It was a trap, likely a very dangerous one, but it was just as likely also their best chance to get at one of the top remaining names on their list.

Dougal Nott, unlike his brother, had not been Marked. That didn't make him any less of a bastard. He matched his brother skill for skill when it came to the Dark Arts according to Lucius Malfoy's memories, and he had picked up where his brother had left off with enthusiasm.

Dougal Nott was a threat to Teddy. Dougal Nott needed to die, and the sooner the better.

"They're going to dig in deep after this, when the Aurors let them loose again." George ran a hand over his face. "Bloody hell. Even with the impressions you got from Avery, we'd never find them. We'd need to hit him outside the wards, somewhere public, and he knows he's being hunted."

"And they're smart. Smart enough to convince Voldemort at his most powerful and charismatic to only Mark one of them and get away with it. Theodore isn't stupid, either. He was a classic bigoted Slytherin but an intelligent one."

"Too smart to risk anything trying to get even with you," George concluded. "Unless, of course, they're guaranteed to win." He paused. "Bloody hell. It's our only chance to get them, isn't it?"

"If Malfoy knew where their manor was, I didn't manage to pick up on it. I only got bits and pieces of what he knew. The Lestranges didn't know. The Imperius doesn't lend itself well to picking through someone's brain at a distance, but what I got from Avery was that he had vague impressions but no actual location."

"Pretty heavy security. Not quite up there with the Fidelius but close. Can't imagine how they pulled that one off. At the very least ... restricted Portkeys, Apparition, and brooms, no Floo, Unplottable, and probably enough wards to slow down a minor army and give them enough time to escape. No one in, no one out without permission. Pay enough to have any records there might have been destroyed, use Unbreakable Vows, contracts, or a Killing Curse if they have to let an outsider know the location. Merlin knows what else on top of that. Paranoid bastards."

"They made a lot of enemies," Harry agreed. "Less paranoid and they'd probably have been wiped out already. They're influential, but they're not untouchable the same way Malfoy was. No one
would have tried this sort of thing with Lucius Malfoy. Whatever the Notts did, it was enough that
the DMLE has them by the balls, and they don't have the political influence to see it dismissed."

That was what Harry figured, anyway, and he was pretty sure he was right. No one – absolutely no
one, and definitely not a Slytherin – would willingly play bait for a Dark Lord out for their lives if
they had any other acceptable choice. And a Slytherin, especially the head of a pure-blood family,
would consider pretty much anything an acceptable alternative to the possible extinction of the family
line.

The Notts were not cooperating out of some sense of duty. If what Harry suspected was even
remotely correct, they were cooperating because it was this or the Veil. Even Azkaban would have
been a safer alternative.

George nodded slowly. He seemed to have reached the same conclusion. “Plan, then?”

“Approach from a distance. A couple of miles, at least. Far enough out that they won't even think of
adding proximity alerts that far away. Get close enough unseen to figure out what we're dealing with.
With some luck, whatever the decoy house is, it'll have marginally weaker protections than their
actual home. Still good defences, but they'll want to lure me in, and the strongest ward schemes can
take months to raise. The Malfoy wards did. The Black ones, too, according to a few of the books in
the library. So get a look at our target and work out a plan based on that. That works?”

George shrugged. “Better than anything I've got. Broom or Portkey? Unless you know somewhere
close enough to Apparate to.”

Harry was conflicted. Portkey was easier but might get spotted. That, and his long-standing feud
with most magical means of transportation. Brooms took longer, but would be harder to pick up on,
and Harry loved flying.

Decisions, decisions. In the end he went with necessity. Reluctantly.

“I don't. All right, Portkey it is. Reconnaissance first, find a good spot to Apparate to next time,
return when we're ready to strike.”

Another nod. “They're expecting you to strike soon.”

“I know. If we wait too long – we don't know what deal the Notts have. The moment they've done
enough and they decide the DMLE no longer has enough of a hold on them, they'll be out of there. If
the DMLE feels the trap isn't working, I imagine the Aurors will do the same. It's a lot of resources to
put into something for prolonged periods of time.”

“A week at the most, then,” George concluded. “Could be a lot more, granted, but if I'd been put in
their situation, I'd pressure them any way I could, and the Aurors can't admit it's a trap. It's
supposedly just a investigation, and it's putting a noble pure-blood family in harm's way by letting the
Dark Lord Potter have their location.”

“First round of recon tonight, then?” Harry suggested. “Get a look at the place. Keep an eye on the
Prophet, too, see if anything about them shows up that looks like it's intended to shut down the
operation. Return tomorrow for a better look, come up with a plan, and strike ... Wednesday?
Thursday? I'm known to be impulsive. If they haven't seen anything by then, they might have started
to let down their guard.”

“Or become nervous wrecks.” There was a gleam in George's eyes that told Harry the thought didn't
at all bother him. “Give me time to whip up a few things, see what we've got hidden away that
wasn't suitable for our normal customers.”

“Your Nightmare Nibbles? That should keep the Aurors busy.”

“And a few other delights,” George agreed. “There is no such thing as overkill against one of Voldemort's toadies. Wards? We wouldn't want them to escape the fun.”

“I'll take a look at what we're up against.” Harry paused to do the mental calculations. “Depending on the size and the locations of the Aurors outside, I should be able to raise some durable wards against Portkeys and Apparition on top of it. There's an adjustment you can make for Floo access, too – I'll ask Hermione about it. We didn't need it with the Lestranges, but the Notts would be mad not to have access to every sort of escape route imaginable.”

George gave him a considering look but didn't ask. Wards took power, growing increasingly demanding with size, and Harry would need to be able to deal with the destruction of the manor afterwards, too.

He frankly wasn't sure if George's trust in his abilities was heart-warming or unnerving. Probably a bit of both.
They appeared a good ten miles from the Notts' likely decoy manor well after midnight. With the location known, it was little effort to adjust the Portkey to arrive a safe distance away. They crossed the last few miles by broom, slowly and cautiously and close to the ground.

They stopped frequently to cast a number of detection spells, both to get an idea of what they were up against but also to avoid stumbling into the ambush on accident. The Aurors were good and would be on high alert. Harry and George had to be better.

The Muggle-repelling wards greeted them just short of two miles out, the first sign of wizarding activity that they had seen. It was followed by the first proximity ward half a mile further on. It was a simple, straight-forward one – anything else would have taken too much effort to cast for something that would be essentially useless against him, Harry figured – and they slipped past it easily once they knew it was there.

The area was unpopulated, not that it was a surprise. The Notts might not have cared, but the DMLE couldn't get away with baiting a Dark Lord in a populated neighbourhood.

They slowed down even further and proceeded cautiously after that. The first sign of Auror patrols appeared soon after and then, rising tall up ahead, the wards they had been expecting.

One full mile out and strong enough that they would have passed as perfectly respectable family wards anywhere else. Someone had put a lot of magic into setting up the trap. The wards themselves were almost invisible, but Harry could feel the force of them against the hairs on his arms and neck even from that distance.

They slowed down a bit away and finally came to a stop, both craning their necks to stare at the dome of magic. George made a low whistle. “Those are temporary wards? That's up there near Malfoy level. Pretty confident they'll lure you in and not just scare you off, aren't they?”

“We did manage to get through the Malfoy wards with no trace, and everyone knows it.” Harry hesitated. “Of course, we don't have the ward details and a ready-made plan this time, and they know we're coming, too. At the very least they're expecting me. It could be a way to wear me down.”

“That just means we won't have to be quiet,” George murmured. The look in his eyes was familiar to Harry; the intent focus that the man sometimes got when faced with a particularly interesting puzzle. “If we can find out what sort of opposition we're up against ...”

The Aurors on the other side of the wards would be safe for now, but that wouldn't help the patrols outside. As one Harry and George turned away from the wards and started to cast one careful, insidious detection spell after the other. There were more effective spells out there, but they had deliberately picked the ones intended to remain unnoticed even by the most sensitive of wards and defences.

They moved outwards with extreme caution and for that reason, perhaps, it took a while to find the first Auror patrol – though, in the Aurors' defence, they were as close to invisible as a group of five people could be. The patrol was clearly on high alert. Harry honestly wasn't sure he would have spotted them if they hadn't been searching for them.

Three of them moved with the silent efficiency of trained fighters. The last two, both significantly younger, looked like trainees or only recently graduated Aurors to Harry.
Look better trained than we hoped, George mused through their bond. Older ones at least.

Veterans, Harry agreed. They had the age and the cautiousness for it. He wondered if it was the same for the rest of the patrols and the Aurors inside the wards. He couldn't imagine the Notts would accept Auror trainees as their last line of defence.

They followed the patrol silently for an hour to learn what they could before they continued their careful sweep of the surroundings. In the end they found three patrols outside the wards and a fourth group stationed inside the wards, based on fragments of conversations they picked up.

Harry had hoped to find someone to Imperius into revealing the finer details of the trap, but none of the Aurors were ever alone and the alternatives – Stun the lot of them, for one – was asking to raise the alarm. One missed check-in and their cover would be blown.

Two hours later they were gone again the same way they arrived and just as carefully unseen.

“It's an expensive operation,” George concluded the following evening at Grimmauld.

They were still careful not to let anything about George draw attention. He was in the shop come opening time, just as he always was. A little tired, maybe, but he had been up most of the night, struck by inspiration for a new prank, and that was worth a little misery in the morning, if anyone should wonder too much.

Harry had spent the day organising what they had discovered and by the time George appeared, there were a number of maps and ward notes.

“Fifteen Aurors outside the wards, maybe more we don't know about, and an additional team on the inside. We don't know how many Aurors are in the manor, but we can probably assume there won't be trainees in that bunch.”

George's eyes flickered across the maps where they had marked the patrols they had seen. “They won't be able to keep it going for long. Fifteen Aurors minimum, probably twenty, and three shifts a day. That's a solid percentage of active-duty Aurors, and if they want to keep it secret, too ... bloody miracle they've managed to keep it quiet enough that Bones hasn't heard about it. Everyone trusts Hufflepuffs.”

He glanced up and met Harry's eyes. “You know they didn't even put that sort of force into the fight against Voldemort.”

“Half of them were Voldemort toadies to begin with.” Harry shrugged. “And he would have slaughtered the lot of them regardless. I'm a safer target.”

“Might be safer if you weren't,” George said, a considering look in his eyes. “Might be safer if they thought twice about going after you.”

Harry thought about the patrol, about Susan and the Aurors he had known, about Moody and Tonks and Shacklebolt, and let out a slow breath. “Maybe.”

If it had just been himself, there would have been nothing to consider. With George to think about as well ... the Aurors were innocent for the most part, but George was a friend. George was family, George was a follower, Harry's with everything that implied, and if it came to it, Harry would see the world burn before he willingly let it harm his family.

George changed the topic before the silence could grow awkward, his point made. “We have a
couple of things at the shop that would have been useful, but the patrols are too scattered. Even if we got all of them, all we'd need is one missed check-in or Auror to sound the alarm and we're done for.”

“Stealth, then?” He paused and traced the ward-line with his fingers. “The Notts will run at the first sign of fighting, and we need to take down the wards to get close to the manor. I'll need to raise wards of our own to keep them trapped, far enough out that whatever else we cast can't interfere with it.”

“Fair chance the Aurors will spot it. Not arguing,” George said, “we definitely need it, but some of them looked like pretty experienced Aurors. The trainees will miss it, they won't notice that close to the Nott wards, but the older ones? They have to have learned this sort of thing.”

“Stealth for as long as it'll work,” Harry conceded. “Hopefully we'll be able to get to the Nott wards without being spotted. After that ... they'll know we're there, anyway, once the wards fall. Speed'll be better than stealth, then, I reckon.”

“Get close, raise our wards, dodge the patrols, wreck the Nott wards with Fiendfyre, and burn the manor down for the grand finale?” George mused. “They'll know we're there, but if we can't stay hidden, anyway, Fiendfyre took down the Lestrange wards pretty fast. Throw in an Invigoration Draught or two as well. You sounded pretty sure about raising those wards on your own. If you can do that ... it would be risky but doable.”

He made it sound so simple. Still ... “Best plan we've got,” Harry admitted. “I'll need to talk to Hermione, she found the anti-Floo ward in one of the books, and I know I saw one that blocked house-elves as well.”

“Wouldn't ask her about that one,” George agreed. “Not unless you want an earful.”

Harry didn't know for sure if the Notts had a house-elf, but they were rich and important enough and with a Dark Lord after them ... they would be idiots not to have one, if nothing else for the ability to escape an attack.

The Floo ward was complicated. The house-elf one somehow detoured around 'complicated' and headed straight for 'headache'. Harry wasn't about to ask Hermione, though, and with their training for the Malfoy Wards he had enough experience to work it out on his own.

It still took him a day and a half – and several honest apologies to Mute, who had to test the ward – but it worked. If he had been more of a Ravenclaw, he would have wondered if the downright strange magic of house-elves had something to do with the difficulties of the ward.

As it was, he was just grateful that he managed to work out the bloody thing.

They struck on Friday. Enough time for Harry to get the proper ward combination down, enough time for the Aurors to hopefully lose their edge a little, but not long enough that the ambush had been called off by impatient higher-ups.

Once they started they would need to work fast. Both Harry and George knew it. They had to assume the Aurors would spot the new wards the moment they went up – it wasn't a given, the magic of the Nott wards might drown it out, but they had to act as if it was – and that gave them precious little time to act.

Harry substituted power for finesse and threw in the some of the blood magic he had learned from
the Black library and practised with George. After half an hour of non-stop casting, the wards that rose blocked everything they knew could be an issue – Apparition, Portkeys, Floo, and house-elves – and the only bypass was Harry's blood, willingly given. An exemption based on his own and George's magic took time and power, and would have added several more components to an already complicated string of spells. Even adding George's blood would have made it more complicated than they could afford.

Harry stumbled when the last spell snapped into place, but George was there and held him upright. A bottle of Invigoration Draught cleared his head and banished the fatigue, though he knew from painful experience that the sudden rush of energy did nothing to help on his concentration. George downed a bottle of Polyjuice for disguise. Harry didn't bother.

A small cut on his arm and two quick Portus spells saw their robes turned into Portkeys for Grimmauld. George grimaced slightly at the blood on his clothes but didn't argue.

They were half a mile from the Nott wards, far enough to let the Fiendfyre spell work without interfering with Harry's wards, and they crossed the last distance by broom and with frequent detection spells.

It was silent – too silent, perhaps – but they arrived by the wards without problem and George shrunk and pocketed the brooms even as Harry raised his wand.

The wards might be temporary, but that did not make them weak.

George grabbed his arm the moment before he could cast. “The manor.”

It took a moment before Harry spotted what he had seen. Light in several windows, and more lightning up by the second. “They know we're here. No point in stealth, then.”

Fiendfyre awoke with a low snarl and a blast of scorching heat. A curled-up phoenix at first that spread its wings and proceeded to grow into monstrous proportions. Several dragons and a three-headed hydra-Basilisk abomination followed to become a towering wall of flames that slammed into the wards with a deafening roar.

Magic groaned, a deep sound that Harry felt all the way to his bones. Another wall of Fiendfyre rose, crested, and fell upon the wards as an army of fire-beasts.

The groaning deepened and with a flare brighter than daylight, the wards collapsed under the onslaught.

“Incoming!” George shouted over the roar of flames.

Harry blinked the spots from his eyes and brought the disjointed Fiendfyre back together into one massive wall again. George's shield lit up in the corner of his eye, and Harry risked spitting his attention when the first spell impacted.

One part of his mind on the living fire, Harry cast a Protego horribilis. Not as strong as it could be, nor as quick to cast, but it was there and would have to do. He could manage nothing else when his Fiendfyre was just waiting for a flicker of inattention to come after him.

Two more spells impacted George's shields from somewhere in the darkness, barely a heartbeat apart, and Harry turned to help him. They would need to deal with the Auror patrol before they could do anything else. Just five people, several of them trainees – how the bloody hell did they stay that well-hidden even when they cast?
He couldn't split his attention between three spells, but he had no qualms about using Fiendfyre on them. Eradicate the patrol, then feed the spell whatever power and focus it needed to destroy the manor.

A manticore split from the inferno and leapt high to land in front of them, taking out several trees on its way. The ground hissed beneath its paws and then it moved, shifting between forms – manticore, hippogriff, thestral – as it hurled like a fireball through the darkness in the direction of the spells.

There was a flash of colour behind him, something yellowish purple – not an Unforgivable – and he half-turned a second too late. With no time or attention left to spare, Harry braced and let it hit.

His shield flared brightly, held for a painful second, and then collapsed in a blinding flash. Purple light and searing pain exploded across his chest. His concentration was shattered, his control of his magic with it, and with a triumphant roar the wall of Fiendfyre rose tall and free.

Someone gripped his arm – George, that magic was George's – and shouted something Harry couldn't understand.

The sharp tug of a Portkey, of spinning and nausea and pain –

Then nothing.

“- the potions, but -”

His chest hurt. *Breathing* hurt.

“- four here and Em-”

It smelled like potions and sterile hospital. His heart said Hogwarts but some slightly more clear-headed part of him knew it wasn't.

Another breath. His chest really, really hurt. He wondered if he could just stop.

“-rry! Keep breathing! Ge-”

Magic settled cool and soothing against the pain in his chest.

He slept.

The next time Harry woke up, he managed to open his eyes. He recognised the room as a spare bedroom in Grimmauld, with thin, white curtains that let in just enough light to see but not be blinding.

He took a breath and it took a few disoriented seconds to grasp that he didn't hurt and even longer to remember *why* this was a surprise.

“Mate? Bloody hell, you scared a decade off of us.” Ron's voice, somewhere to his side. Harry risked a cautious turn of his head.

Ron looked like shit. Exhausted, with dark circles under bloodshot eyes, and a healer's robe that had seen better days. Relieved, though. Very, very relieved.

“There was a spell ...” Harry trailed off as he tried to piece the memory together. “Some sort of Dark cutting curse? It went through my *Protego horribilis*. Barely slowed it down.”
Ron looked grim. “Cutting curse? That thing was made to target a dragon. It's a bloody miracle you survived. We asked around based on your injuries and what George saw, and Charlie recognised it. Probably a personal variation, it was a lot Darker than the one Charlie had heard of, and we haven't been able to find any references in the library.”

That explained the pain. Harry took a slow breath, then risked a look at his chest. There were no bandages, just a thin sheen of some ointment or another where the spell had struck. The scar was broad and vivid red and stretched from his right shoulder, across his chest and almost to his left hip.

“How long?” Harry finally asked.

“Four days. Your shield weakened it enough that you survived the initial strike, and your armour took a lot of the rest. I did what I could until Ernie arrived. We've taken turns watching you once you were out of the woods.” Ron shook his head. “Ernie reckons your magic kept you alive for long enough that we could actually do something. The residue of that thing had burned through most of your ribs by the time we managed to stop it. He says you shouldn't even be alive, but ...”


Comfortable silence settled. Harry didn't feel like moving much just yet.

“Hermione's asleep. She took the night shift,” Ron eventually said. “George is at the shop. The others know you got injured, but we've kept them up to date. I let them know you're awake.”

The memories were still a little scattered, but he had pierced most of them back together now. “I got cocky.”

“Cocky or unlucky. Or lucky, maybe, since you're still alive.” Ron was unusually still in his chair. “All it takes is one lucky shot. Voldemort died to an Expelliarmus.”

“I know.” One lucky shot, and he didn't have a sliver of Voldemort's soul to save him this time.

Silence settled again. Long minutes later Ron spoke again.

“The Prophet calls you the Fiendfyre Lord. Fourteen dead, including those in the manor. No one but us seem to know you were wounded. If anyone still alive had seen, they would have told someone. There would have been articles. They would have pressed their advantage when they had the chance.”

The Fiendfyre Lord. The wizarding world liked their titles. It wasn't as bad as it could have been, Harry supposed.

“George got out safe?” He assumed so, since Ron hadn't mentioned any injuries, but he had to ask.

“Few scratches. Nothing dangerous. Couple of spells took care of it without a single scar. The others know about him now, but he doesn't mind, said it was probably overdue. You bore the brunt of it.”

As he should have. This was all Harry’s idea, Harry that got George involved. If anyone should end up with near-fatal injuries, it was only fair it was him.

“Get some rest, mate. It'll be time for another round of potions soon enough.”

Harry didn't bother to argue. Not with exhaustion sneaking up on him already. Instead he closed his eyes and surrendered to oblivion again.
Harry was up and moving the following day under Ron and Hermione's watchful eyes. Still tired, still sore, but well enough that he felt restless in bed.

Ernie skipped lunch at St Mungo's and appeared around noon to check up on him.

He took one look at Harry, a little tired and worn and in the middle of catching up on five days worth of letters, and shook his head.

“You shouldn't be up. You shouldn't even be breathing. Bloody hell.” Half exasperation, half reluctant admiration. He was starting to sound like a healer.

“I feel beat,” Harry admitted. “Can't stay in bed, though, it drives me up the wall.”

Ernie nodded absently even as he started casting, one spell after the other with the ease that came only with long practice. Harry recognised a number of them from his many visits to the Hogwarts hospital wing.

“You're healing as you should. Pretty much all patched up, actually. The scar?”

Harry shrugged off his shirt and let Ernie take a look at the wide, angry red mark. “It feels fine. I've tried worse.”

Basilisk venom. The Crucius. Voldemort's possession. Even the aftermath of his second encounter with the Killing Curse, the soreness from which had lingered for weeks. Against that, the slight pull from the scar when he moved was barely noticeable.

“Honestly, I think that made a good part of the difference.” Another couple of spells targeted at the scar before Ernie lowered his wand. “You don't see people walking away from repeated amounts of that sort of damage on a regular basis, but there's a theory that goes that your magic remembers. You see it mostly in older Master Aurors or senior curse-breakers. Particularly lucky, reckless spellcrafters and certain parts of the Knockturn population, too. Their magic grows used to the punishment and keeps them alive through things that would have killed most other people.”

He dug a jar of something green out of a pocket and handed it to Harry. “It says a lot about the sorry state of our world that a twenty-year-old managed to build up that sort of resilience through seven years of Hogwarts schooling. Here, put a thin layer on the scar once a day for the next week. I'll take a look at it again after that and see if another week would help. You'll scar permanently, no way around it, but that'll keep it a little less. Other than that, you're doing well. Exceptionally so for someone who was at Death's door five days ago. Rest and listen to your body, healer's orders.”

Harry nodded. “I will. I – thank you, Ernie.”

For everything, he didn't need to say. Ernie got it just fine and nodded seriously in turn.

“If all we can do to help is this, then we'll do that,” he said. “I gave a four-year-old part vampire her inoculations last week. A shy little thing with a skin rash when she gets too much sunlight. Her only crime was to have a great-grandfather of vampire blood. Half a year ago, that crime would have seen her refused by the wards. Her and her mother both.”

He was silent for a long time. Harry didn't interrupt.

“There are plenty of people that don't want anything to do with werewolves, but you'll be hard pressed to find a lot of healers worth their oath who agree with barring children like her from St Mungo's. Dark creatures are dangerous in the wrong circumstances. Most part-humans aren't, no more than any other wizard or witch. St Mungo's does not side with Dark Lords. St Mungo's does
not agree with senseless murders. Officially, St Mungo's is appalled by what you're doing.”

“And unofficially?” Harry asked when Ernie fell silent.

“A healer's oath is no more binding than a Muggle doctor's is. There is a reason why most known Death Eaters used private healers, and it had nothing to do with being richer or more important than the rest of us. There are a lot of healers who lost family and friends to Voldemort's reign of terror and want revenge enough that their oaths come second or, at the very least, get bent something fierce. Unofficially? As long as this is all you do, as long as you don't go on murderous rampages against innocents – if Ron or I can't get there in time, you have allies at St Mungo's. Enough that you'd be safe. Probably even enough that you could escape before the Aurors hauled you off to a Ministry cell when you were stabilised.”

“That could bring the Ministry down on your heads. They only just agreed to allow the Dark creatures treatment again.”

Ernie's smile was sharp and thin. “Even Voldemort had sympathisers on staff. The Ministry does not dare interfere with St Mungo's itself. Barring Dark creatures and those of that blood from the hospital was pushing it already. What will they do? Put a healer on trial for saving a life, even that of a Dark Lord? For obeying the oath they took? No. The Ministry stays clear of that.”

It was a lot of information, a lot of behind-the-scenes things that Harry had no idea even existed. He supposed he shouldn't be surprised.

“You have allies,” Ernie repeated. “As long as you're alive, we have something to work with. We can't bring you back from the dead, but we could probably find a way to keep you out of Ministry hands.”

To someone who had never had real support, who had never had anyone on his side but his two best friends, that thought was equally strange and oddly comforting.

George appeared that evening after the store in Diagon had closed for the night, bearing a folded paper and dinner from Molly Weasley.

“You look like you got into a fight with one of Hagrid's beasties.”

“And lost,” Harry admitted. He pulled out his shirt a little and peered down at the vivid red skin. “Ernie says it'll scar. At least it doesn't look like a lightning bolt.”

George snorted. “Considering how you looked when I got you back here, you're lucky it's just a scar. I think I've got a few grey hairs with your name on it after that.”

“Yeah. I'm sorry about that.” Harry took a deep breath. He was still a little surprised he could do that without pain. He remembered very well just how much it had hurt in those flickers of awareness. “Thank you. For getting me out of there.” He hesitated. “I'm pretty sure I would have died. I – if there's anything I can do -”

“You're family.” George reached out and ruffled his hair. “Ickle Harrykins. If we're counting life-debts, we've got a long way to go to break even.”

And Harry would have done the same for him, he didn't need to say. Harry swallowed against the sudden lump in his throat.

“Still.”
“You could eat your dinner,” George suggested. “Mum's not going to be happy otherwise.”

He was a little hungry. His stomach, in full agreement, growled loudly. Still, there was one more thing he had to ask about. “The Notts? Ron mentioned everyone in the manor died.”

George unfolded the paper, four days old by the date on it. *Nott Family Massacre! Aurors Dead! Dark Lord Potter Strikes Again!*

“We got three of them, including Dougal Nott. The runt hid somewhere else. They were smart enough not to keep the whole family there. Supposedly they all had emergency Portkeys. Didn't do them a lot of good with the additional wards. Once you lost control of the Fiendfyre, everything burned too fast to get out. Most of the Aurors outside the wards got away. The five inside died with the Notts.”

“How do we know who hit me?”

“It was a little Dark for an Auror, but the Notts were all hiding in the manor according to Susan and the *Prophet*. Maybe a pure-blood. There are all sorts of grandfathering laws when it comes to the Dark Arts and family spells. We were pretty close to the Fiendfyre when you got hit. My best guess is that whoever it was died to Fiendfyre. The spell came from the direction of the manor.”

Harry nodded. A few more of the pieces fell into place. He would probably never be able to remember all of those panicked seconds, but he could pick up enough from his friends to form a reasonably complete picture.

“My shield should have handled it, but with my attention split between it and the Fiendfyre ... I assumed anything the Aurors would cast would be Unforgivable or too weak to get through the shield, anyway.”

“Bit of a miscalculation.” There was none of the usual glint of dark humour in George's expression. “Good thing it wasn't the Killing Curse.”

Harry swallowed against the lump in his throat. “I – that one, I can tell. The magic feels familiar. But point made: Don't get cocky.”

“Don't get cocky,” George agreed. “That's what get ickle Dark Lords killed.”

Ron and Hermione sat him down the next day. He was doing a lot better and the same seemed to be the case with them. They had both lost the tired look and dark circles around their eyes, at least.

“We have a problem,” Ron told him bluntly. “Remember the effects of the Vow?”

Harry resisted the urge to touch his throat. The memories of being choked to death by magic still showed up occasionally in his nightmares. “Vividly.”

“Yeah. Thing is, back when it happened, you felt the effects and it scared the lot of us, but that was it.”

Harry had the sinking feeling he was not going to like this conversation. Hermione proved him right a moment later.

“We were wrong when we assumed the effects from the Marks would be instant. That they would be constant. The bond has grown stronger. Enough so that we felt you nearly die twice. Ron almost Apparated to you before George managed to get you home, and I wasn't far behind. It did not let up
afterwards, either. We needed Dreamless Sleep to get any rest while you were unconscious. The effects only eased when you slipped into proper sleep. Distance made it worse – I tried to Apparate to the Hideaway as a test and nearly splinched myself in the process.”

“The bond?”

“The bond,” Hermione agreed.

A few pieces clicked into place. That explained why Ron had looked so miserable when Harry had woken up. He had spent plenty of time in Poppy Pomfrey’s care at Hogwarts, but neither of them had looked quite that worried back then. Worried enough, certainly, but never that wrecked.

Harry was silent for long seconds as he tried to make that new information fit with what he already knew. He had read the pages with the spell thoroughly before he cast it. He had done exactly as it had described – well, as much as he could, when the directions were vague at best in places.

“That wasn't supposed to happen. The book didn't mention that.” They would have noticed, one of them – it wasn't a long spell, no more than a handful of pages. It would have mentioned it somewhere, wouldn't it? “Did – I could have cast it wrong. It's a possibility.”

“You didn't,” Hermione dismissed his concern. “Everything else matched the descriptions in the book. Soul magic is fickle. We would have known if you had cast it wrong. I read the book again, cover to cover, and couldn't find anything about that sort of effects from the bond. It has never reacted to any injuries when we've practised, so it seems to only be the serious injuries – or, perhaps, the bond itself understands the intent behind the injuries.”

Sentient soul magic. Ice settled in Harry's stomach as the reality of that possibility sank in. The strengthened bond hadn't been their doing. Not consciously, at least, or maybe that particular effect of the bond had simply been kept out of the book. Maybe the bond had simply reacted because he had been very, very close to dying.

He preferred to think that was the case. The idea of sentient soul magic that acted without their knowledge or consent was ... not something Harry wanted to dwell on.

“For now.” He took a slow breath as he realised something else. “Only the serious injuries for now. You didn't get the effects when the Vow tried to kill me. You said it's getting stronger.”

Hermione nodded. Ron didn't speak. Harry suspected they had probably spent a lot of time going through that same sort of conversation while he had been out of it.

Several more pieces fell into place. “Is that why we can't sleep apart?”

He never considered it much past that first night – his sleep had been so much better that nothing else really seemed to matter, and Ron and Hermione had agreed. Friendship and shared trauma, Hermione had said once. They slept miserably alone because they subconsciously didn't feel safe.

“Very likely.”

Harry hesitated. “Is there any way to break it?”

“No.” They had definitely discussed it earlier, her response was too sure for anything else. “It was permanent and unbreakable the moment we cast it. We could no more remove the bond than we could remove our own magic.”

That explained a lot. There was always a catch, wasn't there? And he had wondered why no one else
had decided to use it. "... So that's why soul magic is ten years in Azkaban."

The potential for abuse was staggering. He had never thought of it like that, none of them had, but if the bond kept growing stronger … even cast with the best of intentions, the amount of ways it could go terribly, terribly wrong was sobering. And if it had been cast with less pure intentions, if someone had found a way to change the spell just a little … that thing could have become a slave brand instead. No wonder it was illegal. No wonder it was never cast. No wonder that was the sort of magic that had eventually become the basis for the Dark Mark.

“That's why soul magic is ten years in Azkaban,” Hermione agreed quietly.

Harry wondered how the Vow had let him cast it at all. Maybe because none of them had known. Maybe because Hermione had agreed with it. He doubted they would ever know for sure.

“You said distance made it worse?”

“When you were still unconscious, at least,” Hermione said. “It might … we don't know how it will act later on. If it will grow increasingly stronger still. If it has been slowly strengthening, and we simply didn't notice until your life was in danger, or if it happened specifically because of that. If whoever wrote that book – if the person they shared a bond with was never in danger like that, they might never have known.”

Or maybe the author of the book had followed that pull of Apparition like Ron almost had, and had died with whomever they had shared that bond with. Harry didn't say it, and he didn't need to.

“The blood-bond in the jewellery?”

“That bond is blood magic, not soul magic,” Hermione replied. “And far better researched and documented. They're safe. If it came to that, the destruction of the physical vessels of the spell would break the bond. It's not woven into their magic and soul.” She hesitated. “I suppose the same methods could be used to break a bond based on soul magic. The destruction of the physical vessels.”

That was a very delicate way of saying death.

“All right.” Harry nodded slowly and tried to pick up everything he had just learned. “Unbreakable, likely to continue to grow stronger, a downright liability if one of us get seriously hurt, and if we're very lucky, it's sentient, too.” He paused. “So … if Ron found a girlfriend?”

This time Ron was the one to answer. “Bloody awkward, I assume.” He grimaced. “A lot of explaining to do, at least.”

That wasn't even getting into the worst case scenario that he didn't doubt they had already considered. If the bond reacted that strongly to mortal danger – what would it do if one of them died?


Hermione's expression turned equal parts stubborn and defiant. “I found the spell. I suggested it. I was the one who didn't research it well enough, who just – just took that book's word for it! Soul magic! From the Black library! And I didn't look for a second opinion!”

“We all bloody well agreed to cast it!” Ron said loudly, before an argument could break out. “It's nobody's fault. Or all of us, either way.” He shrugged. “Can't do anything about it. Just got to live with it now. At least we don't have a skull and snake on our arms.”
Point.

Harry took a slow breath. Nodded. They would deal, one way or another. There was nothing else they could do now.

Deal, and be a lot more careful with unfamiliar spells in the future.

The Dark Lord Potter wrote Auror Trainee Bones seven days after the disastrous trap. Harry channelled his best Lucius Malfoy impression, tempered by the Lord Potter who still considered Susan a former comrade-in-arms.

A trap, Auror Trainee? I would be disappointed if it hadn't allowed me to reduce most of the Nott family tree to ashes.

I consider us even now. Warn your masters I will not show that same leniency again.

That's more than I could have hoped for, I think. Thank you, Harry. And I'm sorry, for what it's worth.

Auror Trainee Bones took less than a day to reply. Her superiors had helped write it, as always, but the apology had been all Susan. She had insisted, and they had eventually caved.

If it had been real, Susan later explained to Harry, if she had genuinely just tried to get him captured or killed, she would have wanted to apologise. Despite it all – the murders, the Dark magic, the Unforgivables – he was still Harry, still the person who taught her to defend herself, and she owed him that.

After careful consideration, Susan's superiors reluctantly decided that no, Harry would never trust her again, and that they had wasted their one chance. The spells around Susan's home changed slightly around the same time. No one mentioned the spells had been there already, but the DMLE sent out an official team, with Susan's knowledge, to raise a set of 'new' wards to alert the Senior Auror on duty of hostile spells within the area.

Harry didn't approve of the way they had used Susan as bait, but at least they gave some thought to her safety now that their plan had failed. The wards would have done little to stop Voldemort – and only marginally more to stop Harry, if he had genuinely wanted revenge – but at least they didn't just ignore the possibility.

Susan wasn't overly impressed, either, but at least they no longer had to keep up their Auror-approved correspondence.

Two days later, when Harry was properly back on his feet again and the lingering soreness was mostly gone, he pulled Anthony aside after one of the casual group dinners they had whenever schedules lined up.

“I need you to find an address for me.”

Anthony nodded slowly, curiosity plain in his eyes. “All right. Who?”

“Dolores Umbridge.”
Anthony's answering smile was all teeth.

Harry had the address in hand less than a day later. Umbridge might have been fired after the war, but the criminal investigation of her had ground to a halt since the defeat of Voldemort. She did not have Malfoy's financial resources, but she still had enough connections and the intimate knowledge of Ministry bureaucracy to cause any number of difficulties for the DMLE. Harry wouldn't be surprised if she had blackmail on a number of people, too – she managed to get away with far too much otherwise.

George took one look at the address and his eyes lit up with vindictive joy.

“Well, well. The Toad herself.”

“Her birthday is on the twenty-sixth of this month.” Harry's lips curled in a smile every bit as malicious as George's. “I thought it might be proper to pay our respects.”

“The former Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic herself? Oh, definitely,” George agreed. “The proper thing to do. Wouldn't want to be known as uncultured blood-traitors, now would we?”

A birthday present to every last half-blood and Muggle-born and part-human that ever had to deal with her. Harry had certainly wished for that often enough in his fifth year.

The Umbridge home was surprisingly opulent. Nowhere near Malfoy-levels, of course, but still. The position as the right hand of the Minister for Magic seemed to have paid exceedingly well. That, or the woman had found other means to supplement her income. Fudge had accepted numerous bribes. There was no reason why his Undersecretary shouldn't have done the same.

The wards were not exactly on the level of a proper pure-blood manor, but they were still surprisingly strong for common wards.

Umbridge probably knew she had enemies and was smart enough to act accordingly. Those wards still wouldn't keep Harry out, but they would be enough to persuade most other attackers to give up.

“Fiendfyre?” George asked after their first night of reconnaissance. “She'd be dead before she even noticed the wards fall. Won't give us useful information, but she'll be thoroughly dead.”

An option, definitely. The easiest and safest, too. Still …

“I want her to know.” Harry looked up from the mess of notes on the table to meet George's eyes. “I want her to know why she's going to die. I want her to know that no amount of simpering or threats or Unforgivables will save her life this time. I want to be the last thing that miserable creature sees before she dies.”

George was silent for long seconds. Then he smiled, a dark expression mirrored by an unholy glow in his eyes. “A little bit of personal payback, your Lordship? You say the sweetest things. Take down the wards carefully, then. Give her no warning.”

“They're strong, but nowhere near as dangerous as the Malfoy ones. With the right spells, we can get through them easily.” The right spells, a number of which they already knew, and enough power to make up for the rest.

Umbridge lived alone. There would be no one to help her. No one to complicate matters.
“The twenty-sixth, then,” George agreed. “Past midnight. A proper birthday present.”

Maybe they both took a little too much delight in what they were about to do. As far bigger part of Harry knew she deserved every last bit of it, and plenty more. Revenge – for themselves, for Hogwarts, and for every last lesser being she had ruined or killed.

Harry and George had experience with ward-spells from the Malfoy murder, and they had made a point to continue learning more afterwards. Some spells required enough power that Harry alone of the two could manage them. Some spells needed multiple wands to work. Others still had to be done silently, or wandlessly, or any other of a dozen requirements they had stumbled across.

They had trained to take down some of the strongest wards gold could buy. As a result of that practice, the wards around the Umbridge home lasted less than fifteen minutes against them. It would have been far less if they hadn't wanted to do it completely undetected.

As expected, their spells only revealed one person in the house, and few other security measures beyond the wards.

The locked front door was easily opened, and the home beyond it was much like Harry had imagined based on the woman's office in Hogwarts.

Mostly pink, with an alarming amount of kitten paraphernalia. It would have been cluttered, if everything hadn't obviously been put up with a disturbing amount of precision, the space between each and every item perfectly even and just so.

A large, white Kneazle – meticulously groomed and with a pink ribbon around its neck – hissed at them as they entered the house. George took it out with a Stunner.

The staircase was covered by a thick, pink rug that swallowed all sound of footsteps and gave the place an almost claustrophobic feel. The kitten motifs continued on the first floor, from the wallpaper and to the many pictures and decorative plates on the walls. The number of painted eyes watching them was somewhat creepy and more than a little unnerving.

They followed their spell to the location of the only other human in the building – a large room at the end of the hallway with the door partially open and the sound of deep breathing coming from inside.

A Stunner from George took care of Umbridge, while a string of spells made sure she didn't carry anything that could be tracked. To both of their relief, the woman was wearing heavy, conservative night-robes, though George cast a quick spell to change the sickening pink to something less eyes-watering.

Another handful of spells to erase their tracks and they were gone again, though Harry knew he would need a long time to forget that he had been in Dolores Umbridge's bedroom.

Everything had been set up in the larger of the Lestrange safe-houses by the time they woke her up again. A Full Body-Bind kept her from moving at all, and only the sinking comprehension in her unmoving eyes revealed that she was awake and aware at all.

Harry crouched in front of her chair and held out a small bottle of perfectly clear potion. He waited long enough for Umbridge to get the chance to realise what it was before he spoke.

“Veritaserum,” Harry confirmed, never looking away from her. The hatred had returned the moment they spotted her in the bedroom, a whole year of torture and harassment and pent-up fury, and the
scar on the back of his hand stung in a way it hadn't done in years.

“We are going to take everything from you,” he continued mercilessly. “Every bit of blackmail. Every dirty little deal. Everything you helped someone cover up. And then we're going to use it to take down every last worthless Voldemort sympathiser still left in your precious Ministry. The wizarding world will burn. And you will help us.”

He smiled, sharp and vicious, and watched the mounting fear in her eyes with no small amount of satisfaction.

“And when you've told us everything you know, I'm going to be merciful and allow you a swift death. That is far more than Voldemort would have granted most of us. Consider it an unusually generous birthday gift.”

Harry and George returned to the Umbridge home three hours later with a dead body – Killing Curse; Harry had kept his word – and the directions to a large, heavily protected trunk embedded in the floor where Umbridge had kept the evidence of a number of things nobody wanted to have made public knowledge. They had been right about the blackmail and Umbridge, bureaucrat to the bone, had kept meticulous records for herself. Some of it was useless now, the people in question already dead by Harry's hand, but far more would still be valuable information.

They would let the outcry die out. They would let Umbridge be forgotten. They would let people believe that the evidence had been lost with the woman herself and would never reappear.

And then, in months or years, they would bring it out again and see just how useful that information was when it came to bending the Wizengamot and the Ministry to their will.

The murder of Dolores Umbridge made front-page news in the Prophet.

Ron and Hermione knew already. Hermione still carefully cut out the article and saved it. Harry strongly suspected she wasn't the only former Hogwarts student to do just that.

The Holyhead Harpies held their try-outs in early September. True to Luna's prediction, Ginny did spectacularly. A year of training past Hogwarts had honed her skills, and she gladly accepted the position of reserve Chaser she was offered.

The Harpies didn't seem to care in the least about her family's suspected association with a Dark Lord. Harry wasn't even surprised. The Harpies had a brutal reputation, and not just on the Quidditch field.

Harry risked a visit to the Burrow two days later, both to congratulate Ginny and to reassure Molly Weasley – again – that he was doing good and was healing just fine, honest.

Luna greeted him with a bright smile and went to fetch Mrs. Weasley in the orchard. For the first time in longer than Harry could readily remember he found himself alone with Ginny.


Ginny shifted a little and looked as unsure about the situation as Harry felt. “Thank you. I'm – I like them. I really wanted the position.” She took a deep breath. “George – George mentioned ...”
She didn't finish the sentence, but the way her eyes drifted to his chest said the rest.

“I'm fine now.” Harry hesitated. “It'll scar and I think I racked up a life-debt, but it's almost healed. I'm fine.”

Ginny nodded. She shifted again, a little unsure, and then she crossed the room in a half-run and hugged him like the world depended on it. Strong and fierce and clingy, and then she let go again before her mother could arrive and see it.

And if her eyes were a little wet and her skin a little paler than usual, Harry knew better than to mention it.

Hermione turned twenty-one on the nineteenth of September. They celebrated like they did all of their birthdays: with a bottle of Firewhisky as they waited for the stroke of midnight.

They raised their glasses when the first heavy chime of the grandfather clock rung through the house. Ron was the first to speak, lips twisted in a bitter mockery of a smile.

“‘To long life,” he began one of the traditional wizarding toasts.

“‘To strong heirs,” Harry continued.

“‘And to the blessings of magic,” Hermione finished softly. “‘And barring that ... may we be three days in heaven before the Devil knows we're dead.”

They drank as one. Not to wizarding toasts, not to traditional blessings, but to a joking pledge shared by Seamus Finnigan in the Gryffindor common room what felt like a lifetime ago.

Harry and George went after another small manor in late September. The Wootton home did not have a Floo connection, but it used to, and that was enough for Anthony to find the address.

The Ministry did not get rid of records. Ever. Unless, of course, someone paid them enough and Talfryn Wootton had obviously never seen a reason to. The man was not a Marked Death Eater, nor did he have the influence or wealth to have earned himself serious enemies.

He did, however, serve as one of the assistants to the Wizarding Examinations Authority. A harmless-sounding job, Harry knew, that belied the fact that the man had access to the names and blood-status of every Hogwarts student – and a number of addresses as well – and knew which of the examiners that were flexible in their grading with the right incentive.

Have a child of a proper, pure family that didn't quite live up to the pure-blood standards? Galleons or a favour or two would pave the way for some respectable results on the exams. It wouldn't do to have an heir that flunked out of Hogwarts, after all. And if Madam Marchbanks kept a little too close of an eye on things? 'Re-testing' after 'summer tutoring' solved that problem. No need to bother the Governor of the Wizarding Examination Authority with such a minor thing.

Have a Muggle-born that wanted to retake an exam or lodge a complaint about their grading? Well, things tended to disappear in the Ministry. Applications, after all, had to be filled out just so. Wootton would not have made a particular competent Death Eater, but he was a master of bureaucracy and the art of arranging everything to the satisfaction of whoever paid him at any given time.

Avery and the Lestranges had known about him. Lucius Malfoy had considered him useful.
That alone had been enough to make up Harry's mind. He'd had bigger threats to go after first, of course, but Wootton remained on the list, slowly moving upwards as Harry got to work.

Wootton had kept his head down in the time between Voldemort's two reigns, but Harry had learned from Malfoy's memories and the Lestranges' interrogation that the man had done plenty of damage as it was. With the proper grades and the proper blood, you could get hired anywhere, and with a choice between a Muggle-born with good grades or a pure-blood with just as good ones? Harry knew exactly what the choice would be just about every time.

If the Muggle-born was a little too insistent that they had the right to be considered, too – or the right to employment, Merlin help them all – then Wootton could usually help with that as well. Fix a few grades, perhaps, as it obviously had to be a mistake that a Muggle-born had such good grades. Maybe find an address without the hassle of seeking out more obvious venues of information, where people might actually keep track of such things. Problems could be made to disappear, after all.

With a location and a target that wasn't an Inner Circle Death Eater, Harry's task became much easier.

They struck at night, as they usually did. The wards were reasonably acceptable, Harry supposed, but when he had seen the sort of wards the Malfoys and Blacks could boast, ordinary wards didn't even make him pause. Even the Lestranges' safe-house wards, temporary that they might have been, had been better, never mind the temporary Nott wards.

A lot could be said about Inner Circle Death Eaters, but most of them were magically strong and viciously competent. If they didn't raise their own wards, they had the gold and connections to get the best warders in the business to do it for them.

The Wootton wards were small enough that Harry's temporary anti-Portkey and Apparition wards easily encased them and stretched well beyond the property. Floo wouldn't be an issue when the house didn't have a connection anymore, broom was too exposed, and Wootton was nowhere near wealthy or important enough to warrant a house-elf.

George fired off one detection spell, frowned, then tried another. “There are some defences but they're useless. They only block the weakest spells around. Reckon he thinks he's good and safe, since he wasn't one of Voldemort's boot-lickers.”

Harry cast a string of well-practised spells of his own and waited for the result. Useless turned out to be an accurate description. It only blocked the most basic of spells intended to figure out the number of people inside. The second, stronger one Harry cast went through the defences with ease.

A part of him knew that this was what ordinary wards tended to be. Simple wards that were either affordable or cast by wizards and witches with only the most basic of grounding in the art. Most homes were not set up with wards that would give even a Dark Lord pause. Most magicals did not expect to have to defend themselves against Aurors, or Death Eaters, or mortal enemies.

“Two humans, both on the second floor,” George murmured.

Probably the man's wife. Wootton was married. He had a son, too, but the boy was older than Harry by several years and had long since moved out.

It would be easy to simply cast Fiendfyre and let the house burn to the ground. For a moment Harry was tempted. Then his grip on his wand tightened and he forced the impulse aside.

“If it's his wife, she's got nothing to do with it. For that matter, we should probably make sure it's
actually Wootton in that bed and not her lover or something.”

George snorted. “Wouldn't blame her if it was. Intel, then?”

If they checked the man for anything that might be used to trace them, and made sure his wife was kept unconscious until the morning ... he wasn't likely to have anything like the protections Lucius Malfoy had kept around.

“Might as well.” The man might not know all that much useful information, but still. The chance was there.

The house was almost disappointingly easy to break into. Fiendfyre would have been faster but even then, George and his own training with wards meant that that they were past in less than five minutes without triggering a single alarm in the process.

A few spells to open the door unseen. A number of detection spells throughout the house to check for traps – of which there were none. Two Stunners to take out the people in the bedroom, a quick check to ensure that the man was indeed their target, and another handful of spells to erase any tracks they might have left behind.

Harry tore down his own temporary wards with a flick of his wand and then they were gone with the sharp crack of Apparition, less than half an hour after they arrived.

By the first light of dawn, Wootton was dead and his body quietly disposed of. He wasn't a Death Eater, wasn't even a suspected one, and it would be easier for everyone if it couldn't immediately be pinned on Harry. He didn't doubt he would still be a suspect, but at least they wouldn't have any proof, and Wootton didn't fit his usual pattern of targets.

They did have another stack of parchment to go through. Most was useless – things they already knew, or information they had no way of using – but there was always something. Sooner or later, something in that interrogation would prove useful.

Susan turned twenty-one in early October. As such she became of age to observe the Wizengamot debates before she would be able to claim her seat – as a member of a proper wizarding family in good standing – at the age of twenty-five. With no other living relatives with the Bones family name, it was a given she would claim her seat. The Abbott, Longbottom, and Macmillan families all had a seat, too, but those were currently claimed by older relatives, not one of them a day below seventy.

Neville would become an observer as well upon his birthday, as the only other Longbottom left, but both Hannah and Ernie had other relatives in line first. Not that it mattered that much. With two people there, Susan now and Neville come summer, they had the Wizengamot thoroughly covered.

With first-hand knowledge of Wizengamot politics and members, Harry's list of necessary targets became a lot more refined.

When the restrictions on part-humans eased further in mid-October, Susan was the one to explain the behind-the-scenes to him. Outsiders were not permitted to watch the regular meetings, not even a reporter from the Prophet. There were some vague explanations about choosing what was right and not catering to the masses by pursuing popular bills, but not even the Wizengamot itself seemed to give much credit to that. It was simply a way to avoid being blamed for more unsavoury deals and to push through bills to their own advantage without having to answer for them. The majority of the Wizengamot had no wish to see those rules about public accountability changed and so it remained,
an elitist, antiquated system.

As it was, a number of Ministry and Ministry-controlled jobs had creature restrictions. No werewolves. No vampires. No giants, no hags, no half-anythings, no – well, these days Muggle-borns weren't specifically discriminated against, but it hadn't been all that long since they had been on the lists, too, Harry knew.

The most recent changes eased the part-humans restrictions and allowed wizards and witches like Teddy and Lavender to – in theory – hold a number of jobs they would otherwise have been banned from or would, in the very least, have needed a very good reason to get a special permission for.

Teddy's Metamorphmagus abilities would probably have granted him an exemption for the ban on werewolf blood in the Auror forces as it was. With the new changes, that exemption would never be necessary.

Harry was well aware that it was still just in theory and that in practice it would take a lot longer to take effect. It was a start, though.

"Very few people are willing to speak up too much against that sort of bill nowadays," Susan explained to him afterwards. "You've been ... thorough with your lists. Those who disagree aren't willing to risk drawing your attention by trying to block it. Those who agree ... most don't agree with what you're doing, but to block the bills for that reason alone would be idiocy."

"And might draw my attention," Harry added.

"And might draw your attention," Susan agreed. "The Wizengamot prides itself on never yielding to threats, but it has a long, inglorious history of caving at the first true show of force. Voldemort won it over through gold and blood. You haven't bothered with gold, but you have been liberal with blood. The Dark families aren't used to being the ones threatened. They're used to being ones on the right side. If it had been the Wizengamot of a year ago, it wouldn't have worked, but you've killed off the ringleaders since then. No one wants to take over those reins. Not when there's a Dark Lord just waiting for that sort of thing."

They fell silent. Mute reappeared with a fresh pot of tea. For a while that was all they focused on, the hot tea and the biscuits and the lingering silence.

"You don't agree with what I've done."

Susan made a tired sound. "No. It doesn't change the fact that it's necessary."

"I'd like to see the wizarding world turned into a genuine democracy one day," Harry admitted. "I don't know if it'll ever happen, this place has been run by Galleons and might-makes-right for so long, but ... it's a nice thought."

"Something for our children," Susan murmured. "An actual vampire teaching potions, and not just a teacher that everyone claimed was one. A Muggle Studies curriculum that isn't a joke. A Minister that isn't for sale more often than not. Trials that can't be rigged with the proper amount of Galleons or blackmail. Merlin, just a Minister that isn't a pure-blood would be a start. Even just a half-blood one."

She glanced at Harry. "It could probably have been you, in another world. The first known half-blood Minister for Magic. There might have been others but if there were, they hid it well."

"Maybe. I don't do politics very well. Hermione might have been the first Muggle-born one. She's not good with politics, either, but she has the drive and intelligence."
“A detour through the DMLE, maybe. The Aurors or the legal team. That route has bred several competent Ministers over the years.” Susan trailed off and didn’t speak for long moments. “Do you ever regret it?”

Harry paused, cup halfway to his mouth. “What could have been, you mean?” He put the cup back down and took the few seconds to gather his thoughts. “Not for the most part. There is little point in regrets anymore. I can’t undo my decisions, even if I wanted to. Regrets do nothing to help me, and I won’t belittle Ron and Hermione and George’s choices like that, either. Do I wish it hadn’t been necessary? Yes. Merlin, yes. It doesn’t change the fact that I would do it all over again if I had to.”

Susan watched him for a long time. “And if we managed one day? If the wizarding world became the place we want it to be?”

One day, so far into the future that Harry could not even imagine how that world might look. “Hypothetically speaking? Assuming we all survived? Assuming I didn’t fall completely and someone had to stop me? I don’t know,” he admitted. “I never thought that far ahead. I never imagined I would live long enough to see it.”

“Gryffindor,” Susan sighed. There was a little fondness in the word, though, so he assumed that was all right.

“Part Slytherin, I’ll have you know.” Harry paused. “I think ... it would depend on Ron and Hermione, wouldn’t it? I guess it would be nice to just retire. Some quiet place somewhere, well away from everyone and where no one would recognise me. Spend the rest of my life growing flowers or feeding stray cats or something. Just be Harry. Not Harry Potter, or the Boy Who Lived, or the Man Who Conquered, or the Saviour Turned Traitor or the Dark Lord Potter. Just Harry. Maybe I could even convince Ron and Hermione to join me.”

“I suppose ... if you don’t mind feeding the occasional stray badger or raven, we could always visit, too,” Susan said softly.

“There would be tea and biscuits,” Harry offered equally softly. “And whatever strange things we could pick in the garden.”

They finished their tea in silence. Only then did Susan offer him a small, tired smile.

“I think,” she said, “that sounds absolutely lovely.”
Chapter 11

Their luck ran out in late October. Maybe the relative silence from the DMLE had made them lax about security. Maybe they had grown too confident in their own skills. Maybe it was just plain, simple recklessness and stupidity.

Molly Weasley's birthday fell on a Monday. As such she decided to invite the whole lot of the Weasleys and extended family for a birthday party on the 28th, the closest Saturday to the actual day.

Harry declined. Very politely and regretfully, but no amount of convincing could change his mind. He trusted the family but refused to be the cause of tension and awkwardness on her birthday, absolutely refused to put them at risk, and while Molly wasn't happy about it, she understood.

Hermione and Ron took longer to decide. They had visited often enough without a problem, and maybe that was why none of them thought twice about it.

Hermione wavered between the massive piles of books in Grimmauld that they still hadn't managed to go through and an evening of extremely loud Weasleys. Then again, put that way, it was no wonder Hermione elected to stay at home as well.

“Besides,” she told Ron, “do you really trust Harry on his own all evening? With those books?”

Considering that one of those books included a heavy tome on demolition spells, she did have a point.

Ron stared at Harry. “Right. I'll go. I'll tell mum you send the best.”

Decision made, they sent Ron off with a gift, lots of well-wishes and urgings to be careful, and then buried themselves in research. Hermione did have a point with those books, and Harry intended to practice quite a few of those spells on their Hideaway. He still preferred Fiendfyre but it wasn't always practical when you didn't want everything reduced to less than ashes, and several of those spells looked like they would make for some pretty spectacular effects.

It was shortly after noon when the bond with Ron flared to life.

Someone just raised wards around the Burrow. Strong enough to glow. Apparition and Portkeys are blocked, and the Floo connection is gone.

The response from the bond was instant and overwhelming. Harry felt the floor fall out beneath him, his heartbeat became a thunderous drum in his ears, and above it all was the immediate, frantic urgency to follow the pull of the bond to Ron.

Hermione gripped Harry's hand a moment before he would have Apparated, wards be damned, and forced him to stop and think instead. Brooms? House-elves?

Not with those wards. Harry could feel the stillness in Ron through the bond, the abrupt shifts from surprise to anger to worry before it settled as quiet resignation. Well, we always joked that Hermione would find a way to break us out of Azkaban.

How many attackers? Harry's mind scrambled to keep up, to find a way out of it, and all he could think of was utter devastation. If they wanted Ron – Ron or Hermione or George or any of the others – he would make them pay for that in blood. The strong urge to Apparate was still there, and only the fact that he knew what it was now made him able to fight it.
Hermione's pale expression and tight grip on his hand left little doubt she was fighting the same.

They should be there. They should be there, and everything in him screamed to do something about it.

Ron's resignation flickered into determination for a few seconds. *I'm counting six Aurors from the window. Dad says twenty according to the wards. I won't let you two get caught up in this, too. I need you to get me out of Azkaban, remember?*

He didn't mention the rest of the family. He didn't need to. None of them were about to risk them, especially since they knew very well the Weasleys were willing to fight viciously for one of their own.

*What about the bond?* Ron asked when neither of them spoke. *I'm not getting the same itch to Apparate, not like with Harry. I think it's because I'm the one in trouble this time.*

*It's as bad as Harry's case. Even Hermione's mental voice sounded grim. I think it's the distance. George got Harry back almost instantly. You're not one botched spell from death, but we have distance working against us. It won't let me block it, either. I tried.*

If this was what they had dealt with when he had been unconscious, no wonder they had looked so bad when he finally woke up. No wonder soul magic was banned. Not when Harry could feel those harmless, helpful tendrils of the bond dig in deep and *pull* until it felt like they were trying to tear his magic out of him in their attempt to make him Apparate.

*Bloody hell,* Ron said, unconscious echoing Harry's thoughts. *I need to talk to dad.*

The bond fell silent. Neither of them spoke. Hermione's grip on Harry's hand was almost crushing, though Harry didn't mind. He squeezed back, and they sat there in silence and waited for news, one way or another.

Eventually they felt Ron's presence again.

*George is still in Diagon. He wasn't due for another hour. I just warned him and gave the earring to Luna. Even if they search the house, it looks a little like something she might own.*

They didn't ask if he was surrendering. It wasn't like he had much choice.

*Dad isn't too happy, and mum is furious at them. I – it seems like it was just dumb luck. It was mum's birthday and they decided it was worth a try. Everyone here looked as surprised as we were. I don't think anyone sold us out. We were just stupid. Or unlucky.*

*We'll get you out of there. Whatever it takes,* Harry promised.

*I know.* Ron sounded a lot calmer than Harry felt – or Hermione looked, for that matter. Even a Gryffindor knew when they faced a battle there was no point in fighting. Ron's unwavering faith in them was parts reassuring, parts intimidating, but right now it was exactly what Harry needed.

He would find a way to get Ron out of there. Whatever it took. He still wanted to Apparate there immediately, to burn down the wards in a storm of Fiendfyre, and to pick apart every last worthless Auror he saw, and only Ron's bullheaded faith in him and Hermione's grip on his hand kept him marginally grounded.

*Huh. They brought the Head Auror out for this. I think they were hoping to get all three of us.*

Harry felt a flicker of wry resignation from Ron. *I think that's about to be out of my hands.*

There was a brief impression of a Stunner, and the bond fell abruptly silent.

And in Grimmauld Place the cold fireplace exploded in a furious roar of magic as the Dark Lord Potter lost the last tenuous hold on his self-restraint.

“What do we know?”

Harry's emotions had run the gauntlet from fury to worry and back again repeatedly before it had settled – for now – on hard determination. The bookcases and lights at Grimmauld had stopped trembling, at least.

He still paced the room like a caged nundu, bleeding off restless energy the only way he could. Ron's unconsciousness had done nothing to help. It had only made it worse by taking away what should have been a possible stabilising influence on himself and Hermione both. The fireplace, now a partially melted mess of soot and cracked stone, had borne the brunt of it. Even now the remnants of Harry's magic still seethed deep in the stones.

Ernie had learned the Secret to Grimmauld when Harry had been injured. George had let the rest of them in on the Fidelius shortly after. Harry was grateful for that now. Grimmauld was the closest thing they had to a fortress, and right now he wanted a secure, easily-defended place to meet and to serve as a bolt-hole if any of them should need it. Only Susan, George, and Dean were there with them for now. They didn't want to risk drawing unwanted suspicions if too many 'former' friends of Harry Potter all had urgent business right after Ron's arrest.

“Increased Auror activity,” Susan reported. “My schedule just got shuffled. I'm due to report tomorrow morning at six. No orders beyond that, but I talked to a couple of the other trainees. We've all been called in. Different shifts, but they're calling in everything they have.”

“They're preparing for an attack,” Dean said and glanced at Susan. “They haven't contacted me, but remember Wyght? My junior mentor? He kept in touch after I dropped out.”

“He dropped out in June, too, didn't he? Family reasons?”

“He was only a few months from graduating,” Susan said, doing the mental calculations. “But it's still been half a year with no training. Forever in Auror terms. They're not just calling in everything they have, they're actively trying to boost the ranks again. Have you heard anything from Ron?”

“He's still unconscious.” Hermione looked pale but surprisingly calm. It belied the roiling emotions Harry could feel right beneath the surface of the bond. “The Aurors brought everyone at the Burrow in for questioning, but Ron's the only one under arrest. George left the shop the moment Ron warned him. They didn't have enough to pin on anyone else. Luna saw him briefly. He looked unharmed, at least.”

“They'll want defences in place before they wake him up, then,” Susan concluded. “They don't know what you'll be able to do once he's conscious again, but they won't take any chances.” She
hesitated. “There haven't been any emergency Wizengamot summons, but that doesn't mean anything. They'll want to interrogate him to find out what he knows and what he's done before they arrange a trial. No unpleasant surprises that way.”

“They're not shipping him straight to Azkaban, then? That's an improvement. Better than what Snuffles got. Must be Shacklebolt's sparkling influence.” George had been every bit as furious as Harry, but the bright fury had eventually settled into smouldering anger.

Susan glanced at George but didn't rise to the bait. “Several of the off-duty Aurors like to spend the evenings at the Leaky Cauldron. Hannah will get what intel she can out of them. She knows which ones get a little too chatty when they're drunk. Ernie will drop by the Cauldron as well and visit Hannah. Most Hufflepuffs stay in touch after Hogwarts, it won't be suspicious. Now, Ministry blueprints ... they don't exist. Not that we've found. If they're there, they're outdated, hidden away somewhere obscure and forgotten, or very likely both. Anthony and Neville are working on some based on what they know, and Dean and I will join them later.”

They had little information for now, then, but with some luck they could have a lot more come morning. Harry reined in his impatience and nodded sharply. “Right, then. We'll meet up tomorrow. I'll let the others know, too. If Ron -”

Harry paused as Mute appeared, wide-eyed and obviously worried. She handed a folded paper to Harry and was gone an instant later.

Harry understood why the moment he unfolded the paper.

War-Hero Weasley Arrested! Follower of the Dark Lord!

There was no picture of Ron himself, but the Head Auror featured prominently on the front page, in the middle of what looked like a press conference.

“Harry?”

He had clamped down tightly on his emotions, but not fast enough to stop the groan of crushed wood as the solid door behind him imploded in a ball of splinters. Not fast enough stop his cup shattering with a sharp crack. He placed the paper on the table, the headline so big that all of them could read it easily.

“The story just broke.”

He had hoped the Aurors would keep it a secret, so they would at least only be up against the DMLE. He should have known better.

With everyone in the wizarding world aware of it ... everyone would be waiting for his move. Everyone would be watching for anything out of the ordinary.

Bloody hell.

Hannah and Ernie brought news early Sunday morning, none of it any better than the Prophet had been.

Ron was still unconscious. True to Hermione's word, it had taken Dreamless Sleep for them to get any rest at all, and Harry's patience was rapidly flaying. Hermione was little better.

“Tom says the atmosphere in the Cauldron felt like during the first Rise of Voldemort.” Hannah,
with her hard, grim expression, was a world away from the cheerful, tolerant, and occasionally bull-headed girl who was learning the pub-craft from her great-uncle Tom. “Oh, gossiping like a bunch of old biddies like always, but they startled every time the door slammed open a little harder than usual.”

“Indecisive old biddies,” Ernie added. “Bloody hell, I heard them change their minds more often than Fudge did. They agreed with whoever argued the loudest at any given time.”

“Nobody wanted to be the odd wizard out.” Hannah’s expression tightened. “Wouldn’t want the wrong opinion to get back to the wrong person. As far as I could tell, they were more worried that the off-duty Aurors would think they sided with a Dark Lord than they were that you might take offence.”

Harry didn't particularly like the thought of a world where people were more worried about the Aurors' reaction than that of a Dark Lord. On the other hand, he didn't particularly like the thought of being the sort of person feared like Voldemort had been, either. Lose-lose either way.

“Honestly, it was less about the offence and more about what you might do after Ron's arrest.” Ernie sighed and leaned back in the couch, sinking deep into the cushions. “Genuinely worried that the Aurors might decide they’d be wizards of interests if they said the wrong thing, sure. But everyone knows the Ministry has Ron. Everyone knows you're going to get him back or wreck the place trying. Nobody wants to get caught up in that. People haven't forgot about the name the Prophet gave you, and nobody wants to be anywhere near the 'Fiendfyre Lord' when he decides to retaliate. You've proven you're powerful enough to be a threat. Nobody's likely to forget that any time soon.”

“The off-duty Aurors kept an eye on everything,” Hannah added. “More so than usual. Everyone will be watching. Every Auror, every Hit-wizard, every guard at Gringotts. Everyone.”

His mug was trembling again. Harry took a slow breath. Let it out again. Forced the roiling magic back under control, for all that everything in him demanded he let it run wild and free and make them pay for targeting Ron. Company helped, they had found. Made it a little easier to resist constant, gnawing sense of wrong. Harry had not been left alone for a moment since Ron's arrest. If it wasn't Hermione, it was Neville or George, never more than an arm's length away.

“When did they decide backing me into a corner was the smart thing to do?” he muttered, just a little bitter.

“They didn't,” Hannah said bluntly. “But nobody ever accused the common witch or wizard of common sense.”

Because that was just the way to deal with a Fiendfyre-happy Dark Lord. Arrest his friend and back him into a corner with no way out but fighting, because that was just brilliant planning.

Bloody hell.

Harry didn't expect to hear from Susan until sometime that evening after her shift was over, but she did send him one sharp, crystal-clear thought shortly after Hannah and Ernie left.

They found out about the Mark. They expect you to attack. Ministry will be a fortress.

It wasn't a surprise. That still didn't make the news any less unwanted.

Lord Potter,
Do not expect to need a solicitor. They may allow him a trial to satisfy the word of the law but the outcome is given.

Augustus Brookstanton

Brookstanton's letter arrived in the mid-morning and did not mention the word 'Azkaban'. It did not need to. That piece of news was no surprise, either, though Harry appreciated the warning.

What I've come to expect from the Ministry at its finest.

Harry's response was short and to the point and did not warn Brookstanton to stay away from the Ministry for the foreseeable future. That, too, did not need mentioned.

Shortly before noon Ron was pulled abruptly out of unconsciousness and straight into the haze of Veritaserum.

With less practice, there would have been nothing they could do. Harry, with his miserable skills at Occlumency, would have had a problem. Ron, though ... with a far better organised mind and with significantly better skills than Harry according to Hermione, he slipped easily from unconsciousness, past the haze of Veritaserum, and into the clear sharpness of Occlumency instead.

Harry felt the brief, relieved presence of his best male friend. Then the feeling faded as Ron focused on his own mind and the connection with Hermione.

Harry was not the person to rely on for that sort of thing. Repeated practice had taught them that.

Hermione stilled in her chair, eyes closed and expression blank, and Harry settled in for a long wait.

It was close to two hours before Hermione stirred again. Harry had watched over her the entire time. Grimmauld was safe, but he didn't want to risk anything that might break her focus. A brief thought through the bond with their friends warned them not to contact her, and a few softly spoken words kept Mute out of the room.

He wanted to pace, he wanted to fight, he wanted to burn off the magic right beneath his skin, he wanted to hit something and not stop until his knuckles were raw and bloody, but in the end he merely stayed on the couch. Restless, silent, and very careful not to break Hermione's focus.

His hands had started shaking after the first hour of enforced stillness. Half an hour past that, and endless, vivid visions of the Ministry ablaze had started to pass before his eyes. The Fountain as a bubbling pool of molten metal, the Wizengamot chambers filled with chairs burned to cinders, so delicate that a breath would turn them into dust, a line of faceless Aurors that fell one after the other to a Fiendfyre snake the size of a Basilisk -

He would see those visions come to life. One way or another, the Ministry would burn.

Eventually Hermione stirred and took a deep, unsteady breath. Harry reached out to hold her hand and he felt the tremor in her muscles from two hours of perfect stillness.

“Physically he's fine. They just returned him to his cell. They noticed the Mark and know it's Dark magic but they have not attempted to use it yet as far as he knows.” She swallowed. “No bruises, no – no accidents on the way back, no attempts to get even so far for the Aurors that died at Nott Manor and at Potter Cottage.”
All of whom had died at Harry's hands, but he doubted that would have mattered much if someone wanted revenge.

“We decided there was no point in lying,” Hermione continued. “We would slip up eventually and they might even have learned something from his answers. We decided it was best not to answer at all. He didn't speak, not once.”

Her hand tightened around his own. “I – we don't think they will get permission to use Unforgivables, not yet at least, not when all they can really pin on him is the Dark magic from the Mark, but we – we should be able to withstand that as well, and it's not trusted with prisoners who are immune to Veritaserum, and certainly not if they used the Cru- the Cruciatuse, too.”

Hermione's breath hitched and Harry was at her side in a heartbeat. Then his world narrowed down to the bundle of bushy hair and trembling figure in his arms as Hermione broke down into quiet sobs.

For a long time they remained that way, clinging to each other as Hermione sobbed and Harry tried to ignore the tightness in his chest and the blind compulsion to do something, to Apparate to the Ministry and tear every last one of them to pieces.

As Hermione fell silent, Harry risked a thought to Susan.  

*No luck with Veritaserum. What will next step be?*

Susan took a moment too long to reply, and Harry knew it wouldn't be good.

*Probably sleep deprivation. They have potion for it. Resistance takes focus. Time and no sleep breaks most methods. Hard to get permission for Unforgivables. Potion counts as medical. No laws against it.*

One more thing on the long, long list of things wrong with the wizarding world.

*How can they not have laws against that?* he demanded.

*No one believes they would use it, Susan responded quietly. Sleep deprivation used during witch hunts. Tainted by Muggle witch hunters. Obviously no proper pure-blood would use it.*

How charming.

Something must have shown – or his emotions had leaked, either way – because Hermione let go and looked closely at him, searching his expression.

“Harry?”

“Is it safe to contact Ron?”

Hermione watched him for a moment longer. “Yes. He has a headache and he's tired, but he's ... safe for now.”

Harry nodded and reached out for both of them. He didn't want to explain it twice, and he desperately missed the presence of the third of their trio. The bond had gone from unnervingly silent to a raw wound somewhere in his magic as the hours had inched on without word.

There was never a question of whether he should tell them. In Ron's place, he would have wanted to know. He knew Ron well enough to say that he would agree.

Hermione was there in an instant, warm and bright if a little subdued. Ron followed long seconds
later, more tired and weary but with the same bit of relief that Harry felt when the bond settled properly again and eased the strain of distance a little.

I asked Susan what their next step was likely to be. With physical torture and Unforgivables out of the question for now, she expects them to try sleep deprivation. Time and sleep deprivation will crack most ways to resist Veritaserum.

Hermione's grip on his hand tightened again. That's legal?

Susan said that since it was used by Muggles during the witch hunts, it's considered tainted, so obviously there's no reason to make a law against it when no proper witch or wizard would use it.

Ron was strangely quiet. Harry did not need to look at Hermione to know that she was looking as worried as he felt.

Straight from unconscious to Veritaserum wasn't easy but we managed, Hermione and me, he finally said. Now I'm tired and I've got a Bludger-sized headache, and that was from ... what? Two hours? I can't manage Occlumency after a day of no sleep, never mind several.

I – Hermione began and cut herself off. Ron and Harry stayed silent. They both knew the signs of Hermione's mind hard at work, although Harry suspected Ron had already reached the conclusion Hermione had just arrived at.

... The bond takes focus, too, she said instead. Less than Occlumency, but -

- It'll fail, too. You can't get me through another round of Veritaserum if I can't even focus enough to reach you. Ron sounded calm and quiet, the voice of reason that he shouldn't have to be, not now.

Lie. You're a Gryffindor, you and Hermione followed me out of stubborn, stupid loyalty. Leave George and the others out of it, and let me take the blame. Most of it was me, anyway, and the rest doesn't matter. It's not like they can sentence me twice to the Veil.

They won't believe me, Ron told them bluntly. They know I can resist it now. They'll wait until they're absolutely sure I have no way to block it.

Two days, then? Three? Hermione asked grimly.

Hopefully. Ron fell silent. We could be wrong, you know.

Ron didn't sound like he particularly believed it. Neither did Harry and Hermione.

Yeah, Ron admitted at their silence. That's what I thought, too.

“These are the best plans we could make. As detailed and as accurate as possible.”

Neville, Dean, and Anthony arrived with a stack of parchment some twenty sheets tall. Susan was still at work and Hermione was focused on Ron, but they could go over it together later. It would definitely take a while.

Each sheet covered most of the desk and the drawings were done in what Harry recognised as Dean's artistic hand. A slow flip through the stack revealed most of the floors covered – though some had parts missing – as well as a number of sheets with additional information. Warding, security, the cells ... between the four of them, Susan, Dean, Anthony, and Neville knew the layout to a lot of the Ministry and the parts they didn't know for the most part wouldn't matter all that much. The
Department of Mysteries, for one, was little more than a sketch with huge patches missing, but Harry had no intentions of going anywhere near that place again.

The DMLE was drawn out in great detail, as was the Atrium and several other floors. Harry nodded slowly. “Excellent work, all of you. Thank you.”

And it was. A work of art more than mere blueprints and Harry could appreciate it, for all that he had quickly realised something else as well. “Conclusions?”

The trio exchanged a look and seemed to silently elect Neville as spokesperson. “It can't be done.”

“Voldemort managed.” A little too bluntly put, maybe, but Harry's patience was strained already.

“Voldemort took the Ministry because he had enough inside support that security wasn't an issue. Not only do you not have the same, Shacklebolt upped security something vicious, first after the War and then after you killed three people in the Atrium. That's not mentioning the additional funding the DMLE got after the War to rebuild and recover.” Neville fixed his attention on Harry, utterly unwavering. “It can't be done. The place is a fortress. The Atrium, yes. Some of the less secure levels, probably. But those holding cells are located on Level Two, past Auror Headquarters. Short of owning half the Ministry or having a minor army at your back, it can't be done.”

Harry didn't respond, didn't even blink, and Neville sighed.

“I want Ron out of there as much as you do, but it's suicide. Even the lot of us? Not a chance. Maybe, with the element of surprise on our side, we could get in there. We'd have no chance of getting out again once the alarm sounded, not with those kinds of defences. Susan is the only one who might have been able to help, but she's just a trainee. She doesn't have that kind of clearance yet.”

Harry watched him for long seconds. Then he backed down a little, conceding the point. “I have to. Somehow. He resisted Veritaserum, but Susan thinks they're going to start on sleep deprivation. Two, three days and he won't be able to lie. It won't be admissible in court, but that won't stop them from coming after the rest of you.”

“Then I'll face down the Wizengamot and tell them proudly where my loyalty lies,” Neville said quietly. “It can't be done, Harry. Even Voldemort on his own probably couldn't have managed, not with that level of security. We have blackmail on enough people he might not even get convicted. Even if he does, we have a much better chance of breaking him out of Azkaban than the Ministry cells. Most of the Dementors are gone, we'll have time to figure something out, a weak spot in the wards or some guards for sale to the highest bidder, but it can't be done. Not in the Ministry.”

Not unless he owned half the Ministry. Not unless he had the Minister's ear.

The seed of a plan settled in his mind, as insidious as Devil's Snare though Harry doubted Neville would appreciate the comparison. Instead he simply nodded.

“All right. I'll look through this. Thank you again. All of you.”

Anthony didn't have the experience with Harry's usual plans to recognise the fleeting look for what it was. Dean looked suspicious, and Neville ... Neville didn't speak out loud, his expression utterly blank, which told Harry everything he really needed.

It can't be done, Neville repeated silently in Harry's mind. You're facing the Veil if they catch you. It's suicide.
Harry didn't answer.

There was a potion with Ron's dinner that evening. Neither of them recognised it, and the Auror that handed it over said nothing, just checked that Ron had drunk every last drop of it, and vanished the bottle before Ron could chuck it at his head.

There were a number of potions it could have been based on the description Ron gave them. They knew for sure when two, three, and four in the morning rolled by and Ron, tired to the bone, still laid on his cot and stared at the ceiling in complete darkness.

Sleep-deprivation, then, he eventually said, a little annoyed but mostly resigned. Bloody hell.

Neither Harry nor Hermione had been willing to sleep until they had known what the potion was. Hermione's hand in his trembled. Harry didn't speak but he knew, as they all did, that there was a definite deadline for any plans they made now.

Two days, three at the most and Ron wouldn't be able to keep their secrets. Equally important was the fact that he wouldn't be worth a damn thing in a fight, either, by then. They wouldn't just need to get in and out of the Ministry somehow. They would have to do so with someone who was either probably hallucinating and very likely incoherent or flat-out unconscious.

That both of them would probably feel some the effects, too, went unsaid. They couldn't block the bond, and they could barely handle the effects of it as it was.

Two days, three at the most, and Ron would be useless in a fight. Past that, and Hermione and Harry himself might very well be, too.

They slept in shifts by silent agreement. Ron would not be alone.

Harry slept miserably. Hermione by the looks of it had as well. Neither had dared to risk Dreamless Sleep two nights in a row. Her bloodshot eyes looked much like Harry's own had in the mirror that morning, and the deep, dark circles under them did nothing to help the haggard look.

A short night of restless sleep had also given that seed of a plan ample opportunity to grow and even flourish, and Hermione knew him well enough to tell when something was up. She did have the decency to wait until after a rushed lunch followed by two bottles of Invigoration Draught to confront him about it.

“"You have a plan. I won't like it.”

Harry just held out his hand. Hermione accepted it and with a sharp crack he Apparated them to the Hideaway, taking great care not to splinch them in the process. Even then he felt the sharp jerk the moment he Apparated, the increasing strain on the bond that refused to let up for even a second. A moment of inattention, he knew, and he would have ended up splinched in the Ministry instead.

Hermione didn't as much as stumble. They were both used to Side-Along Apparition by now. Harry let go of her and took a few steps forwards. Then he brought his wand up sharply and cast a wordless spell.

Fiendfyre flared to life, from spark to inferno in the space of a heartbeat. It rose high above them in the shape of a monstrous Basilisk, far larger than the creature Harry had faced in the Chamber of Secrets so long ago. The spell took its chance and lashed out, but Harry brutally crushed the attempt. For a moment they were locked like that, Harry's will against malevolent magic. Then the Basilisk
bared its fangs in a soundless, furious snarl and lowered its head to the ground.

He might have slept miserably but if anything, his command of the spell was all the more brutal for it. An outlet for every last bit of restless magic he had barely managed to keep leashed since Ron was arrested.

Hermione watched, wide-eyed and silent. Harry realised quite abruptly that this was the first time she had really seen first-hand just how skilled he had become with the spell.

"With the Elder Wand – if I hadn't destroyed it, maybe that could have been enough to tip the odds in our favour. It was supposed to be unbeatable, for all that it didn't help Grindelwald or Voldemort or even Dumbledore in the end. It was a malevolent, insidious thing, but the one spell I used it for – even my holly wand couldn't have matched it. I could have taken on the world with that thing at my command. It did a very good job trying to convince of that, at least."

Hermione turned to look at him, about to speak. Then she glanced back at the Fiendfyre Basilisk and stayed silent.

"I suppose it comes down to how intelligent the Vow is. Will it understand my intentions and kill me before I can cast the spell?" Harry continued when Hermione did not speak. "We can't fight our way to Ron, you all agree on that. The only way to take the Ministry is if you own most of it or have the Minister's ear. Shacklebolt can't be bribed, but he can be made to listen to reason. Ron, safe and unharmed, or the utter destruction of the Ministry and everyone in it. I intend to make that spell powerful enough that it would gut the Ministry even without being continually fed by my magic. If I lose control of it at that stage it would kill all of us. The two of us would be too close to have time to escape. Ron would be trapped in his cell. Once cast, nothing will stop it until it's forcibly contained or runs out of magic. Not my death. Not my loss of magic. If there is a genuine possibility that my spell would kill you or Ron, and that it would be too late to stop it once I've cast it, would it stop me from casting it in the first place?"

"Not if I allowed you to." Hermione did not even have to think about the answer. Then again, they had spent a long time getting that Vow just right. She wouldn't be Hermione if she hadn't considered every possibility. "The Ministry has exceptionally strong wards. I - even with the amount of magic you feed into it, it would break itself on the wards, I think. It would burn the Ministry to ashes, but it would drain itself before it got through the wards. I think."

The Basilisk snarled at Harry again, malicious intelligence burning bright in its eyes. An equally sharp, vicious command brought it to the ground again. A second of inattention would be enough to lose control, a second of less than perfect focus ... Harry understood why Fiendfyre had such a horrific reputation. He understood exactly why it killed its wielder more often than not. The force behind the spell was overwhelming, a wall of sheer, raw fury that bore down mercilessly on his mind. Only his experiences with Voldemort's possession and Imperius had seen him survive his first attempt at the spell.

"You'll start another Great Fire of London if you get this wrong. If the wards can't contain it - with Fiendfyre rather than ordinary fire ..." she didn't finish the sentence.

A hundred thousand dead if everything failed. Probably more. Every last one of them by his magic. Far more than Voldemort had caused, even during two reigns. Less, perhaps, than Grindelwald, but that man had the backing of a World War. *Less than Grindelwald* wasn't much of a comparison.

“"I know."

Hermione stared at the Basilisk for a long time. Whatever went through her mind, she didn't share.
"You intend to blackmail the Ministry. It's a gamble that no one will attack you on sight. Most of the Aurors might be intelligent enough not to, but not everyone will." She swallowed. "You will need your full focus on the spell. You know what happened at Nott Manor when you split your attention between Fiendfyre and your shield. I can't hold a Protego horribilis to protect myself, much less one big enough to protect both of us."

"I'd ask you to stay home if I thought you would listen," Harry admitted.

"You would." Hermione sighed. "I can manage a physical shield to cover us both. Long enough, hopefully, that someone sees sense and ceases the attacks. Does Ron know?"

"I haven't mentioned it yet. I wanted to see what you thought first."

Hermione nodded. "The others?"

"No," Harry had already considered it. "It's not a straight-out assault. We just need to hold our ground long enough to get the Aurors' and Shacklebolt's attention. More people means more distractions." More people to defend each other, but more people to get hurt or killed, too. More people to die if he got it wrong. "We're all walking out of there, or none of us are. I can't stop you, but I can order the others to stay away. If they expect me to act the part of a Lord, they better be willing to accept those orders, too."

Hermione fell silent again.

"I'll talk with Ron. We need to make sure everyone we care about is out of there. We need to warn Mr. Weasley. Anthony and Susan, too. And Percy. We need to consider every angle."

"I wasn't about to charge off right now," Harry objected half-heartedly and got a pointed look for his efforts.

"Yes, you were." Hermione took a steadying breath. "I'm just as affected by the bond as you are, Harry. We need to make sure we have everything covered. I know we're on a deadline. It's – today is too fast, we'll die if we rush in like that."

"Tomorrow, then."

It was not a question, not really. Ron was running out of time, and Harry could feel the same strain on himself. The temper and the recklessness and the visions of fire and vengeance that never went away. Harry was stubborn, but he had known the moment he felt the full force of the bond for the first time that it would wear him down, slowly and relentlessly. It was just a matter of how deranged he would be by the time he broke.

Hallowe'en. For better or for worse, everything seemed to come back to that day. And if he failed, it seemed appropriate that it should end on the same day it started. The day of his parents' death, the day of the troll that forged their friendship, and the day of his Vow.

"We don't have much choice, do we?" Hermione agreed quietly. "I – I need to think about this. But ..."

She trailed off, but Harry understood just fine. Even the thought would have been abhorrent to her three days ago. Now, though, with Ron in Ministry hands, with the bond gnawing on them their every waking moment ... the world looked very different and far, far bleaker than before.

_Hallowe'en, mate?_ Ron asked later that afternoon. Harry could almost feel the grimace through the bond, though the predominant feeling was bone-deep tiredness and the muted echoes of a dull headache.
When else? You know my luck, Harry responded wryly.

Tired amusement from Ron. Darker, heavier threads of exhaustion sneaked in through those few moments of inattention before Harry felt Ron brutally cut them off.

Never thought I'd miss sleep this much. A heartbeat. Then two. It's a crap plan, but it's the best we've got. Worst case, we'll gut the Ministry and they won't get the satisfaction of a sham trial. I can live with that.

Unfortunate choice of words, maybe, but neither of them mentioned it. Harry just nodded though Ron couldn't see it and felt the weight on his shoulders ease just a little.

“You need to not be on duty tomorrow,” Harry told Susan bluntly when she appeared in the early evening. Hermione had spoken to Anthony through their bond and Arthur Weasley by way of George already. Harry wanted to talk to Susan in person. She was the one most likely to object to his plan.

“I can't.” Susan answered just as bluntly. “If you attack and I'm mysteriously sick that day, it will be too suspicious. I'm already on shaky grounds, being a former student of the DA that was run by the Dark Lord Potter. I won't be of much use to anyone if that happens.”

Harry's patience, somewhat unpredictable at the best of times and worn paper-thin by Ron's capture, took that moment to snap. Something behind them shattered with the sharp crack of splintered glass.

“I'm going to negotiate Ron's release by the use of live Fiendfyre! Forgive me if I don't care in the slightest how suspicious your absence will look!”

Susan's jaw clenched in a familiar sign of stubborn determination. Arguing with a Hufflepuff was like trying to break down the doors in the Great Hall with a Merlin-damned Lumos.

Harry took a breath. Reined in his impatience. Tried again.

“You're the last Bones. Hermione and I – we're walking out of there with Ron, all three of us, or no one is.”

“You included.” The stubborn determination did not go away. “I'm the last Bones, sure. You're the last Potter. If I want to risk ending my family line, then that's my bloody right!”

Harry wanted to argue that it was different but couldn't quite find a way to phrase it that wouldn't come back to bite him. The moments of pause were enough for Susan to carry right on.

“You know I'm right.”

“That doesn't mean I have to like it.” If he sounded a little petulant, she was nice enough not to mention it.

Susan smiled, a little sad but mostly tired. “And that's why we follow you.”

“So,” Neville murmured when they sat in the living room later that evening, just the two of them. “No Ministry Six this time.”

Neville had a glass of Firewhisky. Harry stuck with tea. They couldn't afford to take any more risks than they absolutely had to, not now, and while the bond with Ron was mostly silent, Harry wanted
his mind as clear as it could be. Even if he could do nothing else now, he could do that much.

The tremor in his hand was back, from the tension in his muscles and the strain from the bond. The face that stared back from the mirror reminded him uncomfortably of Bellatrix Lestrange at her most deranged. His hair, unruly at the best of times, looked like a rat's nest and while his eyes didn't match Voldemort's unnatural red, the bloodshot look was getting there.

Neville, polite man that he was, had not commented on it.

“No. Ginny isn't part of this, and I'm not getting Luna involved, not now. I can't take her from Ginny, too.”

“And me?”

Neville, who had been there through it all. Neville, who had settled down that afternoon with a bottle of Firewhisky and several bottles of Invigoration Draughts and calmly let them know that he would keep watch with them that night as they slept in turn under the effects of Dreamless Sleep.

Neville, who had knowingly gone with him to face down Death Eaters and Voldemort himself at the Department of Mysteries at the age of fifteen.

Harry stayed silent for a long time as he tried to find a way to explain it right. Thinking straight took an uncomfortable amount of effort.

“The three of us – we're leaving together, all of us, or nobody is. I'd go alone if I thought Hermione would let me.” He paused again and tried to find the words to make it make sense to Neville. “I couldn't stop Susan, it's her job and her right, but I can stop you. You have nothing to do in the Ministry, and you're the only future of the Longbottom blood. I've ended enough family lines.”

Neville's expression hardened. “That wouldn't stop me.”

Harry met his eyes – stubborn, determined, proud, and so very Gryffindor – and didn't yield an inch. “I'll order you to stay.”

Neville didn't speak, didn't even move. Then he smiled a little ruefully. “Should have expected that, shouldn't I?” A heartbeat. Then his stance eased slightly and he lowered his head briefly, deliberately. “By your will, my Lord.”

Something settled heavily in Harry's chest, relief and fear and the crushing weight of responsibility. For the first time he didn't object to the title. “Thank you.”

Silence settled. Neville refilled his glass and Harry took the opportunity to pour another mug of tea as well. Long minutes later, when the tea had cooled a little, Harry brought out a sealed scroll from one of the pockets in his robe and handed it to Neville.

“If our luck runs out ... the Office of Augustus Brookstanton here in London is the executioner of my will. They have a copy, and there's one in my vault in Constantinople as well. This is my copy.”

Neville's eyes had drifted to the scroll but snapped back to Harry at the explanation. “George -”

“- isn't going, but he will want revenge if everything goes to hell. For Ron, if nothing else.”

Neville sighed, but he accepted the scroll. “He would. Don't make me have to open this, Potter.”

“I'll try not to.” Another long stretch of silence. Harry finished most of his tea before he spoke again.
“It was updated in May. Fleur made me the godfather of Victoire, and I wanted to add a trust vault for her. We kept it secret. The only people who know are her parents and Gabrielle, her godmother.”

“And, of course, Ron and Hermione.” Harry shrugged. That went without saying. “I'm not nearly drunk enough if this is going to be some weepy heart-to-heart talk. You owe me at least another bottle.”

That got a genuine laugh from Harry. “No weepy heart-to-heart. But you can have the bottle. I think I still owe you for Nagini.”

Neville refilled his glass again before he raised it. “Kill the snake?”

It was a toast Harry could get behind. He raised his mug in return. “Kill the snake.”

Hermione reappeared at one that night, bright and awake from seven hours of potion-induced sleep. She still didn't look much better than Harry did. He accepted the bottle of purple potion from her hand and retired to bed himself, leaving Hermione to Neville's quiet company.

Seven hours later, far more clear-headed and rested than he had any right to be, Harry shrunk Dorea Potter's portrait and Apparated to the Tonks residence.

Andromeda met him in the entrance hall. It was impolite to just Apparate inside, but they both knew Harry couldn't exactly just appear out in public without a disguise these days.

“Harry?” A little surprised, a little wary, probably more due to his physical appearances than his actual visit.

Harry handed over the portrait. “For Teddy. There aren't that many of the Black blood around, and even less we'd want anywhere near him, but if you agree, I want him to have the chance to get to know her when he's older.”

Andromeda accepted the portrait but didn't look away from him. “You are about to do something incredibly reckless to get Ron back.”

“Yes.” There was no point in lying.

“You don't expect to survive.”

Harry hesitated. “I know I'm taking a risk. I expect it to be a possibility.”

Andromeda was silent. Then, slowly, she nodded. “Try to remain alive. I would like my grandson to keep his godfather.”

“I'll try.”

It was all he could promise. Andromeda understood.

They had agreed to meet in Longbottom Manor, which – unlike Grimmauld and the safe-houses – was hooked up to the Floo. Neville and Hermione were already waiting when he arrived – and so, to his mild surprise, was George.

Neville looked a little tired and a little less alert than usual. There was only so much Invigoration Draughts could do, which was why Harry and Hermione hadn't wanted to risk them. Neville would be perfectly safe well away from the Ministry, though.
George clasped his arm and held it tightly.

“Make them pay.”

They hadn’t shared any details about Ron’s treatment, nothing but the bare basics, but George wasn’t stupid. He had seen the effects on them and could vividly imagine how Ron was doing in turn.

Harry did not ask why he wasn’t at the store. There was a time to keep up appearances and a point where it no longer mattered. He doubted George would have been able to pass for even remotely his normal self. Harry certainly wouldn’t have, in his place. Neville planned to return to Grimmauld and George obviously planned to stay with him.

'To wait for news' went unsaid. One way or the other.

George let go and clasped Hermione’s arm just as tightly. Neville moved closer in his place.

For a moment they stood there, neither entirely sure what to say. Finally Neville moved, gripped him in a tight, fierce hug and had let go again before Harry could respond.

“George has the right idea.” Neville voice sounded a little gravelly and utterly unyielding. “Make them pay.”

Then he moved on to Hermione and a slightly longer, less ferocious hug.

Finally he stepped away from the fireplace along with George, and Hermione took a steadying breath. “All right, then?”

All he felt from her was fiery, proud, stubborn determination, and Harry loved her for it. He sent a brief flare of love and trust and reassurance to her and Ron both, and then he cut off both bonds as completely as he could with circumstances as they were.

He trusted Hermione with his back and the bond with Ron. They could afford no distractions, nothing to break his focus once the spell was cast. The chaos of the Atrium alone would be enough to deal with.

Harry wrapped his mind in memories of their time in the Hideaway, of Teddy, of their bond and the sheer wonder of having family. Then he raised his wand and cast his Patronus.

Prongs leapt into being and danced a few steps across the floor on shimmering hooves before he turned to look at Harry. “Kingsley Shacklebolt,” he instructed it. “Minister Shacklebolt, I have just arrived in the Atrium. Consider it in the best interest of the imminent survival of your Ministry to meet me there.”

Prongs tossed his head and vanished in a blur through the wall. Harry picked up a pinch of Floo Powder and threw it in the fireplace.

“Ministry of Magic, the Atrium!”

The flames turned green with a surge of magic, and he turned to Hermione and held out his hand.

“Together?” he asked.

“Together,” she said, and took it.

It took several long seconds before anyone recognised them. Someone arriving by Floo in the middle
of the morning was common, after all, and hardly worth a second look.

They hadn't bothered with disguises, which meant no glamours to alert the Aurors, either.

Harry spent those precious few seconds to cross the Atrium to near the Fountain of Magical Brethren, Hermione at his side, and to get a good look at the people around him.

Security to one side, the golden gates – wide open – up ahead, and Aurors lingering right inside those doors. Fireplaces to each side, the Fountain behind them, and the visitor's entrance at the far back. There were people, enough to be a crowd but not quite enough to be called crowded, and there was a reporter lurking around near the golden doors. Harry didn't recognise the man, but he had a photographer with him and paper and quill sticking out of one large pocket. Hoping for a scoop, perhaps. The Ministry had Ron, and that made the place a likely target when Harry acted. It was a stupid place to be, but no one had accused the Prophet's reporters of being overly cautious people.

If the whole place didn't go up in Fiendfyre, Harry supposed the man would in fact get the story he was looking for and probably even more valuable, the first photos of Harry after he became a Dark Lord. After two days of merciless pressure from the bond, he even looked the part.

One of the Aurors caught their eye and several things happened at once. Fire sparked to life above Harry's hand just as recognition made the man's eyes widen. Then a solid bronze shield slammed into place in front of them courtesy of Hermione, and Harry breathed life into his Fiendfyre spell. Life, magic, and two long days worth of fury, fear, and relentless stress from their bond.

A Horntail rose behind them as a wall of fire with the roar of Dark, infernal magic, and the Atrium was thrown into chaos.

A swipe of its tail cut clean across the fireplaces on one side to cut off departures. A ferocious blast of fire incinerated the fireplaces on the other side and stopped any arrivals. Two wizards who had been waiting there died instantly. A third managed a few steps before he screamed and was caught up in the inferno, too. Then, with almost calculated spite, the dragon rested one massive paw on the Fountain and reduced the statues to less than ashes.

The whole thing had taken less than ten seconds.

Someone screamed. The first barrage of spells slammed into Hermione's shield with a viciousness that left no doubt that someone was playing for keeps and did not understand the mechanics of Fiendfyre.

The dragon roared and drowned out the sounds of screams and running, of spells and destruction, and its neck stretched unnaturally long to reach the closest of the fleeing crowd. Harry felt more than saw the death of the first witch it engulfed, but the moment before it could give chase to the rest, a vicious reminder from Harry's magic kept it leashed.

Another several spells impacted the shield, and this time Harry could see the damage on it as well as the strain on Hermione. The Aurors weren't going to stop, not now, not when they were too far into fight-and-flight to see reason, not when they had real life Fiendfyre bearing down on them, but that was why Harry had sent his Patronus.

Before the third barrage could hit, his gamble paid off.

“Stop!”

Kingsley Shacklebolt's voice cut through the Atrium, backed by powerful magic and even stronger wards. The room stilled. No one moved. Shields raised, spells cut off mid-way as the battle ground to
a halt – only the sharp, malevolent hiss of Harry's Fiendfyre remained, towering behind him in the roiling shape of the monstrous Horntail and one breath away from freedom.

The spell knew it. Harry knew it. Shacklebolt most definitely knew it, too, even if Harry wasn't sure if the Aurors did.

It said a lot about the sheer, dominating power of the Ministry wards under Shacklebolt's command that the panicking crowds had stilled, too. Shifting uneasily, clearly afraid, but no longer moving. No longer trying to flee. Harry could feel those same wards bearing down on him as well, noticeable even through the overwhelming presence of his Fiendfyre spell.

A glance at Hermione saw her dispel the shield, too damaged to have stood up for much longer. She remained ready to cast a new one in an instant.

Shacklebolt held out his empty hands slowly and made very sure that Harry wouldn't take it as an attack. The man had never been easy to read, but the wariness was plain now. Not fear, not entirely, but more caution than Harry had ever seen in him before.

The first time, perhaps, that the man had ever really given serious thought to the Prophecy, beyond *Harry must kill Voldemort.*

The Dark Lord's equal.

He kept most of his attention on the Fiendfyre behind him, but his control was strong enough that he could focus some of his attention on other things. Things like the Minister for Magic and the minor army at his side.

The infernal Horntail rose behind him, wings stretched wide, and Harry straightened with it. A few of the Aurors shifted uneasily, but Shacklebolt's command held.

For a long time they simply watched each other, Harry getting an impression of the power behind the wards and Shacklebolt getting the measure of the creature his Aurors had inadvertently brought to his doorstep.

The Minister broke the silence first.

“Lord Potter. I was surprised to receive your message.” Not Harry, it hadn't been just *Harry* for a long time, but he knew it meant something that he wasn't just *Potter,* either.

“Minister Shacklebolt.” Harry kept his voice neutral. “You have one of our friends. We want him back.”

To Shacklebolt's credit, he did not immediately cave. Fudge would have. Shacklebolt just didn't have that special sort of spinelessness that was an identifying feature in most Ministry officials Harry had met.

“The Ministry does not negotiate with Dark Lords.”

“Must be a new policy since Voldemort, then.”

The flinches and muted gasps from the crowd at the name were obvious. A few of the Aurors flinched with them. Harry barely kept his disgust from showing, though he didn't doubt that Shacklebolt's disappointed look at those Aurors hammered home the point quite well.

Slight movement to one side caught his eye. One of the Aurors was slowly moving towards the wall,
almost hidden among the anxious crowd. The Horntail turned its head sharply and bared its massive fangs in his direction and the man stopped immediately. There were a number of carvings along the Atrium walls and throughout the Ministry. Some were decorations. Some were part of the defences. Some, as Harry knew from Susan, would trigger a Ministry-wide alarm if activated just the right way.

Harry turned his attention back to Shacklebolt, trusting Hermione to keep his back safe while he dealt with the Auror. “I don't recommend sounding the alarm. An evacuation ... well, someone might panic and fire at me.”

His mild tone joined by looks of someone who had barely rested in two days got the point across better than anger possibly could have.

Shacklebolt watched him with unreadable eyes. He glanced at the man that was still the focus of the Fiendfyre spell, then made a small gesture. The Auror was still for a moment before he seemed to deflate just a little and took several steps back towards the centre of the Atrium. Harry didn't doubt that there were other ways to evacuate the building, but he honestly didn't care all that much about the people there. The loss of the Ministry building alone would be incomprehensibly big to the wizarding world. Centuries of history. Centuries of records and information. It would take decades to rebuild and far longer to recreate what was lost.

“It's risky, playing with Fiendfyre.”

Harry's lips curled slightly. It was not a pleasant expression. “Maybe. I suppose we all better hope I don't get distracted, then. I know you've found out about the Mark on Ron's shoulder. I'm sure you can imagine how depriving it's been to be forcibly separated like this. We're barely slept for two days.”

The Horntail curled a claw partially around Harry in mock possessiveness, so close that he could feel the blistering heat against his skin. He heard the wings shift and saw them appear in the corner of his eyes, curving around himself and Hermione in a blazing half-dome.

The spell tugged on his magic for more power. Harry readily gave it.

The Horntail burned brighter and taller, the malevolent hiss of fire turned into a deep, low rumble, and this time even the slowest of the Aurors seemed to understand the importance of that carefully-controlled Fiendfyre. Several took a step back, most with their wands raised, for all the good that would do if Harry's control slipped. No one seemed to even consider casting the next spell against them, not anymore.

It took more focus and willpower now but nothing Harry did not have. It was different to keep it so tightly controlled, without the destruction of wards or a manor or enemies as an outlet for its fury. It took the same kind of stubborn will and determination that casting off Voldemort's Imperius did, and Harry had that in spades.

Shacklebolt did not flinch. Harry would have been disappointed if he had.

“If you lose control of that spell, you'll burn with us. All three of you.”

Harry shrugged. “Better than a Dementor or the Veil, I suppose. I'll get the satisfaction of taking all of the Ministry with me, too.”

“Arthur Weasley -”

“- Was warned to stay home from work today, and Percy with him,” Harry finished. Calmness
settled, that strange union of the adrenaline and anticipation of battle joined with unnatural calm clarity. “There are only two people I care about in the Ministry today and both face Azkaban for siding with me.”

Shacklebolt’s attention turned to Hermione, shielded by one immense, burning wing. She answered before he could even ask.

“Until the end, Minister.” Grim and grave and determined, and Harry did not deserve friends like them, not in a hundred years.

“If he loses control, he’ll burn down half of London before they can get it contained.”

Harry didn’t need to look to know she wore that familiar part-stubborn, part-resigned expression, the one that made it clear she didn’t agree with Harry but would still back him no matter what.

“Most likely just the Ministry.” she corrected. “With the wards on this place, the spell would in all likelihood burn itself out before it got through to the Muggle side.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“The Ministry has hardly cared about Muggles before.” Dark, bitter; smouldering anger that made it clear that she gave very little thought to that particular argument. They had already had that discussion, not that anyone else could have known that.

Shacklebolt seemed to agree that it was a lost cause. He looked back to Harry and the barely-restrained spell. “How do we know you won’t simply let that spell run wild the moment you have Mr. Weasley back?”

“You don’t.” Harry didn’t take pleasure in the flat words and the reactions they caused – not much, at least. “You’ll just have to hope that the repeal of the creature restrictions is enough to stay my hand.”

Shacklebolt watched him, probably looking for any sign that Harry was less than deathly serious. Then he made a slight gesture towards two of his Auror guards. “Get Ronald Weasley here. Alive, safe, unharmed. Go.”

The men obeyed immediately. No one else dared move.

He trusted Hermione to keep Ron up to date with everything that happened. Neither of them wanted to risk splitting his attention more than it already was.

Uncomfortable silence settled in the Atrium. Shacklebolt looked remarkably calm about facing down a likely unhinged Dark Lord with barely-restrained Fiendfyre at his back. Calm enough that Harry barely reined in the urge to feed the spell a little more power, just in case.

“I’m surprised to see you willing to risk this many innocent lives.”

“I suppose I’d be less inclined to do so if more than just a token few had fought with us and not left it to schoolchildren to stand up to Voldemort.”

The slight flinch from the crowd at the name was expected this time. Harry ignored it.

“Might makes right, Minister. I’m simply using the Ministry tactics I learned at Hogwarts.”

“Under Albus Dumbledore? I find that hard to believe.” Shacklebolt’s voice could be mistaken for idle curiosity. Knowing how much the Minister admired the former Headmaster, Harry was
genuinely impressed. The man was smart enough to know that disapproval would do nothing, too.

They just reached Ron.

Harry gave no indication that he had heard Hermione's message, and every bit of tension and unnatural calm remained in his body. He did not even allow himself to hope, to let down his guard and fall to his own Fiendfyre or an Auror's spell.

"Under Umbridge," Harry corrected. "I still have the scars from her delightful Blood Quill as a reminder of that lesson. Under the Wizengamot, which has proven frequently that there is no problem that the right amount of influence and gold cannot solve, be it missing trials, convenient pardons, or customised laws. Don't get me started on Fudge's campaign against me, either."

Dark eyes watched him unflinchingly. "You would condemn the many on the crimes of a few? Most of which are no longer even in government?"

"Half of which are no longer in government because I killed them!" Harry's temper flared and the Horntail responded with a roar of flames.

Wands snapped back up. The crowd moved back, barely kept in check by the wards and Shacklebolt's control.

Anger gone as fast as it had arrived, Harry stared defiantly at Shacklebolt. "You're wondering if the Ministry wards can end my spell before it ends you."

"The thought crossed my mind," the man readily admitted. "I decided the consequences of failure were too big to risk."

"For now."

"For now," Shacklebolt agreed. It remained unspoken that should Harry prove a little too mercurial, that choice might very well change.

Harry nodded, accepting that. "I don't have any wizarding sentimentalities, Minister. I will end as many bloodlines as it takes. This is what I will do for Ron. I would do the same for Hermione, or Teddy, or anyone else I call family. I don't want to be Voldemort's successor, but I will if I have to."

The crowd shuffled aside to create a path before Shacklebolt could answer. The two Aurors appeared with Ron between them. Harry didn't dare look away from the Minister, but he heard the small sound of distress from Hermione and saw Ron stumble twice out of the corner of his eye.

A small gesture from Shacklebolt stopped the two Aurors when they reached the halfway point. Hermione, by unspoken agreement, crossed the rest of the distance to Ron and clung to him, briefly and fiercely with no care for their audience. A string of magic some half a dozen spells long followed to spot and remove any attempt to track, control, or otherwise influence their friend.

Then she stepped back again, wand ready and a shield on her lips.

"You'll want to lower the Apparition restrictions," Harry commented when Shacklebolt remained silent.

The silence stretched on. Then, finally, the man nodded and Harry felt the wards ease fractionally.

A glance at Hermione and Ron and they were gone, Hermione Apparating both of them to Grimmauld.
Harry remained. For all that he wanted the Ministry to burn, he wasn't about to Apparate and leave the Fiendfyre to reign free. Not with Susan somewhere in the building. Maybe that had been an attempt to keep her colleagues safe. Maybe one day he would ask her.

He saw several of the Aurors shift; in unease or sudden impulse now that there was only him to deal with, he wasn't sure. Definitely time to leave, though.

He gripped the spell even as he held the image of Grimmauld in his mind. He would need to destroy the spell fast enough that he could Apparate before anyone could stop him, but the Horntail would fight him every step of the way.

He nodded once to Shacklebolt, grabbed the full force of the spell, and brought down every last bit of willpower he had.

The Horntail screeched, an inhuman sound of churning brimstone, and lashed out at Harry. It crumbled into cinders and was gone before it ever touched him.

He heard the Aurors move, heard shouts and the first syllables of spells, and then he was gone in a crack of Apparition. He reappeared in Grimmauld and stumbled like he always did when he was tired or distracted, and then he felt the presence of home and looked up to find Ron and Hermione clinging tightly to each other.

Hermione looked tired but unharmed, with tears trailing dark lines in the dust down her cheeks. Ron looked like he had gone three rounds with a Boggart and lost. They were still the best damn sight Harry had seen all year.

Harry had joined in on their hug before he was even aware of it, swept up in the tight, clinging embrace of raw desperation.

“'I can't believe that worked,'” Hermione breathed. “'Merlin, I can't believe that worked.'”

Ron's grip on them tightened fractionally. “'Never doubted it for a second.'” If his words were a little gravelly and his voice a little unsteady, well, no one had to mention it.

Harry just remained silent and enjoyed the presence of the two of them there with him, of both of the bonds where they were supposed to be and the strain that had finally, finally eased.

His gamble had worked, but he doubted it would be as effective if he had to use it again.

To change the wizarding world he needed the Ministry to yield. To command the Ministry he needed to own a good section of it and have the Minister's ear.

The Ministry would burn. Not today. Not tomorrow. But soon. They would burn, every last one of them, because if that was the only way to keep them from ever going after Ron and Hermione again, then that was what he would do.

Burn it all, scour it to the very bedrock, and rebuild it from scratch in the ashes. If the Minister could not command the Wizengamot, then the Wizengamot would yield. By Fiendfyre, blackmail, or loyalty, he did not particularly care which.

His left hand rested by Hermione's neck, tangled in her hair. His right had a tight grip on Ron's shoulder, silent reassurance that he was there, that they had him back for good.

“'They will burn,'” he vowed quietly. “'Every single last one of them will burn for this.'”
Hermione's breath hitched. Then her grip tightened and she looked up to meet his gaze, stubborn and furious and defiant through bloodshot eyes and ash-grey skin.

“They will burn,” she agreed.

“... Every single last one of them,” Ron finished, low and hoarse. “Every single last one.”

Neville was somewhere behind them, and so was the sense of George's magic, but for now all that mattered was Ron and Hermione and the bond that had finally eased.

A Dark Lord needed gold, and magic, and followers.

Maybe it was time to take up some of those thinly veiled requests to swear allegiance to him.

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Epilogue: 8 years later

Minerva McGonagall leaned back in her chair in her private office with a tired sigh. The Hogwarts letters for the returning years had long since been delegated to Filius Flitwick as Deputy Headmaster. The first year letters Minerva still insisted on overseeing herself. Alone, in the quiet of her office, without the constant commentary of the many portraits in the Headmistress' office.

She liked to have an idea of her new students, to feel that little delight at every Muggle-born name – another child to introduce to the magnificence of magic, another child to see grow into their own and take on the world beyond – and to have the chance to see the addresses. Potter's case had taught them that, at least.

Now the Hogwarts letters had gone out, all but one.

Edward R. Lupin
The Guestroom by the Library
Delacour Summer Residence
Fréjus
France

She had been a little displeased at the address – what eleven-year-old child in their world would not be home on the day of their Hogwarts letter? That simply wasn't done, not on such an important day - but that was not why she had put it aside.

She had known this day would come, and even now she still wavered. It was not his werewolf father that was an issue. They had four werewolf students as well as two part-vampires and several others of mixed blood, and all of them were a delight to teach and hardly more trouble than any other student.

His godfather, though ...

Someone knocked once, sharply. The ancient door opened and Filius Flitwick stepped inside without waiting for a reply. He seemed to know exactly what he would find as he glanced at the letter on her desk, then gave her a pointed look.

“You would be a fool to deny him a place,” Flitwick told her bluntly. He didn't bother to even mention Lupin's name, which removed any doubts she might have had that his visit was a coincidence. “Beauxbatons already sent him a letter. With Fleur Weasley's oldest due to start there in
two years, he won't think twice about accepting.”

Minerva's lips thinned. “I am surprised to hear that our esteemed French colleagues have begun to recruit their students in England.”

Flitwick snorted. “Just the one. Think like a Slytherin, Minerva. He's a valuable commodity.”

“He is a future student! Not a commodity!”

Flitwick made a small, dismissive gesture, clearly not caring all that much. “Student, then. A student under the protection of a Dark Lord. Lupin's presence buys you seven years of insurance. It matters less for Beauxbatons, perhaps, as Potter has no designs on anything abroad so far, but the fact remains. Potter knows it, I know it – depending on how much of a Black the boy was raised, even Lupin probably knows it.”

The reminder made the words settle all the more bitterly in Minerva. She had always been proud to call Remus Lupin a Gryffindor. Nymphadora Tonks had been a Hufflepuff, but her courage and devotion had been unquestionable. A Gryffindor at heart, Minerva liked to think. In a proper world, their son should have gone to Gryffindor. Perhaps even Hufflepuff, like his mother. Instead, young Teddy Lupin was more likely to be a candidate for Slytherin ... or Ravenclaw. Her Charms Professor made no secret of his more distasteful political sympathies, after all. “Hogwarts stood against Voldemort. It shall stand against Potter, too.”

“That it did,” Flitwick agreed, “and Hogwarts fell, and Potter knows it. He wants Lupin to have the choice; he would have gone after Hogwarts already if he didn't. Send the letter. Hope he accepts. And if you are very fortunate, and the boy has a far, far better experience here than Potter himself did – perhaps Potter will decide in seven years that he has more pressing issues demanding his attention.”

Minerva's lips curled in distaste. “And if not? Shall we bow to the whims of another Dark Lord? Would you care to take over the place as Headmaster as one of his faithful? Return the Dark Arts to the curriculum? Bring the Unforgivables back as a punishment? See those he does not approve of reduced to lesser students – those whose family lines do not already lie dead by his hand?”

Flitwick snorted. “Should we start referring to him as He-Who-Must-Also-Not-Be-Named, too? Don't make yourself the fool. He hardly wants Hogwarts as a breeding ground for a new generation of Death Eaters. He wants to see the school as grand as it is supposed to be. The school he was promised at eleven and that we failed so resoundingly to deliver.”

Minerva's inner cat hissed in the back of her mind, furious with the insult to her school. Her more rational self levelled a cool look at her Deputy Headmaster.

“Hardly the fool for not trusting the word of a Dark Lord. Cursed creatures, half-mad from Dark Arts. It shall be his downfall, as with any other of their kind. Voldemort fell. Grindelwald fell. So, too, shall Potter.”

Indeed they did. To Potter and Dumbledore respectively. Who shall challenge him, then? There were two children of the Prophecy, Minerva. One reigns now as the Dark Lord of Britain. The other is his voice and will in the Wizengamot and one of his most trusted. Longbottom would swear allegiance to Voldemort's memory before he ever turned on Potter. Granger? Bones? Thomas? Weasley – any one of the family?”

Minerva did not answer. She did not need to. Potter's closest were as devoted as Voldemort's first followers had been, beyond all sense or reason. The rest – no one present that day had forgotten the sight of a wizard stripped of his magic in Diagon Alley for the attempted betrayal of Potter. The
screams still appeared in Minerva's nightmares sometimes.

Potter killed, as easily and carelessly as Voldemort had done. The worst among his victims, though – those, he seemed to prefer to keep alive, subject to a number of horrifying spells that could only be a product of a Black mind. Even then, Flitwick was sympathetic to his cause. It had felt like betrayal when she had first found out. It still felt like it most days.

Flitwick's expression softened just a little, looked just a little more tired, a little more weary. “We sent children to fight our wars. We expected a boy to defeat Voldemort. This is our just payment.”

Too many memories of death still haunted Minerva's nightmares that she could argue too harshly against it. Not when a number of those memories were of murdered students, struck down without remorse, some of them far too young to have been fighting at all.

“The Order fought. We tried, Filius!”

“We did,” he agreed, “and in the end it wasn't enough. A number of the former students two years above and below him make no secret of their loyalties. A far greater number is at least sympathetic to his cause, for any number of reasons. And, as insidious as Voldemort at his most compelling, those convictions spread. Ten years at the most, and you will see the first of his faithful apply as a teacher here. The Wizengamot is either loyal, bought, terrorized into obedience, or simply dead. Only Shacklebolt's decision to purge the Ministry of unsavoury elements himself before Potter could take steps to do so has kept it from falling as deeply under his control as the Wizengamot has. Susan Bones is in line to become Head Auror eventually – the same Susan Bones who proclaimed her loyalty to Potter in the Wizengamot – and no one is foolish enough to argue, because she is an excellent Auror, and her presence might very well bring them under Potter's protection, too. Only Hogwarts remains untouched. Ten years, and the first of the Longbottom brood will reach Hogwarts age. If Potter doesn't act, Longbottom might very well do so himself, and with his Lord's blessings.”

Another letter like Lupin's, Minerva knew. Another decision to make a decade down the line – far closer than it sounded, that – and for a number of the years that would follow. Alice Longbottom would simply be the first in a long line of problematic students and unlike Lupin, Beauxbatons was unlikely to be an acceptable alternative to her or her family.

Some days she was thankful Albus had not lived to see it. Some days she wondered how different it would have been, if Potter had not been the strongest of their kind left standing. If he had not survived his second Killing Curse.

Flitwick hesitated. “He's more Grindelwald than Voldemort. That is all we can ask for. Send the letter. Hope the boy accepts.”

Minerva looked at the address one last time. Then she summoned the post owl that had been waiting on the top of a bookcase and gave it the letter.

“Edward Lupin,” she told it. “He is in France. Rest before you return.”

A bob of the head and a powerful stroke of wings and the owl was gone, through the open window and into the bright sky beyond.

Perhaps in seven years the world would be different. Until then she would treat Lupin like any other student. Not as Potter's godson, not as the son of one of her favourite students, but simply another student.

If he was anything like his godfather, he would probably appreciate that kindness.
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